



KIT

**A WEBNOVEL
BY FEL (JAMES GALLOWAY)**

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Prologue

Silence.

The wind had died down, leaving only the echo of silence, a memory of sound, as if motion had been quelled in a moment of respect. The soft snow muffled all other sounds, leaving a strange void, a disjunct wrongness, almost eerie in its totality.

But only for the briefest of moments. The sound of someone sniffing shattered the silence, and Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan III opened his eyes and remembered where he was.

It was cold. So cold. His fur was even cold against his skin, and the wind again picked up, slicing through his exposed fur, causing him to huddle deeper into his coat, shivering his tail.

Cold day for a funeral.

They were all there, of course. The entire family, friends, acquaintances, employees, lawyers, hangers-on, golddiggers, the whole nine yards. The entire Vulpan line stood out in that meticulously preened cemetery, the private Vulpan cemetery, attending the funeral of their patriarch. Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan II, caretaker of the Vulpan dynasty of Vulpan Shipyards and Vulpan Steel built by his grandfather and father. He'd died a rich fox, worth hundreds of millions of dollars. One of the richest furs in America, on the top 500 list, dead of a heart attack at 49.

He could hear the crying. How much of it was real, and how much of it was just a show? He always wondered that. He always wondered how much that bitch of a female pretended to care when she looked into his eyes, and how those eyes changed when they looked at him. Like he was...an inconvenience. Oh, his father didn't care about that. He didn't care about love. After the death of his first wife, Kitstrom's mother, he married that cold, vicious witch because she was the daughter of a rich British noble, a true blue-blood and a fox. Cybil Whitmore Vulpan stood there, by the casket, crying uncontrollably, leaning against her father, Count Chester Whitmore. No doubt lamenting the loss of all that money.

The priest went on with his long-winded soliloquy, talking about rebirth and repentance, eternal happiness and heaven. His voice was somber, deep, the big elk raising his hands from time to time as he read from the bible in his paws, his antlers dipping and bobbing with his speech.

Empty words at a time like this. The bastard didn't deserve such comfort.

He sighed, seeing a cloud of misty breath waft in the cold air before him. He knew what was coming next. All those eyes would turn to his sister, Vilenne. She was the heir, four years his senior and just back from England, she was the one his father had given his stocks, just before he died, she was the one that would have control. All the gold-diggers, all the toadies, all the sycophants, they would descend on her like flies, trying to ingratiate themselves to her, trying to leech off from the family fortune.

It was his father's greatest shame, handing over the family dynasty to his *daughter* rather than his *son*. For the first time in the century-long history of Vulpan Shipyards, a male Vulpan wouldn't be sitting at the head of the executive table. It would be Vilenne Vulpan, honor graduate of

Harvard Business School, Oxford scholar, and upon her would fall the herculean task of guiding both the family business and the family itself into a new era.

She could have it.

He'd never gotten along with his family. Ever since he was 12, he and his father had barely spoken and usually only in anger, when the young Kit told his father he wanted to join the Air Force and be a fighter pilot. That was when he found out that his father was a ruthless bastard. His father made life hell for him after that, forcing him to learn about business, driving him, trying to force him to do something he didn't want to do. His father had wanted his male heir to take the reins of the family, a fact that put considerable pressure on the relationship between his father and sister. But Kit had not budged from his adamant position. He did not want to go into business. He did not want to run the family. His sister was brilliant and motivated, she would be a much better family head than he would ever be. Years of continuous badgering, force, and heated arguments had eventually led to his outbursts, disobedience, three occasions of him running away, and even several arrests. It all culminated on his sixteenth birthday, when his father had told him he either took his place as the head of the family, or be disowned.

Kit walked out the front door with nothing but the clothes on his back and never looked back.

His father would break out of that coffin and strangle Vilenne if he knew that Kit was at his funeral. Kit didn't want to be there himself, but he promised Vilenne, and he could never break his word to his sister. Besides, in a way, he had to be here. He had to see them put him into the ground, and know it was over.

From that day forward, his father was his greatest enemy. Not content to simply allow Kit to leave, he had done everything in his power to ruin Kit's life. No matter where he went, his father's greasy fingers followed. From utilities being shut off to his bank accounts being closed or monkeyed with to police harassing him, even to his apartment being repeatedly vandalized and his bike stolen any time he left it unattended, everything that happened had his father's stain all over it. His father wouldn't let him go, trying to punish him as much as possible for rejecting the family, but Kit stood up to it tremendous tenacity, refusing to allow his father to neither run nor ruin his life.

It wasn't all bad. Vilenne sympathized with him, and she helped him after he was disowned, even at the risk of being disowned herself. She secretly lent him some money, had a friend of hers pay for an apartment in Boston for him, and helped him finish school. His hope of going to the Air Force Academy had been shattered by his ejection from his family, for his father had to ensure that his son couldn't get in. One letter to the Secretary of the Air Force made sure of it. So he went into the ROTC at the University of Massachusetts instead, enduring even more of his father's attempts to destroy his rebellious son's life as his father tried to get him kicked out of school. He learned how to fly a plane while in college, advancing his dream to fly fighter jets, but then it all crashed down on him in one moment, and his father hadn't had to lift a finger.

It was just dumb luck, he supposed. The wrong place at the wrong time. The ocelot driving the minivan never saw the light and ran right through it, plowing him and three others over. Two of the others died, the third was paralyzed from the waist down, and he spent nearly four months in the hospital with a broken back. And that ended his hopes of flying in the

military. That kind of injury was an automatic blackball, because his back couldn't withstand the stress of flying high-G maneuvers.

And that was that. His dream was dead. He guessed his father probably danced around his office when he heard the news. The bastard wouldn't even pay for his medical bills. Vilenne had to help him pay them, since he didn't have insurance, which his father didn't try to stop when the scandal hit New England that the son of Kitstrom Vulpan had been critically injured, and couldn't even pay the medical bills to stay in the hospital while in a full body cast. The social backlash of his father's cold-heartedness had forced him to relent and allow his sister to pay his bills. He washed out of ROTC because of his injury, and drifted through school until he graduated with a degree in history.

Graduation was last week, since he graduated in the fall semester because of his injury. No doubt the old bastard had kicked when he found out that Kit had managed to graduate from school despite all the roadblocks put in his way.

He could feel their eyes on him. Dozens of Vulpan eyes, glancing at him, some of them, like Uncle Zach, glaring at him. He knew they wanted to know why he was there. Was he there to try to worm his way back into the good graces of the family? Was he there to apologize? Was he there to see cousins and aunts and uncles he hadn't seen in over five years? He let them wonder. He was there for only one reason, and that was to see them put his father into the ground. To see it, to know he was dead, and know that when he left that cemetery, he was *free*.

He blinked, realizing that the priest was done talking. The widow put a single rose on the casket, and then they watched as it was placed in the

marble crypt at the base of a thirty foot tall monument. The old bastard, he even had to be gaudy and ostentatious in death.

And it was over.

He sighed, a sigh of relief. It was over. The bastard was dead, dead and buried, and he was forever out of Kit's life. He could walk away now, walk away and know that his bastard of a father wouldn't be behind him, stalking him, trying to destroy him. That he was dead, and may he rot in hell.

He sensed that they were looking at him, for he'd stepped out from the throng when they lowered the casket down into the crypt and looked down at it, resisting the urge to unzip his fly and piss down onto his father's casket as a final act of defiance. His ears twitched, both his whole right ear and his damaged left ear, the top half of which was missing, the remnant border ragged and evil-looking. He turned away from the casket and looked at his *family*. The lot of greedy, haughty, arrogant, stuck up, useless wastes of carbon-based life forms that ever slithered across God's green earth. He glared at them, Vulpan eyes staring into Vulpan eyes, but he didn't say a word.

He took his paw out of his pocket, then quite deliberately flipped off the entire Vulpan family.

Then he walked right through them, to a tumultuous array of gasps and angry growls, even a few of his uncles trying to barrel through the clan to get their paws on him, being held back by other family members that didn't want the battery of paparazzi camped outside the cemetery's fence to get pictures of the Vulpan family brawling over the grave of their family head like backwood hillbillies, like hungry piranha denuding the corpse of a hapless victim.

The faster he could get away from them, the better. If anything, being disowned had been the best thing that ever happened to him. He hated his family, except for his sister, he hated the way they treated people, he hated the way people sucked up to them. Vilenne was the only Vulpan outside of himself that didn't think they were divine royalty, five rungs up the evolutionary ladder from all other furs. There wasn't a single non-fox anywhere in their family tree, and his father had been a radical purist, obsessed with keeping their bloodline pure and strong. Only the most elite and richest fox families who could trace their ancestry back hundreds of years even had a chance to get their children a date with a Vulpan, because of the vehemence of the elders of the family about purity and bloodlines.

"Kit," came a familiar call. He stopped and sighed, then turned around. Vilenne was coming up to him, and he looked away from her when she put her paws on his shoulders. "I'm glad you could make it, little bro. I know that couldn't be easy."

"Just be glad Clancy took my flamethrower at the front gate," he said in a humorless tone. "Or I'd have nuked that old bastard."

"I should have let you have it," she grinned. "But only if you fried Cybil along with him."

"Amen."

"I want to talk to you later, okay? After the reading of the will. Once everything's all settled."

"You mean after they read the part that says that anyone caught giving me money or assistance forfeits everything given to them in the will?" he asked bluntly.

“Yeah, that’s one of the parts they’re going to read,” she said with a wink. “But that’s just legal hogwash. He’s dead now, little bro, and *I’m* the one that’s going to be making the decisions now. I just don’t want you to think that you’re all alone.”

He looked into her eyes. Vulpan eyes. Her left eye was amber, but her right eye was green, the same as his, the same as her father’s, the same as his father before him. That unique trait had bred true through every descendent of Arthur Vulpan, Kit’s great-grandfather and the founder of Vulpan Shipyards. In a way, it was a Vulpan calling card. All of Kits’ cousins, aunts, uncles, great uncles, and great aunts all had the same eyes, left amber and right green. If anything, it had been quite a convenient means of squelching frivolous paternity suits brought against Kit’s grandfather back in the day, for he was a notorious skirt-chaser, and no child that didn’t have the Vulpan eyes would even be taken seriously as a bastard child of Kitstrom Vulpan Senior.

Back before the days of DNA.

“I like being alone, sis,” he said evenly, looking down into her eyes unwaveringly. “Aside from you, this family turned its back on me years ago. I wish I could say I was a better fox than them and forgive them, but it’s just not in me. Now that the bastard is dead, I can live the rest of my life without worrying about him coming up behind me to destroy it.”

“I can’t blame you, little bro,” she sighed. “But I’d like to try to put things right.”

“Nothing can put things right now, Vil,” he stated.

“Well, I can,” she said flippantly. “Suzy told me you packed up your apartment and gave her back the keys. Where are you going?”

“West,” he replied. “Far from here. Now that he’s dead, I have nothing to worry about.”

“You got a job?”

“Not yet. I’ll just keep going til I find a place I like, and settle in.”

“Have money?”

“Sis, I love you, I really do, but I don’t want any money from this family. Ever. Except for you, they turned their backs on me, too afraid of losing their trust funds and inheritances. They don’t care about me. All they care about is their fortune and their delusions they’re better than everyone else. Well, I want nothing from them. If I have to pay my way by washing dishes, well that’s money I know I *earned*.”

She gave him a long look, then chuckled softly. “If father found out you were washing dishes, I think he’d roll over in his grave.”

“No, he’d probably dance,” Kit grated. “That bastard did everything he could to ruin my life after I walked out. He’d see me washing dishes as some kind of just desserts. Then he’d try to have me fired.”

“And stain the Vulpan family honor? Inconceivable!” she said melodramatically, putting the back of her paw to her forehead and looking away.

“Let it be stained. It’s about time this family was stained, if only to show the blackness that boils inside their souls.”

She chuckled, then rose up on her toes and kissed him on the cheek. “Well, you have my number, little bro,” she told him. “If you ever need help.” She fidgeted with the front of his coat. “If you ever need to talk.” She

smoothed out the lapels, then patted him on the shoulders. “If you ever need a *friend*, just call me. But don’t call me collect. I don’t think I could afford it,” she said with a grin and wink.

“You’re the only thing I’m regretting leaving behind, Vil,” he admitted, pulling her into a tight embrace.

“You’re only leaving me behind if you forget about me, Kit,” she said, patting his sides. “Go out there, bro. Find your place. *Live*. And if you ever need me, you know where I am. I’ll never turn my back on you.”

“That means a lot to me.”

“When are you leaving?”

“Now. My bus leaves in two hours. It’ll take me that long to walk down to the bus stop and catch a metro to the bus station, then change. I don’t think I want to ride the bus in a suit.”

“Walk? Bro, I’ll have Rogers drive you.”

“No. Six years ago, I walked out out the front door. I’ll walk again. That way, I can leave this place with my conscious clear.”

She sighed, then nodded. “It’s a long walk.”

“I’m used to walking.”

“Send me postcards?”

“Every time we stop,” he promised.

“I’d really like that. Kit...are you sure you don’t need any help?”

“Well, you could buy the postcards. I’m on a tight budget,” he smiled.

“Done,” she chuckled. She opened her tiny purse and took out a hundred dollar bill, and pushed it to him. “It’s the smallest I have, bro, so deal with it. And I expect a hundred dollars’ worth of postcards,” she winked.

“You’ll get them. I promise.”

He leaned down and gave her a long kiss on the cheek, then hugged her one last time. “I have to go, sis. Keep it real, okay?”

“I know Boston is nothing but a bad memory, but always remember that this *is* your home, little bro,” she told him. “And I’ll always be here when you need me.”

“Just promise me one thing.”

“Anything.”

“Don’t turn into *him*.”

“That is my solemn vow, bro,” she said, pushing away enough to look up into his eyes. “If I do, may God make my fur fall out.”

He chuckled. “Be good, sis.”

“I expect to see a postcard in the mail soon.”

“You will. I promise.”

He turned and walked away, towards photographers snapping hundreds of photos, his face resolute, her face regretful.

Just more fodder for the tabloids.

But finally. Finally, it was over. The bastard was dead, and he was free.

Chapter 1

The restaurant was busy, loud with the clatter of dishes and conversation, and thick with both smoke from cigarettes and the smoke wafting from the open grills. It was Friday night, and that was always busy at the Double J Steakhouse, just outside the Northcross mall in Austin, Texas. Customers could see their steaks sizzling on open grills in the back of the dining area, the kitchen doors just beside the grill array where red-shirted waiters and waitresses rushed back and forth to bring orders to their tables. There was quite a long line of customers waiting to get in, and that put the manager in a knot to get the tables turned over and ready for the next customers.

Kit wiped his brow, blew out his breath, and heaved up his large basin of dirty dishes, then set it on his hip as he wiped the table down. Bussing tables was a harsh business, but on Fridays it was murder because they were so busy. He hefted the full basin over his head and threaded his way through a narrow aisle mined with the tails of the patrons jutting out from their open-backed seats. He apologized his way through the throng and then hurried back to the kitchen, narrowly avoiding a ferret female waitress with brown hair who almost crashed into him carrying a tray of dishes, then set the basin down on the track and started feeding dishes through the opening and back to the dishwashers.

Fifteen more minutes. Fifteen more minutes, and he was done for the day. He kept telling himself that over and over again.

He caught his reflection in the chrome of the freezer by the dish window, and frowned. His reddish hair was all wild again, sticking to his right ear, and he still couldn't help but look at the void where the tip of his left ear should have been. Even after two years, he still wasn't used to seeing it gone. It was because he could only see it in a mirror, he reckoned, since was used to seeing the jagged white-furred scar on his right arm, just below his elbow and running halfway to his wrist, and the two white streaks of fur in his left arm where his fur had grown back over the wounds, but had come back in white instead of red.

Ancient history.

Vil had offered to pay for reconstructive surgery to replace the tip of his left ear, but he'd declined. He couldn't afford it, and he'd be damned if he took a penny of money from his family where his life didn't hang in the balance. He let her pay for the hospital bills when they put him back together, but he wouldn't allow her to pay to fix his ear.

"You better get moving before the Blimp catches you daydreaming," Candice teased as she came up to him. Candice was a rather cute doe with pretty brown eyes and a darling smile.

"I only have fifteen more minutes," he answered. "And two more days."

"Yeah, I heard about that. I'm gonna miss you, hon," she said, putting her paw on his shoulder. "Sure you can't hang around?"

He shook his head. "I put back enough money to move on," he told her. "I haven't run out of west yet, so I'd like to keep going."

She laughed. “Well, there’s only desert from here west,” she grinned. “Til you hit the Pacific, anyway.”

“Yeah. I’m kinda looking forward to seeing it.”

“I wish I could do what you’re doing,” she said as she started unloading dishes from her own basin. “See the world, one odd job at a time.”

“Do it,” he prompted.

“Not til I finish school, I won’t,” she laughed. “I’ve only got one more year to go! After that, I might look at doing it.”

“It’s been fun so far,” he told her, hefting his empty basin. “Let me get out there. I can do one more sweep before quitting time.”

Out on the floor, he worked quickly and efficiently, collecting up plates and glasses, and enduring the occasional stare. His eyes were unusual, he knew it, and he was a little used to people either staring at his eyes or gawking at his left ear and the white hair and fur around it. The Blimp, a fat bear that served as the night manager, prowled the area, watching him and the waitresses to make sure they were doing their jobs, but it didn’t really phase him. Kit did his job and he didn’t slack. He put in effort for the time he was paid, unlike some others in the restaurant. He moved to another table and quickly started clearing it, slipping aside as Alice, a cute little black mouse, grabbed up her tip from the table before moving on to check on her other customers. He cleared five more tables, then hefted his heavy burden up onto his shoulder and picked his way back to the kitchen, then started unloading the dishes onto the conveyer. Once that was done, he saw he had five more minutes, so he stacked some clean plates into the dish drolley for the waitresses, then stacked a few carts of clean glasses onto the

pallet. But when the clock hit 7:00pm, he threw his towel over his shoulder and headed straight for the time clock. He punched out, went back and washed his hands, then changed out of his red shirt in the bathroom. He retrieved his backpack from the office, then headed out the employee's door in the back.

He usually didn't bail that fast, but he had an appointment today.

He walked the two blocks to the Java Joint, an internet café where he'd applied for a job but never got a callback, ordered a cup of tea, then sat down and opened his laptop. It was the only really expensive thing he owned, a gift from Vil for Christmas not two weeks after he left Boston, but he was glad she sent it. Using the laptop, they could correspond via email and video, using a videoconferencing program she'd had installed on the laptop before she sent it to him. All he needed was a broadband connection, and lucky for him this café was a wireless hotspot. He did more than just that on it, though. He started keeping a journal of his travels, people he'd met, things he'd seen, writing it all down, and he had to admit, a game of Solitaire or Hearts or Civilization made monotonous days go by a little faster. He started up the videoconferencing program, flipped the cover on the built-in webcam open, then waited for a connection, then smiled as Vil's face appeared in the window. He seated the headset on his face a little, then cut in the audio as he adjusted the microphone that hovered near his muzzle.

"Hey sis," he greeted. "You get my postcard?"

"Sure did," she answered. "Is that thing real?"

He laughed. "Sure is. I saw it. It's made out of plaster."

"I'm not surprised," she grinned. "So, how's life been treatin' ya, little bro?"

“Oh, same as always,” he told her. “I just got off work.”

“Oh? Where you working?”

“Bussing tables at a steakhouse,” he answered.

She sighed. “Bro, you have a *degree*. Couldn’t you at least try to get something a little more, well, dignified?”

“It’s hard to get those kinds of jobs quick, Vil,” he told her. “They like to interview, then call, and then interview. At least at the Double J, I had a job ten minutes after I filled out the application. I needed the money.”

“And whose fault is that?” she teased, giving him a grin.

“All mine,” he said immediately. “I didn’t budget very well, and it didn’t help that I got fired from that Wendy’s in Houston.”

“You got *fired*? Why?”

“Because they were breaking health regs, and I blew the whistle on ‘em,” he answered.

“Isn’t that illegal?”

“In the real world it is. For us wage slaves, there’s nothing we can do about it. What are we gonna do, hire a lawyer?”

She shook her head. “Don’t get me started, Kit,” she warned. “You know how I feel about that.”

“That’s your problem,” he grinned, then he scratched the side of his muzzle. “Just to warn ya, I’m moving on again next week.”

“You never gave me your address there,” she complained. “How can I keep up with you?”

“It keeps you from sending me any packages without my consent,” he teased.

“Well, you can’t blame me for being worried about you, little bro.”

“I appreciate that. How’s work?”

“Bleh,” she grunted, sticking her tongue out, which always made him chuckle. She had a habit of doing that when she was thinking about something unpleasant. “I fired Bundowski yesterday. That little bastard was trying to sell off the Baton Rouge foundry without my approval, probably some kind of kickback scheme. So he’s toast. Want his job? All yours.”

“No thanks,” he said with a shudder.

“Outside of that, it’s going pretty well. I’m looking at buying a shipyard in New Orleans called Avondale right now, and the New Hampshire shipyard just won a new Navy contract.”

“Sounds risky. I passed through New Orleans a few months ago, and it’s still kinda crazy down there, even after all this time since the hurricane.”

“Yeah, but they’re offering a pretty attractive price, and the shipyard comes with quite a few Navy contracts. I could send down some people from the New Hampshire and Virginia yards and get them restaffed quick. I’d just have to ram the merger approval through the Department of the Navy. They have to approve shipyard transactions where there’s active contracts.”

“Sounds like you more or less made up your mind.”

“Yeah, I’m kinda leaning towards buying it,” she nodded, then she adjusted her microphone a little. “Just waiting for the cost benefit analysis

to see if the numbers crunch the right way. So, met anyone lately?" she winked.

"What is this? The Ice Queen, asking about my love life?" he teased.

"Oh, bite me, bro," she said, sticking her tongue out at him. "I'm busy now. I had my flings in college, I'll have you know, but I'm too busy right now to date."

"I haven't really dated either. Most femmes aren't too keen on going out with a fox like me, who'll be gone next month."

"You'd be surprised," she winked. "Aunt Sarah is sure trying to push me off on Steven Vastonne," she said, her tongue peeking out again. "What a stuck-up, insensitive, pig-headed prick."

"But he's got the blood," Kit said with a frown.

"And so Aunt Sarah keeps pushing him," Vil sighed with a nod. "I think I'm gonna marry this cute raccoon I saw down at Wal-Mart the other day," she mused.

Kit almost spewed tea all over his laptop. "Half the family would die of a heart attack!"

"Yeah. Almost makes it worth doing, doesn't it?"

Kit laughed. "What were you doing in Wal-Mart?" he asked curiously. "Isn't that a little lowest common denominator for you?"

"Hey, I needed a new blackberry battery and it was right there," she protested, tapping her muzzle with her forefinger.

"They have everything made in China, if it's cheap," he grinned. "I shop there all the time."

“If you show up with a yellow smiley face sticker, I’ll disown you myself,” she warned.

He laughed.

“Kit,” she said, a bit more seriously. “I want to send you something.”

“No.”

“Hear me out,” she said, putting her hand up. “I want to send you a cell phone.”

“I don’t really need one, sis. I have the laptop.”

“Yeah, but you can’t use it everywhere. I, I don’t like the idea of you out there without some kind of way to contact me in an emergency. I promise I’ll *only* send you the phone, and I’ll take care of the bill. That way you can always call someone if you have an emergency. Me, the cops, 911, whoever you need to. Will you let me?”

He turned it over in his mind, then finally nodded. “Alright. I’ll let you send it. But if there’s anything else in that box, I’ll come back up there and spank you.”

“Well, now I know how to get you to come home,” she teased. “Let me get a pen so you can give me your address.”

“Won’t work, sis, I’m staying in a mission,” he warned. “They don’t take deliveries.”

“Hmm. Give me the address anyway, and also where you’re working now. I’ll take care of it.”

“How?”

“Think like a Vulpan, silly boy,” she winked. “The mission may not take deliveries, but *you* will. I’ll run a messenger down there with it. If I have both addresses, that way he can find you no matter where you are when he arrives.”

“You’re gonna make someone fly down here just to give me a phone?”

“Sure am,” she grinned. “It’s the Vulpan way.”

“I’m glad I’m out of that family,” he grunted, which made her laugh.

“Hey! No insulting your big sister!”

“When you’re deserving of it, you will be insulted,” he teased.

She stuck her tongue out at him. “I’ll try to get it down there tomorrow morning. That work for you?”

“I have to be at work at ten.”

“Well, I know you’re not much of an early riser. Mind if he gets it to you at work instead?”

“That’s fine.”

“Okay, give me the address.”

“I’m not sure of the exact street address, sis. But it’s the Double J Steakhouse just across from the Northcross mall here in Austin.”

“That’s all I need. He’ll find it,” she promised. “Where are you going from there?”

“I really don’t know. I’ll jump on the bus and get off when the mood hits me.”

“Sometimes I wonder how you do it.”

“It’s actually not that bad. I’ve been keeping a journal of it on the laptop.”

“Oooh! Send it to me! I wanna read it!”

“Well, sure, okay. I’ll email a copy to you tonight. That okay?”

“Fine, fine. Now I get to see the world through your eyes,” she grinned. “It should be really cool!”

He laughed. “No wonder you drove that old bastard crazy. You sure don’t speak like a Vulpan. Six years of private school and proper English lessons, down the drain.”

She laughed brightly. “At least you haven’t lost your Boston accent!” she teased. “I should send a *cah* down for you, bro!”

“It’s not that bad,” he said defensively. “Six months in the south has taken the edge off of it.”

“But I can still hear it,” she winked. “Hate to say it, little bro, but I’m gonna have to cut this short. I have some reports to go through before bed, and it’s getting late here. What time is it there?”

“Around eight. It’s, what, nine there?”

She nodded. “I’m looking at three hours of boring reports before bed. And I want to read some of your journal too.”

“Alright. I’ll look for that messenger tomorrow.”

“Okay, bro. Send me those files, okay?”

“They’re on their way as soon as we finish.”

“Then start sending it,” she grinned. “Okay, next appointment,” she said, holding up her blackberry. “Wednesday, any time after six. That work for you?”

“I’ll be on a bus.”

“Damn. Well, I’ll just call ya, okay? Since you’ll have a new phone,” she winked.

“Heh. Alright, sis. Talk to you later. Love you.”

“Love ya, bro. Be good.”

Her picture vanished from the window, replaced by a big black screen with **DISCONNECTED** blinking within it. He put his black-furred paws together over the laptop and laced his fingers, then set his muzzle atop them, lost in thought. A phone. He couldn’t disagree with her reasoning, and that was the only reason he accepted it. It *would* be a little safer. And knowing his sister, it would be one of those phones that would work anywhere in the entire world, like hers. That global plan deal. Although...it would give the family a means to get in touch with him, if they ever wanted to bother him.

Not that would happen, really. The old bastard’s hand kept reaching out from the grave to keep Kit separated from the others. The aid clause was still in the will. Anyone caught giving him anything they got from their inheritances could have it taken away. Vil was the only one who dared to go against the will, but that was because she was the one in control of the family business, and she’d already threatened to take the entire family to court to have the will invalidated and make her executor if anyone in the family dared try to get her cut out.

She could do it. Vil was a sweet femme, loving and considerate, but she could be as tenacious as a wolverine when she was angry, she was a genius, and she had the Vulpan ruthlessness when it came to business. That's how she got the nickname "The Ice Queen," because she could be a cold bitch when dealing with people she didn't like, and when she was at work, she was *all business*. The family was afraid of her, because they knew that if she threatened to do it, that meant she was confident she could pull it off. And none of them were particularly keen on the idea of having Vilenne Vulpan, the Ice Queen, in control of *their* money.

Such a misleading nickname, he often thought. Vil got that nickname while in school because of her icy demeanor when dealing with boys looking to try to woo a rich femme, a *Vulpan* no less, and some reporter had latched onto it when she took over as the CEO of the family business. It was an indication of his sister's personality. In private, she was warm, funny, kind, and sweet, but in public, she was every inch a Vulpan. Cool, calculating, dangerous, and almost ruthless. For the first few months, she needed that cold nature to sweep out the lackeys and sycophants from the company and weed out the backstabbers like Bundowski, those who wouldn't accept the young female as their boss, or thought they knew better than a wet-nosed little kit that was just out of college. She cleaned house quickly, and now had the company running smoothly the way she wanted it. But under it all, she was still Vil, his big sis, who had been a shoulder to cry on when their mother died when he was eight, and the reassuring, steady presence in his life that served as more than a sister. She'd become more protective of him after their mother died, more like a mother herself than a sister, and she was still the only member of his family that he could honestly say he loved.

The rest of them could go to hell.

He blinked, and remembered he made a promise. He sent the files holding his journals as a series of emails to her, one for each state he'd visited since leaving Boston, then shut down the laptop and closed it. He finished his tea, then simply sat there a moment and listened to *Bunvayne* playing over the speakers as the song finished up.

“Oooh, look at *him*, JD!” Sandy squealed in a low whisper, elbowing her and pointing. The chinchilla leaned in close to her, almost cheek to cheek. “That missing piece of his ear makes him look so *dangerous*, doesn't it? I wonder if he's one of those rough types.”

“Sandy,” Jessie sighed. “The last thing I need right now is another *rough type*.”

“Yeah, well, it was just a thought,” she said, a little less enthusiastically.

That was really the last thing she needed. Burke had been cute too, with rugged wolf looks and a good bod, but the instant he dared to slap her during an argument, it was over immediately. She wouldn't put up with that kind of treatment, and besides, her brother would have killed him if she ever told him it happened.

Really. Why did some males think that hitting a female was a way to win an argument?

She hadn't really wanted to come out, but Sandy could be a real pest sometimes. She knew what happened, and she felt it was some kind of moral obligation to help her sorority sister.

A lop bunny sat down on the far side of Sandy and started making small talk. Sandy was insufferably cute and perky, and she could talk to strangers like that. She was so fearless! But, it gave Jessie a moment to secretly look at that fox again, without Sandy pointing out body parts and making all kinds of lewd observations. Something about him...tickled at her. He seemed vaguely familiar to her, somehow. She didn't know how. Had he stood behind her in line down at the cafeteria? Had he been in one of her classes? She'd seen him before, she was certain of it.

Well, he was kinda cute. He was a bit more rugged than most foxes, with a slightly broader muzzle, and looked a little taller too. And his furry arms were a little bigger than the usual college student. This guy worked out. He shifted his arms, and she realized he had a jagged white stripe in the fur of his forearm, ending just before the color of his fur changed to form the dark mittens on their paws common among foxes.

"Scars," Sam said as she sat down beside them, adjusting her round-lensed glasses.

"Huh?" they asked in unison.

"The white stripes on his arm. Those are scars. Probably gotten the same time he lost that piece of his ear."

"Says you, miss Pre-Med," Sandy grinned. "And who says we were looking at him?"

"Mmm-hmm," the skunk intoned, staring directly at the small gray chinchilla.

Sandy's cheek fur ruffled slightly, which made her eyes flash. Somehow, Sam could always do that to Sandy, despite the fact that Sandy

was one of the most fearless femmes Jessie had ever met in her life.

“We should go say hi to him,” Sandy said with a conniving grin.

“You mean you want me to go say hi to him,” Jessie corrected.

“Sure, go for it! He’s *cute*, and now we know he’s not a rough type!”

“He’s got some money, too. That’s a Sabletech DV laptop. Those things are expensive,” Sam reasoned.

“That’s just another good reason!” Sandy said in an excited whisper.
“Go on!”

“I,” she hedged. He was cute, that was for sure, but something told her...he didn’t want to be bothered. “No. He seems like he’s just fine. I don’t think we should bother him.”

“You are such a chicken!” Sandy said, then she got up, adjusted her tanktop, and then marched right towards him.

“Sandy!” Jessie said in a strangled whisper, her fur already ruffling out. She was going to do it! She was really going to go over there and try to set them up!

Lost in the rhythms of the song, imagining in his head the chords he’d have to use to play the guitar component of the song, Kit was oblivious to the world. Music had been one of his few escapes from reality since he left home. The hammering of the drums, the melodic rise and fall of the lead instruments, the angst and anguish in the voice of the lead singer, they merged with the haunting lyrics to form a ballad of loss and dejection.

Nobody knows me.

Nobody cares.

Nobody sees me.

Nobody stares.

I'm lost in the world.

I'm lost in my head.

I've lost my girl.

I've no tears to shed.

Come back to me;

My Dark Angel.

We were meant to be;

My Dark Angel.

Take my soul with you.

Before you return

Before you return.

.

Return to hell.

The lyrics were vague, but Kit could see the heart of them. A male had lost his soulmate, not to a breakup, but in death, and he mourned and hoped for death so they could be reunited. The artist's use of non-rhyming lyrics in the chorus was unusual, holding the rhymic finishing lyric until the very end of the song, but it provided extra impact, more emphasis on the core of the song's meaning.

It was very clever.

He really needed to practice more with the guitar. He could play it some, but he was nowhere near good enough to play in public and not feel like an idiot. Besides, singing had always been his strong suit. His family said he had a good voice, and he actually rather liked it. Too bad he was born to a father who thought music was a waste of time and energy, and refused to allow him to take band or join a chorus or anything like that.

“Hi!”

Kit started, almost knocking his teacup off the table. He found himself staring up at a gray-furred chinchilla with large brown eyes, round ears with three piercings, and a huge grin. That grin slipped off her face when he looked up at her, and then she suddenly clapped her hands and gave out a little squeal.

“Your eyes are *beautiful!*” she exclaimed, reaching down and putting her paws over his wrists. “I’ve never seen anyone with two different colored eyes before that weren’t faked with contacts! Were you born that way?”

“I, uh, yeah,” he said, trying to get his bearings. She talked a thousand words a minute, and it was hard to keep up with her. “Uh, thanks for the complement.”

“You come here often?”

“Just a few times. It’s the only place I can use the internet.”

“Aww, nuts, I thought you were in U.T.” U.T. was the University of Texas, which was down on the south side of Austin, right by the state capitol.

“No, I went to U-Mass,” he corrected with a shake of his head.

“I *thought* you were a Yankee,” she teased, patting his wrists. “I can hear it in your accent.”

“Guilty,” he said with a chuckle.

“So, can I sit a minute?”

“I guess so,” he shrugged.

She seated herself across from him. “It’s nice to meet a guy first, without him coming over and laying all kinds of corny lines on us,” she grinned. “Sorry I scared ya.”

“I was listening to the music. I zone out sometimes when I’m doing it.”

“My sis does the same thing. Then again, she’s a music major. I think she’d marry some of those classical composers if they were dug out of their graves.” She gave him a devious little grin. “Now, let’s get down to business.”

“Business?”

“Yeah. My friend over there just broke up with her asshole of an ex-boyfriend,” she said, pointing to his left. “She’s cute, and she’s available.

You're cute, you don't look like you're attached, and I thought you might like to ask her out."

He glanced over. In a booth against the wall, just under a movie poster of *Star Wars*, two femmes were sitting. One of them was a rather serious looking skunk, with large round glasses, kinda cute in a studious sort of way, and the other was a cream-furred female cat, but she had blond hair, black ears, and black mittens on her paws. Her blue eyes were wide, her face fur was virtually standing on end, and she looked mortified.

She was *gorgeous*.

In one glance, he took her in. She was wearing a blue designer shirt and a silver bracelet on her right wrist. Her hair was perfectly cut and styled in a long side-parted poof that hovered over her eyes, tucked up under her opposite ear. She was very shapely from what he could see of her, filling out her shirt nicely.

Though she was the most beautiful femme he'd ever seen, he just wasn't sure he was ready to even try to talk to her. He wasn't just worried that he wasn't ready to enter the dating scene, but there was a very real fear about how his family would react if their disowned embarrassment started taking up with a *cat*. He may not be a part of the family anymore, but he could still be a liability to their reputation.

"Well, her boyfriend must have been an utter idiot to let someone like her slip through his fingers," he said evenly, looking back at the chinchilla. "She's beautiful."

"So, that's even more reason to go introduce yourself," the chinchilla pressed, grabbing his paw. "Come on, I'll introduce you!"

“No thank you,” he said, with sincere regret. “I’m leaving in a few days, so I’m afraid I’m not exactly what she’d be looking for.”

“Aww! You’re leaving? Going back to Massachusetts?”

He shook his head. “I’m going west.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll go until I find a place that, well, *invites* me to stop. Then I’ll stay there a while and try to find out why it wanted me there,” he said, a distant look in his eyes.

“How *romantic*! So you just go until you find a place to stop?”

He nodded.

“Wow, what a way to live! Imagine everything you get to see and do. It’s like living a vacation!”

“Until you get hungry or need someplace to sleep. Then this little issue called money shows up and spoils it,” he chuckled.

“Well, why don’t you go over there and talk to my friend JD,” she offered. “Maybe you can sweep her off her feet and take her with you,” the chinchilla purred to him.

“Girls like her won’t have anything to do with people like me,” he said evenly, but with a hint of finality. “She has a life and friends. All I have is the road.”

“Well, if you sweet-talked me enough, I might break up with Bobby and tag along,” she winked.

He chuckled. He patted her paw, then leaned in and kissed her lightly on the cheek. “It’s a tempting offer, but I’ll have to pass. And it’s time for me to go. Thank you for a wonderful chat, uh…”

“Sandy,” she said, taking his paw and shaking it.

“Kit,” he smiled.

She giggled. “Kit? Your parents named you *Kit*? That’s like JD’s parents naming her Kitten, or—“

“Why does everyone always say that,” he sighed, throwing his paws up in exasperation.

“Well, because—“

“I know why,” he cut her off, which made her giggle again. He stood up and picked up his laptop, then smiled down at her.

“Why would they do something like that to you?”

“It’s short for something that’s even worse,” he said with a shudder. He *hated* his name, and he wouldn’t go by his middle name because that’s what his bastard of a father was called.

“Oooh, what?”

“Never in a million years,” he said with finality, then he pushed in his chair.

“Maybe you can come back tomorrow and we can talk some more?” she asked.

“I work up until I leave. I doubt I’ll have time. Night, Sandy. It was nice meeting you.”

“You too!”

And with that, he extricated himself from the talkative chinchilla. He passed right by the booth holding the skunk and the cat, and he couldn't help but look at her one more time. Her cheek fur poofed out almost instantly when she looked at him, but he just gave her a genuinely compassionate smile, and said not a word to her. Lord knows, her friend probably embarrassed her half to death already.

Such a beautiful cat. The sad part was, most of him really wanted to sit down next to her in that booth and talk to her, but he knew that that was something he'd better not visit on some poor unsuspecting girl. If she knew about him, she might consider him to be lying, just pretending, then the awful reality would hit and she'd be besieged by tabloid reporters and angry Vulpans threatening her to stay away from one of their own. Even if he was disowned, he was still blue-blood, and no feline tramp should even dare look in his direction, they'd tell her.

He wouldn't drop that hell on her, no matter how beautiful she was, or how much he might want to sit in that booth and talk to her.

“So, what did he say?” Sam asked with uncharacteristic curiosity as Sandy came drifting back to the table.

“He's so *romantic*! He's working his way across the country, just stopping wherever he pleases. He said he knows to stop when the town *invites* him to stay. Wow!” she gushed. “Did you see his eyes? Weren't they *gorgeous*?”

“I’ve never seen anything like that before,” Sam said clinically. “At least not in person. I’ve seen pictures of it in my medical journals, though. It’s a genetic mutation.”

“Oh, stop trying to make it all science-y!” Sandy complained. “Can’t you see the beauty just for beauty’s sake?”

“JD? JD? Hello?” Sam said, waving her white-mittened paw in front of the cat’s face. Jessie blinked, then glanced at the skunk.

He was so *handsome*. Even with the scars and the missing ear, he was a handsome fox, and his eyes were—*wow*. They were beyond gorgeous. She looked at him, and she wasn’t even able to talk. It was almost, well, *intimidating*. But that wasn’t new for her, since she was naturally shy to begin with.

And again, this strange, nagging feeling that she’d seen him somewhere before.

“Oh yeah, she likes him,” Sandy grinned. “I should have asked where he works!” the chinchilla said, smacking herself in the forehead.

“I’ve...seen him before,” Jessie said slowly, blinking and looking at the table. “I don’t know where. But I have.”

“Probably bumped into him at the Circle K,” Sam noted.

“Maybe.” *Or maybe not*, she mused to herself.

Early shift at the Double J was busy in one way, relaxing in another. It was their job to set up the restaurant to open, which was pretty easy. Kit did whatever needed to be done, from setting out chairs to cutting up vegetables

in the kitchen to vacuuming the carpets. The Blimp didn't work days, instead it was Sheila, a mongoose with a pretty laid-back disposition, so much so she brought a Game Boy with her to work and often played it in corners during lulls. Unlike the Blimp, she trusted her crew and knew everything would get done, and she allowed them to go about it without trying to loom over them and micro-manage. That was why Kit always smiled when he saw he was on dayshift.

He was a little distracted today, though. He'd already warned Sheila that someone was going to come see him and he might need about ten minutes when they arrived, and she was alright with it. He kept an eye on the door while they were getting ready to open, but got busy in the kitchen helping them change out a gas cylinder for the fountain drink machine, because the fitting was stripped and they couldn't get the hose off.

Saturday was slow at first, but it got busy quick after about one o'clock, so it was important to get all the little things done before they got slammed. They also usually had a short-handed staff until about one o'clock, which was why Kit worked wherever he was needed when there weren't any dishes to clear.

"Hey, Kit!" Sheila boomed from the door to the dining room. "Those people you said were coming are here to see ya!"

"Sure, hold on a minute!" he called back. "We almost got this fixed! Okay, hold it steady, Lucy, let's try one more time." His arms quivered as he struggled to unscrew the fitting, then the nut cracked and it turned with a light squeal of protest.

"My hero!" the cougar said with a laugh, patting him on the shoulder. "I can get it from here, cutie. Go take care of whatever that boss wants."

Kit came out of the back cleaning his hands on a rag, then almost fell over!

There, flanked by two large panthers in dark suits, wearing a serious gray dress skirt and blazer and holding a briefcase, was *Vil*!

“Sis!” he said in surprise as she lowered her sunglasses, showing him the family eyes.

She laughed and slammed into him, giving him a rough hug. “Little bro!” she called. “It’s so good to see you!”

“I never dreamed—“

“That’s why I did it,” she grinned. “You’re so thin! And look at this!” she said, picking at his red uniform shirt. “Red does *not* look good on you, bro. You need to talk to whoever gave you this.”

He laughed. “I seriously doubt they’d listen,” he said. “What are you doing here?”

“Do you have any idea how hard you are to track down?” she complained. “I haven’t seen you in six months either!”

“You see me every week.”

“Well, I can’t *hug* you ever week,” she added, giving him a little squeeze, but careful not to put any pressure on his back. “Now give your big sister a kiss!” she ordered, tapping her cheek imperiously.

He laughed and did as he was commanded, kissing her on the cheek.

“Where’s your boss? I want to talk to him.”

“Her. And don’t you dare,” he warned in a serious tone.

“I won’t say a word,” she said, sticking her tongue out at him. “Just go have a seat. I want to make sure you won’t get in trouble if you sit down and talk with me a while.”

“Well, alright,” he acquiesced. He went over and sat down at the nearest table, but Vil’s two panther escorts didn’t move from the front door. Vil stood near the kitchen door with Sheila for a few minutes, chatting with her, and they both looked over at him once. Then she laughed and nodded, then went back into the kitchen.

“There, all taken care of,” she said, putting her briefcase on the table. She opened it and took out a box holding a Motorola phone. “Here you are,” she told him. “It’s on a satellite plan, bro. It’ll work almost anywhere. Use it however you want. The number for the phone is on a post-it stuck to the phone inside the box. I have my work, home, and cell numbers in its address book, and a few other numbers you might want to have.”

“Like?”

“Like Clancy, for one. He basically helped me raise you, bro. He’s been really worried about you.”

“You mean you helped him raise me,” Kit grinned.

“Technicalities,” she said with a dismissive wave of her paw, which made him laugh. “Now, I’ve totally murdered my entire schedule for next week, so let’s make it worth it.”

He did. They talked over nearly two hours, about anything and everything. He told her all about his travels and what he’d seen and done, and she went into exhaustive detail about work and home. She told him all about the little war going on in the family over the will, and there were

already a couple of lawsuits filed over this or that cousin that felt he was unfairly cut out. It also turned out that their bastard father's brothers and sisters also felt a little upset that *they* weren't given the company to operate, going instead to his daughter, and she felt that two of their uncles, Kitstrom Jacob and Kitstrom Zachary, might try to challenge the will in court.

"They don't have a prayer, but it could be a little distracting," she snorted. "There was an executor clause in his power of attorney that transferred all the shares over to me *before* he died. Hell, the board at the company approved it long before it happened. I was the next in line way before dad's health started going on him. That torpedos their lawsuit right there. The way I was given the shares makes it impossible for them to try to get them through the court, and I've already hired Ursus and Vorick to look into invalidating dad's will."

Kit whistled. "Expensive."

"Yeah, well, Clancy brought me a copy of an email Cybil sent to her father looking at the possibility of getting me cut out through the back door, because of you, and also a way to try to invalidate the pre-nup so she can lay a claim on the inheritance. So I'm going to beat her to the punch. And since the family's all pissed off over what they didn't get, I guess I'll just have to void Dad's will and take control of everything myself. And since I was given control of the company while he was still alive, there's not a damn thing Uncle Jake and Uncle Zach can do about it."

"I'm sorry to hear about that, sis. I knew that would be a shitstorm when he died, but I was hoping it would pass you over."

"Watch your language, young man," she teased with a wink.

"I'm an adult now, *sis*. So bite me."

She laughed. “Well, the firm feels they have a viable case to invalidate the will, *because* of you,” she winked. “Dad’s obsession with you indicates a lack of sound mind, in their opinion. After all, a man has to be crazy to do what Dad did to his own son.”

“Heh. I’d love to see that. I know it would make that bastard roll in his grave if I was *un*-disowned, but at least in that regard, he’ll get his wish. I’m never going back to Boston, Vil. They turned their backs on me when I needed help the most, and I won’t ever feel like I’m a part of them again.”

“Well, as long as you don’t turn your back on me, I can live with that,” she told him seriously.

“Never.”

“Good,” she smiled. “I read your journals, bro, and they’re *incredible*! You should publish them!”

“They’re not that good,” he said dismissively.

“Bro, the way you describe people and things, it’s like I was *there*,” she told him seriously. “I almost peed myself when I read about that rabbit in New Orleans and the soup can!” She broke out into a gale of delighted laughter.

“Well, it was his story, not mine,” Kit chuckled.

“That’s just it, bro. It was like he was there telling *me* the story, not you just writing down what you heard. It was amazing! Do me a favor.”

“What?”

“Keep doing it. You always wondered what your calling was...well, I think you found it. I really think you could make it as a writer.”

“I don’t think I’d be a good writer. I could never make a deadline, and I’m not that good at making things up. All I can really do is write about what I’ve heard, or seen.”

“Not every writer is a fiction writer, Kit. At the very least, you should put these up on a blog. And write your journal as a blog. You could call it ‘A Poor Little Rich Boy’s Experiences In America’,” she said grandly, putting her hands out as if seeing her title in lights.

“I think Richie Rich would come after me with a switchblade for stealing his nickname,” Kit mused, which made Vil erupt into laughter.

“You should think about it.”

“I will,” he promised.

“So, you have, what, three days?”

“About. I’ll be a little sad to leave.”

“Why is that?”

He glanced at her. “I saw a femme I wanted to get to know better,” he admitted.

Her eyes brightened and she leaned over the table. “Okay, *now* we’re getting to the good stuff!” she giggled. “Tell me all about her! Where did you meet? Is she pretty?”

“I didn’t really meet her,” he said, then described the circumstances in the café the night before. “I wanted to sit down and talk to her, but all I could see was that bastard and the family, just waiting to bury her if they knew I was going out with a cat. Can you imagine what would happen if they found out a *Vulpan* was going out with another species?”

“Yeah,” she said, frowning a little. “That would be a little messy, but nothing that couldn’t be worked out. But was she pretty?”

“She was the most beautiful femme I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“Even prettier than me?” she said with mock rejection. He slapped her on the arm, which made her laugh. “That’s okay, if you thought I was pretty like that, I’d start getting worried,” she teased. “Did you get her name?”

“No, her friend called her JD, but I seriously doubt that was her name,” he said, with a little sigh, putting his elbow on the table and leaning his cheek into his paw.

“Well, we need to get you fixed before you see her again,” she said, reaching up and tweaking his half-missing left ear.

“Eh, I’m kinda used to it now,” he told her, letting her do something he wouldn’t let any other fur do, touch his injured ear.

“I hate it. When will you let me get it fixed for you?”

“When I can pay for it myself.”

“Bro—“

“No, Vil. And that’s final.”

She sighed, then nodded. “You hungry? I think I’d like to try some of the food here.”

“Food?” he said, then he gasped and looked at the clock. “Aw, crud! We’ve been here talking for *hours!*”

“It’s alright,” she laughed. “Your boss said you have the rest of the day off.”

“But I need the mon—“

Vilenne grabbed his muzzle, clamping his mouth shut. “Don’t you dare say that five-letter word in front of me,” she told him with serious eyes. “Now, when I take my paw away, you’d better not say anything but yes. Got that, young fur?”

He nodded silently.

She released his muzzle, but he just gave her a sly grin. “Money,” he completed, which made her both laugh and haul off and slap him on the shoulder.

“Now, I’m sure they’ve been watching us all this time, so let’s at least use it.” She looked back towards the kitchen and waved her arms. When no one came out, she put her fingers to her muzzle and gave out an ear-splitting whistle. Even now, he had *no* idea how she could do that. He’d tried to learn how she did it for years.

Seconds later, Amanda, a rather cute german shepherd, rushed up with a order pad. “I take it you wanted to see me?” she said with a bright smile.

“Amanda, this is my sister, Vil,” Kit introduced.

“Oh, we heard who she was,” she winked. “If you don’t mind me saying, I think your eyes are lovely, miss Vil. I didn’t know you had them too.”

“It’s a kind of family trait,” Vil winked. “Everyone from our great-grandad down has the eyes. It’s how we know each other in a room full of foxes.”

Amanda chuckled. “Hungry?”

“You bet! What’s good?”

“Everything,” she answered. “Want a menu?”

“Please.”

“Good. Don’t trust this one’s food choices. All he ever eats are hamburgers,” Amanda teased.

“Well, some things never change,” Vil laughed.

Amanda brought her a menu, and she spent a long moment looking at it. “Oh, yeah. Marcus! Stav! Go ahead and get something to eat, on me!” she called to the two panthers who still stood silently in the entry foyer, near the receptionist’s podium.

The two panthers took a table near the two foxes, and Amanda brought them menus as well. She came back and gave them a bright smile, lingering her glance at Kit. “Ready?”

“Yup! I’ll take the ribeye, rare,” she answered. “No potato. Put this shrimp bowl here on the side in its place.”

“We can do that, no problem. What do you want to drink?”

“Milk please,” she answered.

“What do you want, Kit?” she grinned.

“I’ll just take a hamburger. Jimmy knows how I like them,” he answered.

“You bet. I’ll get it out to you as quick as it’s done, ‘kay?”

“Sooooo,” Vil sounded after Amanda hurried off. “Think you’re gonna go, or maybe stay a while?”

“My head and my conscious tells me to go. Another part of me is trying to change their minds.”

Vil laughed. “Would that be your heart, or perhaps something a bit further south?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

She giggled.

“I dreamed about her last night,” he admitted, his words without their usual crispness as he started to zone out, usually something he only did when a song he liked was playing on the stereo. “I don’t usually remember my dreams, but I remembered that one.”

“What happened? Something you can’t mention to your sister?” she teased.

He blinked. “No, nothing like that,” he said, his cheeks ruffling slightly. “I just had the guts to sit down and talk to her, that’s all. And she told me her name.”

“What was it?”

“I don’t remember. It’s one of those things where you hear, but you don’t hear, and it’s like you heard. If you know what I mean.”

“Well, maybe you should think of hanging around a while, then,” Vil urged. “Find an apartment. Get a better job than this. Maybe get into a position where you *do* have the guts to talk to her.”

“But the family—“

“Bro, you said it yourself. They turned their backs on you. You’ve been your own fox since you were sixteen, and no thanks to them. You

don't owe the family a *damn* thing. Don't let them run your life *now*. Do what *you* want. If you want to chase after this cat and see where it goes, then by great-grandad's green right eye, do it!"

"I'd love to, but...I dunno. I wouldn't even know what to say. How could I explain it, sis? 'Oh, by the way, I'm one of *the* Boston Vulpans, but I'm as poor as a church mouse and my family might want you dead if they knew about you.' Not quite the kind of smalltalk that's gonna get us on the right foot, is it?"

"Just be yourself, bro. That's all you need to be, and all you should ever be."

"That's the *problem*," he growled.

"Hey, never know til you try," she teased. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"Uncle Zach could have her killed," Kit said with a serious look. "You know how maniacal he is about our bloodline."

"I don't think it would go quite that far."

"Well, I do."

"Then I'll just have to do something about that, I suppose," Vil said dismissively. "Once I have the will voided and they find me holding all their purse strings, let's see how creative they get."

"I'd be careful about that, sis. If you back them into a corner like that, they might surprise you when they come out swinging."

"It won't be a bother at all, bro," she shrugged. "I'll just remind them that they turned their backs on you years ago, so what you do now is none

of their damned business. You've already been disowned. If any of them thinks they're going to put themselves in our father's shoes where you're concerned, I'm going to bust out the sledgehammer and start bashing some toes."

"Nothing would make me happier. The day I wake up and don't remember who I am and where I came from will be the happiest day of my life."

"You're so mean to me," she teased.

"Well, not counting you, sis. Never you." He took her paws in his own and squeezed gently.

"Now, where is that food?" she complained. "I need to start thinking of going back."

"It won't take long," he promised.

Five minutes later, their food was on the table. Vil took one bite of her steak and almost quivered. "Mmmmmmmmm, oh *wow*, you weren't kidding! This is better than any steak I've ever had in Boston!"

"They don't know how make steak north of Arkansas," Amanda teased as she put platters down in front of the two panthers. "If you want *real* steak, you have to come where we take making steak as seriously as a pastor takes God."

Vil laughed, almost losing her mouthful of steak.

Kit enjoyed his hamburger as his sister devoured the steak, then went through the shrimp quickly. "Mmm, I wish they delivered, but it'd be cold by the time it got home," she giggled. "Amanda! Can you have them grill

me another one and put it in some foil? If it microwaves and tastes half as good as it does fresh, it's still better than what I can get at home!"

"One more steak, coming up!" she called from near the kitchen doors and hurried inside.

"It is very good steak, madam," one of the panthers agreed. "I'll go talk to their chefs, if you'd like, and take some notes for Deward."

"That's a great idea!" she said with a nod.

The panther stood up and took a small notepad from his inside pocket, then approached the kitchen door. He opened it and called out. Sheila peeked out and gave him and Vil a curious look, but both of them just waved her on. She nodded, and the panther disappeared into the kitchen with her.

"Stav is always so thoughtful," she chuckled. The two panthers were unknown to him in person, but her emails told him who they were. They were bodyguards, and had worked for her for about a year. She described them as utterly professional, discrete, and quite intelligent. They were twin brothers, with twenty years of impeccable service as the personal bodyguards of some of the biggest names in the world.

Kit endured several more minutes of his sister trying to subtly sway him into doing what she said, but he was quite adamant. The only area where he showed any signs of wavering was in his decision to leave Austin or stay. "I, I just don't know," he sighed, leaning his head back. "I'll have to think about it."

Amanda returned with a large styrofoam box. "Here we are, Miss Vil," she said. "One rare ribeye, double foil wrapped. It should stay hot for a

while. Jimmy said if you nuke it, just pour some water or marinade over it and cook it in a sealed container. That should keep it from drying out as it heats up.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Vil said as she took the box from her. “May I have the check for us and my panther friends please? Oh, and if you wouldn’t mind, separate Kit’s burger from it. I have to pay for that separately.”

“They still watch the bank accounts even after the old bastard died?”

“Like a hawk,” she nodded, finishing her milk. “But they can’t make a mouse’s squeak about what I pay for in cash earned from my boutique. That’s *my money*. It has nothing to do with the family.”

The boutique was indeed just that. It was something she had to set up as part of her work in Harvard, to build a business from the ground up, and do it for real. She had taken a two thousand dollar initial investment and parlayed it into a successful boutique in downtown Boston, where it made a tidy profit every year. The success of Blue Buttons Boutique was one of the reasons why the board of Vulpan Shipyards had agreed with his bastard father to allow Vil to succeed him as head of the company. When it came to business, Vil was every bit a Vulpan.

God, he wished he could have been there when the bastard made that announcement. He must have chewed on his own tongue before saying it.

The old bastard’s will was quite specific. It stated that anyone that helped Kit using *family assets* would forfeit their inheritances. Vil’s outside income from her boutique was no part of the will, so she could spend *that* money to help him if she so chose. But he still resisted it when she did so,

because he knew his family would try to find some way to twist it to try to get Vilenne cut out of the will...more for them.

Amanda returned with two checks. Vil handed her a platinum Visa for one, and a hundred dollar bill for the other. "My and my panther friends' dinners on the card, his dinner with the cash, please."

"Yes ma'am," Amanda said with a nod. "I'll be right back."

"Okay, bro, last chance. Is there any way I can convince you to come home?"

"Absolutely none," he stated adamantly.

She sighed. "Alright. You have the phone now, bro. Please, *please*, use it, okay?"

"Well, you have the number, so I'm sure you'll make sure to remind me when you think I'm not keeping in touch," he chuckled.

"You bet your furry butt I will," she grinned.

Amanda returned. Vil signed for the card, took the change, then pushed fifty of it back to the startled waitress. "Because you've earned every penny," Vil winked. "And here, take this and give it to the cook, for being so considerate to me," she added, handing her a twenty. "And give this to Sheila for being so kind to give me and my brother time." She handed her the other twenty, leaving nothing but pocket change in her paw.

"Ohmahgawd, thank you, miss Vil!" she said, then she ran excitedly back towards the kitchen, waving the bills in her hand. "She *tipped* us!" she squealed as she vanished into the kitchen.

Vil handed the box holding the steak to one of her guards, then picked up her briefcase and stood up. Kit too stood up, and he shared a long embrace with her. “You be good down here, bro,” she told him. “And think about that cat. All I can say is don’t leave. Find her. Chase her. See where it can go. Don’t let the family deny you any chance at happiness.”

“I’ll, I’ll give it serious thought, sis,” he promised. He was always honest with Vil, no matter what.

She pushed back to look up at him, and patted his shoulders. “Well, I’m proud of you, Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan,” she said with a grin. “And I’m proud to say that my brother *washes dishes*.”

He laughed, then leaned forward and put his forehead against hers. “You always were a nut.”

“That just proves we’re related,” she teased back. “I love ya, bro. I’ll see you soon. Bye.” She kissed him on the cheek, then turned and walked away. He watched her go around and to the entry foyer, and then her guards opened the door for her and escorted her out into the parking lot.

He sighed. He missed her. She was the only family he had, and thank God she had never given up on him.

He glanced around. Some of the customers were looking at him, and six faces were crowded into the doorway to the kitchen, staring at him with silly grins. “Kitstrom! Oh, Kitstrom! Wash dishes for me!” Sheila called loudly. “If it doesn’t chafe your delicate, noble hands!”

His day manager ducked into the kitchen with a squeal when he threw a full napkin roll of silverware at her.

But the surreal day was over now. He pocketed the new phone and went back to work. There was still four hours on the clock, and he owed that and more to Sheila for being such a wonderful boss.

Outside, Vilenne Vulpan stood with Marcus as Stav brought the car around, putting her sunglasses back on. “Marcus,” she said in a cool tone, as the business vixen in her began to reassert itself, now that she was back in public.

“Yes, madam?”

“I have a job for you. And it won’t be easy.”

“I thought you might, madam.”

“Did you hear?”

“Yes, madam. It’s not much to go on, but it’s enough. Once I find the chinchilla named Sandy, I’ll find this JD.”

“It can’t be obvious. If the family finds out—“

“I can do it all from my Boston office, madam. What I do on my own time is none of their concern.”

“I’m glad you understand the situation. Just be discrete on this side as well. If Kit finds out I’m putting a paw in, he’ll beat me up.”

“We’d never allow that, madam,” Marcus said with a slight smile.

“Remember, be discrete, but this is important. I only want to find her so I can be there in case he can’t. We’ll let him try first. If he can’t find her, he might get discouraged and move on. I can’t let him do that.”

“I’ll have a complete file on her by Tuesday. That is a guarantee, madam.”

“There’s an extra ten thousand added to your and Stav’s quarterly bonus if you do.”

“You’ve always been a generous employer, madam.”

“It’s how I keep you here.”

“True,” he agreed honestly.

Chapter 2

Thuk-thud. Thuk-thud. Thuk-thud.

The tennis ball hit the wall, then bounced off the rickety floor, and then dropped into Kit's waiting paw. There wasn't much room in here, and even less to do, but a male with a tennis ball always had a means of entertainment at hand.

He was sitting on the floor in front of his World War II surplus cot, in a tiny closet that passed as a room here in the Lone Star Mission, a place for furs like himself to come and find shelter. There was a homeless shelter on one side, but since Kit had a job, he qualified for these private rooms. He wasn't guaranteed a room, though. Every week, on Monday, he had to sign up for one and prove he still had a job. And so long as he got signed up before they ran out of rooms, he was set for another week. And it wasn't free, either. He had to pay fifty dollars for a week, but that was a whole heap cheaper than he'd find anywhere else. It was enough for him, though. The room wasn't too clean, but it was dry, the door locked, and he had access to a shower.

He often did that as he thought. He rather liked playing tennis back when he was younger, and though he lost his racket long ago to a thief, he did like to keep a tennis ball around. Bouncing it off the wall was a rhythmic activity that kept his paws busy and gave him time to think.

And all his thoughts were on *her*.

He dreamed about her again last night. It was almost the same dream, but this time he met her in the Double J. He was working, and she came in to eat. She smiled when she saw him, and he sat down and talked to. Then the Blimp came by and started screaming at him, so he tore off his work shirt and left paw in paw with her....then he woke up.

Why couldn't he get her out of his mind? He never even *talked* to her, for crying out loud! She could be a ditz. She could be crazy. Hell, she could be some psycho serial killer in cahoots with Sandy and that skunk, trying to lure him off to a private place so they could kill him.

One thing was for sure. He couldn't leave now. If he left, she would haunt him for weeks, months, maybe even years. Vil was right about that. He had to find out. If he left and never even tried, then there was no telling what he might be missing.

And that's why he sat there on the floor, bouncing the tennis ball off the wall just under the window, because had a lot to do. He had the next two days off, and he had things to do.

Today, he would go get a Sunday paper and look for a job and start looking for apartments. He'd also go back to the Java Joint and surf the help-wanted websites. Tomorrow, he'd start filling out applications and start sending out resumes. He *was* a college graduate, after all, with a degree in history. But he was also good with his paws and very healthy and strong, thanks to his time in ROTC and his habit of exercising ingrained into him after the physical rehabilitation after his accident. He could find a job where his degree would help, but he could do almost any job.

He was basically just waiting for the Java Joint to open, really. And sitting there wondering why he was going to all this trouble over a *femme*,

but part of him just couldn't try to talk to her without being in a better position. How would it look to her to be asked out by a dishwasher who lived in a homeless shelter? She'd laugh in his face! Such a beautiful cat wouldn't even entertain being asked out by a scarred, broke, *nothing* like him. He had to prove he was worth it to her. He had to find a job. He had to find a place to live. He had to show that he wasn't a waste of her time.

Thuk-thud. Thuk-thud. Thuk-thud.

"Would you cut that out!" the guy in the next room shouted, banging on the wall. "You and that damned ball! You're worse than a dog!"

"Sorry!" he called, blinking. He palmed the ball and stood up, figuring it was about time to get moving. By the time he got down to the Java Joint, it would probably be open. It was nearly noon, and he wanted to get a seat before the church crowds were on the streets. He put on a clean shirt and a pair of jeans that only had one hole in them, the left knee torn out, shouldered his backpack, and headed out.

He passed by others like him in the hall. The destitute, the out-of-luck, the young trying to get on their feet and the old looking for a second chance. There were a thousand stories in places like this, most of them sad but some of them hopeful, and many of them were stories told in the journals he kept. Doing what he did, Kit met all kinds of people. He'd met European royalty in a bar in New Orleans, and had a chilling brush with an escaped murderer in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. He'd sit down and strike up conversations with people, and they'd just *talk* to him. They'd tell him stories. They'd answer his questions. They'd show him who they were deep down inside, and then he'd write it down in his journals.

That made his inability to sit down and talk to that cat even more maddening. He wasn't a shy person. He would have had no trouble sitting down and talking with her, but it was different. He was looking for more than just to talk, and the spectre of his family had risen up and made him afraid. If he'd not wanted to do more than talk, he'd have had no problem sitting down and coaxing *her* story from her.

Everyone had a story to tell.

It was a half hour walk to the Java Joint from the mission, but for him it was a chance to think things through a little more. He got a plan set up in his mind about what he needed to do, a course of action to maximize his efficiency and minimize the time it would take to get it done. It was a typical Texas day in August, dry and already starting to get hot, and by midafternoon it would be broiling outside, much too hot for a New Englander.

It was with relief that he found the Java Joint wasn't busy yet, so he got his favorite table near the small stage they had for open mic nights, pulled out his laptop, and got to work. With a cup of green tea, a bagel, and a Sunday paper, he started hunting through the want ads, both for apartments and for jobs. There weren't many interesting jobs in there, and since this was a college town, there were tons of apartments but many of them were outrageously expensive. He transcribed all the ads into his computer by hand, making a detailed little spreadsheet of apartments available, sorted by price and location, then started listing the available jobs in the want ads in order of desirability. Later he'd cross-reference the two spreadsheets by addresses, so he could focus on apartments near jobs and jobs near apartments.

All those years of being forced into business schools did have some benefit, he supposed. He could make Excel get up and dance across the table.

Once he was done with the paper, he turned to the internet. He surfed several help-wanted websites, searching for jobs in the Austin area, and got quite a few promising leads. His major was history, but that kind of degree also meant that he knew how to write, and he was very good at research and editing, because of all the papers he had to write. There were two jobs posted for researchers, both for local magazines; one a college magazine aimed at the U.T. students and the other a local scene magazine. There was also a job being posted for an internship for a local TV station, but that was aimed more at journalism students from the university than someone like him. But, it was listed, so it was worth at least a look.

He realized he had email. He opened it up and found a message from Vil, a short little note.

Hey Bro.

(512) 555-3924.

That's Lone Star, a magazine based there in Austin. They're looking for a researcher. I know that's something you'd be good at doing.

Give them a call.

And I swear right here and now that I haven't meddled a bit. You'll have to earn that job yourself.

But I reserve the right to help you any way I can, both with what you'll let me do and what I can get away with where you can't see me.

Vil

Kit looked at the number, and realized he'd already written down that ad and had it in his spreadsheet.

He had to chuckle. That damn meddling female, but he loved her for her concern. She was going to let him live his life, but she was still gonna stick her paw in when she wanted to.

He shot back a reply thanking her for something he'd already found himself—just to tweak her a little bit—and promised he'd call first thing tomorrow morning, just as soon as he got his resume printed out down at Kinko's.

"This is stupid," Jessie complained, mainly to herself, crossing her arms before her in the passenger seat of Sandy's Festiva.

"No way!" she said. "I'm hungry!"

"And we're driving all the way up to North Austin to get a bite to eat? Sandy, you're being silly."

"Okay, well, maybe I *am* going back to that café," she winked as they stopped for a red light. "I want to see if he shows up again!"

"I have homework to do!" she protested. "I can't be out all day."

“Well, seeing as how I’m the one with the car keys, I think you’re going to stay out til I decide to go home,” she teased, flashing an evil little smile.

“Sandy!”

She laughed. “Come on, it’ll be fun! Think of the excitement waiting to see if he shows up! We can grab some lunch there, then go hit the mall and get you some new clothes! You’re available again, hon, you gotta *advertise!*”

“I have enough advertising clothes already.”

“I’m almost thinking you’re sick,” she grinned. “Turning down the chance to shop?”

“I, I just want to go back,” she hedged.

“Afraid he won’t show up? Or afraid he will?” she pressed.

“I’m not answering that,” she said primly.

“Riiight. And who was it making all those cooing noises and saying his name before I woke her up this morning?”

The cream-colored fur on her cheeks ruffled.

Sandy laughed. “You’re almost cute sometimes, you know that?” she grinned. “Such a prig.”

“I was raised to be a lady,” she protested. “Besides, if my mom found out I was even going out on dates, she’d have a cow.”

“She’s that bad?”

“She thinks I should get married *before* I even go out on a date.”

Sandy laughed. "How can you find a guy to marry if you can't date?"

"Well, that hasn't quite worked itself into her head yet. And she'd go on a three hour rant telling me how much she disapproves if she found out, then threaten to cut me off and make me come home and go to Cincinnati or Ohio State, where she can be close and keep an eye on me."

"Wow. She sounds like a real bitch."

"Why do you think I came here to go to school? It's a thousand miles away from Cincinnati."

"Well, you've certainly come a long way since we hazed you," Sandy said with a naughty tickle in her voice. "It only took us a year to get you a boyfriend. Too bad we picked such a jerk."

"Eh, it was fun with Burke, at least until I found out what he was really like."

"Well, I'm sorry about that. We'll find someone better this time. We just gotta get you laid, and everything will work out just fine."

Jessie's entire face poofed out. "Well, why are we doing this if he's just going to leave?"

"Because he was *cute*. And hell, girl, you can have a one night stand with him and never have to worry about seeing him again!"

"That was *not* what I had in mind when you got me in this car," she said primly.

"Well, it won't hurt just to see, will it?" she asked with a naughty smile as they got off the interstate.

They pulled up into the parking lot and piled out. The place didn't look very busy, but then again, it was early on Sunday. Jessie went in first, but she stopped dead near the door, causing Sandy to crash into her back.

He was *here*!

His back was to the door, but there was no mistaking him, not with that piece of his ear missing.

"What? Oh, he's here!" Sandy said in an excited whisper.

"Oh my God," Jessie said fearfully, smoothing her hair, kicking herself for wearing nothing but an old pair of jeans and a U.T. tee shirt. She smoothed her shirt, put her paws on her cheeks. "Do I look okay? I must look terrible! I didn't do my hair or anything!"

Sandy laughed. "You're dressed the same way he is," she said, putting her hands on Jessie's back and pushing her forward.

Kit was about to start rearranging the want ads to put Lone Star on top, taking a drink from his tea, when a shadow passed close to him. "Hi!" came a cheery, loud voice, which almost made him choke on his tea.

He knew that voice. It was the chinchilla, Sandy.

He lowered his mug of tea and looked over, then he almost dropped it. *She* was with her! She looked embarrassed half to death, but she was even more beautiful seeing her a second time. She hadn't preened herself, hadn't dressed up and dolled up. He was seeing the real femme under the veneer, and it was even better natural than it was carefully prepared.

"Fancy meeting you again. Sandy, isn't it?" he asked.

“You bet! And this nervous little kitty here is Jessie, but we all call her JD. It makes her sound cool,” she grinned.

“Nice to meet you,” he said, trying to sound casual and friendly. She was clearly quite nervous, and he didn’t want to put her off. “I’m Kit.”

“Um, h-hi,” she said nervously. She didn’t quite know what to do with herself, standing there wringing her black-mittened paws, then she stuck one paw out towards him.

God, she was gorgeous. He just had to look at her again. Slender but well curved, with a long-haired tail that made her look very sensual, a tail that was the same cream color as her fur but had a black tip. In a way, her color markings were almost fox-like, with the ears and the mittens and the black tip on her tail, but she was definitely a cat.

He took her hand and shook it gently, but didn’t let it go. He just looked up at her, silent, and she looked down at him with that same nervous expression. But she didn’t try to pull away.

“Hey, can we join ya?” Sandy asked boldly, giving her friend a sly look.

“Sure, I don’t mind,” Kit said, shaking out of his reverie. “Please, have a seat.”

“Thank you,” she said, seating herself on his right. He was almost disappointed when she pulled her paw from his, putting her paws together on the table before her and looking very, very unsettled. No doubt her friend had put her up to this, and now she was at a loss as to what to do next.

“I’ll go order us something, JD. Don’t run away!” Sandy said with a wicked tilt, then hurried off.

“Umm, so, Sandy said you travel around?” the cat said hesitantly.
“And you’re getting ready to leave again?”

“Travel around yes, but I’m gonna stay here a little while longer,” he answered. “I’ve been looking for a new job this morning.”

“On a Sunday?”

“It’s the best day. New ads in the paper, new job listings posted on Saturday night.”

“What, uh, do you do now?”

“I bus tables at the Double J,” he said immediately, looking her in the eyes. “It’s not much, but for someone like me, it’s usually enough to let me put enough back to move on. But, since I’m gonna stay a little while longer, I need something that pays a little better.”

“Oh. What’s it like?”

“What?”

“Moving from place to place.”

“Sometimes it’s not so bad,” he answered. “I’ve met a lot of really interesting people. Not all of them have been nice, and it was scary there a few times, but on the whole it’s been worth it.”

“Is that how you—“ she said, then she put her paw over her mouth.

“How I lost my ear?” he finished. She nodded, her face frizzing in a blush of embarrassment. He chuckled. “No, I was hit by a car when I was in college, that’s where I lost my ear. It wasn’t from being mugged in some dark alley,” he said with a light smile. “Though that did happen a couple of times when I first started out, before I knew how to get around on my own.”

“You were in college? Where?”

“U-Mass. I graduated last December.”

“Why didn’t you get a job instead of roaming?”

“That’s...a long story,” he said, a little distantly. “Maybe someday I’ll tell you about it. Now, why do they call you JD?”

“Because there’s another Jessie in the house,” she said shyly. “Since she was there first, they all call me JD instead.”

“Well, I kinda like it.”

“Thank you,” she said, her cheeks ruffling in a very pleasing manner. “I think it makes me sound like a male, though.”

He chuckled. “No one could ever say that after they see you. You’re beautiful.”

“I’m a mess,” she complained, patting her hair and smoothing out her face fur.

“No, you’re *you*,” he told her. “Sometimes you can see more about a person when they’re relaxed than when they’re ready. Pretty clothes and makeup and professional hairstyling can often cover up what’s underneath. That’s what’s always interested me, what’s inside. The outside is just a shell, a front.”

Jessie immediately had an image in her mind of Burke, a handsome wolf whose true nature was hidden behind his handsome face. He had been a rotten person wrapped in an attractive package. This fox, he was very insightful, and he seemed very wise. Much wiser and smarter than most

males the sorority girls had thrown at her. All they cared about was how cute they were and how good they were in bed. But there was more to this fox than just a handsome face. The more she looked at him, the more handsome he seemed, even with his unusual dual-colored eyes and the missing piece of his ear. They were almost like beauty marks rather than mars to her, part of what made him handsome.

There was a long silence. She just looked at him, and he just looked at her, and she didn't even realize it. She was lost in looking at him.

"So!" Sandy said loudly, startling both of them. Jessie gave Sandy a dark look as she plopped down in the other chair, holding a platter of bagels and coffee for her, and soda for Jessie. "When's the big moving day, Kit?"

"Well, I was going to leave on Wednesday, but I think I might hang around a while longer," he said, glancing unconsciously at Jessie, a little move she didn't miss. "Something about Austin just invited me to stay a while longer."

"Do tell," Sandy purred, leaning on her elbows and looking directly into Kit's eyes. "So, you want JD's number? We're roomies."

"Sandy!" Jessie said in shock.

"Well, as nice as that sounds, I'm not going to have much time for the next couple of weeks," he said. "I need to find somewhere to live. I've been staying in the mission since I've been here."

"The mission?" Jessie asked. "What is that?"

"A homeless shelter," he answered directly, looking right at her. He wanted to see how she reacted to that news, she was sure of it! "They rent out cheap rooms if you have a job."

“Kinda like the Y?” Sandy asked.

“More or less, yeah,” he nodded. “But if I’m gonna be here more than a few weeks, I’d like something a little...cleaner,” he said with a hilariously distasteful face.

Sandy laughed, and Jessie tried not to giggle. The way he said it was *so* funny, but she didn’t want him to think she was laughing at him.

“You should pick up one of the campus mags,” Sandy told him. “There’s a ton of listings of people looking for roomies, and it’s way cheaper than getting an apartment.” She glanced at Jessie. “And most of the apartments are close to the campus,” she added.

“You know, that’s a good idea,” he said honestly. “I’ve been going through the apartment listings around here, and ugh.”

“Yeah, they’re expensive,” Jessie agreed.

“And people are still trying to fill up houses and apartments. We’ve only been back for two weeks, so the dust is still flying,” Sandy added. “This is a good time to look.”

“I’ll have to look into it.”

“So, what do you do when you’re not washing dishes and sitting around in here?” Sandy pressed.

“Not much. Just live, I guess. There’s not much to do, really. All you can really do is hang out with a bunch of smelly homeless guys, but sometimes that’s actually kinda cool. Some of the have some pretty interesting stories to tell.”

Sandy took a big bite out of her bagel, then kicked Jessie under the table. Jessie glared at her for a quick moment, then took a sip of her soda. What was she supposed to say? What should she do? She wanted to learn more about him, but she was so nervous! What if she said something that got him upset?

“You gotta excuse JD, Kit. She’s kinda shy, and she’s from a sheltered family,” Sandy said after she swallowed. “She’s really interested in you, but doesn’t quite know what to do about it.”

“Sandy!” Jessie gasped, her face poofing out. She almost felt like she wanted to die, she was so embarrassed!

Kit looked right into her eyes and smiled. “That’s okay, I’m a little nervous too. Sometimes I’m not quite sure what I should say or do when I’m around a beautiful femme.”

She looked away, both embarrassed and flattered. He thought she was pretty!

“And it’s a little different for me. I mean, I’m effectively homeless, rootless. What can I really say or do that covers that over? Kinda makes it hard to talk to femmes, really. You know that old rap song, *got no money and you got no car, you got no female, so there you are.*”

“You’re not homeless,” Jessie blurted. “You just have a different way of living, that’s all. I think you could get a real home if you wanted to. You’re just living outside the box, as it were. You know, living life your own way, experiencing it from a different perspective than most other people. There’s nothing wrong with that!”

“Well, thank you,” he said, smiling at her. “And I see there’s a bit of poet lurking in there somewhere.”

“And literature. My major is English,” Jessie admitted.

Kit chuckled. “Listen. Wanna go do something?”

“What ya have in mind?” Sandy grinned.

“Have you ever been ice skating?” he asked. “They have a rink right there in the mall.”

“Sure!” Sandy said loudly. “If you don’t mind a third wheel and all, but I’m also kinda JD’s ride home,” the chinchilla winked.

“I, I’ve never skated on ice before,” Jessie said shyly. “Just on roller skates.”

“It’s a little different, but you can get the hang of it if you try,” he promised, holding out his paw. “What do you say?”

“You don’t mind?”

“Not at all. I’ll even pay,” he smiled.

“Naw, you’re gonna need your money!” Sandy told him. “I’ll treat! You two walk on over, and I’ll go move the car. See you at the rink!”

The chinchilla jumped up and rushed out, leaving her alone with him. She felt her cheek fur ruffle slightly when he looked at her, and she kicked herself for being so shy. *Come on, you silly femme! You know you want to talk to him, so talk to him!* she thought to herself. “So, what’s it *really* like, doing what you’re doing?” she asked.

“It’s been very interesting. I’ve been keeping a journal of it as I move from place to place. Things I’ve seen, people I’ve met, the stories they’ve told. Everyone has a story, and it’s been really interesting going out and finding them.”

“Sounds like you want to be a reporter, or a writer.”

“I really have no idea what I want to be,” he said as he packed his laptop in his backpack and stood up. He offered his paw to her, and she took it as she stood up. His paw was warm. Strong. His pads were rough and hard, a sign he worked for his dinner, but his grip was gentle and inviting. “So, what are you going to do with an English degree?” he asked.

They walked out of the café, and her paw was still in his. It felt kinda nice, and she hadn’t thought to take it out. “I want to be a teacher,” she said. “I’m going to teach while I earn my Master’s, then be a full-time teacher.”

“Ah. What level were you looking to teach?”

“I was thinking middle or high school,” she said. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“How long have you been at U.T.?”

“I just started my junior year,” she explained as they walked towards the mall. “I’ll probably stay and get my Masters here too. I kinda like it here.”

“Where are you from?”

“Cincinnati,” she answered. “You’re from New England, somewhere, aren’t you?”

He laughed. “Boston. It is really that obvious?”

“It is noticeable,” she giggled. “Everyone but you and me has that drawl. Goodness, Sandy’s from Utah, and even *she* speaks with a drawl now. I swear, it must be viral or something.”

He laughed. “Hopefully I won’t catch it.”

“You and me both. What did you study in college?”

“Well, I started in ROTC working towards a degree in political science, but after I was hit by the car, I was washed out medically,” he said with a strange, wistful sigh. “I wanted to join the Air Force and fly planes, but I can’t even pass the physical.”

“You look fine to me.”

“My back was broken,” he said simply. “That kind of injury is a blackball.”

“Oh. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he told her, squeezing her hand gently in thanks for her concern. “Sometimes it’s a little stiff in the mornings, but I’m just fine. Anyway, I changed majors to history after the accident and graduated last December. While I was recovering, there wasn’t much for me to do but read, and I got kinda interested in history. Reading about ancient history kept my mind occupied, and after I got back in school, I decided to study it for real.”

“What did you do your capstone on?”

“I compared ancient Rome to modern America,” he answered. “I compared the societal conditions between the two, with the thesis that

America is following Rome's path. And if something doesn't change, we'll meet the same fate."

"Wow," she breathed, looking over at him. He let go of her hand and opened the door, then held it open for her. "Thank you. That's pretty deep."

"It was an interesting concept. My department head said it made her think about it for a while. I guess I couldn't ask for anything better than that."

"I wouldn't mind reading it."

"Just go to U-Mass' website and search for the title *America and Rome, two civilizations, one fate*. They keep all capstones and dissertations in the library, you can read it online." He winced a little.

"What?" she asked as he opened the inner door for her.

"Well, my name's on the capstone," he said. "My name is...I don't like it," he admitted. "That's why I go by Kit. It's awful."

"Well, it can't be any worse than Desdemona," she said with a slight ruffle of her cheeks. She couldn't believe she told him her middle name!

"Ah, so that's where the D comes from?" he said with a smile.

She nodded.

"Your folks were big Shakespeare fans?"

She laughed. "My father's an English professor at the University of Cincinnati. My sister's middle name is Ophelia."

"Following your dad in the family footsteps?"

“I guess. He used to read me stories when I was kitten, and I just got interested. I’m more of a modern femme, though,” she said with a smile. “I’m more into modern literature. If the authors are dead, it’s not as interesting to me.”

He laughed. “I hope Vonnegut isn’t on that list.”

“You read Vonnegut?” she asked excitedly. “He’s one of my favorite authors!”

They got involved in talking about Vonnegut as they walked to the rink in the center of the mall, but their discussion was interrupted by Sandy, who crashed into them from behind. “It’s about time, you two! Okay, Kit, show us where to go.”

He took them to the rink, rented skates, and stuffed his backpack in a rental locker as they put them on. Sandy looked a little shaky on the thin blades, and Jessie herself was quite unstable when she first stood up. Kit, wearing a pair of hockey skates, stood up rock stable. “I shoulda known you’d know how to skate, being from Boston!” she laughed.

“Every winter,” he grinned. “Come on, I’ll teach you,” he said, offering his paw to her.

She felt strangely vulnerable out on the ice. She knew how to roller skate, but all her weight was on those thin blades, and it made her ankles feel dangerously wobbly as she tried to balance on them. She was almost leaning against Kit as he led her out onto the ice, where others were also skating with different degrees of mastery. Most were shaky and unsteady, like her and Sandy, but a few furs were zooming around the rink as effortlessly as could be. It felt strange to be out of control, and she felt very self-conscious trying not to look like a fool in front of him, but he just

smiled at her and seemed to not notice at all that she was trying her best not to fall down and embarrass herself. Sandy, on the other hand, had no such reservations. She flopped down on her butt almost immediately after getting on the ice, and just sat there and laughed loudly about it. But, the chinchilla was keeping her distance, and for that, Jessie could kiss her. It wasn't half as embarrassing trying to talk to him without her there mortifying her.

He kept hold of her paw as he explained how to move without falling down. They started out slow, and she had trouble concentrating on what she was doing with him holding her paw. He smelled so nice, and he was so strong and sure of himself! But he pushed out to arm's length once she was a bit more stable, and she floundered along beside him as he glided with almost ridiculous ease.

She felt like a pregnant cow, but he seemed oblivious to her clumsiness. He just glided along with her as she stumbled, then swung around and took both her paws in his and guided her. "Easy, easy," he said. "It's just like roller skating, JD. Push off with one foot, then again, then again."

"It feels weird."

"I know, it's because you don't have four wheels. Now push off with your foot and do it just like roller skating."

After three circuits around the rink, she was starting to get a little more sure of herself. It wasn't easy, because all she could feel, or think about, was his strong paws holding hers. "See, you're a natural," he told her as he let go of her paws and drifted back, skating backwards in front of her.

"At least I'm not falling down making a fool of myself," she said ruefully.

“You should never be embarrassed about learning,” he said sagely. “We all can’t be experts at everything we do the first time we do them. I didn’t expect to see you come out and start doing triple axels,” he added with a grin. “Then again, if you did, I’d have felt really stupid,” he laughed. “‘Let me teach you,’ I said, then you’d come out and make a fool out of me.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” she said impulsively.

“I’m glad you wouldn’t. I know I’d feel way nervous right now if I was the one that looked silly cause I didn’t know how to skate, but that’s okay. I just hope you don’t think I did it to you on purpose, that’s all.”

Was she really that transparent? He seemed to know that she really was nervous, and she was feeling a little self-conscious because he was so good at it, so graceful, and here she was clunking along like she had a ball and chain locked to her ankle.

“Well, at least I’m not *that* bad,” she said with a laugh, pointing at Sandy. She was on her butt again near the rail, laughing.

“Let me go take care of that,” he chuckled. “Wait for me, okay?”

“Sure,” she said, coming to an unsteady stop the way he taught her. He circled around Sandy, then reached down and helped her up. Jessie watched as he did the same for Sandy he did for her, holding her paws and skating backwards as he explained how to move to get going. She saw how gentle he was, how he guided her, just laughed with her when she remarked how dumb she looked, but then immediately squelched any further attempts at self-deprecation by giving her an encouraging little pep talk. She stood in the middle and turned to watch as he guided her around the rink a complete circle, then let go of her paws and skated backwards in front of her as she

stumbled uncertainly. He slowed down a little and reached his paws out to her, but she caught her skate on the ice and pitched forward, slamming into him and driving both of them to the ice.

Sandy rolled over on her backside and laughed, but Jessie realized that Kit wasn't laughing. He had his back arched, almost unnaturally so, sitting on his hip with his left elbow down to steady himself, as his other paw was held behind him. He was grimacing in pain.

Oh *God!* He'd told her he broke his back when he got hit by a car! Sandy must have hurt him!

"Kit!" she said in shock and concern, rushing to him as quickly as she dared. She stumbled to a stop and kneeled beside him. "Are you okay?"

"Just give me a minute," he said, sucking in his breath. "That was just bad luck. I hit exactly right. Well, exactly wrong, that is."

"Aww, I'm sorry, Kit!" Sandy said, scooting over to him. "I didn't realize I hit you so hard. You okay?"

"I'll be alright," he said, taking a few cleansing breaths. "And it wasn't your fault, Sandy. I just landed the wrong way. Would you two mind if I go sit down for a minute?"

"Here, let me help you," Jessie said in worry, taking his paw in both of hers.

Sandy helped her lead him over to the empty gateway to the lockers. He sat down on the closest bench and leaned far back, both paws on the small of his back. "No, I'll be fine, really," he said to them as he saw two concerned faces. "Just give me a minute. Get back out there and practice, you worry-hens!" he said, brushing them away with a paw.

She realized he didn't want to concern them...that, or he didn't want them to see him like that. Either way, she just nodded to Sandy and went back out on the rink with her. "I'm sorry, JD, I didn't realize I hit him so hard," she apologized.

"No, he told me how he lost that piece of his ear," she explained. "He was hit by a car, and it broke his back."

Sandy blanched. "Ohmahgawd, I musta—"

"I think he's okay. I guess it's still tender, that's all." They both looked back to the benches, and saw him massaging his back with both paws. He saw them looking, then smiled and waved. They waved back, and floundered along together.

"So, like him?" Sandy asked.

"Yes!" she said instantly. "He's really interesting!"

"He's *gorgeous*," Sandy said, giving her a lascivious grin.

"He's *smart*," she countered.

"Glad we came looking for him?" she grinned.

"Yeah, I guess I am. Thanks, Sandy."

"Anytime, hon, anytime. Did you see how he was looking at you when he said he decided to stay?" she whispered. "I think he was going to stay just for you!"

"I don't think so," she said demurely, but she remembered how he glanced at her. Was he really going to stay just to go out with her? If so, that was so *romantic*!

“I think he really likes you,” Sandy said with a sly smile. “You gotta give him our number, JD!”

“*Our* number?” Jessie protested.

“I live in the house too,” Sandy grinned. “Besides, if you two don’t work out, I might take a shot at that hunk of fine fox.”

They went around twice on their own, then they saw him stand up and stretch his back, bend side to side, then start back out onto the ice. He glided over to them easily. “Sorry about that. Hope I didn’t upset you.”

“Naw, JD told me what you told her about the car. How long ago was it?”

“About two years ago,” he answered. “The docs told me my back would always be a little tender. Stuff like that’s happened before, it’s no big deal. I’m fine.”

“Well, that’s good to know. You guys want something to drink? I’m thirsty.”

“I’m fine, thank you,” he said.

“No thanks, Sandy,” Jessie said.

“Okay, lemme stumble over to that concession stand and get something. Be back in a bit.” Sandy gave her a wink where he couldn’t see, then went towards the opening.

“You okay? Really?”

“Really,” he chuckled. “It’s just when my back gets jarred in certain ways, it hurts, that’s all. Hitting the ice like that was one of the ways.”

“Well, I’m sorry about that.”

“No reason to apologize, JD,” he said dismissively. “I know it would never have happened if Sandy knew.”

“That’s nice of you.”

“Eh, I kinda like her. She’s silly, and boy does she talk fast.”

Jessie laughed. “She reminds me of my little sister. She talks a mile a minute.”

“Ophelia?”

Jessie laughed again. “Don’t *ever* call her that or she’ll rip out your liver,” she said. “Her first name is Jenny.” She was quiet a moment. “Do you have any sisters?”

“I have a sister,” he said. “She’s probably my best friend.”

“That’s nice. It’s not often you hear a brother say that about a sister,” she said with a smile.

“Me and Vil went through a lot,” he said. “After our mother died when I was eight, she was more like my mother than my sister. Even now, she always tries to mother me.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your mother.”

“Thank you.”

“What about your father?”

“He’s dead,” Kit said, his voice turning flat and hard almost out of reflex.

She looked away, a bit chagrined that she seemed to have ventured into dangerous territory. “I’m sorry.”

“No, no, it’s okay. Me and my father had a very long and very ugly history,” he explained. “He threw me out of the house when I was sixteen. After that, my sister was the only family I had. She risked a lot to keep in touch with me, because my father—well, let’s just say that he forbade the rest of my family from having anything to do with me, and the rest of them were too afraid of him to go against him. Everyone but Vil, anyway.”

Jessie could sense...evasion. There was much more to this story than he was letting on. Was he only telling her what he felt comfortable saying, or was he trying to hide something? What had happened between him and his father that had caused him to be thrown out at sixteen? What kind of fox was he that he kept the rest of Kit’s family away, and what kind of vixen was this Vil that she was willing to defy their father to keep in touch with him? There was something...intriguing about what he wasn’t saying. Maybe someday, he’d trust her enough to tell her.

“Anyway, Vil helped me find a place to live, she’d sneak me money, she helped me get into U-Mass after I graduated from high school, and when I was hit by the car, she was the one that was there for me. If it wasn’t for Vil, I’d be dead now.”

“Well, I’ll have to thank her when I meet her,” Jessie mused impulsively, then she looked away from him, her cheek fur ruffling.

“Geez, will she want to meet you,” he chuckled. “I talked to her yesterday, and I made the eternal mistake of telling her about you.”

“But, but we’d never even spoken!”

“I know, but....” he trailed off, looking at his skates. She looked at him, and could see that he was trying to think of what to say, and then his cheek fur ruffled a little. He was *nervous*! Finally, his veneer of confidence was stripped away, and she saw that he wasn’t as strong or self-confident as he seemed. “I told her about how Sandy dropped in on me, and made the mistake of saying that you were beautiful. She was all over me at that point. She knows I don’t make observations like that unless I really mean it.”

Jessie’s heart seemed to flutter a little. He really did think she was beautiful!

“She’s the one that talked me into not leaving. She talked me into hanging around, try looking for you, and seeing if there was something there when I did. She had to talk—” he sighed, then he glanced at her. “I guess I should explain something to you.”

He stopped them in the middle of the rink, and she was starting to get a little nervous, and also a little curious. “This isn’t easy for me to explain,” he said, looking at her with sober and earnest eyes. “Mainly because it’s so outlandish sometimes I don’t think even I’d believe it if I heard someone else say it. So please understand that what I’m about to say isn’t the whole truth. It’s just a part of the truth that puts everything in a rational perspective.”

“I—okay.”

“Alright. Here goes,” he said, taking a cleansing breath. “I’m from what you might call a very eccentric family. They have very extreme views, and most of them are rabid, fanatical purists. To them, the purity of the family line is more important than anything else. If they found out that I was out on a date with a cat,” he said, then he shuddered. “But the sad thing

is, I've been disowned, and I'm still so afraid of them, that it, well, I'm afraid of anything that might happen, that's all," he said with a sigh. "When I saw you in the booth with the skunk, all I wanted to do was sit down and talk to you, but then I saw this spectre of my family hovering over you like a ghost, and I was afraid to do it. It's almost sad. I've been disowned for six years, and still they can reach out and run my life," he sighed. "But even me being disowned wouldn't be enough for them. They'd see me and you as an insult to the family, and I'd be afraid of what a few of them would do, especially Uncle Zach."

And that's why you roam around like a vagabond, isn't it? she realized to herself. *Because you're still running from a family that hates you, but you're still afraid of. How would I feel if Mom and Dad turned their backs on me? I'd feel totally lost. I'd be devastated. Oh, God, you poor fox.*

She reached out and put her paws on his shoulders, her heart pounding in her chest. It was an instinctive move, a need to comfort what she could see was obvious pain. "I'm not afraid of them," she told him in a gentle voice. "Kit, I," she started, then she looked down. "I just met you, but I'd like to see you again. I'm not afraid of your family. After all, they're all in Boston, aren't they? And you roam around. How could they know? How could they do anything?"

"My family has a very long arm, JD," he said honestly. "A very, very long arm."

"Well, let's see if it can reach all the way to Austin," she said daringly, sliding a little closer to him. She looked up at him, and before she had any idea what happened, he was kissing her.

She tensed up, but his kiss was gentle, inviting, not forced or hungry. She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around his neck, and began kissing him back. Burke had never kissed her that way. It was so, so, so... *warm*. And sensual. And almost intoxicating!

Just as she started surrendering to the kiss, he pulled away. She looked up at him in confusion, and saw his eyes were chagrined. "I had no right to do that," he said in a growl, mainly at himself, she realized. "I'm sorry, JD. It was wrong."

"No, no, it wasn't wrong," she said, a little out of breath. "If I wanted you to stop, I'd have kneed you in the groin."

He gave her a curious look, then laughed. "Well, I'd have deserved it."

The magic of the moment faded, and she put a paw to her muzzle, realizing they'd just kissed right out in the public, where everyone could see! She felt her face poof out in a blush, but all he did was smile down at her. "I think this is about the time when I should be saying goodbye," he said. "I've just done something entirely too forward, and did it out where your friend could see. And, I need a little time to think, okay?"

She could hear the pent-up fear behind his voice. Even with her blessing, he was still afraid of his family. Who were they, and what kind of furs were they that could instill such fear in him like this?

"I understand. I can give you my number, and you can call me later, okay?"

"No, that's not proper. I'm not sure you're going to still be this happy to see me after you think things through. I'll give you the number to the cell phone my sis makes me carry around for emergencies. That way *you* can be

the one to decide if what I said and did here was alright enough with you to want to see me again. That way there's no pressure on you at all. Come on, I need to get the phone. I don't really know the number off the top of my head. I'll have to look it up."

He took her paw and guided her back to the benches, leaving her a little confused. He didn't seem cold or angry, it was almost like he was so afraid after what he said, and what he did, that he wanted to back off and think. But did he want her to think or did he want to think himself? Usually Jessie was pretty good at reading other people, but right now she wasn't sure. All she could really tell was that he was kicking himself for kissing her, he was really upset with himself, and maybe he was afraid he lost all the ground he'd made with her up to that point by doing something so rash.

Sandy kept her distance, hovering at the edge of the concession stand with a cup of soda in her paws as Kit opened the locker he used, took out his backpack, and pulled out a brand new and *very* expensive-looking black cell phone. He flipped it open and pulled a little post-it note off of it, and handed it to her. "That's the number of the phone," he told her, folding it into her paw. "But please, don't rush. Think about it. Think about what I said, and think about what it means. And after you decide, if you can forgive me for being an idiot, and if you're really ready to take a chance on someone like me, then call me. I'll be waiting for you. I promise."

His eyes were so earnest. He was so upset. He was so afraid. How much different he seemed now than just a few minutes ago! But as soon as he started talking about his family, his entire demeanor changed, and now he was very unsettled and unsure. She realized that even if she didn't think he was being serious about his family, *he* sure was. His fear of them was very real, even if it was misplaced.

He hesitated, then he seemed to screw up his courage. He leaned down and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, then quickly hurried away. She watched him go, saw him strip off his hockey skates in almost record time, then all but throw them at the clerk at the rental window as he rushed away.

“What happened?” Sandy asked quickly as she hurried over. “Did he grab you or something?”

“No, he,” she said, then she sat down on the bench and tried to sort it all out. “He told me about his family.”

“And that scared him off?”

“Yeah. It did,” she said, opening her paw and looking at the telephone number. The area code was unknown to her. “He’s really afraid of his family, Sandy. I think that’s why he lives like a homeless vagabond. He told me that he was afraid of what they’d do if they found out we were dating. I could hear it in his voice. He was really *serious*.”

“What are they, terrorists or something?” Sandy asked curiously.

“I don’t know,” she said. “He gave me his number.”

“Well, it’s not a lost cause, then,” Sandy said with a smirk. “Call him when you get home.”

“No, I think that’d be too soon,” she said. “I think it’s best if I wait until tomorrow. If I just called him so fast, he wouldn’t think I thought about it the way he asked me to.”

“Femme, you gotta explain this to me. Let’s go ahead and go back to the house.”

“Yeah. That’s a good idea. I forgot I have that homework to do.”

“But, was he a good kisser?” she asked, elbowing her in the ribs.

“It curled my toes,” she admitted with her cheeks ruffling, which made Sandy laugh.

“That’s what’s most important,” she teased.

He was kicking himself.

Stupid, stupid, stupid!

How could he do that? How could he *kiss* her! He could tell she was nervous, he could tell she was a little shy. That was the most idiotic, stupid-assed stunt he could have possibly pulled to totally wreck what was such a wonderful afternoon!

He went back to the mission and paced around his room angrily, for over two hours, his tail swishing back and forth behind him with sharp, jerking movements. He worked so hard to make her feel at ease. He worked so hard to seem as un-intimidating as possible. He could sense that she was shy, he could sense that she was nervous. He didn’t want her to be nervous. He wanted her to feel comfortable, to *talk* to him, to show him the true person inside. And there for a while, she was opening up to him. She was smiling, she was laughing—

God, was her voice lovely!

And then came the *question*. He had no choice but to tell her, because she’d told him about her family. He knew he was going to screw that up, that he couldn’t possibly explain it to her in a way that she’d believe, but still convey how he felt about it. But she looked up at him, and her eyes were

so *beautiful*, and he just, just couldn't help himself. He was kissing her before he even knew what the hell he was doing. And right when he realized it, she put her arms around him, and he lost all rational thought when she kissed him back.

That female could *kiss*!

He groaned, flopping down to the floor, feeling his back protest the hard impact and the unforgiving surface. Stupid, stupid, stupid! The only female that had ever turned his head, a female so beautiful he even dreamed about her, so gentle that he felt almost giddy when she touched him, so compassionate he could feel her concern like a palpable thing, and he *blew it*.

The phone in his backpack rang, almost startling him out of his wits. Was it her? Was she calling him back this fast? He scrambled to his knees and tore it out of the pack and flipped it open. "JD? JD? I'm sorry—"

"Nobody's ever called me that before," Vil laughed from the other end. "Did you find her, bro?"

Kit groaned and flopped back onto the floor. "I'm an *idiot*, sis!" he said loathingly. "I think I totally blew it!"

"Whoa there, bro, calm down. What happened? How did you blow it?"

"I *kissed* her, Vil! Right on the mouth!"

"On your first date? You move fast," she teased.

"It was a disaster!" he lamented, putting his free paw over his eyes. "It was the worst thing I could have done!"

“Well, walk me through it, little bro,” she said, sitting down in her Boston apartment on the sofa near her work desk in her study. “This may not be as bad as you think.”

He glossed over most of their outing, up until he got to the point where he had to explain his concern. “How could I tell her, Vil? How could I explain it? I just couldn’t! I have no idea what I said, but it must have sounded totally ridiculous. She didn’t seem to take it seriously. Then she looked up at me, and God was she so *beautiful*, I, I just don’t know why the hell I did that!”

“Okay, bro, first thing. Calm down,” she called in a steady, cool voice. “Just calm down. Working yourself into a seizure isn’t going to help right now.”

He took several breaths, then began again with a less hysterical voice. “At least she didn’t slug me,” he finally said.

“Well, that’s a positive outlook,” Vil chuckled, leaning back on the sofa. “Now, what happened after you kissed her?”

“I apologized,” he said immediately. “And I broke off the date. I gave her the number to this phone, and told her to call me if she wasn’t angry with me, and if she decided that seeing a homeless bum making minimum wage who’s too much of a chickenshit to stand up to his own family was worth her time.”

“Watch your mouth, Kit,” she scolded.

“Sorry,” he said with a sigh. “I don’t know what to do, sis. I feel so stupid.”

“The first thing you can do is get off the floor,” she told him.

There was a startled silence. “How did you know that?”

“I know you better than you think, little brother,” she told him seriously. “Now get up and sit down on a chair or a bed or something. Do *not* flail about on the floor like a madman.”

He did as she ordered, getting up and sitting on the bed.

“Alright, now, think about it. Did she do or say anything to you that hinted that she was angry?”

“Well, no,” he said after a moment. “But it was so out of line—“

“Stop that!” she barked. “This isn’t about *you*. Did she say anything after you kissed her? Anything at all?”

“No, she didn’t say a word. I think I scared her half to death. She’s very shy, Vil. She’s shy, and she was nervous. That’s why it was like the ultimate bad thing to do to kiss her. I must have scared her out of her mind!”

“Stop it,” she warned in a dangerous voice. “Just repeating things over and over gets us nowhere, and it just works you up.”

“No, wait. After I kissed her and said I was sorry, she said that she woulda kneed me in the balls if she thought I was out of line,” he remembered.

Vil laughed. “I think I like this girl,” she said. “So, she joked about it after you kissed her, but didn’t make any indications she was angry?”

He thought for a minute. “No, not that I can remember.”

“Did she kiss you back?”

He blew out his breath. "I thought I was going to pass out right there in the rink," he said thickly.

"So, she did," Vil chuckled dryly. "And it sounds like you enjoyed it."

"I thought my heart was going to stop."

"Okay then, bro, just relax a little. A girl *never* kisses back if she feels put upon or forced. If she kissed you back, she was definitely into that kiss. You may have ambushed her with it, but she wasn't entirely opposed to the idea of it, from the way it sounds to me. I think you surprised her when you backed off and then broke off the date. If I was just kissed by a guy I liked and he ran away afterward, I'd be surprised too."

"Awww!" he groaned. "I never thought of it that way!"

"It's alright, it's alright," she said soothingly. "If you want my advice, just wait a while. She's going to call you, baby bro. That's a guarantee. You said she was shy, so it might take her a little time to work up the courage to be so forward, but she *will* call you. Just wait for her."

"I...okay. I can do that. I'll wait as long as it takes."

"Is she worth it?"

He answered her immediately. "Hell yes," he said fervently. "She's not just beautiful, sis, she's really smart, and she's *fascinating*. She's gentle, and kind, and considerate. And she loves Vonnegut!"

"Then wait for her, bro," she told him seriously.

"Until hell freezes over."

"Good. Now, I want you to listen to me," she said, very seriously. "I want you to *forget* about the family. I will keep them the hell away from

you. Don't let that affect your decisions about this femme in any way. Do you understand?"

"I wish it were that easy," he sighed.

"Kit, have I ever lied to you?"

"No."

"Do you trust me?"

"Of course I do."

"Then trust me now. I promise you, I'll take care of it. I'm not going to let them interfere in your happiness. You deserve it."

"I'm not making any promises, but I'll try."

"Okay, now that that's settled," she said, not giving him time to beat himself over it, "did you start looking for apartments, or did you just go out with her today?"

"I have a few good leads on some places," he said. "And no, I don't want your help," he declared.

She laughed. "Well, I can get you something that doesn't come with its own forms of life lurking in the fridge, Kit. Trust me, I've seen what some people try to pass off as apartments."

"I can guarantee you I've both seen and lived in worse, sis," he said calmly.

"I guess you have," she chuckled. "But the offer's there, Kit. You're a phone call away from a decent apartment, whenever you need it."

“I’m happy you’re thinking of me, Vil, but I’ll manage. I’ve managed all this time on my own just fine. Trust me.”

“Alright. I think I’ll let you go, baby bro, but you’d better not brood or sulk. If I catch you doing it, I’m gonna fly down there and spank you.”

“I’ll try not to,” he chuckled.

“Okay, bro. I have some work to finish up before tomorrow, so I’ll talk to you later.”

“Love you sis.”

“I love you too, bro. Bye.”

Vilenne turned off the phone, silent a long moment, tapping the antenna of the phone against her muzzle. She then got up and went to her desk, and sat down. There, in an open manila folder, was the entire life history of one Jessica Desdemona Williams.

Marcus had been both efficient and speedy. In just one day, and on a *Sunday*, no less, he had found a girl whose name he did not know and dug up absolutely everything there was to know about her. Family history, her school records, her health records, everything. All of it was right there for Vilenne to peruse, an entire life rendered down into a series of records and reports. Dean’s List student at the University of Texas, pursuing a Bachelor’s Degree in English. Honors student who graduated fifth in her class from Southside High School in Cincinnati, Ohio. Daughter of John and Hannah Williams, both cats, but Hannah’s father was a fox, which meant that Jessica was a mixed species. It certainly didn’t show, from looking at her picture. She looked like she was all cat.

There was nothing in that folder that dissuaded Vilenne in any way about wanting to see her brother chase her. But, that wasn't why she'd had Marcus find out about her. All the other reports were just Marcus being thorough, the only thing that Vilenne had really been after was the girl's address and telephone number.

Not yet. If she called out of the blue, it might scare this girl away from her brother, and she wouldn't allow that. Her brother had had a very hard life, and she'd be damned if she would screw up his chance to find a little happiness.

She knew exactly how to play it.

She punched up a phone number with her thumb and put the receiver to her ear. "Hey Vicki, how you been? No, I'm afraid this isn't a chitchat call. I need a favor," she said. "It's going to be a bit strange, but humor me, okay?" A pause. "Cool beans, Vicki. Now listen. I need you to run a story for me, but it's important you put my picture in it with color. No, I don't know what kind of story. Make something up. Dig something out of the files or call the shipyards or something. What's important is that my picture is in the paper, the picture is in color, and the article is somewhere where a college student will find it. You have a close-up color picture of me in your files? Good." A pause. "No, Vicki, it has to be in *color*. It does no good at all if it's in black and white." A pause. "Well, tell your editor if you do this for me, Vilenne Vulpan will owe your paper a *big* favor. And if that doesn't work, then tell him to call me and tell him I'll pay for it. Say, double your normal advertiser's fee for the space taken up by the article?" A pause. "Since when has journalistic integrity had anything to do with the newspaper business?" Vilenne laughed after a pause. "This is important to me, Vicki. It's very important. More important than money." A pause. "It

has to be either tomorrow or Tuesday. I can't stress it enough, Vicki. It's really important." A pause. "No, this has nothing to do with business. This is *personal*."

She leaned back in her chair and sighed. "Well, I guess it is too late to get it in tomorrow's paper. No, Tuesday works just fine. I guess I can do an interview if you want to do something real. Sure, bring a photographer, he can take a shot of me in my office. But can you guarantee it's in by Tuesday? Thanks a ton, Vicki. You're a lifesaver." A pause. "Well, I think I could swing that, but I'll still owe you a big favor on top of it." She laughed. "Yeah, it's *that* important to me, Vicki. You too. Send me the a copy of the paper when you print it, okay? I'd like to see it," she chuckled. "You too. Take care, hon. Bye-bye."

There, *that* should get the ball rolling down there in Austin.

Kit had tried to explain his family to her, but didn't think she'd believe him. Well, let her see just *who* Kit was related to, and it should all fall right into place.

There was a lot to do and not much time. Besides, it kept him from carrying the phone around with him in his paw all the time. He kept himself completely busy, doing his best to try to not think about JD, even though everything he was doing was directly because of her. She was the only reason he wasn't getting ready to get on a bus for points west, points unknown. She was the only reason he wanted to stay in Austin, because it was where she was. And he had a lot to do. A femme that beautiful, that sweet, that wonderful needed someone much better than the fox he was right now. After all, he was *homeless*. What kind of embarrassment would

he be to her when her friends asked about him? After all, she'd have enough to worry about when he eventually broke down and told her the whole truth about him and his family.

If she didn't run away screaming at that point, or laugh in his face.

He still had no idea how he was going to explain it. It was just so, so, *ridiculous*. He could hear himself now: "Oh, by the way, JD, I'm from one of the richest families in America, but I've been disowned and I don't even have a home. And by the way, my family would probably want to kill both me and you if they ever found out I'm dating you." Oh yeah, *that* was going to go over so well.

But he'd have to find a way. She deserved to know the truth, and she was worth the effort. God, was she worth it.

Monday morning was very, very busy. He was up at five, before dawn, and hit the floor running. His first stop was Wal-Mart, where he bought clothes that he felt looked decent enough for him to go job-hunting; a white dress shirt, a pair of black slacks, a nice tie and belt, and a respectable pair of shoes. Then he stopped by a Staples near the mall and picked out a cheap yet tasteful portfolio to carry his laptop and whatever papers he needed or collected. After he got his business clothes all in order, he banged out something of a decent-looking resume on his laptop and ran it down to Kinko's and had them print him ten copies on good quality gray paper.

All that was done before 9:30am.

As soon as 9:30 hit, he was on the phone. He'd always felt that 9:30 was the best time to make these kinds of calls, since it gave the people in the offices a chance to settle in, but got to them before they got too busy with other things. His first call was to Lone Star, the magazine looking for a

researcher. The receptionist was a male, which surprised him a little, and directed his call to the fur in charge of hiring.

“Uh, yes sir, I was calling about the ad you placed on Monster for the researcher’s position. Is it still available?”

“Yessir, it is,” he said in a heavy Texas drawl. “Pardon my pointing this out, but you don’t sound like you’re local, son.”

Kit chuckled. “I’m in Austin now, sir. Might I come and hand in my resume today?”

“You certainly may. When you get to the office, just tell the fluffy fella at the front desk you’re here to see Rick. That’s me. I’d rather you hand it to me yourself, that way I know it don’t get lost or nothin’.”

“Rick,” he said to himself, writing it down on a little memo pad he kept in his backpack. “Thank you very much, sir. I should have my resume to you in an hour.”

“I’ll be waitin’.”

It wasn’t wise to put all his eggs in that basket, but that was also the only company for which he’d gotten a phone number. The rest were all faxes, post office boxes, websites, much less personal means of contact. But, now that the phone call was made, it was time to get busy with all that other stuff. It was nearly an hour’s bus ride down to the south side of Austin, near the university. Lone Star Magazine was headquartered on Congress Avenue, which was the main avenue that ran right up to the capitol building. In fact, it was only two blocks from the capitol to the south, only five blocks from the south end of the U.T. campus. It was a very old building, he could see, done in late 19th century architecture with heavy

stone blocks and sculpted corners, with tall, narrow windows on all five stories. It was a multi-office building, with some oil company on the first floor, Lone Star on the second, and some trading company taking up the top three. The security guard in the lobby directed him to the stairs—he never rode in an elevator unless he had to, he hated them—and found himself in a large receiving room with bright red carpet, blue walls, and the Texas flag painted on the wall behind the reception desk along with *LONE STAR MAGAZINE* blocked above and below it. The receptionist was a sheep, his woolly fur meticulously combed and organized, and the male was actually wearing *makeup*.

Well...he was indeed “fluffy,” but now he saw that the male he talked to on the phone meant the word in a much less literal sense.

“May I help you?” he asked in an effeminate voice.

“Yes, I’m here to see Rick.”

“Down the office, last door on the left.”

The office to which he’d been directed was a nightmare of clutter. Books, files, sheafs of notes, they were stacked almost everywhere. An oil painting of some badger in an old uniform was on the wall, and there was an antique desk made of mahogany on the far side of the office, with two chairs between it and the door. Behind that desk sat a dog with very unusual, almost calico-like fur pattern, a riot of reds, whites, browns, and tans all looking like some mad painter had used him as an easel. He had a patch of white over his left eye, and a streak of brown over his nose and crossing over his right. His chin fur was a little shaggy, showing his age, and he glanced up just slightly. Then he did a double-take and gave Kit a

long look, probably either looking at his eye or his ear, Kit supposed. He was used to it. “And what can I do for you, sir?” he asked.

“I’m here to turn in a resume,” he answered. “May I come in?”

The dog laughed. “A resume? Really? Is this some kind of joke?”

“Uh, no, sir,” Kit said uncertainly. “We talked on the phone just a little while ago.”

“Well,” he hummed, leaning back in his chair and tapping his fingertips together. “Well, well, well. I always wondered what happened to you. I’ll admit, I’m a bit surprised to see you standing at my door.”

“Excuse me?”

“Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan the third,” he said with a slight smile, then he put his paws behind his head and clunked his feet up on his desk. “The disowned rebel of the Vulpan family.”

Kit blanched, almost taking a step back. Of *course* he might have heard of his family, he was in the magazine business! “I, uh, I... You’re not going to hold it against me, are you?” he asked, almost pleadingly.

The dog laughed. “Of course not! So, you have a resume to hand in, do you? Can I see it?”

Kit stepped in and opened his portfolio, and took out a manila folder holding a copy of his resume. He stepped up and took it out, and handed it to the dog.

“Have a seat,” he said absently as he put his feet down and started reading. Kit seated himself, grabbing hold of the end of his tail and wringing it nervously as he tried to calm down. This guy knew about him,

knew that he'd been disowned. When people did that, knew who he was, they either asked him a million questions or treated him like a live snake. Even when they said it didn't bother them, it still did anyway, thinking that Kit just wasn't like them. But how was this male going to handle it? Was he going to give Kit a fair shake?

“So, despite the fact that you obviously wrote this this morning, tell me. What brought you to Austin? And why do you want to work here?”

“I've been traveling around since I graduated from college,” Kit answered. “Just staying in a place a while, then moving on. And when I got here, something about the town just told me I needed to stay for a while. There's a lot to see here. So I'm trying to find a real job instead of what I've been doing. You know, restaurants and such.”

“I see. History, eh?”

“Yes sir. I'm used to doing extensive research. It's kinda necessary in the history business.”

“That's a definite plus. You have some copies of your research work?”

“Not with me, but I can give you a website that has it all archived. U-Mass keeps it all in their E-library.”

“I'll definitely want to look it over before I call you back,” he said, his voice professional. “What we are, Mister Vulpan, is a college magazine, about the college crowd, and for the college crowd. I'm the main editor of this little expedition. I also own the magazine. Lone Star is circulated mainly on campus and in town, College Station, and we just started shipping to San Antonio. I like to have my reporters and staff to either be young or understand the college lifestyle, and I think you fit both bills in

that regard. Though you're not familiar with the University of Texas, you are from a pretty big school, so you know what it's like."

"Yes sir. I lived in the dorm when I was at U-Mass, and I played my share of Half Life."

He chuckled. "Good. Now, what kind of research you'd do if I hired you is both normal research and also field work. You'd do your share of hunting down facts and statistics, but I'd also send you out to the college to gather information directly from the students. You have any problem talking to strangers?"

"None at all, sir."

"Good. Since we're also rather small, there's a chance I might ask you to do some writing, maybe even some photography. I only have six people on staff, so we all do what we can, when we can. But none of my people are accomplished researchers, so that would be your main focus. Since you're a history major, you know how to put together an essay and make it logical, but have you done any other writing?"

"Well, I kept a journal when I was out on the road," he said. "If you want, you can use that to judge my ability to write outside of the college format."

"Excellent. You need to send it to me."

"I have it right here," he said, reaching into his portfolio and pulling out his laptop. "Do you have a wireless network?"

"It's firewalled against outside machines, but I have a flash drive handy," he said, reaching into his desk and taking out a small USB flash drive.

Kit turned on the laptop and kept half an eye on it as Rick Sanders kept talking. “You ever done any photography?”

“Not professional, sir. But I can take normal pictures.” His laptop finished booting, so he inserted the flash drive and prepared to copy the 7 journal files over to the flash drive, one for each month he was on the move.

“Do you know how to use Word?”

He nodded. “Both Word and Excel.”

“You have any experience with Photoshop?”

“No sir, the most computer work I did was making Powerpoint slideshows for my presentations.”

“Do you have any skills you think I might find useful in a magazine publishing environment?”

“Well, no, not really, sir,” he admitted honestly. “Well. I took some accounting and business classes, but I don’t think they’d be much help here. And I do have a pilot’s license. I’m not sure how much help that’d be around here, but if you ever get an airplane, I can fly you somewhere in it.”

“What kind of hobbies do you have, Mister Vulpan?”

“Well, I can play a guitar a little and I like to sing. I love to read, anything and everything, and I enjoy listening to music.”

“what kind?”

“ABR, sir. Anything But Rap.”

Sanders laughed. “I’m a country man, myself.”

“I’m not all that big on modern country. It seems like it tries too hard to be like pop music,” Kit noted. “I like older country, from the 80’s back. That’s when country was best.”

“Son, you just made a friend,” Sanders laughed. “Who’s your favorite old timers?”

“My favorite old musicians are probably Alabama and Tammy Wynette,” he said.

“You like any of the new groups?”

“Well, Big and Rich are kind of interesting,” he noted. “It’s country with a sense of humor. That’s fresh. Outside of them, it’s all sort of cookie-cutter music.”

“Amen, amen,” he nodded. “Now, you have to answer a question for me. It might be a little personal, so if it offends you, I’m sorry in advance.”

“Go ahead, sir.”

“What happened to you?”

“Excuse me?”

“The accident. I remember reading about it in *Furs*. You were hit by a car, and your father refused to pay for your hospital bills. It said in the story you’d been disowned since you were sixteen. Did that all work out?”

Kit sighed, scrubbing the back of his head with the short claws on his fingers. “Well, mostly,” he said. “My sister paid my bills, and the scandal basically embarrassed my father into not doing anything about it.”

“That wasn’t what I was asking, son,” he chuckled. “Did it all work out between you and your family?”

He looked down. "It did after my father died," he said bluntly. "I was at the funeral. I watched them put that old bastard in the ground, and it was the first time in my life I ever felt *free*. It worked out for me, sir. I'm through with them."

He was quiet a long moment, and Kit felt a little stupid and chagrined for saying that. Oh, sure, *that* was a way to try to impress someone that could give you a decent job.

"Well, we all have family problems at one time or another," he said with a slight smile. "I'll look over your papers and your journal and see what kind of work you do, and give you a call back either tonight or tomorrow."

"I, thank you, sir," Kit said, standing up. The dog stood up as well, and they shook paws.

Kit left feeling a little uncertain. He asked that question, Kit answered before he thought about it, then he was hustled out the door. He had a feeling that Lone Star was a bust.

The rest of the day was busy. He spent a great deal of time of it in the Austin Public Library, using and abusing their computers and their fax machine. He sent out resumes to 29 different companies in the Austin area, jobs ranging from researching at Lone Star to an apprentice welding opening for Cubrin Metalworking, anything that paid a decent salary that he was even remotely qualified to do.

And he sent them out, he wondered how many of the people who read his resume would recognize his name, and immediately throw his resume in

the garbage thinking it was either a joke or there was no way they'd hire someone like him, some rich kid that they couldn't depend on because he didn't need the money.

His name. He should have changed the damn thing, but that was like a thousand dollars, and there was no way he could afford something like that. So he was stuck with it, at least for now.

He kept himself so busy that he didn't realize that it was sunset when he left the library. He hadn't eaten all day, so he stopped at the first fast food joint he came across, a Burger King on Congress Avenue, across from the campus. Kit had a thing for hamburgers. They were his favorite food, and if there was a hamburger on the menu no matter where he went, that's what he got. After growing up eating the exotic food of the rich, he had a love of the simple food of normal people, food that didn't have French names, or served on gold-laminated china in geometric patterns for artistic flair.

Food that wasn't *tiny*.

He dropped down at a table near the counter and dug in, eating with a haste that came with hunger. He was almost finished with his burger when the phone in his pocket rang, and he literally threw it down, his heart leaping. Was it JD, finally calling him back? "Hello?" he called in excitement.

"Heya, Rick Sanders here," came the voice on the other side of the connection. "I looked over your papers and your journal, Vulpan, and it's good stuff. Your capstone was very well done, but I was much more impressed by your journal. It's what I'd expect my journalism graduates to put out."

“Thank you, Mister Sanders,” he said, trying not to sound so giddy.

“Rick. Only my pastor calls me Mister Sanders. You said that research was a job requirement for a history major, and you proved it. And you have the writing skills to do some actual writing if I need it in a pinch. So, why don’t you drop by the office tomorrow and we’ll hammer out the details.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m offering you the job, son. Anyone who can dig up ancient Roman manuscripts to use as references for a capstone certainly knows how the hell to do research. But I still say you went into the wrong major. You’d have been one *hell* of a reporter.”

“Really? That’s great!” he said explosively, almost standing up. “And I thought I’d butchered it when you asked about my family,” he admitted.

“Actually, that’s what convinced me. It proved that you were serious about living your own life, son, away from your family name. I didn’t want someone that was gonna pack up and run home as soon as the job got hard. What you said showed me you’re in it for the long haul.”

“Well, I’m in it for a couple of years at any rate,” he said impulsively.

“Be here at nine, Mister Vulpan. We’ll talk about your salary, and if you take the job, we’ll get your paperwork done.”

“Kit, sir. Everyone calls me Kit.”

“Kit it is,” he chuckled. “See you tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Rick,” Kit said with total sincerity. “This chance means a lot to me.”

“Well, let’s see what you can do with it. I’m on my way out the door, son, so have a good evening. Bye.”

Kit closed the phone, and had to resist the urge to let out a whoop right there in the restaurant. He had a *real* job! He threw away the burger he’d thrown on the table, not hungry anymore, and speed-dialed Vil as he was rushing out of the restaurant. “Hello?”

“I got a job, sis!” he cried loudly and happily, almost bowling over a skunk femme and a coyote male as they were walking into the restaurant. “Lone Star Magazine hired me to do research!”

“That’s great, bro!” she said happily. “What kind of salary?”

“We’re gonna talk about that tomorrow,” he answered, stopping on the sidewalk near the parking lot. “But it’s gotta be better than the Double J!”

She laughed. “No doubt. Don’t just cave, bro. You’re good at what he hired you to do, so don’t settle for his first offer. You know how to research, so *research*. Find out how much other researchers make, and take it to ‘em! Show ‘em how good of a researcher you are!”

“I’ll do that,” he promised. “God, it feels good. Now JD won’t be totally embarrassed about me.”

“Has she called you back yet?”

“Not yet,” he said. “I hope she calls soon, though. I’m like dying here waiting for her to call.”

“She will, baby bro, just be patient. Well, you got a job. Now find a place to live.”

“I’ll get on that first thing tomorrow after I’m done at the magazine. I need to go find a wireless hotspot, sis, so I can dig up that research. I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?”

“You bet. Give ‘em hell, bro!” she said enthusiastically.

He said his goodbyes and closed the phone, then almost ran down the street. He had to go back to the Java Joint and get on that, so he could walk into Rick’s office tomorrow armed with all the facts to get a good salary out of him.

He’d show them just how good of a researcher he was.

“Sam? Sammy, hello?” the coyote called, poking the female skunk in the shoulder.

“Oh, sorry,” she said, watching the fox tear down the street.

“You know that guy?”

“I kinda do, yeah,” she answered. “He went out with one of my roommates yesterday. It didn’t end very well.”

“What happened?”

“From what JD told me, he kissed her, and he backed off and left, when she didn’t want him to. She said he seemed scared to death about something, but she wouldn’t tell me what.”

“Sounds a little weird.”

“Yeah, so far everything about that guy is weird.”

“You heard what he said, didn’t you? He said JD wouldn’t be embarrassed about him now.”

“Yeah, he did say that,” she said musingly, putting a finger to her muzzle. “Hon, mind if we call it a little short? I think I need to go talk to JD.”

“Sure, I don’t mind, sweets. How about tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow sounds just fine. Thanks for being so understanding.”

“I know that a femme just can’t sit on juicy gossip,” he grinned. “I can’t compete with *I have got to get home and tell JD all about this.*”

Sam laughed, patting him on the arm. “Call me, okay?”

“You know it.”

The phone stood there, mocking her.

Jessie sat on her bed, wearing nothing but an oversized Alpha Xi Omega sorority nightshirt, staring at the wireless phone on her nightstand, both desperately wanting to pick it up and too nervous to actually do it. Her stereo was on, tuned to the local pop station, but she really wasn’t listening to it. All she could hear was his voice, going over everything that happened the day before.

He asked her to think about it. Well, that’s all she did all day. She’d been totally lost in classes today, spaced out and distracted, because all she could think of was him. Every part of the time they’d been together, every word he’d spoken, how nice his paws felt when he held onto hers...how warm and wonderful his kiss was....

She groaned and flopped back on her bed. Why couldn't she do it? He liked her, she knew he did! It wasn't like she didn't know what to expect from him! He *gave her his number*, for crying out loud!

Ever since she was a kitten, she'd always been like this. She was a very shy kitten, and though her career choice had made her start facing that shyness, when it came to personal things like this, she was just as shy as ever.

It was so silly! He gave her his number, because he didn't want to pressure her. She understood that, given that really strange thing about his family that made him afraid, and after he kissed her like that. It was actually very sweet of him to let her be the one to decide and make the next step. But it meant taking initiative, being bold like Sandy. If it was Sandy, she'd have called him back like ten minutes later! But as more and more time went by, she got more and more nervous.

Sometimes being shy was just a damn curse.

It was easy. All she had to do was get up and go to the phone. The post-it with his number was sticking to her mirror, right there in plain view. Just pick up the phone and dial the number. That's it. Pick up the phone, dial the number. *Get up, you silly cat!* she thought to herself. *Get up! Isn't he worth it? Do you want him to think that you're not interested in him? Do you want him to think that he scared you so much you don't want another date? He didn't, and it's not fair to him to let him think that! So get up right now!*

She blew out her breath and did get up. She walked over to the phone, and spent a long moment staring at it, her paws trembling slightly. Then she snatched up the phone and looked up at the number.

Her door banged open, and Sam was there, with Sandy right behind her. She'd been out on a date with her boyfriend, but she shouldn't have been back so soon. "We gotta talk, JD," she said with a slight smile.

"Can it wait? I was about to, uh," she said, holding up the phone slightly.

"So you finally worked up the guts to call him, eh?" Sandy teased. "Be glad, I was coming up here to do it for you!"

Jessie's face ruffled a little, and she glanced away.

"Well, this is *about* him. I ran into him down at the Burger King a few minutes ago."

"Really?"

"Yeah, he almost ran me over," she laughed. "We heard him talking to his sister on his cell phone. He said he got a new job at Lone Star magazine," she said, then she looked back down the hall quickly, "and from the way it sounded, he got it with you in mind."

"Huh?"

"He said, and I quote, 'maybe now JD won't be embarrassed about me.'"

"See, I *told* you he was staying in Austin because of you, JD!" Sandy said smugly. "Isn't that romantic? He's giving up on his trip just to be near you!"

"It's almost like a stalker," Sam said. Sandy punched her in the arm. She was not gentle.

“Stalkers don’t give *out* their numbers, Sammy,” Sandy said. “I think it’s romantic. He took one look at JD, and he decided to stay because he wanted to go out with her, so he went out and got a better job than being a dishwasher, just to impress you.”

“Well, I think it’s a little strange,” Sam noted, rubbing her chin with a single black-furred finger. “But, I do have to admit, from what I heard yesterday, I think he’s okay. He told his sister he was dying for you to call him. I think he’s maybe trying a little too hard, but he’s okay. I’d be careful til you get to know him a little better, JD. Once you’re sure he’s not a space case, anyway.”

Jessie laughed. “There’s something he’s not telling me,” she told them. “He even admitted it. He tried to tell me about his family, and said that I probably wouldn’t believe him. And you shoulda heard how he said it! It was something like what I’m about to tell you isn’t the whole truth, but a part of it that’ll let you understand what I’m trying to tell you.”

“He wouldn’t be the first guy that didn’t like to talk about his family.”

“Well, what he said about them wasn’t very good.”

“Yeah,” Sandy agreed. “JD told me he said that his family is a bunch of purists, and they’d have a conniption if they found out he was dating a cat.”

“That’s what he said, but it was the way he said it,” Jessie said musingly. “That wasn’t the part he wouldn’t tell me, just the part he thought was important for me to know.”

“Does it bother you that his family is a bunch of purists?” Sam asked.

“Not really. They all live in Boston, and we’re down here. But, it really bothered him,” she noted, almost clinically. “I could hear it in his voice. Even see it. He’s terrified of his family. I, I think that’s why he lived like a homeless vagabond, really. To get away from them, to hide from them. If you don’t have an address and move from town to town, how can they keep track of you?”

“Yeah, maybe,” Sandy mused. “So, we’ll get outta here, and you call him,” she prompted, pushing the phone in her paw towards her face. “And take notes,” she grinned. “I wanna know! Especially if you two start talking dirty!”

“Oh, out, you!” she commanded, pushing both of them out the door, then slamming it Sandy’s face.

But she didn’t hesitate this time. She immediately started dialing his number.

It was like Sammy’s information broke the wall of her shyness. He was dying for her to call him. He *really* wanted to see her, she was very impressed with what he was doing where she couldn’t see, trying to get a better job just so she wouldn’t be dating a dishwasher, and it made her feel wanted, and very, very happy. There was no nervousness at all now.

The phone rang. It rang again. And her heart leaped a little when she heard it pick up. “Hello?”

“Kit?” she asked.

“JD! Hey! I was hoping you’d call...but would you please call me back in about a half an hour? I’m on a bus right now, and I’m the kind that

thinks it's very rude to talk on a phone in a public setting. It's disrespectful to the others on the bus."

She giggled. "Sure, I can do that, but you have to do something for me."

"Anything!"

"Don't call me JD unless you're asking for me here at the house. Call me Jessie."

"Jessie it is. Half an hour?"

"Half an hour sounds good to me. I'll be waiting."

"Heh, I'll be sitting here staring at my watch," he said ruefully. "I'm so glad you decided I was worth a second chance, Jessie. Talk to you in thirty. Bye-bye."

"Bye."

She put the phone down, feeling a little giddy. She had talked to him without being shy, even asked him to call her by her name! And he was so *polite*! He could have just asked her to call him back, but he explained why he wanted it, and his reason was so *chivalrous*. He was so considerate, even to complete strangers!

She carried the phone back to her bed and sat down on it, pulled her legs up to sit cross-legged on it with her longhaired tail wrapped around her legs, and started staring at her alarm clock.

Thirty minutes....

Chapter 3

She almost overslept.

The other girls in the house were both a little peeved at her and intensely curious, because she stayed on the phone almost *all night* with Kit.

They talked about everything, the slightest things that would cross their minds. They talked about likes, dislikes, movies, books, TV (though Kit didn't watch TV). She talked about school. He talked about living on the road. She talked about Cincinnati and her family. He talked about how life had been just after he'd been disowned. The only thing he wouldn't talk about was his family, and she didn't press him. She could tell that he was very uncomfortable with the subject. All she really learned from him was what little he revealed while talking about other things. He had a sister named Vil, who ran the family business. His father and him had been fighting since he was twelve, and he was disowned at sixteen because he refused to go into the family business. She had no idea what that family business was, but given he was from Boston and was from a stuck-up, purist family, she was betting that his family had some money and ran something like a jeweler's shop or something.

His sister seemed to have money. That expensive Sabletech laptop was a Christmas present from her, he'd told her.

They talked, and talked, and talked. For hours, they talked, and the more they talked, the more interesting he was to her. He was very smart,

and he was very kind and thoughtful, and though he hated his family, he loved his sister deeply. He loved hamburgers and scary movies. He was a strategy game fanatic, from chess to computer games. He loved to read. He loved to sit and listen to people tell stories, and write them down. And he *really* loved music. He was learning to play the guitar, he'd said, and he liked to sing karaoke and at open mic nights. She could tell that he was a very strong fox, strong convictions and willful, but not stubborn or obstinate. He had his opinions, but would listen to the opinions of others, then loved to debate the points of those opinions. They'd spent almost an hour arguing about Vonnagut's works, and though he was hard to sway from his viewpoint—which was all wrong!—he listened respectfully to her point of view.

He was such an enigma! Strong, yet willing to bend. Opinionated, yet open to others trying to sway him. He was very laid back, but had very strong views about politics and government. He was a delight to talk to, an intelligent, well-traveled fox who could tell a sad story about some of the people he'd met, then make her laugh herself silly telling stories he was told from those very same people.

They talked until after midnight, and the only reason they had to quit was because Kit's cellphone battery was almost dead! If not for that, she felt they would have talked all night long. After she reluctantly got off the phone, she realized she'd not done a whit of homework!

It made for a long night, and almost no sleep. She dragged herself out of bed and saw she was a fright, but it was too late for a shower. She resorted to a female's best friend...lots and lots of hair spray. She threw on whatever she had at hand and rushed downstairs, where Sandy, Sam, and two other sorority members, a gray wolf named Charlotte and a rabbit

named Lisa were sitting at the kitchen table, eating breakfast. As usual, Sam had her *USA Today* at hand, reading the news. It was a morning tradition for her. “Hold it right there!” Sandy boomed. “You tie up the phone all night, and think you’re gonna sneak out of here without a word? What did you talk about?”

Jessie giggled. “What *didn’t* we talk about is the better question,” she grinned coyly. “The only reason we stopped is cause his cell battery died!”

Sandy laughed. “I’m sure it’s charged back up by now,” she hinted.

“Yeah, but he’s starting a new job today,” Jessie said with sincere regret. “He’s already out and about, and I don’t want to disturb him. He said he had to go to an internet hot spot and do some research for work before he got there, so he can haggle a good salary out of his new boss.”

“Ooh, where’s he working?”

“You ever read *Lone Star*?”

Sandy nodded. “I’ve seen some copies of it on campus. It looked pretty good.”

“That’s where he’s working. He said that his main job is going to be doing research, but it’s a small staff, so he might have to write articles sometimes and act like a reporter. When they need it.”

Sam snapped her paper, then looked carefully at the new section she picked up. “JD,” she said seriously. “What did you say his sister’s name was?”

“Vil,” she answered.

“As in Vilenne? Vilenne *Vulpan*?”

“He never told me his last name,” she said. “He said it’s one of those things he’d explain later, when he was more comfortable with it. But he never called her Vilenne. He just said her name was Vil. Why?”

“Because I think she’s in the paper,” she said seriously. “Look at this.”

Jessie leaned over Sam and looked where she was pointing. It was a picture of a vixen sitting on the edge of a glass top desk, a computer monitor behind her, legs crossed demurely and leaning on her right paw. She was a very attractive vixen, Jessie noted. “So?” she asked.

“Look at her eyes.”

Jessie did, and she gasped.

Her right eye was green, and her left eye was amber. Just like Kit’s!

The caption of the photo read *Vilenne Vulpan, 4th generation CEO of Vulpan Shipyards, in her Boston office*. The title of the article was *New Blood In An Old Chair: The Youngest Fortune 500 CEO*.

“It can’t be!” Sandy said in shock. “Kit’s a *Vulpan*?”

“Who are Vulpans?” Lisa asked.

“The Vulpans are one of the richest and most powerful families in America,” Sam answered her. “They have more money than some third world nations. You’ve heard of the Kennedys? Well, the Vulpans are like the Kennedys, but they never got into politics.”

“Wow,” Lisa breathed.

She remembered what he said on Sunday. *It’s not the whole truth. It’s just a part of the truth that will help me explain things rationally*, he said.

Because the truth is so outlandish that even if I heard it, I wouldn't believe it.

Outlandish. Kit, the son of one of the richest families in America, but he was disowned, homeless, and up until today was washing dishes for a living...that was *outlandish* alright.

Then, in a flash, an image. Months ago, a magazine. She remembered seeing a picture of a fox with two different colored eyes, missing his left ear, walking out of a cemetery. Was that where she thought she'd seen him from?

It could have been the funeral of his father, the father he hated. *I just had to be there*, he told her last night. *I had to see them put him in the ground and know that he was dead and buried.*

"Sam. Can I borrow your laptop a minute?" she asked.

"Why?"

"Kit gave me a website where he said I could read his capstone, and he was kinda embarrassed because he said his capstone had his full name on it."

"Oh. Ohh! Sam!" Sandy said in excitement.

"On it!" she said, literally running out of the kitchen. She returned a moment later and plopped it on the table. "What's the address?"

"He didn't say exactly, just that U-Mass kept all capstones in their E-library. And I know the title of his capstone."

"Easy enough. Google is a femme's best friend," she said with a chuckle. The four others crowded over her shoulders. A few mouse clicks

brought up the University of Massachusetts main page, and she quickly found her way over to the library page. She clicked the search box and cracked her knuckles. “Alright, JD, what is it?”

“Two nations, one fate, Rome and America.”

She typed that in and hit enter. Immediately they got a response. Sam clicked on the link, and they were looking at a .pdf file showing a cover page of a capstone paper, the title reading *America and Rome: Two Nations, One Fate*.

“Well, you were close,” Charlotte laughed as Sam scrolled down.

There it was. *Kitstrom Vulpan*.

“Oh my *GOD!*” Sandy gasped. “He really *is* a Vulpan! God damn, femme, you hit the jackpot! He must be worth millions!”

“No, he’s homeless and broke,” Sam said evenly. “JD said he said he was disowned, but that does explain the laptop,” she said clinically, rubbing her chin with a finger. “That’s a pretty damn expensive laptop.”

Jessie looked at his name on the capstone, then looked at the picture of Vilenne Vulpan, with her smart gray skirt and blazer, her slight smile, sitting in the lap of luxury while her brother washed dishes for a living. But then she remembered how Kit always seemed to speak of his sister so warmly, so lovingly. He said she’d always been there for him, that she had been the only member of the family to help him when he got hit by the car, and if she sent him the laptop, maybe she did try to look out for him. Maybe it was Kit that refused to take what she offered, but she was always there to help out if something went very wrong, or he was in dire straits. She even

remembered what he's said about his phone, *my sister makes me carry it around in case I have an emergency.*

"Wow!" Lisa sounded. "Jessie, where did you meet him?"

"By sheer luck," Jessie answered. "In that coffee place by Northcross Mall."

"I wonder what it was like for him," Charlotte breathed. "From having all that money, then bam, on the streets. How did he make it? I mean, think about it. He wouldn't know what it was like to live like normal people, not living in his mansion with all his servants."

"Damn, you're right," Sandy said quietly, her eyes drifting to the rabbit.

"It woulda been hard, that's for sure," Sam noted.

It fit. That's why he was so afraid of his family. He said they had a very long arm. Well, if they were that rich, then they probably did. No wonder he was so afraid. The poor fox, he could never feel like he would be free of them!

She went through everything she remembered from last night. Everything he told her fit together neatly with this new little bit of critical information, and everything became more clear. It explained his love for his sister, who had literally saved him from dying on the streets. It explained his almost rabid hatred of his family, who had turned their backs on him and not helped him when he needed it most, when he'd been hit by that car and broke his back. It explained why he was so afraid of his family, because he feared they would lash out at him if he dared to stain the family honor, disowned or not. And since he was no longer part of the family, destitute, he

had no real protection from them, no safety. All he had was his sister, who was his lifeline and also his only defense against the rest of his family.

She put her clasped paws to her muzzle and sighed. Oh, God. What a hard six years for him, but he'd come through it a better fox for his hardships. He hadn't lost his kindness to others, and he could still smile and laugh.

What a male!

"JD? JD? You okay?"

"I'm fine, Sandy," she said with a little smile. "This actually makes it all make perfect sense to me now. It explains everything. He was trying to tell me, but he didn't think I'd believe him. I guess I wouldn't have," she admitted honestly. "He was trying to lead me into it, but he was afraid to be honest with me."

"I can see why," Charlotte laughed.

"I need to talk to him," she declared. "Can I have that, Sam?" she asked, pointing at the Money section of the paper, the one with the article. "I think I'll need it."

"Sure." She handed it up and over her shoulder.

"Thanks. I need to go, I'm gonna be late for class."

"Where can I buy that paper, Sam?" Sandy asked quickly.

"Anywhere," she shrugged in reply.

Jessie didn't pay much attention in her morning class, her mind preoccupied with Kit, and what she wanted to tell him. She had to let him know that she knew, and she understood, and it *did not bother her*. She wanted to see him, wanted to get to know him. She wanted to go see scary movies with him and hide her face in his chest when the monsters jumped out of the shadows. She wanted to walk along the river park with him, paw in paw, talking about nothing in particular. She wanted to go to a bar with him and be embarrassed to death when he pulled her up on stage and made her sing with him.

She wanted to kiss him again.

She waited until lunch before she called him, from a cell phone borrowed from the other Jessie from the house, who had the same European Literature class with her. "Hello?" he answered.

"Kit?"

"Jessie! Hi, how are you?"

"I'm fine. Listen, I know you're busy right now, but when do you get off work?"

"I'm actually off already. When my boss found out I have no home or car, he kicked me out so I could find a place."

"That's nice. Did you get a good salary?"

He laughed. "He was a bit shocked when I went in there with a spreadsheet of researcher's salaries. I made a few concessions to get some immediate help, but all in all I think I got a good salary. Nineteen thousand a year to start, which is about midstream given I don't have any experience, with an adjustment meeting in six months, and a thousand dollar advance so

I can afford to get a place of my own. The main thing is, Rick, my boss, he's going to let me use his wife's old second car until I get something of my own."

"That's good. Listen, I want to see you. Can you meet me somewhere?"

"Right now?"

"No, later. I have two more classes today. Do you know the campus well?"

"Not really."

"Okay, here on campus we have a big bookstore, kinda in the middle. Right outside of it, facing the old bell tower, there's this little square that has benches along the sidewalk. Can you meet me there around five thirty? I'll be sitting on one of the benches."

"Sure, I can do that. I should be in the area, I'm concentrating on finding a place within walking distance of the office. That way I can give Rick back his car."

"Okay. Maybe after we talk a while, we can go get some pizza or something?"

"I'd love to."

"Good. I'll see you then."

"I'll be waiting. Bye Jessie."

"Bye-bye." She handed the phone back to Jessica. "Thanks Jessie."

“No, keep it for now,” the tiger grinned. “If he gets lost, you might need to call him and guide him. Just put it on silent and don’t answer any calls, okay?”

“Sure. Thanks, you’re a lifesaver.”

“We’ve been trying to get you a boyfriend for a year, you silly kitty,” she laughed. “The whole house has already agreed to do whatever it takes to get you two together.”

“Gee, thanks,” she said with a slight ruffle of her cheeks, which made Jessica explode with laughter.

Research.

That’s what Kit was going to do for a living, and that was exactly what she needed to do.

She started with the article. She read it completely. It was about Vilenne, how she was the youngest of all CEOs running the Forbes 500 list of biggest companies. She was the fourth Vulpan to run the company that was named after her family, Vulpan Shipyards, the biggest shipbuilding corporation in America, and fifth biggest in the world. They built every kind of ship, from speedboats up to aircraft carriers, and had branched out to other areas that mainly supported building ships. Vulpan Steel was the ninth largest steel company in America, its own company, but it was folded into Vulpan Shipyards in some business way Jessie didn’t completely understand. She operated both companies, even though they were technically separate from one another. The article focused on the challenges Vilenne faced being both very young and also a female in a the male’s

world of high-ranking corporate executives, but she'd been groomed for the role. Valedictorian of her class in Harvard, third in her class in Harvard Business College, one of the most prestigious business colleges in the world, and she was also an Oxford scholar. She was a sharp businesswoman, and she'd already increased profits at Vulpan Shipyards in the six months since she'd been at the helm.

There was no mention of the rest of the family or Kit in the article.

After her second class, she hit the computer lab and made Google her best friend too. She looked up the Vulpan family in google, and was stunned to get back over a hundred thousand replies! Googling Kit himself brought back over ten thousand replies! She narrowed down her search, and more or less pieced together what had happened to Kit, using old news stories, gossip columns, and blogs. And everything she found on the internet fit exactly with everything Kit had told her. His being disowned, the accident that broke his back, all of it. And oh my God, how the gossip columns went to town over Kit and his father! They speculated on what had caused Kit to be disowned, and it was all the gossip columns talked about for like a year after it happened. They even sent out photographers and reporters to get pictures and details of the disowned Vulpan trying to make it on his own afterwards. How *rude* of them, and how cruel, to make his personal pain some kind of sick real-life soap opera to drool over every morning in the paper! It proved he wasn't lying, but it also reinforced his declaration to her that she wouldn't believe him if he told her the truth, that he wouldn't believe it himself if someone told it to him.

After that, she looked into other members of the Vulpan family. It was a pretty big family, with lots of aunts, uncles, grand-aunts and uncles, and cousins by the platoon. And all of them, every single one, had the same

eyes as Kit. Their right eyes were green, and their left eyes amber. There was even an article on google about it, calling it the “Vulpan Eyes,” a very distinctive family trait that made a Vulpan very distinct from other foxes. Sam would have loved to read that article, it was all about genetics, how it was some kind of dominant genetic trait that bred true through the Vulpan line.

Out of curiosity, she looked up Kit and Vilenne’s father, Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan Junior. The obituary said he died of heart failure at 49, and was survived by brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles...and only one child.

God, what a heartless man. Even in death, he wouldn’t acknowledge that he had a son.

She ran out of time and had to go to her Fundamentals of Education class, needed for her teaching certificate, but her mind wasn’t much on the class. She had all the facts now, so it was just a matter of talking to Kit about it. She knew him pretty well now, after their marathon talk last night, so she had an idea of how to break the subject with him. Direct, to the point, yet with gentleness and tact.

After class, she went down to the bookstore and picked a nice empty bench within sight of the bookstore, but out of the hot August sun. She picked at her blouse and smoothed her jeans, going over it all in her mind over and over. She was impatient, but she was willing to sit there and wait all night for him, knowing that he would be there.

He was late, but he made it. About ten minutes to six, just before she was about to call him, she saw him all but running along the sidewalk by the bookstore. He stopped and looked around, and she waved to him. He

waved back, and padded up to the bench quickly. "I'm so sorry," he said, a little out of breath. "I couldn't find a place to park!"

"It's okay," she smiled. "I'm glad you made it. Sit down please?"

"Sure. How was your day?"

"It was...distracting," she told him honestly.

"It was for me too," he said, leaning back on the bench and brushing his hair back. Then he looked at her. "Jessie? Is something wrong?"

She reached down into her backpack, and pulled out the newspaper. She handed it to him. "Kit. This is your sister, isn't it?"

He looked at the picture, and his eyes widened, and he seemed to stiffen up.

"You're Kitstrom Vulpan," she said gently. "From the family that owns Vulpan Shipyards."

He sagged. He buried his face under his paws, and he was almost stock still.

"Kit," she called, putting a paw on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Jessie," he said, not looking at her. "I didn't know how to tell you. I couldn't figure out a way. I didn't think you'd believe me, that a homeless dishwasher was a Vulpan. I was afraid you'd think I was lying to try to impress you, or I was just nuts."

"Well, I'll admit, I was a little shocked when I found this, and then I looked up your name on your capstone and put it together. I remembered that you told me your name was on it. But Kit. Kit, look at me."

He didn't move. She reached under his paws and lifted his head, and she almost melted when she saw that he was tearing up. "Oh, Kit, I'm not angry," she told him immediately. "You warned me yourself that you didn't know how to tell me without sounding outrageous. Outlandish, I think you said," she said with an encouraging smile. "Remember what I told you when you said how your family would react if they knew you were seeing me?"

He nodded silently.

"I haven't changed my mind," she smiled. "I understand, Kit. You're afraid of your family because they're rich, and they can reach down here all the way from Boston and make our lives hell. Well, I'm not going to let them stand in our way, and neither should you. I don't *care* if you're broke and homeless. I don't *care* that you're from a rich family. And I *really* don't care what they think of me."

"I'm, I'm glad you feel that way, Jessie," he said, sniffing a little, leaning down with his elbows on his knees. "Do you know how it feels to like someone, but be so afraid of your own family that you don't do anything about it? To be ruled by a family you hate, but you can never get away from? It makes me feel helpless sometimes, frustrated. Impotent. I've been on my own for six years, but I'm still so afraid of them I won't live my own life because they might disapprove."

"But you did do something about it," she told him. "You went ice skating with me," she said with a smile. "And we talked all night, and I really liked it. And I want to keep seeing you, Kit, no matter what your family thinks of it." She reached out and clasped his paw, and he put his other paw over hers. "I told you I wasn't afraid then, and I'm not afraid now. Even though I know that you were serious, it doesn't matter to me.

You're worth the risk. You're worth it. Can you meet me halfway and share the risk with me, Kit?"

He looked over at her, his eyes earnest. "I'd carry you."

"We'll talk about carrying me some other time," she giggled. "Are you okay with it? I know your secret, but I don't care who you were. All I care about is who you are right here, right now. I think you're a handsome, intriguing, wonderful fox, and I want to go out with you, I want to get to know you."

"And I want to get to know you too," he mirrored.

"Well then, I think there was a promise of pizza somewhere in here," she grinned. "But, before we get to the pizza, I think I owe you one more thing."

"What?"

She put her paw on his muzzle, pulled him so he was facing her, then she screwed up her courage and leaned over, and kissed him. She felt him tense up a second in surprise, then lean into her and kiss her back with gentle, sensual enthusiasm. The paw on his muzzle looped around his neck, and she felt him put an paw on her knee and his other paw on her shoulder, but all she could really feel was the warm charge running through her from his kiss.

She broke the kiss slowly, then pushed back to gaze into his eyes for a long moment. Then she smiled. "Well, I'm not going to run away on you like you did on me," she winked. "Unless you think I was too forward," she giggled.

“No, forward away,” he said, a little breathlessly. “You’re a fantastic kisser, Jessie.”

She laughed, leaning against him. “So, how does pizza sound? My treat.”

“That sounds great. Uh, isn’t that Sandy?” he asked, pointing.

She looked over by the bookstore, and saw *all* her sorority sisters over there, in a big group, all of them clapping and cheering. Her cheek fur stood straight out, and she buried her face in his shoulder. “Oh my *God!*” she cried. “This is *so* embarrassing!”

He laughed. “You certainly weren’t very shy a moment ago.”

She looked up at him. “You know, it’s the strangest thing. Last night I was scared to call you, because I was too shy. But then Sam comes in and says that you nearly knocked her down in front of Burger King, and said that she overheard you talking to your sister on the phone, that you were so excited about getting the job, and you mentioned my name and were dying waiting for me to call you. I was touched, Kit, really. And then I wasn’t nervous at all about the idea of talking to you. I don’t know why. I would have been mortified at the idea of kissing some other male, but not you.”

“I’m honored you feel that way about me,” he said sincerely. “Now, there’s one thing we can talk about over pizza.”

“What?”

“Getting even with your friends for spying on us,” he said, standing up and offering his paw to her.

She laughed, and took it. “I’m sure you have a few ideas?”

“If you want them to hate you forever, sure, I have a few,” he winked.

She laughed even harder. Kit picked up her bookbag and slung it over his shoulder, then he turned and gave her friends a Bunny Hill salute, complete with a goofy expression on his face, which made several of them bend over laughing. He put his arm around her shoulder, and she felt just fine being snuggled up close to him as they walked away.

Life was *wonderful*.

Kit woke up at the mission at seven, and just laid there replaying last night over and over in his mind. Jessie was, she was...*wow*. They sat in John's Pizza and had dinner and talked, then, after two wonderful hours, he walked her back to her sorority house. She invited him in, but he felt that it would be best not to get grilled by all her friends, so he declined. They kissed again on the porch, a long, passionate, soul-engaging kiss that made his knees a little rubbery when she showed mercy on him. She admitted with a laugh that he was murdering her grades, so he told her to call him only when she felt comfortable. He was patient, and he'd be there when she was ready.

She called him before he even got back to the mission. They talked until nearly eleven, when the cell phone's battery squealed in protest, almost out of power.

What a special femme. She knew his secret, and she *understood* why he felt the way he did. That really meant something to him. It showed she was willing to see it through his eyes, see that his fear was very real. And she wasn't afraid, even knowing the truth. It was so humbling. She was a shy femme, shy and demure, but she had real strength in her, a powerful

strength that gave him the courage to finally stand up and shout to the world
I WILL LIVE MY OWN LIFE, MY FAMILY BE DAMNED!

He felt humble and honored that she was so interested in him. That she was willing to go out with him, talk with him, be his friend, despite the fact that she knew he had nothing, but was willing to work hard to be something she could be proud of. She was taking such a big chance on him, a homeless dishwasher with a terrible family that would hate her, but she didn't care. He could learn a lot from that female about courage.

But, he had work to do. He had a job, now he needed a home. Rick told him he'd start on Thursday, which gave him a couple of days to track down a place to live. He had to make something of himself. He would *not* let people say that Jessie Williams was going out with a homeless bum!

He was up and about by eight. He had to walk a while to get to where he'd parked Rick's car, but everything was safe and sound. He drove back to the magazine's office and went up and checked in with Rick, and told him what he had planned, where he was going to go to look for apartments that day.

"You needed to see me, boss?"

"Yeah, here," he said, pushing a box on his desk. "Your business cards."

Kit opened the box and looked at them. There, with the Lone Star logo in the background, was his name. *Kit Vulpan, Lone Star Magazine*, along with the magazine's telephone number and his very own email address, kit@lonestarmagazine.com.

"Wow, thanks, boss. I've never had business cards before."

“They come in handy. What’s with the clothes?”

“Well, this is an office.”

“Wear anything that won’t get you arrested, we don’t care,” he grinned. “There’s no dress code here. Now, about a place to live. You should look at the area around Bergstrom International,” he suggested. “Ever since the base closed and they turned it into an airport, there’s some pretty cheap housing out that way.”

“It’s kinda far out,” he said. “And I don’t have a car yet.”

“I told you you can use mine til you get one.”

“I know, but, well, I’d like to live close to U.T.,” he said. “I have a good reason.”

“There’s some fine fur strutting around on that campus,” Rick grinned.

“Well, there’s only one there I care to look at,” he explained.

“Ah, say no more.” He leaned back in his chair. “Say, since you’re here, I have a favor to ask.”

“What?”

“I’m gonna run short in next week’s print, and I was looking at your journals. I’d like to take the first one and break it up into article-sized pieces and run it every week, kinda like a running story of sorts. I’ll pay you for it. That okay with you?”

“Fine with me,” he said. “Do you want me to do the editing?”

“Naw, I’ll have Barry do it,” he said. “But I’ll make sure you approve before it goes to press.”

“That’s fine, Rick. I work here now, I’ll do whatever I can for us to make money.”

He laughed. “That’s the spirit! Now go find a place to live, ya homeless bum!”

“Yes *sir!*” he said, snapping to attention and saluting Rick outrageously.

He spent most of the day going from apartment to apartment, and blackballing each one. Too small. Too run down. Too many whores strutting up and down the sidewalk outside. Roommates that were too obnoxious. Too far from campus. Too *scary*. He went through nearly his entire list for the day, when he came across Westwood Apartments, just off Guadalupe. It was only about six blocks from the campus, about nine blocks from the office, and it had assigned parking. He went in and talked to the manager, and to his delight, they had two apartments available, but both of them were two bedrooms. He was about to say his goodbyes, but the manager, a dusky chihuahua with big eyes named Lupe, stopped him. “Well, think about taking on a roomie, friend,” he coaxed. “You ain’t even gonna find a one bedroom for seven hundred twenty five anywhere this close to U.T., long as you don’t mind not having all the perks some other apartments offer, like broadband and gyms. We may not be cutting edge, but our units are clean, they’re big, we have parking, and you won’t find nothin’ broken in any apartment.”

“Well, I could use the other bedroom as an office,” he mused. “And seven twenty five is a bit steep for my salary, but I can manage it. And it *is* close to work.”

“You’re not a student?”

He shook his head. "I work at *Lone Star* magazine." He took out one of the business cards that Rick had printed for him and handed it to the chihuahua.

"Aw, really?" he asked, then he reached under his desk and pulled out a copy of the magazine. "I read it every week," he grinned. "Now, since you work for a magazine I like, friend, how say I knock it down to six fifty a month, long as you promise not to throw no wild parties or be one of *those* kinds of tenants? I'll put you in the unit across from the rental office, so any prospective tenants see a young professional living here, not a beer-guzzling jock. I'll save money in the long run just cause I don't have to repair nothin'."

"You got a deal," he said immediately.

An hour later, Kit had an apartment. A six month lease at six hundred fifty dollars a month, water included, but he had to pay the other utilities himself. Lupe let him use the office phone book to call to get the electric turned on in his name.

"What, no cable?"

"I don't really watch TV," he answered. "I might talk to them about a cable modem, though. I'll need internet access to do my work."

"They bundle cable TV in with the modem around here," Lupe told him. "You gonna call the phone company, or you use a cell?"

"I use a cell," he affirmed. "Why pay for a phone when I already have one?"

"That's the smart thing," Lupe grinned. "When you gonna move in?"

“Right now,” he answered immediately. “The furniture’s gonna take some time to filter in, but I’ll be honest. I just got this job, and I’m kinda living out of a hotel right now. I’ll sleep on the floor as long as it’s in *my own* place.”

“Been there done that, bud,” Lupe nodded sagely. “I got an extra bed in the show unit. It ain’t much, but it’s softer than the floor. I’ll let you borrow that til you get one of your own.”

“Hey, that’s nice of ya, Lupe. I really appreciate it.”

“Hey, no problem. I get the feeling you’ll be the kinda tenant we like around here. Quiet and not blowin’ crap up.”

Kit laughed. “I’ll do my best,” he grinned. “And I’ll make sure to try to work in how cool you are somewhere in the magazine,” he added.

Lupe laughed. “Hey, any publicity is good publicity. Let’s get it moved into your new place.”

And so, Kit was officially no longer homeless. 1642 Guadelupe Avenue, apartment 1-B, with nothing inside it but an old bed with a worn-out mattress with no sheets, blankets, or pillows. But it was *his* apartment. He wandered around the place, with its tired beige carpeting and vanilla walls, the venetian blinds on the windows, its fifteen year old appliances in the kitchen, but Lupe was right. The rooms were big, the place was spacious and clean, and his apartment was directly facing the office and show unit. No doubt Lupe was willing to give him a break on the rent to put a tenant he could trust in the unit facing the office, where potential renters could get a bad impression if a visible apartment was occupied by a party animal.

A trip to Wal-Mart fixed some glaring problems. He bought bedding, a pillow, a cheap nightstand table, and an alarm clock. He also bought some food to put in the fridge, cereal and milk, hamburger, tea in coffee maker bags, a coffee pot he could use to make either tea or coffee, and a gallon of spring water to drink. He even remembered the paper plates, bowls, and plastic silverware to hold him over until he could get real ones. He got home, put it all away, then set up the alarm clock, made the bed, and flopped down into it contentedly. He stared up at the ceiling for a long moment, then pulled out his phone to spread the good news.

The first call was to Rick. “Rick here,” he answered the direct line that bypassed the receptionist, the gay sheep named Marty.

“Rick, this is Kit. The house hunt’s over.”

“Great! What did you get?”

“An apartment on Guadelupe. Westwood.”

“Ah, they’re old, but hey, it’s what you wanted. Walking distance.”

“Hell yeah. I signed the lease and everything, so I’m golden, but we might have to sneak in a blurb about the apartments for the landlord. He gave me a break on the rent cause I work for the magazine, so we kinda owe him a little,” he chuckled. “I’ll bring your car back when I get started to work tomorrow.”

“Eh, keep it for a bit longer. You’re gonna need to move some stuff around for a few weeks. Get all that settled, then you can give the car back. But you will be at work tomorrow. Time to start earning that advance.”

“I’m looking forward to it, boss,” he said earnestly.

“Nine o’clock, but I’m in the office by eight every morning, so don’t feel bad if you show up early,” he chuckled.

“I’ll be there.”

“I got a workstation all ready for ya,” he declared. “And bring your laptop, so Mike can add it to the network.”

“Will do.”

“Now settle in, and I’ll see you tomorrow morning. Be good, son.”

“Thanks, boss. Night.”

“Later there.”

Kit hung up, then speed-dialed Vil. “Hello.”

“Sis, I got *so much* news for you,” he said immediately.

“Baby bro! Ooooh, I’m all aflutter. So, let’s start with the important part. JD?”

“She called me back!” he declared.

“I told you she would!”

“And she saw your picture in the newspaper and guessed at who I am,” he declared.

“Oh, she did? What happened?”

“Much to my surprise, she’s okay with it,” he told her, which made her audibly sigh in relief over the phone. “She told me that she’s not afraid of my family, even now that she knows just who they are. I swear, sis, what

did I do to get a chance to go out with a femme like her? I guess God's starting to give me a break."

"It's about time he did," she said seriously. "So, have you gone out on a real date yet?"

"Not a *date* date, but we did go have pizza after she sat me down and told me that she knew."

"Did you kiss her?"

"Yeah. I think I lost track of a few hours afterward."

She laughed. "That's great, Kit, it really is. I'm very happy for you."

"And the other good news, sis, is I am now *officially* no longer homeless," he announced. "I am talking to you inside my very own apartment."

"That's *wonderful!*" she said brightly. "What's it like?"

"Not too bad. It's really old, but nothing's on fire, all the appliances work, and there's no holes in the floor."

She laughed. "Furnished?"

"I wish. The landlord's letting me borrow one of the beds out of the show unit til I get my own. He's a pretty nice guy. He even gave me a break on the rent cause I work at the magazine, and I won't be some insane party animal. He put me in the apartment right in front of the rental office, so I can make a good impression on the visitors."

She laughed. "Don't blow it, bro. A landlord scorned is almost as bad as a vixen scorned."

“I’m not about to. I start my first day of real work tomorrow. Rick, my boss, he even printed me some business cards.”

“Speaking of that, bro, I need your address and number for work, and for your new place,” she told him.

“Yeah, sure, hold on. I need the card and my lease. I haven’t memorized them yet.” He retrieved them. “You ready?”

“Go.”

He gave her the address and number of the office, then the address of his apartment. “I’m warning you right now, sis, no surprises. No packages, no nothing.”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“Bull—“

“Kit! Watch your mouth!”

“You would so do it,” he teased.

“Alright, I would do it, but if it bothers you that much, I won’t.”

“I want to make it on my own, sis,” he told her. “I want to see if I can do the real life thing on my own as well as I made it doing the homeless drifter thing.”

“I can understand that, bro, I really can. Oh, speaking of money, did you sock it to your boss when you discussed your salary?”

He laughed. “I had a *spreadsheet* ready for him,” he said, which made her laugh delightedly.

“That’s my brother!” she told him. “How much?”

“Nineteen thousand a year.”

“That’s *it*?”

“For a researcher with no experience, that’s more than the average,” he said defensively. “And I wrangled some other perks out of him, like him letting me borrow one of his cars for a while.”

She giggled. “Good. You didn’t tell him your license expired last year, did you?”

“Of course not,” he said with a naughty chuckle. “Now that I have a place to live, I’ll go get a new license. One with my *address* on it,” he said with a dreamy kind of contentment.

“A great feeling, eh?”

“Ohhh, yeah,” he all but purred.

“Kit.”

“Yeah sis?”

“I want to come down and see you,” she announced. “And I want to meet *her*.”

“Uh, well, she already knows about you, so I guess that wouldn’t hurt,” he said. “But sis, if you come down here, they’re going to know. And they’ll find out about her.”

“It’s going to happen sooner or later, bro. Which would you prefer, now or later?”

“I’d prefer never,” he grunted.

“Don’t wish for what can never be, bro. Just trust me. I promised you I’d keep them off you, and I’ll do just what I promised. But I want to meet this female that has you so smitten she’s making a respectable fox out of you.”

He laughed helplessly. “By God, I guess she did at that.”

“So, I can come down?”

“I can’t really stop you if you did.”

“That’s right. I’m kinda tied up right now, so it won’t be until next month. Find a couple of days off and tell me, and I’ll work my schedule around it.”

“Alright. I guess that gives me a month to get Jessie ready for it.”

“Jessie?”

“She doesn’t really like me calling her JD unless I’m asking for her on the phone,” he chuckled.

“Do you have her number?”

“Yeah.”

“Give it to me.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I want it,” she stated. “If I ever have to find you and you’re not answering your phone, I’ll have it. And besides, you know I’ll just get my hands on it the other way if you don’t.”

He grunted. “Who’s saying you didn’t already?”

There was a long pause. “I refuse to answer that question, on account of the grounds that you’ll beat me up.”

“You *did*, didn’t you! You’re asking for it just to cover your ass!”

“Well, I did dig a *little*,” she admitted, a little ruefully.

“You’re terrible!”

“No, I’m a sister who wants her brother to be happy, even if I have to put a paw in myself,” she said simply. “I didn’t *use* it, little bro. And I wouldn’t have unless she didn’t call you back within five days. That way I could find her and lead you to her if she didn’t call you back.”

He wanted to be angry with her, but he knew her, and knew she was saying exactly what she meant. “You’re too damn nosy.”

“You bet your ass I am where you’re concerned,” she said without a hint of shame.

“Watch your language,” he teased.

She laughed. “So, I’m forgiven?”

“I guess so.”

“I’m afraid I’m about out of time, bro,” she sighed. “I got a ton of work here to go through. I’m really happy things are starting to work out for you. Really.”

“Thanks, Vil. You’re the reason I’m here. If not for you, I’d be getting on a bus tomorrow.”

“I’m just happy you’re happy, Kit. I’ll call you this weekend so we can work out when I come down.”

“Okay.”

“Be good, baby bro. I love you.”

“I love you too, sis. Bye.”

“Bye-bye.”

He closed the phone and dropped it on the bed beside him, then laid back and stared at the ceiling. Maybe things really were working out for him. He had a decent job now, his own apartment, and about a half a mile away, there was a gorgeous cream-colored cat with black ears and mittens that was thinking about him, who knew his secret, and was not afraid of his family.

God, he never knew life could be this good. And there was only the potential for it to get even better.

No matter how enthusiastic he was about his first day of real work, certain ugly realities managed to put a serious damper on his mood.

The first one was the bed. That bed and his back *did not* get along. He woke up feeling like a pretzel, and it took him almost a half hour to get to the point where he could move without wincing. Clearly, the first thing on the list of things to buy was a heating pad.

The second damper on his day was the fact that he had never considered the possibility that the bathtub wouldn't have a shower curtain. That made a shower out of the question, removing the possibility of aiming the shower head at his lower back and letting the heat work out the pain, and sitting in the tub wouldn't work as well.

So, being that he was out of options for a soothing way to ease the pain, he opted to stop at the Circle K near his apartment and buy a little single-dose pack of Advil. He downed it with a bottle of iced tea, and drove on to the office for his first day of work.

He arrived a bit after eight, wearing the only pair of jeans he had that didn't have a hole in them and a clean tee shirt, and found that the lights were on but only Rick was there. He stopped by Rick's office to announce himself, and Rick gave him the dime tour. The magazine's offices were split into a large central room with workstations around the walls, a large circular table with an inset LCD computer monitor for displaying the magazine layout, and two tiny offices on the far side from Rick's office in the hallway leading to the central room.

To Kit's surprise, one of those offices was *his*. It was a tiny cubicle-sized space surrounded by boxes and boxes of papers, articles, files, magazines, and books. There was a desk in there with a workstation on it, and a very old leather-bound chair, probably a holdover from the original tenants of the office. "A researcher needs a separate space for all the resource material, and a quiet place where he can dig without distractions," Rick explained. "Besides, until yesterday this was a storage room, so why not put you right in here with the stuff you might have to dig through?"

Kit chuckled. "True."

"The boxes do have a kind of order to them. You'll figure it out as you get the hang of it. You okay?"

Kit grunted, putting his paws on his sides. "The bed my landlord lent me is too soft."

"You have problems with your back?"

He nodded. "It's not really a surprise, if you think about it."

"Yeah, true. You gonna be okay?"

"I need to go buy a heating pad. That helps out quite a bit."

"Say no more. Go ahead and go get one. There's a Target about six blocks from here. Just turn left out of the parking lot, you'll see it on the right. You're just spinning your wheels til Mike gets here to set up your laptop anyway."

"Thanks boss, I appreciate it."

He returned with a heating pad, a new coffee mug, and an empty picture frame he fully intended to fill with pictures of Vil and Jessie. He set up his heating pad and sat down in the chair, testing it, when Rick opened the door in front of a dusky raccoon. "Kit, this is Mike Belcher," he said. "He's our resident tech-head, and he runs the website for the magazine. If you have any computer problems, he's the raccoon to see."

"Nice to meet you," he said, standing up and shaking Mike's paw.

"You too. Boss said you have a laptop for me to add to the network?"

"Yeah, hold on." He dug it out of his portfolio and put it on his desk.

"Wow, a Sabletech DV 900! You know your rigs!"

"No, I have a sister who knows people who know about computers," he chuckled ruefully. "She gave it to me for Christmas."

"Well, your sister made a good buy. A little expensive, but it's one serious piece of hardware."

"I'll tell her you said she made a good buy."

“A damn good buy,” he said, taking out a memo pad. “It’ll just take a second. This run on wireless G or N?”

“No idea.”

“I’ll look it up,” he chuckled. “Don’t know much about them, eh?”

“I know how to click on the pretty little pictures, but once you start throwing jargon at me, I’m lost.”

Mike laughed. “It’s not that hard. I’ll teach ya.”

“Sounds like a deal to me.”

Mike looked up some settings on his laptop and wrote them down on his memo pad. “Alright, it’ll be added in about ten minutes.”

“That’s quick.”

“When you know what you’re doing, it doesn’t take long,” he grinned, then he scurried out.

“Mike’s damn good,” Rick told him as Kit sat back down. “Here.”

Rick handed him a file folder. “Ooh, my first assignment?”

“Yep. I want everything you can get on the company and its board. And look up the history of the land in the file, too, so Barry has some good background to go on when he gets his interview.”

“You got it.” He turned and looked at his monitor, saw the icons for the programs he needed to research, as well as the web browser that would get him to rich data sources like the library and the courthouse. “Shivers,” he said with a chuckle. “My first real job since college.”

“Welcome to the real world, Kit,” Rick grinned. “Now prove I made a good decision when I hired you.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Mike was a chatty fellow, friendly and outgoing, which Kit rather liked. Mike’s primary job was maintaining their computer network and the website for the magazine, but he also dealt with the publishing programs, did some photo editing, and basically handled little things the office needed, since he was the fur that usually had the most free time on his paws.

Rick too he liked, because he was intelligent and kind, and had been very good to him. Rick was the main editor, working with his graphic artist Savid to lay out the magazine every week. It was Rick that decided what went into the magazine, and he also dealt with the outside, dealing with advertisers and such. Rick was a very, very busy dingo. It would almost be overwhelming with him deciding to print a weekly magazine, but the magazine only had about twenty pages on the average every week, and they usually had no trouble filling the pages with both content and advertising. That was because Lone Star had a good circulation in Austin, and was just starting to test the waters in College Station and San Antonio. Rick told him that they had enough work backlogged to fill three issues. When Kit called him on it about his journal, he just laughed and admitted that he fibbed a bit, and just thought that running the journal as a weekly feature would be a good draw.

He met Marty later that morning, and found the sheep to be flamboyantly gay, but also a pretty smart guy with a wicked sense of humor that Kit immediately liked. Not only did Marty work as the receptionist, but

he also did a lot of the editorial work in conjunction with Rick, proving that Rick wasn't lying when he said that everyone in the office wore more than one hat. Marty's part of the magazine was the mailbag, printing reader letters, going through submissions and deciding which ones would be printed, then editing them a little if they needed to be cut down or had objectionable language that had to be removed.

Barry was one of the two journalists that worked on the magazine. He was a black bear, with an intimidating visage but a soft voice, who was sober, diligent, and from what Rick said, a damn fine reporter. Barry did the "real" news articles that went into the magazine, but also did some lifestyle articles dealing with college life. And now that Kit was there to help him research, he'd get even better. Barry had been doing almost all the research for the magazine, and Kit was there to take the load off of him and let him focus on reporting. Barry was the fur in the office he'd be working with the most.

Lilly was the only female working at the magazine. She was a graduate student in journalism, taking her master's classes at night, cutting her teeth in the industry at Lone Star. She was a red squirrel, with about fifty piercings in her ears and dressed goth, but with a good nose for a story and a finger on the pulse of college nightlife. She was the one that knew what was hot and what wasn't. Lilly handled the magazine articles that dealt with college culture and lifestyle, maintained *The Scene* section of the magazine that listed all the current hot spots, and she kept track of all the bands that came through town and listed where they were playing. Lilly was also the best photographer they had, and was the one that took most of the important pictures.

Savid was an Indian mongoose that was the assistant layout editor and head graphic artist. He had an atrocious accent, but he was a very good-natured fellow that had a stunning eye for what was artistic. He was the only artist Kit had ever seen that could draw a nearly perfect circle using a computer template board, *free-handed*.

Jeffrey was a white-furred mouse that was the junior graphic artist. Where Savid focused on designs and graphics, Jeffrey did most of the illustrations and other detailed work. Jeffrey was a talented artist, working mainly on paper and scanning in his work where Savid worked mainly with a template and graphics programs. Jeffrey also wasn't bad at photography, and Lilly was training him in the art so he could more or less take over that role...though Rick was considering hiring a dedicated photographer, much the same way he hired Kit to be a researcher.

Eight furs printing out a weekly magazine. The office was always busy, always a little hectic, it seemed, but the seven furs he was just getting to know all seemed to get along well with each other, and knew what they were doing.

Kit did his best. He finished his Aguavo Construction research job by lunch, of interest to Lone Star because they were going to build a new dorm in an annex just off the campus grounds. He laid down on Rick's desk a sheaf of information about the company, its board members, the land they were about to develop, the blueprints of the proposed building and its past history of the building that had stood on the lot before it was demolished, all neatly cross-indexed and with a table of contents. All it took was a phone book, a pleasant voice, a couple of hours of surfing the public records, and a masterful command of Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word.

Rick opened it up and started leafing through it, and he just kept nodding. “Holy hairballs, Kit, this is damn nice work. And *fast*.”

“Well, everyone goes a million miles an hour around here, boss,” he chuckled. “I didn’t want to look like I was slacking.”

“Son, you’re gonna fit in here just fine,” he winked. “Lunch!” Rick screamed, startling Kit a little bit.

“Chinese!” Mike called.

“Fast food!” Lilly screamed in reply.

“Lunchbox!” Marty shouted with a funny lilt.

“Uh, what does that mean?” Kit asked.

“What they want for lunch, of course,” Rick grinned. “What are you up for?”

“Anything that doesn’t squeal when I stick a fork in it,” he said.

Rick chuckled. “You can either go out and get something, or call something in and have it delivered. If you do go out, it’s policy around here to see if someone wants something brought back, and bring it. Just pay for it and bring the receipt, they’ll pay you back. When you get back from lunch, I need some research done on a fraternity on campus that’s on probation.”

“You got it.”

“Rick, advertiser on line one,” Marty’s voice came in over an intercom on his phone.

“Dammit, work calls,” Rick growled, picking up the phone. “You going out for lunch?”

“I think so.”

“Pick something up for me. I don’t care what. I’m not picky when I’m hungry. Rick Sanders,” he said into the phone after pressing a button on its face.

He waved to Rick, then poked his head out into the main office. “I’m going out. Any orders?”

“Chinese!” Mike called. “Little Dragon on Congress, best takeout. Kung Pow chicken and two eggrolls, please.”

“I have to go out myself, so I’ll pick mine up,” Lilly told him.

“Okay. Jeffrey? Savid?”

“No thank you,” Savid said with his thick accent.

“I’ll go later, but thanks,” Jeffrey said with a wave of his paw. He and Savid were bent over looking at a monitor built into the main table, a page layout from the look of it. They went back to discussing something about it.

Kit decided chinese worked for him too, and picked up lunch. He ate in his office, paging through the file Rick had sent him about the fraternity on his desktop, his chopsticks blurring as he wolfed down beef pepper steak stuffed in the little square cardboard box. He worked through the material. The fraternity was on probation for a party where they allowed underage students to drink, and they got busted by an Campus Police undercover officer. He tossed his garbage, then started working through it to get the information Rick wanted about the members of the Rho Chi Epsilon fraternity. He started with the fraternity website, then called the national headquarters for the fraternity and fished for a list of members. After that, he dug up phone numbers for the parents of some of the members and

called around. He didn't ask anything invasive or combative, simply explaining he was doing research on the fraternity that their sons belonged to, and he wanted some honest opinions from them about it.

He worked through the list of information Rick wanted, then cross-indexed it and dumped it into Excel so he could array it and set up a table of contents. Once it was all organized to his satisfaction, he exported it back to Word, then sent the file to Barry's computer. "Barry, that fraternity material's ready!" he shouted from his tiny closet. "I sent it to your desktop!"

"Thanks, dude!"

Rick pulled him out of his office after that and had him work with the others, basically just watching what they did. Rick put him with Mike first, who occupied the other tiny office that hosted five computers and a bunch of computer manuals. Kit sat down with him, and Mike showed him around the website, showed him the page he was building for Kit's bio for the magazine. "We won't come out and say you're a *Vulpan* Vulpan," he grinned. "Oh yeah, I need a pic of you for the page. He picked up a camera from his desk.

"Rick told you about that, eh?"

"Yeah, you'd think he'd have to, if you think about it," he nodded. "But that's okay, we're cool with it. You do good work for a disowned ex-rich kid," he grinned.

"Thanks."

"Let's take the pic in your office," he said. "Sitting at your desk."

"My office is a mess."

“Yeah, but your office is the office of a *researcher*. Researchers are supposed to be surrounded by books and junk like that.”

Kit laughed. “Point.”

Mike snapped a few pictures of him sitting at his desk, turned to look at the camera, then uploaded them into his computer. Kit watched as he threw the picture into Photoshop and cut it down, made a few tweaks to it to make it internet-friendly, then dropped it into the webpage. “There, just that easy,” he said with a nod. “Barry’s gonna write a bio summary about you that’ll go down here,” he added, pointing at the empty area to the left and below the picture.

“Cool. I’ve never seen a webpage being built before.”

“It’s not that hard. I’ll teach you. You seem to know your Microsoft Office. I think you’d do well playing with HTML.”

“The legacy of a mis-spent youth,” he grinned.

“I doubt that,” he chuckled.

He was put with Barry next. Barry showed him some of the reports he’d done, and walked him through the open projects he had going. “I’m done editing what we’re gonna put first in the new piece,” he said, bringing up a document. It was from his journals. “We’re gonna call it ‘through my eyes,’ and pick out some of the stories and things you wrote about in the journals. I think it’ll do well. You’re a pretty good writer.”

“Wow, thanks for the complement,” Kit said with a slightly goofy smile.

“Rick had me drum up a bio summary on you for the website. Read it over and tell me what you think,” he said, tabbing to a new window.

Barry had been kind to him. The bio made no mention of who he was. It simply said he was 22, a graduate of the University of Massachusetts, and he was from Boston. It said that he’d spent time after graduating from U-Mass traveling the country to experience what America had to offer before coming to Lone Star, which was his first real job after college. The bio listed him both as a researcher and a staff writer for the magazine.

“It’s really nice. Thanks for kinda not mentioning *that*.”

“They’d think we were lying if we did,” Barry grinned, showing off a mouth full of sharp carnivore teeth. Barry had had his teeth sharpened. It was a custom in some parts of the south and west for carnivore furs to sharpen some or all of their teeth, to look more like the carnivores they were. Kit himself didn’t do it, but like most foxes, he did have a pretty impressive set of canines. He could deliver a brutal bite if forced to defend himself to that degree. “I think it’s kinda cool that you managed to find your own place despite that. I think it was pretty rough going from being a trust fund rich kid to fending for yourself.”

“It wasn’t fun,” he nodded. “But I made it.”

“Someday I might have to do an interview about that with ya.”

“Well, maybe someday,” Kit hedged.

“Hey, no pressure. Whenever you feel like doing it.”

“Thanks.”

He was placed with Savid and Jeffrey after that. They showed him how they built the basic layout of the magazine in a computer program using the magazine's template style, which Rick would come out and check over and correct from time to time. Savid showed him his graphics he kept on his computer, and Jeffrey drew a quick sketch of Kit and showed it to him. "Wow, that's good for how fast you did it," Kit noted.

"Thanks," the mouse replied. "I do the editorial cartoons we put in the mailbag section, so I have lots of practice."

"Rick, he say you were from Boston," Savid said. "What it like there?"

"Cold in the winter," Kit chuckled. "With lots of trees and gentle rolling hills. The harbor is very pretty in the fall, when you look down from Breeder's Hill and see the riot of fall colors bending with the buildings, and then the blue sea stretching out like a blanket."

"It hot here, like India, but winters are cold."

"Cold cold, or cold for India cold?"

Savid laughed. "Cold to me cold."

"They're not that bad. It can drop below freezing from time to time, but we don't get snow or nothin'," Jeffrey added.

"Rick say you have rich parents before breaking from family to live by self. You travel to my country?"

"No, I never did get to India," he shook his head. "I did go to Hong Kong and Australia, though."

"Ah, I been to Hong Kong. Amazing city, yes?"

"Yes, it was awesome," Kit agreed.

He sat with Lilly after that, as she showed him *The Scene* page of the website. “Basically what we put in the magazine gets thrown up here, too,” she explained. “This is the only page that Mike doesn’t handle himself. I’m still learning the advanced HTML stuff, so he helps me make it look just right, but I do all the content.”

“It looks nice.”

“Thanks. You like to club?”

“I like to go out sometimes, but I’m not a clubhopper,” he answered.

“Too bad. A handsome fox like you? You’d never go home alone, that’s for sure.”

He laughed. “If I did that, the cat I’m seeing might not be too happy.”

“Damn, the cute ones are always taken.”

“That’s because there’s more competition for us,” he grinned playfully.

“Least you’re not one of those ‘not outside my species’ types.”

“Hell no.”

“Good. My last boyfriend had purist folks, and they had a fit when he told them he was dating me. They rode him so hard, I broke up with him just to get them off his back. But we still see each other in secret,” she grinned.

The most interesting sit-in had to be with Marty. The sheep had pink streaks in his wool, and he painted his nails. Kit didn’t feel self-conscious sitting beside the gay sheep as he showed him his section of the magazine. “I go through the letters people send and decide which ones to print,” he said. “I’m a big believer in free speech and different views, obviously,” he

said with a tilt to his voice that made Kit laugh, “so I like to put as many viewpoints as I can on the page. It’s a pretty cool gig. Rick hired me just to be the receptionist at first, but he gave me the mailbag and told me to run with it. He’s a great guy. Too bad he’s married,” he mused. “And not interested.”

“He’s got an interesting coloration. I’ve never seen that many colors all random like that on anything but a calico.”

“His mother’s a dingo and his father’s an African wild dog. Can you say *clashing fur*, honey?”

Kit laughed.

Marty snapped his fingers. “But it does look good on him,” he noted. “Just like that eye of yours looks good on you.”

Kit chuckled and unconsciously put his paw to the right side of his face. “People do love to stare at it.”

“I read that your whole family’s the same way.”

“Yeah. Everyone descended from my great-grandfather.”

“Must make for some killer family pictures.”

“It makes the family stand out,” he agreed.

“Mmm-mmm-mmm, I should look into a colored contact lens,” he noted. “I’d knock ‘em dead if I had a blue eye!”

“At least you could take out the lens when you don’t want to attract attention.”

“Oh, honey, since when does Marty Wexler *not* want to attract attention! Bring it, honey! I’m a drama queen!” He struck a Madonna-like pose, looking imperiously up at the ceiling, which made Kit nearly fall out of his chair laughing. “So, you coffee or tea?”

“Tea.”

“Chinese or italian?”

“Italian, naturally.”

“Treadmill or weights?”

“Treadmill.”

“Long walks on the beach, or snuggled up by a fire?”

“Hmm, I’d have to go for the fire.”

“Oh, baby! Too bad you’re not gay! We’d sync!”

Kit chuckled. He didn’t feel self-conscious at all. “Well, you are kinda cute, in a sheep sort of way. If I did swing that way, you’d get a second look.”

Marty laughed. “We could play the hunter and the hunted,” he grinned. “Oh Kit baby, come raid my chicken coop!”

Kit laughed.

“And I’m glad you’re not one of those gay-o-phobes,” Marty grinned. “Usually males start shying away when I say things like that.”

“Nah, it’s cool. I’m not interested and you know it, but that doesn’t mean I can’t take a joke.”

“Oh yeah, we’re gonna get along, honey, that we are,” Marty said with a nod.

He sat in with Rick after that. Rick talked with him about the magazine for a while, how it made money by relying heavily on advertising, since the magazine was distributed free on the campus and only cost a dollar on news stands out away from the campus and out of town. “Our main income is the advertising,” he said as he showed Kit the layout of a page from next week’s issue. “The sale price off campus basically just covers the costs of shipping it out. We contract with a printer that’s only about a mile from here, and they ship the issues out where I pay to have them sent. They have a few other customers, but we’re their biggest, so they go a little further with us than they do with their other customers. If they lost our account, they’d probably go under.”

“What kind of fees do you charge?”

“Not that bad. But advertisers are willing to pay for space, because we have a good circulation. Sometimes I have more ads than I have space for them,” he chuckled, “but I won’t let the magazine get cluttered up with ads. If I did that, I’d lose readers cause they’d feel like they were reading a commercial. I try to keep the fees down so I don’t scare the advertisers off. It’s something of a juggling act sometimes, and some months the magazine barely breaks even. But hell, as long as it pays all our salaries, that’s what matters.”

“Amen,” Kit chuckled. “Do Savid and Jeffrey do ad work?”

He nodded. “Sometimes they design ads for some of our clients, Jeffrey mainly. Savid’s specialty is computer graphics and design, but Jeffrey’s much more of an artist than a designer. He’s talented.”

“I noticed. He whipped out a sketch of me in about five minutes.”

“I have him do editorial cartoons and other sketches,” he said. “I asked him if he thought he could do a three panel comic strip serial to run in the magazine. He can do it, but he’s not very good at writing it. Say, maybe you and him could get together and work something out. You’re a good writer, and he’s a good artist.”

“I wouldn’t know how to do something like that,” Kit laughed.

“So? It’s not like you’d lose anything if it bombs.”

“Well, if you want us to try, boss, we’ll try.”

There was a knock at the door. Kit and Rick looked up, and Kit’s heart lurched a little. It was Jessie! She was wearing a U.T. tee shirt, Longhorn Orange, with *University of Texas* emblazoned across it in white letters, and a pair of jeans with a wide belt hitched over one hip. “Hi,” she said with a smile. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course not!” he said happily. “Rick, this is Jessie Williams. We’re going out. Jessie, this is Rick Sanders, my boss.”

“It’s nice to meet you. Sorry to drop in like this,” she said shyly. “But Kit told me where he works, and I wanted to see his office. Is that okay?”

“That’s just fine, my dear,” Rick said easily. “Come in, come in!” She stepped in, and he shook her hand fondly. “My, you’re very beautiful, my dear. Kit can certainly pick a femme.”

She looked away with a shy smile, her cheek fur ruffling.

“Show her your office, Kit,” Rick urged. “We’ll pick this up after you’re done.”

He gave Rick a grateful smile. "It's not much, Jessie," he chuckled. "Here, it's just across the hall."

"Leave the door open!" Rick called as he led her out. "I'll have no shenanigans going on in the office!"

Jessie's entire face poofed out, and she put her paws to her cheeks. "He *didn't*!"

"Be glad it wasn't Marty. It would have been worse," Kit laughed.

"You bet it woulda been, honey!" Marty called from the reception desk.

"Well, here it is," he said, showing her into the tiny room. "Sorry that I can't offer to have you sit down, but I'm not sure if there's even another chair under all this mess," he said ruefully.

She giggled. "That's alright. How is your first day?"

"Pretty cool," he said as he sat down at the desk. "I've already got some work done, and I'm learning my way around the office and learning how they put the magazine together. I've never done work like this before, but at least the researching part isn't that bad."

"How do you do that?"

"The internet and a phone book," he answered. "Rick or Barry or Lilly asks me to dig up information on a person or a place or a thing, and I go find it and arrange it so it's easy for them to read and they can find the facts quickly. It's just like writing a paper in school, really. But instead of spending all my time in the library, I spend my time looking things up online or making phone calls."

“And he’s good at it!” Barry called from the main room.

Kit chuckled. “Thin walls and an open door. And no doubt they’re all in there being quiet so they can eavesdrop on us.”

“Busted!” Lilly said melodramatically.

Jenny giggled. “Well, I’m sorry I barged in on you,” she apologized. “I should have waited until you were off, but I didn’t know when that was.”

“Five or so,” he told her. “Maybe later if I’m working on something.”

“Well,” she said, sitting on a box near the door, then squeaking in surprise and jumping up when it shifted under her. “Want to go get something to eat after you’re off work?”

He scratched his muzzle. “It might not be a good time, Jessie,” he said, with obvious disappointment. “I just got an apartment yesterday, and it’s totally empty. I have to go get some stuff for it after work.”

“You did? That’s wonderful!” she exclaimed. “What’s it like?”

“It’s a bit old, but it’s actually kinda roomy,” he said. “The landlord me cut a deal on the rent because I’m not a typical college party animal. Right now, it’s totally empty. If not for my landlord’s kindness, I woulda slept on the floor last night. Though I might do that tonight,” he grunted, putting a paw on his back. “The bed he lent me is too soft. I woke up this morning bowed over like an old geezer.”

“Your back, huh?”

He nodded.

“Well, I can go with you,” she offered. “Males sometimes forget some of the little things you need to make a home.”

“Well, that would be nice. Not much of a date, though,” he smiled.

“Who says we need to go out on a date to have fun together?” she challenged. “Spending time with you is spending time with you, Kit, whether we’re watching a movie or shopping for dishwasher detergent.”

“Point,” he chuckled.

“You said you don’t have anything at all in the apartment?”

He shook his head. “Just a bed, a nightstand, and an alarm clock.”

“Does it have a dishwasher?”

“Yeah. I assume it works.”

“Okay. Does it have a shower curtain?”

He laughed. “Nope. And boy did that surprise me when I went to take a shower this morning.”

“Okay. I’ll go sit down and make up a list of things you’ll need, and we’ll go get it after you’re off.”

“Thanks, Jess, really.”

“Jess?” she asked.

“Sorry.”

“No, no, you can call me Jess,” she said with a smile. “It’s just nobody ever has before. I kinda like it.” She went to the door. “Mister Sanders? Is there somewhere I can sit down?”

“Certainly, my dear, and please, call me Rick. Go pick a chair in the main office. We have a nice big table right in the middle you can use. And

don't mind the staff. If they start bugging you, just smack 'em."

"Hey!" Lilly called. "No fair, boss! How can we scope her out if we can't bug her?"

Jessie laughed, her cheek fur ruffling slightly when she looked back to him. "I'll be waiting."

Kit leaned back in his chair, feeling very...content. Jessie was a wonderful femme, caring and thoughtful. Rick beckoned him for his own office—they could see each other from their offices when sitting at their desks—and he went back to his boss' office.

"She's beautiful, son," he said quietly. "And she's very charming. Don't blow it."

"Believe me, I'll do my best not to," he answered vehemently. "You can say that me being here is because of her. I was about to move on when I met her. And, well, here I am."

"Well, if you work out, I'll have to thank her."

"My sis said she's making a respectable fox out of me," he laughed ruefully.

"Nothing wrong with that, Kit," he chuckled. "Now, let me show you our master template. It's the basic layout the entire magazine follows."

In the main office, Jessie had a glowing smile.

So, she was making a respectable fox out of him, was she? Well. She guessed she'd have to make sure he *stayed* respectable.

“Jessie! Jessie!”

She looked up, then blinked as the red squirrel female with a zillion earrings in her ears snapped a picture of her. “Nice,” she beamed, looking at the image captured in the tiny screen on the back of her digital camera. “Kit has an empty picture frame in his office. I’m gonna give him something to put in it.”

She smiled shyly. “He does, does he?”

“You bet. Mind if I give him your pic?”

“I’d like that, thank you.”

Shopping with Jessie was *fun*.

She was very thorough. She had a long list of things he’d need for his apartment, from obvious things like a shower curtain and soap and toilet paper, to little things he never considered, like cleaning supplies, a flashlight, a laundry basket, a vacuum cleaner, and a pair of scissors.

“Scissors?” he asked curiously, looking at the list.

“There’s nothing worse than not being able to find something you should have,” she said simply. “The first time you need those scissors, you’re gonna thank me.”

“Can’t argue with that,” he nodded.

They prioritized the list based on his money and his needs. Between the advance Rick gave him and the money he had saved up, he had about six hundred fifty dollars available to spend after paying his rent and deposit for the apartment and the electric company, and holding back the money he

needed to live on until his first paycheck. The first thing he needed was a new bed, and for that, they went to Value City Furniture. Kit tested out several beds, which Jessie fretted over the cost. Some of them were more than he had!

“This is a necessary expense, Jess,” he told her seriously as he tested a queen-size. “Because of my back. If I don’t get a bed my back can handle, I’ll wake up every morning feeling like I was tied in a knot.”

“Well, yeah, I guess so,” she acceded. “I didn’t realize they were so expensive.”

“Yeah.”

What he eventually settled on was a queen size mattress and box springs that ran him nearly three hundred dollars. Instead of a proper bedframe, he instead bought bedrails. The furniture store promised to deliver it to him tomorrow afternoon, which he wasn’t too happy about, but that was the best they could do. “I guess I can live with one more night in the other bed,” he grunted. “At least I already have a heating pad, and I’ll be able to take a hot shower in the morning.”

After that, they hit Wal-Mart. Instead of buying sundries, instead, Jessie pushed him straight to the male’s wear department. “You can’t wear the same jeans every day,” she challenged. “You need more clothes!”

“Heh, I need clothes because almost everything I own that I could wear to work is dirty. It’ll be expensive to wash clothes that often if I don’t expand my wardrobe. My apartment has hookups for them, but they also have a coin-op laundry room for the efficiencies I can use until I get my own.”

“Well, I can take your things to my house and wash them for you so it doesn’t cost you so much, until you can get a washer and dryer.”

“Jessie, you don’t have to do that for me.”

“I don’t have to, but I want to,” she told him firmly. “Now let’s pick out something nice for you.”

After he had three more pairs of jeans and a pack of tee shirts, they tackled the list. They filled a buggy with all manner of things he needed, the top item on the list being a cheap microwave oven. After that important item was secured, they started down the list, from towels to a TV tray and folding chair so he could use his laptop, all the little things one might find in a junk drawer, to clothes hangers for his closet. Kit used a piece of paper to keep careful track of the total cost of everything in the basket so he didn’t go over budget, and it was almost like they were a married couple. He got to see what she liked and didn’t like as they roamed the aisles, and he found that he liked her taste. She was elegant, yet understood the need for thrift and picked a happy medium between taste and price.

When he got within fifty dollars of the cap, he reined it in. “Alright, we’re close to the edge here, Jess,” he called. They both leaned against the handle of the cart, looking at the list, noting all the items crossed off of it. He could smell her fur, that lovely scented soap she used, and it was hard to concentrate on what they were doing.

“Well, it’s not even half of it,” she complained. “That bed really hurt.”

“Yeah, but the bed mattered more than the rest of the list,” he grunted, scratching his cheek. “Or I’d be showing up at work every morning very grumpy.”

She giggled. “Well, it’s a start, anyway. Do you cook?”

“I can cook for myself, that’s about it,” he answered.

“Have you bought any food for the house yet?”

“A little.”

“A little isn’t going to cut it, mister,” she told him with a slight smile.
“What is it, cereal and beer?”

He laughed. “Cereal, yes. Beer, no. I don’t like beer. I drink wine. I bought cereal and some hamburger, mainly.”

“Did you get bread? Or eggs? Did you get some of those disposable salt and pepper shakers to hold you over? Did you buy cooking oil?”

“Uh, no.”

“*Males*,” she sighed. “Come on, let’s go get you stocked with the necessities,” she announced, pushing the cart forward.

“I’ve been scolded,” he remarked with a rueful chuckle, then he followed behind that gorgeous long-haired tail of hers. “At least I remembered the coffee pot!” he called.

“But you didn’t buy a frying pan!” she challenged, pointing at the cheap frying pan that was in the basket. “How were you going to *cook* that hamburger you bought, Kit?” she asked, looking back at him.

He laughed. “Point.”

Using what little money he had left, she outfitted him with the bare necessities he’d need to hold him over until he got paid. She picked out basic staples, bread, cheese, lunch meat, cooking oil, and some little cups of

yogurt which he rather favored. She told him what he needed, and he picked the brands he preferred.

When he announced they were at the red line for his finances, they stepped back and regarded the shopping cart, which was absolutely full, and rather heavy. She put a finger to her muzzle and regarded it, then brushed her hair back away from her blue eyes. “It doesn’t look like three hundred dollars, does it?” she remarked.

“I’m gonna be eating out of a brown bag until I get paid,” he chuckled.

“Well, at least now you have what you need to do that,” she said, giving him an amused sideways glance.

“Thanks to you, Jess. You were a lifesaver.”

“I’m glad I could help.”

The cheetah that checked them out was a little intimidated by the cart they pushed up in front of his counter, but he tackled the order with no complaint. Kit watched the prices go by, checking them against his figures, making sure he didn’t forget anything and would go over budget. After nearly ten minutes of checking out items, the total came up to \$297.38, which was only two cents off what he estimated, because of rounding the sales tax.

“Wow, you were almost dead on,” she noted, looking over his shoulder at the notebook.

“Well, anyone in my family is good with numbers,” he said modestly as he dug up the cash to pay the cheetah.

“You two must be setting up a new home,” the cheetah noted as he took the money.

“Well, I’m helping him settle into a new apartment,” Jessie answered with a demure smile. “Males don’t know how to shop.”

Kit laughed. “I’m glad she came along to hold my paw,” he admitted to the cheetah. “I woulda never thought of half of this stuff until I needed it.”

“Told you,” she grinned.

“You did at that,” he agreed with a chuckle.

The one thing they didn’t consider was bulk. Rick’s second car was a Chevy Cavalier, and it only had so much cargo space. Kit and Jessie had to do a little stuffing to get it all into the car, because of the microwave oven and folding chair taking up so much of the trunk and the garbage can dominating the back seat. In the end, Jessie had to share the footspace of the front seat with the groceries, and had the bag holding the clothes he’d bought in her lap.

He stopped to think a minute. Shopping with her was...wonderful. It was such a mundane thing, and they didn’t do much but talk about what they were buying, comparing it, but it was an interesting window into how her mind worked, and he’d had a great time. It just felt, *natural*, palling around with her as she made fun of his sense of style, and he complained about how expensive some of the things she was putting in the basket were. It wasn’t a date, hell, they hadn’t really gone on a real date yet, but in some ways, it was even better than a date. He couldn’t see who she really was, what kind of female she was, sitting in a movie theater. Going shopping with her had been *much* more educational.

“What is it, Kit?” she asked, adjusting the bag in her lap as she looked at him.

“Nothing. I had a wonderful time, Jessie. That was almost better than a date.”

She laughed. “Well, I had fun too,” she told him, reaching over and putting a paw on his shoulder. “But I hope our dates aren’t quite that expensive, or you might have to ask your sister for a loan just to go out with me.”

He laughed richly. “Knowing my sis, she’d foot the bill herself,” he chuckled as he started the car. “Vil likes to try to mother me, Jess. She keeps trying to send me things and send me money between attempts to make me come home, but I won’t let her.”

“Why not? She’s only doing it because she loves you.”

“Yeah, but it’s also risky for her to do it,” he said. “If my family wanted to get anal about it, they could try to claim that she was violating the terms of my bastard father’s will. There’s a clause in the will that states that any member of the family that’s caught helping me forfeits everything they got from him.”

“Wow,” she breathed, putting a paw to her mouth.

“Yeah. They can’t touch the company, though, because she was given the shares that gives her control while he was still alive. And she does have some money that has nothing to do with the family fortune. But she does have a lot of money from the inheritance, and her house, and lots of other things. They all came from the will. If she got dis-inherited, she wouldn’t be homeless and broke, but it would cause a serious disruption in her life, and I

won't allow it. I love my sister, Jess, and I won't let her end up with her life turned on its ear because she's been helping me. I'm a grown fox, I can make it on my own. I appreciate her concern for me, I really do, but I have to look out for her as much as she's looked out for me."

"That's very noble of you, Kit."

"Nobility has nothing to do with it," he chuckled. "All I care about is that Vil doesn't ruin her life because of me. So I have to watch out for her."

"Well, I think it's sweet."

"She wants to meet you, you know," he told her.

"I'd like to meet her too."

"That's good, because she wants to come down and see me next month."

"Really?"

"Yeah. She's not sure what days yet. She'll call me back this weekend and set it up."

"That's fine with me, Kit. I'd love to meet her."

"Oh, and I should warn you. She has your telephone number."

"That's okay. I don't mind," she assured him.

They talked about little things as he drove them back towards campus, but she looked around as he turned onto the street on which her sorority house was located. "Where are you going?"

"I'm taking you back to your house."

“Oh, no,” she challenged. “I’m not making you carry all this around yourself! Besides, I want to see your apartment.”

He chuckled. “Alright, but I’ll say now that I warned you.”

It wasn’t far to his apartment, barely more than a mile. He pulled into his space, and motioned. “Well, here we are,” he said. “Home sweet home, or something like that.”

“Okay, you go unlock the door and I’ll get started.”

They took turns ferrying bag after bag into the apartment, storing it up against the walls of the bare domicile for the moment. Jessie carried the trash can he’d bought as he carried in the microwave, then she wiped her brow and looked at he roomy living room. “It’s pretty big.”

“Yeah, it’s a two-bedroom. It’s old. I guess they built this place back when space mattered.”

“How much?”

“I got a deal on the rent. Six hundred fifty a month, as long as I behave. As you saw, we’re right in front of the rental office. The manager, Lupe, he said as long as I don’t throw wild parties or blow things up, we have a deal.”

She laughed. “I guess I can see his side of it because of all the U.T. students,” she agreed. “Well, let’s get this mess organized.”

She didn’t have to help him, but she did. She put the groceries away while he put up the shower curtain. She set up the TV tray and little lawn chair in the corner of the empty living room while he put away the towels in the linen closet and put the fur soap and shampoo in the shower, then set a

roll of toilet paper on the spindle by the commode. She seeded a junk drawer in the kitchen with the little odds and ends while he put hangers up in his closet and took the tags off his new clothes. He heard the radio he bought come on in the kitchen, as she tuned it to the local pop station, but he let her go on about it as he unpacked the new sheets for the bed they'd deliver tomorrow and put them in the linen closet. He put the light bulbs she had him buy on the shelf above the sheets, then went back into the living room to start working on the cleaning supplies. He heard a sizzling from the kitchen, and smelled hamburger. He peeked in and saw her standing in front of the electric stove, singing along with the radio as she tended two hamburgers that had just started to brown in the new pan.

"Jessie, you don't have to do that!" he protested.

She looked over at him and smiled. "I'm hungry, you haven't eaten, and I don't know if you know how to cook," she said with a smile.

"Uh, you know, there's only one chair, and I don't have a table."

She laughed. "We can stand and use the counter," she winked. "Can you make us some tea?"

"Of course." He busied himself with setting up his coffee maker to brew a pot of tea, and she pulled the ice trays out of the freezer and filled them with water, her tail ghosting over him and she went around him to put them back. It felt really strange being in the kitchen with her, just making dinner, but hell, this was ten times better than anything else he could have imagined. It just felt *right* to him to be around her, when it was just the two of them, when he was just being himself, and she was just being herself, and he loved it.

She finished frying the hamburgers, and put them on pieces of bread laid out on styrofoam plates. “Ketchup?”

“Please,” he answered as he poured to plastic cups full of hot tea, and she dug the brand new bottle of ketchup out of a bag and squeezed tight little circles of ketchup onto both burgers.

There was a knock at the door, which surprised him a little bit. He went over and opened it, and found Lupe at the doorway. “Hey, I was just checking to see if you needed anything,” he said. “I saw you take all that stuff in, and figured by now you’d know if you forgot somethin’.”

Kit laughed. “No, I don’t think so. But thanks a lot, Lupe, I appreciate the concern.”

“Hey, no prob,” he said, putting his paws in his pockets. “Is the cute kitty-cat gonna be rooming with you?”

Kit’s fur ruffled a little. “Uh, no, she’s just helping me settle in,” he answered.

Lupe grinned. “Ah, I got it. I’ll leave ya to it, then,” he said, then turned and walked back to his own apartment, which was beside the office.

“Who was that?” Jessie asked as he came back to the kitchen.

“My landlord, just seeing if we needed anything,” he said.

“That was nice of him,” she said, handing him a styrofoam plate.

“Yeah, he’s a pretty good guy,” he nodded. “Well, my first real meal in my own place,” he said, looking around.

“A little threadbare,” she laughed.

“But with wonderful company,” he said honestly, looking into her eyes.

Her cheeks ruffled slightly, and she smiled at him. “To independence,” she said, holding her hamburger out like a glass of wine.

He laughed and bumped his own burger against hers. “To independence,” he agreed, and they both took a big bite out of their burgers.

It was nearly nine when he took her home. They’d enjoyed a plain meal of hamburgers and yogurt cups, with hot tea to wash it down. Then she actually did the dishes for him, washing the pan and spatula she dirtied making dinner while he set up the trash can and threw away their plates. Then, they just roamed the apartment and talked for nearly an hour, about what kind of furniture he wanted, how much it would cost, how he could use the second bedroom as an office for when he brought work home from the magazine, and then she went on a thirty minute tear about the windows, talking about curtains. But, then she realized it was late, and she had homework to do, so he offered to take her home.

All in all, it was a wonderful evening.

He pulled up outside of her sorority house in his boss’ car. She unbuckled her seat belt, then looked over at him. “I had a great time, Kit,” she told him with a bright, sincere smile. “It was really nice to just hang around with you.”

“You were a lifesaver, Jess,” he told her. “Thanks for all the help.”

“Hey, I can’t let my guy run around looking for a pair of scissors when he needs them,” she grinned playfully, then she leaned over and kissed him.

He literally hummed in his throat as he kissed her, feeling his tail shiver, then she broke her kiss and leaned back with shimmering eyes. “Bring your dirty clothes to work with you tomorrow, and I’ll pick them up after school and take them home to wash them for you, okay?”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“No, but I want to,” she said, putting her paw on his shoulder and neck. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Kit,” she said. She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, then she opened the door and climbed out. He handed her her backpack, and she lingered her paw over his as she took it from her.

“Have a good night, Jess. And thanks again.”

“Any time. Drive safe now. Remember, this isn’t your car,” she said with a playful wink.

He watched her walk up to her sorority house, a large affair with columns in the front that supported a balcony, upon which he saw Sandy and a collie standing at the rail, looking down. God, she was so beautiful. The door opened before she reached it, and the skunk he’d seen before and a rabbit pulled her inside excitedly.

“Hey Kit!” Sandy shouted from the balcony.

He leaned down so he could see her through the open passenger window. “Hey, Sandy!” he shouted in reply.

“So how did it go?”

“We had a good time!” he shouted in reply.

“What did you two do?”

“We went shopping!” he called, which made her laugh. “I’ll talk to ya later, okay? I gotta get home!”

“Sure, see ya later!”

He put the car in gear and pulled away. Yes, he’d had a great time. A fantastic time. A wonderful time. And tomorrow, he’d see her again.

He already couldn’t wait.

Chapter 4

“You went to *Wal-Mart*? What the hell kind of date is that?” the other Jessie protested, then she laughed.

“It wasn’t a *date* date,” Jessie remarked as she put her backpack on her shoulder. She’d been ambushed in the living room, where Jessie, Charlotte, and a gray vixen named Sherry were watching TV when he dropped her off. Sam and Lisa had opened the door for her. “Kit just got an apartment, and he didn’t have anything at all. It was totally empty. So I helped him buy what he needed for it.” She laughed. “That poor male, he had no idea what he needed. He’d bought food to cook, but didn’t buy any pans to cook it in!”

Sherry and the other Jessie laughed, but Charlotte looked over at her with a curious look on her face. “So, he got an apartment, eh? I hope he had a bed,” she said with a sultry look.

“Not one he was going to keep,” she said primly, ignoring that bit of lewd innuendo. “The one his landlord lent him was hurting his back, so he bought a new one.”

“Did you sit on it? You know, try it out?” she asked.

Jessie’s cheeks ruffled slightly. “I did no such thing!”

“You shoulda,” she winked. “Getting you laid before you graduate is the driving goal of this entire sorority.”

Jessie's face frizzed out as the other females laughed. "We thought we had you taken care of with Burke, but he turned out to be a first class bastard. We're sorry about that," the other Jessie apologized.

"Well, it worked out. If it wasn't for him, Sandy and Sam would have never taken me to that movie, and we wouldn't have met Kit in that café."

"Well, he was good for something at least," Lisa grinned.

"Well, details, girl!" Sam pressed. "What did you do? What did you talk about?"

"Details have to wait," she told them. "I haven't done any of my homework yet!"

"Oh, no!" they all said. Sam and Lisa grabbed her by the paws and dragged her into the living room, then pushed her down on the couch between Sherry and Charlotte. They forced her to go over the whole day, from going to Kit's work to their shopping venture into Wal-Mart to going to his apartment. They kept grilling her over everything he did, most everything he said, and musing over it. They all knew who he was, that he was the disowned son of a rich family, and they kept harping on how he didn't seem like a rich person, that he seemed like a normal guy. More and more femmes came down as they were talking, until nearly the entire sorority was packed into the living room, some twelve females.

"And he never tried anything forward once?" Sandy demanded.

"No, he was the soul of courtesy," Jessie answered.

"Someone needs to smack some hormones into that male," she said, which caused some giggling. "I've never met a male that didn't at least *try* after the third date. I hope he's not a eunuch or something."

“He doesn’t kiss like a eunuch,” Jessie challenged. “He just knows I’m shy, so he’s being considerate. Ever since we went ice skating and he kissed me, he’s been going very slow. He told me then that he was letting me be the one to take the steps. I think he’s still doing it.”

“Hon, you may be shy, but you’re not timid,” the other Jessie noted with a grin. “I think it’s about time you started inviting him to take a couple of those steps.”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about it,” she said, her cheeks ruffling a little. “He *is* handsome.”

“God is he!” Sandy said with a lustful sigh. “I even love that half-missing ear, it makes him look like a rogue!”

“So, JD, are you gonna make that invitation?” Sam said with an uncharacteristic grin. Sam wasn’t the type to be too much into gossip.

“Well,” she hedged, her cheeks ruffling, which made them all laugh.

“The house virgin thinking about a male. It’s about time!” Denise, a fellow cat, called raucously. “Finally, the mission will be accomplished!”

“I wouldn’t mind at all,” Jessie admitted with a demure glance down. “But since our first date, and now that I know who he is, I want to be careful. He’s had a very bad time of it, and I, I don’t want to blow it, you know? Something tells me I have to be careful with him. He’s still terrified of his family, and I’m afraid if I push him too fast, too hard, his fear of his family is going to drive him away. He’s not going anywhere. He has a job now, and an apartment. He likes me, he likes to be with me, and that gives me time to work him out of his fear. I’m thinking about it. God, am I

thinking about it, I can't lie. But I have to make sure *he's* ready, or it could ruin everything."

"I've never met a male that wasn't ready," Sandy said with a dirty grin.

"His body might be ready, but his mind might not be," Jessie said immediately. "I don't want to lose him, Sandy. If that means I have to go slow and be careful, then that's exactly what I'm going to do. I've gone twenty-one years without having sex. I can wait a couple more months."

"And it'll make bagging him that much sweeter," Sherry giggled.

"Well, it sounds like you've thought about this," Sam noted.

"I've *seriously* thought about this," Jessie nodded. "Kit is very special, but he's also very delicate. If I don't handle this the right way, I'm going to ruin it, and what's worse, it's going to make it that much harder for him if he ever tries again. If I hurt him too much, he may never try another relationship with a female again. He'll just use his fear of his family to push females away."

"I never thought of that," Charlotte said soberly, and several females nodded.

"I guess those psychology classes actually aren't a waste of time," Lisa said with a rueful chuckle.

"So, if you think I'm not moving fast enough, or I don't want to—you know, you're wrong," she stated, feeling her cheek fur itch a little. "I'm going to reel my catch in slowly, because he's very special and needs special attention."

“Well, we’re here if you need help,” Sandy grinned. “It’s still the greatest and most sacred mission of this sorority to get you laid.”

“You femmes,” Jessie said, her face frizzing.

That bed was going to kill him, but then again, it had had its last chance.

Kit woke up at 6:00am, unable to sleep any longer, and staggered out of the borrowed bed with his back screaming in protest. He went straight for the shower, now that he could take one, to let the hot water massage his back and soothe out the pain. Fifteen minutes under steaming hot water began to untie the knots in the muscles of his lower back, and he sighed in contented relief when he felt the pain drain away.

God, Jessie had been a gift. Thanks to her, he actually had a towel to dry off with, food to eat for breakfast, a place to sit down to eat it, a radio to listen to—at least after he changed it to a classical music station—and lunch to take to work.

He finished drying off and put on his new clothes, then remembered to pack the dirty clothes in the basket and take it out to the car. Then, with almost sadistic glee, he stripped the bed, took it down, and stacked the mattresses and rails by the wall to make room for the bed he was getting today. Then he locked up and went to work.

The second day was just as hectic as the first, but he found that he actually enjoyed it. They would bring him things, and he’d track down the details. He also got his first lesson in using Photoshop, and he got to see the team interact. They were like a bunch of teenagers, laughing, playing,

joking with each other, but it was clear that they had fun working for Rick. Rick too wasn't above joking himself, old in body but young at heart, and Kit felt very at home among them. They worked hard and did good work, but they also remembered that they were all friends in addition to being co-workers.

At the end of the day, after five, he attended his first staff meeting. This was the issue-ending meeting, as Rick went over the issue that would be printed on Friday, which had been finalized a while, and asked for any last-minute input. Kit saw with some surprise that they'd put his picture on the article they were running that was taken out of his journals, and Rick announced that *Through My Eyes* was going to be a weekly back-page article.

He was even more surprised when Savid turned it to the second page, where all the credits were listed, and Kit's name was added...and there was a small box article beside it, with the headline *Lone Star Welcomes Kit Vulpan To the Team*. The picture of him in his office was under the title, with a short paragraph under it:

Lone Star is growing! We welcome Kit Vulpan to the crew!

A graduate of the University of Massachusetts, Kit has joined the team as the lead researcher and a staff writer. He'll be penning a new series of articles for us, and making sure we keep our facts straight!

Be nice to him, Austin! He may be a Yankee, but he's a great fur!

“I’ll need a new picture to replace our group shot,” Mike said. The group shot was on page two of every issue, over the listed credits, a picture of the crew sitting around the big table. Then he grinned. “I think she can take it for us.”

They all looked to the hallway. Jessie was standing there, her backpack over her shoulder, a little embarrassed. “I’m sorry,” she apologized. “Mister Marty wasn’t at the front desk, I thought Kit was just working late.”

“Oh, honey, don’t call me *Mister!*” Marty said morosely. “If anything, call me *Miss* Marty!”

Jessie giggled.

“No problem, my dear,” Rick smiled. “Since you’re here, mind taking a picture for us?”

“I can do that,” she nodded. Lilly got a camera and showed her how it worked, and she backed up to the hallway. “Alright, gather in everyone!” she called.

Lilly draped herself into Kit’s lap and threw her arms out, grinning at the camera. Everyone gathered in around them, making funny gestures or pointing to each other. Kit grabbed Lilly’s bushy tail and reached over and stuck it under Savid’s chin just as the flash went off. Savid sneezed, and Mike collapsed in helpless laughter.

“That was great!” Barry laughed. “Tell me you got a good picture!”

“I think so,” Jessie said, advancing into the office. Mike looked at the image on the screen, then grinned broadly.

“Fantastic! This is our new group shot, no doubt!” He uploaded it to the network, then replaced the old group shot with the new one, and everyone laughed when they saw it. Savid had a surprised look on his face in the picture, but he just laughed when he saw how silly he looked.

“It is good! It shows how much fun we have making the magazine!”

“Alright, folks, it looks like it’s a wrap,” Rick said. “Any objections?”

There was silence.

“Alright, it’s off to the printer. Kit, for us, Friday is a late day. I don’t expect you to be in until one, and we tend to work until about eight or nine, but if you *want* to come in earlier, you’re welcome to.”

“He always says that,” Barry grinned at him.

“So, that’s it, people. Good work.”

Kit got up and came over to Jessie. Rick went around them, then stopped and turned around.

“You know, if you want to hang around here, you’re welcome to, Jessie,” Rick told her with a smile as Kit came over to her. “We’re not stuffy or picky, and you wouldn’t be the first girlfriend to come hang out with us.”

“Or boyfriend!” Marty called.

Rick chuckled. “So for the record, you never have to knock around here. You’re always welcome in the office.”

“Thank you, Rick, that’s kind of you.”

“Hey, you’re a very attractive young cat, and at least you don’t have fifty earrings in your ears like Lilly,” he winked.

“Watch it, you old dingo!” Lilly called with a grin.

Kit was blinded by a camera flash. Lilly had the camera in her paws, taking pictures of the three of them. Jessie leaned over and kissed Kit on the cheek, and Lilly caught it on her camera. She looked at the picture on the screen, and laughed. “Oh, that’s a good one!”

“Let us see!” Marty called. They gathered around her, and Kit saw him smiling, Rick smiling, and Jessie kissing him on the cheek with one foot raised behind her, her eyes closed but her expression mischievous.

“That’s a keeper!” Mike announced. “Website fodder!” He snatched the camera from Lilly and rushed for his office.

“Checks are on my desk, people,” Rick called. “Good work, you earned it!”

“Next week will be better!” everyone shouted in unison, which startled Kit and Jessie, and that made them all laugh.

“They’re a pretty funny group,” Jessie noted as she waited in his office as he packed his portfolio.

“I feel at home here, even after only two days,” he told her honestly. “They’re all great. I feel blessed that Rick gave me this job. Do you want to go out tonight? You know, we haven’t had a *real* date yet.”

She giggled. “No, I’m afraid I can’t tonight. I have a test tomorrow in English Lit. You’ve been killing my grades, Kit, I have to study!”

He chuckled. “Don’t blame me for that,” he said with a wink.

“It *is* your fault,” she accused, crossing her arms beneath her breasts and giving him a cool, yet amused, look.

“Careful there, hon, or he might prove you right,” Rick said as he came up to the door. “You’ve got a check on my desk, Kit.”

“I’ve only been here two days!”

“You’re on *salary*, silly fox,” he said. “You get the same pay every week, even if you did only work for two days. Besides, I get the feeling that you might need the money.”

“Well, I can’t deny that,” he admitted.

“I think you’re gonna work out here, Kit. The crew really likes you, and you’re a damn good worker.”

“Thanks, Rick. I really like it here. This place is awesome.”

“Have you opened a bank account yet?”

He shook his head. “I was going to go get a Texas license tomorrow, so I can just swing by a bank and open an account when that’s done.”

“Sounds like you have a plan. How goes the apartment?”

“Well, I’m set on the niceties, and I should have a bed being delivered in, oh, about half an hour,” he noted. “The rest of it’ll fall into place. The bed’s the important part.”

“Good for your back?”

He nodded.

“I know that feeling,” he chuckled. “But mine’s from age, not an accident.”

“You don’t look that old, Rick,” Jessie protested.

“I’m forty-three, my dear,” he grinned.

“No way!”

“I know, I aged well,” he chuckled. “I’m heading out, so you need to clear outta here, Kit. Unless you want to be locked in. My wife takes a dark opinion of it when I’m late getting home on Thursdays.”

“I’m getting ready to go right now.”

“Don’t forget your check.”

“I won’t.”

Kit retrieved his check and he and Jessie were herded out of the office by Mike and Barry. “So, you wanna go grab a drink with us, Kit?” Barry asked. “We always go down to The Pit on paydays. It’s a local bar.”

“I’ll have to pass,” he answered. “I have to get home, they’re delivering my new bed.”

“Ah, well, maybe later.”

“See you tomorrow then, Kit. Have a good one!”

“You too,” he said as they pushed past him and started down the stairs.

“Did you bring your laundry, Kit?” she asked.

“Yah, but I’ll tell you again, Jess, you don’t have to.”

“Hey, I’m helping you out. Besides, if I have your clothes, you have to come see me,” she winked.

He laughed. "I'd do that without holding my clothes hostage. May I drive you home?"

"Sure."

He drove her back to her house, and got out with her. The laundry basket was in the trunk, and he opened it up.

"This is it?" she asked.

"You said my work clothes," he said in confusion.

"I said dirty clothes," she responded. "You have to have more than this!"

"Well, yeah, but I don't want you turning into my maid, Jessie. It's just not proper."

She laughed. "Kit, stop being silly! Let's go back to your place and pick up your laundry."

"Well, alright, but I'll have to find some way to pay you back for your help."

"Well, do you have Sunday off?"

"Yeah, Sunday and Monday."

"Then let's go out on Sunday. A *real* date. Dinner and a movie."

"It's a deal," he said with a nod. "But dinner and a movie is just too cut and dry."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Dinner and something better than a movie," he answered.

“What?”

“Well, you’ll find out on Sunday, won’t you?” he said with a mysterious smile.

“Ohhh, okay, if you wanna play it that way. I’ll just wait and see what you have in mind,” she said with a beautiful smile.

He drove them back to his apartment, and she followed him in. “We have got to get rid of this ‘no furniture’ echo,” she said with a look around.

“Eh, I’ll get there eventually. I have the clothes piled up in my room. We only bought one laundry basket, I had nowhere to put them,” he chuckled.

She came in and stood beside him. “That’s it?”

“That’s it. I don’t have many clothes, Jess. That’s all the dirty clothes I have. It’s just about all the clothes I have,” he chuckled ruefully.

She sighed, then she laughed. “Well, I guess you’ll fix that eventually too.”

There was a knock at the front door. “Go ahead, I’ll gather it up,” she told him.

He answered the door and found himself staring at a huge panda, almost a head taller than him, stood in the doorway, taking it up. A thin meerkat was at a large truck in the parking lot, opening the rear door. They had blue coverall uniforms with *Value City* embroidered on them. “Kit Vulpan?” the panda asked.

“Yeah, you have my bed?”

“A-yup. We’ll bring it in for ya.”

Kit stood aside as they brought in the mattresses, then the panda removed the plastic as the meerkat brought in the rails. Then they very quickly put the rails together and stacked the mattresses. Kit returned to the living room with them and took the clipboard that the meerkat handed him. “Sign right here,” the meerkat said in a Texas drawl.

“Looks like you might be a repeat customer,” the panda noted, looking around.

“Probably,” Kit chuckled. “As you can see, I’m just getting settled in.” He finished signing and handed it back. “It won’t be quick, that’s for sure,” he grinned. “It’s gonna be a ‘what can I get with this paycheck’ kinda deal.”

“Well, you won’t beat our prices, so come on back. We’ll get you all decked out.”

They left, and he saw Lupe coming out of the office across the way. “Lupe, I’m done with the bed!” he shouted to the next building. “Wanna come get it?”

“Tomorrow’s fine!” he called back.

He went back in, and wandered back to the bedroom. He stopped in the doorway and leaned against it, crossing his arms and kicking one foot up onto his toes behind him as he watched Jessie. She’d put all the clothes in the basket, but now she was sitting on the edge of the bed, both paws down beside her, bouncing on it just slightly as she looked down and behind herself, away from him. She ran one paw along the bed, tracing her padded fingers along the new material, then she looked to him. Her cheeks ruffled a little, and she gave him a shy smile.

He didn't say anything. He'd only known her a few days, but in that very short time she'd seemed to have shed much of her shyness around him. But that, that was a *shy* smile. Was she thinking dirty about him?

God, he hoped so. He'd been thinking that way about her since the first time he saw her, but was always very careful never to let stray thoughts like that taint things when she was with him. He saved those kinds of thoughts for when he was alone, because she *was* shy, and he didn't want to scare her off. After that disaster of kissing her on their very first pseudo-date, he didn't want to give her any reason at all to feel uncomfortable with him.

"I take it it meets your expectations?" he asked with a teasing smile.

"Well, I'm not sleeping on it. I was curious how firm it was, because of your back."

"Firm, but not like a board," he answered. "You ready to go?"

"Sure."

He took her back to her house, and got out of the car and went to the trunk. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm going to take this in," he replied. "I'm sure your friends are all kinds of curious about me. May as well run that gauntlet now, rather than make you have to run it by yourself."

She laughed. "Oh, they are at that. They're like a bunch of nosy sisters."

"How did you end up in a sorority?"

"Well, my mom was in this one," she said as he picked up the basket, and she closed the trunk. "I didn't really want to join a sorority, but I really

didn't like my roommate in my freshman year, so I worked up the courage and pledged. They all like to make fun of me because I'm shy and I come from a really traditional family, but that's okay," she giggled. "When they need help with their homework, or when they want something they don't make in a microwave, they always run to me or Sam." She led him up the sidewalk. "Sam's the skunk you saw that first day. She's in pre-med. She's *really* smart. Was valedictorian and everything."

"Do you like it?"

"I do now," she nodded as they reached the door. "The others are all nice femmes, and we get along really well. Last chance to run away," she winked. "If you go in there, they may not let you out. Oh, and they know about you," she warned. "So don't be surprised if they ask about it."

"That's good to know," he said with a nod. "Alright, lead me into hell, Charon."

She laughed and opened the door.

It wasn't as bad as Jessie let on. He wasn't allowed past the living room—house rules—and not all of the sorority members were home. Jessie took the basket from him while Sandy and a gray cat converged on him from the couch. "Kit!" Sandy called. "You're bringing laundry?"

"I kinda don't have anywhere to do it right now," he said ruefully. "Jessie agreed to help me out. She's great."

"You know, you owe her if she's gonna do your laundry," Sandy teased, poking him in the shoulder.

"I know. I really have to make it up to her," he agreed.

“Kit, this is Danielle. Dan, this is Kit.”

“Hi,” she said. He shook her paw cordially. “JD’s gone on and on about you.”

“Well, I hope she left out all the bad parts,” he grinned.

“Are you kidding? The bad parts are the good parts!” Sandy protested. “So, how’s the magazine?”

“I love it there,” he said honestly. “The people are great, and the work is fun and challenging. If you want, come down to the office and look around after classes,” he offered. “See how a magazine is put together.”

“Cool, I might do that!” Sandy nodded vigorously.

“Just don’t all come at once. Rick said he doesn’t mind when people come to the office, but I think three or four pretty young femmes might cause too many distractions.”

“That’s what’s fun to do,” Sandy grinned.

“And you have to behave. I’ve only been there a few days. If you come in there and turn the place upside-down, I might get fired.”

“Now it’s no fun at all,” she said with a toss of her hair.

Jessie returned. He stepped up and took the empty laundry basket she offered him, which had a spare laundry bag in it. “Listen, Jess, I really appreciate this,” he said sincerely. “You’ve only known me a few days, and you’re doing my laundry. That’s kinda...weird.”

She laughed. “I don’t mind at all, Kit,” she told him with an honest smile. “You’re in something of a weird position here. And if I can help you

get on your feet by doing laundry, and it doesn't cost me anything when I can just throw your laundry in with mine, well, why shouldn't I?"

"And we get to check out what kind of underwear you wear!" Sandy added.

Kit reached behind himself and raised up his shirt, then pulled the waist of his jeans down a little to reveal a waistband of his briefs. "Looks like Fruit of the Loom to me," he noted, which made Sandy laugh.

Jessie, however, wasn't laughing. She looked behind him, then gasped and put her hands on the tail of his shirt and pulled it up a little more, exposing his lower back. It was crisscrossed with white streaks of fur. They were scars.

"Oh, those are from the surgeries," he explained as Jessie, Sandy, and Danielle looked at his back. "They operated on me three times. First time they put in steel rods, the second time they added some screws, then the third one they took the rods out." He put his paw on his lower back, in the center of those stripes of white fur. "This is the exact height of the hood of a Ford Aerostar," he remarked, flattening his paw and chopping his thumb and finger against his back lightly. "Or so they always told me in the hospital," he chuckled, gently pulling his shirt down. "I actually don't remember anything from that entire day. The docs said that was normal. In my memory, I went to bed the night before, and next thing I know, I wake up two weeks later in the hospital, in a full body cast."

"Ouch," Danielle said compassionately, her expression riveted. "Well, I'm glad you're better, Kit."

"Thanks. The happiest day of my life was the day I got out of that cast, and I could go to the bathroom by myself. Even after months of it, I never

got used to having a nurse, help,” he added.

“I can imagine. It wouldn’t be easy doing something like that with an audience,” Sandy reasoned.

“You have no idea,” he noted fervently. “Well, I hate to say it, but I’m gonna get going. I don’t want Jess complaining that I’m wrecking *your* grades too,” he winked.

“I can wreck my grades all by myself,” Danielle laughed.

“Remember, Sunday,” Kit told her. “Dress casual.”

“I’ll call you and tell you when you can come get your clothes,” she promised. “Can you tell me exactly when you’re picking me up?”

“I’ll have to see what time it is,” he grinned. “I’ll let you know by tomorrow.”

“Okay. Have a good night, Kit.” She reached over and put her paw on his shoulder, then kissed him. It was little more than a quick peck, but on the lips nonetheless, which put a little shiver in his tail. “Talk to you tomorrow.”

“I’ll be waiting. Bye you two. And thanks for letting me get out of the house unscathed. Jess made it sound like I’d be tied up and interrogated,” he grinned.

“Oh, that’s coming,” Sandy teased. “There’s just not enough of us here to hold you down.”

Kit laughed. “Then I’ll run away now,” he said, then he literally ran to the door, which made all three femmes laugh.

Friday was busy, because it was the first day of the new cycle, and it was like starting over. Though Rick and Savid already had this week's issue planned out, there was a lot of work to do to put it all together, and Friday was a huge day for Lilly, because it was the start of the weekend and Lilly was the one that kept up on the current hotspots and trends in U.T. student society. Lilly spent Fridays out of the office, roaming the campus during the day, and hitting the clubs at night to review bands and keep track of the "in" things.

Kit could knock out any research they threw at him relatively quickly, so he spent a lot of time working with everyone else, doing anything he could both to learn the tricks of the magazine trade, and to make sure Rick felt he didn't make a mistake when he hired someone like him. He and Jeffrey talked about trying to make up a comic strip to run in the magazine, debating if it should be comedy or melo-comedy-drama, stand-alones or serialized with an ongoing plot. Jeffrey sketched out a few ideas for characters for the strip, and they worked out something of an idea that they'd pitch to Rick after Jeffrey whipped up a few episodes of it.

And he got to see the magazine in printed form. Rick brought him a copy around four, while he and Jeffrey were talking things over, and Kit paged through it. It looked just as it did in the editor program, but it did feel kinda nice to actually hold onto it, to be able to read it without having to click on a mouse. He had to laugh when he saw the group picture, and Jeffrey turned to the page holding his first journal story, showing a huge closeup of his face, only his eyes, right beside the title of the article, *Through My Eyes*. Beneath the title was his name, and a boxed caption explaining the article to the reader.

"Oh, that's downplaying it right there," Kit said with a rueful chuckle.

“Hey, it’s your most striking feature,” Jeffrey laughed.

“I kinda thought this was,” he said, pointing at his half-missing ear.

“Hell no, your eyes just reach out and grab someone,” Jeffrey countered.

Kit read the caption under the title:

Kit Vulpan spent six months traveling from New England to Austin after graduating from college, working his way across America. These articles are excerpts from the journals he kept of his experience. The furs in these articles are real, though the stories they tell may not be. This is America, seen through his eyes.

“Not bad,” Kit noted. “At least Barry picked a good piece to introduce with. If he went with one of the sob stories, it might turn readers off.”

“Yeah,” Jeffrey agreed. “Was that guy really like that?”

Kit nodded. “Sure was. He sat at that stool every night. It took me almost a week to get him to where he’d talk to me, then he told me that story. Trying to butter up the waiter, I guess,” he chuckled.

“Musta been cool to do it.”

“It had its moments. But I’m glad I’m here. For more than one reason.”

Jeffrey laughed. “She’s *gorgeous*. You’re a damn lucky fox.”

“Amen. Now I just have to not blow it.”

“What, she’s emo?”

“No, she’s just a little shy,” he explained. “And I really screwed up on our first date. So I’m kinda walking on eggshells around her. She was very gracious and gave me another chance, and I don’t want another strike. I think after the next strike and I’m out.”

“She didn’t seem shy to me. She even kissed you for that picture.”

“I know. That surprised me a little. But if you want to see if she’s shy, try talking to her. She’ll blush at the drop of a hat.”

Jeffrey laughed. “I think demure is a better term,” he grinned.

“I just call her perfect,” Kit said honestly.

“Then don’t blow it,” he teased.

“I’d better not anytime soon. She has almost all my clothes,” he chuckled.

“She’s washing them?”

“Just this once,” he affirmed. “I don’t have a washer and dryer yet.”

“Be careful, you may get everything back pink.”

“Only if I make her mad,” he laughed.

About five, Jessie called on his cell phone. “Kit, your clothes are done,” she told him. “You can come pick them up after work.”

“Jess, *thank you*. Really. You didn’t have to do this for me. It was very kind of you.”

“Well, I expect to be wowed on Sunday,” she giggled.

“I’m buying the tickets right now,” he told her...and he was. He was on the website, reserving tickets for them to an outdoor Austin Philharmonic Orchestra performance in a place called McKenzie Park, which was on the south bank of the river that ran through the city. “I’ll be picking you up around two, Jess. We’ll go eat dinner first, then go. I suggest that you do not wear a skirt. Actually, jeans or shorts would work best.”

“What kind of date is this?” she asked, her voice both a little concerned and amused.

“The best kind,” he told her. “Just trust me.”

“I trust you,” she assured him. “When will you get off work?”

“Around eight,” he answered. “Me, Jeffrey, and Savid are the only ones in the office right now. Everyone else is out working.”

“Oh, looking for stories and such?”

“Yeah. Lilly and Barry are working on stories. Marty and Mike are helping them, and Rick’s over at an advertiser talking to them. I get my turn outside tomorrow.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m being sent down to the campus to gather some information from students face to face,” he answered. “Sometimes research takes more than a phone and a computer.”

“Hey Kit,” Rick’s voice called. He turned and saw him in the doorway of his tiny office.

“Rick needs me, I gotta go. See you soon.”

“Okay. See you soon. Bye-bye.”

“Bye hon,” he said, then he closed the phone. “Yah boss?”

“I remember you saying you play the guitar, and my wife dug this out of the attic,” he said, showing him a dusty guitar case. “It belonged to my son, one of a long line of interests that died as soon as he realized he’d have to work at it. If it still works, it’s all yours.”

“Wow, thanks, boss,” Kit said in appreciation. “I haven’t played in a couple of months, since my guitar got smashed at the bus station in Mobile.” He put the case in his lap and opened it, and found an old acoustic guitar inside. He took it out and put the case on the floor, then pulled it up and tested it. It was out of tune, but that wasn’t a problem. He tuned it up with practiced ease, then played a series of chords to test the tuning.

“I thought you said you were still learning!” Rick laughed.

“Well, I am,” he said modestly. “What I just did is easy.” He began to play a tune, then began to sing the lyrics almost immediately.

Would you know my name,

If I saw you in heaven.

Would it be the same,

If I saw you in heaven.

I must be strong, and carry on,

‘Cause I know I don’t belong here in heaven.

“Woah,” Rick breathed.

“What?”

“Damn, son, you said you liked to sing, but I didn’t know you could *sing*,” he said seriously. “What song was that?”

“It’s called *Tears in Heaven*,” he replied. “It’s one of my favorite songs, and one of the few I can play all the way through on a guitar, even though I’m just playing basic chords, not the real guitar melody that goes with it,” he added, then closed his eyes and picked it back up, unable to just stop without finishing the song.

Would you hold my hand,

If I saw you in heaven?

Would you help me stand,

If I saw you in heaven?

I’ll find my way, through night and day.

Cause I know, I just can’t stay here in heaven.

Time can bring you down, time can bend your knees.

Time can break your heart, have you beggin' please.

Beggin' please.

Beyond the door, there's peace I'm sure.

And I know, there'll be no more, tears in heaven.

Would you know my name,

If I saw you in heaven.

Would it be the same,

If I saw you in heaven.

I must be strong, and carry on,

'Cause I know I don't belong here in heaven.

He finished, and opened his eyes. He saw Rick, Savid, and Jeffrey all standing in the doorway, amazed looks on their faces. "What?" he asked.

"Well, I know who we're taking to the Pit for open mic night contests," Jeffrey said, then he laughed.

"You sing very beautiful," Savid told him.

“Thank you,” he said modestly, putting the guitar in his lap. “Just another legacy of my youth,” he said. “I really liked music, but my bastard father refused to let me enjoy it. It was all business with him. He had no soul for art, no ear for music, and considered it a complete waste of time. To him, there was only money.” He strummed the guitar absently. “I was starting to learn to play a guitar. Clancy smuggled one into the house for me,” he remembered, his eyes distant. “My father found it, and he broke it right in front of me. Then he told me that a Vulpan didn’t waste time on such ridiculous nonsense.”

“That’s raw,” Jeffrey noted.

“That, was my father. May he rot in hell,” Kit said with utter conviction. “After I was disowned, I was too busy trying to survive to learn how to play,” he told them. “But once I got into U-Mass, after the accident and I washed out of ROTC, I bought a new guitar and took lessons from a music major friend of mine. I used to be a lot better, but I got rusty. I need to practice more.”

“Well, you should have time,” Rick told him. “Just not around here,” he added with a grin. “I’m not running a karaoke bar here.”

“Of course not,” he laughed, putting the guitar away in its case, then propping it up against some boxes next to his chair.

“If you never got to do music, where did you learn to sing?” Jeffrey asked.

“Well, singing is something you can always practice, unless you’re gagged,” he chuckled.

“True enough.”

Kit swung by the sorority house after work, and found it almost deserted. Almost all the femmes were out, with only Sam and Jessie inside. He brought his laundry basket, and Jessie went to go get the laundry while he sat on the couch and waited. Sam was sitting in a recliner across from him, a biology book spawled in her lap, but she closed it when he sat down. “So.”

“So?” he asked curiously.

“Where are you going on Sunday?”

Kit gave her a grin. “What, do you tap the phones?”

“JD is something of the house’s little sister,” Sam said seriously. “We all watch out for her, and that means we drag these things out of her, because she’s shy, and maybe a little naïve. How someone as pretty as she is got to college like that is beyond me. Fanatical parents, I guess,” she mused. “You can expect anything you tell her that’s not personal to be common knowledge in this house.”

Kit laughed. “She warned me that I’d face the third degree, but I didn’t expect you to grill her too.”

“She’s the kind of femme we rarely let out of the house by herself,” Sam told him. “Not because she’s not an adult, but because she’s a total sweetheart and we love being around her. Everyone in this house loves her. So, if you hurt her, you’ll have a whole mess of angry sorority sisters breathing down your neck.”

“Understood,” he said immediately and honestly. “Believe me, that’s the last thing I’d ever do. I already screwed up with her once. I won’t do it again.”

“And how did you screw it up?”

“When I kissed her. That was way out of line. I’m just glad she gave me another chance.”

Sam gave him a slight smile. “That wasn’t as much a mistake as you think it was,” she told him. “She thought it was a good kiss.” She opened the book again. “And you’d better think of kissing her again, very soon, or she’ll think you’re not as interested in her as she is in you.”

“I’m looking forward to it, but I’m not going to rush it,” he said calmly. “Jess isn’t the kind of girl you let slip through your fingers. I’m willing to take things at her pace. She’s worth waiting for.”

“I’m glad you understand that.”

“Jess said you’re studying pre-med.”

“I want to be a doctor,” she affirmed.

“What year are you in?”

“I’m a junior. Me and JD pledged together.”

“Nice. How long have you known her?”

“Since pledging. We’re roommates.”

He glanced towards the stairs, looking for Jessie, then leaned forward. “Are her parents as bad as she said?”

Sam chuckled. “Yes, mainly her mother. JD calls her Momzilla. Her mother calls here at least three times a week to check on her. If she’s not here at night, her mother pitches a fit over the phone. And she’s relentless.

She knows that JD's seeing you, and had a complete meltdown last night over the phone since JD hasn't been here the last two times she called."

"Because of me?"

"Because you're male period. Her mother thinks she shouldn't so much as kiss a male unless it's at the end of a marriage ceremony."

"Well, how is she supposed to find someone like that?"

"Her mother doesn't think that way. JD is the oldest child in her family, but she's the first one to leave home. Both of her daughters are out of high school now, and both left home. JD is here, her sister is going to Ohio State. So her mother is having some separation issues with letting her children go. She said that since her sister left home, her mother's been off the deep end. The funny thing is, she isn't half as nuts about her brother Ben. She's only crazy over protecting her daughters."

"Her brother can't get pregnant," Kit noted.

"Yeah, I'm thinking along the same lines. Her mother is ultra-traditional. Marriage before sex, behaving like a lady, yadda yadda yadda. She's a relic of a forgotten time, if you ask me. She should have been raising her children in the fifties, not the new millennium."

"Stop bad-mouthing my mother, Sam," Jessie said as she came down the stairs, carrying a full laundry basket. "I know I complain about her a lot, but she does mean well."

"And this defense will cease the instant she calls," Sam noted calmly, which made Kit chuckle. He stood up and took the basket from her, then put it on the couch.

“Listen, Jess, let me thank you again. It was very good of you to help me out. I really owe you one.”

“Well, I think there’s something you can do to repay me,” she said, tilting her cheek up towards him and tapping it.

He laughed. He leaned down and gave her a very loud kiss, which made Sam giggle.

“I’d better get a better kiss than that on Sunday,” she told him with a teasing, but inviting smile.

“Sam, I might need to practice, so I can live up her expectations. You available?”

Sam’s book fell out of her lap as she erupted into laughter. Kit grinned at Jessie, but got a face full of couch pillow for his trouble when she whacked him. That nearly made Sam fall out of her chair.

“I wash your clothes for you, and you try to get a date with my roomie? Out, you ingrate!” Jessie said, pointing at the door, but she couldn’t suppress a grin.

“I’ll pick you up at two,” he said with a playful smile.

“I’ll be waiting,” she promised as he picked up the basket. She stepped up and gave him a real kiss, a light, inviting kiss on the lips, then she stepped away with a little smile on her face.

Sam gave him a knowing look as she went back up the stairs, and he couldn’t help but watch that gorgeous cat with that amazing long-haired tail swaying back and forth behind her, almost hypnotized. Sam cleared her

throat, and he realized he was staring. He blinked, then pulled the basket up to his hip. “Uh, thanks for the chat, Sam. It was fun.”

“I’ll see you later,” she said with a nod, picking up her book. He let himself out, and Sam found her page, took a sip of her soda, and chuckled to herself.

“Oh yeah. She’s got him hooked, alright. Now just comes the reeling in.”

The last thing he expected to find on his desk on Saturday morning was a note, and a key.

Kit:

I don’t work on Saturdays. This is your key to the office. The code for the alarm is on the post-it on your monitor. If you’re the last out, don’t forget to set the alarm before you lock up.

Your assignment is on my desk. When you’re done, you’re done, go home.

Rick.

Well, he guessed it was a show of trust that Rick would give him a key to the office before he’d even been there a week, and give him an assignment without any kind of supervision at all.

He wouldn’t allow that trust to be misplaced.

Rick wasn't the only one that had Saturdays off. Jeffrey, Marty, Savid, and Mike were all off on Saturday. The only ones that worked were the writers, it seemed...but, they had Monday off where the others had to work. At least Rick made sure everyone had two days off...that was nice of him, given they had such a small staff, and producing a magazine was a tough business.

His assignment actually took most of the day. He researched available Saturday facilities on campus, both for school and for student recreation, using a press pass secured for him by Rick for the research. He studied the facilities, both the quality and variety, and interviewed students using them to gauge their satisfaction. Since he didn't know much about the campus, it actually gave him quite a tour of the campus, and he got to meet quite a few of the students. A couple of them recognized him from the magazine. One of them even startled him with a question. "Dude, who was that gorgeous cat that was kissing you?" the lemur asked.

"Huh?"

"On your mag's website, he said. "There's a pic of a kickass cat hottie giving you a kiss. Who is she?"

"That's my girlfriend," he said with a laugh.

"Damn," the lemur muttered. "You lucky bastard."

Girlfriend. He'd said it impulsively to defend his turf, but after sitting down and thinking about it, he realized that was *exactly* how he wanted to think about her. She was beautiful, she was smart, she was kind, she was gentle, she was funny, she was...she was *amazing*.

She was what he'd been looking for all his life, and his family be damned.

It was at that moment. For the first time, probably ever, the spectre of his family began to fade. He was already overcoming that fear, wanting to go out with Jessie, be with her, but the fear had still been there, just suppressed. But for the first time, for the first time ever, he *wasn't* afraid.

He wasn't afraid.

He couldn't be afraid. If he was afraid, he would lose her. If he was afraid, he'd drive her away when she was finally ready to take the next step, and he wasn't prepared to meet her there. If he was afraid, the best thing that ever happened in his life would slip through his fingers, and he would spend the rest of his life in bitter regret over losing his chance at happiness.

He'd been such a coward. It wasn't courage that got him through life after he was disowned, it was his sister's kindness. It wasn't courage that got him through college, it was his sister's help. It wasn't courage that got him through nearly six months in a hospital bed, it was tons of painkillers. It wasn't courage that got him through six months of living as a drifter, it had been *fear*. Fear of settling down where they could find him, fear of getting too attached to people because of his family, fear, fear, fear.

If he wanted her, he had to have the guts to tell his family to go to hell, and *mean* it. Not just mouth it in bitter anger over how they had hurt him. Not just scream it as a front for blaming them for what happened to him. Not growl it in his throat when he found something good, something special, but something of which they'd disapprove. He had to mean it.

He had to mean it.

He stood up. “The Vulpan family can *go to hell*,” he declared with utter sincerity, *meaning* it. “Well, except for Vil,” he added with a sardonic chuckle.

He walked away from that spot.

And he felt like a new fox. He felt like a new life was waiting for him just over the horizon.

A new life. He had a job now, and a home. He had new friends, and he had a female who seemed interested in him, and a female he’d walk through fire for if she asked it of him. He didn’t need to hang off the end of his sister’s string anymore. She didn’t need to mother him anymore. She would be his dear sister, his good friend, and his only family, but he didn’t need her protection anymore. He could stand on his own feet. He could be his own fox, and make a new life for himself without needing her help.

And the rest of his family could *go to hell*.

If anything, Vil was usually punctual. She said she’d call him that weekend, and it was almost dead middle of the weekend when she kept that promise. His phone rang when he returned to the office, and transcribed his notes from his reasearch he’d been writing in his laptop to his desktop.

“Hello,” he hummed absently as he started transferring files.

“Hey, baby bro,” Vil answered. “How you doing?”

“I’m doing great,” he told her. “I’m getting settled in here at work. I’m about to leave now.”

“You don’t have weekends off?”

“Sunday and Monday,” he answered.

“Ah, I see. Well, doesn’t change what I have to tell you,” she chuckled. “I’ll be down next weekend. I’ll be arriving on the third and be leaving on the sixth.”

“Labor Day weekend?” he asked as he called up the calendar on his laptop and switched it to September.

“Yeah. I was aiming at three days with you, but I’ll take two and two evenings.”

“Well, one evening. I work evenings on Friday. It’s a very busy time for us.”

“What do you do on a Friday night for work?”

“Vil, this is a magazine aimed at college kids,” he reminded her. “Friday’s a big day for students, so that’s when we do a lot of our work. Lilly, one of the reporters, is usually out almost all night gathering info for her pieces.”

“Ah, true,” Vil mused. “Well, I can just wait for you, I suppose.”

“I’ll give you what time I can, sis, I’d love to see you again. But I just got this job, and I can’t blow it. So you’re gonna take a back seat.”

“I’m not used to being out of the spotlight,” she teased.

“Well, welcome to the real world,” he told her in a tone that made her laugh.

“So, how’s it going with Jessie?”

“We have our first *real* date tomorrow,” he answered, saving his work and then closing his laptop.

“That’s nice, but it doesn’t answer the question.”

“It seems to be going fine,” he answered. “I’m not rushing it, sis. When she’s ready, we’ll take the next step.”

“And what step is that?”

“Whatever she wants,” he answered immediately.

“Where are you going on your date?”

“Orchestra,” he answered. “Austin Philharmonic’s performing Beethoven.”

She laughed. “I should have known,” she teased. “It’s not the Boston Pops. You’ll have to tell me if they’re any good down there in Texas.”

“Here’s hoping.”

“Here’s hoping she likes classical, or it’s going to be a bad date for her,” Vil laughed.

“Well, there’s always opera, I suppose. Femmes are supposed to like the opera.”

“Kit, she’s a *normal* girl. She’d probably be more interested in going to see some rock band.”

“True, but I think she’ll like it.”

“I’m rootin’ for ya, bro. And I hope you’re right.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Remember, I want to meet her, so expect me to invite her out with us at least one day.”

“I already warned her. She’s okay with it. She’s curious to meet you.”

“Well, I’m curious to meet her,” Vil mirrored. “By the way, I love this picture of you with your magazine crew.”

“What? How did you get that?”

“I had a copy of your magazine Fed-Exed,” she said. “And I see you took my advice about your journals. Good for you!”

“Actually, that was my boss’ idea,” he admitted. “He read through my journals with the other material I gave him when I applied for the job.”

There was a short silence. “What is this?”

“Huh?”

“Where is the request not to let the others see the magazine?” she teased.

“Let them,” he said immediately. “I don’t care. Maybe it’ll piss them off that I’m building a life for myself without them and their money.”

Vil laughed. “It probably would. I’m looking at it right now. Ah, so that’s the Lilly you mentioned. Your boss is kinda cute,” she told him. “He has some wild fur, doesn’t he?”

“He’s a great guy.”

“Maybe I can come visit your work. I’d love to meet your boss.”

“We could probably manage it. He knows who I am, so it wouldn’t be a big shock for him. They all do at work. And all Jessie’s sorority knows.”

“I’m glad you’re not hiding from it, bro,” she said seriously.

“No, I guess I’m not. I’m not gonna shove it in people’s faces, but I won’t hide from it either.”

“Good for you. I’ll get off of here and get some work done, bro. “I’ll call you before I leave and give you some specifics.”

“No prob, sis. I need to lock up the office and head home, I’m done for today.”

“Good luck tomorrow,” she said.

“Thanks, sis. Be good.”

Kit was actually *nervous*.

This was unusual for him. He wasn’t the kind to get nervous over something he understood. She liked him, and he knew it. She was looking forward to this date, and he knew it. So was he. But he was still nervous. Maybe Vil was right and she didn’t like classical music. If so, this might be a very long and unpleasant date. Maybe it was a good thing they were going to go eat first.

He was there at exactly two, and he saw six of the sorority femmes sitting on the balcony over the front door, no doubt there to scope him out and spread the warning through the house that he was there. He told her jeans and tee, and he mirrored his own suggestion, wearing his new jeans and a simple white tee, with a short sleeve white linen shirt worn over it, left unbuttoned. He didn’t even get a chance to ring the doorbell when he

got to the porch. The door opened, and Jessie was there, with several femmes behind her.

She was *stunning*.

Her hair was done to perfection, looking breathtaking. She must have spent *hours* combing her fur, for there wasn't a hair out of place anywhere. She had the tiniest bit of eyeshadow on her eyelids, and just the tiniest touch of mascara, and she wore a simple pair of gold chain loop earrings in her ears. She wore a tan tank top and a pair of shorts, with a delicate little leather belt and a small beige purse on a thin leather strap on her shoulder. He stepped up to her, literally gawking, and he could smell a faint flowery perfume about her. Her makeup, her dress, even her perfume, it was subtle, delicate, enhancing what was already there instead of trying to hide it. God but was she a wonder!

"You like?" she asked demurely, stepping out and looking up at him with her gorgeous blue eyes, the bright sunlight making their pupils contract down to vertical slits.

"I'm afraid to take you anywhere," he told her. "I'll have to beat the other males away with a stick."

She giggled, her cheek fur ruffling slightly, and the sight of that drove him wild. He held his paw out to her, and she took it. Just the touch of her sent a shiver through his tail. "Well, I'll protect you, Kit," she smiled.

"I might need it," he said heavily, then he blinked and remembered they weren't going to spend the entire date standing on the porch. "Shall we go?"

“Where do you want to eat?” she asked as he walked her to the car Rick was letting him use.

“Anywhere you want,” he told her.

“Well, there’s this nice place just down the street from my parents’ house in Cincinnati,” she suggested with a teasing smile.

He laughed. “By the time we get up there, you might be in a little trouble with your professors.”

“Well, in that case,” she said with a mock sigh, “I guess I’ll have to settle for Red Lobster.”

“Red Lobster it is,” he said as he helped her into the car, then closed the door for her.

She had to guide him to the restaurant, and they spent the driving time talking about whatever crossed their minds, as they tended to do. They had the same freedom of words they had that first night when she called him, talking about just about anything. Their issue of discussion, talking about post-Civil War literature, continued into the restaurant, and held firm all the way through ordering dinner. “I can’t stand Chesnutt,” Jessie said, shuddering her shoulders. “That dialect he uses is the written equivalent of nails on a blackboard.”

He laughed. “Well, if you can read through it, it’s kinda interesting,” he protested, taking a sip of his tea.

She looked at his cup, then she laughed. “I guess you can’t take a Bostonian away from his tea,” she grinned.

“You can’t take a Cincinnati away from their terrible football team either,” he retorted.

“Oh, now you’re getting personal,” she teased. “Here comes a half hour schpiel glorifying the Patriots,” she complained, throwing her paws up.

He laughed. “I didn’t know you were that much of a football fan.”

“My parents are football freaks,” she told him. “Pro, college, high school...they’d even show up at peewee games if they knew where they played them,” she said, which made him chuckle. “My dad is so funny,” she giggled. “He’s this little slip of a cat, barely taller than me and even thinner, and come Sunday he paints himself up in Bengal stripes and screams like a maniac. He hasn’t missed a Bengal home game in like twenty years.”

“Season tickets?”

“He saves for them every year,” she laughed. “I guess football rubbed off on me. I even played in the 12 year league.”

“You played football?” he said in surprise. “How could anyone on the team concentrate?”

Her fur ruffled in a very appealing manner. “Well, I hadn’t filled out quite yet then, and besides, even now, put this under football pads, and it’s not very noticable,” she said, motioning at herself.

“*I’d* notice it,” he said honestly.

“You’d be looking,” she winked.

“Damn right I’d be looking,” he retorted instantly.

The hyena waiter brought them their dinners. He had crab legs, she had lobster. "I haven't had lobster in months!" she said happily as the waiter put her plate down. "Burke hated seafood!"

"Anyone who takes a cat out had better expect seafood to be on the menu," Kit teased.

"Too right," she agreed pleasantly, picking up the shellcracker.

It had been years since he'd had crab legs, and he found them to be rather good. Jessie seemed quite happy with her lobster, going through it faster than he'd ever seen a femme eat. "Hungry?" he asked teasingly.

"I haven't had anything but a slice of toast all day," she answered. "The others wouldn't let me eat lunch, either."

"Why not?"

"They've been making me get ready since ten," she answered. "And I was too nervous to cook this morning. They didn't want me burning myself at the stove, and I don't trust any of *them* to cook."

"You were nervous?"

"A little," she admitted, looking over to him.

"I was too. I still am, a little."

She smiled gently. "Well, me too. I'm not sure where we're going."

"I'm not sure if you'll like it."

"Well, I promise to keep an open mind."

"I'm just glad I'm not the only one who's nervous," he said with a relieved sigh.

“Of course I’d be nervous, Kit. This is our first date, and I don’t want to look like an idiot.”

Her honesty took him off guard, and he laughed ruefully. “I was thinking the exact same thing.”

“Well, since we’re being totally honest here,” she said, giving him an adorably sly little look, “would you think I’m a pig if I asked for one of your crab legs?”

He laughed delightedly. “Be my guest,” he said, breaking one off and offering it to her.

After dinner, he drove her to the park. She was a little curious when they arrived, and was even more curious when she saw all the other cars. He got out and helped her out, then opened the trunk and pulled out a blanket and a small cooler he’d bought the night before. “And here we are,” he said.

“What are we going to do?”

“We’re going to a concert,” he told her.

“Oh! What kind of music?”

“Classical.”

“Really? I’ve never been to a live classical concert before. Do they always have them out at the park?”

“Sometimes they do,” he said. “The Boston Pops has this huge outdoor theater where they perform quite a bit, in the summer. So, you don’t hate classical music?”

“I’ll admit, I don’t listen to it all the time, but I don’t hate it. This should be interesting.”

“Well, next date, it’s your turn to surprise me,” Kit told her as he put the blanket over his shoulder.

After giving his tickets to a raccoon standing at a roped-off area, he proved he had no glass bottles in his cooler, received a program, and they moved in. He spread his blanket at what he felt was the optimal distance from the stage, just behind most of the others who had arrived before them, then helped her sit down. He sat down himself beside her. “What are we going to listen to?” she asked.

“Your program has it all,” he said, opening it. “Three Beethoven pieces and a violin concerto,” he told her. “Movements from the Third, Fifth, and Ninth symphonies, and Brahms’ violin concerto in D major,” he told her. “Hmm, I’m not familiar with that piece. This should be nice.”

They filled the time waiting with idle chitchat, as the orchestra took the stage and began to tune and prepare. “So, what’s going to happen?” she asked as those around them began to quiet down a little.

“Okay, they’ll spend about fifteen minutes or so getting ready, on the average,” he explained. “Then the conductor will come out, and we’ll applaud. He’ll get the orchestra ready to play, and then they’ll play. Usually, we don’t applaud until they finish the entire piece on the program, because sometime there are pauses between movements. But, if a soloist does a really fantastic job, sometimes the audience does applaud between movements, but they try to keep it brief so it doesn’t interrupt the flow.”

“Do they tell you what they’re playing?”

“They’ll follow the order in the program,” he said. “If you’ll notice, there aren’t any microphones up there. The conductor will never say a word.”

“Ahh, okay.” She looked around, and saw their blanket was surrounded by other blankets. “I didn’t realize this was so popular.”

“Popular with some.”

“Umm, did you see where the restrooms are?” she asked.

“No,” he said, standing up. He looked around, then sat back down. “Over there,” he said with a point.

“I’ll be right back then,” she told him, standing up. “Watch my purse for me?”

“Of course.”

“Thanks,” she said, patting him on the shoulder as she got up. He watched her walk away, watched that gorgeous black-tipped tail of hers, and he almost shuddered. She was so damn *sexy*!

He leaned back after she hurried off, trying to get his heart back under control. Sometimes he thought it was unfair, her being so beautiful. It was so hard to keep his attention focused, because she was so smart, and he had to keep his wits about him to keep up in conversation with her. He couldn’t just stare at her and say “duh.” She might not appreciate that. He had no doubt that she had males staring at her all the time, and he didn’t want to be just like all the other males. He wanted to be different to her, special. But it wasn’t easy. She was so pretty, he had no doubt that she could *afford* to be shy, because she had no end of males that tried to talk to her. She could be picky. That was one reason why he felt so honored that she seemed so interested in him, that out of all the males out there that would jump if she snapped her fingers, she chose *him* to go out with.

A homeless dishwasher with only half of an ear, a bad back, and a very dark and unpleasant family history.

She returned and seated herself demurely beside him, sitting on her legs. He looked over at her, and couldn't look away. She was *radiant*, the picture of loveliness. She glanced at him, then looked to him with her blue eyes, and she *smiled*.

He sighed in contentment, and that made her cheeks ruffle. "So, what are you thinking?" she asked in a low voice, leaning close to him.

"That I must have won God's lottery," he answered, gazing into her eyes.

"Oh, do tell," she said with a throaty chuckle. "I didn't realize I was a prize."

He blinked, not quite sure how to answer that. But her eyes were expectant, so he just blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "Not a prize. A treasure."

Her eyes seemed to soften, and she bumped her shoulder up against his.

The conductor came out onto the stage, and those around him began to applaud. He blinked when he realized she'd been leaning closer and closer, until their noses were almost touching. She pulled away a little as they both clapped, then looked down at him in curiosity as he leaned back on his paws and closed his eyes. "What are you doing?"

"Don't *listen* to the music, Jess. *Feel* it. That's the big difference with classical music. You listen with your heart and your soul, not your ears."

The concert began. Kit tried to lose himself in the music, like usual, but he just couldn't. She was right there beside him, and that was all he could think about. He kept opening his eyes, kept glancing over at her, both to see if she was enjoying the music, but also because he couldn't think of anything else but her.

He lost all manner of conscious thought halfway through the second movement of the Ninth symphony, when she leaned against him. He had his arm around her before he was even thinking, and she began to *purr*.

God, that was incredible! It filled his ears, and it seemed to vibrate through him like a thousand symphonies. All he could do was think *oh God, she's purring!* and he didn't even dare to move, afraid that she'd stop, that he would ruin the moment, when she was so content and happy that she would purr for him. He closed his eyes, then, and lost himself not in the power of the music, but in the power that Jessie's purr had over him.

He was honestly shocked when the concert was over. He didn't remember the end of the Ninth. He couldn't recall a single bar of Brahms' concerto. He just looked up and realized that others were getting up and folding their blankets, and the concert was over.

He'd totally zoned out!

"Uh, Jessie?" he asked softly. She was still against him, her head leaning against his, and she was still purring.

"Mmm?"

"I think the concert's over."

"Mmm," she hummed, her purring going right on.

“But you can keep right on,” he said with a soft chuckle. “That’s the only music I’ve been listening to since you started.”

Her purring stopped, almost immediately, and was afraid that he’d offended her. She looked at him, then she *smiled*. “I’ll perform that music for you whenever you like,” she told him in a low, sensual whisper.

Her eyes...*invited* him. Subconsciously, he started leaning down towards her, slowly, hesitantly. He could see the invitation, but he remembered what happened the last time. He hesitated, but she made his mind for him by leaning up and kissing him. Again, he found himself all but paralyzed by her. The entire world melted away, and there was nothing but her.

She pulled away, looking into his eyes, and she was smiling. “That was nice,” she hummed.

“When I can move my tail again, I’ll let you know,” he said breathlessly.

Jessie giggled like a teenager. “I guess we should go,” she said with a little regret.

“We don’t have to go home yet,” he offered. “This is a big park. Would you like to go for a walk?”

“Yes,” she nodded.

They walked along the river, holding paws, and they talked. They talked for hours, wandering the park aimlessly, but always coming back to the river. Jessie seemed to be digging for something. She kept guiding their conversation to his personal life, asking about U-Mass, asking about his sister, asking him about living alone after he was disowned. He wouldn’t

dare lie to her, so he told her the truth, the honest truth, telling her what it was like, and how it made him feel. She was silent a long moment, then she stopped them by a bench and sat down. “Kit, I have to ask you something. And you might not want to answer it,” she told him.

“I’d answer any question you asked me, Jess.”

“Do you love your family? Did you ever love your family?”

He sighed, leaning back on the bench. “I think there was a time when I did,” he said. “When I was very young. They were always around, always visiting, and I had lots of cousins to play with. Uncle Zach used to carry me around on his shoulders,” he said, his voice a little wistful. “But then my mother died, and everything changed. Dad became distant, and basically gave up raising us to Clancy and nannies. And as I got older, I realized that my aunts and uncles and cousins, they were being nice to me because they wanted something from me. At that time, my sister wasn’t interested in business because she was raised as a debutante, and, well, everyone just assumed I was going to be the next Vulpan that ran the company. It had passed from father to first son through three generations. I guess everyone assumed it but me. After mom died, all Dad did was work. It was his entire life, and I hated it. I hated how it took him away from me, and I hated how everyone wanted to be my friend just because they thought I’d be the one running the family after Dad died,” he said, looking down at his paws. “I resented it, and then I began to resent him, and them. So I started to rebel. Ever since I was twelve, me and my father had something of a family war. He was dead set on training me to be his heir, and I’d have nothing to do with it. I’d tear up the books he gave me. I ran away several times. I even set fire to his Bentley once,” he chuckled humorlessly. “Then I turned

sixteen, and Dad told me flat out I either start getting my act together, or I was disowned.

“He never got the chance to disown me. I walked out. I never looked back. I decided right there that I’d rather die on the streets living my own life than live trapped in the hell of that family, where money was the only thing that mattered, and marriages were based only on how rich and how pureblooded the spouse was.” He sighed. “A life where all I did was obsess about money, and come home every night to a vixen I didn’t love. I couldn’t stand the idea of it.

“Vil explained what happened after I left. There was almost a rift in the family because my uncles kept trying to get *their* sons into the CEO’s chair, but my dad was totally honked off. See, Dad was the oldest, and he didn’t want to give up the prestige of being the one that passed the company to his own son...and all he had left was Vil. Vil *does* love business, so she proved to our father she could be a good CEO. She went to Harvard, then graduated from business school. After she graduated, she talked him into giving her the company, and he was desperate. By that time, he’d found out his heart was bad, and he had to start thinking of succession. So the company’s board met, and they voted Vil to be the next Vulpan. That pissed off my uncles something fierce. They didn’t want a *female* running the company and having control of all the money. As you can tell, they have some pretty Victorian views...guess it goes paw in paw with their purist mentality. So, my dad compromised by dividing up the family fortunes among all my aunts and uncles after he died, and cutting Vil out of most of the money. All she really got out of the will was her house in Chelmsford, a few cars, and her trust fund. She’s rich, don’t ever doubt that, but she has a lot less money

than the rest of the family. Most of the family fortune is in the hands of my aunts and uncles, but they still hate the idea of Vil running the company.”

“Because she’s a femme?”

“That, and because she never stopped defending me,” he grunted. “My family *hates* me now, Jess. I’m a traitor to them. I put myself above the family and I got disowned, and I didn’t have the courtesy to just die in some gutter like a failed excuse for a fox. I’m a walking embarrassment to them, an eyesore. And I certainly didn’t help my case at the funeral,” he mused. “After they put the bastard into the ground, I flipped off the entire family right there at the gravesite. A paparazzi got a picture of it and everything,” he chuckled.

“I, I saw a picture of you when you were there,” she told him. “I hadn’t remembered it until a couple of days ago. You were wearing this long overcoat, and you were walking away from your family. There was a short vixen behind you, looking away.”

“That was my sister Vil,” he told her. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised you saw a picture of it. They put it in *Furs*. Anyway, since Vil has always been on my side, it’s made her something of a pariah in the family, but she’s a pariah my family has to be nice to, because *she* runs the company,” he said with a humorless chuckle. “They have their fortunes, but Vil is the one that controls the family legacy, and all the power that comes with sitting in the big chair at Vulpan Shipyards. It makes her a global power player. When Vil snaps her fingers, the President of the United States jumps. Whichever Vulpan sits in the company’s chair is the most powerful member of the family, money or no money. She has all the prestige, all the power, even though her aunts and uncles have about fifty times more money than she does.”

“The first time I saw you, I had this feeling I’d seen you before. After I remembered that picture, well, that explained it.” She giggled. “Too bad.”

“Huh?”

“Well, you seemed familiar to me,” she explained. “That was why I was so interested in you. Maybe I thought it was fate or something.”

“I think it was,” he said honestly.

“You think so?” she asked, looking at him.

“There can’t be any other explanation why a femme like you would go out with a male like me.”

“There’s nothing at all wrong with you,” she protested. “You’re handsome, and you’re very smart and charming and polite. A femme couldn’t do much better than you, Kit Vulpan. And don’t you forget it.”

“That’s very flattering,” he smiled.

“It’s the truth. Do you know what I see when I look at you?” He shook his head. “I see a wonderful male who’s trying to find a place for himself in the world. I see a male who’s shaken off some things that would have crushed weaker males and still came through it with his sense of humor and his compassion for others. I see a male who’s brave and courageous, because he’s willing to defy his family to go out with a cat. I see a male who’s lived in the shadow of his family for so long that he’d forgotten what the sun looked like, but still keeps yearning for the light.”

They were silent a long moment. “Kit,” she said.

“Yes?”

“I think I know you pretty well now, even though this is only our first week together,” she told him, nuzzling his cheek with her muzzle, reaching out and taking his paw in her own. “Kit, there was nothing to forgive when you kissed me in the skating rink. I was a little surprised, but I really liked it. I wanted you to kiss me. I keep wanting you to kiss me. And I keep wanting to kiss you. And I’ve been thinking about you the same way you think about me,” she breathed huskily in his ear, which made his tail shiver. “I’ve been waiting because I knew your fear of your family would push you away if I tried too hard. And I’m not sure you’re entirely over them yet, so I’ll keep waiting. When you can look at me and not see the spectre of your family hovering over me, then we both know it’s time,” she intoned sensually.

His tail straightened out behind him, the fur standing straight out, and the paw holding hers trembled a little bit.

“God, you know how to motivate a fox,” he said nervously, which made her giggle.

“How do you think I feel? Kit, I’m a virgin,” she told him. “And I mean a *virgin*. I don’t know much at all about males, or what I’m supposed to do, or how I’m supposed to act. If my mother ever heard me say that, she’d chain me to the wall in the basement until I was thirty. I’m nervous too.”

“Could you at least show it? Here I am trembling, and you’re as solid as a rock.”

She laughed. “It makes a femme feel good to know she can make a male tremble. I spilled my secret. Time to reciprocate,” she teased.

“Well, you can’t ever expect a rich kid to be a virgin,” he told her. “There’s just too many opportunities. But I haven’t been with a femme since the accident.”

“That’s a long time.”

“Not as long as you.”

“Well, I don’t know what I’ve been missing,” she said, squeezing his paw.

“I guess I can’t counter that one,” he chuckled ruefully.

They sat there for a while in content silence, watching as the sun began to set over the western hills. “Jessie.”

“Hmm?”

“Do you believe in love at first sight?”

She looked at him. “Not really. It’s a romantic idea, but I don’t think it really happens. But I *do* believe in love at first kiss.”

He looked at her. “So....”

She just smiled, all mysterious.

“Mean kitty,” he accused playfully.

“I have to keep you guessing,” she winked. “You might get too complacent. Aunt Penny always says that once a male hears you say *I love you*, he stops trying.”

“Love isn’t a game that has a finish line,” he protested. “If it did, then it would *be* finished when you got there.”

“That’s romantic,” she said.

“So, if I promise to never stop trying, will you answer the question?” he asked.

She laughed. “Mmmmaybe,” she teased, tracing her finger in circles on his shoulder.

“And you said you had no idea how to talk to males,” he laughed ruefully. “You liar,” he teased with a grin.

“Alright, alright,” she acquiesced, scooting up against him. “I’ll tell the truth. When you kissed me, I was surprised. I thought there was something there, but then you confused me when you backed off. At first I thought I did something wrong, then I realized you thought you’d done something wrong, and I thought it was so sweet. You were thinking of me before yourself.”

“It’s because you’re so shy, and you were nervous. I, I couldn’t help myself when I kissed you, and I realized I went way over the line.”

“I could tell you knew I was nervous, and you were still being so kind to me, trying to make me feel comfortable,” she told him. “And then, when you kissed me, I didn’t feel you being forward, I just felt what you were trying to say without words.

“So, was it love at first kiss? I don’t really know. My dad always says you’re never really sure when it is you fall in love, you only realize it later. But, from the way I feel right now, I’m thinking that it might be a *distinct* possibility...” she trailed off, looking into his eyes.

He could not look into those eyes and resist the overpowering temptation. He leaned down and kissed her, kissed her with pure,

unrequited passion, trying to tell her without words just how he felt about her. She pressed against him, her arms looping around him, even felt her long-haired tail wrap sensually around his. It was sheer bliss, and he was almost disappointed when it was over. She looked up at him, a little breathless, and he chuckled.

“What?”

“I see I’m going to have to start saving money.”

“For what?”

“For a ring,” he said earnestly.

She gave him a wild look, her cheeks ruffling out, then she laughed. “Slow down there, my fox,” she told him with a smile. “You have to meet Momzilla before you decide to become part of *my* family.”

He laughed. “I’ll make sure to wear my armor.”

“You’ll need it,” she grinned, pushing herself into his arms, tapping him playfully on the nose. Then she leaned in and kissed him again. “Mmm, well, one thing’s for sure.”

“What?”

“I’m going to enjoy this game you call love.”

“Me too,” he grinned, and he kissed her.

He got her home at nine. Both of them were a little out of sorts, for they’d spent over an hour on the bench, kissing and nuzzling, and being totally frank and honest with each other. Some pretty dark secrets were

traded on that bench between them, acts of trust offered and taken with sincerity. Though neither of them came out and said *I love you*, it was there. Oh, it was there.

He helped her out of the car, and she wrapped her arms around his waist and kissed him lingeringly, sliding her fingers up and down the scars on his back lightly as he held her close, then dared to slide his paw down and press it against her very attractive backside. She squeaked a little, but just kissed him with a little more passion, more than happy to allow him to paw her in a place that a respectable male had no business putting his paws.

“I’ll save you the torment of going in,” she giggled into his neck as she nuzzled him. “Call me tomorrow?”

“I’m off tomorrow. I’m going shopping for a couch. Want to go? I like your sense of style.”

“Sure, I’d love to. Pick me up at five?”

“I’ll be waiting.”

“Mmm. Kit, I had a wonderful time.”

“So did I. I’m going to go home and take a cold shower.”

She grinned. “If that’s the case, then maybe you should take your paw off my butt,” she teased. “It can’t be helping.”

He laughed, moving the offending appendage.

“But don’t worry,” she said, raising up and whispering to him, close to his ear, “I think you’ll be ready very soon. Like you said, you have motivation now.”

He slid his paws up her back, until they were resting on her shoulders. “I’ll do my best.”

“Don’t make me wait too long. I want to know what I’m missing,” she purred.

“And who’s not helping now?” he protested.

She laughed, then lunged in and gave him one more kiss, a chaste kiss on the cheek. “You be good, my handsome fox,” she told him. “And I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Have a good night, my pretty kitty,” he smiled in reply.

“Only if I dream of you tonight,” she said throatily, then she pulled free of him and sauntered up the sidewalk.

He watched her walk up to the door, open it, look back at him, then go in. Once she was out of sight, his knees wobbled, and he blew out his breath.

Good God, what a *female*!

He got back in the car, started it, then leaned against the steering wheel for a minute. Cold shower. Yes. Cold shower would be good. He pulled out, heading for home, thoughts of Jessie dominating his every second.

He wasn’t joking. He was *definitely* going to start saving for that ring.

Neither he, Jessie, nor the femmes watching from the sorority house saw the telephoto camera pull back into the window of a dark sedan, and then pull off in the opposite direction.

Inside the house, every femme was in the living room. They watched her come in, then lean against the door as she closed it and let out a long, contented sigh.

“Oh, tell me you did!” Danielle said expectantly.

“No, but we will soon,” she literally purred, putting her black-furred paw to her cheek. “I think he’ll be ready soon.” She gave them all a huge grin. “I’m going to marry that fox,” she declared with a little hum.

They all squealed and clapped, then swarmed her, demanding a second by second account of the entire date.

Chapter 5

Kit's apartment slowly began to resemble a home, rather than an empty dwelling.

Jessie helped him pick out a nice couch, a light tan one with deep cushions and flared armrests on the ends, covered with thick upholstery. It was kind of pricy, but she liked it, and since she liked it, he bought it. He also bought a cheap desk for his laptop, a rolling chair, and one of those flimsy metal tables to put in the large living room right by the kitchen, a dining area, that gave him something to eat on. He completed his bachelor's dining room suit with two very cheap and unmatching chairs. A tablecloth covered up the cheap flimsiness, but at least now he had somewhere for him and Jessie to eat.

Jessie had told her friends about his apartment, and Tuesday, when he got home from work to await the delivery of his couch, he found almost half of her sorority waiting for him. While Sandy was flirting with Lupe, they pulled a TV stand, endtable, and an old TV out of their cars. They were letting him borrow them until he could get his own, some of the cast-off furniture that was in the basement of the house and a TV donated by Danielle, who'd just bought a new TV, one of the LCD ones she could hang on the wall of her rather cluttered room. The TV she lent him was an old tube TV, but it was a 33 inch model that must have taken up a huge piece of real estate in her room.

He didn't really watch TV all that much, but it was kind of her to let him borrow it, so he'd take it with gratitude.

Jessie stayed over after her sisters went home, and she cooked him dinner, and they spent nearly three hours sitting on his new couch, talking, which led to making out. He got her home about ten, after he realized it was either take her home or take her back to the bedroom. She told him when he could think about that and not see the spectre of his family, when he could think about making love to her without a single worry about his family crossing his mind, then it was time. It wasn't time yet, but he managed to go quite a while before he had a single thought about his family. And he had too much respect for her to do anything other than what she wished, when it came to that. When that time did come, and it *would* come, he would be able to look into her eyes and tell her so with utter honesty.

He had to agree with her, regardless. She was right. He had to be free of his family before they got intimate, or it would be a weight dragging them down into the bottomless pit. God knows, he didn't want to share his bed with his entire family, and that's what it more or less would be if he slept with her with his family hanging over him.

The loaned TV also gave the cable guy something to do when he arrived to install Kit's cable modem. The cable modem went in the spare bedroom, but the leopard also hooked up the cable to the TV. It was indeed a package deal, basic cable for just fifteen bucks a month with the cable modem subscription, anything he could get without using a converter box. It gave him about fifty channels, which was about forty-seven channels too many. He rarely turned it on, and when he did, it was either on a news channel, the Weather Channel, or A&E, Discovery, or National Geographic.

He wasn't quite sure how to handle the modem, so he asked Mike for some help. The raccoon came over after work on Wednesday, then they hit the tech stores. Mike had him buy a good wireless router, then hooked it up for him, isolated it so only Kit's computer could use it, and showed him how to add new computers to his wireless network when he bought a desktop. Kit rather liked the wireless part, though. He could use his laptop anywhere in the apartment, even sitting out by the door outside on his tiny porch, and Mike had fixed it so he could get to the magazine's network from home to move files back and forth. That would let him take work home with him, since he could do some of his research from home.

By Thursday, his apartment almost looked *normal*. He had a couch, TV, coffee table, dining table, desk, and a bed. Hell, he was almost there, even if some of it wasn't his. Not only furniture, but he had cable, internet, and a radio, too. All he needed now was a DVD player, a good stereo, and some music and movies to play in them, and he'd be set.

Well, and a car. He was still using Rick's wife's car, so he had to start looking for his own.

He was initiated into the Lone Star custom of going to The Pit after work on Thursday, but he didn't go alone. Jessie joined them, and they spent a few very fun hours palling around with the crew, basically just moving their fun from the office to the bar.

Vil called while he was at the bar and gave him her arrival time. She'd get in before he went to work, and when he offered to pick her up at the airport, she scoffed.

"Oh, please. I already have a limo arranged that'll take me to the Austin Regency. I'm also going to do a little work there. There's a steel

company there in Austin, and I want to give it a once-over to see if it's worth buying. I'm also going to talk to one of the smaller oil companies about a contract with the Galveston repair facility. I told them I'd talk to them about it there in Austin. Their CEO is going to fly out and meet me tomorrow afternoon at a satellite office in Pflugerville."

"You just had to turn this into work," he accused lightly.

"Hey, that's how I write off the trip on my taxes at the end of the year," she teased. "This is a *business* trip. The fact that you're there is just a convenient coincidence. They don't have to know that the only reason I'm going to talk to the company and look over the steel mill is to give me that front of officiality for when I come see you."

He laughed. "You're terrible!"

"That's how a Vulpan does business," she teased with a smug little trill to her voice. "I'll pick you up after work, and we'll go meet Jessie at her house. I want to give it a look."

"You can tell her that yourself," he told her. "She's here with me."

"Oh, really? Put her on!"

"Jess!" he called. She laughed and looked away from Rick and Marty, and he held the phone out to her. "My sister wants to talk to you."

"Really?" she asked, taking the phone. "Uh, hello? Vilenne?"

Kit winced.

"Vil, Vil," she said placatingly.

"You're learning," Kit grinned at her.

“Oh, hush, *Kitstrom*,” she told him with a charmingly insulting expression, then paid attention to the phone. “Sorry, I was chastising your brother. Oh, yes, he deserved it.” Then she laughed.

“Dude, she goes for the throat, doesn’t she?” Jeffrey laughed from across the table. “Straight to the full name!”

“I enjoy the punishment,” he mused, just enjoying watching her talk to his sister without listening to what she was saying.

Vil kept Jessie tied up on the phone for nearly a half an hour. Jessie’s body language relaxed visibly as they talked, as she got over being nervous over talking to someone as imposing as Vilenne Vulpan to giggling and carrying on like she was talking to an old friend. “Here, she wants to say goodbye,” she said, handing him the phone.

“Hey sis,” he said into the phone.

“I like her,” she said immediately.

“Well, so do I. Why do you think I ask her out?” he challenged.

Vil laughed. “So, tomorrow when you’re about to get off work, call me. I’ll come to your work to pick you up, meet your co-workers, and we’ll go get Jessie and get some dinner.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” he agreed.

“Cool beans, bro. See you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow, sis. Have a good flight.”

“Thanks. Bye-bye.”

“Bye.” He closed the phone and looked at Jessie, who was talking to Rick. She glanced at him, then turned and looked at him curiously.

“What is it, Kit?”

“Vil said she’s going to come pick us up tomorrow after I get off work,” he told her. “She wants to see the office too, so I think I’d better call her a little early,” he mused.

“What was that? You’re gonna bring your sister up to the office?” Rick asked.

“Yeah, she wants to see it. Is that okay?”

“Hell, son, that’s fine.”

“Do you think she’d mind giving me a very brief interview? It’d be a major scoop if we got an article about Vilenne Vulpan into the magazine!” Barry said.

“Yeah, but then people will find out she’s my sister,” he protested. Then he closed his mouth and thought a brief moment. “No, nevermind. Go ahead, Barry. I shouldn’t be ashamed that my sister is rich and successful,” he grinned. “And though I don’t bring it up, I shouldn’t really hide the facts about my family either.”

Jessie put a paw on his arm. He looked to her, and saw that glorious smile on her face. “What?”

“Oh, nothing,” she said, then she leaned in close to him. “Let’s go back to your apartment,” she whispered huskily in his ear.

“Uhh, sure, if you want,” he told her. “Sorry guys, but Jess needs to head out, so I’m going to take her home. See you guys tomorrow.”

“No, our secret weapon for the open mic contest is bailing!” Marty said with mock outrage. “We bet money on it!”

Kit laughed. “Well, do your best,” he grinned as he stood up, then helped Jessie out of her chair.

He drove them back to his apartment and let her in, but Lupe intercepted him after he went to check the mail. His new checks had arrived. “Yo, Kit,” he called. “The UPS guys dropped a package off at the office for you.”

“UPS? I wasn’t expecting anything.”

Kit went to the office with Lupe, and inside against the wall there were three boxes stacked neatly. One of them was fairly large, but the other two were medium sized. He recognized those boxes almost immediately. They were the original boxes he’d used to store all the stuff when he left Suzy’s apartment in Boston. Vil had shipped it all to him!

“Oh, cool!” he said in surprise. “I almost completely forgot about this stuff!”

“What is it?”

“It’s my stuff from home,” he answered. “From when I was in college. I told Suzy to do something with it all, but she musta sent it to my sis, and my sis mailed it to me.”

“Cool deal. Lemme help you carry it home.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it, but be careful. The two small boxes are mostly books.”

“I get one, you get one, no prob.”

Kit and Lupe carried the three boxes over to his apartment and stacked them by the door. Lupe looked around, and chuckled. “Damn, dude, this place looks like a real home now,” he said. “All you need is some pictures or something for the walls and some curtains, and you’re set.”

“Yeah,” Kit said as he put down the largest box. “Thanks for the help, Lupe.”

“Hey, no prob. Don’t forget, you gotta pay rent next month!” he teased with a laugh.

“Like you’ll let me forget,” he grinned.

“Jess, come look at what Vil sent me,” he called as Lupe left.

She came out from the bathroom and looked at the boxes. “What are these?”

“It’s my stuff from when I went to U-Mass,” he said. “After the accident, Vil didn’t want me living in the dorm because of my back, so she helped me get an apartment just off campus, a little one bedroom efficiency. After I graduated I put all my junk in these boxes and told Suzy to get rid of it. I’d totally forgotten about it.”

“Suzy?”

“A friend of Vil’s. She helped us out by acting like a middle-fur so Vil could pay my rent without anyone knowing.”

“Ah. What do you want for dinner?”

“Jess, you don’t have to cook for me,” he protested.

“I don’t have to, but I want to,” she answered. “You need to eat.”

“Well, if you really don’t mind cooking, I can’t very much demand anything specific,” he chuckled. “Just surprise me. There should be an X-Box in here,” he said eagerly. “And I have a bunch of DVDs too.”

He unpacked his old life in the living room while Jessie cooked. Old knick-knacks, some of his old schoolbooks, some sketches his roommate did before the accident and he moved out, and yes, his old X-Box was in there, as well as a bunch of games and quite a few DVDs. He had the DVD player add-on for his X-Box, so he had something to play them on. He dug out the little Transformers toy that Paul had given him on his birthday as a joke, but he’d kept, some thing he’d bought on Ebay called *Sky Warp*, which turned into an F-15 fighter. It was an inside joke between them, because he was taking flying lessons and wanted to be a fighter pilot.

And books! Lots and lots of books. Fiction and nonfiction, but mostly non-fiction. History book after history book after history book, most of them about the Roman Empire, which was his favorite field of study in history. His cookbooks were in there too.

He put the little toy out on the TV ostentatiously, and taped the sketches up on the wall in the eating area, then went about hooking up the X-Box. By the time he had it hooked up, he realized the batteries in the DVD add-on remote were dead, so that was something he’d have to go buy.

“Heh, well, you guys need an extra alarm clock?” he asked as he opened the final box and found his old alarm clock on top, the most of the remainder being books.

“I can take it home with me,” Jessie called, coming out of the kitchen. She didn’t have much food to work with in his kitchen, but she’d managed to make a salad and some Hamburger Helper he’d bought the other day.

“We need to talk about your shopping habits, mister,” she teased. “There’s not much I can do with what’s in there.”

“Hey, us young guys aren’t known for cooking,” he chuckled.

“Well, come get something to eat,” she told him. “I’ll make us some tea.”

They enjoyed the simple meal, and Kit was getting a strange feeling. Jessie was...*watching* him. He enjoyed being with her, and over the last couple of weeks, he’d gotten to know her, and what she was doing wasn’t entirely normal for her. She was eating too, but she kept her eyes on him, almost all the time.

The good thing about plastic dishes was not having to clean up much afterwards. He washed up the pan she’d dirtied while she wrapped the salad and leftovers in plastic and put them in the refrigerator. He noticed that she was humming to herself. Sheesh, did that one beer she drank have that much of an effect on her? He made a mental note not to take her into anymore bars...or, well, maybe taking her to bars if it made her this agreeable afterwards.

They sat on the couch, and almost immediately she cuddled up to him in a way he found incredibly pleasing, which went up by exponential degrees when she began to purr. He put his arm around her and just listened to her purr for a long, long time. She patted him on the shoulder. “Kit?” she asked.

“Yes?”

“May I use your phone?” she said, looking up at him. Her eyes were absolutely *smoldering*.

Those luminous blue eyes put him out of sorts. “Uh, sure,” he said, digging it out of his pocket and handing it to her. She flipped it open and hit the speed dial for her own number, and put it to her ear. “Hey Linda, it’s JD. I’m fine. Listen, can you tell Sam that I won’t be home tonight? I’m staying over at Kit’s.”

Kit’s tail almost broke when it tried to snap straight out behind him, driving into the back of his couch.

“Hush, you. No. No, no, hush up a second. Just tell Sam what I said. No. Linda—Linda. I’m going to hang up on you. I mean it! Okay. Just tell her, and so help me, if I come home tomorrow and find anything like that, I’m gonna have Ben come down and beat you up! I swear I will!” She snorted. “Fine. Fine. Linda, you *are keeping me from Kit*,” she said in a voice so intense it surprised him. “If my mom calls, make something up, stall, do something, can you do that for me? Thanks. Okay. Bye.” She leaned forward and put the phone on the coffee table, then leaned back against him and began to purr again.

He was quite out of sorts. “Uh, Jessie, we’re gonna—“

“Mmm-hmm.”

“But what about—“

“You’re over it,” she told him sedately. “When you told Barry you weren’t ashamed of your sister, I knew you were over it.” She was quiet a moment. “Remember when I told you we’d have to talk about you carrying me later?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, why don’t you carry me somewhere?” she asked, giving him a glowing smile.

She didn’t have to ask twice. He swooped her up and carried her over to the door, and she laughed as he locked it. Then he turned and carried her back to the bedroom. “I think this is entirely too soon,” he told her seriously, but he wasn’t stopping. “We’ve only been going out for two weeks!”

“I’ve been waiting my whole life for this,” she said huskily in his ear. “And I don’t want to wait anymore.”

“Your wish is my command, my Lady,” he told her as he carried her through the bedroom door.

Some things are worth waiting your whole life for.

It was morning, 6:42am, but his alarm hadn’t gone off yet. Not that he really had to set it, because Friday was his late day, but Jessie had morning classes and he didn’t want her to be late. He lay on his stomach, paws under his pillow as he looked at the clock. She was awake too, propped up on her side, her paw sliding up and down his lower back, over the scars from the surgeries. It was that gentle touch that had awakened him. His back was aching from last night, but her gentle hands seemed to seek out the pain and soothe it with a light, delicate touch. She didn’t know his back was hurting him...or at least he didn’t tell her. But her fingers just seemed to know exactly where to go, and her touch was *magical*.

He’d slept with other girls, but it had *never* been like that. It was... absolutely indescribable. And though she was a virgin, she was in no way

shy or timid. She was beyond ready to be deflowered. She was very... enthusiastic. And very curious. Even afterward, she spent a long time doing what she was doing right now, exploring his body with her eyes and her paws, getting to know every inch of him.

He still felt this was a little too soon. He wanted to take his time, lead her to this point slowly, gently, carefully, but she seemed to want nothing to do with his schedule. But then again, he should have expected it. She'd made her intentions quite clear on Sunday, but he didn't expect her to feel that he'd reached that level quite so quickly.

She was right though. Not once, not once all night, did he have a *single* thought about the possible consequences they might suffer from his family. Even now, those consequences meant absolutely nothing to him. He didn't *care* if they went ballistic once they found out he was dating a cat. Hell, he *wanted* them to know. He wanted to shout it from the rooftops, put it on the internet, that he was in love with Jessica Williams. He was in love with a *cat*. They could all go to hell. It was *his* life, and he'd live it any way he damn well pleased. They lost any right to have a say in his life when they turned their backs on him, more concerned about their money than one of their own family.

They were like sharks, turning on each other the instant there was more in it for them to do so.

"Does it hurt?" she asked, caressing his back. "I never really thought about if I might hurt you when we were doing it. I was a little... preoccupied," she added with a laugh.

He turned his head and looked at her. "No, it doesn't work quite that way," he told her. "It only hurts if I sleep on it wrong or I get jarred or hit

the wrong way. I know how not to move and what not to do to keep from hurting it. I can satisfy your demands without hurting myself,” he grinned.

“That’s good, because I think I’m going to have some more of those demands,” she giggled, leaning down and kissing him on the muzzle.

“Thank you for an absolutely wonderful evening, sir,” she grinned.

He laughed and rolled over on his back, and she snuggled up with him. “It’s too bad it’s almost time to get up and get moving. What time do you have your first class?”

“Nine,” she told him.

“Hmm,” he said, looking over her and to the clock. “You know, we have about a half an hour,” he told her.

“Not long enough,” she complained. “I want to *experience* it, Kit. It’s too new, too wonderful to me to be something we try to do before the alarm goes off. Thirty minutes for my second time? Nuh-uh. We’d never make it in time. It would take me that long just to kiss you properly.”

“Ah, it would technically be your third time,” he pointed out.

She laughed. “Well, I stand corrected, and you’re supposed to be a little more caring and considerate giving I’m entering an entirely new stage of my life here,” she said, poking him in the chest with her finger.

“The old A.S., eh? After Sex?”

She laughed. “And here I thought you’d still respect me in the morning.”

“Oh, we might have to talk about that, I suppose,” he said off-handedly, which earned him a face full of pillow. He pushed it away from

his muzzle, laughing. "I can't respect you, you're just too adorable," he added. She laughed and pulled the pillow away, looming over him, then she quite deliberately reached out and touched him in the only place she'd avoided all night.

She very gently pinched the ragged edge of his left ear.

"Did it hurt when you lost it?" she asked.

"I don't remember it at all," he reminded her.

"Oh yeah. Did it hurt much after?"

"They had me on too many painkillers for me to feel much of my ear, when it felt like my back was on fire," he told her honestly.

"You know something?"

"What?"

"I can't imagine what you'd look like with your ear whole," she told him, covering his entire ear with her paw and rising up and away to look down at him critically. "It's like this was how you were meant to be to me. Doesn't that sound silly?"

"Not silly at all," he said gently. "You know something?"

"What?"

"Your claws are very sharp."

Her cheeks ruffled and she gave him a contrite look. "I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"Nothing I wasn't willing to endure," he grinned. "I've never slept with a cat before. I didn't expect that Vulcan Death Grip."

She laughed helplessly, burying her head in his neck and shoulder. "I'll try to be more careful next time."

"If you're not, I'm going to make you wear oven mitts." She rose up and gaped at him, and he winked. She erupted into gales of laughter. "That's some pretty formidable weaponry there you have, ma'am," he told her. "Have you ever had to use them?"

"Once," she answered, still giggling a little. "When I was in high school. Boys don't harass cats or skunks. We can do very mean things to them if they get fresh."

"Remind me never to be fresh with you," he smiled.

"Well, I *think* I could let you be a little fresh, given you've done all those other things with me," she winked, then she flopped down on his chest and kissed him. "Mmmm," she hummed, then she began to purr. "Well, their mission is accomplished," she noted.

"Huh?"

"My sorority. They've told me it was their mission in life to find me a boyfriend that would take my virginity."

"Remind me to thank them. I hope they like kisses," he mused.

She growled in her throat, a very surprising sound. He laughed and put his arms around her. "Understood, ma'am," he grinned.

"And don't you forget it," she smiled, then she began purring again as she kissed him.

Oh, *God*. She was a good enough kisser as it was, but her purring just vibrated right through him in the most exotic, unbelievable manner.

“Mmmrraaahhhh,” he hummed as she snuggled in with him. “Are you sure you were a virgin? I’ve never met any femme who can kiss like you.”

“You just bring out the vixen in me,” she teased.

“I’d rather bring out the cat in you,” he countered. “Do all femme cats kiss as good as you?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never kissed a femme cat that way.”

He chuckled. “Point.”

“Come on, if we stay in this bed I’ll just get bad ideas,” she told him, rising up. “Can I take a shower?”

He laughed. “We make love, and you ask me to use the *shower*?” he noted. “Jess, love, my house is your house. After last night, I think you can do whatever the hell you want.”

She dropped back down and gave him a toe-curling, passionate kiss. “My, what was that for,” he said breathlessly.

“For calling me *love*,” she grinned. “There’s other rewards for good behavior, too,” she said in a purring voice, playfully nipping at his right ear.

“I think I’m going to like this training,” he mused as she got out of bed and sauntered towards the bathroom, as he watched that tail of hers sway back and forth.

Despite his brave front, his back *was* stiff. While she got the shower ready, he lay in bed for a minute, then sat on the edge of the bed with both paws on his waist, working out the kinks. He wasn’t used to that kind of... exertion. Hopefully he’d build up either some endurance or some resistance to it. That, or taking Advil before bed was going to become a ritual.

He stood up and stretched, then gathered up the sheet to make the bed...and realized he'd have to wash the sheets. And he hoped that her first time hadn't hurt. He bent down to pull the sheet and felt his back sting, and rose up with both paws on his back, arching it as his tail slashed back and forth.

He jumped when her paws touched him. "I thought you said your back didn't hurt."

"Well, it's a little stiff, but nothing serious," he hedged.

"Kit," she said seriously, wrapping her arms around him and pressing up against his back. "I'm a little disappointed in you. You can be honest with me."

"I just didn't want to worry you, that's all. Last night was *your* night, Jess. I wasn't going to do anything to take away from it. Besides, I wasn't about to stop either, back or no back."

She hummed in her throat. "But you'll be honest with me from now on?"

"Even if it's what you don't want to hear?"

"*Especially* if it's what I don't want to hear. Now, does your back hurt?"

"A little. But don't you worry about it."

"I will worry about it. I don't want to hurt you."

"Love, this isn't something you can hurt me like that. If that makes sense."

"Not really."

“Alright, then just trust me when I say it’s *nothing* you need to worry about. You didn’t hurt my back. It’s just sore, that’s all. After either a hot shower or a little bit with a heating pad on it, and I’ll be just fine.”

“Mmm, a shower, eh? Then c’mon,” she purred, turning them around. “Let’s get this back all better.”

She virtually babied him. She massaged his back in the shower, her magical paws soothing away the pain, then he washed her hair and her tail for her. He ruffled her tail dry, pausing to tweak that black tip. “God, I love this tail. Almost like a fox.”

“My grandfather’s a fox,” she winked back at him. “I inherited his black tips,” she added, holding up her black-mitten paws, and wiggling her black-backed ears.

“Well, I think it looks wonderful.”

“You’re a fox. You’re biased,” she giggled.

“Then call me biased. Do you like Honey Nut Cheerios?”

“Sure do. Now turn around, mister. Someone’s tail looks like Sandy when she gets out of the shower.”

His back was completely pain-free by the time his tail was dry and combed. He got dressed and went to the kitchen, and poured cereal into plastic bowls for breakfast while Jessie dressed. She came in while still combing her hair, and took the bowl from him with a smile and a nod. “Not quite what I had in mind, but I guess we’ll have to make do,” he noted.

“What did you have in mind?”

“Something a little better than plastic spoons and styrofoam bowls,” he sighed. “You’re much too important to me.”

She gave him a radiant smile, and laughed. “Oh, Kit, it could be gruel served on a toilet seat, and it wouldn’t matter. The company is much more important than the accessories. You may be from this super-rich blueblood family, but I much better like the Kit that likes to eat hamburgers on pieces of bread and doesn’t complain about Hamburger Helper.” She leaned in and nuzzled his neck. “I do appreciate the thought, but I’m much more interested in this,” she told him, putting her paw on his shoulder, “than some perfect fantasy. Reality was much sweeter than anything I dreamed about.”

He felt his tail shiver at that. “Pretty kitty,” he said in a quivering voice. “Don’t make me regret having to go to work. Cause you’ll regret going to school.”

She laughed. “I’m already regretting it. But there’s always tonight.”

“Well, there is that,” he said. He took up his spoon. “If we can keep Vil from talking all night, that is.”

“That’s alright. I’m looking forward to meeting her.”

“Oh, she’s gonna love you,” he chuckled.

After breakfast, he drove her back to her house. He got her home around eight, which would give her more than enough time to go in, change, and get her books for her classes. He helped her out, and she gave him a long, lingering, sensual, intimate kiss. “Jessie.”

“Mmm?”

“I know this is crazy. We’ve only known each other two weeks, for crying out loud. But, I love you.”

Her claws dug into him painfully. “I think maybe it was,” she breathed.

“Was what?”

“Love at first kiss,” she said, looking up at him. He was lost in her eyes for a long moment, then she kissed him again, passionate, fiery, which almost made his knees unlock. He had to lean back against the car, and she chased him relentlessly, making him completely surrender to her. “Mmm, start saving for that ring, Kitstrom Vulpan,” she whispered in his ear. “Keep going the way you’re going, and you won’t be disappointed when you ask that question.”

She was *evil*. She hurried away after saying something like that, and all he could do was watch her and wonder just how much of it was a joke, and how much of it was serious. He blew out his breath, ran his paws through his hair, then lightly slapped himself on the cheeks. For a moment, he forgot where he was and what he was doing, then vaguely recalled that he had to go deposit his check in the bank, and start researching cars so he could find a good bargain.

He got in Rick’s car and got to work. He had things to do today, and it was time to get back to reality after that blissful night of heaven on earth.

Jessie didn’t even make it to the stairs. She was hoping that she could sneak into the house and get to her room before anyone noticed her, which wasn’t hard given her room was the first door on the right upstairs, but clearly they’d been looking for her. The other Jessie, Sandy, and Danielle

ambushed her not five steps from the front door, the big tiger grabbing her in a huge hug and picking her up off the floor. “We’re so happy for you, baby!” she called.

“Yo, ladies! MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!” Sandy screamed at the top of her lungs. Jessie’s face poofed almost straight out, even her tail frizzed, and she thought she was going to die of mortification when loud cheering and clapping came from upstairs and the kitchen. “Now, give us the low-down, JD!” Sandy said as the other Jessie put her back down. “The lower, the better!”

“I’m going to be late for class,” Jessie said primly, heading for the stairs.

Sandy erupted into laughter. “Playing innocent doesn’t work anymore, you naughty femme,” Sandy teased. “You’re not innocent anymore!”

“Well, maybe not, but still, it’s just not the proper thing to do,” she said.

“Oh, stop playing coy,” Danielle grinned. “You *know* you wanna talk about it.”

“Well, maybe a little,” she admitted, her cheeks ruffling. “But can it wait a little while? A night like that isn’t something you just *talk* about. It was *wonderful*.”

“See, now you’re talking,” Danielle laughed as they started up the stairs. “How was it?”

“You know very well how it was,” she answered, a touch priggishly.

“That depends on the male,” Sandy said with a dirty grin.

“Did his back cause any problems?” the other Jessie asked. “My dad hurt his back a few years ago, and mom said he has trouble, performing.”

“Your mom talks sex with you about your dad? Ewww!” Danielle shuddered, which earned her a swat from the tiger.

“Well, he was sore this morning, but he seemed to get better after he got up and moving,” she answered. “I never even thought about that until this morning, when I woke up. he was laying on his stomach, and I could see the surgery scars on his back.”

“Is he as cuddly as he looks?” Sandy asked. “His fur is so soft and gorgeous. He must be nice to hold.”

“He snuggles well,” she giggled in reply as they reached her room. Sam was already gone, for she had an eight o’clock class on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

“I have to say, I’m a bit surprised,” Sandy said with a laugh. “We try to get you laid for two years, and you go and jump in the sack with a guy you met two weeks ago! And after you put on all this aire about waiting for the right time!”

“It was the right time,” she said calmly as she pulled her shirt off, changing for school. “I was waiting for him to lose his fear of his family. Well, he lost it.”

“That was fast,” the other Jessie chuckled.

“Well, on Sunday, I kinda hinted that the as soon as he did that, I’d be more than receptive to sleeping with him,” she said with a little giggle. “He had...motivation.”

The other three femmes laughed as she took off her jeans, and fished clean clothes out of the dresser.

“Sure he wasn’t faking it?”

“I’d know if he was. I know him very well, Sandy. I could tell if he wasn’t sincere. No, he lost his fear of his family. I guess I just offered him something worth facing up to it.”

Sandy gave her a wicked smirk. “Oh, you offered something, all right. Something about any male would have wanted.”

“Only one male will ever get it,” she declared as she put on clean underwear, then stepped into a fresh pair of jeans. “I’m marrying that fox, femmes. Mark my words. I couldn’t find a better male if I searched all my life. I found my husband.”

“I hope he knows this,” Danielle giggled.

“Oh, he knows,” she stated, giving Danielle a glance. “He knows. All that comes now is the waiting. He’s much too much the gentlefur to ask me now. He feels like we’re moving too fast, and he’ll want to slow down a little. He’ll get secure in his job, feel out how I feel about it, and I guess I’ll have to take him to meet my parents,” she said with a shudder. “But as soon as he feels like he’s ready, that he can give me a stable home and can take care of me, he’ll ask me.”

“And you’ll say yes?”

“I’d say yes right now,” she declared. “But he won’t ask me right now.”

“You’re sure about that?”

She nodded. “I know him very well, Sandy. I’ve only known him two weeks, but...but I know him. I’m sure of it.” She began to pack her bookbag for her two classes. Friday was something of her short day. Her 1:00pm class didn’t meet on Fridays, so that gave her a class at 9:00am and another class at noon. On Mondays and Wednesdays she also had a class at 1:00, but that was a two hour class. But instead of going to class on Fridays, she worked as a tutor in the study center from 2:00pm to 3:00pm, tutoring in English. It was good practice for her, she felt, getting her used to teaching students. “Now, if you guys will excuse me, I gotta get to class.”

“Oh, put aside some time on your calendar after you’re done, femme,” Sandy declared in a teasing voice.

“You may have to wait. Kit’s sister is coming today, and she wants to meet me.”

“Ooh, bring her here! We need to meet her!”

“It must be nice to be so rich she can fly down whenever she wants,” the other Jessie noted with a chuckle.

Kit was right about one thing...A.S. It really did have an impact on her. She was kinda lost most of the day, ghosting through her first class, forgetting to eat lunch, nearly forgetting her homework assignment for her second class. She kept thinking about Kit, and last night, and Kit...and last night. And Kit. Oh, and last night.... It was almost embarrassing, because she’d never had those kinds of thoughts with that kind of intensity while sitting in a public area. At one point, she was purring while lost in one of her reveries, and a weasel male made a rather direct comment about it from the next table. That about mortified her.

She struggled through her last class, trying to think of some way to keep her mind on school when it was somewhere else, and was blissfully thankful when it was over. Not because she could go see Kit, but because she wouldn't feel ashamed that she wasn't really prepared for class. Her grades had come way down since she met him, so much so that her European Lit professor had pulled her aside and asked her if anything was wrong, and that was something she had to correct. She just had to learn how to concentrate with this new distraction in her life.

When she came out of class, she was a bit surprised to find two huge panthers standing in the hallway. They were watching the students leave, but when Jessie came out, one of them approached her. "Miss Williams?" he called.

"Uh, yes, that's me," she replied uncertainly. Who were these two, and what did they want? Were they cops? They were certainly dressed up like they were official, with their black suits.

"We work for Miss Vilenne Vulpan," he told her. "She's downstairs, and would like to give you a ride."

"Really? She's *here*? How did she know?"

"When Miss Vulpan wants to know something, it's our job to find out," the panther told her right up front and evenly.

"Oh."

"Follow us, please."

She followed the two panthers downstairs, and to a teacher's parking lot that was right beside the building. Jessie stopped in surprise when she saw a *limo* sitting in the parking lot! "You shouldn't be surprised, Miss

Williams,” the other panther told her with an amused tone. “Miss Vulpan *is* wealthy.”

She laughed. “Well, after spending time with Kit, I guess I didn’t expect it.”

One of the panthers went ahead and opened the door of the limo, and Vilenne Vulpan stepped out. She was actually rather short, a few inches shorter than Jessie, but she looked almost *regal*. She had a calm, cool expression, and was wearing sunglasses. Her gray skirt and blazer were made of silk, and she wore a conservative dress shirt beneath her blazer. She was short, but she was also slender and sleek, with curvy hips and a slightly smaller than average bust. Jessie came up to her, and the fox offered her paw. “It’s nice to meet you, Jessie,” she said with a slight smile. “I’ve been looking forward to it.”

“It’s nice to meet you too, Vil,” she said, taking her paw. Jessie was a bit surprised when the short fox pulled her into an embrace.

“I think I’d rather have a hug than a handshake. You *are* dating my brother, after all,” she laughed. “Now please, get in, get in! We have a lot to talk about outside of Kit’s earshot.”

Jessie had never been in a limo before. It was *huge*! There was room for eight furs back there, in its facing seats, and there was a TV set into the side of the limo. It was clearly a rental, but it was meticulously clean and very snazzy. Vil seated herself by the door, and put Jessie in the seat facing her, so they could see each other while talking. “Now, pardon me dropping in on you like this,” she started. “I finished what I was doing faster than I expected, so I had Stav track you down so I could pick you up.

“No, that’s alright,” she assured her, feeling a little nervous.

“You’re not quite sure what to expect, do you?” Vil asked, leaning back and putting a finger to her muzzle, then she winked.

“Well, no, not really.”

“I’m the same femme you talked to on the phone last night,” she grinned.

“Yeah, but it didn’t really hit me that you’re *you* until just now. The limo,” she said.

She laughed. “Well, I’m not like my brother. I *like* the little perks that comes with money,” she winked. “So...you’re going out with Kit. First thing, honey, *thank you*. He’s totally crazy about you, and you’ve given him the first happiness he’s had probably since he was eight.”

Jessie’s cheeks ruffled, and she looked away shyly. “He’s a wonderful male,” she said. “I love him, Vil. I know I’ve only known him for two weeks, but I love him.”

“Ooh, really?” she asked eagerly, sitting on the edge of her seat. “And what makes you think that?”

“I don’t have to *think* it,” she replied. “I just...know.”

“Well, far be it from me to doubt something you believe in your heart,” she said with a mysterious smile. “How do you think he feels about you?”

“I know he loves me.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m *positive*.”

“Hmm. What do you think he’s going to do?”

“Marry me,” she said, looking directly into Vil’s eyes.

“There’s a lot of baggage that comes with a ring in this family, honey,” Vil said seriously. “That’s one of the things that I’m here to talk to you about.”

“Kit told me all about it, Vil, and it doesn’t worry me at all,” she said calmly. “I know that his family will hate me, and that since they’re rich, they might even try to break us up. But I’ve found the fox I’m going to marry, and I’ll dig these in and I won’t let go,” she said, holding up her paws and extending her claws.

Vil laughed. “Kit might not appreciate that.”

Her face poofed out a little. “He’s already complained a little,” she admitted. “Vil, I slept with him last night. I think you deserve to know.”

“Really!?” Vil gasped, then she laughed. “Good for you! I’m happy for you!” She looked at Jessie’s claws, then laughed even harder. “Oh my, did you stripe him?”

“Not where anyone can see,” she said demurely.

“I think I might have to send him a monthly shipment of Neosporin,” Vil mused, which made Jessie’s tail frizz out. “So, was it good?”

“That’s a strange question for a sister to ask.”

“He may be my brother, but he’s also my best friend,” Vil told her evenly. “Call it curiosity. You’ll find that we foxes are just as curious as cats, and we don’t like to have that curiosity denied. That’s why Kit’s in a good job where his curiosity is a job asset,” she grinned.

“Well, he was my first,” she admitted with a bit of a ruffle. “So it’s not like I can compare it with anyone. But it was wonderful.”

Vil gave her a curious look.

“What?”

“You were a virgin? And you’re that pretty? Good God, femme, did your mother keep you in a box in the basement until you graduated from high school?”

Jessie erupted into helpless laughter. “Something like that,” she admitted. “My mom kept me away from males. She’s an ultra-traditionalist who thinks I shouldn’t even date until after I’m married.”

“And that’s why you went to school far, far away,” Vil mused.

“I see you see to the heart of the matter,” Jessie said with a small smile.

“Alright, so, where are we going?” Vil asked. “We can’t sit here in the parking lot. No doubt we’re attracting attention.”

“Uh, could you drive me home so I can drop off my backpack?”

“Certainly. Marcus, take us to her sorority house.”

“Yes, madam,” the panther behind the wheel replied.

“It’s—“

“He knows where it is, honey,” Vil cut her off. “And that’s something that you’d better get used to, pretty quick. I know a lot more about you than you’d expect. When Kit told me about you, I got curious, and I looked you up. Does that bother you?”

“Well, it’s surprising. And a little disturbing.”

“Yes. And that’s something that the *others* will do when they find out that Kit’s dating you. So, I had Marcus dig to find anything about you they might try to latch onto. And luckily, he couldn’t find anything. Thank that mother of yours for keeping you as clean as a saint, honey. You’re an angel, and that takes away one angle of attack that my uncles might try to use if they go after Kit.”

Jessie frowned. The way she said it...it was as casual as if she were talking about mowing the lawn. Were the lives of normal people really nothing but something to be used to her family?

“But that’s the other reason I’m here, honey,” she said, reaching over and patting Jessie’s knee. “I promised Kit that I would keep his family off his back if he pursued you. I’m here early to talk to you to make *you* that same promise. I swear to you, Jessie, that I will do everything in my power to keep Kit’s family out of your life. Well, except for me, of course,” she said with a grin.

“I, that’s very nice of you, Vil.”

“Kit’s my little brother, but ever since mom died, I’ve felt more like his mother than his sister,” she told her. “Kit took it really hard, and it didn’t help that our father all but abandoned us after Mom died. Dad took it even harder than Kit did. I guess that most of what happened between them all goes back to that,” she sighed. “I think it would have been much different if Mom had lived. Anyway, Kit’s had a very rough time of it, honey. I’ve done what I can to make it as easy as possible, but I have to be careful, and Kit’s very independent. He doesn’t like it when I meddle. If he’s found happiness with you, you’ll find me to be the strongest ally you’ve ever had. I’d do almost anything to make Kit happy, Jessie. I owe it to him at the very least,

I want to at the very most. If you ever need anything, and I mean *anything*, I want you to call me. If you ever just want to talk, hey, call me.”

“I will, I promise,” Jessie assured her.

“I think I’m going to like you, Jessie. You’re not just good for my brother, you’re also a sweet femme that’s fun to talk to.” Her smile faded. “Now, as to that other thing. Just because my family knows I’ll come at them like a pissed off bitch if they interfere with Kit, that doesn’t mean that they might not try behind my back. That’s where you come in. Hon, Kit will never tell me if his uncles start trying to interfere. He’d try to deal with it himself, and keep me out of it to prevent me from having any issues with the rest of the family. But *you* will tell me. If you notice anything unusual, people taking pictures, cars that seem to hang around, I want you to call me. If anyone ever contacts you with strange messages or you get any threatening letters, call me, and *save those letters*. If any of your sorority sisters or friends see anything unusual, you need to tell them to tell you about it, and if it happens, call me. I can’t step on the family if I don’t know they’re up to something.”

Jessie nodded. “I will.”

She pulled a piece of paper from her pocket and handed it to her. “Here. There are two numbers there. The first one is the number to my personal cell phone. That’s the number you call if you ever need to talk to me. See that second number?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s the number to Vanguard Security. That’s a private security firm. I’ve hired them to keep an eye on things around here, to keep a passive watch over Kit and you and make sure my family doesn’t try

anything funny. Now, they are going to keep an eye on you, but do it from a distance. If they do it right, you'll never notice them, and they're not going to be planting cameras in your rooms or anything like that. Their job is to stay deep in the background and serve as a discouragement for my family, because I *will* tell them that I've put men down here to protect you. They'll just be keeping an eye out for any shenanigans my family might try, but they'll also be available to you in case you ever need them. If you ever feel like you might be in trouble, call 911 for sure, but also call them *immediately*. They'll come to help you. They're at your service, hon, even if you just don't feel comfortable walking alone across an empty parking lot. They will always come if you call, and they will help you. So if you're nervous about walking across campus after dark, call them. They'll send a guard to escort you."

Jessie laughed. "Kit did say you like to mother," she stated.

"He wasn't lying a bit," she grinned. "You're important to my brother, so you are important to me. And you'll find that *I'm* the ultra-protective member of this family. Here, I want you to have something."

"What is it?"

"It's a cell phone," she answered, reaching into the bag beside her and pulling out a Motorola phone box. "This phone will work just about anywhere, hon, and don't you worry about the bill. I'll take care of it. The phone's inside, but it's already charged, and I already have mine, Vanguard's, and Kit's cells on its speed dial. Now, if you'll give me your old phone, I'll have Marcus take care of moving everything to this one. You're going to lose your old number, but hey, you can make all the calls you want for free," she said with a wink.

“I don’t have a cell phone, Vil.”

“What? Hon, that’s not good. Thank God I got here, then. A femme should not go around without a phone. It’s not a good idea.”

“I usually don’t go out alone. One of my friends is almost always with me.”

“Well, still, I don’t want you going around without a phone. You matter to me, honey.”

“You’re very thoughtful. Thank you,” she said with a nod, taking the box.

“I was going to give you this phone and have you get rid of your old one, but since you don’t have one this works just as well. Just don’t give that number to your mother,” she winked.

“I appreciate it, but you really don’t have to give me anything, Vil,” she said demurely. “Kit likes to make it on his own, and I can understand why he does. He wants to completely split from his family, to where he doesn’t feel like he needs you to mother him anymore, and he can’t do it as long as he feels you’re gonna be there to bail him out whenever he gets in trouble.”

Vil gave him a serious look. “You really do know my brother,” she said with a sober nod.

“I understand him, Vil. I think he’ll get mad if you’re giving me things, so you might not want to do it.”

“This isn’t a gift, hon. This is a *necessity*. If you need to call someone and don’t have a phone, you’re gonna be in serious trouble...and I’m not

just talking about my family. A college femme should *not* be going around without a phone. It's just not a good idea."

"Well, thank you again."

"It's just the first of many gifts," she grinned. "I'll tell a secret."

"What?"

"I'm going to buy him a car."

Jessie laughed. "He's going to fight you over that," she told him.

"He can fight all he wants, because he's going to lose," she said with confidence. "I'll explain it to him in simple terms. He'll fight, he'll yell, he'll argue, he might even threaten to not see me again while I'm here, but I'll win. I have the one thing on my side he can't ignore."

"What is that?"

"Logic. My brother is very practical, Jessie."

"I've noticed."

"I'm sure you would have. He'll see that he *needs* his own car. It's not really a matter up for debate. I'll let him pay me back for it if it makes him happy, but I'm not going to let him go around without a car. If he loses his job, well, he'd have to give that car back his boss is letting him borrow. I'm not going to let him stay in that kind of a position."

"I doubt that'll happen. His boss likes him, he likes his job, and he does good work. All the furs at the magazine are great. I like them a lot. They're almost like a family."

"Does Kit fit in with them?"

“Like a glove,” Jessie giggled.

“So, you have a license, hon?”

She laughed. “Oh, no, you’re not gonna talk me into a car.”

“Why should I talk you into it? This is another of those *logic* issues here, hon. Given who you are and the kind of family Kit has, I don’t like the idea of you not having a way around if you have an emergency. I don’t want you to be at the mercy of someone else.”

“Well,” she said, putting a finger to her short muzzle in thought.

“When you say it like that, it does make a kind of sense. And I’ve never had a car of my own before,” she mused.

“See? That wasn’t hard at all.” She reached into the bag, and produced a pair of two keys. “Here you go. One’s for your new Corolla, the other goes to Kit’s Pathfinder.”

Jessie laughed helplessly. “You already *bought* it?”

“Like I said, this was an argument I knew I was going to win. Besides, if he wakes up and finds it in the parking lot, what’s he gonna do? Give it away? My brother’s practical, and besides, I think he wouldn’t put up a fuss about it in private,” she grinned.

“You’re terrible!”

“Kit tells me that all the time,” she hummed pleasantly. “It doesn’t change anything, though.”

Jessie just couldn’t help but laugh. She’d known Kit’s sister for all of a half hour, and she’d already proved she was everything Kit said she was. She was friendly, warm, funny, kind, and caring, but she was also very nosy,

very protective, and very loose with the idea that she needed to keep her distance from her brother. That she'd go out and buy cars for her brother and his girlfriend because she felt they needed them, without any kind of consultation, said much about Vil's personality...both the good and the bad.

"I hope you don't mind stock," she said. "I took what was on the lot, but I did go for ones with some extras on em, like CD players and car alarms and such. I don't know if you can drive a stick, so I got you an automatic, but Kit's is a standard. He might have to teach you how to drive it. Your car is white, but Kit's Pathfinder is charcoal gray."

Jessie laughed. "Vil, why on earth would I complain about it when someone who *gives me a car?*" she said. "That's a huge gift!"

"Well, it's nothing to me," she said dismissively. "If you don't like it, let me know. I'll talk to the dealer about letting you trade it for something you do."

"No, no, I'll be just fine. I just hope that Kit won't be too mad, or that you're trying to subvert me or something."

"I'll explain it to him, honey. And don't expect any other gifts," she winked. "I only gave you the phone and the car because I honestly believe that you *need* them. I won't be giving you anything unless I feel it's a necessity."

They pulled up to the sorority house, and she pointed at a white Corolla sitting at the curb a little ways down. "My, they already delivered it so you could give it a look over. Nice," she noted.

One of the panthers got out and opened the door for them. Vil climbed out, and Jessie followed her, holding her backpack. She was torn between

wanting to look at the car and trying to keep her sense of decorum. She was actually *thrilled* at the idea of getting a new car, but she wasn't sure she wanted to be too excited about it until she saw how Kit felt about it. She might have to give it up. She wouldn't keep it if it bothered him that much, she knew how he felt about how his sister meddled.

She'd hold her excitement. She had to talk to Kit first and see if she could keep it.

"Want to come in? My sorority sisters are curious about you. They know about Kit."

"Sure, I can do that," she said.

There were only five femmes home when the panthers escorted Vil and Jessie inside. They stood by the door while Jessie introduced Vil around, then she ran up and dropped off her backpack while Vil chatted with the femmes in the living room.

"What's it like running a big company?" Sandy asked excitedly.

"Lots and lots of paperwork," Vil laughed. "And you don't get much free time. A lot of people depend on me to keep the company profitable for their jobs and their livelihood, and it's been getting harder and harder with so many jobs going overseas."

"You won't do the same?"

"We can't," she answered. "We have naval contracts, and those demand that the ships be constructed inside the United States. It's just a good thing that my grandfather was visionary when it came to business and branched us out so we have companies that produce everything we need to build ships. That keeps our costs low and keeps us very competitive,

because we can build them cheaper than anyone else in America, but produce the best quality possible for ships that might enter combat. Trust me, femmes, the shipyard considers quality to be the most important product,” she said proudly.

“Does being so young and a femme cause any problems?” Sam asked.

Vil laughed. “Oh, yes. I’m called ‘the baby’ by others in my circle, but most people in business call me the Ice Queen,” she winked. “Because when it comes to business, I’m a cold bitch. And I’m proud of it.”

That produced quite a bit of giggling. “My major is business. What do you think I should look into doing when I graduate?” Charlotte asked.

“Tech,” she answered instantly. “If I were you, I’d either get on board a tech sector company or start your own. Or, you can send me your resume when you graduate, and I’ll see if you’re Vulpan material,” she winked. “But I’m very picky about who I hire, and I have a high standard. If you work for me, you will *work*. But I’ll take good care of you in return.”

“I’ll have to do that.”

“Well, ladies, I’m afraid I don’t have time to hang around. I have to go drop in on my brother,” she grinned.

“Well, say hi for us,” Sandy said. “We like Kit. He’s a sweet male.”

“He is at that,” Vil agreed with a nod.

As they drove to the magazine, Vil seemed a little preoccupied, but she had this strange smile on her face. When the limo stopped outside and one of the panthers opened the door for them, she gave Jessie a smug look.

“Now watch and learn how to handle my brother,” she told her.

Jessie broke into a fit of giggling.

Jessie introduced Vil to Marty first, and all work in the office ground to a halt when Vil came back to the main office. Kit came out of his office and hugged his sister, and Jessie watched as she worked across the room, shaking paws, smiling gently, and being very gracious and feminine. She followed the siblings back to Kit's office after the introductions, and watched as Vil took something out of the bag and handed it him. "What is this?" he asked.

"The keys to your new car," she stated bluntly.

"Oh, hell no," he said immediately, pushing them back at her.

"No," she said strongly, pushing them back. "Listen to me, Kit. You *need* this car. I can't have you going around in your boss' car. If he needs it back, then you're going to be walking. And my brother is *not* going to walk."

"There's nothing wrong with my feet."

"That might be true, but—"

"There's no—"

"*Listen*," she snapped, putting her paws down on the arms of his old chair and getting nose to nose with him. "I know very well that you can walk, and I know very well that you'd rather walk than taking any charity, especially from me. But this isn't about *you*. This is about what's *necessary*. If you have an accident, what are you going to do, walk to the hospital?"

"I'll call—"

“Well, I’m sure that Jessie is going to *love* taking a bus when you go out on dates.”

He looked a little less sure of himself now.

“And what happens if she needs to go somewhere? Do you ask one of her roommates to take her, or do you take her yourself?”

Jessie almost giggled. Vil was *sneaky*! She was going to browbeat him into taking the car *before* telling him she bought one for her too, and use his need to take care of her as the main point of her argument for him taking the car!

“Well—“

“And what do you do when you need to go grocery shopping? Carry them? Buy one of those little carts I see old females toting around that has groceries in them? And let’s look at the most important thing. If something happens, if you or Jessie has an emergency, you need a way to get around quickly. No matter how normal you want to be, you do *not* live in what one might call normal circumstances. Not so long as you carry the name Vulpan. You *need* a car. There’s no two ways about it. Now, you can either scrape and save and scrimp and buy some used piece of junk that might conk out on you after two months, or you accept that I’m right, you’re just being stubborn, and take what I’ve given you because you *need* it.”

He was silent a long moment. “I don’t like it. How am I ever going to make it on my own if you’re always doing stuff like this, Vil?”

“I’m only doing what I think needs to be done,” she told him archly, poking her finger in his chest. “If you’ll notice, I didn’t stuff a check in your pocket. I bought you a car. I bought you something you *need*, and no

amount of whining about it is going to change that fact. I bought you your laptop because you *needed* it. I gave you that phone because you *needed* it. And now I'm giving you a car, because you *need* it. But no matter how much you whine, argue, complain, bitch, or moan, at the end of the day you will *take* that car, Kit. I feel you need that car for your own safety, and I'm not going to back down. So *take these keys*. Because if you don't, I'll just wear you down until you give in, and you *know* I'll do it. You talk brave over the phone, little bro, but when you're face to face with me, you know you won't win."

He glared at her, then he sighed and gave a rueful little laugh. "I take it you're not going to give in?"

"I'll clear my calendar," she threatened in a frosty voice.

He was silent a long moment. "Alright," he declared in a growl, but he did reach out and take the keys. He looked at them. "Uh, Vil. These keys aren't the same."

"That's right. The other key is to Jessie's car," she winked.

Kit gaped at her. "You sneaky bitch!" he said hotly.

Vil laughed. "You just got boonswoggled, little bro," she grinned.

"Uh, Kit, about the car. I can give it back," Jessie offered.

"No," Kit said. "What goes on between me and my sister is between us. But if she gave you a car, and you want to keep it, love, then I'd never step on your happiness. Never feel you have to ask me for permission for *anything*. You know how I feel. You know me. I know you'd never go too far, because I trust you. But Vil's right. If you have an emergency, you may

need a car. And I sure as hell would rather you have it and not need it, than have you need it and not have it.”

“Damn right,” Vil said adamantly. She snapped open her phone. “I’ll find out where it is. They should have delivered it by now.”

“What kind of car is it?”

“I got you a Pathfinder,” she told him. “It’s a stick, I know you hate automatics. I felt you might need something that can carry cargo. I bought Jessie a Corolla. It’s the perfect car for a student. It’s small and gets great gas mileage. Hello, this is Vilenne Vulpan. I want to speak to Steve Cruthers.” She tapped her foot. “Yes, this is Vilenne Vulpan. Has my Pathfinder been delivered? Where? I didn’t see it when we pulled up. Ah, very good. Thank you, Mister Cruthers. Good evening.” She closed the phone. “It should be parked just around the corner from the front door,” she told him. “Let’s go make sure it’s there.”

They followed Vil and her panther escorts out and around the corner, and there it sat. It was a charcoal gray Pathfinder, brand new, still with the stickers on the window. “There it is,” she said with a nod. “I gave you a month of insurance, baby bro, it came with the car. So’s the first year of taxes.”

“It’s in my name?”

“Yeah. I know all your vitals, so I had it put in your name.”

“Alright,” he said as they reached it. He opened it and looked inside. “How much did it cost you?”

“Some number between one and one billion,” she said dryly in reply.

“Sis,” he said threateningly.

“I’m not budging, bro,” she stated bluntly. “After the hell the family put you through, the least I can do for you is buy you something you *need*. Take it and be happy, you little ingrate,” she said with a challenging grin.

“Vil,” he sighed.

“Hey, don’t piss on my parade, baby bro,” she told him. “You’ve never let me do something for you like this. Don’t make me upset.”

“Alright, alright,” he sighed. “Thank you for getting me a car, sis. I’m not too happy about it at this moment, but I’m sure it’ll grow on me.”

She laughed. “See, that wasn’t so hard,” she grinned. “But don’t worry, bro. I know you want to make it on your own, so I’ll back off. I only bought you this because you *need* it. No more, no less.”

He came up and kissed her on the cheek. “And for that much, Vil, thank you.”

“Hey, I understand, baby bro, no matter what you think,” she winked. “Now let’s go back in. Lock up your new toy,” she reminded.

Jessie found herself being pulled along with Vil as Kit locked his new car. “That’s how you deal with him, hon,” she whispered with a conspiratorial grin. “Kit can be stubborn, so you have to nail him before he can set his feet. He’s more amenable to being swayed before you start arguing with him,” she explained. “As he argues, he rationalizes his points and gets more and more stubborn. Never let him do that. If you do, you won’t move him. Get in his face immediately and throw everything you have at him. Make your entire argument and don’t allow him to argue back. He may love you, but he still has his manners and he won’t interrupt you.

He thinks that it's rude, and he'd never be rude to someone he loves. Use that against him."

Jessie giggled. "You're a bad femme, Vil," she said with a grin.

"I know my brother, hon," she said sagely. "As long as you make sense, he'll listen to you. He's practical, so if you prove you're right, he'll change his mind. It just takes being a little dirty to get him to do it."

Jessie laughed. "Mean vixen."

"I'm not called the Ice Queen for nothing, kitty," she grinned.

They went back inside and spent over an hour with Kit's co-workers. She met with them and sat around the big center table and talked, and laughed, and got to know them. Jessie saw that Vil had a powerful effect on people, and not because she was rich and powerful. She was warm and personable, and she was very...*affable*. Jessie wasn't quite sure why they called her the Ice Queen when what she'd seen of her was very charming and charismatic...but then again, the way she'd browbeat her brother into taking the car *was* rather ruthless. Barry took Vil back to Rick's office for a few minutes, probably to interview her like he mentioned yesterday, and Kit went back to his office to finish up some work. Jessie followed him in, and sat down on a stool that he'd put in the office for visitors. A chair wouldn't fit in the cramped space. "Kit?"

"Yeah love?" he asked as he picked up a folder.

"Do you really mind about the cars?"

"I can understand Vil's argument, love, but how can I ever prove to myself that I can make it if she keeps holding my hand?" he asked simply. "But to answer your question, no, love, I don't really mind. Vil was right. I

need a car, and I'd be in a world of hurt if I wrecked Rick's car. Not only would I not have a car, I'd have to pay him for the damages, and that'd be a major problem for me. And I'll be honest here, Jess. I'm thrilled she gave *you* a car. It shows she's not just thinking about *me*."

"Well, now I can come over whenever I want," she said, leaning in and nuzzling him.

He reached over and put his paw on her cheek. "I'll have a key made for you. And I notice that Vil already thought of that."

"How?"

"She gave me a key to *your* car."

"She gave me a key to yours," Jessie giggled. "Can you teach me to drive a stick?"

"Oh, my poor clutch," he lamented. "I'll have to apologize to it in advance. Ow!" he sounded when she swatted him on the back of the head.

"I have to go, I have a meeting," Vil called from the hallway. "Come on, Jessie. I'll give you a ride."

"Do you mind, Kit? I'd like to go check out the car," she said with building excitement.

"Go have fun," he smiled. "We still having dinner, Vil?"

"You bet. I'll meet you at your house after you get off work. Can I have the key?"

"Uh, sure. Think you can swing by somewhere and make a key for Jessie?"

“And one more for me,” Vil said with a sly smile.

“No,” he said bluntly. “You’re not taking a copy of *my* house key back to Boston. That’s just begging one of our uncles to steal it.”

“If they knew what it was,” she said flippantly.

“I mean it,” Kit said in a dangerous tone.

“Alright, alright,” she sighed. “I won’t make an extra key. Just one for Jessie.”

“Thank you.” He gave her the key to his apartment, and Jessie gave him a kiss goodbye, then filed out with her after saying goodbye to the crew.

“Now then, let’s get you a key. Two, actually.”

“But you said—“

“I never break my word, Jessie,” she said calmly. “I promised him I wouldn’t make an extra key for *me*. I’m going to have one extra made for *him*. He should have a spare.”

“Ah, okay.”

“I told you hon, I look out for my baby bro. He sometimes doesn’t think of things like that. It’s one of his faults. But I love him anyway.”

Jessie laughed. “That’s true,” she agreed. “I had to help him buy his stuff for his apartment. He had no clue what to get.”

“He’ll learn,” she said simply. “My bro is smart, hon. He’ll learn, and he’ll be wiser for it. Now, let’s go finish up that meeting. I’ll need you.”

“Huh? Why?”

“I could have Kit’s car put in his name because I know all his vitals, and I can forge his signature,” she winked. “But your car will be in *your* name, and that means you have to sign some papers at the dealership so they can issue you the title.”

“Oh, okay. I guess I’ll have to get insurance for it.”

“Nope. Insurance is all taken care of. You’ve got a month of insurance through the dealership, but you’ll only need it for all of this weekend. That car is a gift, hon, and that means you never pay a dime for anything but gas. *Ever*. I’ll have the policy Fed-Exed to you by Tuesday. I’ll take care of the insurance. That car is under warranty, and I’ve also set up an account with them for all maintenance for your car. If it ever breaks down, call the dealership. They’ll fix it for free. I also want you to take it there for everything you do to a car, hon. Oil changes, tune-ups, everything. Take it back to the dealership, and it’s free. They’ll take good care of you, or I’ll come back down here, buy their dealership, then close it.”

Jessie laughed, but she saw the look on Vil’s face. “You’re *serious*!”

“You bet your tail I’m serious,” she said bluntly. “I made it abundantly clear to them that you *are very special to me*, and I don’t take kindly to people trying to cheat me in a business deal. If they ever try to charge you a dime, you call me, and I’ll eat them for breakfast.”

“Wow, now I know why they call you the Ice Queen.”

Vil laughed. “As long as you do what you promise to do, I’m as sweet as honey, Jessie. But cross me, and you’ll find out how much of a bitch I can be.”

Jessie giggled. “I won’t cross you, I promise.”

“You’re my bro’s girlfriend, hon. You can cross me,” she winked.

They went to an auto dealership called Tucker’s that was just off I-35, and Jessie and Vil were shown into the office of the owner himself. There, as the owner, an antlered buck, gushed all over Vil, Jessie signed the papers for the car. “Now, Miss Williams, Miss Vulpan has set up a special agreement with us over your car. Just bring it to us for everything, and you will be taken care of, free of charge.”

Jessie listened as the owner of the dealership explained everything that would happen in detail, about her license plates, her temporary insurance, and the special arrangement that Vil had set up. She received his personal card, and he told her to call him direct if she ever had any complaints or problems with anyone at the dealership. “Now remember to take your U.T. ID card with you when you go to pick up the license plates. With that, you don’t have to change your license over to Texas.”

“My license is already Texas.”

“Ah, well, then you have nothing to worry about,” he chuckled.

“Thank you, thank you very much,” Jessie said, a little overwhelmed. “I really appreciate it.”

“It’s no problem at all, Miss Williams. Remember, put those papers in your glove compartment as soon as you get back to your car.”

“I will.”

Vil had her panther driver take them first to get a key made for Jessie for Kit’s apartment, then he took them back to her house. She gave Jessie a hug inside the limo. “Now go play with your car,” she grinned. “I’m not

going to pick you up, hon. Just drive over to Kit's apartment and wait for us there."

"I can't thank you enough, Vil."

"Thank me? For something you *need*? It's not a bother, hon. It's a requirement. You have those keys, Stav?"

"Right here, madam," the panther said from the open door, holding up two keys.

"Take those, and give one to Kit, hon. Now go charge up that phone, and carry it with you at all times. And enjoy your car."

"Thank you, Vil!" she said happily. The panther opened the door for her, and she took the box holding the phone and all its equipment and rushed towards the door.

It was the last thing she ever expected...Vil had given her a *car*!

And what was almost as important to her...Kit had given her a key to his apartment.

Oh, the possibilities....

Chapter 6

Vil was as good as her word, which was par for course for her.

She'd bought him and Jessie new cars, she'd given Jessie a phone because she needed one, and not a single thing more.

She really did understand. She knew he wanted to make it on his own, prove both to his family and to himself that he could survive, even prosper, without the family money and the family name. She loved to mother him and to meddle, but she knew how important it was to him. She would supply him with what she felt he had to have as a matter of safety, but nothing more.

Dinner on Friday was at the Double J Steakhouse. Vil had fallen in love with their steaks, so they went back there so she could indulge herself. Kit watched Jessie most of the dinner, who seemed almost unable to sit still because of the wonderful gift that Vil had given to her. He spent most of the dinner, and the time after, catching up with Vil, and listening as Vil and Jessie got to know each other better.

Jessie was also good to her word. There *was* tomorrow. When Vil left his apartment, she remained. And she spent the night.

That was why it was so great she had her own key to the apartment and her own car. Kit had to work on Saturday, so he just left her at his apartment, and headed in when she decided to go back to sleep after he got up. She'd lock up and drive home on her own.

Saturday, Vil took them to a Broadway show playing in Austin, then Kit took them to a bar to catch a local band that Lilly said was really good.

And Jessie stayed the night on Saturday.

Sunday, Vilenne and Jessie just hung out with him in his apartment. Jessie seemed totally amazed that Vil loved to play X-Box, and what was more, she totally whipped him in the games they played. Vil certainly made all sorts of comments about his apartment and how slapdash it appeared, but she didn't offer to buy him any furniture. It was a fun day for him, having the chance to just spend a day with his sister and his girlfriend without any kind of activities or pressures. They was just being themselves.

Sunday night, they said their goodbyes. Vil was leaving first thing in the morning, and she wasn't going to roust him to see him tomorrow. She had to get back to Boston. Besides, she confided to him privately, she knew that Kit and Jessie only had one day off a week together, and Vil had taken it from them. Monday was a school holiday, so Monday was for them, not for Vil to interfere.

God, he loved that sister of his.

After Vil kissed them goodbye, they watched from the doorway as she was driven off in her limo. Kit leaned against the doorway as Jessie waved, then he reached out and took her paw. She looked back at him and smiled. "Well, hello there," she told him with a teasing smile. "Think I can stay over tonight?"

He laughed. "Do you have to ask?" They went back inside, and sat down on the couch and snuggled in contented silence, as he listened to her purr. "Haven't you missed like four calls from your mother?"

“Yes, I have,” she answered. “I’m doing it on purpose.”

“Why?”

“So I can maybe send her to the hospital when I tell her the truth.”

Kit laughed. “Don’t be mean to your mother.”

“Momzilla? She deserves it,” Jessie said with a snort. “She’ll have a cow when she finally gets me on the phone, you mark my words.”

“And what will you tell her?”

“The truth. That I’ve met a male,” she answered simply. “That we’ve been going out. And if she asks if I’ve had sex with you, I won’t deny it.”

Kit laughed. “She’ll have a stroke.”

“She’ll threaten to cut me off,” she said. “My parents are paying my tuition, and they send me money so I don’t have to work. Mark me, she’ll threaten to cut me off and make me come home. When she does that, I’ll threaten to go get a job as a stripper to pay for tuition.”

Kit’s ribs started to ache. “Oh, God, pretty kitty, you’re brutal!”

“Oh, it has a purpose, my handsome fox,” she said, looking at him with a grin, then she laid down with her head in his lap, looking up at him. “I want her to see the worst that can happen...at least in her point of view. Once she chews on that for a while, I’ll offer to bring you home to meet her.”

“Oh, so the purpose is to get me killed and buried in a shallow grave,” he teased.

“No, the purpose is to make her think there’s a consequence if she decides to go on the warpath without even *trying* to be civil to you,” she explained patiently. “I think my folks will like you, Kit, if they just give you a chance. I’ll have to step on my mother to make her give you that chance.”

“And all this time I thought you were innocent,” he laughed.

“You corrupted me,” she winked. “And I know my mother. If I don’t put a leash on her, she’ll instantly hate you, and she won’t ever let go of it, even when we get married. You won’t be my husband, you’ll be the evil male that destroyed my innocence and stole me away from her family.”

“Good God, you’re serious?”

“As a doctor,” she affirmed. “My mom is almost fanatical. She thinks that *she* will pick out my husband, so she’s sure he’s ‘right for me,’” she said, making ditto motions with both paws. “When he’ll really just be right for *her*.”

“I can’t believe she’d do that.”

“It’s more or less how she got married,” she sighed. “Though in their case, it worked out. Mom and Dad really do love each other. So Mom thinks that if it worked for her and Dad, it’ll work for her daughters.” She grunted. “Sometimes I wish I was born a male. Ben doesn’t have to put up with Momzilla like we do. She’s really nosy about his girlfriends, but she doesn’t actively try to stop him from meeting femmes like she tries to keep me and Jenny from meeting males.”

“Oh hell no,” Kit said immediately. “Don’t ever say that again.”

“Say what again?”

“That you wish you were male.”

She laughed. “I’ll never say it again, I promise,” she said with a teasing grin, reaching up and patting him on the chest. “Anyway, how would you feel about a trip to Cincinnati over Thanksgiving?”

“Hmm. Well, I’ll have to talk to Rick about it. It’ll all depend on that. But, if I can find the time off, sure. I’m willing to face Momzilla. You know I can’t say no to you, my pretty kitty.”

“Well, it’s going to be important, my handsome fox. Even if you can only swing a two day trip. We’ll have to do it.”

“Now that I think we can do. I can always borrow the money from Vil for some airline tickets, and we can fly up on Sunday and fly back on Monday.”

“Well, that would be you. My folks always have me fly back for Thanksgiving. I’ll be there the whole break. They usually make me stay for winter break too, but I’m going to stay here and just fly back on Christmas. Would you like to come for Christmas too? I don’t think you’ll be going to Boston.”

“No, I won’t be,” he assured her. “And we can always drive up for Christmas. It’s cheaper than flying.”

“Hmm, eighteen hours in a car with you? However will I stand it,” she said with a teasing smile.

“I’m sure you’ll find a way to tolerate it,” he said dryly.

She laughed. “So, you’re okay with it?”

“You told me that facing Momzilla was a condition for marriage. So, let’s get that out of the way.”

Her eyes softened. “What a sweet thing to say,” she said in a purring voice.

“I’m just hoping I’m still going in the right direction to hear the answer I want to hear,” he teased, tapping her on the nose.

She gave him a sultry look. “Well, your chances are beginning to slide. I think it’s because you’re ignoring some of my demands,” she told him.

“Oh, I’ll have to do something about that, I suppose.”

The good mood didn’t last much into Monday, though. Jessie stayed over again on Sunday night, and at least that part was quite nice and enjoyable. Having her around the house made him feel very happy, and not just because he loved to look at her and to touch her...it was just because she was *there*. She cooked breakfast, he washed up what dishes they had, then they went to go buy some real dishes and silverware. She picked them out, going for the cheapest sets that didn’t look terrible.

It was in the checkout line that the day started to go south.

“Oh. My. *God*,” Jessie gasped, blushing so hard almost all the fur on her entire body was ruffled, and her tail looked like a pipe cleaner.

He looked at her. She’d pulled a copy of the *National Enquirer* out of the rack by the register and was leafing through it as the bear at the checkout counter rang up his purchase.

“What?” he asked, looking at her. She turned and held out the paper, opened to an inside page, where there were many pictures of various furs, most of them clearly taken from a distance or in poor quality, paparazzi photographs of unsuspecting celebrities.

There, in a small picture just under George Clooney, was Kit and Jessie, kissing outside her sorority house. She was dressed in the clothes she wore from their first date, when he took her to the park. God damn it! Someone must have followed them, taken pictures, and sold them to the tabloids!

There was a story as well, a short little paragraph mixed in with other such small bits of dirt on other people whose pictures appeared on the page along with theirs:

Kitstrom Vulpan III, rebel of the Vulpan family, has been spotted over six months after he nearly started a fight during the funeral of his father, Kitstrom Vulpan Junior. The details of what happened during the funeral are still secret, but whatever the circumstances were, they caused the renegade Vulpan to disappear after the funeral.

Further attempts to identify the unknown femme kissing him have been met with resistance from the Vulpan family, who aggressively deny any knowledge of their rebel son and any relationship he might have with the femme.

He gave her a stricken look. “Jessie, I’m sorry—“

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” she told him. “When I told you I wasn’t afraid of your family, I knew this might happen. I knew this might happen, Kit. Your family *is* famous, my handsome fox, and no matter how much we try to run away from it, it won’t change. I just wish they could have gotten a more, well, *dignified* picture. Not one with me hanging all over you like a wanton tramp. If my mother sees that picture, she might have a heart attack.” She gave him a slight smile. “Let’s buy this. We can cut the picture out and put it in a scrapbook.”

“Well, my pretty kitty, the cat’s out of the bag now,” he said in a grim tone as he paid for the dishes and the silverware, and started pushing the cart out. He noticed that the bear went immediately to another copy of the magazine that Jessie had bought. “There’s no doubt that my family knows by now. They keep an eye on the tabloids.”

“Let them know,” she breathed in his ear. “I’m ready for them. But the question is, are you ready for *my* family?”

He chuckled. “I think I can handle it.”

“Well, I guess this is one of the things Vil thought might happen when she arranged for those security people.”

“Excuse me?”

“Vil told me she hired a security company, uh, Vanguard I think it’s called, to kinda lurk in the background in case your family starts trouble for us,” she explained. “She said they weren’t supposed to follow us around or anything like that, but they are supposed to be here to play defense in case your family does anything. I guess they’d probably go after paparazzi too, if we told her they’re harassing us. She also told me if I call them, they’ll come help me if I ever feel afraid or anything. Almost like having my little

brother Ben around to make me feel safe. I guess if I start getting followed around by cameras, I can call them and have them come help me.”

Kit turned that over in his mind. It was her meddling, there was no doubt about that, but in this case, he was *very glad* she decided to take that step. Vil was very protective over him, but she knew he knew how to handle things like that. But Jessie might not, and if she could call security to come help her or chase them away, then that was just fine with him.

He meant it when said that what Vil did for Jessie was just fine with him.

“Well, I’m glad Vil was thinking ahead,” he said honestly, using his keychain remote to unlock the Pathfinder, and opening the back door to put in the new dishes.

The tabloid embarrassed Jessie, but it unnerved him a little bit. He was quiet and contemplative as he drove back to his apartment, and unpacked the new dishes and silverware and decided where to put them while she read the material she was assigned for homework, thinking it over. Just saying that he was ready for his family to know was fine, but he wasn’t quite sure he liked the idea of the *public* getting in on the act. He was kinda used to tabloids and paparazzi from his time as a Vulpan, and then after, when the story broke he’d been disowned and they circled him like vultures, watching him, waiting for him to crash and burn and being there to take pictures of it all. In a way, he guess that really pissed them off, for Vil had made sure that he didn’t end up in a hospital or in jail, taking care of him when he was unable to take care of himself. The tabloids had a field day with it, but then the story faded into memory as time went on and it became disappointingly clear that Kit Vulpan was not going to become a juicy news story. The only real issues he’d had with the press after his being

disowned and getting settled into a new life was when he was hit by the car. That was news, and then it erupted into a scandal for the Vulpan family when the press got wind that Kit had no way to pay for his hospital bills. One of the richest families in America refusing to pay for one of their own after he was nearly killed...the negative press was so damning to the Vulpan reputation that his bastard father had relented and allowed *Vil* to pay for his hospital bills. He wouldn't even do it himself, and he made Vil take that money out of her own trust fund.

That, he had to admit, had been about the only time that the public attention had ever really helped.

It almost made him afraid to open the door to his own apartment. Would there be a swarm of cameras out there, waiting for him? How many people in Austin had seen it, and would piece together that he worked at the magazine? Was the magazine going to be harassed? Would his friends get hassled because of him? Was it going to be like Boston all over again, where people would follow him around, peeking in his windows? He hoped not.

But one thing was for sure. He was calling ADT or some other alarm company first thing Tuesday. He wanted some kind of alarm on his apartment.

He sat down on the couch beside her, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his paws under his chin, deep in thought. He was a little startled when Jessie put her paw on his shoulder, then pulled him to lean back on the couch, then wormed her way into his arms, nuzzling his neck. "It's going to be fine, my handsome fox," she told him gently. "I'll protect you."

He chuckled. "My well-armed pretty kitty, I'd like to see that," he teased.

She raised her paw, and showed him those small yet razor-sharp claws, which made him laugh. "I guess I'm just worried. I never really considered the possibility that the tabloids would care about me. It's not really *news* that I'm living a normal life, ya know?"

"It is when it's a Vulpan doing it," she answered, looking at him with a grin.

"Well, I'm just hoping they'll forget all about it when they realize that I'm not glamorous. The only thing I have going for me they might want to take pictures of is *you*, my pretty kitty."

"Aww, such a sweet thing to say."

"Well, they're not taking pictures of me for my looks, that's for sure," he noted.

She laughed. "You're the most handsome male I've ever seen, mister," she told him, poking a finger in his chest. "Don't sell yourself short."

"As long as you find me handsome, that's all that matters," he told her. "Does it bother you?"

"It does, but it's worth it," she answered honestly. "I'm a very private person, my handsome fox. You know that. So the idea that a picture of me trying to taste your tonsils is plastered in a national tabloid is rather disturbing."

He almost collapsed in helpless laughter.

“But it’s worth the embarrassment, because it means I’m still with you,” she told him when he recovered. “I don’t care about all the press. If that’s baggage I have to lug around as part and parcel of being your girlfriend, then so be it. I’ll do it.”

“I’m honored you’d do so much for me.”

“I think I’ve done a little bit more than that for you,” she said with an arch little smile.

He laughed. “Well, don’t make it sound like it was a chore now.”

She giggled. “Only for you, because of this back,” she teased, reaching behind him and putting both paws on his lower back, over his scars. “I think I’m going to take some massage lessons,” she mused. “So I can fix in the morning what I broke the night before.”

“I won’t complain. I think you do a good job as it is. As of right now, I’m just glad you’re not cutting your initials into me anymore.”

She laughed, her cheeks ruffling out. “I’m getting better.”

“You are at that,” he said in a husky manner, nuzzling her neck. “What do you want for dinner?”

“Why do you care, I’m the one cooking,” she teased. “I should be asking you that.”

“I can cook!” he protested. “You forget, ma’am, I’ve worked in my share of restaurants. I know my way around a kitchen!”

“Only if you don’t have to stock it,” she teased.

“Ya ya ya, bite me,” he shot back. “Ow!” he gasped when she leaned in and did just that, clamping her sharp canines into the side of his neck, just

hard enough for him to feel it but not hard enough to draw blood, which made him jump. He laughed helplessly. “So, it’s my turn to cook for you.”

“It won’t be exotic, will it?”

“I can do exotic, and I can do hamburgers,” he chuckled.

“Well, I was thinking of Italian.”

“Ooo, a kitty after my own heart,” he chuckled. “Lasagna?”

“You know how to make lasagna?”

“Didn’t I just offer to make it?”

“So, who makes it for you? Hungry Fur? Banquet? Betty Crocker?”

He laughed. “I do, you goofy kitty,” he answered. “I’ll have to go buy what I need for it, though. Wanna come?”

“I think I need to get this homework going here, love,” she said regretfully. “Do you mind?”

“Of course not. I’ll go get it and get it started. Hold down the fort.”

Much to her surprise, he *did* know how to cook, because he had a cookbook and he wasn’t afraid to use it. It had been in the books that Vil had sent him, the stuff from his old apartment. Kit wasn’t a gourmet chef by any means, but he could follow the directions in a cookbook, and preparing lasagna actually wasn’t that hard as far as the actual preparation went. The hardest part was layering it into the brand new baking dish he’d had to buy along with the ingredients. “And there we are,” he announced. “Now we just sit here and smell it cooking and not go crazy.”

She laughed. “Oh, I know all about that. I’m the only femme that really knows how to cook at the house, and I get these vultures hanging around the kitchen when I’m doing it,” she told him. “They eat TV dinners while I cook chicken casserole,” she giggled. “I’ve been teaching Sam and Sandy, and they’re getting the hang of it.”

“Your mom teach you?”

“Yeah, but my dad’s actually a better cook than my mom,” she said. “He likes to cook, but mom thinks that’s *her* job, so he doesn’t get the chance to do it often. Only when mom’s feeling really tired or he wants to pamper her. It’s not a big shock, is it,” she chuckled. “My mom’s been teaching me and Jenny how to cook since we could walk.”

“I didn’t even know what a kitchen looked like until I was twelve,” he told her. “I think the first time I ever cooked anything was when I was sixteen. Suzy had to send her cook over to teach me,” he said distantly, remembering. God did that femme save his butt.

Suzy was Vil’s best friend. She was a fox too, but she wasn’t in the same social class as the Vulpans, so his father had never really considered her as potential for a wife. Suzy’s family was *new money*, her father Jack had built a fortune in the electronics business. He was the founder of Yankee Bytes, a chain of computer and electronic stores in the northeast. But, she’d had something of a crush on Kit, so she was more than willing to help out. Suzy and Vil had quite a conspiracy going, as Vil funneled money to Suzy to help pay for Kit’s living expenses. Suzy was the femme who had taken Kit’s virginity, back when he was fourteen and she was sixteen...in an office in the Boston Oaks Country Club. To this day, Kit had very erotic memories of overstuffed leather sofas.

“So you were trained?”

“I was trained how not to blow up the kitchen,” he said. “Actually, the main thing Vince taught me was how to read a cookbook and follow the directions.”

“Smart. At least that way you could teach yourself new recipes.”

“Yup. I learned how to cook what I like to eat, and since I’m not too picky, I’ve never worried much about taste.”

“That’s an odd thing for a rich kid to say,” she grinned.

“Oh believe me, rich people food is *not* anything to brag about,” he snorted. “It has to be exotic to impress, and made to look like the freakin’ Mona Lisa on your plate. I think I ate every possible edible plant and animal on Earth before I was ten, when all I wanted was hot dogs and french fries.”

“Well, you’ve had a chance to try lots of different things.”

“Yeah, but I got to eat it again about five months later,” he told her.

“Ouch.”

“Yeah. Trust me, pretty kitty, when you’re a rich kid, it’s *nowhere near* as much fun as most people think it is. Sure, you have toys and servants, but most people don’t see the training and the work. Not many seven year olds are put in front of a table for two hours a day to be taught how to eat properly. Trust me, I busted my butt for all the perks that comes with being rich.”

She leaned against the counter. “You’ve seen both worlds, my handsome fox. Answer me honestly. Which world would you rather be in?”

“Honestly? Right here,” he said immediately. “Money is a curse, my pretty kitty. It’s a curse. I saw it consume my father and turn my family against itself. If a lawyer came down here right now and handed me a check for the entire Vulpan fortune, I’d tear it up.”

“But think of what you could do with it.”

“Yeah, and I also think of what it did to my father. I never want to be like that. I never want to be so obsessed with money that I abandon my own children.”

“I’ve never had money,” she mused. “Well, my folks make a good living and I’ve never really gone without, but I’ve never had the money to do anything I wanted.”

“Most people think if they make enough money, they’ll be free,” he told her. “In reality, you just trade one set of legchains for another. I became free when I gave it all up.”

“Well, I’m not going to complain. It brought you to Austin,” she smiled.

“You want to know what real treasure is, my pretty kitty? It’s right here,” he said, putting his paws on her waist. “You’re worth more than my entire family put together, because true treasure is that which you value the most. To some, treasure is money or gold. To me, it’s *you*.”

Her eyes softened, and she gave him a glorious smile. “You’re such a sweet male,” she said, looping her arms over his shoulders and kissing him.

Kit helped her work through her homework by allowing her to type up an essay on his laptop, then emailing it to her school account. She surfed the internet while waiting for the lasagna to cook, and Kit made a salad to go

with it, then sat down on the couch and practiced with the guitar Rick gave him. His guitar books were among the books in the stuff Vil sent him from his apartment, so he had it open before him, practicing the chords as they appeared in the book he'd been using before he graduated. He was terribly rusty, only managing to get about halfway through material he'd already learned before without making a mistake. The only reason he'd managed to play *Tears In Heaven* without any mistakes was because it was one of his favorite songs, and one of only about five he'd learned by heart.

"I think it's cool you're learning that," Jessie told him from the TV tray and lawn chair that served as his living room computer desk. "I never learned an instrument. Then again, I never really wanted to, to be honest about it. I'm not that good at music, and I was way too shy to ever think of playing in public."

"You can learn and never play for anyone but yourself," Kit chuckled. "I'm certainly not learning this to make it as a rock star."

"Well, cats don't do well with stringed instruments," she said with a smile.

He laughed. "Gee, I wonder why," he said dryly.

The lasagna turned out pretty well...or at least Jessie seemed to enjoy it. *Really* enjoy it. She was the fastest eater he'd ever seen, but on the other paw, she ate small portions, and there wasn't even an ounce of fat anywhere on her it shouldn't be. She didn't say a word until she was done with both her lasagna and the salad, then she got up and kissed him on the forehead. "That was *wonderful*," she told him. "I think I'm going to like this arrangement."

"What arrangement?"

“A male that can cook food I like to eat when I don’t feel like cooking,” she told him as she washed off her plate.

“I live to serve, my pretty kitty,” he chuckled. “I think there’s a yogurt cup left in the fridge if you want dessert.”

“Now I get to watch you eat,” she laughed.

“I was trained to eat slow,” he shrugged.

“You never had to compete with a brother and a sister,” Jessie giggled. “When there’s two chicken legs and three kids who want it, someone’s gonna miss out. Besides, the last kid at the table usually ended up getting roped into doing the dishes.”

Kit laughed. “Ah, that explains it.”

Jessie’s phone rang. She went over to her purse and dug it out, and Kit went back to his dinner. “She did *what*?” Jessie demanded. “No, no, it’s ok Danny. Did he leave, or does he—okay. Hello? No, officer, I’m fine,” she said in a calm voice. “I’ve been staying at a friend’s house, that’s all, and I kinda told my friends not to tell her I’ve been out, because I didn’t feel like having an argument.”

Officer? Kit put his fork down and paid attention.

“No sir, it’s okay. My mom is kinda...protective.” She laughed nervously. “Well, that is one way to say it. It’s not a bother, really. Thank you for understanding. Yes, I’ll call her right now. No, I don’t need to talk to Danny—Danielle. Thank you very much sir. I will. Goodbye.” She closed the phone, then actually *screamed*! “My mother *called the cops*!” she said fiercely. “Because I haven’t been at home all weekend!”

“Holy cow,” Kit breathed. She wasn’t kidding about her mother, not a bit!

“I need to call her, my handsome fox, and this will *not* be a pretty call. I should go home.”

“No, you don’t need an audience, and you’ll have one if you do it at the house. Do it here, where you’re alone. I’ll go down to the store and get some things I need. You call me when it’s safe to come back.”

The look she gave him was one of the most profoundly grateful looks he’d ever seen in his life.

“First, my pretty kitty, use *my* phone. If your parents have caller ID, they’ll have your number. Trade me phones.” She did so, handing him her phone, and he fished his phone out of his pocket and gave it to her.

“Second, don’t scream too loud. I’m not sure how thick the walls are around here. You might be entertaining my next door neighbor.” He kissed her on the cheek. “You’re on my speed-dial hon. Just be strong.”

“I love you, Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan,” she told him sincerely.

“And I love you, Jessica Desdemona Williams,” he smiled.

Kit left her to what was clearly going to be a very ugly business. He knew she was going to be terribly upset when she called him, so he first went down to IGE, the closest supermarket, and bought a bottle of red wine, some tissues, and a large box of chocolates and a bouquet of flowers. When she was finished with that ugly business, she was going to be very upset and hurt, and he wanted to minimize her pain as much as possible. After he had everything he needed, he went down to The Pit, since it was only about a mile away, and basicly nursed a single daquiri for over an hour as he waited

in grim silence. He didn't have to imagine what might be sizzling over that phone between them, because he'd had his own share of nasty words with his father. There wasn't anything Jessie could think to say to her mother that Kit hadn't screamed at his father. He knew how he'd felt after those shouting matches...angry, infuriated, disrespected, but also very hurt and very vulnerable, feeling like he'd eroded away one of the foundations upon which his life had been set, even if it was a bad one. That was the curse of fights like that with a loved one...driving the dagger into them sank it just as deep into your own heart.

His phone rang. He sighed and opened it. "Pretty kitty?"

"Come home," she said in a small voice, raw and trembling.

"I'll be right there."

He left the chocolates and wine in the car, and went in with the flowers and the tissues. She was standing near the table when he came in, and when she looked at him, it was painfully evident she'd been crying. She ran across the room and collapsed against him, crying uncontrollably. All he could do was wrap his arms around her and hold her close, rocking her back and forth.

It took her a long time to cry herself out. He sat with her on the couch, holding her, stroking her hair, comforting her as she worked through it, until she settled in heavy silence against him, her head buried in his shoulder. She took in a ragged breath. "Thank you," she said in a weak, weary voice. "The flowers were very thoughtful."

"I have some chocolates out in the car," he told her. "And a bottle of wine."

“Getting drunk right now sounds like a great idea,” she said in a breaking voice.

“No, getting drunk is *not* a good idea right now,” he told her gently yet firmly. “Don’t drink your problems away, pretty kitty. I’ve seen what happens to those who do. It’s a road best never putting a single foot on.” He squeezed her gently. “But, a glass of wine does help take the edge off of it. Would you like one?”

“Please,” she sniffled.

She wiped at her face and took the opportunity to blow her nose while he retrieved the wine and chocolates. He poured her a little more than he’d usually put in a femme’s glass, poured a glass of equal size for himself, and returned to the couch. “Gently now, my pretty kitty,” he said as she reached for it with a trembling paw. Kit watched with a little dismay as she drained nearly half of it with one swallow. She held it close to her mouth, then finished the rest of the glass with a second. Then she put the glass on the coffee table and reached for his. He considered holding it away from her, but the last thing she needed right now was someone *else* telling her what to do. She was 21, she was an adult. If she wanted to get drunk, he wasn’t going to stop her. He’d just make sure she didn’t hurt herself while inebriated. He let her have it, and watched her empty his glass as well.

Given how much she’d just drank, she’d be in no condition to drive in about ten minutes. She was so light, that alcohol would hit her like a hammer.

“Give me your keys,” he stated immediately.

“They’re in my purse,” she said weakly. “But I’m not going home tonight. I don’t want to be alone.”

“You’re welcome to stay with me any time, my pretty kitty. Any time. Do you feel like talking about it?”

“She said she was going to cut me off,” she told him.

“Did you tell her about us?”

“I did,” she said, gripping his shirt in her paws. “She made me angry, and I just threw it in her face. I even told her we were sleeping together.”

Kit winced. It was one of *those* fights.

“Why won’t she treat me like an adult?” she asked in a plaintive voice.

Kit sighed. “Sometimes, pretty kitty, you can just never answer some questions. That’s one I don’t think I can answer.”

“I’m afraid, Kit,” she said in a small voice, almost trembling. “If she cuts me off, I might have to go home.”

“Or become a stripper,” he said with dark humor.

She actually laughed a little. “I guess I should go fill out some applications.”

“That’s my kitty,” he told her with a lighter voice. If you make a joke out of it, it doesn’t seem so bad. But don’t you worry about it, love. Your semester’s already paid for, and I won’t let you starve. How’d you like to have a sugar daddy?”

She looked up at him. “Kit, you can’t afford—“

“I can very much afford to feed and take care of my femme,” he told her strongly. “I have almost everything I need now, Jess. From here out, my

pay is just for living. I can easily support both of us for the rest of the semester.”

“I can get a job,” she told him, her expression looking less bleak. “I can help.”

“No, you don’t,” he told her. “School is your time, my love. I’ve graduated, let me do the working.”

“But what about next semester? My scholarship doesn’t cover all of my tuition.”

“Let’s worry about next semester when it gets here. So, rest easy, my pretty kitty. If you want to stay here, I’ll do everything in my power to make it happen. Even,” he sighed, “even if I have to call Vil.”

She gave him a wan smile. “You’d do that for me?”

“I’d do *anything* for you, my love,” he told her immediately and adamantly. “Even if I have to go to Vil.”

She gave out a sigh and put her head on his chest. “Thank you,” she told him. “I know what that means to you.”

“So maybe now you know what you mean to me.”

Her eyes almost seemed to melt. She leaned in and kissed him tenderly. He waved his paw between them when she pulled away. “You’re gonna be lit up in about fifteen minutes, judging from that,” he said with a gentle smile. “I think we’d better get you settled in before you start dancing on the coffee table.”

“I would, for you.”

“Well, maybe some day when I’m not afraid you’ll fall off,” he told her, gathering her up in his arms and standing up.

“Where are we going?”

“Back to the bedroom. I think you need to rest a little bit.”

“I don’t want to be alone.”

“I’ll be right there until you fall asleep. And that’s exactly what you need right now, my sweet, pretty kitty,” he told her, kissing her on the cheek. “A nap does wonders. Things won’t seem quite so bad when you wake up.”

“I don’t want to sleep.”

“Then we’ll lay there.”

Despite her declaration, she didn’t stay awake long. He laid with her in his arms, a calming, reassuring presence, and the emotional exhaustion from the fight, combined with the wine, lulled her into a calming nap. He disengaged himself from her carefully, tucking her in, then he kissed her on the forehead.

He’d had his own share of what she was feeling now. Sleep was always the best prescription.

Back in the living room, he sat down on the couch and blew out his breath. Poor Jessie. But this was a reckoning that he figured was inevitable. Eventually, Jessie and her mother was going to have this argument...Jessie actually told him that it was coming. But Jessie wasn’t as ready for it as she thought, and her mother calling the police to find her had broken the dam of indignation in her and caused her to go off on her mother.

But, things would be alright. Kit had offered her a way out, a way to feel like her mother didn't have her trapped into a situation where she had no control. She'd feel much better, and would engage in her next argument with her mother from a position of strength. The threat of losing not just her power, but her relationship with her daughter should snap her mother right into line. Because if Jessie didn't *need* her mother, then her mother had better watch her step for fear of driving her daughter away.

His phone started vibrating across the coffee table. He figured it was either Rick, Vil, or Jessie's mother, calling back to continue the argument. He picked it up and read the number on the display. It was out of state and not Massachusetts.

He spent an entire ring debating, then opened the phone. "Hello," he called.

"Who is this?" came a mild male voice.

"My name is Kit Vulpan," he said evenly. "And you must be John Williams. She called you using my phone," he said quickly, before he asked the question that had to be on his mind.

"Ah. Is she available?"

"No. I put her down for a nap. She was very, very upset."

He actually laughed. "I'd never think to hear someone say that about my daughter," he said. "Is she alright?"

"She will be, after some sleep. I don't know what was said, but she was barely coherent when I came back. It took a whole lot of holding and a glass of wine to calm her down."

“Oh dear,” he sighed. “Well, first off, allow me to apologize for visiting another’s problems on your door.”

Kit was a bit surprised. It seemed her father wasn’t anything like her mother.

“But given these, unusual, circumstances, I would ask that you return my daughter to her house at once.”

Nope...spoke too soon.

“She asked to stay, so I’m letting her stay,” Kit said evenly. “She’s twenty-one years old, Mister Williams. She’s an adult. I’m not going to send her packing home like a child because her father said so. It’s her decision to stay, and so she will stay.”

“I would gather to make note that since you will not produce my daughter, that is a claim you cannot make in good faith.”

Ohhh, this one got *formal* when he was angry. Kit could hear it rippling behind his voice.

“Then I’m afraid you’re going to have to take it on faith. But as soon as she wakes up, I’ll be happy to have her call you.”

“That is unacceptable. She must return home at once.”

“Might I point out, sir, that you’re in no position to make demands. Jessie is asleep, it’s sleep she needs, and I will not send her home. And there’s little you can do about that, so it’s best to simply concede the matter now so we can move on to all those questions I’m sure your wife is hissing at you to relay right now.”

There was a startled silence. “Well, you’re a very perceptive male, I’ll give you that,” he acceded.

“Very well. Now, since I have your attention, let me make things very clear. Jessie is very special to me. I love her. I love her a great deal. And no matter what you or your wife says or does, you are not going to stop us from seeing each other. That’s a point you’d better just take off the table right now.”

“Ohh, little boy, you had better *believe* that she is going to stop seeing you!” a female voice cut in, probably from another phone.

“Or what? Or you’ll cut off her money and starve her until she comes home? That’s a pretty nasty way to get your way, isn’t it?”

“You have no right—“

“I have *every* right, madam,” he snapped quickly, cutting her off. “The one that has no right is *you*. She’s an *adult*. She is twenty-one years old. She has the right to live her own life, in the manner she pleases.”

“Not while we pay for her college she *does not!*” the woman said hotly.

“Fine. Cut her off,” Kit said calmly. “I’m not in college, Misses Williams. I graduated six months ago. I already have a job, and I make a comfortable salary. I can easily support her *and* pay her tuition. If you cut her off, then I will pay for her school and her living expenses. So go ahead and threaten to starve her into obeying you. You’ll find it to be a hollow threat.”

To call it a stunned silence was a *gross* understatement.

“Perhaps now you start seeing the big picture?” he asked evenly. “I would *very carefully* consider what you say to her the next time you talk to her, Misses Williams. If you make her too angry, she’ll have nothing to do with you. And she won’t *need* you.”

The threat of that hung like a heavy blanket over the phone. He could hear two sets of breathing over there, no doubt each of them on a different phone. He heard one of those phones over there hang up, and he wondered a moment which one of them had done so.

“Is she living with you, Mister Vulpan?” the father asked calmly.

“No. She lives at the sorority house. She’s just been coming over during the holiday weekend. My sister was in town, and I wanted them to meet.”

“I see. What do you do?”

“I work for a magazine,” he answered.

“I fail to see how a reporter can afford to pay my daughter through college.”

“Do you happen to have a computer handy, Mister Williams?” he asked. Perhaps it was time to kill two birds with one stone. They deserved to know the truth of him, and that truth would back up his claim quite effectively.

“Why yes.”

“Then go to any search engine and look up my name. Kitstrom Vulpan.”

“And what does this prove?”

“That I can pay your daughter’s way through college,” he said simply. “Let’s make that clear right now.”

There was a brief silence. “Kitstrom...Vulpan,” he hummed aloud, then there was silence.

And silence.

And more silence.

“You cannot possibly be one of *those* Vulpans!”

“Afraid so,” he said, a little regretfully. “That’s me. Right eye green, half of my left ear missing. If that’s not enough proof, then go to the website of my magazine. Lone star magazine, all one word, dot com. You’ll see a picture of me in the staff section, and there’s a picture of me and Jessie in the photo gallery, so you can see us together and you can’t possibly deny it. Compare those pictures to all those other pictures of me floating around on the internet, then come back and call me a liar. Now, while you’re doing that, let me explain something. See, I’ve been disowned. That’s why I never had my ear fixed. Honestly, I can’t afford it, and I refuse to take any money from my family. But you see, my sister still loves me, and she’ll do me a favor. Her name is Vil. Vilenne Vulpan, the CEO of Vulpan Shipyards. You can look that up while you’re at it,” he said easily, leaning back on the couch. “Now, usually I stay away from my family. We had a very nasty falling out, which is why I’m disowned. But my sister keeps in touch with me, and she owes me a favor. If I asked it of her, she’d pay for Jessie’s college. To Vil, paying two years of tuition at U.T. is little more than petty cash,” he stated, deciding to rub it in a little harder. “I’ll never take a dime from my family, Mister Williams. As far as I’m concerned, all of them but my sister can rot in hell. But where your

daughter is concerned, I'll do anything to make her happy. I'll swallow my pride and I'll beg my sister for a favor. I won't take a dime from my sister, Mister Williams, but I'd be more than willing to beg my sister to give *Jessie* the money to pay for school. And my sister would do it."

He let Jessie's father chew on that for a second. "I'm not a rich man, Mister Williams. I'm what you'd call lower middle class. I have no money from my family, and I don't want it. I broke from them six years ago, when I was sixteen. But, my sister sympathized with me over what happened in my family, so she'll do me this favor. Vil will pay for your daughter's college, and I'll work two jobs if I have to in order to make sure she has the money she needs to live on."

"You'd do all this?"

"In a heartbeat," he said instantly. "I love your daughter, Mister Williams. I'll crawl to hell and back carrying the Rock of Gibraltar for her."

"That is...quite an emphatic declaration."

"It's truth. As soon as I have enough money saved up, I intend to propose to her. *That* is how seriously I take this, Mister Williams. *That* is how far I'm willing to go for her. And she fully knows how I feel about her, and I can only hope she loves me even half as much as I love her. And now that you know this, maybe that will help you understand why Jessie got so angry with her mother earlier."

"She's never mentioned any of this," he breathed, mainly to himself.

"And why does that surprise you, Mister Williams? Your wife rides Jessie relentlessly, and Jessie's told me that her mother didn't want her to have anything to do with males. She calls almost every other day to check

on her, and if she's not home to answer the phone, your wife has a conniption."

"She's only worried about Jessica."

"There's a big difference between being worried and being obsessed," Kit said bluntly. "If *you* were still in college, would *you* like it if your mother called after you every other day, and called the police to find you when you didn't answer the phone?"

"Well, no."

"Then why are you putting your daughter through something you wouldn't tolerate yourself?"

"Well, because she is a very innocent young lady and it's a parent's right to be worried."

"You have to let her go eventually," Kit noted. "She's twenty-one, Mister Williams. She's an *adult*. She can walk into any bar and order anything she wants. Take it from someone who came from a broken family, Mister Williams, your wife is doing a fantastic job of pushing Jessie away. And if you don't get your wife to back off, you see what's going to happen."

He sighed. "Yes, I can see it," he admitted. "I would never have believed it, but given that I could hear Jessica screaming over the phone, I can see what might happen."

"Pardon my observation, but this fight was inevitable," he said. "Any child would resent what your wife was doing to Jessie."

“I suppose so,” he sighed. “And I must admit, you’re rather surprising, Mister Vulpan, facing down the angry parents of your...girlfriend.”

“Thank you for conceding that point, sir,” he said with sincere respect.

“Please, call me John,” he said, his voice less hostile, more curious and conversational. “What kind of magazine do you work for?”

Kit and Jessie’s father talked for nearly an hour, as he quietly probed Kit’s life to get a better understanding of this male that was courting his daughter. Kit could tell that John was quite intelligent, and wasn’t quite as fanatical as Jessie’s mother. He’d seen to the heart of the matter quickly, and now he was gathering information, most likely to use it against Jessie’s mother. And he reciprocated. He was an English professor tenured at the University of Cincinnati, whose subject of expertise was Renaissance literature, specifically Shakespeare. He enjoyed to cook, and he was also an avid sport shooter, which surprised Kit. He seemed too mild-mannered to talk about guns, and know what he was talking about. But he wasn’t a hunter, he just enjoyed target shooting and skeet shooting. From John, Kit learned more about Jessie’s family. Jessie’s younger sister Jenny was going to Ohio State, majoring in nursing, and her younger brother Ben was still in high school, where he was a football player and would possibly be courted to play football in college on scholarship.

So, that explained all those times Jessie said she’d have Ben come down and beat someone up.

He glanced up and saw Jessie. She was standing in the hallway leading back to the bedrooms, and she looked a little bleary. He held his paw out to her, and she came over and sat down, immediately curling up with him. “Your daughter is awake now, John,” he said.

She gave him a strangled look.

“It’s alright, my pretty kitty,” he chuckled. “Hold on, sir.” He held the phone out to her.

“Uh, D-Dad?” she said tentatively. “No, I’m alright. I feel a little light-headed, though. No, Kit had wine here, and I drank some to calm down. Kit already took my keys.”

Kit heard the loud voice clearly. “Keys to *what?*”

“Go ahead and tell him. I already told him who I am,” Kit told her.

She nodded, then looked down towards knees. “Umm, Kit’s sister came to see him this weekend, and, uh, she gave me a car. Yes, Dad, a *car*. It’s a Corolla. She said it would be good for a student. Yes, I think it was nice of her too. Yes, Dad, I thanked her,” she sighed, and was silent a long moment as Kit heard the mumbled voice of her father. “Yes, Dad, he did,” she finally answered. “I’m not too happy about the idea of him going so far out of his way for me, especially having to crawl back to his family, but I do think it’s sweet of him. Yes, Dad. Yes, Dad,” she said, with a little exasperation. “Honestly? I want to stay here. This is Kit’s home, and I want to be near him. If I have to get a job to help pay my way through school, then that’s what I’ll do.” Her cheeks ruffled. “Well, I feel the same way, Dad. I love him.”

Kit squeezed her a little bit at that declaration, which made her giggle. “Nothing, Kit’s just being a little silly, that’s all.” She sighed. “No, I don’t want to talk to Mom. I’m still mad at her. No, Dad. No, I’ll be fine. Kit will take care of me. He even knows how to cook,” she said in a warm voice. “Dad, I’m going to go. We’ll talk about this tomorrow, okay? Okay. Okay, I’ll tell him. Love you too, Dad. Bye-bye.”

She closed the phone. He took it and put it on the couch beside them, then wrapped both arms around her. “What did he say?”

“That he has your phone number now, so you’d better behave,” she told him.

He chuckled. “Well, I think everything’s gonna work out, my pretty kitty. I laid down the law on your mom.”

“What did you do?”

“I told her who I was, who my family was, then told her that I’d pay to keep you here if she cuts you off, so she’d better start treating you like an adult instead of a little girl, because you wouldn’t be dependent on her anymore. She hung up on me right about then.”

“That’s Mom, alright,” she sighed. “I’m sorry they called you, Kit. You didn’t have to get involved.”

“I didn’t mind at all, Jess. Those are my future in-laws, after all. If I don’t deal with them now, when am I going to start? I’m a big fox now, hon. I can take it.” He gave her a little squeeze. “I wish they had a webcam. I would have paid money when they found out I’m a *Vulpan*.”

She giggled. “You know, that might actually help,” she said, looking up at him with a little smile. “If anything, Mom can say I landed a rich husband.”

“I told them I was disowned. I told them the truth, hon. They deserve to know.”

“Ah, well, it was a good idea.” She put her head on his shoulder and chest, and sighed. “And it was such a good day, too. You even cooked for

me.”

“Any day with you is a good day, my pretty kitty,” he told her gently.

He held her for a long time, time passed in weighty silence. Kit kept pondering how her parents were going to react, how it was all going to play out, but no matter what, he wasn’t going to lose her. He’d make sure she stayed in Austin, that she got her degree, even if he had to ask Vil to make it happen. Whatever made her happy.

He was going to marry her, after all. So her happiness was the only thing that mattered to him.

Strange. He was so worried about his own family...the last thing he expected was to run into an issue with *hers*.

“Kit?”

“Yes, love?”

“I want to make love to you.”

Not a surprise to him. She’d just suffered major emotional turmoil, and maybe she just wanted to feel safe, and secure, and wanted, and loved. “Of course. But if you throw up in the bed, I’m going to rub your nose in it,” he warned.

She laughed. “I don’t feel sick, just buzzed.”

“Well, I’m not usually the kind that takes advantage of drunk femmes,” he chuckled. “Will you respect me in the morning?”

“Well, mmmmaybe,” she hummed.

“Enjoy it while you can, love,” he told her. “Cause you’ll have a hangover in the morning.”

“Don’t remind me,” she grunted as they walked, arm in arm, back to the bedroom.

Kit had Jessie stay over all night, and he got to see her at her worst... bent over the toilet, retching her guts out kind of worst. Hair a mess, eyes baggy, breath that would scare away Godzilla kind of worst...but he didn’t mind. He wanted to know all of her, and seeing her at her worst wasn’t that bad at all. Even with her hair a mess and sick, she was still beautiful, and he considered it a privilege to take care of her through it, not a chore.

She was definitely not feeling well in the morning, but it wasn’t a full-blown hangover. She’d drank enough wine to definitely get buzzed, but not falling-down drunk, so the backlash was only moderate. She had a bit of a headache, and felt a little tired and groggy, but not much more.

“You sure you’re alright to drive?” he asked as they came out of the apartment.

“I’m okay, you big worrier,” she told him. “I have to go back to my room and get my early class books, then I’m off to school.”

“Okay then. Tylenol will do wonders for that,” he said as she winced against the light.

“I have some aspirin at home.”

“I’ll call you tonight, pretty kitty. Even despite last night, it was a good weekend.”

She winced. "I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you, I promise."

"You made it up to me before it happened," he said with a sly smile.

She laughed, then put her paw to her head. "Maybe that was *your* fault, getting me all excited," she said, then her cheeks frizzed and she laughed nervously when Lupe waved to them from the building across the way, going the fifty feet from his apartment to his office. "Want me to cook tonight?"

"As long as you tell your roomies to tell your mom you're with me," he winked. "I don't doubt that she'll be calling tonight."

"Probably," she sighed. "Maybe you can help me do my homework," she said brightly.

He laughed. "We'll see. I charge a stiff fee for homework."

"I might pay it. I definitely need to borrow your laptop. Mine died on me about a week before I met you, and I've kinda been in the lurch since. Mom and Dad were going to send me a new one. I *hate* sitting in the computer lab to type out my assignments."

"Buy a flash drive today while you're at school," he told her. "That way you can just save everything to your flash and take it to school with you."

"That's a good idea."

Kit was dead on with his prediction. As they were cooking a dinner of leftover lasagna and salad, his phone rang. Jessie picked it up for him, took one look at the number on the screen, and sighed. "Hello," she said, in a not

quite enthusiastic voice. “Yes, Mom, I’m at *his* house. I don’t have a laptop, remember? I need to use a computer to do some homework, and he’s letting me use his so I don’t have to sit in the computer lab.” She handed him the leftover lasagna from the night before, and he put it in the microwave. “What, you were calling *him* instead of me, or were you just looking for me?” She growled a little in her throat, that strange sound, and he saw her ears lay back momentarily. So, that’s what she looked like when she was angry. “Kit, I’ll talk to her out on the porch,” she told him.

“Take your time,” he told her.

She was out on his porch for about twenty minutes, no doubt as her mother tried to salvage the situation after Kit effectively knocked her legs out from under her. He heated up dinner and set it out, then picked up her phone and called Rick to talk about some of the research he’d been doing that day, and also to go over the cartoon idea he and Jeffrey had been working on, since Rick was out of the office for the latter half of the day and they hadn’t had a chance to talk about it. She came back in as they talked about the strip in a conference call with Jeffrey, and Jessie held the phone out to him. “She wants to talk to you.”

“No, we werent—sorry Rick. Uh, hold on.” He took the phone. “Misses Williams? Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m talking to my boss on the other phone right now. Would it be a bother if I called you back? It shouldn’t take more than ten minutes.”

“I—very well. I’ll be waiting for your call.” Her tone was a bit frosty.

“Thank you. Goodbye.” He closed the phone and put Jessie’s phone back to his ear. “Sorry about that.”

“Troubles, son?” Rick asked.

“Nothing major. Jessie’s mother wanted to talk to me. No doubt to give me the third degree to decide if I’m good enough for her daughter.”

Rick laughed. “We can pick this up tomorrow morning, no problem.”

“No, we’re here and we’re almost done with it, let’s get this done,” Kit said. “Anyway, Rick, what do you think?”

“I like the idea of it. Are you going to introduce more characters later?”

“We’re already designing them,” Jeffrey answered. “We’ll start with Jo-jo, Oxnard, and Buck, and we’ll introduce the others as it goes along.”

“And you’re sure you can maintain a storyline?”

“Well, this is going to be half plotted, half stand-alone strips,” Kit answered. “The main plot will evolve around the three main characters, but quite a few stand-alone strips will involve the tertiary characters. Those will be zingers and comedy, while the main plot will be comedy with a story.”

“We were planning on doing two or three strips an issue for the first month to introduce the strip and establish the story, then cut back to one per issue,” Jeffrey added. “If we have room. Marty might kick our asses for cutting into his mailbag space, though.”

“I think we can juggle a little bit of space on page nine for the extra strip,” Rick noted. “We can cut down Barry’s article about the governor’s tour of the campus and bite a couple of letters out of the mailbag and squeak out the room. How many strips have you finished?”

“We have nineteen strips totally done,” Jeffrey said. “Kit did the writing for six more, I just haven’t done the panels yet.”

“You did that many before even bringing it to me?” Rick asked with a laugh.

“Eh, it gives me something to do at home while watching *Mythbusters*,” Jeffrey laughed.

“And it fills up that empty time I have between assignments,” Kit added.

“Okay, you busy bees. We’ll have a group meeting in the morning so we can get some feedback on the strips. You know, see if furs other than you two think they’re funny and all. If they think the strips’ll fly, we can work ‘em into the next issue while me and Savid have time to make space for ‘em.”

“Sounds like a done deal,” Jeffrey assented.

“Works for me,” Kit agreed.

“Okay, son, the reprieve is over. Time to face the music,” Rick chuckled.

“I’ll bring a bathrobe for you tomorrow, Kit,” Jeffrey sniggered. “Just in case she skins you.”

“Oh please,” Kit snorted. “But thanks for the votes of support,” he added with a sarcastic drawl.

He hung up, and took in a girding breath. “Alright, pretty kitty, dial it. Let’s get this overwith,” he said like a fox about to do war.

And it *was* war. Hannah Williams did *not* like him, and her dislike was all over her voice as she asked Kit relentless questions. She grilled him about his family, about his work, about his personal life, even about his past

love life. She was almost brutally direct, and wasn't afraid to ask him literally anything. And her questions were definitely slanted, asking him questions like if he'd ever beaten his girlfriends, did they give him venereal diseases, if he did drugs. She kept asking him what bad things he did rather than asking him about his hobbies or his work or how he felt about her daughter. Jessie sat at the laptop and listened to his side of the conversation, but thankfully she didn't hear the ugly questions he was being asked...for he would only reply to those with yes or no.

Interspersed through the questions were the comments. Snide comments, unfriendly comments, where she made denigrating, hostile remarks about him and his life. Kit ignored them, because he wasn't about to take that bait and challenge her over it. She was *dying* for him to give her an excuse to yell at him, to prove that he was no good for her daughter, but he wasn't stupid enough to walk into that cave. He was polite and respectful over the phone, and he remained just as polite and respectful no matter how disrespectful she was to him.

She kept after him for over an hour, and he kept getting less and less patient with her...which was probably what she wanted. She was badgering him, probably trying to provoke a reaction which she could then use against her daughter...along the lines of "well, he was rude and abusive to me over the phone!" while leaving out the fact that she provoked it with relentless biting comments.

It all basically came to a close when she finally asked the question he felt she was probably avoiding. "And just *how* do you expect to pay Jessie's way?" she demanded.

"I may have been disowned, Misses Williams, but I still have someone in the family who loves me. Vilenne Vulpan. She's my sister, and she's rich.

And she owes me a favor. For her, paying for two years of tuition would be the same as the change in your pocket. She'll give Jessie the money if I ask it of her."

"So you can't even pay it yourself!" she declared. "You have to slink away to your family and beg money out of them like a freeloader!"

"Where Jessie's well being is concerned, I'll do whatever it takes," he said calmly.

"Don't you dare presume to know what's best for my daughter!" she said in outrage.

"Her well being is whatever she wants," he said evenly. "I've told you before, Misses Williams, I'm very much in love with her. What makes her happy is what makes me happy, and I'll do whatever I can to make her happy. Even if I have to go back to my family and ask for money to help her get through school, I'll do it if Jessie asks it. As far as I'm concerned, she's worth it."

She chewed over that, looking for a hole to exploit, but found none. "I have to cook dinner," she declared.

Then she hung up on him.

Well, Jessie was right about the whole "hanging up when losing" issue. That was the second time she'd done it.

He blew out his breath and closed the phone. "She hung up on me," he told her.

"Then she couldn't think of a way to argue with you," Jessie giggled. "Speaking of dinner, it's probably cold by now."

He looked at the lasagna and salad on the table. “Well, we can just reheat the lasagna. Why didn’t you eat?”

“Without you?”

“I don’t need to be spoon fed, silly femme,” he said, which made her laugh.

The whole brouhaha with Jessie’s parents simmered down, and Kit put it out of his mind as the days rolled into weeks.

Jessie and Hannah reached something of an understanding. Hannah detested Kit, but she held her tongue about it out of raw fear over the possibility that Jessie might wash her paws of her mother and accept Kit’s offer to pay for her schooling. That created something of a wary truce between them, and even made it a bit easier on Jessie. Because of Jessie’s explosion on her mother, Hannah seriously curtailed her invasive behavior. She called less and less frequently, until she was down to just once a week, every Saturday while Kit was at work and Jessie was at home, and their conversations were a little strained because her mother so desperately wanted to lay down the law on a child she no longer had any control over, which was an exercise in futility.

It had been a devastatingly effective tactic, and it knocked the wind right out of Hannah’s sails. Jessie was quite happy with the result, even if Hannah was beside herself.

For Kit, though, it was a blissful time. He and Jeffrey began their strip, which they called *School Daze*, about Jo-jo the raccoon, Oxnard the bull, and Buck the wallaby, and the warped insanity that followed them around

while they attended the University of Texas. Jo-jo was a genius inventor of things that blew up in her face or caused chaos on campus, Oxnard was her boyfriend, a star linebacker on the football team who quoted Shakespeare and had a deliciously jaded view of life, and Buck was a foreign exchange student from Australia who mistook the insanity that Jo-jo created to be typical American life. One particular panel that Kit really liked was when Oxnard handed Buck a beer, and the wallaby just stares at it in the next panel with a fearful look on his face, paw hovering over it, trembling. In the last panel, Oxnard gives him an amused look and says, “Forsooth, Buck, *normal* beers don’t explode,” to which Buck simply replies, “Ah. Got it.” Lilly collapsed into laughter when she read the nineteen panels that they’d finished, telling them that “oops” was going to be the ultimate tagline for Jo-jo. When she said “oops,” everyone evacuated the building.

It was a hit. Jeffrey’s artistry was amazing, and Kit had a dark enough sense of humor to put them into all kinds of evil yet funny situations. Rick ran two strips, then the next week he ran four more, then ran three the next week. The feedback on the strip was mostly positive, with some asking for new strips to run on the website rather than the magazine.

Rick made room for *School Daze* as a new weekly. It would run two strips a week, for as long as Kit and Jeffrey could keep it funny.

Kit and Jessie settled into a very pleasant routine. They’d meet during the week, keeping it minimal so Jessie’s grades didn’t slip, but Saturday and Sunday they were always together. Jessie would come to the office on Saturdays and do her homework, study, even help out around the office, and Jessie got involved in the writing of *School Daze* as she offered a femme’s outlook on how new characters being introduced would behave. Her suggestions evolved into her taking control of a the off-plot strips that dealt

with two minor characters, Missy the snobby vixen and Cutler the goth doberman and the clash of personalities their differing lifestyles entailed. Jessie had a wicked sense of humor, and her off-plot strips were riotously funny. Jessie's name was added into the by-line for her strips, and Rick even started paying her for her effort.

On Sundays, they just hung around the house most of the time, acting more like a married couple than a dating couple. And Kit loved it.

Not everything was just swimming along, though. For one, there was an eerie silence from his side of the family. By now, he was sure they knew about Jessie, and he'd expected at least a phone call in the middle of the night, telling him to break up with Jessie, or a brick thrown through the window at Jessie's sorority or something. But nothing. Nothing at all. Either they really didn't care about him, or Vil had really stepped on some necks up there in Boston and scared them out of the idea of interfering. Jessie's side of the family, though, was about the same. Hannah's hatred of Fox only intensified, just as Jessie predicted, as she took huge offense to Jessie going out with a male she didn't hand-pick for her, and what was worse, a male that threatened Hannah's vice-like grip on her daughter. The relationship between the two of them became really strained, which often necessitated John to intercede between them during their more vociferous arguments.

As September faded into October, Kit took stock and realized that he'd saved up enough money to start shopping for engagement rings. He was very thorough about it, researching extensively to find the right jeweler selling the right ring at the right price. It took him almost a week to find the ring he wanted, a beautiful pear cut diamond with two emeralds flanking it in an elegant gold filigree setting. Once he found the ring he wanted, it took him nearly three weeks to pay for it. They accepted his down payment, then

dropped nearly his entire next two paychecks into paying it off, forcing him to live off ramen noodles and walk to work to save on gas. He showed it to Rick on a windy, rainy October afternoon, two days before Halloween, in a black velvet case. Rick whistled as he examined it, then handed it back to him. “Damn, Kit, that’s a hell of a ring. How much was it?”

“Well, let’s just say that Jess shouldn’t be too attached to our first born,” he said, which made the dingo laugh. “It took me almost a month to pay for it. They’ve had it reserved for me, letting me pay in installments.”

“When are you gonna officially pop the question?”

“I’m not sure yet,” he answered. “I do know that I’m not sure we’ll have the ceremony until after Jessie graduates. I’m not sure I want to do that to her. Getting used to being married on top of school? It might hurt her grades.”

“She might share your view, son. In my experience, femmes don’t like having their males uncommitted. She may insist on the ceremony long before then.”

“It’s all up to her,” he said simply. “I’m happy either way, as long as we’re married at the end.”

“Have you talked about it much?”

“Not really. She knows I’m gonna propose, but she always kinda changes the subject when I talk about specifics. I guess she doesn’t wanna think about things like that until she has a ring on her finger.”

“Never know, maybe,” Rick nodded. “I didn’t give Martha any advance warning,” he chuckled. “I floored her with my proposal.”

“How long did you go out before you proposed?”

“About a year. I’ve often thought that maybe you and Jessie went a little too fast, but now I think it was a silly thought. You two are perfect for each other.”

“What changed your mind?”

“Watching you two around the office,” he answered. “The one part most couples don’t consider when they get engaged is how they’ll gel living in the same space. You and Jessie are compatible in every way. That’s a solid foundation for a lasting marriage.”

“I hope so, cause the idea of a lasting marriage is what I’m looking for.”

“Well, you may be a young couple, but I think you’ll make it. I’ve been married for twenty-one years, and I pray to the good Lord every night that we have fifty more just like them.” He closed a file he was working with on the computer. “Well, I’d say it’s about time to knock off for the day,” he declared. “You walk again today?”

“Yeah, gotta save money,” he grinned.

“You want a ride home?”

“Nah, I’ll be fine.”

“I’d rather drive you, son, that hardware you’re carrying there isn’t something I’d want to risk on a mile long walk through town.”

“Well, when you put it that way, sure, I’ll take a ride.”

Kit packed up before Rick, so he said goodbyes to the crew and went out early to wait for his boss. He stood by the door, spotted Rick’s car down

by the corner, and started walking towards it, his mind filled with images of how it would look, how it would feel, when he knelt down in front of Jessie and offered her the ring that occupied his raincoat pocket. He almost couldn't wait. He wanted to take her down to the courthouse and marry her today, but females just didn't do things that way. Besides, he also didn't want their marriage to impact her school. He'd give her the ring, probably on Sunday, and after that they could sit down and talk about the specifics.

He glanced back for Rick, and his eyes took note of a black truck or SUV that pulled to a stop beside him. He didn't much notice anything about it, but as he turned away, his mind flashed an image of the person in the passenger's seat...and the pistol in his paw.

Six months of living in homeless shelters had conditioned Kit. He flinched and whipped around, even as he heard the gunshot. Something slammed into him from behind, making his breath blast out of his lungs. Before he even felt the pain, he knew. He knew he'd been shot. He dove to the ground as he heard another shot, and in a moment of clarity rolled on the wet streets *towards* the shooter, getting a parked car between them and getting out of his line of sight. He rolled up to the side of the car and tried to put both paws down, but his left arm was hanging limply, and the first thunderclaps of pain was starting to throb through him, making him suck in his breath as he got to his knees. He heard the car door open, and realized the shooter was coming out for him!

He huddled by the car. He'd turn and moved towards the back of the car, against the flow of traffic. The shooter would come around the front of the car to get at him, and he already saw one of the shooter's legs. He had no time to try to go around the back!

He reacted instinctively. When his assailant's leg appeared around the front of the car, he lunged. He slammed into a tall, burly leopard, who seemed honestly surprised, knocking his gun paw high. The leopard grabbed at him, trying to bring his weapon to bear, but Kit used the only weapon he had available to him.

The leopard howled in pain when Kit opened his mouth and drove his long fang-like canines into the neck and shoulder of the larger leopard. He clamped down like a pit bull, grappling with the leopard even as he sawed his teeth back and forth, tasting hot blood in his mouth even as his breath turned to fire in his lungs. But the leopard put his clawed paw into Kit's shoulder, grabbing where the bullet came out of him, and he shuddered as pain overwhelmed his rational mind. He released his biting grip on the leopard, staggering, and then something struck him in the side of the head and he dropped to the ground, his mind consumed in a haze of pain and confusion.

Rick was coming out of the lobby of the office building when he heard it. A loud explosion, a sharp *crack*, which he immediately recognized was a gunshot. It was just outside! He ran across the lobby and erupted from the door and quickly looked around. He saw it immediately, and it chilled his blood.

He saw a figure crumpled on the wet pavement, and a tall leopard stepping out of a SUV, one paw to his neck and a pistol in his other paw. He stepped towards the twitching figure.

It was *Kit*!

Rick reacted with the speed of his old training back when he was in the Army. He reached to his concealed shoulder sheath and produced a Glock, and he did not hesitate. As the leopard stopped over Kit's body and raised his pistol, aiming at his head, Rick took aim and fired in a fast motion. The leopard's head snapped to the side, and he dropped to the sidewalk like a gutted fish.

The SUV's tires squealed as the driver took off. Rick raced out into the street, pistol in paw, and the reporter in him took over from the Army grunt that had roared back into his mind, and he memorized the license plate number of the black Grand Cherokee. Then he blinked and raced to Kit, putting his weapon back in its holster.

Thank God for the Texas concealed carry laws!

He was breathing. Rick saw that he'd been shot in the back, high in the left shoulder. The bullet had exited just under his collarbone, leaving a sickening spatter of blood on the wall a few steps further down. Kit's eyes were open, but his expression was vacant, and his tail was twitching spasmodically. He was already in shock!

A quick glance at the leopard was all it took to see he was dead. He'd been shot literally in the ear canal, and it had went through his head to blow a huge hole out the other side.

There was a scream behind him. Marty and Lilly had been just a few steps behind him, and they stood there in shock. "Call 911!" he barked immediately to them as he pressed his paws against both sides of the wound, to stem the loss of blood. "Kit's been shot!"

Lilly screamed again, but Marty immediately went for his cell phone. Rick pushed Kit back down to the sidewalk as he began to move jerkily.

“Easy, easy, son,” he said in a calm voice. “Just lie still. This doesn’t look like a serious wound, but you can’t jostle around. The paramedics are on the way, so just lay back and relax and let me take care of you.” Rick pushed Kit gently yet firmly down to the pavement, laying on his side, his eyes blinking owlishly and his breathing fast and shallow. “Lilly! Lilly! Go get anything we can throw over him to keep him warm! *Now!*” he barked.

Lilly gasped, literally jumping up and down, then rushed back into the building.

“Marty, where is that ambulance?” he barked.

“The operator says it’s coming,” he said.

“Listen to me! I got the plate of the other guy’s car. Repeat this into the phone for the dispatcher. Black Jeep Grand Cherokee, Texas plates, Whiskey Delta X-ray nine six three three. Say it back!” Marty nodded, and repeated it to the operator on the line. “Tell the operator he’s going into shock, so they’d better get here *now!*”

Marty repeated that. “He says to cover Kit and try to keep him warm,” he said.

“I’m already one step ahead. Where is that damn squirrel?”

The whole crew appeared on the street, carrying seat cushions, coats, and the quilt that Rick kept on the back of the old leather chair in his office. “Don’t touch him!” Rick snapped when Mike moved to grab the pistol laying close to the leopard’s nerveless fingers. They draped the quilt and coats over Kit as Savid put a pillow under his head, and Rick kept his paws on Kit’s wound to stem the blood loss.

“What happened, Rick?” Jeffrey asked fearfully.

“I have no idea. I heard a shot, so I ran out and see Kit on the ground, and that leopard standing over him with a gun. I don’t even remember pulling my gun. It musta been instinct,” he growled.

“I think that instinct saved Kit’s life,” Mike breathed, as the sound of a siren wailed in the background, getting louder and louder. “Thank God, here it comes.”

An ambulance and two police cars screamed onto the scene. A raccoon and skunk boiled out of the ambulance, running over with a medical kit, and a burly dog and a lioness jumped out of the police cars and hurried over. “Is that the shooter?” the lioness asked as she took in the scene.

“Yeah, officer. I shot him,” Rick said. “My weapon is holstered. I’ll give it to you in just a minute.”

“You musta had first aid training, sir,” the raccoon noted as he knelt by them.

“Army,” he said simply. “I’m keeping pressure on the wound. Tell me what to do here.”

“Okay, go ahead and take your paws off,” the skunk told him. “We’ll take good care of him.” Rick let go and stood up, giving them room, as the two paramedics quickly took command of the situation, cutting Kit’s coat and shirt away to start prepping the wound so they could transport him to a hospital. Rick held his paws out wide, covered in blood. “Left side, officer, you’ll find my weapon in a holster under my coat. I don’t know if I safetied it, so please be careful.”

“You have a permit?”

“Yes ma’am,” he said immediately. “It’s in my wallet. Right back pocket. Excuse me if I don’t get them for you,” he said, holding his bloody paws up.

“We’ll get to that later, I think I can trust your word for now,” she said as her partner started talking to the others. She took out a notepad. “You know the fox?”

“Yes ma’am, I’m his boss. His name is Kitstrom Vulpan. My name is Richard Sanders.”

“Alright. Now explain what you saw.”

Sense returned to him, and with it came pain.

Kit sucked in his breath when a lightning jag ripped through him, and reason returned with sensation. Two paramedics were over him, working on him, and he saw the dead leopard behind the paramedic, as the other one rushed back to the ambulance for something. He saw the gun laying on the ground.

He’d been shot!

“Easy, easy,” the raccoon said soothingly, putting a paw on him when he tried to move. “I just gave you something for the pain, so just give it a minute and it’ll take the bite off. Do you know your blood type?”

“What the hell happened?” he asked woozily.

“I was hoping you could tell us,” a female voice called. He looked up and saw a lioness in a police uniform leaning over him, along with Rick and the paramedic.

“Someone tried to kill me,” he said uncertainly. He was starting to get cold, and his head was pounding, and his shoulder was on fire. “I think he hit me in the head.”

The paramedic produced a light and shone it into Kit’s eyes. “Looks like you might have a concussion on top of this,” he said with a nod. “Can you move your legs?”

“Y-Yah, I’m okay, I think,” he said, then he hissed in pain when a white-hot jag of agony ripped through his shoulder. “Or maybe not,” he said in a weak voice.

“Don’t go Rambo on me now, friend,” the paramedic chuckled as his partner showed up with a stretcher. “Can you feel your left arm? Can you move your fingers on your left paw?”

“I can feel my arm,” he said, then tried to move his fingers...which twitched in reply.

“Good, looks like the bullet didn’t hit any nerves. Do you know your blood type?”

“A negative,” he answered. He’d been in a hospital long enough when he was hit by the car to remember that much.

“Okay then, what’s your name?”

“Kit.”

“Alright then, Kit, here’s what’s going to happen. We’re gonna immobilize you and put you on a stretcher, cause if you were hit in the head I don’t want to take any unnecessary risks. Then we’ll cart you off the the hospital so you can flirt with the nurses.”

Kit chuckled weakly, which made him wince when the pain lashed through him. “I think my girlfriend would kill me.”

“I won’t tell if you won’t,” he grinned. “Officer, I think it’s best to talk to him at the hospital. He’s lost a significant amount of blood, we need to get him stabilized.”

“No sweat, Jack, I’ll follow ya.”

More police arrived as Kit was bundled on a backboard, combing the scene, talking to the others in the crew, and already roping off the area with police tape. The paramedics secured his head to a padded collar so he couldn’t move his neck. “Rick,” he called.

“Yeah, son?”

“Can you take my phone and call Jess and my sister? And could you hold onto the ring for me?”

“I’d be happy to, son. I’ll call them and get down to the hospital as quick as I can, as soon as the police are done taking my statement. Which pocket are they in?”

“The phone’s in my front pants pocket. I put the ring in my raincoat pocket,” he said, his voice slurring as a gray haze began to creep into his vision. It was either loss of blood, or the pain, or the medication they pumped into him, but he was feeling decidedly unfocused.

The raccoon gently and tentatively checked Kit’s pockets, then found the phone and the box holding the ring. He handed them to Rick, who immediately turned his back and opened the phone to start making calls.

Kit was immediately relieved. His precious ring was in safe hands. He closed his eyes, facing down the pain and allowing the paramedics to do their work.

“You’re gonna be just fine, friend,” the raccoon told him. “We’ll have you up and about again in no time.”

“Which hospital are you taking him to?” he heard Rick ask.

“Austin General,” came a reply.

“Rick,” he intoned, in an disjointed manner.

“Yeah, son?” he asked.

“Think I can get a few days off?”

Rick actually laughed. “I dunno, I might have to think about it. But I’m glad you can joke at a time like this. It shows me you’re gonna be just fine.”

Kit tried to relax, but it wasn’t easy. His shoulder felt like it was on fire, but at least from the feel of the pain, it wasn’t deep in his chest or anything like that. It was on the outside of his chest, in the shoulder, and it hurt like hell. He just hoped that Jessie wouldn’t have a fit when she found out.

Chapter 7

They took good care of him in the hospital. He was carted straight into the emergency room, and then he was surrounded by doctors. They asked him all kinds of questions, examined the wound, even X-rayed it to look at the internal damage...which wasn't as bad as it could have been. When Kit flinched when he saw the gun, it literally saved his life. The bullet hit him in the back of his shoulder, near his arm, and had exited just under his collarbone, near the sternum. The bullet had missed everything vital, but the collie that was the attending lead doctor did tell him that he'd be having some surgery so they could repair some tissue around his sternum that had been torn by the compressive force of the bullet as it went through him. "It shouldn't take very long," he told Kit as they applied a temporary bandage to the wound.

The pain medication had really kicked in by then, reducing his shoulder to a dull throb rather than it feeling like someone drove a red-hot spear through him, but the medication combined with what the doctors called a mild concussion made him a little dizzy and made it hard to think. They had him in the bed, sitting up so his shoulder was elevated, when the lioness that had been down at the office came into the treatment room. "They said you're up to answering a few questions now," she said. He nodded. "I'm Sergeant Elizabeth Rivers, Mister Vulpan."

"I wish we could have met under different circumstances...even a speeding ticket," Kit mused, which made her laugh.

“Alright, Kitstrom—“

“Kit.”

“Kit. Let’s start at the beginning. Just tell me what you remember, and take your time.”

He went through what he remembered, having to backtrack a couple of times because his memory was a little fuzzy about the details of that mess. “After I bit him, I don’t really remember all that much. I think he pistol-whipped me or something. Is he dead?”

The lioness nodded. “Your boss carries a concealed weapon,” she told him. “He shot the leopard. You should thank him, Mister Vulpan. He saved your life.”

“Oh, I will, trust me.”

“Now, I have to ask this, Mister Vulpan. Is there anyone you know that might have reason to hurt you?”

“You don’t think it was a robbery?”

“Most robbers don’t kill their victims before robbing them,” she said. “And certainly not in broad daylight on a city street. We think this might be personal.”

He sighed. “Well, I could say that I’m shocked, but not surprised,” he told her grimly. “My family has very extreme views, and I’m violating them.”

“The Vulpan family? You really think one of them would hire a hitman to kill you?” she asked.

“Ah, so you know about my family.”

“We *are* the police,” she grinned. “It just took a couple of ID checks to dig it up. It’s not exactly hidden.”

“Well, let’s say that I wouldn’t be totally stunned if one of them did,” he said. “I can think of a couple of uncles that might try it.”

“Which ones?”

“Zach and Jake—er, Kitstrom Zachary and Kitstrom Jacob. My grandpa named all his boys Kitstrom,” he explained as he saw her eyebrow raise. “My dad continued the tradition when he named me.”

“Ah. Well, I’ll call up to Boston and ask around a little bit. Just to make sure.”

“Tread *very* carefully, officer,” he said with absolute seriousness. “The Vulpans *own* the Boston Police. Expect to be stonewalled.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, at least until the detectives take the case from me,” she said with a smile. “I’ll tell the doc I’m done, and you’re ready for visitors, okay?”

“Thank you, officer.”

“*De nada*, Kit. I’ll come check on you in a while.”

The doctor returned, and not alone. Jessie and Rick rushed in behind her. Jessie’s eyes were sheened and red, and the fur on her cheeks was matted from tears. She tried to hug him but recoiled when she saw the bandages, so just settled for putting her cheek against his own, nuzzling him. “I’m alright, my pretty kitty,” he told her. “See? Still here and kicking.”

“I was so worried,” she said, her voice trembling. “Are you okay?”

“I’m just fine,” he said.

“He’ll be fine, miss,” the collie told her. “He’ll be going up to surgery in—“

“Surgery?” she gasped.

“It’s alright, they just want to repair some damage to the tissue under the exit wound, miss, ah.”

“Jessie,” she answered.

“Jessie. Like I said, they’re going to fix that, and then he’ll be in a hospital room and well on his way to a full recovery. The bullet didn’t hit anything important, and the injury is easily treated. He’ll be up and about in no time,” he said with a chuckle. “All he’ll have to show for his adventure is a scar nobody will see under his fur and an old arm sling he can hang on the wall and use as a prop for his story,” he smiled.

“Doc, I have enough scars, I don’t need another one people can see,” he chuckled, pointing with his good arm at his injured ear.

“Well, that one’s more spectacular anyway,” the doctor chuckled. “You should play the lottery, Mister Vulpan. This is the second major incident you’ve survived. Now, steal your kisses while you can, Mister Vulpan, you’ll be off to surgery in just a few minutes.”

Jessie nuzzled him tenderly. “I’ll be right here waiting,” she told him.

“You have school tomorrow, little missy,” he told her in a weak but playful voice. “And they’re not going to let me go anywhere.”

“Just *try* and make me go home,” she said adamantly, taking his paw in hers and holding it.

“I don’t think I have the arm strength for it at the moment,” he smiled weakly.

“Son, I have your things. Do you want me to keep them or give them to Jessie?”

“Give her the phone, Rick,” he said, his eyes steady.

Rick nodded in understanding. “I’ll put the rest of it in your office then,” he said, giving Kit a wink behind Jessie’s back. “They only let two at a time in to visit, and the whole crew’s waiting outside. So I’ll give up my spot so they can take turns until they take you up.”

“Officer Rivers said you saved my life, Rick. *Thank you.*”

“Any time, son, any time. Thank Martha, actually,” he chuckled. “She was the one that didn’t feel comfortable with me working the hours I do without protection. She’s the one that got me to get the permit.”

“Well, I owe her a big kiss on the lips.”

“I might get jealous,” Rick grinned, but he filed out.

“Vil called me,” Jessie told him. “Right after Rick did. Rick called her, then called me, then she called me. She told me to tell you that she’s already on her way down, and don’t worry about the hospital bills. She already called the hospital.”

“She just needs to take out health insurance on me,” Kit sighed.

“What happened, Kit?”

“I’m honestly not really sure. The police don’t think it was a mugging. They think it was a failed hit, which I guess is possible, if my family decided I committed a sin too grievous to forgive.”

She gave him a stricken look. “You mean they tried to kill you because of *me*?”

“If they really did do it, they tried to kill me because of *me*,” he said unflinchingly. “Don’t *ever* think that this is your fault, my pretty kitty. But, I do want you to call that security company that Vil hired and tell them what happened, and they might want to keep a much closer eye on you. I don’t want you going around alone. Not right now.”

Marty was the first to visit. He looked very grim and serious, expressions that seemed alien on his face, and he patted Kit on the good shoulder. “Keeping the faith, soldier?” he asked in a surprisingly quiet and positive tone, much unlike his usual flamboyant melodrama.

“The docs say I’ll be just fine, Marty, and right now I’m too keyed up on morphine to feel much of anything,” he said with a smile. “Is Lilly okay? I heard her screaming.”

“She was a little freaked, but she’s better now,” he answered. “Don’t you worry, Jessie, we’ll be right here with you. You’ll have lots of friends there while we’re waiting.”

“Thanks, Marty,” she said, giving him a look of profound gratitude.

“Hey, I gotta watch out for the only femme around that looks better than me in pumps,” he said airily, which made her giggle.

Okay, Marty was feeling better now.

Before Marty could send the next person in, two orderlies returned with the collie. “Alright, Mister Vulpan, let’s get you up to surgery. If you two will wait in the waiting room, the receptionist can tell you when he’s done, and what room he’ll be in.”

Jessie leaned in and kissed him on the cheek, her eyes worried.

“Relax, pretty kitty. As you can see, I’m not in any danger, and I’ll be just fine.”

“That he will,” the collie agreed. “Now if you two will go to the waiting room, we can get him going.”

“Come on, Jessie, let’s go tell the others he’ll be okay,” Marty said, patting her on the shoulder.

She gave him a longing look and blew him a kiss as Marty walked her out, and the orderly transferred the IV hooked up to his arm to a stand attached to the bed. “Alright, Kit, away we go,” the doctor said. “You’ll be in and out quick, and we’ll get you settled into your room.”

Kit had been through enough surgeries in his day to know that for the patient, it was a very undignified business.

The first thing they did was shave off his fur. His fur was one of his few vanities, for it was thick and glossy, and it looked quite nice. Not satisfied with just shaving away around the area to be worked on, the doctors had gone on a veritable orgy of clipping, shaving away almost all the fur on the entire left side of his chest, both the white fur on his chest and the reddish fur on the sides of his shoulder and outer pectoral. Not satisfied with peeling his chest like an apple, they also shaved off the fur around the entry wound on the back of his shoulder. As if the half-missing ear wasn’t bad enough, now he’d look like he had mange until his fur grew back in.

The surgery itself wasn’t really that bad. The surgeons were professional and polite, and they had him under within minutes of putting

him on the operating table.

It was the aftermath that was the embarrassing part.

For one, anesthesia wasn't quite as serene as most people believed. Every time he'd been put under, when he woke up, he was violently ill. And this time was no different. It was hard to be dignified retching into a pan, and even less so when one did it to an audience. A vixen nurse helped him through most of his indisposition, which had to be as distasteful to her as it was to him.

For another, doctors couldn't operate on one's finger without stripping the patient completely naked, then putting them in a flimsy little hospital gown that would open in the back with the slightest flick of the tail. Being in a bed with a blanket over him didn't change the fact that he knew what he was wearing, which would make any trip to the bathroom more of a show for the nurse than anything else, who would have to help him out of bed and over to the bathroom.

One could manage only so much dignity with one's bare butt hanging out the back of a hospital gown.

But, at least it was over. They had him in observation in a private room in the hospital, and though his shoulder and chest were in pain, it was dulled by the drugs dripping into his arm through an IV. The doctors had given him a glowing report when he was coherent. The repair to the tissues in his chest was done without any complications, and he'd have no movement or health problems at all once he healed. He'd have to undergo some physical therapy once the muscles pierced by the bullet mended, and also because his arm would be in a sling for a few weeks.

It already was, actually. His arm was literally strapped to his side to keep it immobile, to prevent any movement from torquing the wound and possibly tearing his stitches.

But, even though the injury itself wasn't serious, the implication behind it *was*. Officer Rivers stopped by soon after the surgery, before they allowed anyone to visit him, and filled him in. The leopard that was killed was one Josh Ruger, a.k.a Spots, a mid-level hood in the Atlanta mob. Unless Spots was on vacation in Austin and decided to keep himself in practice when it came to shooting furs, then he was there on business, and his business was Kit. It was a very strong indication that someone tried to have Kit killed...and the list of those who might want that was decidedly short.

Vil was going to blow a blood vessel when she found out...and may God help the family. She'd come down on them like an avalanche. For the first time since he was sixteen, he found a sliver of sympathy for someone in his family other than his sister. Vil was a vindictive bitch when she was angry, and the family was about to see the Miss Hyde that lurked beneath that witty exterior.

Whoever did it certainly seemed to sense that, for they'd dug up someone far, far from Boston to do the deed. And they must have warned the guy. He didn't fly or take any kind of public transportation into Austin the cops could find, and no cars were rented in Austin under any known alias Spots used. They thought he drove in from Atlanta to cover those tracks, and would have driven back after it was done, so they were looking for his car, and had an APB out on his car that covered all of Texas and Louisiana. Austin was pretty much well smack dab in the middle of Texas,

so it was going to take anyone driving that car several hours to get to virtually any border, even Mexico's.

So...it seemed that the family *did* take exception to his relationship with Jessie, and decided to voice that displeasure with the business end of a gun. It was shocking to him, but not surprising. It was shocking that they went straight for that very dangerous and extreme option immediately, without the usual attempts to sway, intimidate, or blackmail him into breaking it off. No, they went straight to the ultimate solution, killing Kit to prevent him from marrying someone that many in the family would consider little better than livestock.

God knows, it shouldn't have been a surprise. Not only was Kit disowned and poor, but he was *thriving*. That had to be an anathema in their eyes, a cancer on their souls, that Kit didn't just eke out a meagre existence eating out of garbage cans, he instead had built a good life for himself without their money, without their power, without them period. He didn't *need* the Vulpan family to be happy, and that had to eat at them like acid poured into their eyes.

The collie doctor came in. "And how are we feeling?" he asked as the vixen nurse handed him Kit's chart.

"Exposed, half-naked, and doped up," he answered.

"In other words, normal for someone just out of surgery," the collie grinned. "How much fur did they take off?"

"Too much," he replied with a grunt.

"Yeah, they love to go nuts with that shaver," he chuckled. "Oh, if nobody told you, I'm Doctor Randy Barnett, the chief physician around

here. You can call me Doc. I know, it's a terribly unimaginative nickname for a doctor, but if I was more creative, I'd be working in Hollywood instead of Austin."

Kit chuckled. "It's not much more creative than Kit."

"Hmm, well, all these squiggly lines and mysterious marks look all in order," he noted, handing the chart back to the vixen, who was giving him an amused smile. "Now, let's see if they put your heart on the right side of your chest like I told them to." He put the stethoscope in his ears, and probed Kit's chest for a moment, as the nurse took his blood pressure. "Well hell, they didn't do it again. I really need to go down there and straighten the surgery staff out," he said. "But that's a healthy heart, no doubt about it. BP?"

"One ten over eighty," the nurse replied.

"Now let's see if that concussion didn't knock some sense into you," he said in a jovial manner, taking a pen light out and shining it in Kit's eyes. "Well damn, you're just giving me nothing to do. Couldn't you at least *pretend* that you need me here, Kit?"

Kit laughed.

"I guess I won't be able to keep you locked up in this prison, I suppose. You look ready to handle that pack sitting out in the waiting room. Let me trot out there and sell them some tickets, and they'll be in in a few minutes."

Kit laughed again, which his shouldern't didn't agree with. "I'd appreciate it, Doc." He gave a short wave, and swept out of the room as quickly as he entered.

“Don’t let his Patch Adams act fool you, Kit,” the vixen said with a smile. “Doctor Barnett is one of the best doctors in Texas. You’re in the best care around, and we’ll take good care of you.”

The vixen left him alone for about a minute, then the door opened again. Jessie literally ran into the room, her paws on his face and kissing him all over his muzzle, cheeks, and forehead. He had to laugh at her display, which made her cheeks ruffle as she looked coyly down at him. The whole crew filed in behind her, and as she pulled the stool over to his bed, he shook paws with everyone and got a kiss from Lilly. “You really scared us there, Kit,” Mike told him. “The doc said you’d be just fine though, so that’s good news.”

“Yeah, he told me the bullet went right through and didn’t hit anything vital,” Kit nodded.

“Is it hurt much?” Savid asked.

“They have me on too many drugs right now to feel it,” he answered, motioning with his muzzle at the IV dripping into his right arm.

“If you wanted some time off, you should have just asked for a vacation,” Jeffrey grinned at him. Lilly and Barry gave him a shocked look, but Kit laughed, which broke them of their feeling he’d said something out of bounds.

“Well, Rick complains I don’t get enough rest,” he noted, looking at his boss, which made him laugh.

“We’ll be a little short-handed without you, but we’ll manage,” Rick grinned.

“Well, I hope I’m back at work soon. We have too damn much fun there for me to want to stay away.”

“Shh, don’t tell the boss we have fun!” Lilly protested, giving Rick a sidelong smile. “He might decide to stop paying us!”

“I’d have to stop paying myself, and Martha might have something to say about that,” Rick said with a mild smile. “Have the docs given you a date for getting out of here?”

“Not yet, but hopefully not long,” he said. “If I’m lucky, I’ll be back home in a few days.”

“That soon?” Jessie asked in surprise.

“There’s really not much they can do around here but stick needles in me, pretty kitty,” he told her. “I can sit on my couch at home and watch TV the same as I can sit in this bed and watch TV. Besides, you ever taste hospital food?” he asked with a shudder. “I had almost five months of it, and it’s not something you wish on your worst enemy.”

“We’ll smuggle you in some real food,” Barry promised with a grin.

“That would be nice,” Kit assured with a nod.

Jessie’s phone rang. “Vil! No, I’m right here with him right now. He’s out of surgery, and the doctor told me he’s going to be just fine. Sure, hold on.” She held the phone out to him, and after looking at the IV, she instead put it right to his ear.

“Hey sis,” he said.

“Are you okay, Kit?” she asked fearfully.

“I’m alright. I was shot in the shoulder, and I’m feeling about as good as one can under the circumstances. Until the meds wear off, anyway.”

“I’m on a plane right now,” she told him. “I’ll be there about three hours. We’re somewhere over Tennessee right now.”

“Well, it’ll be nice to see you, even if I’m not quite happy about the circumstances.”

She gave a humorless chuckle. “I’ve already got in touch with the Austin police,” she said, her voice turning icy. “They told me what they think.”

“Uh oh,” he said quietly.

“Yeah, uh oh,” she said. “When I get home,” she said, then was silent a moment. He could almost imagine seeing her bristle in her seat on that plane. “I *will* find out who’s at the bottom of this,” she declared in a cold, sinister tone. “And then I’m going to skin him with a rusty butter knife and hang his mangy pelt on my wall.”

“Just be careful, sis,” he said seriously. “I’ve told you before. Don’t underestimate the uncles. They will fight back, and they have lots of money to do it with.”

“We’ll just see about that,” she said with a hiss.

Oh, God. Vil was going to be a nightmare. He’d heard that tone before, and she would destroy anyone that got in her way.

“Did they put you in a private room?” she asked, getting her temper back under control.

“Yeah, they did.”

“Good. Don’t you worry about a thing, baby bro. I’ve already picked up the tab for this. I’ll let you get back to Jessie, and we’ll talk when I get there.”

“Alright. Love ya sis.”

“Love ya bro.”

He nodded to Jessie, who took back the phone. “Vil? No, I’m okay. Thanks, that’s sweet. Do you need someone to pick you up? Okay. Okay, see you soon. Bye.” She hung up the phone. “Vil said she’d be here in a couple of hours,” she told the group.

Kit enjoyed the visit with the crew, as they kept probing him over whether or not he was really feeling okay, and joking and kidding him and each other, at least until the vixen nurse came into the room. “Alright, people, afraid open visiting hours are over,” she told them.

“Can I stay?” Jessie asked in a frightened tone. “I don’t want to leave him!”

“Are you family, hon?” she asked.

“She’s his fiancée,” Rick told the nurse.

“Then you’re welcome to stay. But the rest of you, shoo!” she told them. “Open hours are from eleven to eight. Come back tomorrow, eleven o’clock, if we don’t send him home first,” she smiled.

He shook their paws, and Lilly kissed him on the cheek, and then they waved their farewells as the vixen herded them out of the room. “Now, let’s check that blood pressure, Mister Vulpan.”

“Kit,” he corrected as she pulled a blood pressure cuff from a slot on the wall behind the bed.

“Kit. Any sharp pain?”

“No, just a dull ache.”

“Alright,” she said as Jessie moved, and she checked his blood pressure. “Nice and stable,” she said with a nod. “I’ll leave you to your visitor, Kit. You’ve got two hours until visiting hours are over, honey, so get your kisses in now. And no shenanigans in here,” she added with a naughty little smile as she left the room and closed the door.

Kit chuckled as Jessie’s cheeks ruffled, and she sat back down and took his paw in hers. “I’m fine, my pretty kitty. Don’t look so worried.”

“I have every right to be worried!” she protested.

“I know, but look. I’m *fine*. Really.”

“If you were fine, you wouldn’t be in the hospital,” she challenged.

“Okay, I’m fine in relative terms among people who are in hospitals,” he said with a grin. “You’ll see, pretty kitty, they’ll have me out of here in just a day or two. They could probably send me home right now, but I guess they just want to make sure there weren’t any complications from the surgery.” He frowned. “They shaved off my fur. I look like I have mange.”

She gave him a startled look, and actually laughed. “You’re nearly killed, and all you can worry about is your fur?” she asked him.

“This is nothing compared to what it was like after I was hit by that car. If I seem a bit blasé about this, well, there ya go.”

“And you’re not afraid? I mean, someone tried to kill you!”

“And Rick shot him,” Kit said simply. “I’m not afraid for me, I’m worried about *you*. Did you call that security company?”

“Yeah, I did. They have someone in the waiting room right now. He’ll escort me home, and they said they’d keep a guard with me if I wanted it.”

“Well, I want it.”

“I know. So I told them that it’d be okay for a few days. Because I knew it would make you worry if I didn’t.” She sighed. “Besides, I’m a little scared, Kit. I feel safer with the guard, but—“

“Don’t worry about it, pretty kitty,” he told her. “Vil is coming, and she’s pissed off. You’ve never seen my sister when she’s angry, Jess. It’s not pretty. You’ll find out why they call her the Ice Queen.”

“Yeah, when she called me back, I could tell she was mad,” she agreed. “She sounded like the clock on a time bomb.”

“That’s a pretty accurate description,” he chuckled. “Vil will find out who tried to kill me. And when she does, well....”

“What?”

“Let’s just say that there’s a good chance the police *won’t* be bothered about it.”

She gaped at him. “You mean—“

“Yup,” he nodded. “Vil will play at that level.”

“I’m...well...*wow*,” she said, blowing out her breath.

“This isn’t the little league, my pretty kitty,” he told her. “Vil may decide that the law isn’t good enough. And one thing you need to learn

about rich people is that to them, the law is nothing but a minor inconvenience.”

“That’s really surprising.”

“It shouldn’t be, given where I’m sitting right now,” he told her seriously. “Odds are, one of my uncles decided that following the law wasn’t sufficient to get what he wanted, and well, here I am.”

“But to have someone killed?”

“You’re dealing with people who don’t have the same morals as normal people, Jess,” he told her seriously. “I’ve told you before that money is a curse. Well, you’re getting a look at one of the ways that curse works. My uncles think they’re the highest form of life on Earth, and believe they’re above the law of the puny mortals. The only law they really fear is my *sister*, because she holds the reins of the family’s power. And though I love my sister, Jess, she has the same mindset. She’ll obey the law of us normal people, *until it gets in her way*. She can be just as ruthless as any other member of my family. In a way, she has to be. You have no idea what really goes on behind the doors of a huge company like the shipyards. Vil breaks the law on a daily basis, I’d wager, and when it’s something personal like this, well, she may throw the law out the window and deal with it in the way *she* feels is appropriate. Just like whoever tried to have me killed, she’ll be judge, jury, and if needs be, executioner.”

Jessie was silent a long moment.

“Does that surprise you?”

She sighed. “Yes. She didn’t seem that way. I thought she was very nice.”

“Oh, she is, Jess. I love Vil a lot. She’s a sweet, charming, and loving vixen who has a big heart and a kind disposition. She’s the nicest member of the family, and very generous and caring. In that way, she’s much different from the rest of the family. But there’s another Vil lurking behind what you see, a calculating, ruthless vixen who will crush anything and anyone that gets in her way. That is the Ice Queen, and you’re going to get your first good look at it when she gets here. Just don’t let it affect your opinion of her too much. This isn’t a part of you you’d ever see unless it was serious, like right now,” he noted, motioning at his injury with his right arm. “Once her sense of justice has been satisfied, she’ll go right back to the funny, charming vixen you’ve come to know.”

“Well, she’s only doing it because she loves you,” Jessie reasoned.

“Just so,” he nodded, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. The ordeal of the day was finally catching up to him, and he was starting to get sleepy. Before he could even say a word, though, he felt her paws brushing his hair away from his face.

“Getting sleepy, my handsome fox?” she asked in a gentle voice.

“Tired,” he answered. “I’ve had a busy day.”

She laughed in spite of herself. “I remember when you were there for me, Kit,” she said in a low, gentle voice. “Now it’s my turn to be here for you. Just rest, my love. I’ll be here, and I’ll take good care of you. I will always take good care of my handsome fox,” she breathed, taking his paw and squeezing it gently.

“I’m going to hold you to that,” he said with a weary smile.

“Feel free,” she whispered, kissing him on the forehead. “Now get some rest.”

“I will. Have I told you today that I love you, Jessie?”

“I can never hear it enough,” she told him with a gentle kiss.

“Well, I love you, Jessica Desdemona Williams,” he declared in a tired voice.

“And I love you, Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan,” she returned, patting the back of his paw.

Her presence soothed him, soothed away the pain in ways the medicine could not, and he fell asleep after a few minutes.

Jessie sat at his bedside silently, holding his paw, relief warring with concern inside her, and more than a little fear.

Jessie was fearful, but she was intelligent, and her mind was already working through what she’d learned. She saw now that Kit’s fear of his family had been totally justified. Though they had no proof of what happened, Kit seemed convinced that it was his family that had arranged to have someone try to kill him, and she’d trust his judgment in the matter. It made her reflect on his family, and him, and even her relationship with him.

She looked down at him and asked herself a simple question. *Do I love this fox?* she asked, to which the answer was immediate. *With all my heart,* she answered herself, feeling her heart melt just looking at him, his face composed and looking totally vulnerable laying in that hospital bed. She felt relieved he was going to be alright, fearful for him, worried about his

recovery, concerned that there might be complications. But under it all was that simple love. Since their first meeting, she'd been swept off her feet by him.

It really had been love at first kiss, right there in that skating rink. It had just taken her a while to come to see it, just like her father had said. That was when she fell in love with him, when he kissed her.

She didn't believe in love at first sight...but her own experience was making her doubt that position a little.

She stroked the fur on the back of his paw. Now that she knew where she stood, she had to look at the situation. Someone had tried to kill him because of their relationship, and they might try to kill her too. Maybe even *her* family. *Is it worth it?* she asked herself, staring down at him. *Is it worth risking my life over to stay with him? Is it worth the chance that they might come after my family?*

That was a hard question to answer. She loved him completely, and she had no real concern for herself. To her, it was worth the risk to see him, because he was worth it. He was *perfect*, the male God had put on this Earth for her to find and love. Her devotion to him was unswerving, as unswerving as his own was for her, but her family was a complication. It was more than just *her* in this, she saw. Was it fair to her parents and siblings to drag them into this?

No. It wasn't fair to them, really. She had to admit that to herself. But, she was an adult. This was her life, this was her choice, and she wasn't going to be afraid of Kit's family.

It won't drive me away, she vowed to herself. *I can warn my folks what happened and what it might mean, but I won't run away. I'll just have to*

take precautions. Vil will help me, I know she will. She can keep my folks safe. I trust her. Kit was willing to risk everything for me. I have to be just as strong as him.

She made her decision. She would stand by him. She would face the future with him together, because she loved him.

And she knew just how to tell him.

The nurses and doctor that checked in on them periodically were quiet and cordial. They didn't wake Kit up when they found he was asleep, but they did check his temperature and replace his IV with a new bottle. Jessie stayed right by his bedside, not leaving him for a second, just watching over him while he slept. Even after even her visiting hours were over, for some reason, they didn't make her leave. As the time and the silence and the energy expended over the day caught up with her, though, she got more and more tired, until she leaned down onto Kit's bed and fell asleep with her head on his stomach.

A light touch on her shoulder woke her up. She sat up blearily, putting a paw over her face. "Do I have to leave?" she asked in a low whisper.

"Not if you don't want to," came a low reply, slightly amused.

Jessie sat straight up and turned around. It was Vil!

She hugged the smaller vixen fiercely, and Vil patted her on the back. "I just got in. How is he?"

"The doctors say he'll make a full recovery," she answered, holding onto Vil's paws as she pushed away a little. "They did surgery on him after

he got here.”

“They’ve been keeping me up to speed on that,” she told Jessie, sitting down on the stool, and reaching out and stroking back Kit’s hair, her fingers lingering on the two white streaks in it that were from when he was hit by the car. “Hey, baby bro,” she called in a low, tender whisper. “I’m sorry it took so long for me to get here, and I’m sorry this happened to you. But don’t you worry. Your big sister is here, and I’m going to take care of it.” She stroked the hair back from his face the way a mother would, then rested her paw on his shoulder as her other paw gently squeezed his left paw, jutting out from the sling that kept his left arm immobilized. She bowed her head, and Jessie clearly heard her snuffle. She put her paws on Vil’s shoulders, and much to her surprise, Vil whirled around and grabbed hold of her, crying into her stomach and chest.

To see that kind of emotion from someone Kit said was ruthless when she was angry surprised her a little, but then again, her love for her brother should have told her that that was a stupid assumption. She cradled Vil’s head and comforted her, being there for her, and held her for long moments as she let her grief run its course. Vil’s weeping ceased, and she just held onto Jessie for a long moment, unashamedly showing that she wasn’t as cold as the world believed her to be.

“Thank you, Jessie,” she said in a more composed voice, letting her go. “I guess it didn’t hit me until I could sit down and see him. See what they did to him,” she said, her voice turning to ice.

Maybe Kit really wasn’t exaggerating.

“Are you alright, Jessie?” she asked pointedly.

“It scared me, but I’m okay.”

“That’s not what I asked,” she said, looking at her directly. “Now you know. Now you know just what kind of family he’s from. Now, I’ll ask you again, *are you alright?*”

She knew what Vil meant, and she nodded. “I won’t leave him, Vil. I’m afraid for my own family, but I won’t leave him. I’m not going to let them win.”

“Don’t you worry about your family,” Vil said in a steely tone. “This is all my fault. I thought I had them all well leashed, but I see now I was in grievous error. I’ll make sure your family never gets dragged into this. They’ll be just fine.” She turned back around to look at Kit. “And thank you, Jessie. Kit really did find his soulmate when he met you. You have the right stuff, femme. You’re strong enough to be the wife of a male like him.”

“He hasn’t asked me yet,” she said, her cheeks itching.

“Oh, he will, Jessie. He will.”

“I hope so. After this...I don’t want to lose him, Vil. I want to marry him.”

“It should happen soon. I can’t wait, actually. I’m as impatient as you are. I’ll be honored to call you *sis*.”

“That’s very nice of you to say,” Jessie said modestly, her cheeks ruffling.

“Well, I meant it,” she said, stroking Kit’s paw with her fingers. “My brother *is* my family, Jessie. He’s the only member of it I care about, and the only one that really matters. Before he met you, all he did since college was wander around, looking for a purpose, but having no real desire to find it. Just drifting through life. I thought for a while that it was going to end up

killing him. It was a rough life, hon, a lot rougher than he ever let on. I know, I kept an eye on him. Then he met you, and inside three days, he had a job, he had an apartment, and he had *hope*. That was something he hasn't had any of since the accident that ended his dream to go into the military. You changed his life, Jessie. In many ways, I think you saved it," she said softly. "I think if he would have gotten on that bus and moved on instead of trying to find you, he'd have been dead within two years."

"Well, I'm glad he stayed," she whispered, leaning over Vil and looking down at him. "I think I would have spent my whole life looking for him, and would have never been truly happy."

Vil reached up and patted her paw. "Well, let's give him a chance to get some sleep, hon. Come take a walk with me. We have some things to talk about."

"But—"

"He'll be alright on his own for a few minutes," she said with a soft chuckle.

They walked down the hall, towards the small sitting area for visitors by the elevator, near the nurse's station. While they walked, Vil explained everything the police had told her in greater detail, telling her where the assailant came from, how they were looking for his accomplice, and she theorized about how it came about. "I'm not sure who did this, but I *will* find out," she declared in a growling hiss, keeping her voice low. "And when I do, God help them."

"Vil," she said, stopping them. "Kit told me some of that, but he also said what you might do."

“What I might do? What I *will* do,” she said seethingly.

“No,” she said quietly, but firmly. “Don’t do that.”

“It’s what they deserve!”

“Then you’d be no better than them,” Jessie said with quiet dignity.

Vil started to say something, but came up short.

“Please. For me. All I ask is you don’t stoop to their level. I don’t want to wake up some day in the future and feel like I have blood on my paws.”

Vil’s eyes flashed, but she blew out her breath. “You’re asking me to tie my paws, hon. You can’t fight fair against these people. They cheat.”

“I never said be an angel, Vil. I just said don’t kill them over it. Punish them, *yes*. But do it the *right* way.”

“There is no right way,” she retorted.

“Yes, there is, Vil. Think about it. If you kill them, what does it prove? Did you ever see the movie *Trading Places*?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, in the movie, a rich boy and a poor boy get humiliated by a pair of rich brothers. In revenge, they make them poor. Don’t you think *that* would be justice? Find a way to take away their money. Do to them what they did to Kit, just without the guns.”

Vil opened her mouth, then closed it. Then she rubbed her chin with a furry finger, her eyes deep in thought. “Well, I *have* been exploring invalidating Dad’s will,” she mused. “But that probably wouldn’t work. The other members of the family will just give them money.”

“But what kind of use is all that money when they’re in prison?”

She snorted. “Uh, Jessie, sweetheart...I hate to tell you this. But if a Vulpan ran into a Starbucks and hacked everyone inside to death on live national television, no jury in Massachusetts would ever convict.”

“If Massachusetts is their playground, then perhaps you should look into making them play on *your* playground, then,” Jessie urged. “Kit once told me that if you snapped your fingers, the President himself would jump. He said *you* have all the power in the family. Use it.”

Vil’s eyes narrowed, and she gave an almost imperceptible nod. “So, you want me to *destroy* them,” she said in an offering tone.

“They deserve it for hurting Kit,” she said with surprising vehemence. “Just do it *legally*. I don’t want to live my life knowing you had someone murdered over me and Kit. I’d never be able to live with it.”

She gave Jessie a long, serious look. Then she put her paws on Jessie’s arms. “I never make a promise I can’t keep, so I won’t promise. But I will promise you that I’ll *try*.”

“That’s good enough for me, because I know you’ll succeed,” she said with a gentle smile.

“You really are something special, hon,” Vil smiled, then gave her a brief, warm hug.

“Vil...my parents. I’m worried about them. I’m willing to walk through hell for Kit, but they don’t have anything to do with this. My mother would probably have paid half of what it cost to hire that hit man,” she said with a sour frown. “She *hates* Kit, with a passion that’s almost

holy. But I'm worried that me and Kit might cause my family trouble. I don't know what to do."

"Well, I do," Vil said. "Leave it to me, Jessie. I'll make sure they're safe and sound, and they'll never know they were being watched over."

"I appreciate it, Vil, really," she said with a grateful smile. "You're so good to us."

"I'm just being motherly," she winked.

"Well, don't stop on my account," Jessie smiled.

"Well, in that case, see what you can do to talk Kit into letting me mother him a bit more," she said with a sly smile. "I don't like him living in that apartment. You two need a house. A nice big house, with a big yard and plenty of room for your kids, and a maid and cook to free you from all those menial chores, and—"

"Take what you can get, Vil," Jessie teased.

"I'm a *Vulpan*, dear. I get what I want."

"At least until you come up against another *Vulpan*," Jessie winked.

"Don't make me not like you, femme," Vil grinned.

"It's too late for that."

Vil laughed, then put her paw over her mouth when the black-furred dog nurse behind the desk gave her a harsh look. "You're almost too good for my brother," she told Jessie with a smile.

"Nah. We're just right for each other."

“True enough,” she agreed as they returned to his room. He was still asleep, sleeping peacefully, and Jessie’s heart melted when she saw him. He was so strong, such a strong fox, but here he was, totally vulnerable, and yet...he still seemed strong. Even laying in that bed, she remembered how he didn’t worry a whit about himself, his only concern was for *her*. His only worry was for *her*. He had tried to comfort *her* from a hospital bed.

How did she get so lucky to have a male like him love *her*?

“Come on, let’s go watch over the most important male in our lives,” Vil said with a gentle smile and a nudge. “He needs us.”

Kit was *very* unhappy with Jessie, because she ditched school.

He could understand that she was worried about him and was upset, but still, there was little she could do for him, he was just fine, and there was no real reason for her to miss classes. She should have gone, even if she couldn’t concentrate, because an absence was an absence, and they’d hold it against her. He didn’t want her to mess up her school for his sake.

But it was a losing battle, and he knew it. When he woke up, both she and Vil were with him in the room, Jessie sleeping literally at his bedside, and Vil in a chair by the little table next to the window. Both of them seemed to know he was awake before he even got to put his paw on Jessie’s gorgeous blond hair, and he was smothered in kisses from both his sister and his Jessie. The doctor checked in on him before they could talk, though, taking his blood pressure, and bringing in a nurse to change his bandages. Kit got his first look at the wound, which was now a line of stitches about two inches long just to the left of his sternum and literally just below the edge of his left collarbone. It didn’t look all that bad, but it was oozing a

tiny bit of blood after the scabbing that was stuck to the bandage was pulled free. But that bleeding stopped before they even put on the new bandage.

After they left, Vil sat down and talked to him. She told him everything she knew, and speculated on which uncle was the one that did it. There wasn't much more she could tell him that he already didn't know, but what she did tell him was what she promised Jessie the night before.

What surprised him even more was that she agreed to it. "I owe her that much, little bro," she stated. "This *does* involve her too. If she wants me to play nice, well, I'll try it her way first."

"That's all I want," Jessie nodded. "I know it may not bother you, but it bothers *me*."

"And that's why I'll try it your way first."

Then came the argument...such as it was. When he realized it was ten, and Jessie's first Wednesday class was in session, he told her she should go to school...and he almost got his head bitten off by *both* of them. He endured a ten minute tirade from the two of them about how she was worried about him, and her place was there, and so on and so on and so on. He shut up just so they'd give over on the nagging and give him some peace and quiet.

They weren't the only ones playing hookey, though. The entire crew showed up at eleven, when visiting hours began, and they stayed for nearly three hours. Lilly brought a camera and they took quite a few pictures of him, the room, the crew in the room, Jessie and Vil, even the doctor and the nurses that came to check on him. Mike put quite a few of them on a memory card, to add to both the website and two that would go into the magazine.

It had hit the news last night that he'd been shot. It wasn't that big a deal, just a news blurb on the local channels, but on *campus* it was big news. *Lone Star* was a popular magazine on campus, and to hear that one of the staff had been shot rippled across campus by ten. He received quite a few cards and even three bouquets of flowers once word got out, and Mike told people on the website where they could drop off the cards.

Kit kept watching Vil. She would spend quite a bit of time over by the window as the others kept him engaged, on her phone. He wondered what she was hearing, what orders she was giving. The Ice Queen was going to rampage across Massachusetts like a tornado, he knew it, and he just wondered how much she was going to adhere to her promise to try to do it legally once she was back home, and no longer had Jessie right there to remind her of it.

The collie doctor from last night showed up around two, and he shooed everyone but Vil and Jessie out of the room. He examined Kit and asked quite a few questions. "Alright, Kit, here's the deal," he said, closing the chart in his paws and looking at him. "We're going to take you down and give you a CAT scan to survey the injury and make sure the surgeons did everything right. After that, if everything pans out and there's no sign of infection, and with luck, we'll probably be releasing you the day after tomorrow."

"Yes!" Kit said happily.

"Don't get too happy about that," he grinned. "Part and parcel with an early release is a nurse that comes twice a day to check up on you and change your bandages, and I'll be stopping by once a day to examine you and make sure you're behaving. You'll also be restricted to your house and put on extended rest. That may not be a big hole, Kit, but it *does* go all the

way through, ya know,” he grinned. “The key to a quick recovery for you is to keep as sedate as possible and limit how much you move. Now, I’m willing to let you go home and do your recovering there, but if I see you’re not healing, I’ll haul your furry butt right back in here so fast your tail won’t know where you went.”

“Understood,” Kit chuckled. “Why two days? Why not tomorrow?”

“The simple truth of it is, we could probably release you right now and you could do alright,” he said honestly. “But right now, we’re much more worried about infection than the possibility you might tear your stitches. We’re keeping you over to make absolutely sure that wound doesn’t get infected, and if it does, you’re already right here so we can stomp on it quickly.”

“Well, that makes sense.”

“What are the chances of that happening, doctor?” Jessie asked.

“Right now? Pretty slim. We’re over the hump as far as the risk of infection goes, but we’re not taking any chances. Sometimes the sneakier bugs take a couple of days to start showing up. Now, have they let you out of that bed today, Kit?”

Kit laughed. “Only to go to the bathroom. Which they won’t even let me do alone,” he added, giving Jessie a cool look.

Her cheeks frizzed when the doctor grinned at her.

“Well, then I think you’ll be up to moving to a wheelchair. I’ll have a nurse come get you in a minute, and we’ll take you down to the CAT room. So, pretty ladies, help him sit up and baby him while I go fetch a wheelchair

for his drag race down to the second floor,” he grinned, then he left the room.

Kit had seen TV shows about CAT scanners, but the reality of it was... big. It was a huge machine that took up the back half of the room in which it was placed, looking like some kind of mutant plastic donut. Kit was placed on the moving table in the middle, and a camera-looking device orbited around him behind the cover of the device. It was a rather dull experience, actually, for he had to lay in there and be still for a quite a while. “So, this is like an MRI?” he asked the technician as the machinery hidden inside the machine continued to hum.

“Kinda the same principle,” the rabbit replied from behind his shielded position. “But CAT scanners are actually X-ray machines, where an MRI uses magnetic fields. CT scans are good for what they’re looking for here, damaged tissues around the sternum. Those will show up in the imaging very clearly. They could have used an MRI to do it too, but they won’t put you in an MRI because of the screws in your back.”

“But the screws in my back are supposed to be titanium. That’s not magnetic, is it?”

“Nope, but there’s also some radio waves used, which would cause the screws in your back to heat up,” he answered. “It wouldn’t make them melt or anything, but given where those screws are, I can see why the doctor didn’t want to take any unnecessary risks. If they thermally expanded too far, they might crack the bones they’re in...and those bones aren’t in a very good place for such a thing to happen.”

“Ah. I didn’t know that.”

“Well, now ya do,” the technician chuckled.

The CAT scan took about thirty minutes total, and he was back in a wheelchair being pushed by a rather burly bobcat nurse or orderly, he wasn't sure, who chatted amiably at him while taking him back up to his room. "You should talk to some of the docs about fixing that ear," he noted as they came out of the elevator. "It doesn't look like it would be all that hard for them to make as good as new."

Kit was quiet a moment, recalling what Jessie said about his ear. *I can't imagine what you'd look like with your ear whole*, she'd said to him. *It's almost like this was how you were meant to be to me, you know?*

"No," he said as the orderly pushed open his door. "I like my ear just the way it is."

Jessie eventually lost the battle, because Kit cheated. Outrageously.

While she and Vil were down at the cafeteria getting something to eat, Kit called the nurse, who called Doctor Barnett for him. He told them he was worried that Jessie was going to flunk school if something wasn't done, so he asked the doctor to *force* Jessie out of the room after visiting hours were done that night. She just had to go back to school, she couldn't miss two days in a row. She'd be so far behind that it would take her a week to get back up to speed, and that didn't count the bad grades from missed work, the possibility of doing poorly on tests, and having absences on her record that might cost her if she had another emergency this semester and had to miss more classes.

"So, you want me to step out in front of that semi, do ya?" Barnett laughed over the phone. "Don't answer that. Sure, I'll be the evil meanie for

ya. If worrying about her is keeping you from getting your rest, well, something's gotta be done about it."

And so it came to pass. The crew came back after work and hung out in his room for a while. Rick and Savid brought a laptop and showed him the layout of the next issue, including the front page picture of him in his hospital bed, with Jessie and Vil sitting on each side, and him giving a thumbs-up to the camera. Barry had done a story about the shooting, which read almost like something out of *Newsweek* given its detail and the number of interviews he did with the police and the hospital. It ran three whole pages, which created an issue with 26 pages rather than the usual target of between 20 and 24. He told them he'd be out by Friday, which relieved everyone greatly, and caused Barry to furiously edit part of the story he'd written about it.

They hung around for a few hours, and then drifted out one by one, until Rick was the last one. And much to Kit's happiness, Martha stopped by to see him. Martha was a surprisingly tall great dane, which made her a pretty good match for Rick. But she was a plump as she was tall, a middle-aged woman who enjoyed eating the food she cooked, and had a very matronly and caring personality. She'd raised three sons with Rick, all three out of the house now and two in college. Martha had been a part time worker before their youngest left for school at LSU, but now she'd taken up working full time in a crafts store, for she was exceptionally good at sewing and was a good expert to have about for questions asked by customers.

"Martha!" he said happily as she came into the room.

"Hello dear," she said with a smile, bringing in a fruit basket and a covered box. "I brought you some dinner, I thought you might be about sick of hospital food."

“You’re a lifesaver, Martha,” he said with a laugh. “What is it?”

“Meat loaf, mashed potatoes, green beans, and some homemade rolls,” she answered. “And how are you feeling?”

“Fine, just a little achy, and the bandages itch,” he grinned, his eyes locked on that box in her paw.

She laughed. “I take It you’re hungry?”

“For real food? You bet I am. Jessie won’t leave long enough to cook me anything.”

“Oh, don’t push this on me, you silly male,” Jessie laughed. “You never *asked* for me to make you something.”

“But you know I hate hospital food,” he said, looking at her. “You should have sensed my hunger and distaste for hospital food and taken action!” He sighed. “And here I thought we were perfect for each other. I’m starting to re-evaluate the foundations of our relationship, pretty kitty.”

She whacked him with the spare pillow, albeit gently and carefully, little more than a light tap to his muzzle.

“I’ll give you foundations for our relationship when I get you home,” she threatened, though she was smiling. “You seem to forget who’s going to be the one taking care of you when you’re out of here.”

“Uh, Rick, think I can borrow Mickey’s old bedroom?”

Martha laughed. “Oh no, you made that bed, young’un, time to lay in it,” Martha warned.

“Maybe they’ll hold me here for a few more days,” Kit mused, which made Jessie laugh.

“Well, it’s good to see you in such high spirits,” Martha said, taking Rick’s paw.

“High spirits is a good term for it,” he grunted. “The meds they had me on made me as high as a kite up until about this morning. I think I’d rather take the pain over that.”

“I kept saying that while I was pregnant,” Martha chuckled. “Then the contractions came. They couldn’t give me enough painkillers after the truth was staring me in the face.”

“My reasoning is a little different, Martha,” Kit said.

“When Kit broke his back, they had him on some pretty strong stuff,” Vil said. “After he started to heal, they had to wean him off of it.”

“Yeah,” Kit nodded. “Martha, this is my sister Vil. Vil, Martha, Rick’s wife.”

“It’s nice to finally meet the legend in person,” Martha smiled, taking Vil’s paw.

Vil laughed. “A legend in my own mind maybe,” she winked.

“I’m sorry it took so long for me to come see you. I was in El Paso yesterday to see Brian. When Rick called and told me what happened, I wanted to come back to see you, but I couldn’t trade in my plane ticket,” she said with a sigh. “And I wanted to make you something nice when I did get back.”

“I’m so glad you did,” he said as Jessie unpacked the box for him, and before his eyes was *real* food. “How was Brian?” he asked.

“Same as always. Like a big teddy bear. He sent you a get well soon card, by the way.”

“Tell him thank you from me. How did the interview go?”

She smiled. “He hasn’t heard anything solid yet, but he had a good feeling about it. To think our oldest is going to follow his old man into the journalism business. I would have hoped for something better for him,” she said, giving her husband a smile and a teasing poke.

Kit laughed. “Well, tell him congratulations from me.”

“Dear, working at KXEP is a hell of a lot different from what we do,” Rick chuckled. “Brian has a face for television. A mug like mine’s best served staying in print.”

“What is Brian going to be doing? Reporting?” Vil asked.

“Brian’s a meteorologist,” Rick answered. “He’s going to be doing weather forecasts for a TV station in El Paso. It’s his first big break since getting out of college.”

“He’s our oldest,” Martha added. “Our younger boys are still in college.”

“You sent three kids through college? That must have been expensive,” Vil noted.

“It was a challenge, that’s for sure,” Martha said. “You’re looking at the two biggest misers in Texas, Vil honey. We don’t make pennies squeak, we make the beg for mercy.”

“Well, I’m impressed. That’s quite an accomplishment. Congratulations.”

“Well, now I can say I know a TV weatherman,” Kit chuckled.

“He’ll be doing weekends and off hours stuff for a while, but after he’s been there a while he might move up,” Rick said modestly. “Brian’s a handsome boy, and he’s actually pretty good at his job. It just in the TV business, looking good on camera’s almost as important as predicting the weather.”

“Yes, Brian doesn’t look like a patchwork quilt like his father,” Martha said, which made Vil laugh.

“If I recall, dear, my fur is what me got me my first date,” he told her.

“Well, not everyone has good taste like I do,” she said.

Martha got to know Vil as Jessie tried to feed him, and he kept slapping her paw away. “There’s nothing at all wrong with my right arm, you silly kitty,” he told her teasingly.

“Well, excuse me for worrying about you,” she returned with a slight smile.

It was a wonderful meal, almost tasting heavenly after two days of hospital food. Martha was a good cook, and he was ever fond of meat loaf. After he finished eating, Doctor Barnett came into the room. “Well, I hate to break up this little party, including food,” he said, glancing at the plate on the little wheeled tray, “but Kit’s going to need a good rest for tomorrow. So I hate to tell you all this, but his visiting hours are over. For *everyone*,” he said with a smile, but quite firmly, staring right at Jessie and Vil.

“But he—“

“Doctor’s orders, little lady,” Barnett said firmly. “He’s going to be busy tomorrow, so it’s best to just wait until he’s ready to be discharged before you come back.”

“So that means you *will* be in school tomorrow, young lady,” Kit said adamantly. “Vil, make sure it happens.”

“I’m not going to be able to concentrate at all,” she complained.

“That doesn’t matter,” he said. “What matters is you show up, so they don’t mark you absent again. I’m sure we can arrange it so they don’t discharge me until after you get out of your last class.”

“What time is that?” Barnett asked.

“Around four,” Kit answered for her.

“Oh, definitely. He probably won’t be discharged until around five,” he said with a nod.

“See? So go to school tomorrow, and Vil can come pick you up and come back just in time to take me home.”

“Alright,” she sighed. She leaned down and gave him a lingering kiss, then Vil kissed him on the cheek and patted him on the shoulder.

“I’ll take her home,” Vil said.

“I drove here.”

“Give your keys to Marcus, he’ll drive your car back for you,” she said. “I’d rather take you home myself. We have some things to talk about.”

“I—okay. See you tomorrow, my handsome fox,” she said. “You can call me if you get lonely.”

“I’ll be fine,” he told her. “I’ll call you before I go to sleep, just so you know I’m okay.”

“You’d better,” she said, nuzzling him.

Barnett herded them all out of the room as they said goodbye, and he leaned back against his pillow and sighed. Truth be told, he’d rather have his sister and Jessie with him, but it was for their own good. Jessie *had* to go to school tomorrow, and Vil would be too much of a worrier to get much rest. He appreciated their concern, but in this case, it was more of a detriment to them than it was a boon for him to be comfortable to allow them to go on with it. Jessie needed to go to school, and Vil needed a night in a bed so she could get some real sleep. Those two femmes meant a great deal to him, and he’d make damn sure they were both okay.

Fortunately for him, things went very smoothly in the hospital. All the tests they did showed that the surgeons had repaired the damaged tissues around his sternum perfectly, and there was no sign of infection. The wounds were already healing, and things looked quite favorable. Favorable enough for them to return his pants to him—his shirt and coat had been cut off of him and were trash now—and Vil had one of her panther bodyguards bring an overized shirt she bought for him to put on, his arm lashed to him by a sling under the shirt. He felt a heck of a lot better after he had on real clothes, even if they didn’t want him moving any more than absolutely necessary. He felt a little lonely, that was certain, but he could handle it.

It did make the time crawl by, though. They wanted him to rest, to not move around, and he wasn’t used to that. He was an active fox, and he didn’t realize how active he was until they didn’t want him to move around.

He laid in bed for a while and tried to watch TV, but TV never really interested him and he could only watch so much news before he got depressed about the sad state of the world. After that petered out, he sat at the little table by the window and read newspapers the nurses brought him, then started on one of the books from home that Vil had had her panther guards go retrieve the day before.

Some people watched inane TV. Kit read history books about Rome, Greece, and the ancient civilizations.

But his heart wasn't really in it. He basically drifted through the day, waiting for them to let him go home, waiting to see his sister and Jessie again. He guessed it was a delayed reaction after the fact, but now he felt strangely vulnerable, and being alone was more unnerving than it was restful. All he wanted was to be around his family and friends, to be near them and know they were alright, and know he was alright.

A cat orderly did bring him a present around noon. It was a copy of *Lone Star*, and there on the cover was a picture of him, Vil, and Jessie, and underneath it read the title *He's Okay!*

That was sweet of the crew, really.

He got curious, and read the article. The article read much like what he'd heard Rick and the officers say, and it did specifically state that it was Rick who had shot and killed the attacker, and that the accomplice was up to the time of printing still at large.

The last two paragraphs were what caught his attention:

Kit is slated for release from Austin General on Friday afternoon, and is expected to make a full recovery. We hope to have him back in the office keeping our facts straight very soon. Well-wishers are encouraged to drop him an email here at the magazine. Letters can be emailed to kit@lonestarmagazine.com.

A \$50,000 reward has been offered for information that leads to the arrest and conviction of the accomplice that participated in the attack. Anyone who has any information about this attack should call the Austin Police, the Texas Rangers, or Crimestoppers.

A reward? Naturally...that had to be Vil. But he wouldn't say anything about it. He *wanted* that other bastard to be found and thrown in jail, and if there was a big bounty on his head, the chances he'd be caught were much better.

He leafed through the magazine, knowing what was in it but having nothing better to do than read it...until he got to the mailbag. The *School Daze* strips were gone. In their place was one of Jeffrey's drawings, a three panel comic that took up the entire top half of the page. In all three, there were very realistic sketches of Jessie, in a dark, gloomy kind of background. In the first, she was standing far to the left side of the empty page, in the distance, her head bowed and her paws before her. The caption read *I didn't know what you meant to me until I almost lost you*. In the second panel, she was closer, her back to the viewer, looking into the distance. The caption read *I thought we had forever. In a second, I almost lost forever*. In the third, it was a close-up of her, her expression hopeful. *Life is too short, and love is too precious, my handsome fox. Will you marry me?*

He was *stunned*.

Either Jeffrey was playing the worst joke in the history of the universe, or Jessie *had proposed to him using the magazine*.

It took him almost five full minutes to wrap his mind around what he was seeing. When he did, when he finally got his senses, he was on the phone so fast he almost tore his stitches reaching for the phone with his bound left arm, forgetting it was in a sling. He called the office first, and heard Marty's voice answer. "Lone Star," he called.

"If you don't get Jeffrey on the phone *right now*, I'm going to come down there and strangle you with a mouse cord," Kit said in a deadly voice.

Marty laughed. "I can do that, honey," he beamed over the phone, then he was put on hold. Jeffrey picked it up almost immediately, and Kit could hear that it was on speaker. "Kit, I thought you might call," he said, then Kit heard almost everyone laughing in the office.

"If that was a joke, I'm gonna—"

"No joke!" Jeffrey told him. "Jessie wrote it and asked me to draw it. It's *serious*, bud. She proposed to you."

Kit was silent a long moment. Shy Jessie had proposed to him...by using a public magazine? That was almost...almost...insane! In both regards! It was insane that she would propose to *him*, since she was so traditional, but it was even more insane that she would do it literally in the public venue!

"Kit? You there?" Mike asked, snickering.

“I’m here,” he said woodenly, which caused even more laughter. “So, what’s the answer!” they all shouted in unison.

“As *if* you even have to ask that,” he snorted, then he laughed. “Rick?”

“Yeah, son?”

“Why did you let Jessie go through with that?”

“It was what she wanted, son, and besides, I wasn’t going to say a word. It wasn’t my place.”

Kit sighed. “You realize I’m going to get all of you for this.”

“Such are the declarations of males who can’t do a damned thing about it,” Lilly laughed. “So answer her!”

“My answer is in Rick’s desk,” Kit said. “Can you bring it to the hospital, Rick? I’d like to have it handy.”

“I’ll bring it right now, Kit,” he said with a chuckle, as the others all started demanding what he meant. “Kit bought Jessie a ring,” he said, meant for the others, but audible to him. “A damn fine one at that. He had it with him when he was shot. He was attacked more or less on the way to go propose to her.”

That wasn’t quite the way it happened, but Rick had planted that seed before Kit could even say a word, and he realized that it would be impossible to get that idea out of their minds. They all begged to see it, and Kit relented. There was a pause, and then came gasps from the crew as they must have been looking at it. “My God, Kit, how much did that cost?”

“A *lot*,” Kit answered. “Why do you think I’ve been walking to work the last month?”

“You sold your truck? Damn!” Barry gasped.

“No, I was just saving money on gas,” he laughed in reply.

“I’ll be there in about fifteen minutes, son,” Rick told him. “Just hang in there.”

“Yo, Kit. I’m saving the original board for you,” Jeffrey added, then he hung up the phone.

Kit spent that fifteen minutes in a bit of a daze. He’d already bought a ring, and if he wouldn’t have been shot, he would have looked for the right opportunity to propose to her. But this, this just overwhelmed him. Jessie had gone against her personality, her nature, even her training as a young lady in what she did. He was amazed. He was astounded. He was...*happy*. That she would do something like that for him, so much against her nature, it showed how much she loved him. *She* proposed to *him*! She beat him to the punch!

God, what a femme!

Rick arrived while he was pondering it. He came in and shook Kit’s hand, then produced the little box holding the ring. “Here it is, son,” he said. “Now, when are you going to give it to her?”

“The first thing when I get home,” he grinned in reply. “Now I want you to back me up if she asks about the ring,” he said. “You’re my witness, boss, I had the ring *before* today. I had marriage on my mind long before she had Jeffrey draw that strip.”

Rick laughed. “You surely did. And I’ll make sure to tell her when she shows it to me.”

“I knew you were a good guy,” Kit grinned.

Kit’s waiting grew almost unbearable after Rick went back to the office. He wanted to see Jessie. He wanted to see her *now*, but she wouldn’t be there until after four. And having to remain calm and sedate made it worse. Five separate times, he got verbally spanked by the nurses for too much moving around. At one point, they even called in Doctor Barnett, and they threatened to tie him to the bed if he didn’t either sit down or lay down and remain stationary.

It was an eternity. He almost started watching the clock, waiting... waiting...waiting. The time between three and four was absolute hell, knowing he’d see her soon, but knowing it was so far away. He was like a hyper child waiting for Christmas, unable to sleep, unable to get out of bed for fear that Santa would pass his house by, trapped into an eternity of waiting for the desired prize at the other end of that long tunnel. Doctor Barnett threatened to medicate him if he didn’t calm down around about 3:15, when they gave him a final checkup, took his blood pressure, and drew blood one final time to test for any infection. They sent it off to the lab while the nurses changed his bandage, and Barnett stayed in the room to keep him from pacing while they waited for the reply.

That was the torture. Barnett kept him solidly in his chair, where all he could do was tap his foot and wait for the lab to do whatever it was they did.

A few minutes after four, the answer came. “Well, your white count is normal, no unusual spikes anywhere,” he said. “That’s that, Kit. You’re outta here. Call your ride, and I’ll have the nurse get the papers ready.”

He was on the phone seconds after Barnett left the room. He called Vil's cell, and she picked it up before it could even ring once. "Hello?"

"Sis, I'm being released!" he told her happily. "Can you go get Jessie and come pick me up?"

"I already have her. I just picked her up from school. We'll be there in about twenty minutes."

"Don't be late, I need to talk to Jessie!" he told her. "I mean I *really* need to talk to Jessie. Put her on."

"I rather thought you might," she said in an amused voice, then hung up before he could press her.

That *bitch*! Oh, she was gonna get it!

Calling back would be pointless. Vil just wouldn't answer the phone. He was forced to wait.

He did get a little sidetracked when Barnett came back in with a nurse and some papers. He basically allowed Kit to sign out of the hospital, then sign some agreements about his home care. A nurse would come twice a day to check on him and check his bandages, and once a day, about 8:00pm, Barnett himself would be making a house call to check his progress. He'd have to return in two weeks to have the stitches taken out, but that could be done at the outpatient clinic, which was in an annex building across the street from the hospital. Barnett brought him an extra sling, just in case he had to remove the one he had, and explained to him how to put it on by demonstrating with the spare, as his nurse put it on him.

He didn't hear the door open, but he definitely heard her voice. "Kit?"

He turned around, and she hurried to him. She stopped just before him, reaching out but afraid to embrace him, but he didn't give her a chance. His good arm reached out and dragged her into an embrace, and he put his right arm around her, holding her shoulder, and did nothing more. He just held onto her, tightly, his cheek against the side of her head. She put her paws in the only place she felt safe to hold him, low on his back, and just leaned against him contentedly.

"Jessie," he breathed.

"Yes, Kit?"

"I'm going to murder Jeffrey," he told her.

She giggled. "So, you saw it."

"And we're going to talk about that when we get home," he told her. "There's something I want to say to you, but it can wait until we're in private."

"An answer?"

"You'll find out." He let go of her, and looked to Vil. "Take me home, sis."

And she did. There was a *limo* waiting in the pickup lane. Vil's two panther bodyguards helped him into the limo, and Vil and Jessie got in behind him. Jessie kept giving him expectant looks, but Vil just sat over there with a little smile on her face. She knew him, she knew him well.

He kept his peace until he was home. They helped him out, and Jessie opened the door for him and led him into the apartment. Vil stopped at the

door, but did not come in. She just gave him a knowing smile, and then slowly closed it, leaving them alone.

“Kit, I just—“

“No, my pretty kitty, don’t say a word. We’ve always joked about marriage, and I’ve talked about it, but I’ve never done anything to prove to you how serious I was.” He dug into his pocket. “The day I was shot, Jessie, I was bringing you this. I’d just picked it up that day.”

He held out the box to her.

Her fingers trembled when she took it from him, and then her eyes widened and she gasped when she opened it. “That’s why I was walking to work, pretty kitty. And why I’ve had no food in the house for the last month. I was saving for this. I wanted to propose to you, Jessie, but you beat me to it.”

He put his paw over one of the paws holding the ring box, and he knelt down. “Jessica Desdemona Williams, I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?”

“*YES!*” she screamed, dropping to her knees and kissing him passionately, even as she was very mindful of his injury. She put her chin on his shoulder, and behind his back, she took the ring out of the box and slipped it on her finger. “I love you, Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan, and I want to be together with you always. I want to have your children, and watch them grow, and grow old with you. I want the *forever* that was almost taken from us.”

She kissed him again, and he heard Vil chuckling at the doorway. “That’s not something you do on your knees, you two. And

congratulations.”

Jessie’s cheeks frizzed, and she laughed helplessly. “Did you buy him the ring, Vil?”

“Nope. If it was me, it would have been a hell of a lot bigger. Rick told me about the ring yesterday, but swore me to secrecy. Kit bought it before he was shot.”

“So now you know, my pretty kitty,” he breathed in her ear. “I was touched by your proposal, I really was. But the traditionalist femme in you can rest easy knowing that I was half a heartbeat from it. If not for being shot, I’d have proposed already.”

“I love you!” she said happily. “When can we have the ceremony?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he chuckled. “After I heal for one, and after you’re sure you can handle such a big change in your life without it affecting school for another.”

“So, a month?” she offered.

“Oh, hell no,” Vil called. “My little brother’s getting married. You’re *not* going to run to some judge somewhere and get married in a little office! Oh no, this calls for a *real* wedding!”

“Hell no,” Kit growled, looking at his sister.

“Come on, I dare you to fight about it,” she said pugnaciously. “You want to deny Jessie a chance at the kind of wedding little girls dream about?”

That *bitch*. She knew exactly how to attack him. He could reject her help all day, but as soon as Jessie’s happiness got involved, he just had no

defense. He couldn't deny her anything.

"Then I'll leave it up to her. *Jessie* gets to plan the wedding."

"Actually, that's my parents' job," Jessie giggled.

"The way your mother feels about me? It would likely involve machine guns and land mines."

Jessie laughed, then got up and helped Kit back to his feet, but she kept her arm around him and stayed in his embrace. "I'll have to tell them," she said. "Want me to tape it for you?"

"I should be able to hear it clearly if I just go outside," he said dryly, which made both Jessie and Vil laugh.

"I think she might calm down a little once she knows we're engaged, my handsome fox," she said. "Not much, though. I guess I should get used to that," she sighed. "It's going to make visiting my folks a little tense."

"It'll all work out," Vil assured them. She came over and put an arm around each of them, hugging them both. "I'm very happy for both of you," she told them. "And I'm going to go back home now, Kit. You're going to be okay, and I can go home knowing that you're home, you're going to be just fine, and you've done what you should have done a month ago."

"I wasn't ready a month ago," he said, looking into Jessie's eyes adoringly. "I didn't have a ring. I couldn't propose without a ring."

"I would have said yes," she told him with a loving smile. "Ring or no ring."

"I'd never take anything you deserve away from you, my pretty kitty," he said softly.

“Then never leave me,” she told him, her heart in her eyes.

“Never.”

“I’ll make sure of that,” Vil told them with a chuckle. “It’s a guarantee.” She kissed Kit on the cheek, then kissed Jessie on the cheek. “Now then, it’s time for me to go. I have a lot to do, a wedding to plan, and some family members to castrate.”

“Behave,” Jessie told her seriously.

“I promise to do my best to do things the way you want,” she said honestly. “But I reserve the right to deal with them in the way they deserve.”

“Just remember what I said.”

“I won’t kill them. But when I’m done, they’ll wish they were dead,” she said in a cold, deadly voice that made Jessie physically flinch.

Jessie laughed. “I think I can live with that.”

“I’m glad you can. Jessie, call your parents tonight and tell them.”

“I will. I’ll call them right now.”

“Good. Be good to each other, you two. And call me, both of you. Every day.”

“We will,” Kit assured with a nod.

Vil left then, left so abruptly that it surprised him a little bit. He expected her to stay at least until tomorrow...but then again, Vil was still bristling mad, and that made her a little unpredictable. Now that Kit was safely home—no doubt with an army of security guards surrounding

Westwood, all out of sight—she felt it was safe to leave him now, and get on to the business of rabid, no-holds-barred, bare-knuckled payback.

May God speed her on that journey.

Kit leaned down and kissed Jessie tenderly, just revelling in the thought of it. They were engaged. They were going to be married...and all he could think was *finally*!

“Well, what now, Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan?” she asked with a light smile but loving eyes.

“Now, you call your parents,” he told her.

“I want to move in. Tonight. Now.”

“I want you here,” he returned. “But your parents need to know.”

She looked down at the ring on her finger, then she looked up at him. “I love you, my handsome fox,” she said simply, nuzzling him.

“And I love you, my pretty kitty.”

Vil settled herself in the limo, feeling very satisfied. It seemed that her gentle nudging had been all it took to get those two together, and now that they were engaged, she was quite content about.

But there were things to do. From what she’d learned so far, the orders had come out of Boston, but so far her investigators had not narrowed down exactly who gave the order. Whoever did it was very, very careful, obviously fearful of being discovered.

Not fearful of the law. Fearful of *her*. Vilenne Vulpan was fifty times worse than the law.

“Marcus, laptop please,” she called. The panther took her laptop from the front seat and passed it back to her, and she set it on her lap.

“Shall I call the airport, madam?”

“Yes,” she answered as her laptop came up. “Tell them we’re not going straight to Boston.”

“Where are we going then, madam?”

The system came up. She open a file, a detailed report sent to her just in the last hour, showing the current progress on several projects, from shipyard business to her building legal challenge over the will to the search for who shot her brother. “Cincinnati,” she finally answered. “I think I want to meet Jessie’s shrew of a mother face to face.” She went to another file, holding the telephone numbers of certain individuals that the law would very much like to see disappear. “And step on her.”

“Very well, madam,” Marcus acknowledged.

Chapter 8

Judging from the fireworks he could hear over the cell, Hannah reacted to the news pretty much well the way he expected.

He sat on the couch as Jessie paced back and forth through the living room, listening to her. To her credit, she didn't try to hedge or try to work her into it. Jessie knew that her mother would object, so she went right to the point. Within two minutes of making the call, the message was delivered...in surprising terms.

"Mom, listen. Kit proposed to me, and I accepted," she stated, in an even voice. That was it. No softening the blow, no using more flowery language. The facts, straight up.

The eruption came immediately. Kit couldn't make out Hannah's words, but he could definitely hear her screaming, even from that distance. Hannah raged at her daughter for long moments, as Jessie remained quiet, but then she retaliated when Hannah played out the initial salvo. "Now you listen to me!" Jessie barked. "I don't *care* how you feel about it, Mom! This is my life! I love him, and I want to marry him! You can either accept that, or you can not accept it. That's your choice. But don't ever think that there is *any* way you can *ever* make me change my mind."

He heard her tone change, from demanding and outraged to wheedling, but Jessie just stonewalled her. "If you're not going to do anything but tell me how I'm messing up my life, mother, than I think I have nothing more to

say to you. Allow me to introduce you to *your* favorite way to end an argument!”

Then she hung up.

Kit laughed delightedly, then winced a little when it sent a little shiver of pain through his shoulder. “That’s giving her her own medicine,” he said with an approving nod.

The phone rang again almost immediately. Jessie opened it, closed it, then deliberately turned it off. “I’m glad she doesn’t have *my* cell number,” she laughed. “Let’s call Rick and tell him the news.”

The news was spread quickly. It was Friday, the late day at work, so everyone was there when Jessie called them. “He’s putting it on the speaker in the office,” she told him, as she set the cellphone to speaker as well and held it out for them. “Rick? Guys?” Jessie called.

“We’re here, hon,” Rick said.

“All of us!” Lilly called.

“So, what did he say?” Marty asked.

“That’s a stupid question, Marty!” Kit called. “But I had to do it properly. Kneeling down and everything.”

There was a wild celebratory whoop from the office. “Congratulations, guys!” Jeffrey said.

“I’ll put it up on the website!” Mike called happily. “Did you finish that drawing, Jeffrey?”

“I drew up a new board announcing the engagement,” Jeffrey said to them. “It has you two kissing, and just the word *yes* in big letters across the

top,” he added.

“You *didn’t*!” Jessie gasped, her cheeks ruffling.

“Hey, if you’re gonna propose in a magazine, it’s only fair to the readers to see the answer,” Jeffrey laughed.

“Congratulations you two, really,” Rick said. “Son, I’ll drop by in a few minutes and bring you your laptop.”

“Thanks, boss.”

“What did the hospital say?”

“I’m on extended rest at home,” he answered. “Restricted activity, but I hope to be back at work in a couple of weeks at the most. It’s not that strenuous to sit at a desk, after all. I just won’t be typing very fast until I get rid of this sling,” he chuckled.

“Don’t push yourself, bud,” Barry called. “We’ll be here.”

“Maybe I teach you edit while your arm heals,” Savid offered.

“Hey, that’d be cool,” Kit said brightly.

“Only if you can do it here,” Jessie warned. “The doctor told him to rest, and I’ll make *sure* he rests,” she said. “I’m going to move in with him.”

“You go femme!” Lilly said happily. “Get those claws in him and don’t let go til after he says I do!”

“She’s not going to be dragging me to the altar, Lilly,” Kit laughed. “I’m entering into that nightmare willing and able.”

“Nightmare?” Jessie asked with an arched brow.

“I’ll enjoy the torment,” he said, giving her a kiss.

“I hope so,” she teased, nuzzling him.

“Now if only we had someone there to take pictures of that warm and fuzzy moment,” Mike mused, which made Kit laugh.

“Well, I think we’ll let you get back to work,” Jessie told them. “I need to go buy some groceries and cook him something for dinner.”

“No, no, no cooking,” Rick said. “I’m coming by, I’ll bring you something. What do you want?”

“Pizza,” Kit said hungrily.

Rick laughed. “Pizza it is. What kind and where from?”

“Pizza Hut,” they said in unison “A medium supreme for me,” Kit said.

“Get me something without mushrooms,” Jessie said. “Outside of that, I’m not picky.”

“Got it. I should be down in about half an hour, kids. Don’t start eating the carpet before I get there.”

Jessie laughed. “I may not be here, Rick, I *still* have to go to the store. There’s almost nothing to eat here. Kit’s been starving himself to buy my ring. And I’m not too happy about that,” she said, giving him a stern look.

“Well, I am,” he told her.

“Uh, you have money for that, hon? I can—“

“I’m fine, Rick. Vil gave me a pre-engagement present.”

“Oh, she *did not*—“

“It’s alright, Kit,” she said placatingly. “She knew you were broke because you bought the ring. She gave me two thousand dollars to hold us over until you get better. We do have to pay the rent and the bills and eat, you know. And since you don’t have insurance, she didn’t know if you had any kind of workman’s comp to pay you while you heal.”

“Well, I guess that’s alright,” he said. “At least she didn’t try to give you a check. I wouldn’t put it past her.”

“She’s tried,” Jessie giggled. “But I keep telling her no.”

“Well, that was nice of her,” Marty said. “Think she might want to take care of me?”

“You’re not her type, Marty,” Kit chuckled.

“Well, I wouldn’t have let you get tossed into the street,” Rick chuckled. “You’re not just my workers, you’re my family too. And families watch out for each other.”

“Aww, I feel a group hug coming on,” Mike said in a gushy voice, then he squealed when someone must have slapped him or something.

“I’ll get a move on, kids. Be there in a bit.”

“Well, what shall we do while we wait for Rick?” Jessie asked after they said their goodbyes and closed the phone.

“I can think of something, future Misses Vulpan,” he said, pulling her against him. She giggled and cuddled in with him.

“I think I can go to the store after we eat,” she said with a contented sigh, leaning her head against his shoulder and neck, and then she began to

purr.

John thought that perhaps Hannah had gone a bit too far this time.

He sat in his chair in front of the TV, turned off, with a book in his paws, trying to focus on reading while Hannah stormed around the house, carrying the telephone with her. She'd been trying to call Jessica back for nearly two hours, hitting redial every few minutes, pacing back and forth and back and forth, from the kitchen to the foyer and back again. She was quite furious and outraged, and John was keeping his mouth shut.

Unlike Hannah, John wasn't half as opposed to the idea. Oh, he certainly felt that Jessica was too young to get married, and that she should have most definitely finished school first...and that might still happen. What little he'd managed to piece together so far was that Jessica was *engaged*, that she didn't elope. There was time to try to convince her to hold off on the actual wedding until after she graduated from school, when she could more diligently focus herself on the change of lifestyle that came with having a spouse. But where Hannah was violently opposed to Jessica's choice in males, John wasn't. Kit seemed to be a decent, hard-working sort that would treat Jessica well, but no amount of trying to explain it to Hannah was going to move her. For her, this was personal, and it wasn't about Jessica. It was about her own father.

He could see that rather clearly. Hannah's father was a fox, and he had not been a good father to her, nor a good husband to her mother. He'd been a lazy, shiftless sort who cheated on Hannah's mother at the drop of a hat, yet her mother wouldn't leave him because she loved him. It was quite a sad situation, actually. Victor had used Patricia, living off of her, cheating

on her, and when Hannah was nine, Patricia had finally reached her limit and laid down an ultimatum to Victor. He would either shape up or ship out.

And he left...but not before cleaning out the bank accounts and taking as much furniture as he could fit in his truck while Patricia was at work and Hannah and her two brothers were at school.

Hannah spent most of her childhood listening to her mother tell her how no-good her fox father was, and it developed a prejudice against foxes in her mind. To her, *all* foxes were like her father. If Kit were a cat or a dog or something, John felt she wouldn't be quite this adamant about it, though she would still object to it. But since he was a fox, Hannah's personal prejudices were building on her protective impulses.

He almost felt sorry for her. Jessica was a very demure, shy young lady, but she was very willful. If she'd dug her claws in about marrying the fox, she wasn't going to be moved. Hannah could crash against that wall for the rest of her life, and it wasn't going to move. The only thing that would change Jessica's mind was herself, and the harder Hannah tried, the more she was going to alienate her daughter. Jessica loved her mother, but every child had a limit, and Hannah would push her to that limit. Hannah was just as willful as Jessica, and now that they were put on a collision course with each other, a train wreck was a virtual certainty. All he could hope was that the two of them didn't permanently poison their relationship.

He sighed a little as Hannah stormed through the living room, then reappeared immediately, stopped to dial the fox's number, and then she actually cursed and continued on. Ben came down from upstairs as she stormed past, a surprised look on his face. Ben was a very burly young man, tall and muscular, which was perfect for a football player. Ben took after his father in his coloration, with cream-colored fur everywhere but a dark patch

of fur on his right shoulder and the right side of his back, hidden under his shirt. “Did Mom just say what I think she said?” he asked.

“Probably, son,” John said evenly, turning the page.

“What’s got her tail under the rocking chair?”

“Jessica.”

“What did Jessie do now?”

“It seems that her boyfriend proposed to her, and she accepted.”

“Woah, really?” John nodded. “Wow, I never thought Jessie would do something like that. No wonder Mom’s trying to claw up the furniture. I guess this is a bad time to ask to borrow the car,” he chuckled.

John was about to chide his son, but the doorbell rang. “I got it, it’s probably Hank,” Ben said, hurrying to the door. John went back to his book as Hannah came out of the kitchen. “Uh, can I help you?”

“I’m here to see your parents,” came an unknown voice.

“Sure. Please, come in.”

“Who is it, Ben?” Hannah asked as she moved towards the foyer, which was around the corner from the living room, just past the stairs. John heard Hannah gasp when she got to the corner. “I don’t believe we’ve met,” Hannah said, in a somewhat unfriendly tone.

“My name is Vilenne Vulpan,” came the reply. The sound of that name made John almost drop his book. Vilenne Vulpan? The boy’s sister, who he said was rich? “Kit is my brother, and I’m here to talk to you.”

“Uh, please, come in,” Hannah said, her voice a little uncertain. John looked up as Ben and Hannah led a rather short vixen into the living room. She was dressed in a plain gray business suit, with a skirt instead of slacks, and a little black tab-tie. Her eyes were just like the pictures that he’d seen on the computer of Kit, with her left eye amber and her right eye green. It must be some kind of shared trait between the two of them. Two huge panther males stepped into the room behind her, dressed in black suits, one of them carrying a briefcase.

John put his book in the chair beside him and stood up, then went over and shook her paw. “I’m John Williams,” he said in introduction. “My wife Hannah, and our son Ben. Please, sit down.”

She seated herself on the couch, her thick tail tucked in beside her, and she gave them a direct look as John and Hannah sat down in their chairs. Hannah looked a trifle piqued. Ben stood by the stairs, not getting involved but curious enough to hang around to listen. “First off. Has Jessie called?”

“Yes, she called,” Hannah said with pinched fury. “Have you talked to her? Do you know what she said?”

“She’s engaged,” Vilenne said simply. “To my brother.”

“And I would assume that your visit concerns this engagement? If I recall, you live in Boston, madam,” John said calmly, cutting off the certainly biting remark that Hannah was about to deliver. “What brings you to Cincinnati?”

“I was on my way home,” she said. “I arranged to stop over here so we could talk. First thing, I suppose. Did Jessie tell you what happened?”

“Not concerning the engagement?”

Vilenne shook her head. “My brother, Kit, was shot just outside his office a few days ago,” she told them.

Hannah gave her a startled look, and John gasped. “Dear Lord, is he alright?”

“He’s home now,” she told them calmly. “As far as gunshot wounds go, he was very lucky. His injury wasn’t bad, and he’s already home and on the mend. He’ll be just fine.”

“Well, that’s good news at least.”

“Thank you for your concern. But, obviously, that’s not why I’m here. I’m here about your daughter and my brother.” She leaned back a little. “Jessie told me that you’re not...happy, about them.”

“No, I’m not,” Hannah finally said, a bit frostily.

“Why?” Vilenne asked simply.

“Because she shouldn’t be fooling around with boys while in school,” Hannah said immediately. “And definitely not with a boy I don’t know!”

“Have you *tried* to get to know him, or did you just immediately decide not to?” she asked, quite conversationally.

Hannah drew herself up, preparing to let this young vixen have it, but John raised his paw. Hannah might be a formidable woman, but this slight little vixen just *oozed* confidence. If Hannah got into a shouting match with her, she wasn’t going to win. “Hannah, dear,” he said urbanely.

“Don’t you *dear* me, John!” she said icily. “It’s quite clear she’s siding with *them* on this matter!”

“Of course I am,” she said pleasantly. “I don’t think you understand those two very well, Misses Williams. You decided to take a stand without investigating. You don’t *know* my brother the way I do.”

“And you don’t know my daughter!”

“I know her quite well. We talk at least once a week,” she said dismissively. “Sometimes as often as every day.”

Hannah came up short. “She’s never told me that!”

“That’s because every time you call, all you ever do is nag her about my brother,” she answered.

Hannah took a stiff expression at the word *nag*. “I’m only doing what’s best for Jessica!”

“What’s best for Jessie? I don’t think so. What’s best for Jessie is to marry Kit,” she said calmly.

Hannah was about to start yelling, but John brought her up short. “And what makes you believe that?” he asked.

“Because Jessie is the best thing that ever happened to my brother,” she answered casually. “He absolutely worships her.”

“That’s no reason why it’s best for Jessie, it’s only what’s best for *him*!” Hannah snapped. “He’ll just use her and then throw her away when he’s done!”

“Just like a fox?” Vienne asked simply.

Hannah’s cheeks ruffled.

“Stav,” she called, reaching out her paw. One of the two panthers, the one with the briefcase, stepped forward and gave her the briefcase. “You don’t know my brother, Misses Williams,” she said calmly as she opened it on her lap. “I don’t think you appreciate what life has been like for him.” She took out a small pack of papers. “Our mother died when he was eight,” she began. “When that happened, our father pulled away from us. My father suffered from the same curse as my brother, Misses Williams. He loved too much. When my mother died, it destroyed him inside. He lost all interest in me and my brother, he left us to be raised by our butler and nannies. Seeing us reminded him of her, and he couldn’t stand it.

“That set the stage, I suppose. Kit hated our father for rejecting us, and he acted out. It got even worse when our father got over his grief enough to take interest in Kit again, but it wasn’t love. He wanted Kit to train to be the next Vulpan in line to run the family business. I won’t go into the details of it, but it ended when Kit turned sixteen, and he left the family after our father issued an ultimatum. When he did that, my father disowned him, but he couldn’t let it go. My father hounded my brother from that moment on. He couldn’t accept that Kit rejected him, and his obsession to bend Kit to his will became total hatred. My father did everything in his power to ruin Kit’s life after he left, to force him to crawl on his knees back to the family and beg to be taken back in. My father arranged it so Kit’s life was hell. He had people steal his things. He would get Kit fired from any job he could get. He once even had someone set fire to the apartment building where Kit was staying with a friend. Kit had no peace, Misses Williams. No peace, no safety, nothing. Can you imagine that, Misses Williams? A sixteen year old rich kid thrown on the streets, with no inkling of how the real world works, and a father with *hundreds of millions* of dollars trying to ruin anything he

built for himself? Sometimes I'm amazed he managed to survive, but my brother is very strong.

"He wasn't alone, though. I love my brother, Misses Williams. When our mother died, I more or less became his mother. After our father disowned him, I did my best to make sure he could make it."

"Pardon my curiosity, but what does any of that have to do with my daughter?" Hannah asked coldly. "We all had hard childhoods. So he made it, big deal. From the way it sounds, I'd not want my Jessica to have anything to do with someone carrying so many childhood scars. It just proves he's no good for my daughter."

"Hannah!" John said in surprise.

"I see you're putting your own scars into this," Vienne said with surprising calm. She opened one of the files in her paws. "This is the record of your father, Victor Cremeans," she said, which made Hannah's eyes bulge. "Do you hate my brother because of who he is, or do you hate him because he reminds you of your father?" she asked with direct eyes.

"How *dare* you!" Hannah snapped, jumping to her feet, but the slender little fox just gave her a long, steady stare, a chilling stare that seemed to suck the defiance right out of his wife.

"You're not dealing with a child you can shout down, Misses Williams," the little fox said with a biting tone. "I stare down the rulers of nations on a daily basis. You do not intimidate me in the slightest." She closed the folder, then opened a different file. "I would guess that that's the main reason you hate my brother so much, but I think there's a little more to it. The past is the past, Misses Williams. The days of the Columbus Twenty are long past. Kit fully knows that Jessie is a mixed breed. She told him

herself, I believe on their second date. My brother doesn't care about it. All he sees is her, not who her parents are. Or grandparents, in this case. Kit loves her for who she is, Misses Williams, not *what* she is."

"How did you know about that?" Hannah gasped, dropping back to her chair heavily, her eyes wide.

"I'm a businessfemme, Misses Williams. I never enter into any situation without being fully prepared. It took only about twenty minutes of studying your family to get an idea of why you hate my brother so much, and *your* history is a simple matter to dig up once one knows your maiden name. Simply put, Misses Williams, my brother is *not* your father, and her heritage never once crossed his mind. I told you where he comes from so you could get an idea of what kind of fox he is. My brother is strong, Misses Williams. He stood up to everything my father could throw at him, and he came through it. You have no idea how courageous he is. If you ever met *my* family, you'd understand. My family is not nice, Misses Williams. When Kit was disowned, they abandoned him, because they were more interested in the family's money than they were in my brother. When it was clear he wasn't going to be the heir, and my father was disowning him, they threw him away like so much garbage. When he was hit by a car and nearly killed, I heard my uncles complain that he survived, and my father was going to refuse to allow anyone to pay his bills in hopes that the lack of treatment would *kill* him."

Hannah's jaw dropped and she gaped at the vixen in shock. John felt his own level of outrage himself.

"Maybe now you understand what my brother faced?" she asked simply. "After that, Kit totally abandoned the family, except for me. He hates them now, and he won't have anything to do with them. He wants to

make it on his own, without his family name, and without the family's money. Does that give you an idea how determined he is? Now, the other side of that is simple, Misses Williams. My brother is in love with Jessie. And I'm not talking about puppy love. He *loves* her. And before you ask how I know, mind that I basically raised him after our mother died, Misses Williams. I know him better than anyone on this planet.

"Before he met Jessie, my brother lived a transient life. He would ride a bus somewhere, get off, and work menial jobs until he had enough money to move on. Sometimes I think he did it to hide from our family, because they still hate him, and a family as rich as mine has a very long arm. Sometimes, I think he was looking for something. He was doing the same thing in Austin, and he was only a couple of days from leaving when he met Jessie. And that changed *everything*."

"Within three days of meeting her, Misses Williams, he had a job, an apartment, and was starting to build a real life for himself," she explained. "And he did it *all* just so he could date your daughter. He didn't want her going out with a homeless dishwasher, so he got a good job at a magazine, he got an apartment, and he created a stable foundation for himself so he could court her. That's how much he loves her, Misses Williams. He completely changed his entire way of life just to be worthy of her."

She shuffled through the files in her paws. "I'm telling you this for two reasons. The first is so you can understand just how much Kit loves Jessie. She's his entire life, and he'd walk through fire for her. The second is so you understand my brother a little better. He's strong and courageous, and he won't give up on Jessie. He won't leave her, and he'll always be there for her. All he wants to do now is make her happy, even to the point of letting me do things for her he never let me do for him," she said with a

humorless chuckle. “He never let me buy *him* a car before he met her, but he didn’t mind one bit when I bought one for her.”

She gave Hannah another of those long, slightly ominous looks. “Now, Misses Williams. Did you have something to say to me?”

It hung there for a long moment. Hannah looked about ready to lay an egg, but then she screwed up her courage and drew herself up in her chair. “I don’t think a child pretending at being an adult should be walking in here telling *me* how I should think about my own daughter,” she declared with narrow eyes.

“This isn’t about your daughter. This is about my brother,” she said simply. “And I may be young, Misses Williams, but I run a multi-*billion* dollar corporation. I think that gives me at least the leeway to presume to think I know as much as someone your age, even if you’re almost old enough to be my mother.”

John cut it off before Hannah had a conniption. “I think you’re quite brave for coming here, but I think this is something Kit should have done himself.”

“No, that would have been quite impossible,” Vilenne said simply, staring at Hannah. “Because your wife would have never given him a chance.”

“Why should I give him a chance?” Hannah snapped. “I don’t have to even see him to know what kind of male he is!”

“Hannah, dear, you’re being rude,” John told her, a bit sternly.

“I don’t have to be polite!” she said hotly, whirling on him. “She can’t defend that tramp of a brother of hers! Didn’t you hear her? He’s a bum, a

hobo! He'll leave our Jessie the instant he's bored with her!"

"Dear, I think you're only hearing what you want to hear," John said, with more authority. "I've humored you up to this point because I felt you'd eventually come to your senses, but this has gone on quite long enough. From what I know of Kit and what I've heard today, I'm actually quite at ease about the idea of him marrying Jessica."

"You can't be serious!" she gasped.

"Deadly. You took an instant dislike to the boy out of anger because Jessica was going out, and you refuse to let it go, even when it's abundantly clear that this is not Jessie going steady with Jack Singer back in high school. This is our Jessica finding a husband, which is what you've wanted for her all along. Now, you should take a good long look at this, Hannah. If you don't relent, you will push Jessie away. She's not going to give up on this marriage just because you disapprove. I'm rather sure of that."

"Perhaps if you *did* get to see them, you'd change your mind," Vilenne noted, taking a thick stack of photos out of her briefcase, inside a folder, and putting them on the coffee table between them.

"I don't *want* to see them! And I will *not* back down, John! That boy is going to ruin her life, you mark my words! And I will not stand for it!"

"Well, then, I guess my time here is done," she said, putting the papers back in her briefcase and closing it. "Since that's your decision, then now you will listen to mine. Kit and Jessie are getting married. Jessie wanted you to plan her wedding, as is traditional, but I'll be telling her that that's quite impossible. I'll have her plan it herself, and I'll be paying for it. And if I pay for it, *you will not be invited*," she said coldly to Hannah. "But you're more than welcome to come and give her away, Mister Williams,"

she said in a much more cordial tone. “And I’ll always be there for them, Misses Williams. If they have problems, they will come to me. When they need advice, they will come to me. When they need help, they will come to me. I will be the one having baby showers for Jessie, and sending their children birthday cards. I will be the part of their lives that you refuse to be. I will always be there to support them and help them, because I love my brother and I love Jessie, and I want them to be happy.

“There was a lesson in my story, Misses Williams, one you seem to have missed. My father’s anger with my brother turned into an obsession of hatred that destroyed Kit’s life and consumed my father like cancer. Before my father died, his hatred of Kit had blackened his soul and turned him into a miserable wretch. I think his heart gave out because it could no longer keep a soul like his alive on this Earth any longer. What I’ve heard from you here tonight is just the same as I heard from my father. Your hate has no rationality. It is hate for the sake of hate. And if you’re not careful, you will turn out exactly like my father. You will destroy everything good in your life, you will drive your daughter away, and your actions will tear your family apart like paper, *just like it did mine.*”

Hannah jumped to her feet and took a threatening step towards the vixen. Ben almost lunged to intercede, but one of those huge panthers put a big paw in front of him and shook his head. Vilenne took a business card from her pocket and boldly stepped past Hannah and handed it to him. “This is my card, Mister Williams,” she said. “The number written in pencil at the bottom is to my personal cell phone. Call that number, and you will get me directly. If you have any questions, or you ever need help, just call me. You’re now a part of my family, and you’ll find that I’m always willing to help.”

“I’ll, ah, I’ll keep that in mind,” he said, glancing at Hannah. “I must say, you’re a very interesting young vixen.”

Vilene gave him an amazingly charming smile. “I’m full of surprises, Mister Williams,” she told him. “Marcus, could you call the car around?”

“Certainly, madam,” one of the two panthers said with a nod, and quickly let himself out.

“I’ll be going back to Boston now,” she told them. “I hope you think about what I said, Misses Williams, and ask yourself if holding on to your hate is worth losing your daughter.” She walked away from them before Hannah could respond, but she stopped in front of Ben, who looked down at her with some surprise. “Ben, is it? Or do you go by Benjamin?” she asked.

“Uh, Ben, ma’am,” he said uncertainly.

“You’re one hell of a running back,” she said with a grin.

“How do you know that?”

“I had Stav dig up some tape of your games. Like I said, I’m *thorough* when I come to a meeting,” she winked. “I had your entire life histories in those papers I pulled out of my briefcase. You should think about playing college ball. Given your moves, I think you could make it all the way to the NFL.”

“I’m hoping to.”

“Hmm,” she mused. “Which college do you want to play for?”

“Uh, well, I kinda want to play for Ohio State. I’ve been a Buckeye fan for like all my life.”

“Ohio State, eh?” she said with a mysterious smile. “I’m a U-Mass fan, myself. Too bad you don’t want to be a Minuteman, they could use a running game.” She patted him on the forearm. “Don’t worry too much, Ben. As good as you are, I’m sure you’ll get an offer from someone.”

John escorted her to the door, and a look outside showed a limo sitting on the street, the other panther at the door waiting for them. “I should thank you for spending the time and effort to come see us,” he told her. “Even if you didn’t get the outcome you wanted.”

“Oh, I’m not so sure about that,” she said with a smile. “At least *you* understand.”

“Ah, yes, well, you’ll find that when my wife digs in her claws, she’s almost impossible to move. It may take a few years for her to come around, when she sees beyond any shadow of a doubt that Jessica and Kit will stay together.”

“What she misses in that time is her own fault,” Vilenne shrugged. “All I care about is that Jessie will be unhappy because of her mother’s adamance, because nothing will stop her from marrying Kit.”

“She inherited her mother’s stubbornness,” John chuckled.

“And her father’s mind,” Vilenne added.

“Why thank you.”

“Just try to make it clear to her, Mister Williams. She’s on the losing end, and if she doesn’t admit defeat gracefully, she may miss out.”

“I can only try.”

“That’s all I can ask, Mister Williams.”

“I think you can call me John,” he chuckled.

“John,” she smiled. “My friends and family call me Vil.”

“Vil.”

“It was nice meeting you. Good evening.”

“You too.”

He watched her go, escorted by that hulk of a panther. The other panther opened the door for her and let her in, they got in with her, and then the limo drove away.

That, was a *dangerous* young vixen, he realized. Young, yes, but intelligent, and absolutely fearless. She took on a hostile Hannah in her own home, and stared her down. And Hannah was not timid!

He leaned against the doorframe and smiled. Well, if anything, he was even more secure in the idea of Jessica marrying Kit. Vilenne—Vil—had made it clear that she would be watching over them like a guardian angel.

A guadian angel with millions of dollars in the bank.

He closed the door and came back into the living room, where Hannah sat in her chair, still holding the phone, a look of fury and indignation on her face. She got up and threw the phone into her chair, then stormed to the stairs. “You can sleep on the couch,” she declared in a cold tone, then stomped up. Her footsteps pounded across the ceiling, and then he heard a door slam.

“Woah,” Ben said in a low tone. “I think Mom’s a little mad.”

“You think, son?” John chuckled. “Just give her time. That young vixen put some pretty convincing truths in front of her, and she’s just too

stubborn to admit she's wrong."

"You think she's wrong?"

"I know she's wrong, son," he said simply. "I think Vilenne was right about that. She hates Jessica's boyfriend because he's a fox, not because of who he is. She looks at him and only sees what her father did to her family."

"I never took Mom as a purist," he mused. "Especially since she's a mixed breed herself. She didn't say anything at all when I was going out with Shelly."

"She's not a purist, son, she's just biased against foxes."

"Good thing she looks totally like a cat," Ben chuckled. "Else she'd have some issues every time she looks in a mirror." He grinned. "You know, there's this total hottie vixen at school named Amanda. Maybe she'd go out with me."

"Ben?"

"Yeah Dad?"

"Are you trying to kill your mother?"

Ben laughed. "I have to keep my options open here, Dad. You know, that's something I always wanted to ask her."

"What?"

"What was it like for her when she was growing up? I mean, we got tons of mixed breeds at school. It's no big deal. Heck, America has so many breeds now, it's sometimes hard to even find your own breed to go out with. I think some of them look just awesome, like Zoe. She's half tiger, half wolf, and she has black stripes and her tail—uh, well, I've read my history

books. Not many guys can say his mom is *in* a history book. What was it like for her?"

"It wasn't easy for her, but she was a very resilient young femme," John chuckled. "I remember when she started school, that first day," he said musingly. "It was during the start of desegregation, Ben. Back then, being a mixed breed was just the same as being an African fur. Probably worse, if you really want my opinion. African breeds at least had their pure lines, but mixed breeds like Hannah, well, that was a moral taboo, even among European and American breeds. Back then, son, breeds kept strictly to themselves, and mixed breeds were worse than children born out of wedlock. Children like her had much more to deal with than racial bigotry, because purists are even more fanatical than racists. They were discriminated against by *everyone*, even the African breeds. They had no place, no status. Slavery ended after the Civil War, but the Mixed Breed Emancipation Act didn't pass until after femme suffrage. Mixed breeds were still little more than slaves until then, they didn't even have the right to vote, all because of the fanaticism of the purists. You should have seen her, Ben," he sighed. "Having to go through all those parents who were yelling and screaming all those nasty things at her, throwing things at her. But she never once lost her temper. She just kept her head high and outclassed them all. I think that's when I fell in love with her," he sighed. "God, were my parents against it," he chuckled. "But Hannah charmed them right out of it. Hopefully, Jessie and Kit can charm her out of her attitude."

"Huh. I've always been afraid to ask Mom about that."

"She doesn't like to talk about it. After all, son, she *does* look just like a cat. She never had to reveal she was a mixed breed. You'd never tell it

from looking at her.”

“Why did she then?”

“Because she had something to prove,” he said. “She wanted to show the world that even though she was a mixed breed, she was still a proud femme who was going to make something of herself. Besides, son, her brothers were *visibly* mixed breed. If she would have hidden behind a lie of pure blood, it would have been insult to her brothers, and she loved them too much to do that to them.”

“It’s a shame. I woulda liked to have met them.”

“They were very nice,” John told him, remembering those two, with their fox muzzles and cat ears, fox mittens and cat’s claws. “And they loved their big sister. They never deserved what happened to them. But that’s a sign of those times, son. Jeb and Will died because of the stupidity of hate. Don’t ever forget that lesson.”

“You know something, Dad?”

“What?”

“It sounds like Mom forgot that lesson.”

John blinked, and looked at his son. “You know, Ben, I think you’re right. And I think it’s about time someone reminded her of that.”

“So, can I borrow the car?”

“Go ahead. Be back by eleven.”

“Aww, man!” he sighed, then he picked up the keys from the tray where John kept them and cleared out.

John went upstairs and knocked on the bedroom door. "I have nothing to say to you!" she shouted from inside.

"Well, I have plenty to say to you, dear," he said seriously. He opened the door and saw her sitting on the bed, her arms crossed, looking away from him. And for a brief moment, he saw the young, strong femme he'd known in high school, sitting there with her head held high despite the nasty things the others were whispering to her. That strength had been her salvation back then, but it was working against her now. "I think you're being totally unfair, and I wanted you to know that."

"I cannot sit by and watch my oldest girl's life be torn apart," she said coldly. "That fox will be nothing but heartache for her."

"And how can you know that?" he asked. "All you've ever done is talk to him over the phone, and as I recall, you were very unfriendly! Is it any surprise you got a bad impression from him, since that's what you wanted to get from the start?"

"Don't cloud the issue, John!" she shouted.

"I think you're the one clouding the issue here, Hannah," he told her sternly. "I have to ask you this, dear. Did *you* appreciate the way my parents treated you when you were younger?"

She gave him a startled look.

"Dear, you're treating him the way *they* used to treat *you*," he pointed out. "They made up their minds about you without ever meeting you, but you changed their minds. Don't you remember?"

She sighed, then smiled a little. "Yes, I remember."

“They were wrong about you. They were very wrong about you, and they admitted it. It took my mother a little longer to admit it than my father, but they eventually did.”

She put her paws on her knees and leaned forward, her long-haired tail swishing back and forth behind her. Jessica had inherited her mother’s tail, and it looked good on both of them. “I just can’t accept it, John. I don’t like it. He’s going to break her heart.”

“Dear, she’s an *adult*. I think she’s more than capable of dealing with a broken heart, if it would come to that. And personally, I disagree with you. I talked to him for a quite a while, and I think he’s sincerely in love with her.”

“So was my father with my mother, *at first*,” she said pointedly. “You just can’t trust foxes where their hearts are concerned.” She gave a slight chuckle. “And him sending his sister here was just dirty. I thought she was going to put me over her knee and spank me there for a minute.”

“She is a rather formidable young vixen, isn’t she?” John chuckled, coming over and sitting down on the bed, taking her paw in his own. “Dear, I understand you’re worried, but understand that I think you’re wrong. I object to the engagement simply because I think Jessica should finish school before getting married, but I have nothing against Kit otherwise. Once she finishes school, I’d be quite content to see them marry. And despite the fact we disagree, I still love you.”

She gave him a sidelong look, then sighed. “You don’t have to sleep on the couch tonight, John,” she declared.

“Who says I would have? There’s always Jenny’s room. If you can get past all the stuffed animals.”

Hannah giggled. “I’m sorry I yelled at you, John. That was uncalled for.”

“All’s forgiven, my sweet,” he said, leaning over and kissing her on the cheek. “Now, for once, *you* are going to let *me* cook. I think you have something you need to think about.”

John left her sitting on the bed. He glanced at her before closing the door, saw her lean back on her paws, looking up at the ceiling, already in thought.

He left her and went down to the kitchen, and busied himself with making dinner. He liked to cook, but Hannah thought it was a scandal if he did, so he rarely got the chance. He decided on something simple, so he started putting out what he’d need for chicken parmesan.

He heard movement in the living room. He peeked his head out, thinking Ben had come back for something, but it wasn’t Ben. Hannah was sitting on the couch, and she had the folder that Vil left open in her lap. She was going through the photos, one at a time. John couldn’t see them from his angle, but he saw Hannah’s eyes soften more than once as she looked at them.

John smiled. *Who knows, maybe she will come around*, John thought with a little smile as he went back into the kitchen. *At least to the point where she can be civil.*

Jessie was worse than a mother.

He expected her to be a little protective, but he didn’t expect her to virtually take over his life. When Doctor Barnett stopped in that night just

for a quick visit, Jessie and Doc had a long talk about exactly what Kit should and should not do, how she needed to work with him because of the injury. And Jessie followed those instructions *to the letter*.

She was almost a dictator. She kept him on the couch almost all the time, and she talked to Lupe to have him look in on him when she was at school. She did all the work around the house, she carefully made sure that he took all his medicine, antibiotics and mild painkillers in the evening to take the bite off and allow him to sleep comfortably. She controlled every aspect of his day from morning til night, most of which was spent on the couch either watching DVDs or surfing the internet on his laptop.

Of course, his chances came when she was at school. She wanted to be with him all the time, but he put his foot down at the very thought that she'd leave school. He was just fine on his own while she was at classes, because the nurse came in around ten to check on him, and Lupe was just across the courtyard, who came and checked on him about every hour. When he had the place to himself, he was working. It was kind of hard to type with one hand, but he could pick up a phone and click a mouse, and Rick didn't mind sending him little projects to work on to help alleviate the boredom.

The apartment sure wasn't empty in the evenings. Several femmes from Jessie's sorority came over almost every night to visit with Jessie, see him, and even help out a little bit. Sandy and Sam were Jessie's best friends, and they were over almost every night. They'd helped her move her things to the apartment, and now they dropped in quite often, which Kit didn't mind at all. He rather liked those two. Some of the crew also dropped in on him almost every night as well, as Rick brought him some material to play with during the day, and they just came over to hang out and help Jessie.

One thing was for sure, Jessie had an easy time of it. She had plenty of paws around willing to help her with almost anything.

And not a day passed where Vil didn't call at least once to check on him, and use the video conference program to see him, check on his progress. He could see that she was still furious in those video conferences, but hadn't yet discovered who had attacked him. She voiced her frustration about a week after Kit returned home. "Whoever it was certainly covered their tracks," she growled, throwing a report file down on the table before her computer, out of his sight. "I even took Atlanta apart, and nothing. This guy didn't take this contract through the mob. It was a personal job."

"What did you do in Atlanta?"

"I think that it's best you don't know," she said with a direct stare that shut him up immediately. "You'd think that I'd find *something* by now," she said with a dark scowl. "I think I'm going to have to start shaking the family tree. If it becomes clear I'll punish the entire family over the actions of one, someone might balk."

"Be careful," he warned again. "If you push too hard, they're gonna push back."

"Let them," she said flatly.

Despite the whole "nurse nazi" issue, Kit loved having Jessie around all the time. After all the visitors went home, they'd sit on the couch and cuddle, sometimes for hours, as he just let the sound of her purring lull him into a sense of total contentment. She moved into his bed as well, though she kept her paws off of him because of the injury. Doctor Barnett had warned against any kind of intimacy, and she showed a hell of a lot more control than he did. He was willing to bend the rules a little, but she

wouldn't hear of it. About all she'd allow him were kisses and an occasional feel of all those things he loved to touch that she kept hidden under her clothes. She seemed to have a line, and wouldn't allow either of them to cross it. It was worst at night, when she was right there in bed with him. He'd reach out and touch her, and she'd allow it, but when he started getting frisky, she shut him down like a misbehaving washing machine.

Of course, her parents weren't too thrilled about it. She hadn't told them she moved in when she told them about the engagement, and her parents found out when they called the sorority. Sandy had let it slip that she'd moved in at Kit's, and Kit was the one that ended up fielding that call, since Jessie was at the store.

"Is it true she's moved in with you?" her father asked directly not two seconds after he answered the phone.

"She didn't give me much choice," he answered, a bit ruefully. "But yes, she did."

"I do *not* approve of this, Kit," he said. "Not only is it completely improper, it might interfere with her school. *That* is why she's in Austin, not to chase boys."

"Well, sir, you can try to talk her out of it," he said simply. "Best not try until after the docs take this sling off me, though. She's gone completely Nurse Nightengale on me. Right now, I'm not her fiancée, I'm her patient. Actually, can you talk to her? She's worse than a freakin' nanny."

John actually laughed. "That bad, eh?"

"You have *no* idea," he said with a short growl. "She got these instructions from the doctor, and she follows them religiously. And if I try to

object or if I get restless and want to move around, she puts the worst guilt trip on me you've ever heard. And she *teases* me," he sighed. "She won't—nevermind. I think that's not something you'd care to talk about."

Much to his surprise, John laughed. "I think I can understand what you're saying," he said. "She's affectionate, but she's not being *affectionate*."

"God," Kit sighed.

"Have you set a date yet?" he ventured to ask.

"No, it's too early yet, and besides, she won't talk about it. She and Vil have been calling each other and talking for hours every night, so I'm pretty sure they're setting it all up. Will Misses Williams budge?"

"She's budging a little, but no icebreaking yet," he answered. "I think she's getting a double shot of reality to the face, and it'll get worse when I tell her that Jessica is planning her wedding. I think that might push her over the edge. If she misses her first child's wedding, I think she'd kick herself for the next ten years."

"I hope she does. I'd like to have her there."

"But she hates you."

"So? It isn't about me, John, it's about Jessie. Jessie will be happy if her mother is there, and that's that in my mind. I'm more than willing be civil to her for Jessie's sake. And the hate is only one way, I assure you. I don't hate Misses Williams even if she can't stand me. She's just being a mother-in-law."

John laughed. "I would much prefer to see Jessica return to her sorority when you're off doctor's care."

"It was her decision, John," he replied calmly. "And I can't deny her anything she wants. You're welcome to try to talk her back to the sorority, but I'm not sure you'll have much luck. She's taken over my apartment," he chuckled. "I've never had makeup in my medicine cabinet before, and my shower is now cluttered with like ten different bottles. I have weed through them to find my shampoo and soap."

"You'll get used to that. But I would prefer you get used to it after you're married."

Jessie came in through the door with Lupe, who was helping her carry in groceries. "Actually, you can talk to her yourself, she just got home. Hold on." He put his paw over the microphone on his cell. "Jessie, it's your dad."

"Hey Dad," she said after taking the phone. "Yes, I did," she said immediately. "Why? Because for one, he needs me to be here right now because he's on bedrest, and for another we're engaged. No, I don't think so. Dad, we're going to be *married*. Does it matter if I move in now, or after the wedding? It's not like we're not already—" She blew out her breath. "Well, that's the way it is, Dad. It's not like it's going to be too long after the doctors say he's healed that we get married. No, we haven't yet. Vil wants a little more time to talk about it. She offered to pay for the wedding, you know, and since Mom won't have anything to do with it, I'm the one that's planning it. I don't know yet. I'm too busy taking care of Kit to think much about it."

"I'm not an invalid!" Kit protested, which made Lupe laugh as he went back to the door. "And if you burned out my clutch, femme, we're gonna

have words!”

Jessie laughed. “I drove Kit’s car to the store, and it’s a standard,” she giggled into the phone. “I’m not bad, really! It’s not that hard.” She put her purse on the coffee table. “No, Dad. No. No. Listen, it’s not up for discussion. I moved in with Kit because he needs me, and I love him. After he heals, I’m not moving out. This is where I belong. Yes, I know how Mom is going to explode,” she sighed, “but I don’t care. No, Dad, I haven’t forgotten school Kit browbeats me into doing my homework every night. He won’t let me forget about school.” She put her paw over the phone. “Thanks Lupe, you’re a lifesaver,” she told the chihuahua as he brought in another load.

“*De nada* Jessie,” he replied. “We want him back too. I got nobody to play poker with on Sunday nights!”

“No, I’m here, Dad,” she said, mouthing the word *poker* at him, which made Kit just laugh and nod. “The landlord was helping me bring in groceries, that’s all. No, you can tell Mom, I don’t care. But if she calls here and nags us, I’m gonna turn off the phone. Make sure you tell her that. Okay. I’ll think about. Dad, I have to go, I have to put away the groceries and cook, and Doc Barnett should be here in a little bit to check on Kit. I will. I love you too, Dad, bye-bye.”

“So, you moving in, Jessie?”

“Yeah, Lupe. Is that a problem?”

“Naw, naw, you’d be moving in when you marry anyway,” Lupe grinned. “Ain’t nothin’ in Kit’s lease about not takin’ on a roomie.”

Surprisingly enough to Kit, Jessie's mom never did call to explode on her. But then again, Kit had the feeling that Hannah was walking on eggshells around Jessie now. She was being pushed out of the wedding, a clear indication to her that her daughter was more than willing to choose him over her, and now that fact was making her seriously reconsider. The times Hannah did call her, she was much less hostile and confrontational, but they did get into some arguments, over him.

As the days passed, some of the restrictions on him were lifted. Doctor Barnett gave him a little more license to move around every day. By his first week back, he was allowed to move about the house freely so long as he got plenty of rest between activity cycles. His wound was healing at a rate that pleased his nurse and Barnett. He spent most of his time doing what work that Rick sent him, and also answering get-well emails sent to him. On Friday, Jeffrey ran the other strip, just a huge drawing of Kit and Jessie kissing with *YES!* In huge letters across the top, telling everyone that was interested that he and Jessie were engaged. He answered quite a few congratulatory messages after that, and Mike took a picture of the happy couple and put it up on the website for anyone who was curious to see them in the flesh, as it were.

About a two weeks after he came home, Barnett came over and removed the bandages and was quite pleased with the results. "Well, tomorrow the stitches come out, and I think it'll be just fine. It looks like you're healing up just the way you should. Maybe even faster."

"That's because I make him stay on course," Jessie giggled.

"Well, remember, Kit, tomorrow at two at the annex," he said as he put on a new bandage, then helped him back into his sling. "They'll pull your

stitches, and I'll come over give you a complete exam and we'll talk about where we go from there."

"Think I can get out of the sling?"

"It'll depend on how well you've healed inside," he answered.

"But I'm having almost no pain now, just a dull ache and itching. I've even stopped taking the pain meds."

"Well, that's a good sign. We'll see tomorrow."

Jessie didn't go to her English Lit class to take him to the hospital, but at least this absence was planned for and excused. She sat with him in the waiting room, and they even allowed her to be there when the nurse and orderly removed the stitches. "I see your fur is growing back," the nurse noted.

"It's kinda prickly," he complained.

"Just let it grow out, and it'll soften up," she said as she carefully removed another stitch.

"How is it looking, nurse?" Jessie asked. "Did he heal well?"

"Well, the cut in his skin is almost healed," she noted. "I doubt that he's in danger of opening it as long as he's careful. I think the doc'll let him go without new stitches."

Barnett filed in wearing a lab coat over slacks and a dress shirt. "Okay then, Kit, now that I have you where I keep all my power tools, let's check out that shoulder, hmm?"

Barnett's examination took over an hour, where Barnett thoroughly examined his shoulder, then had him to quite a few movements and

exercises to test his arm and how much pain he felt when moving it. He sent Kit over to the hospital for another CAT scan, and they waited in an exam room there for Barnett to come back. When he did, he was carrying some papers. “Alright, you want the good news or the bad news?”

“Uh, both?” Kit asked.

Barnett chuckled, scratching at his muzzle. “The good news is that you’re healing along quite nicely. I’m not going to replace your stitches.”

“That’s good news, alright,” Kit said. “What about the sling?”

“That’s the bad news, I’m afraid,” he chuckled. “But, there’s some not-so-bad news that goes along with it. I want you to keep your arm in a sling for one more week, Kit, but we’ll forego the straight jacket. I know it doesn’t hurt that much, but the bullet did go through most of the muscles that deal with moving your shoulder, so I’d like to give them just a little more time to heal before you start putting stress on it. But, you’re no longer on restriction,” he announced. “I’ll give you a standard sling, and you’re free to go back to work and engage in *light* activity. But don’t push it,” he warned.

“How light?” Kit asked, glancing at Jessie.

Barnett laughed. “Oh, I think as long as you’re stationary,” he said with a toothy grin.

Jessie’s entire face frizzed out.

They left with a new prescription for an antibiotic to guard against infection, and a new normal sling. It felt *so good* to at least be able to move his arm a little bit, not feeling like his left side was tied down. “I can’t believe you asked him that!” Jessie said as they walked to his Pathfinder.

“Well, at least now we have permission,” he said enticingly in her ear, sliding his paw up her side.

She shivered a little. “We’ll talk about this when we get home,” she said sternly.

“I hope so.”

They stopped at the office first. Kit and Jessie visited, and he told Rick that he could come back to work. “I still can’t type til they take me out of this sling, but I’m dying at home, Rick,” he complained. “I need to come back to work.”

“No problem, you can work with me and Savid until you’re back to full strength,” Rick told him. “Since we’re off tomorrow, why don’t you just come in on Monday. That alright?”

“Hell yeah,” Kit chuckled. “I’d rather come in tomorrow, but I wouldn’t mind a weekend with Jess.”

“No pressure, though, son,” Rick told him. “If you feel tired or want to go home, just lemme know.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, boss,” Kit nodded.

They went home after that. “I’m gonna need to borrow your car, my pretty kitty,” he told her as they filed into the apartment. “I can’t drive mine like this.”

“That’s okay, my handsome fox,” she told him. “What do you want for dinner?”

“I know what I want for dinner,” he said huskily, draping an arm over her.

She giggled. "I'm still mad at you for asking that."

"Well, we got permission," he breathed, grabbing her belt buckle.

"I dunno, my fox, I'm afraid I might hurt you."

"You can tie me to the bed," he offered.

"Don't make promises you can't keep, my fox," she giggled, then she shivered when he pulled on her belt buckle, cinching her belt around her.

"Alright, I think we can try," she said thickly, reaching up and putting her paw on the side of his head as he nuzzled her cheek from behind. "But if I hurt you, it's your fault."

"I can live with that," he said, pulling her towards the bedroom.

"Wait, I forgot to lock the door!" she said, pulling away. He waited when she went and locked it, then sauntered back to him. "Now, let's talk about this," she said in a purring voice, holding his paw and giving him a smile.

"It's your fault," he complained. "Letting me touch you, then not letting me go any further."

She laughed. "I couldn't help it. I love it when you touch me, my handsome fox," she said with a bright smile, pulling him back to the bedroom. "It makes me feel wanted."

"Well, mission accomplished, because I *so* want you right now."

She laughed and pulled him into the bedroom, then she closed the door.

Making love while injured introduced some complications to the process, but Kit had no complaints.

She lay with him in bed, with the afternoon sun making the curtains glow, and she was purring in contentment. His left arm was carefully draped over his stomach, but his right arm held her close. She was exquisitely careful, but he did have a little pain...which he'd never admit to.

"Mmm," she hummed, her purring ceasing as she spoke.

"How *do* you do that?" he asked.

"Do what?"

"Purr when you kiss me, when you can't purr when you talk."

She giggled. "I breathe when you kiss me," she said, snuggling up to him. "Because I know you love it when I purr."

"It's like kissing a vibrator," he said, which made her gasp in surprise. "But that's a good thing," he told her, keeping her from rising up to glare at him. "It goes right through me and makes me knees melt."

She laughed. "Well, now I know how to stop any argument immediately."

"I doubt you'll be purring when we're fighting."

"My handsome fox, I can purr on demand," she said with a giggle, her paw carefully and delicately tracing through the area where his bandages were, in the area of shaved fur. "Sure, I purr when I'm happy, but I've learned how to fake it," she giggled.

"Oh, there goes my self esteem," he said darkly, which made her laugh.

“No, it’s not that I want to fake it,” she told him. “It’s just that when I was a little girl, I *couldn’t* purr. I didn’t really understand why, so I tried to learn how to do it.”

“Why couldn’t you?”

“I really don’t know,” she said. “Mom always told me I was being silly when I worried about it, but all my cat friends could do it. I guess that was the first time I ever really felt like my mixed breed ancestry was a bad thing. For years, I thought that I couldn’t purr because my grandfather’s a fox.”

“Well, obviously it worked out.”

“Yeah. I guess I just had to grow up a little more before I could purr, that’s all. My cat friends could do it when they were six or seven. I couldn’t purr until I was almost twelve. But, all my trying to do it on purpose kinda taught me *how* to do it when I could,” she chuckled. “My mom thinks it’s amazing that I can force myself to purr. She doesn’t know any cat that can.”

“Maybe it’s a *good* part of being mixed.”

“Mom can’t do it.”

“I think your mother only purrs when she’s burning me in effigy.”

Jessie laughed.

“Did you ever have trouble being mixed?”

“Nah,” she replied. “I went to public school, and there’s lots of mixed breeds in city schools. Besides, I don’t *look* like a mixed breed. I can pass as a purebred cat easily. Now if I’d have been born somewhere in the rural south, I guess it’d be a problem. Why, is it an issue in Boston?”

“Not really, but they’re not very common,” he answered. “It used to be bad, though. Boston used to be the headquarters of the Purity League.”

“Oh, them,” Jessie sighed.

“My family were charter members,” he admitted with a dark grunt. “A lot of Vulpan money funded their lobbying. But then Massachusetts changed the law and redefined them as a hate group, and they were booted. Thank God.”

“I’m lucky that way, I guess. All of Mom’s kids are. None of us have any fox traits but me, and all I got was the coloration. But that’s nothing definitive, ya know?”

“Yeah, there have to be plenty of cats running around with black mittens, black ears, and a black tail tip.”

“Well, some have mentioned that they do look kinda fox-like, but nobody’s ever asked me if I’m mixed,” she told him. “I can imagine you had almost as much trouble as if you were mixed.”

“My eyes? Only in Boston,” he answered. “It’s the Vulpan family trait, so it kinda identified me. Most of the time it was useful, but there were quite a few times when furs wanted to beat me up because I was a Vulpan.”

“I can imagine.”

The phone rang. Jessie had put it on the nightstand, so she reached across him and grabbed it. “Oh, nuts,” she breathed, opening the phone. “Hello? Hey Mom.”

Kit laughed.

“No, this is not a good time to talk. I’m busy. No. No—Mom, you *don’t* want to know. Mom—Mom. Mom! Fine. I’m in bed with Kit,” she said in a hostile voice. “Yes, you heard me! In bed! Naked! And we just finished *having sex*,” she said heatedly. “There, are you happy now? At least now you know!”

And she hung up the phone.

Kit laughed delightedly. “You’re getting mean, my pretty kitty.”

“She wouldn’t stop asking what I was doing, so I told her,” she said with a huff, turning the phone off and putting it back on the nightstand. She snuggled back down with him, sighed in contentment, and began to purr.

“Oh, sure, *now* you purr,” he snorted. “Now I’ll always wonder if you really mean it, or you’re faking.”

She laughed, then slid up and kissed him on the nose with a cherubic grin. “I promise I’ll only fake it when you ask me to,” she winked. “But so far, every purr you’ve heard out of me was genuine. Fiancee’s honor.” She held up her right paw.

He laughed. “There’s no such thing.”

“What are you saying? I have my honor.”

“Not when we slept together,” he grinned. “You’re honorless.”

“Well, that’s your fault now, isn’t it?” she retorted primly.

He laughed and put his good arm around her, pulling her against him. “God, I love you, you silly kitty.”

“Mmm, say that again,” she purred, nuzzling his neck and cheek with her own cheek.

He thought that her kissing him when she was purring was bad enough, but her nuzzling him like that put her throat in direct contact with his neck, and he could feel it vibrating against him. “God, you know how to drive me crazy,” he groaned, twining his fingers through her hair. “You give an entirely new definition for the term *necking*.”

She laughed against his ear. “This is how naughty kitties do it,” she whispered in his ear.

“I *love* naughty kitties,” he sighed, surrendering to her attentions.

The new sling wasn’t half as bad as the straight jacket, and it was wonderful to be able to go out again.

They spent almost all day Saturday out, from walking in McKenzie park to going to see a movie, then a nice dinner that Jessie didn’t have to cook. When they went home, they spent a wonderful evening just sitting on the couch, cuddling...at least until her mother called.

Hannah wasn’t too happy about her little stunt from the day before, and it touched off a bit of a heated exchange between them. But then Jessie laughed and cuddled in with him a little more. “Well, Mom, I’m trying,” she said. “Wow...what is that I just heard? Without a single scream?” She laughed. “Okay, okay, thank you for at least trying. I appreciate it. We haven’t really talked about it yet. Vil said she’d pay for it, but Kit doesn’t really like it when she pays for things for him.”

“Oh my God, you’re talking about the *wedding*? And she isn’t going nuclear?” Kit asked.

Jessie gave him a cool look, and swatted him on the leg. “I guess you’d have to talk to her about that. I can have her call you. You do? How did you get it? She *what*? Oh my goodness! Kit, Vil went to see my folks!” she declared.

“Huh? She never told me she did that.”

“When did she come see you? When? Hmm, that’s when she left here, after Kit got out of the hospital,” she said, mainly for his benefit. “Well, what did you think of her?” Jessie listened to the response, then laughed. “Yeah, she’s like that, but I really like her. She’s a wonderful vixen. She bought me a *car*,” she all but purred. “Uh, Mom, since you’re not going crazy, I wanted to tell you something.” She gave a startled look, then laughed. “No, Mom, I’m not pregnant,” she laughed. “I’d love to be, though,” she added impulsively. “Anyway, I invited Kit to come to Cincinnati for Thanksgiving. Would that be alright? I want him to meet you and Ben and Jenny.” She giggled. “No, Mom, I’ll have Dad hide all the guns and knives before he gets there. Now, why did you call?” She laughed. “Mom, you *always* have a reason to call anymore, usually when you feel like arguing.”

Jessie sat up a little. “Mom! I don’t feel like arguing now. Well, you do! When’s the last time we talked that didn’t turn into an argument!” Her cheeks ruffled appealingly. “Umm, well, I was...busy. And you wouldn’t stop asking! No, Mom, I *wasn’t* just saying that. We really were in bed. Well, he’d just gotten back from the doctor, and we couldn’t—uh, well, he’d just gotten taken off restriction. Well, you go two weeks and see how you feel!” She gasped. “Oh my God, I’m sitting here talking about sex with my *mother*,” she realized.

Kit laughed when Jessie's entire face poofed out. "Mom? Mom! Mom, I'm—" she stopped, then she laughed. "No, I'm not trying to ruin it on purpose, but you asked! No, no, that's fine. It'll be nice to hang up the phone without us hanging up on each other for once. Okay. I love you too, Mom. Bye." She closed the phone, and gave out a little squeal and hugged Kit. "I don't believe it!"

"She's not ordering voodoo dolls of me anymore?"

She laughed. "Well, not quite, but she *did* say she'd come to the wedding. Under protest of course, but she said she'd be there. For Mom, that's a *huge* step." She snuggled down against him, laying her gorgeous tail over his lap. "She said you're welcome to come to Thanksgiving."

"Should I bring the number for the Poison Control Center?"

She giggled. "Putting it on speed-dial may not be a bad idea. Mom might just be playing nice to get close enough to you."

"Your mom is something else," he chuckled.

"Well, she's just protective."

"Kinda like you," he teased, poking her in the shoulder.

"Now you know where I get it from," she giggled.

"I wonder what got her like that."

"I know what got her like that," she sighed, a little sadly.

"Oh? Feel like telling me?"

"Only if you can promise to keep a secret."

"For you, pretty kitty? You have my word."

“My mom was one of the Columbus Twenty.”

Kit gasped. “Hannah? Hannah *Cremeans*? That’s your mother?”

“Yeah. When she married and her name changed, she kinda faded into the background. I’m surprised you knew her name.”

“Pretty kitty, I have a Bachelor’s in *history*.”

“But your focus is ancient history.”

“That doesn’t mean I don’t know my modern history.”

“Well, my mom had two brothers.”

“Say no more, pretty kitty,” he sighed. “I know about it.”

“I guess she doesn’t want to lose anyone else, so she’s majorly protective,” she reasoned. “Grandma more or less picked out my dad for her, which worked out since my dad was in love with my mom. So, now Mom thinks she needs to pick husbands for me and Jenny. Add those two together, and you see why me and Jenny left home to go to school.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“Because my mom hates it,” she answered. “Because of what happened to my brothers. She doesn’t like to talk about it. And you can’t ask her about it, Kit. It just makes her sad, and she’ll hate you even more.”

“Wow,” he breathed. The Columbus Twenty, twenty mixed breed high schoolers that integrated the Columbus East High School after the Mixed Breed Civil Rights laws were passed in 1971, which completely ended all forms of breed segregation. Even though mixed breeds were supposedly covered in the civil rights laws of the 60s, the purist movement kept finding ways to exploit the loopholes in the laws to continue to discriminate against

mixed breeds. The Columbus Twenty were like the African breed children in the south, the first kids to go to school under the new laws.

Oh yes, that was a dark day in the Vulpan household, he was told.

If Jessie's mom was Hannah Cremeans, then he knew her story. Her younger brothers, William and Jebediah Cremeans, were both killed by a purist mob in October of 1972, the last known furs to have been lynched. Six of the killers were convicted, and they were still in prison to this day.

Damn, no wonder she wanted to forget. Her brothers were killed because they were mixed breed, and they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. But that was also an event that changed public opinions and spelled the death of the purist movement and purist organizations. Those two boys were literally killed on camera, and it caused massive outrage. Kit was surprised that Hannah had managed to vanish from the public eye like that, since she was famous after a fashion. But then again, that was a kind of fame that one would never want.

"I understand, pretty kitty," he said, hugging her tightly. "Did she ever talk about it with you?"

"No. She never talks about it. I learned about it from Dad."

"Well, that does explain a little about why she may hate me," he sighed. "The Vulpans were never very shy about their sympathies."

"No, I don't think she even knew who your family was until after I met you. And her hatred of you started *way* before she knew who you were. Besides, think about it. *I'm* a mixed breed, my handsome fox. That you're marrying me might make her feel different. You're no purist," she giggled.

“Well, I’ll have to keep that in mind next time I’m about to be pissed at her. That was one rough road to travel.”

“Maybe now you know why I put up with it for so long. In a way, I kinda understand the way she feels.”

“Yeah, I can understand that.”

Learning the truth about Jessie’s family had actually changed Kit’s opinion of her mother quite a bit.

He thought about it most of Sunday, as he was more or less browbeat to sitting on the couch as she settled into his house—*their house*—a bit more, making it more of a home for herself. She went out that morning and bought new curtains to replace the ratty old ones donated by her sorority house, and occupied herself with much of the morning and early afternoon with putting them up. Kit helped as much as she’d allow, but he spent much of his time pondering what he’d learned about Hannah Williams.

In a way, she felt kind of like a kindred spirit. She too had faced tremendous hardship in her life, from a different source but with a similar effect, but she’d suffered much more loss than Kit. Kit had never lost anything but his love for his family and material things he could replace. Hannah had lost her brothers, and had been punished, degraded, and humiliated for something beyond her control. And she’d managed to come through it, raise three children, and find a husband who loved her and build a good life for herself. Sure, she was a little extreme, but now that he knew what he knew, he could rationalize her ultra-protective nature. He could understand it. Hannah had lost much in her life, and she wanted to hold on to what she had, a compulsion so powerful that it drove her almost to the

point of driving her daughters away from her. But there was also a tremendous acceptance there. Since Hannah never talked about her past, she was keeping her own experiences out of her children's lives, allowing them to grow up without any of her own bad experiences tainting their outlooks. She'd raised them like any normal mother, albeit a protective one, allowing them to be *normal* kids, giving them the childhood she'd been denied. That she could separate her own bad experiences out of her parenting told much of Hannah's wisdom and strength, and at least in Jessie's case, she raised an intelligent, well-adjusted young femme that, while maybe a little naïve, was just as normal as any other twenty-one year old. And that was an accomplishment.

It was too bad she hated him. He'd love to talk to her, and learn *her* story.

But he wouldn't do that even if she didn't hate him. Jessie said that her mother never talked about that, never talked about her history, and he'd respect that. It had to be painful, and he knew from experience that there were some parts of his own past that he'd love to never think about again, never have to remember. But he could respect her without ever asking about it.

Monday, he finally got to go back to work. Since he couldn't really type very fast and that hindered him in his usual duties, he instead worked with Rick and Savid, and started learning the business of magazine editing. They started training him in how the editing program worked, kind of like a glorified Powerpoint, and he started getting the hang of it. Mike, not wanting to be outdone, hijacked him for a couple of hours after lunch to show him how a website really worked, teaching him the very basics of HTML and actually relating it in ways to the editing program that made

sense to him. Mike also couldn't resist showing off all the pictures of him in the hospital he'd put on the website's photo gallery, as well as Jessie's proposal and the reply on their own special webpage. "That's part of magazine history now," Mike grinned. "The magazine's very first marriage proposal."

"Mike, the magazine's only been in print for two years," Kit protested.

"So? It's still a red-letter day."

Driving Jessie's car was a lot different from his. He'd gotten used to being high up, and driving the Corolla was like riding a motorized sled. But her car was an automatic, and since he only had one arm—at least officially, since he could move his arm quite well now without pain—it was really his only option. He got home and found Jessie not there, so he surreptitiously took off the sling and exercised his arm slowly and carefully. It burned a little when he moved it too far, which he only did carefully for fear of tearing something in there, and there was still a little nagging ache and a lot of itching, but he had a fairly decent range of motion without any pain at all. With luck, he'd be fully healed in just a week or two. As long as he didn't raise his arm over his shoulder or reach too far to the right side or too far behind him, it was more than tolerable.

Jessie came in carrying some Wal-Mart bags, and she gave him an immediate hostile look. "What are you doing!" she demanded.

"The doc told me to exercise my arm out of the sling, remember?" he said mildly, putting his right paw on his shoulder and very tentatively working his left arm back and forth. "He said five minutes a day once I didn't feel any jabs when I took it out of the sling."

"Oh. So he did. How does it feel?"

“Like I’ll be back to playing football soon,” he smiled, then he patted her backside as she went back. “Or the good kind of wrestling.”

She laughed, swatting him with her tail. “I think you’re already up to that point,” she said with a naughty smile at him. She opened a bag from Circuit City, and showed him a small box. “I hope you don’t mind, but I went out and bought something for us.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a camera,” she answered. “You know, we don’t have one, and I’d like some more pictures than what Mike takes.”

“Oh, how much was it?”

“Four hundred dollars,” she said, her cheeks ruffling slightly. “I know it’s a little expensive, but Lilly recommended it. It’s just like hers. She said it takes great pictures, it can even take video, and it’s really tough. She’s dropped hers bunches of times and it still works fine.”

“Well, I don’t mind if it’s what you want,” he told her.

“I know, I’m sorry,” she said, looking down demurely. “But we don’t have any pictures, and I want a camera.”

“Don’t apologize to me, my pretty kitty,” he chuckled. “We’ve managed Vil’s gift very well, and since Rick kept paying me even when I was in the hospital, we had the money to spare. And she won’t mind at all that you used the excess to buy something you think we need.”

“I was going to ask you to save it to help me buy me a new laptop, but I can just keep using yours, if you don’t mind.”

“It’s yours for the taking, love,” he assured her. “I don’t use it at work. We might fight over it a little at home, but I’m sure we can work it out,” he chuckled.

“I know I’m sounding like I’m just taking over all your money,” she said with sudden shyness.

He laughed. “Jess, it’s not *my* money, it’s *our* money. You even have an ATM card for my bank account. You don’t have to ask for permission, silly kitty! As long as you warn me so I don’t go thinking I have more money in the bank than I do, you’re more than welcome to it. I trust you, love. You’re a sensible cat who won’t go crazy with our money.”

She laughed sheepishly. “Well, I’ve had a few impulses, but I knew it would be a bad idea.”

“And that’s why I trust you,” he smiled, putting his arm back in the sling. “So, let’s get that camera set up.”

After installing the software on the laptop, they played with it a little bit. Jessie took pictures of the apartment and of Kit, and he took a few of her, then they downloaded a few of them to the laptop. Jessie mailed some of them to Sam and Sandy, and mailed quite a few of them to her father’s university email account, mostly the ones of the apartment.

Kit had noticed before that Jessie was very good at taking pictures, and the pictures she took were actually very well done. Jessie had an eye for it, just like Lilly. Lilly had taught Jessie how to use her camera, and obviously taught her a little about photography, so Jessie had went out and bought the exact same kind of camera so she was working with something with which she was familiar. Kit watched as she mailed the photos off, sitting at the dining room table, with him leaning over her shoulder.

“You know, we need one more thing,” Kit noted.

“What?”

“A video camera. One with a stand, we can set up in the bedroom,” he said huskily, putting his paw around her slender waist.

“You,” she laughed, elbowing him gently. But her breath caught in her throat and she immediately began to purr when he started nuzzling her. “Do you think it would be too much to ask for a laptop, love?”

He chuckled against her neck. “How much money do we have in the bank?”

“I don’t know exactly, maybe a little over a thousand,” she answered.

“We’ll go shopping for them next weekend. And I’ll look at video cameras,” he added kissing her neck. “We’ll give Mike something *good* to put on the magazine website.”

She laughed, reaching up and putting her paw against his head.

Kit’s idea of shopping for laptops actually never got off the ground. When Vil called that evening to talk about the wedding, he asked her where she bought his. “Why, did yours break?”

“No, Jessie doesn’t have one, and I was going to shop for one for her.”

“She doesn’t have a laptop?”

“She broke hers about a week before she met me.”

“Well hell, I never knew,” she said in obvious surprise. “You couldn’t afford the laptop I gave you, little bro. I’ll send her one.”

“But—“

“Let’s not get into that argument again, brother,” she cut him off.
“Jessie *needs* a laptop, and I’m not going to let you buy her one out of some discount store.”

“You know I hate it when you do that.”

“And I know you can’t say no when I give things to Jessie,” she returned, rather smugly. “She needs a laptop for school, and so she’ll get one. A *real* one, not a junkbox special out of a blue-light sale.”

“You just make me feel so able to provide for my future wife,” he said darkly into the phone, which made her laugh.

“It’ll be there tomorrow morning. You working?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll have it overnighted to your office. Now put her on the phone.”

He snorted. “Jessie! My evil bitch of a sister is on the phone!”

Jessie laughed as she came out of the bathroom. “Are you being mean to your brother again, Vil?” she giggled when she took the phone from him. “Really? Aww, Vil, you don’t have to do that for me! We can afford a laptop.” She laughed. “Yeah, well, Kit’s *is* nice. Aww, you’re so sweet. Thank you!”

Kit stalked away, grumbling under his breath.

He kept thinking about Hannah, kept wondering at the story that she might have to tell, but more worried about her hatred of him poisoning her relationship with her daughter.

He thought about it sitting at work, as he got to design his very first magazine page for the week after next's issue. While he was sitting there juggling article text, ads, and pictures within the magazine's style template, he thought about it. He needed to bridge the gap with Hannah, offer an olive branch now that it seemed that she was starting to come around, at least as far as the wedding was concerned. He shifted a column of text into its spot, nestled in around a picture of a new nightclub that was opening next month.

Text.

It was such a simple, elegant idea! The art of writing a letter was a dead art nowadays, but hopefully someone of Hannah's age might appreciate it.

He finished up the page he was working on, saved it, then wandered back to his office. He sat down at his computer, took his arm out of its sling, and then started up the word processing program.

And he wrote.

His first paragraph summed up the entire letter quite nicely:

Dear Mrs. Williams:

I'm sure that you're a little surprised to receive this, and please pardon the fact that it's not hand-written and was sent via e-mail. But I felt it was necessary to write this. You and I haven't exactly been on friendly terms. I know that there's little I can do to persuade you against your position on me, but I felt that it was necessary for you to

understand how I feel about Jessie. So, this letter is for you, but it's about your daughter. I can only hope I can express how much I love her and keep it under the size of a novel.

He wrote simply and from the heart. He told Hannah about how he met her, and how she had captivated him, almost from the beginning. He pulled no punches about himself. He was a homeless dishwasher when he met her, and he admitted as much. He went on to talk about her, how he felt about her, the little things about her that he loved, from her black mittens to the maddeningly adorable way she blushed, to her amazing sense of humor, to her wonderfully caring and compassionate personality. He described her to Hannah through his eyes in honest terms, putting in words what he felt inside, but feeling and admitting in the letter that his words just couldn't do it justice.

And on he wrote, as his left shoulder began to ache from the effort. Members of the crew came to his door and saw him almost totally engrossed in what he was doing, and didn't bother him, not even Rick. Page after page, honest, sincere emotions, observations, hopes, dreams, and plans. He told her about how he hoped the wedding would go, but he was keeping himself politely out of it because it was Jessie's wedding and it was to make her happy. He told her about the children they hoped to have, he told her about the plans he had for the future. His plans completely revolved around Jessie, as he prepared to support her, nurture her, care for her, and spend the rest of his life making her happy.

And he told her about his family. Again, he pulled no punches. He told her about his history, about the history of his family, and about the split that had caused him to leave the family and spurn their views and their money.

How can I explain it, Hannah? I guess I can't. By all rights, I should have grown up just like my father, just like my family. But I didn't. I never felt the way they did. I couldn't understand why they hated so much. I heard all of their propoganda, and I guess I believed it out of blind faith, until I rebelled against my father, and I got to see first hand for myself out on the streets. Do you know that I'd never even seen a mixed breed in real life until I was fourteen? I didn't quite know how to react. I remembered what my family had said about them, but when he talked to me, I just couldn't fathom what on earth they were complaining about. He was kind. He was concerned about me because I was wandering the streets alone after dark, and I was obviously just a kid. When he coaxed the fact that I'd run away out of me, he didn't march me straight home. He took me to a Burger King and sat down and talked to me, something my father had never done. He was warm and friendly, and that night sitting in that Burger King, sharing a box of fries while he let me voice all my pent-up frustrations and anger about my family, was one of the turning points of my life. I guess some children have their illusions shattered by harsh reality. Mine were shattered by a talkative, kind male named Rudy, who was half raccoon, half dog.

I never really told them about how I felt, because I knew that not just my father would come down on me. The Vulpan family is tight-knit around the controlling family, which was mine, because they held the reins of power and the keys to the bank. I was doted on as a kid because I was the heir apparent, but inside all I could do was scream. It wasn't what I wanted to do. I would have been a terrible

businessmale. After meeting Rudy, I knew that if I didn't try to find my own happiness in life, I would have wasted the gift God gave me.

I guess I should thank Rudy and my father, and my family. Their actions brought me to Austin, and it was here that I found that happiness.

And the money? I'm sure you might wonder about that. I saw what it did to my father, Hannah. I saw it consume him until money was all he cared about, even over his own children. I saw what money had done to my uncles, and my cousins. Money can make some people happy, but when you have too much of it, it destroys your life. It's a curse, Hannah, a curse that destroys, no matter how much it can be used to build. I was rich, once. But I'm far richer now than I ever was when I had money, because now my life is nearly complete. And when we have our first child, then I'll know what it's like to be truly blessed.

And he wrote on. Friends came and went, but when they called him, he didn't answer. His left arm went beyond pain and settled into an angry numbness, a kind of dull buzzing. He just wrote, and wrote, divulging heartfelt desires, admitting to fears, anything he thought that would help Hannah understand him so she would understand just how much he loved her daughter.

He blinked when the phone rang. He picked it up, then grunted in pain when he carefully rotated his left arm as he opened it. "Hello?"

"Kit? Where are you?" It was Jessie.

He looked at the clock on his computer, and saw that it was nearly 8:00pm. He'd been sitting there three hours after quitting time, working on the letter. "Oh, I'm still at work. I've been working on something that I couldn't quit."

"Come home," she told him. "The doctor said *light* activity, not overtime!"

"I've been taking it easy, love," he assured her as he started the last paragraph:

Well, Hannah, I'm afraid I'm going to have to end it here, though I feel I've completely failed to try to explain how I feel. I just haven't done it justice. But, your daughter just called me and is nagging at me to come home. I'm still in the office, some three hours after I should have been home, and she's still in nurse mode. Until the doc gives me a clean bill of health, she's going to be my terror of a pretty kitty. I can only hope that you read this letter and at least understand how much I love Jessie, and can only beg for your blessing to be her husband and the father of your grandchildren.

Sincerely,

Kit

He saved the letter, then opened up the email program. "Hon, what's your email address at home?" he asked. "Something I can send to your family at home, rather than your father's office?"

“Umm, try skeetfan at armstrong dot com. That’s my dad’s home email.”

“So, your mother would get an email if I sent it there?”

“Mom? You’re sending email to Mom?”

“She’s put out a cease fire offer, pretty kitty. I’m going to try to get a peace treaty.”

Jessie laughed. “Yeah, just put it in the subject line it’s for Mom, and Dad’ll have her come read it.”

“Well, it’s going to be a file and a message, in case she doesn’t want to try to read it that way.” He copied the entire text of the file into his email client, attached the document that made up the letter, and then sent it on its way. “Alright, pretty kitty, I’m on the way home.”

“I’ll call home and tell her you sent her something.”

“If you do that, she’ll get your number.”

“Well, I guess I should. Like you said, she’s showing signs of asking for a peace treaty, so I guess a little show of faith on my part would help a little.”

“Okay.”

“What did you send her?”

“A letter,” he answered, putting his left arm back in the sling after closing everything out and turning off the monitor. Mike didn’t like them shutting down their computers, he was one of those who believed that letting them run was better for them in the long run than turning them off and on. “A letter explaining how I feel.”

“It took you three hours to write it?”

“I’ve been writing it since after lunch,” he answered. “I hope she has some time. It’s over twenty pages.”

“Woah.”

“I don’t think I did a very good job. It’s hard to put *I love you* in words that don’t do it justice.”

“Aww, you’re so sweet, my handsome fox.”

“Thanks, my pretty kitty.”

“Come home, baby. I’ll cook you something to eat.”

“I am a little hungry. Gotta hang up now, hon, I need the only paw I’ve got to set the alarm and lock the door. See you in fifteen.”

“Before you go, what do you want for dinner?”

“Anything handy.”

“How does hamburgers sound?”

He laughed. “Since when do I say no to hamburgers?”

Chapter 9

The laptop that Vil had sent Jessie the day before was, quite simply, awesome.

It was a new model, the next step up from Kit's own laptop, and he was just slightly jealous of it. Mike, on the other hand, was almost *violently* jealous when he came over to help them set up the laptop for their home network. Sam too was quite interested in it, having come over to hang out with Jessie and get some more lessons on cooking. "Think I could get your sister to do me a favor?" he asked with a laugh as they finished setting up the laptop for the network, and Mike went about installing the programs she'd need on it and importing over the work she kept on his laptop into her own.

When Vil called that night to talk about the wedding, he told her that the laptop had come. "Jessie's in love with it, and Mike almost stole it," he chuckled.

"What, you like it?"

"It's a lot nicer than mine," he admitted.

"I didn't even see it. I just told them to send the best they had. I have the same laptop as you, bro, how much better is it?" He told her about the upgrades with the new model, which made her laugh ruefully. "Hmm, sounds like I'm gonna upgrade mine too."

"Mike was drooling over it."

“Oh, he’ll get over it.”

He should have caught the little tilt in her voice that would have warned him that she had shenanigans on her mind. It would have prepared him for what happened at work the next day. As he and Savid worked through the mailbag page with Marty, working out how much space he’d need for the issue, Fed Ex showed up in the office. Two of them, with a dolly of Sabletech boxes. “Which of you is Rick Sanders?”

“I am,” Rick called as he came out of the office. “What’s this?”

“Delivery,” he said. “You got nineteen boxes total here, sir. Where do you want us to stack them?”

“Delivery of what?”

Kit, however, was on the phone almost instantly. “Hey bro,” Vil called in a bored voice, the sound of a computer keyboard’s clicking in the background.

“Vil!” he barked.

She laughed immediately. “Are they there?”

“Vil sent them!” he said, in a little disgust. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I was looking for a way to pay Rick and your friends back for saving your life, baby bro,” she said pleasantly. “I figured what the hell, why not invest a little in your company?”

“What the hell did you do?” he demanded.

“I bought your office a new computer network,” she replied. “And some other equipment that magazines often need. Did you think I’d forget?”

I don't forget slights, but I also never forget good samaritans. And it's not like I'm down there throwing cash around," she said teasingly. "Tell me that your magazine can't *use* what I've sent you."

He growled, then sighed and chuckled ruefully. "We probably can," he admitted.

"And it's not a gift. It's an *investment*. I expect to see a return on the money I've invested in your company. But, I won't be looking for money. I'll be looking for a favor sometime in the future."

He blew out his breath. "What did you send?"

"It's Christmas for *Lone Star*, baby bro. Open them and see," she actually giggled, then she hung up on him.

Rick gave him a wild look. "Vil sent it all," he repeated. "As a thank-you for what you guys did for me."

"She did?" Marty gasped, as the two delivery drivers waited patiently.

"Stack them anywhere," Rick told them. "Let's see what we got here."

After four more trips, all the equipment was taking up the entire office. Rick talked with the two delivery drivers, a mouse and a rat, signed for it, and then they left. "Well, let's see what's in them," Rick said. "Everyone pick a box, but don't scatter stuff everywhere. And look for a manifest! There has to be a manifest in one of the boxes. They'd never send a shipment this big without a manifest."

Vil was *thorough*, and she made everyone in the office feel like a little kid. Vil had sent enough cutting-edge desktops to replace everyone's workstation, complete with large monitors, as well as a high-powered new

server that could replace the five boxes Mike used for the current website and other jobs. And she also sent eight identical laptops, the same model as Jessie's new laptop, even one for *Kit*. There were also four video cameras, three high-powered professional digital cameras, five hand-held casual digital cameras, two new digital drawing easels, two new high-powered scanners, four professional-grade color printers, and a huge LCD TV that could be hooked up to a computer and serve as a monitor, which they could hang on the wall and use for meetings. The last item they came across, buried in the box holding all the cameras, was a small box packed with a personal gift to Rick, the fur who had literally saved Kit's life. Inside the box was a stack of envelopes, a little plaque to hang on his wall, and a letter. "There are three personal gifts to each of you," he read aloud to them all. "I've also decided to invest in your magazine by supplying you with equipment you need to do your work. The laptops, the Blackberries, and the envelopes in this box are my personal gifts to you, the crew, who were there for my brother when he needed you. The professional equipment is for the magazine, so you have everything you need to do your work. Except," he chuckled, "for the Toshiba camera. That one is Jessie's. I just had them send it to the office as part of the shipment, and Kit can take it home to her tonight. And to Rick, who shot the fur who nearly killed my brother and saved his life, a personal thank-you, my eternal gratitude, and a small token of my appreciation for saving my little brother."

He looked at the envelopes, saw that his own was on top, and he opened it. He gasped, his eyes wild. "Holy—" he said, breathing fast. "She sent me a check for *twenty thousand dollars!*"

"Oh *God!*" Lilly said with a squealing laugh. Rick handed the next one in the stack to Mike, who tore it open, then gave a whoop.

“She gave me *ten* thousand! I can buy a new car!”

After all of them were opened, Kit saw the ugly truth. Vil had given ten thousand dollars to every member of the crew but Rick, to whom she gave twenty thousand. And there was nothing he could do about it. Outside of the laptop and the Blackberry, she’d directly given nothing to him. She instead went around him and gave to everyone at his job, including the job itself. And there was nothing he could do about it. She only sent him the laptop and the Blackberry, and not because of who he was, but because he was a member of the staff.

He wouldn’t complain too much. He had to admit, Jessie’s laptop was *awesome*, and he was secretly thrilled that Vil sent him a toy of equal wow-factor. He had his principles about not taking hand-outs from Vil, but the little kid in him couldn’t deny the excitement of having a kick-ass laptop to play with. The Blackberry, well, he could actually see use for that. He *did* do some work outside the office, and staying in touch was always a good thing. Thanks to Vil, now the whole office had a way to keep in touch through company phones, something Rick couldn’t afford.

And he also had to admit, Vil was right. They could use everything she sent. It was all cutting edge, and they could really get a lot of work done on it.

Mike was *in heaven*. It would be a lot of work to install all the new equipment, but he looked forward to it with a childlike enthusiasm.

And he got to work. The first thing he did was put all the new laptops on the network, and after that, little got done...so it was a good thing that the next issue was already basically wrapped up. It usually was by Wednesday, what most of them were working on were pieces and sections

for next week's issue. The entire office started installing their programs on their new laptops as Mike went through and started installing equipment. He started with the master computer, which was the main station that handled the actual editing software and files they sent to the printer, and worked down from there, moving on to Rick and Savid's systems, which also handled editing, but Rick's computer also held most of the vital magazine files and documents he needed to run the magazine. Mike was very thorough as techs went, and was able to mirror everything on their original systems into the new ones quickly and efficiently, making it almost seem that they weren't on a new machine. There were some differences, and he'd had to reinstall some software because the new machines were more powerful and had more options, but it didn't take him long, about two hours per box. He drew up a schedule after he finished with Savid's system and made sure everything worked properly. Mike would be installing the new machines at a rate of two a day from there out. Jeffrey and Lilly would get theirs tomorrow, Barry and Kit the day after, and then the day after that, Mike would come in on his day off and install his own workstation and port everything dealing with the website and databases to the new blade server stack.

“Now, since we got all this junk all over creation,” Rick said after Mike told them about the plan, “here's the deal. When Mike finishes installing your new station, if you want, you can keep your old one and take it home. Jeffrey, Savid, you can keep the gear you have installed on your old machines, since you'll use it. Anyone who wants the old printers and scanners can throw their names in a hat and we'll draw to see who gets to keep them. Mike, the machines you're using to run all the network stuff are yours.”

“I’m going to keep two of them here to serve as backups,” Mike told him.

“Mike, think I might borrow one of those?” Kit asked. “I don’t have a desktop at home, and I’d like a platform for doing some stuff.”

“Why not use your old computer, Kit?” Barry asked.

“Kit’s box isn’t set up for dealing with heavy graphics or movie files,” Mike answered for him. “It’s the oldest box in the office, and it just doesn’t have the horsepower. I think I could swing trading you your old box for one of the servers. It has the hardware for it.”

“You can have my old machine, Kit,” Savid told him. “I don’t need another computer at home. I have what I need...but I would like to keep easel. Easel here is better than easel I have at home.”

“I doubt I’ll be doing any graphic design,” Kit chuckled. “But thanks, Savid. We just bought a camera, and with this one that Vil sent Jessie, I’d like to have a single computer we can use for it, not two separate laptops.”

“No problem, Kit. You get good computer for that, mine is graphics machine, it has lots of power and much memory for graphics. I have many graphics programs on it already,” he grinned.

“Well, there ya go, Kit,” Mike laughed. “Savid has *all* the good graphics software on his box, so you get the whole shebang. I think he even has Moviemaker.”

“Yes, you install off server for me, remember?”

“You can do what you want with them, son,” he chuckled. “I’ll have Mike install the big TV on the wall on Monday, and I think I’ll have cable

put in for it,” he chuckled. “Can it run cable and still work as a presentation monitor when we have staff meetings?”

“Hell, easily, boss,” Mike nodded with a chuckle.

“Mmm—mmm—mmm, can you say *superbowl party*, ladies?” Marty said with a snap of his fingers, which produced some chuckles.

“We’re gonna be a little crowded with all these boxes around, but it’ll work out. Don’t throw them away, Mike. I’ll take them home and stow them in my old storage shed, just in case we need them to ship something back.”

“Got it, boss,” he nodded.

In all, Kit was a little miffed at Vil for meddling, but again, she had him by the whiskers on this one. She didn’t send anything directly to him. She sent things that the magazine could really use. And though she sent money, she didn’t send truly obscene sums. She gave each of them a large amount that they could really use, but not so much that it went beyond the pail. And besides, they were his friends. He couldn’t be angry that Vil had shown them such generosity, for they were all like him, even Rick. They were all squeaking by on lower middle class incomes, but they all loved their jobs and they had a lot of fun doing it. Rick may have owned the magazine, but on some weeks he took home less money than he paid his staff, and he kept paying Kit even when he wasn’t working...so that Vil gave him money seemed like a very proper thing to do for him.

And Kit got an *awesome* laptop...and a little more. Kit put his name in the hat for the printer, and he won one of them, but he lost on the draw for the scanners. He was happy about that, because those were professional-

quality graphics printers, and able to print out high-quality photographs when one used the right paper.

He went home with his old and new laptops, Jessie's new video camera, printer, and Savid's old system. Jessie was in the kitchen, a little apron on over a tank top and shorts, getting ready to cook stuffed bell peppers. "Sam's coming over later, my handsome fox. What is that?"

"You won't believe what Vil did," he grunted as he put his portfolio on the coffee table. "Come out the car, I need your help."

"What?"

Jessie listened as he explained what happened, and laughed when he opened the trunk and showed her Savid's old computer and monitor. "Vil sent you a video camera too, so I figured I may as well take advantage of it. Rick's letting everyone keep their old computers to take home, but Savid gave me his because my old office machine is kinda old. Savid's computer is a graphics machine, so it's got plenty of power. It can handle everything we need to do on it, no problem. We can put all our pictures and movies and such on the desktop, that way it's not scattered across three laptops."

"Hmm...Kit, are you too attached to your old laptop?"

"Why?"

"Because Sam would kill for it. Think you might sell it to her?"

Kit laughed. "Love, she can *have* it."

"She'll be thrilled!" Jessie said, kissing him exuberantly. "I'll get the heavy stuff, my handsome fox, you get what you can carry."

Even though Kit was sure he could do it himself, Mike still showed up a little after he got home, still giddy and all but dancing around like a kid. “I came to help ya network that desktop,” he grinned.

“I think I can handle it, Mike,” Kit chuckled. “You’ve taught me well.”

“Well, yeah, but this one’ll be a bit trickier. You’re dealing with a machine that was part of another network, so I’ll have to do a little remapping on it. It’s either that or reinstall.”

“And lose all the programs Savid has on it? No way! This is like free Edit Master, Office, Flash, Moviemaker, Studio, and Photoshop!”

“Then let’s get it set up,” he grinned.

Sam came over as Mike was setting up the desktop to be the main part of the their home network. “*What?*” she gasped from the living room, then she appeared in the doorway of the spare room where Kit had his modem, serving as a little office. “Kit, are you giving me your laptop?”

“My old one, yeah,” he grinned. “My sis sent me a new one, and Jessie asked if I’d sell my old one to you. But you’ve been a big help, and the sorority gave me a lot of my furniture, so it’s only fair to return a favor with a favor. As soon as I get all my stuff off of it, it’s all yours. Just share it with the rest of the sorority,” he added with a chuckle.

Sam charged in and hugged him from behind, “I think I love you!” she shouted.

Kit laughed. “Don’t let Jessie hear you say that.”

It took about two hours. Mike and Sam stayed over for dinner as Mike set up their new desktop. It had all of Savid’s programs on it, and Mike

went ahead and set up the printer and attached it to the network so any of the four systems on the network could print using it. Mike even helped him mirror his old laptop onto his new one, then cleared out his personal files and gave the old laptop to Sam, but left the programs on it. They decided to leave it on their home network as well, so Sam could come over and use their printer. Since Sam was pre-med, the ability to print some detailed pictures might be useful to her for her anatomy homework and such.

Sam looked like a girl with a new doll after Mike helped him move all his personal files off his old laptop and to his new one, and he handed the old one over to Sam. She actually cradled it like it was a baby when she waltzed out of the room with it.

“That’s one femme who takes her computers seriously,” Mike chuckled. “And cute, too.”

It took Mike until Tuesday to finish the conversion of the office to the new equipment, and the last station he replaced was Kit’s own. It was a *huge* upgrade for him, going from that wind-up toy to a cutting edge workstation with the best graphics card and a virtual bottomless pit of RAM. It was so powerful, he could run about ten different programs at once and barely notice a slowdown. It also put them a little behind on their work, because of the sheer giddiness and the disruption of the computer network while Mike replaced everything. They had to roll up their sleeves and buckle down to get the magazine fully laid out and ready for printing on Thursday night.

On Thursday, they held their first staff meeting using the big TV as their display as Rick and Savid went over the issue and looked for feedback

or last minute changes. It was a *huge* difference from all of them crowding around the monitor they had in the table...which was actually still there. Rick rather liked using it when he and Savid were working, since it was fairly large and under glass, which allowed them to lay things over top of it to get a rough idea how things would look.

Getting used to the Blackberry, on the other hand, wasn't quite so easy. He'd never had one before, and had no idea how it worked. He spent the better part of Wednesday afternoon reading its manual and learning how to set it up and customize it, and really saw that he wasn't going to get as much use out of it as he expected...at least until he had it all working. Since Vil had set up the accounts for them, she knew which was his, and she was already sending him messages. Vil was a dedicated "Crackberry," someone who was never without her trusty device, and now that Kit had one, she started using it to email him. The one she'd sent them all was like a bloody swiss army knife. It was a phone, email messenger, text messenger, web browser, video and audio player, integrated camera, organizer, wifi, modem feature that allowed the blackberry to connect a computer to the internet using the device's own phone feature, it even had GPS. He emailed Vil when he got the device up and running, and she called him back using the Blackberry's phone number not a minute later.

"Hey bro," she said with a chuckle.

"I didn't need *another* phone, Vil," he told her.

"Hey, I wanted to get you a *real* toy, and Blackberries do it all," she told him. "I'd be totally lost without mine. Look at it this way, bro. Now, when applications ask you for a work phone and you don't want Marty knowing your business, give them the Blackberry number."

Kit laughed. “Well, that is a good point. And it feels kinda *businesslike* to have a company phone,” he added. “I hope this doesn’t cost too much.”

“Eh, I just had your accounts added into the shipyard account, but your phones are like mine and my higher execs, unlimited, where I have limits on the ones used by my lower execs.”

“Isn’t that a bit dangerous? I mean, that’s *documented* help you’re giving me.”

“Don’t you worry about that, little bro,” she told him seriously. “I’ve almost taken care of that little problem.”

When he asked her what she was going to do, she refused to answer, and then hurriedly said her goodbyes and hung up.

Rick put a memo out for them all that had all their Blackberry numbers listed, so they could call each other. All of them put the numbers in their phone features, and that wired up the whole magazine.

The Blackberry came in handy the next day, when he was at the annex for his next doctor’s appointment. This time, he was there alone, and Doctor Barnett gave him another exam to check his arm. The exterior signs of the wound were now fully healed, and there was only a little tightness and twinging when he moved his left arm in certain ways. His fur was even well on its way to growing back out. Barnett examined him for about a half an hour, and then had the nurse draw some of his blood. “Well, we’re gonna check for any sign of infection,” he announced, “but either way, I want you to take that antibiotic until it’s gone. That will really discourage any bugs from trying to take up residence in you.”

“Okay, Doc,” Kit chuckled.

“Now, on to the results. Good news, bad news...which do you want?”

“Both,” he smiled.

“Okay, since you’re leaving it up to me. The good news is, kiss the sling goodbye,” he grinned. “I still want you to take it easy, though, and you’re still on light activity restriction. No heavy lifting, no stresses to your shoulder, and if you spend extended periods of time at a computer, I want you to take a five minute break every twenty minutes.”

“Okay.”

“Now, the bad news. Physical therapyyyyyy,” he said in an intentionally melodramatic, spooky voice which surprised Kit and made him laugh. “Three times a week right here in the annex, you’ll have a half hour of physical therapy, to work the tightness out of your shoulder and get your muscle tone back.”

“How long will I have to do that?”

“It’s never a set time, Kit, it’ll depend on how well your shoulder responds to therapy. When I feel your shoulder is rehabilitated, you’re outta there, and you never have to come back. But, I want you back here in two weeks so I can check out the shoulder and see how it’s responding to therapy. Same place, see the nurse at the desk for your appointment and to set up your therapy. Now get outta here!” he said with a grin and a shooing motion with his paws.

Once everyone got used to the upgrades, it just *rocked*.

The new computers were fast and powerful. The Blackberries actually proved *very* useful when Barry, Lilly, and Kit were out doing fieldwork, letting them check in with the office and each other quickly, and more than once on the next Tuesday, Kit sent off research information straight to Barry's Blackberry as he was out doing interviews. All in all, by the time they released the next issue, they were fully used to them, and the magazine was better than ever.

He also got an answer from Jessie's mother. After returning to work from physical therapy, he found an email message from her in his work email. He opened it and found a short message:

Kit:

I received your letter and read it. I found it to be surprisingly moving, and I have to admit that you stated your case with emotion and warmth. I can appreciate your candor.

But understand, this is a very personal and emotional issue for me. I have no doubt you love Jessica, not after reading that letter, but what I fear is the future, when you grow bored with her and then abandon her. I know you say you'll never do that, but that's the big difference here. You say you won't do it, but I think you will. And I don't want my daughter to have to raise children alone because you've left her.

I've agreed to come to the wedding. I admit that I can't stop it, that I can't turn Jessica away from what I think is a terrible decision. She's made it clear to me that if I force her to choose between you and me, she'll choose you. I have to accept that fact. All I can do is

step back, watch, and pray that I'm wrong. And when you do leave her, I'll be there to help her get her life back together.

I do want you to come to Thanksgiving. You need to meet Jessica's brother and sister, and I'd like to talk to you in person, so we can discuss the marriage. I promise I'll try to be civil.

Hannah

Kit leaned back and read it again, and pondered it. Well, that was... nothing he ever expected. She was afraid he was going to leave Jessie when he got *bored* with her? It was almost ridiculous! But, since so many marriages ended with divorce—no, that was a silly thought. No, not really. It was a justifiable thought for Hannah, since she didn't know him and she didn't understand how much he loved her.

He was right...he just couldn't put it into words.

She did deserve a reply, though.

Hannah

I'm a little surprised by your reasoning. It had never crossed my mind. But, looking at it from your point of view, I can at least understand it.

That's one of the things we can talk about when I come for Thanksgiving.

But, I do need to warn you. Because I was in the hospital (I'm sure Jessie told you all about it, I won't go over it again), and my boss was kind enough to pay my salary while I was out of work, I can't in good faith ask him for any extra days off. It would be terribly rude. We will be doing an issue on the day after Thanksgiving (our magazine prints once a week, and is released on Fridays), so I'll be working during Thanksgiving week. The best I will be able to do is to fly up on my days off, stay overnight, and then fly back the next day. My normal days off are Sunday and Monday. I'll talk to my boss, but I may end up going that way.

I will get Thanksgiving day off, however. If me coming up either before or after Thanksgiving is too much of a hassle for you, or I'll miss meeting Jessie's brother and sister, I could fly up on Wednesday night, and then fly back on Friday morning. On Fridays, we don't come into the office until 1pm. That would give me enough of a window to fly in, spend Thanksgiving day with you, then fly back early the next morning.

By the way, Hannah, if you ever want to talk to me in real time, please, don't hesitate to call. You have my number, and I'm always willing to talk with you.

Kit

He thought that was a decent enough reply, and sent it off.

He spent most of the rest of the day knocking out some research projects and working with Jeffrey on the strip, and was surprised to have a reply back from Hannah as he checked his mail one more time before heading home.

Kit:

I'd rather keep it in emails for now, since I have time to think about what I want to say. That prevents me from saying something that might get me banned from the wedding. The phone doesn't have a backspace key.

Kit had to laugh at that.

I can appreciate your dedication to your company. Given the choice between a weekend at either end or Thanksgiving itself, I'd much rather have you there on Thanksgiving day. It might make things a little rushed, since I'd like to have a long talk with you and I have a lot of cooking to do that day, but you'll miss Jenny if you come before Thanksgiving and you'll miss John if you come after. John has to go to a conference in Chicago, and will be leaving on Sunday afternoon. I don't think that would give us enough time to talk with you.

So, if you would, please make your reservations for Wednesday evening and a return on Friday morning.

Hannah

Kit typed out a quick reply telling her that he'd do so, then went home.

Jessie was doing her homework at the table when he came in, but the smell of tuna cassrole assaulted his nose in an appealing manner. "Hey pretty kitty," he called as he closed the door. "You mom sent me an email about Thanksgiving."

"She did? What did she say?"

"I gave her the options for me coming out, and she went with Thanksgiving day. I'll be flying out Wednesday evening, and flying back Friday morning."

"You won't get much sleep."

"I'll live. God, that smells wonderful."

She giggled. "You mind some company tonight? I asked Sandy and Sam to come over. I'm going to help Sandy with an essay she needs to write."

"I love how you asked me *after* you invited them over," he laughed.

She grinned. "It's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission."

"You're terrible," he accused, leaning over and kissing her on the ear as he went into the kitchen for some tea. Jessie always had at least a cup of

tea waiting for him when she got home before he did. “Your mom also answered my letter. She gave the strangest answer to it.”

“How so?”

“She said that she thinks I’m going to leave you after I get bored,” he said with a mystified expression as he took a sip of his tea. “But, at least she said she believes I love you now.”

“Well, it’s a small step,” she said. “But I agree, that’s a weird reasoning. I think Mom doesn’t understand.”

“Not at all,” he said with a nod. “I’m a fox that takes marriage vows seriously. When the priest says *til death do you part*, I take it to mean exactly that.”

“I’m glad, cause that’s the only way you’ll ever get away from me,” she said with a loving grin, reaching over and patting his paw. “How’s your shoulder?”

“Doing fine,” he said. “I didn’t have any pain at all today. So, any movement on the marriage front?”

She laughed. “Some. I don’t want to set a date until you’re completely healed, though. Me and Vil have just been talking about decorations and the reception, and my dress. There is something she wants, though, that we haven’t told you yet.”

“What?”

She seemed to steel herself. “She wants to have the ceremony in Boston.”

“Absolutely not!” he said immediately. “I won’t go within a thousand miles of Boston! Is Vil crazy? Does she *want* to start a war in the family? If I brought you to Boston, that would be like bringing you into the lion’s den!”

“She’s...serious about it, Kit,” she said. “I’ve been trying to urge her out of the idea, but she doesn’t want to give it up. She wants you to get married at the church where your father and mother married.”

“Well, that’s nostalgic of her,” he said with dark irony. “No. We met here, our life is here, we marry *here*. I won’t get married in a place that has nothing but bad memories.”

“I think that’s why she wants us to marry there, so you’ll have a *good* memory.”

“Well, she can just get that idea right out of her mind,” he said adamantly. “She went *way* over the line this time. I could handle her giving the office and the crew gifts because it made them happy, but she’s starting to get *way* too comfortable with the idea she can cheese me into what she wants.”

“I’ll tell her—“

“No, *I’ll* tell her, Jess,” he said, standing up and taking the phone out of his pocket.

She picked it up on the first ring. “Hey baby bro,” she greeted.

“*No*,” he said with a hiss.

“Ah. She told you, did she?”

“Are you crazy?” he demanded. “You want us to get married in *Boston*? Are you just trying to kick sand in the family’s face, Vil? This isn’t some kind of game of nose-tweaking! This is *our lives*, Vil! I won’t bring Jess within *artillery range* of Boston!”

“Kit, I didn’t want it because I want to rub you in the family’s noses. I wanted to...it’s hard to explain. I wanted to honor a promise. Do you remember Mom much?”

“Of course I do,” he answered.

“Well, it was mom’s wish that we got married at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, Kit,” she told him. “I just thought it would be nice to do the one thing I could remember that Mom always wanted, that’s all.”

“She never told me that.”

“Since when do mothers talk about weddings with their sons, baby bro?” she asked. “It’s something that mothers talk about with their daughters. Trust me, bro, I’d never bring you to Boston without a good reason, and I sure as hell would *never* expose Jessie to the family. I just want to do something for Mom.”

“Well, I can understand that, but it’s still completely out of the question,” he said.

He heard her sigh. “How about a deal, then?”

“What?”

“You have your wedding in Austin, but you *also* get married at the Holy Cross,” she said. “I can arrange for a midnight ceremony at the Holy Cross. You can fly in, go straight to the cathedral, have a ceremony, then go

right back to the airport. That way we honor Mom's wishes and minimize the exposure."

"I...dunno, sis. I'll have to talk to Jess about it. This is something we have to agree to together."

"No pressure, baby bro. Talk about it and get back to me."

"Talk to me about what, love?" Jessie asked after they said their goodbyes.

"Vil explained why she wants us to marry in Boston," he said, sitting back down and taking her paw. He explained Vil's idea to her quickly and simply. "I...I don't know, love. I'd love to give something to Mom, but...."

"But you'd have to go to Boston," she surmised, touching his cheek.

He bowed his head, holding onto her paw.

"I understand, love. I know what Boston is to you. So really, I don't have anything to say. Personally, I don't mind flying in and having the ceremony. We'd only be there like two hours. But I'm not the one that matters here, my handsome fox. Vil doesn't understand why you don't want to go there, does she?"

"She knows that Boston is nothing but bad memories for me," he told her. "I spent most of my life either trying to get away from that place, or trying to forget it. But," he said with a sigh. "But I loved my mother, Jess. If she wanted me to get married in that cathedral, I'd like to fulfil her wish. It just won't be easy."

"I'll be there with you, my love. You don't have to face it alone."

He gave her an earnest look of relief, love, and gratitude. She leaned over and kissed him, then, to his surprise, she urged him down, until he was laying on the couch with his head in her lap. He sighed and closed his eyes as she tousled his hair, and just babied him a little as he tried to get over the fear and anger and humiliation and pain that always came whenever he thought of his life in Boston, both before and after he was disowned. Sometimes Jessie just amazed him. She always seemed to know how he was feeling, and always seemed to know exactly what to say or do to make him feel better.

Clearly, that moment of quiet intimacy was the perfect time to be interrupted. The doorbell rang, and Jessie just sighed. "It's open!" she called, keeping her paw in his hair.

Sandy and Sam came in, Sam carrying her new laptop and backpack and Sandy with her backpack. "I think we're interrupting something," Sam noted.

"Naw, if JD's head was in *his* lap, *then* we'd be interrupting something," Sandy said with a naughty grin.

"I think someone doesn't want any supper," Jessie said in a prim tone. He didn't need to look at her to know her face fur was ruffled.

"When will it be ready?"

"When the timer goes off," she answered, twirling his bangs around her finger. "You two can set the table. I'm busy."

"We can see that," Sandy laughed.

"Did we have to let them in?" he asked, rolling over on his back and looking up at her with a light smile.

“Well, given I invited them over, it would have been a little rude to leave them on the doorstep,” she giggled.

“I swear, JD, we must have totally corrupted you,” Sandy grinned as Sam came out of the kitchen holding plates. “You go from the vestal virgin to engaged in like three months.”

“I was just waiting for the right guy to come along,” she said with a gentle smile down at him, her cheeks ruffling slightly.

“Can you find one for me? I think me and Bobby are about done.”

“Mind if I make more tea?” Sam asked.

“Go for it,” Kit called, reaching up and taking Jessie’s paw.

“Hey Kit, your fur grow back?” Sandy asked.

“It’s about halfway there,” he answered her.

“Can I see?” she asked.

“You *really* don’t want to eat dinner, do you?” Jessie said archly.

Sandy laughed, then laughed even harder when the timer went off. “Oh no, I’d better get it before you kick me out!”

The physical therapy wasn’t much fun.

It wasn’t that Kit minded doing physical labor, since he’d spent months doing manual jobs. It was the mechanical feel of it. He did exacting exercises in a large room filled with other patients and therapists, which made his arm and shoulder ache when he went back to work. He went three

times a week, and though he hated it, over the course of three weeks, it did do its job.

Over that time, his fur grew back in, and the pain finally faded away from his shoulder. Doc Barnett proclaimed him fully healed, but continued him on physical therapy to both strengthen his shoulder and arm and also to make sure that he'd have no lingering pain or reduced range of motion from his wound. The latter concern was minimized, Barnett said, because of the excellent work of the surgeons who had repaired the tissues in his chest and shoulder, putting it back together perfectly and allowing Kit to heal with no issues at all.

When he was finally released from physical therapy and completely discharged and proclaimed healthy, his shoulder was as good as new. There was no pain, no stiffness, and much to his eternal relief, no sign he'd ever been shot. His fur did *not* grow back scarred white like it did on his back and head, mainly because the vast majority of the surgical scars were on his white-furred chest. Only the edges of the incisions wandered into the red fur on his shoulder, and that fur grew back red, not white.

It was nice to finally be free of it. He was back to full strength, back to work, and Jessie was overjoyed that he was fully healthy. She made him a cake from scratch when Barnett gave him his all-clear and discharged him from physical therapy, German chocolate, and even gave him a very private party that night that resulted in him being late for work the next day.

As he'd healed, he continued corresponding with Hannah. It was strange to talk to her over email, like something out of that movie *You've Got Mail*, but it had a strange quirky charm. Kit wrote her about every day, a page or two as he talked about work and other innocuous things, but mainly continued to tell her all about his life with Jessie and how much he

loved her. He told Hannah things that Jessie wouldn't, even delving slightly into their love life when Hannah boldly asked if they were practicing any kind of protection before the wedding. He was honest in telling her no, that Jessie was *hoping* to get pregnant, and though he'd be overjoyed to have a child, he was secretly hoping that Jessie could finish school before she conceived. He really wanted her to get her degree, and a child would honestly make that much harder. But, he'd written, he could not deny Jessie anything. She wanted a baby, and though he was concerned for Jessie's ability to finish school, he couldn't tell her no. If she became pregnant, well, they'd find a way to make sure Jessie got her degree. Hannah *really* didn't like that answer, but, he did feel like he scored a few points with his position. She grudgingly complemented him for his wisdom and his dedication to Jessie's education.

But what he liked most was the fact that he was getting to *know* this enigmatic woman, who had a story he was dying to learn, but knowing he could never ask her to tell it to him. Not only would it be terribly rude, but he'd made a promise to Jessie, and Kit was a fox of his word. Jessie called Hannah "Momzilla," but when he learned the truth of her, and then began to correspond with her, he started understanding her and didn't think she was quite that bad. Sure, she was pushy, willful, cunning, overbearing, melodramatic, and she was stubborn, but at least he knew why she was the way she was, and that allowed him to shrug off the majority of her invasive badgering without getting angry about it. He could see that though her actions were being influenced by her own past, she still sincerely loved her daughter and wanted what was best for her, and in that manner he could not fault her. Jessie was a treasure, the most precious thing in the world, and he'd be just as protective if she was his daughter. The main difference between them, though, was that Kit trusted Jessie, where Hannah didn't.

But that was a fundamental difference between spouses and parents the world over.

He'd just finished up another message for Hannah and sent it off as he sat on the couch, laptop in his lap, listening to classical music on the radio and the wind howl as a freak November thunderstorm raked across Austin on a Sunday afternoon. Jessie was over at the sorority, visiting with friends, and Lupe had just left a bit ago with two other neighbors, Dan the lion and Mickey the lemming, who came over to watch football. Which, for Kit, meant getting ragged on because he wasn't a Dallas fan. Luckily, they didn't watch Dallas play, so the snide comments and Patriots bashing was kept to a minimum.

Kit may have hated the city of Boston, but he was still a loyal Patriots, Celtics, Red Sox, and Bruins fan.

He made himself some tea, and was sitting at the couch, a hot cup on the coffee table as he surfed the web and checked email when Jessie got home. She was in the act of closing her phone when she came in. "Hey, my handsome fox," she called with a bright smile.

"Welcome home, pretty kitty. You're in a good mood."

"Just got off the phone with Vil, we have everything all planned out as far as what we want. And now that you're all healed up, it's time to set a date."

"That is your domain, my pretty kitty," he said with a gentle smile as she leaned down for a kiss.

"Well, I'd like at least a *little* input," she said to him. "Sometimes I feel like you're a little *too* accommodating, Kit. Do you realize we've never

once fought? That's a little unusual given how long we've been together."

Kit laughed. "Oh, that's not going to last forever, but I'd like to avoid that for as long as possible. And I'm accommodating because I want you to be happy, my pretty kitty. If it makes you happy, then it makes me happy. And since I honestly have absolutely no opinion about what day we should have the ceremony, then what more is there for me to say? It all falls on what day makes *you* happy, Jess. We can get married tomorrow, we can get married next year, it doesn't matter to me as long as we're married at the end and it makes you happy."

"Really?"

"Really, love. Find the day that works best for you and your family. Since Vil can come down here whenever she wants, and that's the only member of my family I want at the wedding, this side of the aisle is flexible and easy to please."

She laughed. "Okay then, love, lemme call my folks and talk to them about it."

"Think I'll go over to Lupe's."

"Poker?"

"Minimum safe distance," he said immediately, which made Jessie laugh richly. "Who's cooking tonight?"

"I am, silly. What do you want?"

"I've been having a craving for steak."

"Only because I bought some and they've been in the meat drawer," she accused.

“Well, that might have had something to do with it,” he agreed.

“Well, that works for me too. I think I’m gonna be on the phone for a while, and that’s something I can cook with one paw tied up by the phone,” she chuckled, kissing him one more time. “Take your phone, I’ll call you when it’s ready.”

“Surely, love.”

Kit evacuated himself over to Lupe’s apartment to give Jessie the space and privacy to deal with the sure hostility Hannah would present when a solid date was put in her face. Hannah had been rather pleasant and civil. Lupe’s apartment was very much a bachelor pad. It was a little messy, dominated by his TV, and filled with mismatched furniture. And though it was a little messy, it was actually rather clean. Lupe just had a habit of leaving things laying around. “She boot you brah?” Lupe asked.

Kit chuckled. “Nah, just giving her space. She’s setting the date of the wedding, and that means calling her mom. She’s not very happy about Jessie getting married, and Jessie doesn’t like to fight with her mother in company. So I cleared out to give her privacy.”

“Ah, that’s nice of ya, brah,” he noted. “Glad to hear you’re finally getting the ball rolling. Any idea when it’ll be?”

“Knowing Jessie and my sister, the first day that her parents can manage to get here...but probably after Thanksgiving,” he speculated. “She *does* want them to meet me before the wedding, and I’m going up to her folks’ for Thanksgiving dinner. So, probably sometime in December.”

“Ah, cool. So, you have any of that leftover curry in the fridge?”

Kit laughed. “No, you ate it all. And I was a bit ticked when I went looking for it,” he said, pushing Lupe lightly on the shoulder.

“I can’t help it, brah, Jessie’s an awesome cook. She offered to teach me.”

“She’s trained quite a few cooks, she could make something out of you,” he noted. “I think she gives cooking lessons once a week over at her old sorority.”

Lupe grinned. “So, she have a sister?”

“She does, who lives in Ohio,” Kit told him.

“Damn. Is she cute?”

“No idea. I’ve never seen her before. She does have a brother though.”

Lupe gave him a look, then laughed brightly. “No thanks!”

“Hey, it’s always an option.”

When Jessie called him back home, he was fairly sure she had a firm date, and she didn’t disappoint, nor did she wander too far from his expectations. “We have a date,” she told him. “December eighteenth. I’ll be out of school, Dad’ll be done at work on the fifteenth, but Vil can’t get down here that week until the seventeenth, so we’re holding it the day after.”

“Nice. So, we’re still having it at Four Corners?”

“The reception, yeah. My folks had to be talked down over the church, though,” she giggled. “They thought we were having a catholic *wedding*. I had to remind them three times it’s not going to be a catholic wedding, just in a catholic church. Our Lady of Fatima.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Vil organized it for us. It’s a new catholic church about two miles from here. The monseignor there agreed to conduct a non-denominational wedding for us, but Vil was kinda adamant about a catholic priest conducting the ceremony.”

“Vil’s a Catholic, pretty kitty. “The whole family is, at least theoretically. I haven’t been to confession since I was fifteen.”

“Well, my family is Baptist, and I didn’t want a holy war,” she laughed. “Vil’s coming down next weekend to finalize the details, and I still need a dress.”

“Go as the most beautiful femme in the world, love. Go naked.”

“I’m sure you’d like that,” she giggled, her cheeks ruffling.

“So would every male in Austin,” he added, leaning over and kissing her on the neck.

“Well, I think I’d have a problem showing my dress to my daughters in fifteen years,” she giggled, beginning to purr almost immediately.

“We can always take pictures,” he offered in a husky voice, wrapping his arms around her.

“Kit! Don’t you dare distract me right now!” she ordered, pushing against his chest. “This is important!”

He chuckled. “Have you got the invitations?”

“The list is done, yeah. Now that we have a date, Vil said they’ll go out tomorrow. She’s the one that’s been doing all the real planning,” she giggled. “After we finalize the details, she takes care of it. So far, we’ve got

all the decorations and flowers handled, and Vil's booked the reception for us at the Four Corners. I just need to get my dress and the bridesmaid's dresses, and you need to pick a best man and grooms, and the rings."

"That's easy. Rick will be best man, and I'll dispense with the other grooms because I couldn't pick just two or three. It'd be the whole crew or none."

"That's fine, love. Sam and Sandy will be my bridesmaids. We'll have to get you a tux."

"I can rent one."

"Vil already said no. She wants you to keep your wedding clothes. She said it's an old custom."

"That's why I wasn't going to do it. It's a Vulpan family tradition, and you know how I feel about my family."

"Well, can you humor me? I'd like to have your tux hanging in the same bag with my dress. That way we're always together, just like our wedding clothes."

He smiled gently. "For you, my pretty kitty, of course I will."

"I just hope your tux and my dress get along as well as we do," she giggled.

"They better, there won't be much room in that garment bag. I guess we'll know they do if we open the bag in a year and find baby clothes in there," he agreed, which made her laugh.

"Maybe, if we're lucky, we'll have a baby to put in them," she cooed to him, nuzzling his cheek.

“And who’s distracting who now?” he challenged.

“I have more control than you,” she said teasingly.

“Oh really?” he asked archly. He knew all her little buttons, and he used one of them against her. He put his paws on the small of her back, above and to each side of her tail, and started to massage her. Jessie’s back was very sensitive, and he’d learned that that area was particularly sensual for her. She leaned against him and immediately began to purr, her claws kneading his back and shoulders. But then she caught herself and laughed ruefully.

“You cheater!” she accused, pushing out a little. “I didn’t do *that* to you!”

“Hey, I’m just arguing my case,” he retorted with a teasing smile. “You said you have more control than me. Well, I think that statement’s been debunked.”

She laughed richly, then gave him a sultry look. “Well, if you want to fight over who has less control, well, I know your on switch, love,” she threatened with a smug smile.

“Oh no, get that throat away from me,” he laughed as she began to purr and leaned forward.

“I win,” she said smugly, letting him go with a victorious smirk.

“And you accuse me of cheating,” he said under his breath as she sauntered back towards the kitchen. “What about the rings?”

“Vil told me to go pick out what we want, and she’d pay for them. She also said if you argue about it, she’ll brain you.”

Kit laughed. "I get the feeling she's going to insist."

"Well, given how much money we have right now, we wouldn't have many options," Jessie answered as she pulled the baked potatoes out of the broiler. Kit moved to make some tea for them, but the combination of the smell of the steaks and Jessie's gloriously shapely backside taunting him as she retrieved the foil-wrapped potatoes made it hard for him to keep his mind on what he was doing. "But I don't think we're going to go buy rings that cost more than our cars," she giggled. "I want to find some rings that are tasteful but not too expensive."

"I saw some good ones at the place where I bought your engagement ring."

"We can go look tomorrow after I get out of school."

"Sounds like a plan."

Knowing that they had a solid date didn't make him feel nervous as much as it made him anxious. He felt like a kid waiting for Christmas. He thought about it all during dinner and while he was practicing the guitar and she was doing homework. They were going to be married, and all he could think was *why do we have to wait so long?* He watched her as they ate, as pop music played on the radio, and couldn't think of anything else. She glanced at him, then smiled and blew him a kiss, which made his heart flutter. "Did I go too far?" she asked with a little smile.

"Not far enough," he answered.

"Eat your dinner," she ordered. "I didn't slave over a stove just to watch you ignore my cooking. Besides, I get the feeling both of us will need our energy tonight."

He laughed. "Yes ma'am."

Kit spread the news at work the next day, dropping in on them on his day off while Jessie was at school. "We've set a date," he said in the office as Savid, Jeffrey, and Mike were busy preparing pieces for the next issue. "December eighteenth."

He accepted hearty congratulations and pawshakes, and a rough hug from Marty, then sat down at the big table. "I need a best man yet," he ventured. "Think you'd be up for it, Rick?"

"Of course, son!" he said with a laugh. "I haven't worn a wedding tux since Martha dragged me to the altar."

"Oh, I've been dissed! The heartache!" Marty said, putting the back of his paw over his eyes melodramatically.

"Well, you could always ask Jessie if you could be a bridesmaid," Jeffrey chuckled.

"Oooo, I'll have to talk to her," he said. "I just can't clash with the bridal party! We have to color-coordinate!"

"I'll leave that to you, Marty," Jeffrey laughed. "Where can I rent a tux at, Rick?"

"You don't have to wear a tux if you're a guest, son," Rick chuckled. "Just something nice will do."

"Kit, can we invite some folks?" Mike asked. "I'd like to have my folks come and such."

"Well, I don't see anything wrong with it, but lemme ask Jessie before you do," he said. "You should get your invitations in the next couple of

days, by the way. They're supposed to go out today, but my sis is handling it, so I guess they'll come from Boston."

"I'll be looking for it. And I need to call Martha, we'll have to go reserve a tux," Rick chuckled.

They went shopping for rings that afternoon. The shop owner remembered him, and showed them several pairs of wedding rings. Jessie gasped in delight when he took out a fifth set, which were amazingly plain. The male's ring was a simple band of gold and silver twisted together, and the female band was similar, but had three small diamonds vertically arrayed across the top, which was similar to her engagement ring's single diamond and vertically flanking emeralds.

"They're *beautiful!*" she exclaimed, holding up the female's ring. "Look, Kit, the gold and silver bands are just like you and me, two different breeds who come together to make something beautiful. How much are they?"

"The set is fifteen hundred dollars," the little chipmunk said with a light cough. "But since you're a repeat customer, I think we can negotiate over that a little."

"You make it thirteen fifty, I can pay for them right now," Kit said immediately.

"Kit, that'll wipe us out!"

"It's worth it," he said, holding up the male's ring, then slipping it on his finger. "And it even fits as is."

"Well, why not?" the chipmunk laughed. "Thirteen fifty it is. Try it on, madam, let's check the sizing."

Jessie's ring wasn't quite as made-to-order. It was a tiny bit too small, which the jeweler fixed using a very light mallet and a strange little cylinder that was thicker at the bottom than the top, marked with ring sizes. He slipped it onto the cylinder, got Jessie's ring size, then used the mallet to delicately and carefully stretch the ring to fit by tapping it down onto the cylinder. He only had to enlarge it by a half a size, so he was done in just a moment. He carefully inspected the ring to ensure it wasn't damaged in any way, then had her try it on again. "Perfect," he said with a satisfied nod. He nodded again when Kit handed him his debit card, but he pulled it back a second.

"Jessie, remember when I told you it was important to tell me if you took out any money?"

"Let me guess, this is when that counts," she laughed, and he nodded. "I'm positive I haven't."

"We're about to find out," he said, handing the card over. "Cause if you did, it's going to decline."

To Kit's delight, the card was accepted. "Do you want to take them with you, or would you prefer to leave them here until you're ready for them? I can keep them in the safe for you until you're ready to pick them up."

"Actually, that's a good idea," Kit told him. "I'd feel safer with them here."

"Oh, wait, we need some pictures of them!" Jessie said. "Do you have the camera?"

"It's at home."

“Well, let’s go get it!”

Kit laughed. “We’ll be back in about half an hour,” he told the jeweler.

“We’ll be open,” he said, putting the rings into a box and taping a *Sold* receipt onto it, then taking it into the back room.

They took quite a few pictures of the rings, then when they got home, they sent them to Vil and Jessie’s parents. Vil called back almost immediately and asked how much they’d cost and the number of the jeweler so she could make the call. Kit took great, almost smug satisfaction in telling her they were already bought. “I paid for them *myself*, Vil,” he said, rather proudly.

“Well, good for you! How much?”

“Some number between one and one billion,” he said dryly. He’d been *waiting* to get her back for that.

“Oh ho, the little bro wants to get snotty,” Vil laughed. “Just for that, I’m getting you a wedding present.”

“You better not. The wedding *is* the present, sis.”

“We’ll see about that,” she teased.

“You’re gonna look awful funny standing out in front of the church,” he told her.

She laughed. “Has Jessie started looking for a dress?”

“She’s doing that right now,” he said, looking over to the couch, where Jessie had several bridal magazines stacked on the coffee table. “I’m sure she’s called Sam and Sandy while I was running the rent check over to

Lupe, and they're on their way over to giggle and coo at the pictures while I make dinner."

Jessie stuck her tongue out at him, which made him laugh. "I take it you were close?" Vil asked.

"I'd say so, given that face she just gave me."

"You're delving into the female realm here, bro," Vil chuckled. "Females love their wedding dresses."

"Is she going to get hers in time?"

"Kit, Kit, Kit," she chided. "She'll show me the design she wants, and I'll have it either bought or made for her inside a week. Then it's just a matter of having the tailoring company do the final fitting."

"Company?"

"Wentshires, here in Boston. I've already secured a team to go to Austin to do the fitting and alterations."

"Vil, you're sending a team of tailors to Austin? Isn't that—"

"Don't say it!" she barked. "This is Jessie's *wedding dress* we're talking about, you foolish boy! I don't care what it costs. She'll get exactly what she wants, and it will look smashing."

"If you say so."

"It will. Now, have you thought of a honeymoon?"

"It's not going to work," he sighed. "I haven't been there long enough to ask for time off for a vacation. It's not fair to everyone else. I did ask for Saturday and Tuesday off so me and Jess have a long weekend after the

wedding, and a part of that was flying up to Boston to fulfill Mom's wish I get married in the Holy Cross."

"Hmm," she mused. "How about this. You fly back to Boston with me on Saturday and have the ceremony, and I have my private jet fly you two to Florida. You can stay in my condo in Boca Raton and come back on Tuesday. That way you get three days of vacation that almost qualifies as a honeymoon, it's not outrageously expensive, and you'll be back to work on time Wednesday."

"That...that sounds fine to me," he said, looking at Jessie as she paged through the magazine. "I'd love to give Jessie a real honeymoon, but it's just not going to happen."

"It'd have to stay in the U.S. regardless. Jessie said she doesn't have a passport," Vil mused.

"Do I detect a faint hint of attempted meddling over there, sis?" he asked pointedly.

"It was shot down," she laughed. "Give the phone to Jessie, bro, I need to talk to her. And you can feed that poor femme!"

He handed the phone to Jessie with a chuckle, and was surprised when she covered over the magazine. "No peeking!" she said with surprising heat, snatching the phone away from him. "Kitchen! Go!"

"You'd think I barged in when you were sitting on the toilet," he laughed.

"Seeing me naked is *no way* the same as seeing my dress before the wedding!" she barked at him. "Now clear out, Kit!"

“You haven’t even picked it yet,” he said with a grin.

“Well, I *might* pick one on that page, and you’re not gonna see them!”

“Okay, okay, clearing out,” he laughed. “Baked salmon okay with you? With asparagus and au gratin potatoes?”

“Fine, fine, just scat, you! This is a no-Kit zone!”

He cooked dinner for five, since Sam and Sandy had also brought Danielle, because her mother was a fashion designer and Danielle was in school for the same thing. The four of them spent the whole time going over dresses in magazines and on websites, and he did his best to ignore them with headphones and his Blackberry, listening to the news webcast.

When the doorbell rang, Kit chuckled from the kitchen. “I guess Lupe can smell it from across the courtyard,” he called as he covered the asparagus and pulled out a bottle of wine. He pulled down wine glasses, and turned when he realized two figures were standing in the boundary between kitchen and living room. One was a coyote male, the other was a cat female with tabby fur, and both were wearing expensive-looking clothes. The coyote wore a gray pinstripe suit, the cat wore a very well cut blue skirt and blazer. He took his earphones out and looked at them curiously. “Can I help you?”

“I’m Delores Kittimer from Marks, Kittimer, and Wilson,” she said by way of introduction. “Are you Kitstrom Vulpan?” the female asked.

“That’s me.”

The male put his briefcase on the table and withdrew a folded sheet of paper. He handed it to the femme, who in turn handed it to him. “Then this is for you.”

“What is it?” he asked, taking the oven mitt off and reaching for it.

“A subpoena,” she answered.

“A *subpeona*? What for?”

“You’re being subpoenaed to give a deposition as a possible witness in a lawsuit, Mister Vulpan.”

“Lawsuit? What lawsuit?”

“You don’t know?” she asked, in some surprise.

“No, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said, in a little irritation. “Who the hell is suing me? And what for?”

“Nobody’s suing you, Mister Vulpan,” she said simply. “You’re being called to give deposition in a rather complicated matter. It’s a case to invalidate the will of Kitstrom Vulpan Junior. This subpoena is for a deposition to be held at our law offices on November fifteenth.”

“Will? Who’s trying to overturn the will?”

“Two parties, Mister Vulpan. Cybil Whitmore Vulpan, and Vilenne Vulpan. Both have filed suit to invalidate the will of your father, and the judge has decided to combine both cases.”

“*What?*” he gasped. “Vil challenged the will?”

“As well as your stepmother,” she said with a nod. “We represent no one party, Mister Vulpan. We’ve been retained by the state of Massachusetts to host your deposition, rather than call you to Boston. You’ve been subpoenaed to give deposition as a possible witness.”

“Who subpoenaed me?”

“The subpoena is a blanket subpoena for all interested parties to depose you, since you live out of state,” the gray fox said to him. “The last we heard, lawyers for five respondents and both petitioners will be present for the deposition.”

“What? When the hell did all this happen?”

“The suit was filed by Misses Whitmore Vulpan on last Monday, Mister Vulpan. Vilenne Vulpan filed an independent suit on Wednesday, and the cases were merged by the presiding judge in a hearing yesterday afternoon.”

“Well...what the hell do I have to testify for? I have nothing to do with the will. I’ve broken off from the family.”

“Vilenne Vulpan seeks to restore a previous version of your father’s will, where you are a beneficiary of your father’s estate,” the femme told him. “That makes you a party to the proceedings.”

“Vil is dragging *me* into this mess? I’m going to kill her!” he said with sudden heat.

“You didn’t know?” the male asked, in some surprise.

“I had no idea,” he said, a little overwhelmed. “I sure as hell am *not* happy about it. I walked away from my family years ago, I want *nothing* to do with the will, this lawsuit, or any damn money. I don’t see why I have to testify.”

“Well this isn’t testimony, Mister Vulpan, it’s a deposition. They just want to ask you some questions that will pertain to the case, that’s all. You should be done the same day. Just be at our offices Monday morning at nine, and they’ll take your deposition and you’ll be free to go.”

“Good day to you, Mister Vulpan,” the female said, and then the male closed his briefcase, and they both left.

Kit just stood there as Jessie and her friends gave him startled looks. He came over to the table, sat down, then put his head in his paws. God, why did they have to start all this nonsense and *drag him into it*? They could fight over his bastard father’s money all they wanted. He had nothing to do with it! Why couldn’t they just leave him alone? And what was worse, *Vil* was doing it too! Why in the bloody blue blazes was she trying to invalidate the will? Was it some kind of twisted attempt to get back at the family en masse for the attempt on him? Was she really going to take it that far?

He could see the nightmare coming. Lawyers, and lawyers, and more lawyers. Answering questions for the next six years, and maybe even being forced to testify in court.

Gentle paws slid over his shoulders, and he felt Jessie hug him from behind. “You okay, my handsome fox?” she asked compassionately.

He blew out his breath, then rose up and patted her arms. “I guess so,” he said with another sigh. “I just want nothing to do with all this.”

“You should call Vil, love,” she urged. “I’ll finish up dinner.”

He took his phone and sat out on the porch in the cool afternoon and called her. “Hey bro.”

“Vil,” he said grimly. “I just got subpoenaed.”

She blew out her breath with a dark curse. “I was hoping they’d leave you out of it. This has nothing to do with you. Who did it?”

“From what I was told, *everyone*, even *you*.”

“I told them to leave you out of it,” she growled.

“What the hell is going on, Vil?” he demanded.

“Let me summarize it, it’s complicated,” she said. “I told you that I was keeping an eye on Cybil, that she was looking into trying to invalidate the will and claim the family fortune by means of her marriage to Dad. Well, she’s doing it. She’s trying to invalidate the will *and* her prenup by claiming Dad wasn’t of sound mind. Hell, bro, she’s even trying to strip *me* of my control of the businesses. She’s basically saying that everything Dad did in the last two years of his life should be thrown out, and everything given to her because she’s the wife. If she pulls it off, she’ll have effective control over everything.”

“Well, didn’t Dad *marry* her in that same two year span?”

“She’s glossing over that part, bro,” she told him clinically. “And her angle isn’t to actually get everything. She’s shooting for the moon so she can actually settle for half. It’s a common trick, threatening to tie us up in court for the next fifteen years and wearing us down. Now, I also told you that *I* was looking into beating her to the punch by suing to invalidate the will with the aim of totally cutting her out. That was my original plan, but after you were shot, I decided to go after the family at the same time. I’ve put Boston through the wringer, and I still don’t know who ordered that hit on you, so I’m going to make the family give him up by going after their money. My suit is a little different. I’m suing to have the will Dad had before you were disowned restored, which puts you back into it...and receiving the vast majority of the money and control of the businesses to boot. In effect, I’m trying to have you installed as the heir.”

“Why the *hell* are you doing that?” he literally shouted.

“Because that’s how the will was written, no more, no less,” she answered calmly. “It’s all I have to work with here, bro. I gotta play the hand as it was dealt in this case. I know how you feel about this, Kit. I’d never have done this if there was another way, believe me. Now, *my* angle is to strip the uncles of the majority of their money, and threaten to have you basically toss them out of their homes unless whoever tried to kill you doesn’t own up *immediately*. The version of the will I’m trying to have instated leaves the uncles and cousins with little more than their trust funds, which is nowhere near enough to support them in the kind of lifestyles they’re living right now.”

“Vil, why did you do this to me?” he asked, almost pleadingly.

“Kit, I never wanted to drag you into this,” she told him. “And think a minute. If *I* didn’t do it, then you’d be guaranteed that *Cybil* would have. You don’t think she’d have you dragged back to Boston to testify in the trial? Her entire case hinges on how Dad went crazy after he disowned you. You’re the entire basis of her case. For that matter, what Dad did to you is *also* the fundamental foundation of my own case,” she admitted. “So what the judge will basically be doing is looking at the will, looking at our cases, and then judging just how crazy Dad was and if it merits altering his will on the basis that he wasn’t of sound mind when he drew it up.”

“You’re both arguing the same point?”

“More or less. But the issue for Cybil is she has to get around her *prenup* in addition to the will, where I don’t have that kind of a barricade. She’s going to have a major problem with that, because my lawyers have told me they can more or less prove that Dad had little to do with the

prenup, that was a creation of his *lawyers*. The lawyers weren't all crazy when they drew it up, so Cybil has to talk very fast to get around that little problem. It's a strange world when me and that bitch are going to be trying to prove the same legal issue but with different motives," she chuckled darkly. "So, little bro, that's the whole deal. I'm sorry you got dragged into this, but don't blame me. I filed my suit *after* Cybil. She beat me to it by two days. Yesterday, the judge merged both cases into a single case, and I was going to tell you about it this week...but I didn't expect them to start throwing around subpoenas so fast," she grunted. "You would have been called no matter what."

"Why can't they just leave me alone," he said in a quiet, almost defeated voice.

"Look at it this way, Kit," she said gently. "After this, one way or another, they'll never bother you again."

"That's not very comforting," he told her.

"If I win, you get the family fortune, which you can just throw away," she told him. "If Cybil wins, nothing changes for you. If the uncles win, they'll be too busy dealing with Cybil's appeals to bother you."

"And what's to stop the uncles from deciding that one way to kill your case is to come after me again?"

"That has nothing to do with my case, Kit, and it would do the uncles no good," she answered. "Remember, I'm trying to restore a *will*. That you're the main beneficiary in the will I'm trying to restore is pointless in the argument. If you were to die and I win the case, then the family fortune would go to an executorship, probably administered by the courts. You

really don't matter one bit in the big picture. Unless I win, that is," she chuckled. "Then *you* will control the family fortune."

"I don't want it, Vil."

"I know you don't. But you can use that as a hammer against the family. Blackmail them into leaving you alone, and you give them back their money."

"That or they try to kill me again."

"Oh, that's *not* going to happen," she told him heatedly. "You don't know what it's like in Boston right now, bro. I have the whole city locked down, and they know it. If they so much as even confess they did it underwater while speaking German, I'll know in fifteen seconds. Cousin Liza can't even screw her poolboy without a report of it being on my desk in triplicate before they're even finished. If someone tries, I'll know before they even hang up the phone."

"That sounds slightly illegal."

"You don't want to know. Trust me."

"Then I'll leave it there."

"I'm afraid I gotta go, little bro. I'm kinda busy right now. Need any other questions answered before I do?"

"Uh, I can't think of any."

"Well, call me back tomorrow around six, I'll make some time so we can talk about this more thoroughly, okay?"

"Alright."

“I’m sorry, Kit. I know you hate this, but it won’t take long. I’ll talk to you tomorrow, bro. Bye-bye.”

“Bye sis.”

He closed the phone and sighed, putting his elbows on his knees and leaning over. God, it was going to be a nightmare, and it meant that he was going to be right back in the spotlight. He was surprised there weren’t fifty cameras in his face, this was the kind of thing the tabloids drooled over, a rich family in a nasty legal battle over the family fortune, complete with a widow vying to steal the fortune away from the children. Now he’d have to go do this deposition and answer questions for three or four days, then wait and worry that he’d be forced to go testify at the trial. And on top of all that, his wedding was coming up, which was going to distract him from Jessie and her special event, and no doubt that was going to find its way into the tabloids along with the trial. He had this nightmarish image of a pack of paparazzi mobbing them as they left the church, flashes going off in their faces, keeping them from reaching their cars to go to the reception.

What a mess.

He could only hope that Jessie was patient and understanding, because she was about to get thrown into the wolves. His shy and private pretty kitty was going to have her entire life taken apart on national television, and it was all because of him. Hannah’s painful past very well might be dragged out and her secret exposed, all because of him. His friends at work, and Lupe, and Martha, they were all going to be harassed and aggravated. The lives of everyone that mattered to him were about to be disrupted, and it was all because they had the misfortune of being his friend.

He could only hope they'd forgive him for the insanity that was about to descend upon them.

Chapter 10

It was a whirlwind of activity, fear, and anxiety for Kit.

After finding out about the lawsuit, Kit's life was turned upside down. The anxiety over the lawsuit just piled onto the excitement surrounding the wedding, which got closer with each passing day. Kit did his best to try to submerge himself into the preparations, but the lawsuit and all the ramifications surrounding it just intruded themselves into his life.

The first unpleasant action surrounding this news was warning everyone. He started with Jessie, then Lupe, then told the crew, rather grimly. They didn't quite think it was as bad as Kit made out, but they didn't know the press the way he did. He'd been blessed in that they'd not bothered him—or he'd not seen anything—since that one picture that appeared in the *Enquirer*. Either they saw no reason to keep pestering them after that picture, or he'd not noticed any photographers, since he didn't bother reading tabloids.

The second unpleasant action was telling Hannah and John. He wrote Hannah an email that explained what was going on, warned that there was a chance that they might be bothered by the press, and apologized about fifty times, in very humble terms, for visiting the troubles of his own family upon them.

The third unpleasant action was a justification of his warning. Kit and Jessie were leaving work a few days after learning about the lawsuit, on

Saturday, when a vixen approached him with a male skunk who had a camera hanging from his neck. “Kitstrom Vulpan?” the vixen asked.

Kit took one look at the pair, took Jessie’s paw, and shook his head. “No thank you, no comment, no way.”

She gave a start, then laughed. “I guess you’d have enough experience to see us coming. You’ve already been interviewed?”

“I won’t be,” he told her. “I have nothing to do with that insanity, and I want no part of it. I just want to be left alone. You can put *that* in your report.”

“What about you, miss? Care to comment for the Boston Herald?”

“I don’t have anything to say either,” she said shyly, hurrying past them and pulling in close to Kit as they walked away. “I hope that doesn’t happen again,” she told him nervously.

“That’s a hollow dream,” he sighed sourly. “They’re just the first.”

And they were. Kit had the foresight to hang a sign on the door that read *NO COMMENT, don’t even bother knocking*, and he stuck to it. Sunday they were left alone, but on Monday, while Jessie was at school, three separate furs rang the doorbell that he didn’t know. The first two were obviously TV reporters of some kind, and the third thought he was being clever by putting his finger over the peephole so he couldn’t see who it was, and knocked and rang the doorbell incessantly. Kit retaliated by calling Lupe, who came over about five seconds after Kit told him what was going on. Kit heard the chihuahua and whoever it was screaming at each other, as the unknown male voice kept yelling about freedom of the press and his

First Amendment rights, until Kit heard Lupe threaten to let him tell the cops all about it when they came to arrest him for trespassing.

Jessie, however, didn't fare half as well. She was literally trembling when she unlocked the door and came in, and buried herself in his arms before she even took her backpack off. "Jess, what's wrong?" he asked, putting his paws on her shoulders.

She began to cry. "It was horrible!" she cried.

"What happened, pretty kitty?" he asked, bringing her over to the couch. He took her backpack off of her, and sat her down. She clung to him, her claws digging into him a little painfully.

It took him a while to calm her down enough to tell him. "A reporter followed me around after my education class," she told him. "He kept demanding I talk to him, but I wouldn't even look at him. Then he grabbed me," she sniffled, cringing. "He grabbed hold of my tail and wouldn't let me go until I started screaming. Some other students came and chased him away, but he came back after they walked me to the cafeteria. I tried to get away from him, but he kept getting in my way. When I went into the femme's room, he came in after me!"

"I hope you called the cops."

"I tried, but the reporter tried to take my phone away from me, so I kicked him in the groin and ran out."

Kit chuckled. "Well, I'm glad you left him something to remember you by."

"The cops arrested him. Someone else called them when he went into the girl's room after me."

“Good. I’m so sorry, my pretty kitty,” he said sincerely “I’m so sorry that happened to you.”

“I’m not giving you up, Kit,” she told him, gripping him with her claws. “I was scared, but they’re not going to scare me away from you. I love you so much, Kit.”

“I love you too, Jess,” he breathed, leaning his cheek against her head. “I want you to call Vanguard, pretty kitty. I don’t want you going back to school without an escort.”

“I will. I’ll ask for someone to walk me to class and back.”

Luckily, however, that kind of journalist seemed to be the exception rather than the rule. Kit declined three separate interview requests the next day, and Jessie told him that only one reporter tried to talk to her, someone from CNN, which she declined. “He was polite at least,” she told him when the large bear that was from Vanguard walked her into the apartment and then took his leave. When I told him I wasn’t going to talk about it, he just gave me his card and told me to call him if I change my mind.”

“Yeah, I’ve got like seven cards so far, if you count the ones reporters left at the door yesterday,” Kit growled. “I’m just glad our cell phones are being handled by Vil, so they can’t track the numbers down.”

“How long is this going to last?”

“Until they realize that we’re not going to talk,” he said with a sigh. “Maybe a week or two. They can’t be too pushy or we’ll never talk, unless they’re like that guy that harassed you yesterday, who won’t take no for an answer. I wonder if he was the same one that Lupe had to chase off the property.”

“Probably. How did they find me at school?”

“Probably either hacked into your registrar or bribed one of them for your schedule,” Kit grunted.

“It’s almost scary how they can do that,” she told him. “Do you think it’s safe to ask Sam, Sandy, and Danny over?”

“Odds are they’ll be approached if you do. If they already haven’t been, that is.”

“I’ll warn them.”

The threat of being exposed to the press didn’t seem to bother them. Sandy brought them over in her car about half an hour later, which made Kit very glad. They knew Jessie well, and they quickly had her catting away and laughing as Kit cooked dinner and they looked at wedding dresses online, going to a couple of websites that Vil had messaged him on his Blackberry that morning. The rigors of the last couple of days were forgotten in the fantasy world of an impending bride.

“Oh *wow*, look at this one!” Jessie said in delight. “Isn’t it *beautiful*?”

“It’s very nice,” Sandy agreed. “I love the—“

Jessie slapped her paw over Sandy’s muzzle. “Not with *him* here!” she warned.

Kit laughed so hard he almost dropped the skillet.

Jessie and the femmes retreated back to the bedroom, leaving him alone in the front half of the house. He was cooking Italian meatballs and rice, but he’d already made up the meatballs the night before, so it was just a matter of browning them and adding in the sauce and spices, and boiling

up the rice. His phone rang after a while, when he nearly had dinner ready, and the number on the display was Vil's. "Hey sis," he called as he opened the phone.

"Tomorrow after work, don't make any plans," she told him. "Jessie picked her dress. I've already bought a tux for you, so you're going to be fitted for them tomorrow."

"I figured she might have. She retreated into the bedroom a bit ago with her pack of friends while looking over dresses on some website."

"She picked a design from Wentshire's site, so they already have it reserved. They'll be coming to fit her for it tomorrow, and they'll take care of you while they're there. Got your Blackberry handy?"

"It's in the living room."

"I'm texting you an address for a dress shop that's agreed to host my people," she told him. "I need you two there tomorrow around six."

"How much is this dress?"

"Some number between one and two billion," she teased in reply, then she laughed.

"You know, eventually one of us is going to get tired of that line," Kit noted dryly.

"It's not like it has gold thread or anything," Vil chuckled. "So don't worry too much about it. It *is* gorgeous, though."

"You'd better not say anything about it or Jessie will kill you," Kit warned, then he sighed. "Well, I hope they don't follow us there."

"Who?"

“We’ve had several run-ins with the press the last two days, sis,” he said wearily. “One reporter got arrested on campus for chasing Jessie into a bathroom.”

“Oh, *him*,” Vil said with a growl. “That made the news up here in Boston,” she told him. “He’s a gossip columnist for the *Enquirer*, one of those ambush reporters. Literary paparazzi.”

“He scared Jessie so bad she broke down in tears when she got home. I had her call Vanguard to escort her today.”

“Good move,” she agreed. “I’ll give them a call myself and ask them to tighten up a bit. They’ve been working in the background and have some very specific rules about interfering with your lives, but with you guys being bothered, I think I’d like them to be a little more active.”

“I won’t say no.”

The dress did bring a little lightness to the tension in Kit’s life. The next afternoon, they went to a large dress shop in north Austin called Brenda’s, where a ten fur team of tailors met them and fitted them for their wedding clothes. They were efficient, thorough, and very friendly, putting them at ease, joking with them, even teasing Jessie a little by offering her to do her measurements naked with Kit in the room with her. She surprised Kit with her response, “oh, he’s seen me naked before,” she said brazenly, though her cheeks were a little ruffled. Jessie was usually extremely shy, she’d never say something like that most of the time. The fitting took about two hours, and when they were done, the tailors told them that they’d have the clothes made and ready for a final fitting in about a week. They made another appointment for next week, two days after the deposition, when the

finished clothes would be brought down and they'd try them on so the tailors could make final alterations for the wedding next month.

The drive home, on the other hand, wasn't quite so nice. They were in Kit's Pathfinder, and it was totally clear to him after a minute that a white Expedition was following them. "Jess love, call Vanguard and ask them if they've got people following us. Cause someone is."

She nodded and took her phone out of her purse. "Hello, this is Jessie Williams. Yes, I'm okay, but do you have a guard with us? We're being followed. Is that our escort?" She looked at Kit and shook her head. "Umm, I don't know exactly. Where are we, Kit?"

"We're getting on the Mopac up near the mall," he told her. "We'll be going south and getting off at Guadalupe."

She relayed that, looking back, out the back window. "Okay. It's a, umm, Expedition. A white Expedition. No, I can't see the license. Okay. We will. Thank you very much." She closed the phone. "They told us to pull into the Wendy's there at the exit, they'll have a car waiting for us."

"Okay."

"He also said we should carry our camera with us and take pictures of the cars if we think they're following, that it'll help them track them down."

"We can do that."

They did as the security firm asked. When they exited off the Mopac Expressway, Kit pulled into the Wendy's, where a gray-painted sedan with the Vanguard logo emblazoned on its hood and both doors immediately pulled up into the space beside theirs. Another Vanguard car pulled out, and when the white Expedition slowed down as if to turn into the parking lot,

then kept going, the second car pulled out in a squeal of tires and chased after it. The two vehicles sped off down Guadalupe, leaving Kit's Pathfinder and the first car. Kit rolled down his window, and a wolf in the passenger seat did the same. "We'll follow you home, Mister Vulpan," the wolf called.

"Thanks, guys, you're a lifesaver."

"You should consider allowing us to attach a guard with you at all times, Mister Vulpan."

"No, not yet. They're just reporters, after all. All they can do is harass us until you come chase them away."

The wolf chuckled. "We'll do our best, sir."

The security car escorted them safely home, and they waved to the two guards as they reached their front door.

"Well, that was a dose of reality to ruin an otherwise good time," Kit sighed as he closed and locked the door. He barely managed to take his things out of his pockets and put them in the dish on the coffee table when Jessie grabbed his paw and pulled him with her to the couch. "What?"

"I need a reason to want to cuddle?" she asked with a giggle, snuggling up with him. "I had a good time. I can't wait until you get to see my dress, my handsome fox."

"I can't wait to see it either, pretty kitty. Do you know what'll be more fun?"

"What?"

"Taking it off you," he said, running his paw up her side.

She shivered a little and immediately began to purr. “I’m surprised you’re feeling frisky after they followed us home,” she told him.

“Let’s just say that I’m enjoying your attempt to comfort me,” he chuckled.

“I have homework to do, and we have to cook dinner yet. But,” she said, then she leaned up and wrapped her arms around his neck and shoulders and kissed him quite intimately.

Kit’s prediction of two weeks seemed to be holding true. The worst of it was at work, since his work phone number was a matter of public record, as was his work email address, but the crew came through for him in marvelous fashion. Marty was the lead blocker for him, taking on the press with his usual melodramatic and funny flair. He’d banter with the reporters that called and the few that visited in person, distracting and engaging them, but being adamant about not allowing them to get past him. On the phone that was quite easy, since he had control of the phone system. In person, his control was more subtle, yet more profound. Marty acted like a pop diva, but he was very smart and had a very quick mind, able to challenge reporters on their level and manage to make them laugh and smile even as he thwarted them. Email for him was easy to handle, for after finding out it was from a reporter, he simply deleted it.

The attention did alter their daily habits. Kit and Jessie stayed home for the most part, only going out to go to work or school, where they knew exactly where they were going and had control over their environments. Their friends came to them rather than going out to see them, and those friends themselves were approached by reporters. But, to their delight and relief, every one of their friends joined the “no comment” bandwagon, saying nothing and being very firm about it.

As the days went by and the time of the deposition neared, he got more and more unsettled. Jessie was the anchor keeping him from having a nervous break, and all their friends seemed to come together and pitch in to try to keep him comfortable and calm. There was almost always someone over for a visit in the week before the deposition, be it one of the crew, Lupe, or one of Jessie's sorority sisters. Those gatherings also started something of a little interaction, too, he noticed. Sandy started becoming quite interested in Jeffrey when she broke up with her old boyfriend, and got even more interested when she found out he was unattached. Kit was a little surprised when Jeffrey asked Kit for Sandy's number. Sandy and Jeffrey wasn't the only interaction, but it was the most dramatic. Sam became very good friends with Mike, and Lilly started palling around with Danielle and the other Jessie on Friday nights as she did her research and rounds for the magazine.

But time marched on, and no matter how much he dreaded it, it came to be the Monday of the deposition.

He woke up two hours early and spent a good hour of it sitting on the couch, nervous and unhappy. But this had to be done, and he didn't have any choice. He's been subpoenaed, and if he didn't show up he'd get into legal trouble. Jessie came in wearing nothing but an oversized sleeping shirt, leaving her legs bare to midthigh, rubbing her eyes, and the shirt was only something she threw on to come out of the bedroom, since she slept nude with him, always joking that it made sure there wasn't anything in the way if they got frisky during the night. Jessie was very modest, she wouldn't even set foot out of her own bedroom without wearing something, but she was almost fearlessly bold around him...but that was one of her little adoring quirks. She was very modest, but she had no modesty at all

around *him*. That made him love her even more, since it showed how completely comfortable she was with him. She wouldn't come out of the bedroom without clothes on in her own house, but she was the same femme that would drop her jeans and use the bathroom right in front of him. That was something she hadn't done with anyone else...but then again, Kit was the only person she'd ever slept with, so her complete ease around him wasn't really too much of a surprise.

"Morning, pretty kitty," he called. She came over to him, and instead of sitting down beside him, she instead climbed into his lap, straddling him, paws on his shoulders as she kissed him. He almost wished she hadn't done that. When she straddled him that way, it immediately put him in an erotic mood, because all he could think about was when they used that position during sex. He put his paws on her waist and caressed her sides gently, but couldn't resist sliding his paws down, pulling her shirt up, and grabbing two pawfuls of her gorgeous backside, which made her hum in their kiss.

"Do you want me to go with you, Kit?" she asked, for about the twentieth time since last night.

"I want to take you back into the bedroom and take this shirt off you," he said honestly, pulling on the tail of the shirt, lifting it all the way up to expose her fully to him. He leaned forward and kissed her on the upper chest, on a little cowlick of unsettled fur right on her sternum, then fondled what the lifted shirt revealed, the shirt falling back down over his paws.

"I'll be late for school if we do," she said with regret, leaning forward and nuzzling him. "How about this. After you get home and I get home from school, I give you everything you want," she cooed. "And I promise never to sit with you like this on the couch in the morning again," she giggled against his ear.

“That’s about what did it,” he admitted with a soft laugh. “When you sit like this, all I can think of is when we make love,” he breathed in her ear. “It’s a very similar view, just without this shirt in the way. Besides, no male on Earth could think straight with you sitting in his lap like this, especially when you’re not wearing panties,” he added.

She giggled again. “I’m sorry, love.”

“Don’t *ever* be sorry,” he told her. “If you were sorry, how would I ever get my cheap looks and easy feels?”

She laughed. “Looks are free. Feels are gonna cost ya,” she winked.

He squeezed her breasts, grinning at her. “And how much was that?”

“You’ll find out tonight,” she said with a throaty purr, whispered into his ear.

“Do you take Visa?”

She picked up the couch pillow and hit him over the head with it.

He truly appreciated Jessie’s attempt to distract him and cheer him up, but reality interposed again. He dressed in a pair of black slacks and a dress shirt without tie, ate the breakfast Jessie cooked for him, drank his tea, saw Jessie off to school, and then steeled himself with a moment of quiet calm before picking his keys up and heading out.

The law office was only about two miles from home, only about nine blocks from work, so it didn’t take him long to find it. It was a very large office, taking up the entire first floor of the office building in which it was located. A husky femme in a blue blazer was sitting behind the reception desk, her thick white fur combed to perfection. “May I help you?”

“Uh, I’m here for a deposition,” he told her.

She looked at him, and when she looked him in the eye, she seemed to recognize him. “Oh! Yes, one moment, Mister Vulpan,” she told him, picking up the phone. “Miss Kittimer, Mister Vulpan has arrived,” she said into the phone. “It’ll be just a moment. Would you like to sit down?” she offered as she hung up the phone.

“No thanks.”

The vixen who’d come to his house before came through the door separating the reception area from the offices. She was wearing a black skirt and blazer, with a soft brown shirt rather than a white one beneath it, and her long hair was done in a curly style was held back from her face by barettes and contained in the back by a comb. When she got close, he could smell a faint whiff of perfume about her. “Mister Vulpan,” she said, offering her paw.

He took it and shook it firmly. “Call me Kit, I hate that name,” he told her.

“Kit,” she corrected. “Come with me, and I’ll explain how this will work.”

She led him into a panelled hallway lined with oil paintings of the furs working in the office, their names emblazoned under them, as well as doors. “This is going to be an open deposition,” she told him as she passed her own painting, the title naming her as Dolores D. “Deedee” Kittimer. “The lawyers from all nine are present, and the representatives from each side will be in the conference room and will ask you whatever questions they wish. So you’re looking at three sessions of questioning. The two

petitioners in separate sessions, then the combined lawyers for the respondents.”

“Not separately?”

“No, since you’re a potential witness for each side of the case, they’ve decided to question you as units rather than individually. The lawyers for Misses Whitmore Vulpan will question you first, then the counsel for Miss Vulpan will question you. The way it’ll work during the sessions is simple, Kit. They’ll ask you questions, and you answer them. It’s basically that simple. After either a break or lunch, depending on how long it takes, the counsels for the respondents will have their opportunity. We’ll make sure you have any drinks or snacks you might want, and remember, you’re not under arrest in there, so if you want to take a break for a few minutes, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll be sitting in on the deposition as an observer for the court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts,” she told him. “And since you didn’t bring your own counsel, I’ll seat an associate with you who can warn you if you’re saying something that wouldn’t be entirely wise.”

“I don’t need a lawyer, Miss Kittimer,” he said dismissively.

“When it comes to this kind of a situation, I think you *need* legal counsel looking out for you, Kit,” she urged. “One misspoken word might bring the threat of a lawsuit against you, and you *do* have the right not to answer certain questions. Do you know which questions those are?”

“Uh...no.”

“Then you need counsel,” she said simply. “Our firm has already been paid by the court, and you’ll actually be doing us a favor, so I’ll provide you with counsel at no charge. I’ll seat one of our newest associates with you, who can defend your rights, and so he can get some practice. But don’t let that worry you, he’s actually quite a good lawyer. He’s just lacking experience in the practical aspects of being a trial attorney.”

“Well, if it’s free, I’d be stupid to decline,” he said honestly.

She laughed. “Spoken like a wise fur,” she told him. She led him to a large area filled with low-walled cubicles, where most of the legal secretaries worked, he imagined, and the vixen waved over someone near a wall of doors, talking to a short badger wearing a thousand dollar suit. The one she waved over was a tall, thin male skunk with a very odd double white line between his eyes rather than a white patch common on some skunks. “Kit, this is Kevin Simmons, our newest associate. He’ll keep the other sharks in line,” she chuckled.

“It’s good to meet you, Mister Vulpan,” he said, offering his white-mittened paw. Kit shook it. “I promise to do my best to keep them from wandering into territory they have no business asking about.”

“What kind of territory?” he asked curiously.

“Your impending marriage is off limits, for example,” he answered. “That’s your own personal business that has nothing to do with the case, though I have the feeling that the counsels are going to try to press you on it, since one of the petitioners is trying to get you back into the will. They also can’t ask about your personal life. They have to limit their questions to facts pertaining to your past, your job, and they can only ask general questions about your personal life. For example, they can ask *if* you’re

getting married, but they can't ask to *whom* you're getting married. That has no bearing on the case at hand. If they try to get too personal, I'll make them back off."

"I'm starting to feel a little better about this," he said honestly.

"I'll do what I can to make this as painless for you as possible," Kevin promised.

He was led into a large conference room, where four furs stood up as they entered. Three male badgers and a female mouse, all wearing serious business suits. "We're from Graham, Graham, Graham, and Zychowski," the tallest and oldest of the badgers said by way of introduction. "Has our host explained the process of a deposition to you, Mister Vulpan?"

"They did."

"Very well, shall we get started?" he asked as the female mouse sat back down and opened a laptop computer before them.

And they did. The lawyers from his stepmother were polite, but they asked very personal and invasive questions about his past, his history with his father and family, and his life after he was disowned, focusing on the pattern of harassment he suffered after leaving home. The vixen and the skunk who were sitting in were quiet and attentive, and he thought that they really didn't have much to do with it, until the mouse asked him a question about Jessie. The skunk immediately put his paw over Kit's own and spoke up. "That's out of bounds, counsel," he said in a polite yet firm voice. "That has no bearing on the matter at hand."

"We disagree, counsel," she retorted. "His fiancée might have influenced his decision about this suit."

“What decision? I wanted no part of this,” Kit said, rather pugnaciously. “I got dragged into this completely against my will.”

“So, you have no desire to claim your share of six hundred million dollars?” the youngest of the three Graham brothers asked.

“My family can take that money and shove it up their—“ he said, then blew out his breath. “No. I have no interest at all in the money, my family, or the will. I don’t care one way or the other about this damned lawsuit. I just want it to go away so I can go back to my own life.”

All three of them immediately started scribbling on the memo pads before them.

They didn’t drift back into that area again. After another half hour or so, they wrapped up their questioning. All four took turns shaking his paw, and then they filed out. “It wasn’t entirely wise to tell them you have no interest in the will,” Kevin told him.

“It’s the truth,” he said simply. “I don’t want any of the money.”

“Yes, but that helps their case. They can argue that your sister’s claim lacks merit because you don’t want to be included in the will.”

“I see my sister’s been meddling again,” he growled darkly.

Kevin gave him a curious look. “She hasn’t called here, that would be improper. I just figured you’d be on your sister’s side, given what I’ve read about the history of this case. She’s been the only member of your family to stay in contact with you. I’m not the only one who thinks you want her to win the case.”

“I want her to win the case, but I’m *not* happy about her bringing me into this,” he answered honestly. “And I swore to tell the truth when we started. I won’t lie, not even for Vil.”

“There’s the truth, and then there’s the truth as presented that keeps you honest without delivering the complete details,” he said with a chuckle.

“Spoken like a true lawyer.”

“I gotta be what I gotta be,” he grinned.

The lawyers for Vil were next. They were much more personable than Cybil’s lawyers, but they were just as hawkish when it came to asking him questions. They questioned him for over an hour, focusing on many of the same things that Cybil’s lawyers did, his history with his father, his treatment of him, and what happened after he was disowned. But where Cybil’s lawyers inferred, Vil’s lawyers came right out and asked him. “If Miss Vulpan was to win the case, what would you do, Mister Vulpan?” the tall jackal, named Terry Assad, asked. “After all, you’d be placed in control of your family’s assets.”

“Give it back to the family,” he said immediately. “Hand it over to someone else and let them deal with it. I don’t *want* the money. I just want to be left alone and go back to my life.”

“Thank you, Mister Vulpan,” the jackal said. “I think we’re about done here.”

“I think we can break for lunch now,” Kittimer noted, looking at her watch.

“There’s a pretty good Chinese place about a block from here,” the skunk offered.

“I know, I order from there all the time,” Kit chuckled. “My office is only about a mile from here.”

“Well, feel like some company for lunch? We can discuss what’s coming. As you’ve probably figured, the respondents are going to treat you as a hostile witness, so we can discuss what’s coming.”

“That’s a good idea.”

Kit decided he rather liked this Kevin Simmons. He was amiable, affable, and witty, but he was *very* intelligent and very observant. They ate lunch and Kevin explained what was coming, preparing him for dealing with much less friendly questioning, and Kit got to know the skunk and found him to be a very nice guy. “You know,” Kit said as they walked back to the office, “I know someone that might love to meet you.”

“How so?”

“My fiancée’s best friend is pre-med, and you seem like just her type,” he hinted.

Kevin laughed. “Are you sure we’ve known each other long enough for you to try to set me up on a date?” he asked.

“Eh, you’re not bad for a lawyer.”

“And you’re not bad for a reporter,” Kevin grinned.

“I’m not a reporter, I’m a researcher and writer,” Kit challenged.

Kevin was right about the afternoon. They moved to a larger conference room, that was filled with sixteen lawyers representing the five uncles and two aunts that were opposing the suit. Kittimer, Kevin, and Kit

sat down at the head of the table, the two lawyers flanking him, and they began.

The questions were detailed, invasive, and delivered like he was being cross-examined. Kevin repeatedly had to warn them off when they got too personal, when they started digging into business that had nothing to do with the matter at hand. They were blunt and forceful, and more than once they dropped questions on him that shocked him. When the attorney for his aunt Melissa got her turn, who grilled him over his relationship with his sister for nearly twenty minutes, suddenly asked, “are you in a sexual relationship with your sister?” That shocked Kit, angered Kevin, and almost got the little weasel of an attorney punched in the nose, had Kit been within reach of him. It certainly infuriated Kittimer, who threatened to eject the weasel if she didn’t keep his mouth in line. “You can’t do that,” the femme weasel said smugly.

“I am acting as the direct representative of the court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts,” she said in an icy tone. “If you don’t think I can’t throw you out of here, then have your state’s bar drag you into a disciplinary hearing, then *try me*.”

The weasel backed off at that point, but did question Kit about his relationship with his sister for nearly a half an hour longer.

They went right down the line. They questioned him for four hours, and then they took a half hour break for something to eat, where Kit called Jessie and told him they were running late. After the break, he was questioned for another hour and a half, until the last lawyer finally got his chance and questioned him for nearly twenty minutes. The last question the stag asked startled Kit, but not in a bad way. “Is it true that you have no active interest in this suit?” he asked, the one question none of the others

had asked him. They'd probably agreed to only ask it once, at the end.
"That you're not actively engaged in your sister's suit to restore the original will that gives you executorship of the estate?"

"That's right," he said. "The first I'd heard about it was when I was given the subpoena to be here today. I had no part of it."

"I see. If your sister and your stepmother lose, what will you do?"

"Nothing," he answered.

"And if one of them wins?"

"Nothing. Well, if my sister wins, I'll just give the money back to the family. I don't want it. I just want to be left alone and live my own life, away from them, and away from all the insanity that surrounds them."

"So, if you win, you won't hand the family fortune over to your sister?"

"I'd have her help me deal with it, if only because she's the only member of the family I trust. As I'm sure all of you know, someone tried to kill me, and I think it was one of my uncles that arranged it. So I wouldn't hand over the family fortune to someone I think might have tried to have me killed."

"You realize that's an unsubstantiated accusation," one of the other lawyers said immediately.

"I know, but that doesn't change how I *feel* about it," he answered immediately. "*Someone* sure as hell hired a hitman to try to kill me. And given my history with my family, my family's purist sympathies, and my

current fiancée, it's not much of a stretch for me to suspect any one of them."

"So you admit you can't be an impartial executor?" the lawyer asked. "That you're biased against my client and the other respondents?"

"My bias has nothing to do with money," he snorted. "Are you asking what I'd do if my sister won? That's easy. I'd bring the entire family together and make them sign a pledge stating that if they ever interfere with me, badger me, pester me, or try to harass me, my fiancée, or her family, they forfeit their money. Once they sign, they receive an equal share of the family fortune. I'll give it all back to them, and I won't take a single bloody penny of it. I don't *want* the money. I just want to be free of them and live my own life."

"And the shipyards and other businesses?"

"I'd give it back to Vil—Vilenne. Dad gave it to Vil before he died, and the board recognizes her as the heir."

"I see. Thank you, Mister Vulpan. I believe I'm done."

Kit left the conference room as the lawyers all conferred with each other, Kevin just behind him. "I'm surprised you'd make a declaration like that. You'd really just give it all away without taking a cent?"

"Money is a curse," he said with sincere conviction. "It's a curse I want no part of. It destroys people, Mister Simmons. I won't let it destroy me."

"I guess you have reasons for thinking that way," he mused. "And you can call me Kevin."

“Kevin. Say, do you play poker?” he asked.

Kevin laughed. “I’ve been known to do so from time to time. Why, you have an offer?”

“I play poker on Sundays with my landlord and some guys from my complex. We have an empty chair.”

“That sounds like fun. I’m in, as long as it’s not high stakes.”

Kit laughed. “Not if you consider a pot of eighty cents to be too rich for your blood. We play using pennies, nickels, and dimes. So bring two dollar’s worth with you. Two bucks is the buy-in, and we play every Sunday until someone wins it all, but we don’t go any later than eight. If nobody’s won by eight, we all go all-in and play the last hand sudden death showdown style. The winner uses the cash to buy the beer for the next game, and we start over the next week.”

“Okay, now *that* sounds like fun,” Kevin grinned.

“Then come on over. We start around four.”

In all, he was relieved beyond measure when he got home. He flopped down on the couch and blew out his breath, and pulled out his phone to call Jessie. “Hello?” she called.

“Hey pretty kitty. I’m home.”

“How bad was it?”

“It wasn’t fun. But it’s over now.”

“Do you have to go back?” she asked.

“No, I’m basically done unless I’m called as a witness for the trial... which I probably will,” he sighed. “Where are you?”

“I’m over at the sorority,” she answered. “Want me to come home?”

“You have a promise to keep,” he said teasingly.

“So I do,” she said enticingly into the phone. “I’ll be right home.”

When she got home, he made sure she lived up to her promise that morning. She certainly didn’t object. She showed him again why he loved her so much, for she could sense what he needed, and gave it to him...in this case, a wild romp in bed to take his mind off the weighty issues and stresses of the day. Jessie was the best therapy around. When they were done, Kit laying atop her, Jessie slid her paws across the scars on the small of his back as she purred her contentment, which sounded a little funny because she was still a little out of breath. She sounded like a sputtering chainsaw, which made him laugh.

“What?” she demanded.

“You shouldn’t purr when you’re out of breath,” he teased, nuzzling her neck.

She giggled. “I can’t help it,” she admitted. “So, feel better now, my handsome fox?”

“You know it,” he breathed, rising up on his elbows and kissing her muzzle. “Someday, I’m gonna convince you to let me take some pictures of this gorgeous body.”

She laughed. “I’ll tell you what. You can take them, but not ‘til the reporters all go away. If someone could hack U.T. to get my schedule, then

they might try to hack our own computers. I don't want to find naked pictures of me on the front page of some tabloid. Until then, you'll have to settle for looking at the real thing."

He chuckled. "It's a deal. The real thing is better anyway."

"How was it at the lawyer?"

"I got grilled," he grunted in reply, moving to slide off her, but ten claws dug into his back and instantly disabused him of that notion. Kit thought it it was very curious that Jessie had five fingers on her paws, but only four toes on each foot...but that was normal for cats, she'd told him.

"Where do you think you're going?" she asked with a grin, though he couldn't see it since they were literally nose to nose.

"Getting off your ribcage so you can breathe, maybe?" he chuckled in reply.

"You're not *that* heavy," she told him. "What kind of questions did they ask?"

"You name it, they asked it," he said. "There was like twenty-five lawyers there asking me questions."

"That many? Woah," she breathed. "I'd have been so nervous I woulda thrown up."

"That's one reason why I'm glad you didn't go," he said. "I don't want any part of my screwed up life encroaching on yours, my pretty kitty. As far as I'm concerned, I've done enough damage just from you being with me."

"Don't you worry about me, my handsome fox. I won't let them push me away. I've got my claws in you now, and I'm not ever letting go."

“Good, cause I won’t let you get away,” he hummed, nuzzling her. “I did tell them the one thing they probably all wanted to hear.”

“What, that you don’t want the money?”

“Yeah. I made that clear right up front, in all three sessions.”

“Sessions?”

“They broke it up into three questioning sessions, with each side in the case. Vil’s people, my stepmother’s people, and the lawyers for the rest of my family. Since each side wanted to ask me different things, but the lawyers working on each side were working for the same goal, they just set it up that way so I didn’t have to talk to each lawyer separately. That woulda taken like five days.”

“You’ve never really talked much about your stepmother.”

“I only saw her once in person, at the funeral,” he shrugged. “I was out of the house before my father remarried. He only married her for her family and so he had a wife for appearances. He didn’t love her, and she didn’t particularly care about him. It was more of a business arrangement than anything.” Kit chuckled. “Vil absolutely hates her. She said she’s a shallow, vain, conceited bitch. But she has the bloodline,” he grunted. “She’s from British aristocracy.”

“How is she going to get your family fortune? Didn’t she sign a prenuptial agreement?”

“Yeah, but she thinks she can get around it.”

“What do you think will happen?”

“I really don’t know. Either way, I don’t really care. I just want them to leave us alone.”

“Well, there’s one thing I do want if your sister wins, since you’ll have control of the money.”

“What?” he asked suspiciously.

“A scholarship trust fund for our babies, so *they* don’t have to worry about college.”

“Hmm. Now that I think I wouldn’t object to,” he mused after thinking a moment. “Thinking ahead, are we?”

“You know I am,” she said, kissing his throat. “I hope we have a baby before our first anniversary.”

“I’d love it, but I’m a little worried about that,” he said honestly. “If you have a baby, how’s that going to affect your school? It’s going to be hard to graduate.”

“I’ll find a way, my handsome fox. I want my degree, but I want to be a mother even more.” She kissed his nose. “I wonder what our children will look like.”

“They’ll be beautiful,” he said simply. “So, can I get up now?”

She nipped lightly at his muzzle. “Maybe.”

“I must need more practice if you’re still frisky after *that*,” he chuckled.

“Practice? Heavens no,” she giggled. “I’m just getting my second wind, that’s all. Besides, you just had the ‘I want to forget today’ session,

now I have to start working on the ‘I’m sorry about Thanksgiving before it happens’ sessions.”

Kit exploded into laughter, dropping his head on her shoulder. “You’re giving me apology sex before it even happens? You’re not instilling me with confidence, pretty kitty.”

“I’m going to still be giving you apology sex a month after our first anniversary,” she said ruefully. “So, up for a little pre-emptive apology?”

“Can I ever say no to you?”

“Not when I know where your on switch is,” she said, and she started to purr.

Jessie’s little present to him reminded him that Thanksgiving was only a week or so away.

After telling everyone about the lawyer, Kit told the crew about his trip, and everyone buckled down to get the magazine put to bed. They had to finish next week’s issue a day early, since everyone would be off on Thursday, but the good part of that was that since it was Thanksgiving week, it was going to be rather light. Their plan was to get more done than usual on the week before, so they could skip Thursday without causing any undue problems. This basically meant that everyone was going to give up a part one of their normal days off. The writers would be working half a day on Monday, and the others would be working half a day on Saturday. Nobody worked on Sunday in Rick’s outfit, since Sunday was the day Rick went to church.

The issues with the press, however, didn't calm down after the deposition. Kit continued to stonewall the numerous attempts they made to get an interview, briskly brushing past several newscrews that tried to stop him outside, as Vanguard kept a car near the apartment to chase off any news vans or reporters that tried to come to their apartment, once their address became common knowledge to the news organizations. Jessie kept a guard with her any time she went out alone, who kept all reporters away with a kind word but a stern warning that Miss Williams had no comment. Kit kept telling himself he was going to kiss Vil every time Jessie came home with a smile instead of tears, because the guard was keeping them away from her.

Kit was busy all week, but Jessie was even busier. She was leaving for Cincinnati on Saturday, on a morning flight out of Bergstrom, and she was making sure to stock up on a week's worth of affection before she left. When she wasn't kissing him, touching him, nuzzling him, cuddling with him, or luring him into the bedroom, she was doing two major projects that were due on Friday. Sam and Sandy came over every night, and Kit did his own bit of matchmaking by quietly hinting that Sam needed to come over the next Sunday both he and Jessie were home, that he had someone he wanted her to meet.

His relief that the questioning was over made the time fly, until he was waking up on Saturday morning to the sound of Jessie in the shower, her suitcase packed and sitting by the door. He scrubbed his face and got up, then wandered to the bathroom himself to relieve himself. "Kit?" she called when he lifted the seat.

"Yeah hon?" he asked.

She looked out from the shower. "I was about to wake you up."

“I’m up. How much time do we have? I didn’t look at the clock.”

“About three hours,” she answered, turning off the water. She opened the curtain and started using her paw to strip the water out of her fur, and he flinched when she flicked it at him with a giggle.

“You make me miss and you’re cleaning it up,” he warned.

She laughed as she pulled the towel off the rack and started scrubbing at her fur to dry it. “What I wouldn’t give for one of those full-body fur dryers,” she sighed.

“This is an old apartment.”

“We should save for one of those portable ones. We can set it up in the corner of the bedroom,” she said.

“That’s an idea,” he nodded as he finished up. He helped her out of the tub, then took the other towel and helped her scrub most of the water out of her fur and hair. “You got your coat ready?”

“Yeah, it’s on the couch,” she told him. “I checked the weather, and it looks like it’s going to be messy. They’re calling for snow. That’s rare in Cincinnati this time of year. I’m gonna miss Austin by tomorrow,” she laughed.

“How cold does it get here in the winter?”

“Sometimes it can get cold, but the daytime isn’t bad. Like the fifties,” she told him. “Last winter we had a stretch where it was below freezing for almost a week.”

“That’s nothing like Boston,” he chuckled. “Usually it goes below freezing in November and doesn’t get back above it until April.”

She turned around and kissed him on the muzzle and cheek. “I’m gonna feel all musty,” she complained. “But I gotta get dressed. The airline said we should be there two hours before my plane leaves so I can get through security.” She looped her arms around his neck and kissed him lingeringly. “Mmmm, God I’m going to miss you,” she hummed as she nuzzled him.

“Baby.”

“Mmm?”

“I don’t think necking naked in the bathroom is getting you ready to go.”

“Spoilsport.”

“If I don’t get you home, your parents will kill me.”

“Five days without touching you,” she said longingly, sliding her paws down his back, then grabbing two healthy pawfuls of his backside as she nuzzled his neck.

“You’ll live,” he chuckled. “I’m the one that’s going to be alone until I fly up. You’ll be home.”

“Fighting with Mom,” she sighed, grabbing the base of his tail with one of her paws while the other caressed the scarred area of his back. Even now, months after they’d become intimate, she couldn’t keep her paws off his scarred lower back.

“Company is company,” he chuckled. “Now let’s get dressed before you make me all musty too.”

She laughed and grabbed hold of him tightly, pressing her damp fur against his front. “If I have to be musty, so do you,” she teased.

“Stop that, young lady,” he laughed, grabbing hold of her, picking her up off her feet, and swinging her around. She laughed as he walked them out of the bathroom and towards the bedroom. “Now then, you little brat, let’s get you ready to go!”

They dressed, and while Kit put her suitcase and coat in the car, Jessie wolfed down a breakfast of toast and orange slices. He doublechecked to make sure they had everything, and went through the checklist as she put on a pair of fur-topped boots. “Purse ready?”

“Got my keys, credit card, phone, and cash in it.”

“Plane ticket?”

“In my purse.”

“Phone?”

“Charged and in my purse, and the charger’s in my suitcase.”

“Laptop?”

“In my backpack. I have the charger in my suitcase.”

“Cameras?”

“Camcorder’s in the suitcase, camera’s in my backpack. And yes, I have extra memory cards.”

“Books?”

“Backpack.”

“Ipod?”

“Backpack, charging base is in my suitcase.”

“Toiletries?”

“Suitcase. Did you find out what it’ll take when I change my name?”

“A copy of your marriage license, birth certificate, social security card, and your driver’s license,” he answered. “We have an appointment on December fifth for the blood test for the license, so don’t make any plans that day.”

“This isn’t a good time to tell me something like that,” she laughed as she pulled on her other boot, then stood up and shuffled her feet a little. “I hate shoes,” she complained.

“I’m not fond of them either, but it’ll be cold in Cincinnati.”

“You don’t have claws on your feet.”

“You got me there. You could always go without them, but cold and wet are a bad combination.”

“I know,” she sighed. “I’m not really used to them now. I don’t think I’ve worn shoes since last winter.”

“They’re a lot more common in Boston. Vil always wears shoes. She’s used to it.”

“Remember to buy a pair of winter shoes before you come up,” she told him.

“I’m going right after work. You know, there are a few places up in Boston that won’t let you in if you’re not wearing shoes.”

“Really?” she asked in surprise.

He nodded. “It’s how they keep tourists out. Most of them don’t pack shoes when they visit in the summer.”

“I guess that’s one way to do it,” she giggled as she picked up her purse and looked inside it. “You about ready to go?”

“Yeah.”

He carried her backpack out to the car, helped her into the passenger seat, locked the house up, then climbed in and started the Pathfinder. It was only about twenty minutes to Bergstrom, which used to be an Air Force base before it was changed into a civilian airport. Kit parked in a short term lot near the terminal and carried Jessie’s suitcase for her as they filed in. She led them through the sparsely populated terminal to the United counter, and an attendant checked her suitcase and directed them to the gate from which her plane would leave. They didn’t have much trouble, at least until they reached security. Jessie seemed a little annoyed when they wouldn’t let Kit through, taking his paw and leading him back a ways as a family came up behind them.

“We still have two hours,” she complained. “I don’t want to wait without you.”

“Let’s talk to security and see how long it’ll take for you to get through since it’s not busy, and we can go grab a cup of tea at that restaurant.”

“Okay.”

It turned out that they promised to get her through in about twenty minutes, so they had a cup of tea at the Dunkin’ Donuts that was in the main terminal. Jessie bought a *USA Today* and leafed through it, holding his

paw as he sat watching the TV hung from a mount in the corner of the restaurant. They were quiet, but the grip she had on his paw told him how reluctant she was to leave him. He just kept hold of her paw, and then urged her to get up. He packed her paper in her backpack, and deliberately started leading her back to the security gate.

“I hate this,” she sighed when they reached it.

“I’ll be fine, my pretty kitty,” he chuckled, leaning over and nuzzling her neck.

“I miss you already,” she said in a poignant voice. “I never thought I’d feel like this before I even leave!”

He kissed her tenderly. “It just shows me how much I love you,” he told her. “I feel the same way, but I know we’ll see each other in five days. It’ll just *feel* like forever,” he grunted.

“Five days alone in bed,” she groaned. “I don’t if I can get to sleep without you there with me.”

“I know the feeling. But let’s get you going, pretty kitty. Call me when you get to Cincinnati.”

“As soon as I can,” she affirmed, kissing him so hard that he almost felt his knees unlock. He gave her her backpack, kissed the back of her paw, and then shooed her towards the checkpoint. “Did you test that videoconferencing program?”

He nodded. “It works. I have it all set up, and I can walk you through the connection steps on the phone when you use it the first time.”

“At least I’ll be able to see you,” she sighed, leaning her head on his shoulder a moment.

“You have to go, Jess, or you’ll miss your plane before you get through security.”

She sighed. “Alright. Drive carefully when you go home. I’ll see you on the computer tonight.”

“Be good, pretty kitty. I love you.”

“I love you, my handsome fox,” she said, giving him one more longing look, then turning and filing into the checkpoint, around a corner, and out of sight.

He sighed. Five days without her. He wasn’t sure how he was going to survive it.

Kit thought that the time after he was disowned was the closest thing to hell on earth. Nothing could describe the sense of total fear and confusion that came when a rich kid who had never so much as made toast for himself was suddenly thrown out onto the hard, cold streets with no money, no possessions, no home, and no idea what real life was like for normal people.

He discovered that true hell was being separated from the femme he loved.

Talking on the phone just didn’t fill the void. She wasn’t *there*. He couldn’t reach out and touch her, and cuddle with her. She wasn’t there to tease him when he cooked, or make that silly face when he talked about hockey, or watch her jump up and cheer when her Bengals scored a

touchdown. She wasn't there to make fun of for her preference for corny teen-femme pop music, or to feel her run her fingers along the scars on his back in her ritual, so well she knew them she could trace every white line without looking at them. He missed her sitting at the table doing her homework while he practiced the guitar, watching her pretty face screw up in a mask of intense concentration as she took up knitting again, something her mother had taught her but she hadn't done in years, since she was a little girl.

He missed every part of her and life with her.

There was only one thing to do about it. Write it out.

He sat at home that night, after talking to her on the videoconferencing program for two hours, and sat at the desktop with his favorite classical music playing, the score to Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* ballet. He stared at the word processor window for nearly ten minutes, then he began. He wrote a letter about how it felt to be separated from her, describing it in stark, somber tones, trying to capture the essence of what he was feeling into words. He spent four pages trying to capture that essence, but never felt quite like he'd managed it. But, as was his custom, he copied it into an email and sent it to Hannah, continuing their practice of emails where he told her how he felt, and she kept trying to convince him to break off the engagement.

He spent that night laying in bed staring at the ceiling for most of the night. It felt...*wrong*, not having Jessie sleeping beside him. He just couldn't relax, couldn't rest. Every time he started feeling sleepy, he'd reach out and find the other side of the bed empty, and that would just start the cycle again. The only solace he found was at three in the morning, when

the phone rang. He didn't even have to look at the number on the display. "Can't sleep?" he asked when he opened the phone.

"No," Jessie said morosely. "You're not here with me. I don't know what to do, I can't rest."

"I know."

"Sing me a lullabye, Kit. I can't get to sleep without you here."

He chuckled and did just that, singing *Rock-a-bye Baby* to her. When he finished, he could hear her breathing on the other end, but she made no other sounds.

She'd fallen asleep.

Kit spent almost half an hour just listening to her breathing, and it was that music that lulled him to sleep himself.

Work did help. He had no reason to go home, so he hung around work well after quitting time, knocking out just about every project on his schedule for next week's issue, working until nearly ten that night. Jessie called him at ten, and he stayed on the phone with her as he locked up, drove home, and sat on the couch drinking more wine than was entirely good for him. She was falling asleep at two in the morning, and he urged her to hang up the phone this time so she didn't drain the battery, instead having her use the videoconferencing software. She put the computer on her dresser and angled the monitor so the camera got a view of her bedroom. Her parents hadn't changed anything in it since she left, so it looked like a high school femme's room. It had older, sturdy cherrywood furniture, a queen size bed, and posters of music bands on the walls, along with a collection of unicorn figurines on a bookshelf on the other side of the bed.

He watched her climb into bed, her beautiful eyes looking at the laptop, then closed her eyes when he again sang her a lullabye.

Sunday...well, Sunday sucked. Jessie was busy with her family, so Kit was trapped in the house due to the fact that he didn't want to be chased around by determined reporters. Lupe and Dan came over and watched football with him, then they played poker after the first game with the second game on the TV.

Kevin made good on his promise to come play. He called around five to get directions, and showed up about twenty minutes later. He showed up wearing jeans and a Dallas Cowboys tee shirt, and that got him immediate high praise from Lupe and Dan. Kit's first impression of Kevin was totally justified, for Kit found him to be intelligent, funny, good-natured, and quite friendly. He struck up quick friendships with Lupe and Dan as well as himself, and lost in his first outing against the boys in poker with humor and dignity. "Well, y'all busted my poker cherry quick," he lamented with a grin as he tossed down his losing hand.

"You better hope that Dan don't win, he always buys that crappy Milwaukee's Best," Lupe said sourly.

"It may be crappy, but it's cheap," Dan laughed. "Does it matter how it tastes as long as it gets us buzzed?"

"Well, I'll have to bring some Mountain Dew," Kevin chuckled. "I'm driving home, so I can't be going crazy."

"Where do you live?"

"Just outside Austin, near Pflugerville," he answered. "I got an apartment up there. I haven't been working at the firm long enough to save

up a down payment on a house.”

“Hey brah, you shoulda came here, I got units open,” Lupe told him. “And I make deals for guys who don’t trash my apartments.”

“Deals?”

“I gave Kit a break on the rent cause he’s not a party jock,” Lupe chuckled.

“Ah, well, I needed a furnished apartment, and what I got isn’t too bad. It has a pool and some other perks.”

“Ah. I can’t compete with that. The only thing these old units can say is they have washer dryer hookups,” he chuckled.

There was a knock on the door, and it opened before Kit could say anything. Sandy peeked in. “Kit!” she called.

“Jessie’s in Cincinnati, Sandy, remember?” he said.

“We know that, goofy,” she laughed, opening the door. Jeffrey and Sam were with her. “We promised her we wouldn’t let you sit around alone!”

“Sandy, it’s poker time.”

“And you keep on playing while I cook!” she announced.

“Uh, is it really okay for us to come over, Kit?” Jeffrey asked.

“I don’t mind, come on in,” he said. “Oh, Sandy, Sam, Jeffrey, this is Kevin. He works at the law firm that hosted the deposition.”

“Hey, how you all doing?” he asked, waving to them as they came into the living room. Kit noted, with a little satisfaction, that he was looking

right at Sam, and Sam was looking right back at him.

“Ah, so you’re a lawyer, are ya?” Sandy grinned as she went past them and into the kitchen.

“Afraid so,” he chuckled. “At my first job out of law school, which is little more than being a glorified gopher.”

“We all have to start somewhere,” Sam said with a slight smile as Dan dealt out the cards. “You know, you’ve never asked us to play.”

“Hell, Sam, put down your two bucks and pull up a chair,” Lupe laughed. “We don’t discriminate.”

“We’ll take anyone’s money,” Dan agreed with a chuckle.

“Oh no you don’t! We promised Jessie to cook Kit a meal so he wouldn’t pine!” Sandy protested.

“Pizza Hut,” she said simply, which made Sandy and Jeffrey both laugh.

“I can’t object to that. So, who wants to teach me how you play this game, and lend me two bucks?”

“Hell, let’s just start over, since Kevin’s already been knocked out,” Lupe offered. “Let’s count it all back out so us starters have our two bucks again.”

“Note he offered that when he’s winning,” Dan said with a laugh to Kit. “That’s noble of him, eh?”

“If he was losing, we’d just accuse him of trying to cheat,” Kit grinned in reply.

The three of them bought into the game, and after Lupe went and fetched a couple of chairs from his show unit, they had a very fun couple of hours sitting around playing poker, drinking beer, eating pizza, and having a good time. They *almost* made him forget that Jessie was in Ohio, but he kept expecting her to come out of the kitchen and tease them for playing poker, since she wasn't too fond of the game. Kevin fit in perfectly with his other friends, and by eight, when it was time for the showdown hand between Sam, Lupe, and Kit—Sandy, Jeffrey, Kevin, and Dan were knocked out—Lupe dealt out their hand of Showdown, five cards dealt face up one round at a time.

“Where did you learn how to play poker, Sam?” Sandy asked, eyeing her sizable pile of change. Sam was the second highest at the table, only a little behind Lupe. “You’re pretty good!”

“My dad was a professional poker player,” she said modestly.

Lupe gave her a look. “Your dad is Black Jack Mickleson?”

She laughed ruefully. “Yeah, that’s him,” she admitted. “He retired from poker last year, though. How did you know about him?”

“I saw him on one of those poker shows,” Lupe said as he dealt out the third round. “They said he was one of the big winners, that he’d won that big competition in the past.”

“That’s why he retired,” she said with a shy smile. “He won the World Series of Poker five years ago, and decided to hang it up when it got so popular and all the new people started flooding in. He decided to chase his other dream while he still had the energy to do it. He opened a bar.”

Lupe laughed. "A man after my own heart!" he exclaimed as he dealt out the fourth round. "Where is the bar at?"

"My mom and dad moved to Florida after I started college. He opened his bar in Jacksonville," she answered. "They always did like it there."

Lupe dealt out the last round, and Sam gave a wicked little chuckle when she won with a pair of kings. "Now remember, Sammy, next week you buy the beer," Lupe told her. "Just don't buy Milwaukee's Best!"

"Beer hater," Dan chuckled. "Alright, let's get this place cleaned up."

They all got up and started cleaning up beer bottles and pizza boxes, but left the money on the table. Once the table was cleaned of everything but the cash, Sam pointed at it. "Can you just put that in a jar somewhere Kit? I'll just leave it here. That way we always have change around if we want to play."

"No problem, Sam," he told her.

"Don't think that gets you out of beer buying duty next Sunday," Dan said teasingly as Sandy dropped several cans into the trash bag he was holding open.

"I'll have my Dad ship us something," she told them. "He gets a bunch of imported stuff from Europe. Want to try some German lager?"

"You just became my best friend, Sam!" Lupe laughed.

"I didn't know you could ship alcohol," Kit mused.

"You can if you use the right shipping company," Sam smiled.

"Well, you're full of surprises," Kevin told her. "A premed student who can whoop the lot of us at poker and knows more about beer than most

males?”

She laughed. “You should know all about it.”

He chuckled. “Hey, the family is just *from* Europe. I was born in Delaware.”

“Huh?” Lupe asked.

“He’s a European skunk,” Sam told them. “I’m indiginous.”

“Indiginous? So, your breed met the boat, eh?” Dan asked with a smile.

“You could say that,” Sam said mildly. “So did his. They went back on it.”

“Huh?” Lupe asked.

“Back then, the colonization didn’t go just one way,” Kevin explained. “Some American breeds went to Europe. My family was part of a group that colonized Britain while the British foxes were colonizing New England,” Kevin chuckled. “So, we came to be known as European skunks. We even developed this,” he said, tapping the double white lines between his eyes.

“I’ve never met an American breed that calls themselves indiginous before,” Dan noted.

“There’s really not too many of us who can say that,” she answered. “There’s only a handful of truly indiginous North American breeds. Raccoons, prarie dogs, coyotes, cougars, bison, that’s really about all I can think of. Some, like us, we have cousin breeds on other continents, though skunks came from here first,” she chuckled.

“That’s really interesting,” Sandy said. “I didn’t know that. I just know my family came up here from Chile just before the Great Depression, we were part of a group of Chilean and Argentinan chinchillas that came north and settled in Texas and Oklahoma after the corn blight of twenty-four. My grandpa used to talk about it all the time.”

“What’s your last name?” Dan asked.

“Lopez,” she grinned. “Just like Jennifer,” she said, striking model’s pose.

“Speak Spanish?” he asked curiously.

“Si, si,” she grinned. “Our grandparents and parents taught us when we were kids. That’s an advantage around here.”

“She was our lifeline when we went to Mexico last spring break,” Sam laughed.

“I wonder what it was like for your family to move to England,” Lupe said to Kevin. “That musta been hella culture shock.”

“I guess it wasn’t all that great, since my grandfather moved back to America,” Kevin answered with a grin.

“Well, I can’t say much,” Dan chuckled. “The most I know of my family is we came from Atlanta.”

“We came from Mexico, brah,” Lupe grinned. Sandy chattered at him in flawless Spanish, and Lupe grinned and answered her.

“Well, now that I’ve had my biology, anthropology, and history lessons for today, in addition to losing two dollars to a pretty poker shark, I gotta

get going,” Kevin grinned. “I have a lot of work coming up. Thanks for the invite guys, I had a great time.”

“Hey brah, feel free to come back!” Lupe said, and Dan nodded in agreement. “Next week we’ll probably play over at my place, since Mickey’ll be back from Louisiana. I got a bigger table. And you *gotta* come back, Sammy,” he grinned. “You owe us beer!”

“I’ll be back. Will Jessie be back next Sunday?”

Kit nodded. “I pick her up from the airport at noon,” he answered.

Kevin shook paws with everyone, then said his goodbyes and started on his way home. “We gotta go too, I have some homework to finish,” Sandy said. “Don’t tell Jessie we ordered pizza or she’ll kill us,” she laughed. “We were supposed to *cook* for you.”

“Now I know what to say when I need a favor,” Kit noted.

Sandy and Sam went back to their house, and Dan and Lupe took the trash out for him on the way out. He sighed and sat down on the couch, turned off the TV, and missed Jessie all over again.

He had a little easier time of it that night. Jessie called him, they talked over the computer, and he again left it running in his room so she could look at her monitor and see him sleeping, and he could do the same. It wasn’t the same as her being home, but it was something.

Hannah was already driving her crazy. Jessie wasn’t lying about the fights, for they’d already had two doozies, both of them over the wedding. Hannah could admit that he loved her, and she loved him, but she was still

opposed to the idea of them getting married. And her attempts to be civil about it evaporated when she had Jessie right there under her roof, where Jessie couldn't just hang up on her to end the conversation. Jessie complained about it on Monday night, threatening to un-invite her mother to the wedding, but Kit talked her out of it. "Just stand your ground, love," he told her. "Remember, come Sunday, you'll be back home, and you'll be able to hang up on her again."

"Come Wednesday, you'll be here," she purred, giving him a sultry look.

He laughed. "Baby, if you think your mom's bad now, just *try* to get frisky with me in her house."

"Oh, go ahead, ruin my fantasy," she said, giving him a pouty look.

"That fantasy could turn into a nightmare pretty quick."

"We'll see."

"Jessie," he said warningly. "I won't be party to murder."

"Huh?"

"If your mom caught us, she'd die on the spot. Then we'd be begging the judge for adjoining prisons."

She exploded into laughter.

He was getting a little used to her not being there. On Monday night, he actually slept more than five hours, and Tuesday he was busy with getting ready to go. He packed a single carry-on for the trip holding a single change of clothes, his laptop, and a couple of books. He put it by the door and picked it up on his way out on Wednesday, told Lupe he'd be back on

Friday and warned him that Rick would be there that evening to pick up Jessie's car to take with him back to his house while Kit was in Ohio, then got in his car quickly when he saw a reporter moving towards him and pulled out before she could so much as get a microphone ready.

He'd been working overtime every night since Jessie left, so he really didn't have much to do. He spent most of the day in his tiny office, looking at the clock every ten minutes and waiting anxiously. He'd see Jessie tonight. He'd be able to kiss her, hold her in his arms, smell her hair and fur, feel her fingers tracing the lines of the scars on his back. And, he had to admit, he was very curious, almost excited, to meet Jessie's family. Hannah was a paradox to him, a hostile stepmother who had a rich and enigmatic history, who had a story he was dying to hear but wasn't allowed to pursue. He wanted to meet her mild-mannered father who was a gun fanatic, her good-natured brother who was a football player, and her Barbie-doll cute sister that Jessie said had the mouth of a drunken sailor and a less than traditional personality...which was Jessie "nice-speak" for the fact that Jenny acted out against her parents once she left home by indulging in everything they forbade her when she was there. Jenny was a party girl at Ohio State, and was nowhere near as shy and demure as Jessie was.

Rick took pity on him. He sent him out on some errands, talking to some advertisers, keeping him busy until three. At three, they had their staff meeting and put the issue to bed, and then it was time for Kit to go.

Rick drove him to the airport in his own car. Rick was going to keep his Pathfinder over the holiday, since all the reporters were around and Kit didn't really like the idea of leaving his car out where someone might get some ideas. Rick was going to go get Jessie's Corolla after he got home and picked up Martha and watch over their cars for them while they were gone.

They stopped at the dropoff lane by the terminal, and Kit blew out his breath.

“You got everything?” Rick asked.

“Yeah. Jessie’s car is parked in her spot at the complex. Remember to remind Lupe you’re there for it. I told him you were coming to pick it up today, but he might forget. Oh, and don’t forget about the alarm, Rick. If you do go into the apartment, turn off the alarm. You have the code?”

“In my wallet, but I doubt I’ll have to do that,” he said.

“Just in case,” Kit said simply.

“I’d have to say thank you for trusting me with your cars and your apartment, son,” Rick chuckled. “It means a lot to me.”

“If I can’t trust you, who the hell can I trust?” Kit asked with a smile.

“You’d better get along, son. Remember, you’re only gonna be there one day. Keep telling yourself that when she starts to nag on ya.”

“I’m actually looking forward to it,” he said as he opened the car door. “It’s the last major obstacle to the marriage, so I’m eager to get it out of the way.”

Rick laughed. “Hell, son, you two are already married. The ceremony’s just a technicality at this point.”

“The world is built on technicalities.”

“So it is. Have a good flight, son.”

“I’ll bring you a bit of my in-laws’s bloody fur as a souvenir.”

Rick laughed. “Be good. I’ll pick you up on Friday morning.”

“I’ll be here.”

Kit closed his door and watched Rick drive away in his car. He fished his ticket out of his carry-on bag, then turned and hurried into the terminal. In just a few hours, he’d be with Jessie again.

He couldn’t wait.

Chapter 11

The day before Thanksgiving was one of the busiest travel days of the year...and Kit was caught up in the middle of that hurricane.

Bergstrom was *packed*. His intent to be there three hours before his 6:00pm flight turned out to be wise, for he cleared security literally ten minutes before his plane pulled away from the gate. All the workers in the airport were surly and short-tempered, and the security guard that screened him was irate and unpleasant. The gate was filled and the plane was already boarding when he got there, putting him at the back of the line. The plane was packed as well, but at least he got lucky as far as seating assignments went. He had an aisle seat at the front of coach, and the seat beside him was taken by a short, quiet female rabbit that didn't feel like talking, who was traveling with a teenage femme rabbit that looked like either her sister or cousin. The younger one had her nose pressed to the window, looking out with silent interest when he stowed his backpack in the overhead compartment and sat down, pinching his tail a little in the narrow seat as he pulled it around his hips so he could sit down.

The plane taxied out fifteen minutes late, and then spent nearly a half an hour sitting at the end of the runway. When they finally did get into the air, the first half of the flight was anxiously boring, as Kit felt like a kid waiting for his parents to wake up on Christmas morning so he could open his presents, and the second half was unpleasant. The plane hit a weather front on the way to Cincinnati, running them through two separate episodes of turbulence. They were delayed again when they got to Cincinnati, as Kit

began to get anxious and excited about the idea of seeing Jessie. They had snow there, and they were stuck circling the airport as the ground crew cleared the runway so they could land. Every circle around the airport just made Kit that much more anxious and impatient, and he had to focus on keeping himself from losing his composure. He didn't want to be rude to the politely quiet rabbit sitting next to him, who had been the soul of courtesy during the entire flight.

When the plane finally landed, over an hour late, Kit had to hold onto the armrests to keep himself in his seat. When the plane taxied up and stopped at the gate, he was up the instant the plane came to rest, pulling down his carry-on and handing the two rabbits their luggage with a nod and a polite smile. Since they were in the front of coach, they were the first out after the first class people, and he poured out into a hugely busy and populated terminal, filled with furs of all breeds, shapes, and colors. He was on the phone the instant he was out of the tunnel, calling Jessie. "Hello? Kit?" she called.

"I just got off the plane," he informed her, looking up at the signs hanging from the ceiling to get his bearings. "Where are you?"

"Umm, we're just inside the terminal, between the main door and the United counter," she answered. "We're moving towards the gate where your plane arrived. We'll meet you just outside the security checkpoint, okay?"

"I'll see you in a few minutes. I can't wait to see you."

"I know the feeling," she giggled, then she hung up. Really, there was no reason for her to say goodbye, given she'd be seeing him in person in just a minute.

Kit hurried down a very long terminal, so long it had moving walkways...and of course, his gate was at the very end. Instead of using the walkway, he instead walked briskly beside it, outpacing those on the walkway by almost double. There were too many people on the moving walkway to do anything but stand on it. It took him almost five minutes to walk down to the other end of the terminal, until he reached the security gate that stopped people from coming in. He stepped through it, and even with all the furs crowding the terminal, he saw her. He saw her jump up to look over all the heads, on the far side, and she raised her black-mittened paw and waved vigorously. Kit almost bulldozed people out of his way and he rushed to her, and then she was right there, arms open and rushing towards him. He took her in that moment, seeing her with her jeans and winter boots she bought in Austin, and a thick downy red vest-coat worn over denim jacket.

“Kit!”

He buried her in his arms, holding her tightly, rocking her back and forth. For a long moment, he just held her, eyes closed, reveling in her presence, feeling five days of longing fade away when he could touch her, smell her long, gorgeous hair, feel her paws gripping his back, hear her breathing. He put a paw on her upper back and gripped her shoulder as one of her paws dug under his shirt and immediately came to rest over his scars.

“I missed you so much,” Kit breathed quietly, nuzzling her cheek and neck with the side of his muzzle.

“I missed you too,” she returned, pulling back just enough to give him a long, sensual, lingering, intimately passionate kiss.

It was heaven...until a polite cough behind Jessie reminded both of them they weren't alone.

Jessie's cheeks ruffled as she let go of him and snuggled under his left arm, then she giggled ruefully. Behind Jessie was a rather short, slender male cat, middle aged, with crème colored fur and a slightly darker patch over his face, almost like a Siamese but not quite, wearing a heavy tan coat and a pair of dark slacks. He was wearing boots as well. Kit had seen a picture of this cat...it was John Williams, Jessie's father.

"Mister Williams, it's good to finally meet you," Kit said, offering his paw to the small cat.

"Please, call me John," he smiled, taking Kit's paw in a firm grip. "How was the flight?"

"Rough," he replied. "And long."

"Well, you're here now, even if you're a little late," John chuckled, and they started out, Kit and Jessie walking arm in arm beside her father. "You might want to consider calling your boss and warning him you might be late getting back," he cautioned. "They're saying we might get up to six inches of snow by tomorrow night, and you can imagine how that's going to snarl things."

"That's not a pleasant thought, but if it buys me more time with Jessie, I'll take it."

"Sitting in an airport waiting is never fun," John chuckled.

They had to all but swim through a sea of other furs as they made their way down the terminal, but when everyone else went to baggage claim, they managed to break free of the pack and get into a little less crowded

surroundings. Kit really didn't care now, all he could feel or think about was Jessie, walking along with him, her tail coiling around his own tail playfully as they walked. He did start to care, though, when they got outside. It was biting cold, and all he'd brought was a windbreaker and a pair of winter shoes. Jessie snuggled up to him as John led them along streetlit sidewalks to a large parking lot, and then through most of it to reach a Chevy Impala parked near a parking garage. John opened the passenger side door for him, and there was a momentary confusion on just how they were going to do this. Jessie wouldn't let go of his paw, urging him to the back seat so they could sit together, but he kissed her on the cheek and urged her into the front seat. Kit got into the back, sitting behind Jessie, and he immediately leaned forward and reached over the seat to put a paw on her shoulder. "Hannah mentioned that you're going to a conference this weekend?"

"Oho, you call me 'Mister Williams,' but you call my wife Hannah?" he asked with a slight smile as he backed out of the space.

Kit chuckled. "Well, she gave me permission to call her that a while ago, in our letters."

"You know, I was very impressed by those letters," John told him as Jessie turned on the heater. "You're a fairly good writer, Kit. You did a good job explaining how you feel."

"Thanks. They didn't do much good, though."

"Oh, they did a lot of good," John chuckled. "Now, Hannah doesn't absolutely hate you, she just dislikes you."

Kit laughed. "Well, I'll take what I can get. I hope she doesn't give me the third degree tonight. I'm kinda tired."

“No, I think she’s saving that until tomorrow. Right now, she’s in a huff.” Jessie laughed, and John gave her a sharp look. “That’s enough of that, young lady,” he warned. “I think you did that on purpose.”

“Did what?”

“Jessie and Hannah had a very heated argument over your sleeping arrangements.”

Kit sighed. “Pretty kitty, I *warned* you—“

“I will *not* spend another night alone, and definitely not when you’re in the same house!” she protested. “Mom can put our video camera in the room to make sure we behave, but you *will* be sleeping in my room.”

“Oh, wonderful,” Kit sighed. He wasn’t even there yet, and already Jessie had managed to put him on the wrong foot with Hannah.

“I was saying about the same thing,” John said. “Jessie doesn’t seem to understand that these fights with her mother don’t just inconvenience *her*. I’m the one that has to listen to Hannah storm over it for hours afterwards.”

“Mom needs to understand that I’m an adult, Dad,” she challenged.

“Kitten, intentionally rubbing your mother’s nose in her perceived failure is not a mature act,” he said patiently.

“Well if she wants to treat me like a kid, I’ll be one when it annoys her,” Jessie said sternly.

“And that’s what we’ve been dealing with since Jessie got home,” John sighed, glancing back at him as they got on an interstate.

“I know, Jessie’s told me about it, and the letter Hannah sent on Tuesday wasn’t like her. She was much more annoyed than usual.”

“They’ve been fighting like their tails were tied together,” John lamented.

“You’re not going to make this easy on me, are you love?” Kit asked with a rueful chuckle.

“I’ve been *trying* to be civil, Kit,” she said. “But Mom’s been relentless.”

“I’d have to agree with Jessica,” John added. “Her mother has been the one starting the fights. She’s been after her since the minute she got off the plane.”

“Well, then I have an idea of what kind of reception I’m going to get,” he predicted.

“No, I think you’ll be rather surprised,” John said with a chuckle. “Hannah’s gotten it into her head that you’ll do whatever Jessica wants, so she’s focusing all her efforts on convincing *Jessica* to call off the wedding.”

“Which will never happen,” Jessie said adamantly.

“Which I wouldn’t allow either,” Kit agreed. “I got my ring on her, and she’s going to follow through. Even if I have to drag her down the aisle. A Vulpan never lets someone back out of a deal.”

Jessie laughed, and John gave him a sudden look, both surprised and amused. “I could see that. A shotgun wedding, just with the shotgun trained on the bride instead of the groom.”

“You don’t let a femme like Jessie get away, John. It’d be monumentally stupid. I may get annoyed with Hannah, but the one thing I can thank you and her for is raising the most perfect femme in the world.”

“Aww, you’re so sweet,” Jessie said, looking back at him with a loving smile.

“I’m not so sure I could call Jessica perfect,” John chuckled, “but I do have to admit that she wasn’t a *complete* disappointment.”

“Dad!” Jessie protested.

The Williams house was inside Cincinnati, near the eastern city limit, on a pleasant little street surrounded by middle class homes, and a little store and restaurant sitting on the corner of their block. They had a two story house of no particular design Kit could identify, painted what looked like a yellow in the illumination of the streetlight on the street before it, and shrubs flanking the walkway leading to the front door. It had a driveway on the left side that went back behind the house, where there was a detached garage on the edge of the back yard, behind a large paved area where cars could park or turn around without having to back all the way down to the street. There was a basketball hoop hanging over the garage door back there, he noticed through a thickening snowfall.

“Strange weather,” John said as he stopped the car on that pad. Kit saw that there was a back door hidden just behind the back corner of the house, with a light turned on over it. “I can’t remember the last time we had a white *Thanksgiving*.”

“I’m kinda used to snow,” Kit said as he opened the door and got out, dragging his carry-on by the strap and then slinging it over his shoulder. “We get enough of it in Massachusetts.”

“Well, Kit, this is your last chance to run,” John said with a grin. “Once we open that door, you’re committed.”

“The path to the altar is through that door, John,” he said simply. “I’m ready.”

John chuckled and urged him to follow.

The door opened into a laundry room of sorts, with the washer and dryer on the right and a window and narrow table on the left. “Leave your shoes here,” he said as he kicked off his own shoes, setting them under the narrow table. Kit took off the winter shoes he’d bought for the trip up and set them neatly under the table himself, and steadied Jessie as she struggled to take off her boots. After they were unshod, John led them into a very large kitchen, with a counter in the center that had pans and utensils hanging off a rack suspended from the ceiling. They had a huge stove, with six burners rather than four, and a large stainless steel paneled refrigerator sitting beside a vertical stand-alone freezer. A microwave and toaster oven stood on the far counter, next to a coffee maker, sitting by a small door that led to what was probably a pantry. There were two doorways across the kitchen, one facing them that led into a dining room that had shutters to hide the kitchen from it, and another on the right wall that was an open archway. A tall male came into the kitchen through the open archway on the other side of the counter. He was a very muscular young male, wearing a muscle shirt that showed off his wide shoulders and corded arms, who had cream-colored fur with a dark patch spread on his right shoulder, under his shirt. “Heya, you must be Kit,” he said, coming around the counter and offering his paw. “I’m Ben, Jessie’s little brother.”

“Only by age,” Kit chuckled as he shook Ben’s paw.

“I’m the outcast in the family,” he grinned.

“I still say you were switched at birth, son,” John grinned at him. “I don’t know where he got his height from. Certainly not his parents.”

“Where’s your mother?”

“Upstairs, fussing at Jenny,” he answered, going to the refrigerator and taking out a V-8. “Mom! Jenny! They’re back!” Ben shouted as he went into the next room.

Kit clearly heard the feet pattering on the ceiling, hurrying across it, then the footsteps were on the stairs across the living room. It was definitely the living room of a family, with two chairs in the middle of the floor and a pair of couches flanking them, creating an enclosed space of sorts that encapsulated the TV. There was a piano on the far end of the living room, behind one of the couches, near the stairs. There were pictures everywhere, pictures of the kids and family on tables, in a curio cabinet, on top of the entertainment center, and hanging on the walls. Two sets of feet appeared on the stairs, and as they came down, Kit got his first good look at the rest of Jessie’s family.

The first one down was a little carbon copy of Jessie. She was a touch shorter and her chest was a little flatter, but the resemblance between Jessie and this, which had to be her sister, was profound. She looked just like her sister, except her eyes were amber where Jessie’s eyes were blue. They had the same cream-colored fur as their father, but the younger sister lacked the fox-like markings that Jessie had. She did, however, have a longhaired tail, like her sister, and she had a dark band of fur on her face right over her eyes, almost looking like a mask, which Kit thought looked rather attractive. She was wearing a half-shirt tank top and a pair of jeans with holes worn through them.

The other femme was undeniably Hannah. She was a shorter, more mature version of Jessie, with the same basic facial structure, and she had interesting fur. She had black-tipped ears and tawny, golden colored fur and hair, but just like Kit and other foxes, the sides and underside of her muzzle, as well as the lower half of her face and front of her neck, was white. The boundary between tawny and white fur was very defined and striking. That white streak went down her neck and vanished under her blouse. Her tail was not longhaired, but she had the similar color patterns of a fox at the tip, going from tawny to white to black at the very tip, just like Kit's own tail; the three-colored tail was another Vulpan family trait. Outside of those three features, nobody could look at Hannah and believe that she was half fox. She looked all cat, having only inherited cosmetic fur coloration patterns from her fox parent.

"Well, it's nice to meet you face to face, Kit," Hannah told him in a surprisingly warm voice, reaching her paw out to him. He took it and shook it warmly.

"I'm glad to be here," he said.

"I'm sure that opinion will change," she said with a serious look, which made him chuckle.

"Hi, I'm Jenny," Jessie's sister said brightly, nudging her mother out of the way and taking Kit's paw between hers. "Jessie wasn't kidding, you really are handsome!" she announced.

"Well, thanks," Kit said mildly. "But I'm taken."

Jenny gave him a wild look, then laughed. "Maybe if I'm lucky, you'll have that sisters fantasy."

“Jennifer Ophelia Williams!” Hannah snapped in shock and outrage, which just made Jenny explode into laughter. That earned her a smack on the bottom from her mother.

“I’m just kidding, Mom, sheesh!” she protested.

“You don’t make jokes like that!” Hannah said hotly.

“It’s alright, Hannah, Jessie warned me about Jenny already,” Kit said calmly.

“Oh? And what did she warn you about?” Jenny asked.

“That,” he chuckled, tugging a little on his bag.

“Let me take you up so you can drop off your bag, love,” Jessie said, taking his paw. That statement got Jessie a white-hot look of anger from Hannah, but Jessie simply stepped past her mother and led him towards the stairs. “We’ll be right back down,” she announced.

Hannah looked about to follow them up, but John put a paw on her elbow and stayed her.

Kit followed Jessie upstairs and to the first door on the right. Within was the room he’d seen through the computer, with the teenager’s posters and the collection of unicorn figurines on the far dresser. “Well, here it is,” she said. “Just drop your bag anywhere, love. Go ahead and test the bed.”

He nodded, setting his bag on the floor and sitting on the bed, then leaning back on it. It felt a little soft, but it didn’t feel all that bad on the average. “I don’t think it’s going to be that bad,” he told her. “A little on the soft side, but I think I can manage it.”

“Manage what?” Hannah asked, standing in the doorway, and her tone was not friendly.

“I told you mother, Kit has a bad back,” Jessie said, rather belligerently. “He can’t sleep on something that’s too soft, or he’s in a lot of pain the next day. That’s only one of the reasons why he’s not sleeping on the couch. He wouldn’t be able to move in the morning!”

“He can sleep in one of the other kids’ beds and they can sleep on the couch.”

“We’re not having this argument again, mother,” Jessie said in a steely tone. “If you don’t recall, we already live together. I’m not going to sleep separate from him under the same roof!”

“Jessie,” Kit warned. “Hannah. I can appreciate your position, but please understand that I’d like to sleep in here. I haven’t had more than three hours of sleep since Jessie came back here, because I got so used to her sleeping beside me. We’ll leave the door open, you can put a camera in here, but please allow us this one indulgence. It’s the only thing I’ll ask you for while I’m here.”

Hannah gave him a long, searching look, then sighed and nodded. “I don’t like it, but I’ll bend on this, at least this time. You *do* look a little exhausted.”

“You have no idea,” he said wearily. “I haven’t got much sleep, and it’s been a very long day.”

“Well, come down and at least chat for a little while, then you can get some sleep,” she told him.

After they came back downstairs, they did just that. Kit chatted amiably with Jessie's family, getting to know them. They told him about their work, their schools. Ben told him about his football career and his hopes he'd get a scholarship offer from a good school, and Jenny told him about Ohio State and her plans to become a nurse. Kit reciprocated by telling them about his job in Austin, and then, after Jenny pressed him on it, told them about his trip across the eastern half of America as a wandering laborer. "It certainly wasn't all fun and games, but I met quite a few very interesting people, and learned a great deal," he summarized after the tale ended with Austin.

"I'd imagine there's no end of homeless bums and riffraff in places like that," Hannah said.

"Well, yes, but some of them were very interesting people. You'd be surprised at how some of them ended up where they did. Most got there through bad luck, but some of them were like me, there by choice."

"Who would choose a life like that?" she asked.

"You'd be surprised," he said. "I met a fellow who had a doctorate in physics in a homeless shelter in Montgomery, Alabama."

"No way! A Doctorate?" Jenny gasped.

"He showed it to me," he chuckled in reply. "When I asked him why he was standing in a soup line, he answered that he realized that living life in society was living a lie, and giving it all up freed his mind from the distractions of trying to live life by stupid rules that made no sense and just bogged his mind down on frivolous concerns. So he gave it all up. He'd sit outside on the steps and just *think*, for hours at a time. Just sit there and think. Sometimes the others would sit there and watch him, like it was some

kind of spectator sport,” he said, which made Jenny giggle. “The first time I saw him do it, when he finally did move, I asked him what he was thinking about. He answered that he was thinking about what his wife would do to him if she found him.”

That made all of them, even Hannah, explode into laughter.

“The others said they always thought he was sitting there thinking about physics, you know, solving the mysteries of the universe. I guess sometimes he was, but not that day. He told me later that my arrival made him think of the life he gave up, since I was kinda doing the same thing as him. Sometimes I think I’d like to find him and see how he’s doing. He was a very, very interesting guy.”

“Uh, Kit, mind a personal question?” Jenny asked.

“If it involves me taking off my clothes, yes,” he answered.

She giggled. “Jessie told us about the lawsuit. Why don’t you go after your fair share of the money?”

He looked at Jenny steadily. “It’s not something I can easily explain unless you *know* what it’s like to be rich, Jenny. But the best way I can explain it is this. Money in moderation is a good thing, but when you reach a certain point, money becomes a curse. Money destroyed my family, Jenny. My family isn’t a family. It’s a collection of shallow, vain, hateful, greedy people bound together by money and our family name. Money and power is all they care about. They’ve forgotten what it’s like to be happy. They think money *is* happiness, and I won’t ever allow myself to become like them. I want no part of that. This is happiness, Jenny,” he said, motioning around himself. “A house full of a family that loves and cares

about each other. It's the one thing I wish I had, but all I had was *money*. Can you understand that?"

"I guess I can, in a way, but it seems a little strange."

He found himself yawning, and covered his maw with his paw. "Excuse me. I think it might be about time for me to go to bed. I had a very long day."

"Understandable. It was a madhouse at the airport," John chuckled.

Jessie stood up deliberately. "I think I'll go ahead and turn in myself."

Hannah gave Jessie a hard stare, but nodded. "Keep the door open," she ordered.

"We will. Goodnight everyone, see you in the morning."

They said goodnight in return, and Jessie led Kit upstairs and into her old room. "Bathroom's down at the end of the hall," she said before he even asked.

They gathered together into the bathroom and brushed their teeth together, then returned to her bedroom. Jessie closed the door to change clothes while Kit unpacked his carry-on, setting his laptop on her desk beside her own and stacking the few clothes he brought with him on top of it. He was setting out a fresh pair of underwear and a shirt when the door banged open suddenly, startling him. "I told you to—" Hannah snapped, but came up short when Jessie gave out a startled cry and snatched at her bedspread, clutching it to her naked body.

"Mother!" Jessie gasped. "Do you mind?"

"I do mind if you're in here *naked* with him!" she snapped.

“Mother,” Jessie said in a deceptively low voice. “He’s seen every part of me, from every angle, and every distance,” she said rather bluntly. “We sleep naked, he couldn’t possibly miss it.”

The graphic visual a statement like that could induce played across Hannah’s face. She looked outraged, then embarrassed, then a little sheepish. Then her eyes hardened, and she pointed at her daughter. “I’ll not have that going on in my house!” she warned. “I was willing to bend on this outrageous idea to keep the peace, but if you’re sleeping in that bed together, you’re wearing something!”

“Hannah,” John said, coming up behind her and putting a paw on her arm. “You’re being a touch silly, dear. You can’t change it, and forbidding it now doesn’t change the fact that it’s already happened, and will keep on happening when they go home. Leave them be.”

“John, you can’t be serious!”

“I’m quite serious. Now leave them alone. And for Pete’s sake, close the door.”

Hannah seemed torn for a moment, looking between Kit, who was still dressed, and Jessie, who was nude behind the bed, covering herself with the bedspread, then blew out her breath and gave them a long, flinty look. “There’d better not be any *foolishness* in here,” she threatened.

“Mother,” Jessie said calmly, “if I decide I want to *have sex*—“

“Jess,” Kit warned in an authoritative tone. That startled Jessie a little; she almost never heard him speak that way. “Stop baiting your mother. It’s rude.”

“She started it!” she protested. “She’s treating us like children!”

“This is *her* house,” Kit told her simply. “Now be grateful for what she gives us, instead of trying to take the whole mile.”

Hannah gave Kit a long, searching look, then nodded. “I’m glad at least *one* of you has some manners,” she declared. “Good night. Sleep well.”

“Good night, Hannah, John. And thanks again.”

“Any time, Kit, any time,” John said from behind the wall, and Hannah reached in and grabbed the door, then closed it.

Jessie growled in her throat and dropped the bedspread. “Now do you see what I’ve been dealing with all week?” she demanded.

“And how many times did you goad your mother into it?” he asked simply as he pulled off his shirt.

“Well a few, but she’s been hounding me since the moment I got off the plane,” she admitted, pulling the covers down.

Kit shed the rest of his clothes and climbed into bed. Jessie slid in with him and turned off the light, then snuggled down into his arms. “Hi there, Mister Vulpan,” she said in a purring, loving tone.

“Well hello there, future Misses Vulpan, fancy meeting you here,” he returned, putting his nose right against hers on the pillows. She inched closer and gave him a long, sensual, tender kiss, filled with the longing of five days of separation, her paws encircling him as she kissed him with gentle love and tenderness, a kiss that celebrated their reunion more than an invitation to make love. He felt quite overwhelmed by her sensual kiss, surrendering to it and to her, then she sighed and snuggled against his chest.

“My, what a welcome,” he said breathlessly. “I’m glad I was already laying down or you’d be picking me up off the floor.”

She giggled. “You know something?”

“What?”

“Right now, I’ll take a good night’s sleep over ticking off Mom by making love.”

He laughed helplessly and nuzzled her. “I’m glad I’m not the only one who was thinking that. Finally, a good night’s sleep,” he said with dreamy contentment.

“Mmmm,” she hummed in agreement, and fell asleep within a matter of seconds.

Kit was just behind her. It wasn’t home, it wasn’t their bed, but she was there. Her warmth comforted him, the smell of her hair and fur soothed him, and the sound of her breathing was like the sweetest music in his ears. Days of frustration trying to fall asleep melted away with her touch, with touching her, and the accumulated sleep deprivation tugged at his consciousness like an anchor. Reunited with her, he was able to drift into gentle, restful sleep in a matter of moments.

Hannah was up early...but then again, she always was. John himself was usually up quite early because of his job, but he did like to indulge in the occasional late morning on holidays. But she was being a little silly, in his opinion. Since five in the morning, Hannah would creep up to Jessica’s door and listen intently, then creep away, every five or so minutes.

It was a surprise to John that Hannah gave in on the matter. Jessica was an adult, and though John personally wished she'd wait to get married until after she finished school, he wasn't opposed to the idea of it. Then again, his opposition to the idea stemmed on the chance that it might disrupt her school, but she seemed to have settled into a domestic life with Kit without her grades suffering, and, well, them marrying now was a simple technicality. They lived together, shared the same bed, and that was the aspect of married life that John feared would interfere with her schoolwork. But he'd been wrong about that, and he could admit it. John could see now that Kit's sister had been right. Kit was good for Jessica, just as Jessica was good for Kit. He kept her on track to get her degree, was just as adamant about it as they were, and Jessica filled a need in Kit, a desperate need to be part of a loving relationship, filling the void in him left when his family deserted him.

Vilene was not kidding when she said that she knew her brother. John had read all the letters Kit had sent Hannah, so he had a very good understanding of the young male now. At first glance, one might think that shy Jessica was the one that was hanging onto Kit, attached to him, but it was the other way around. Kit was almost slavishly devoted to Jessica, a powerful bond that, thankfully, seemed to go both ways. Jessica adored Kit, loved him deeply, and from what he'd seen, seemed to come out of her shell with him. He'd always been worried that his shy yet stubborn daughter wouldn't be able to find her own voice, would just accept her husband's wishes, and then her stubbornness would poison the marriage as she resented his perceived control over her. But it wasn't like that at all with them. In just one evening, he saw that Jessica was utterly comfortable with Kit, and what was most important to him, she was just as willing to give Kit orders as she was to take them from him. John was amazed that Jessica had

stood her ground against her mother over having Kit sleep in her room, for she usually avoided conflict. For that matter, John had been perpetually surprised by his daughter since she told them about him. Kit seemed to bring the strength out in her, gently causing her to come out of her shell and be herself, be the adult femme that was hiding within the shy girl who had left home with a suitcase and trembling paws. Vilenne had been right. Kit was what was best for Jessica, even as Jessica was what was best for Kit.

They were a perfect match.

Now, if only Hannah could admit it to herself. John knew his lovely wife, knew that despite her flaws, she was a beautiful femme who he still loved just as passionately as he did when they first met. Hannah didn't want to admit to herself that Kit was the right male for Jessica, which was becoming harder and harder for her. Kit's letters had *moved* Hannah. That boy had worked miracles when he started sending those letters, letting Hannah get to know him in a passive, non-confrontational matter, and he'd caught her humming to herself when she re-read letters he'd sent to her weeks ago. Hannah *liked* Kit. She really did. But she still was adamantly opposed to the marriage, because she still feared that he would abandon Jessica when the fire faded from their relationship...which was its own little problem, he could see. Hannah wanted to get to know the boy in person, she wanted to be nice to him, but she was afraid to do it, afraid that *she* would get burned along with Jessica if Kit left their daughter. She wanted to get to know him, find out how much of those letters were carefully prepared and how much of it was the true him, but the spectre of her father kept getting in the way. Kit's main task here, he could see, would be showing Hannah he was not her father, but that would be an uphill battle. Kit's family was very odd and unpleasant, but to Hannah, Kit had left them, and that made him

look unreliable in her eyes. Hannah was devoted to her family, almost obsessively so, and Kit's abandonment of his own family, no matter how much they deserved it, was a mark against him.

And yet, even with that black mark, Hannah still was inclined to like the boy. So did John.

Hannah was there again when John got out of the shower, her ear pressed up against Jessica's door, listening intently. John went past the door to their bedroom and came up to her, and tapped her on the shoulder. "Dear, leave them alone," he whispered.

Hannah was about to say something, but a very faint, muffled sound came out from under the door, and Hannah's eyes went wide. She grabbed the doorknob and opened the door a crack, and John couldn't resist peeking inside himself, looking over his shorter wife.

They were still asleep. Whatever sound John had heard had to be some dream-induced mumble. Kit was laying on his stomach, left paw tucked under the pillow, and Jessica was crowded up against his side with her arm thrown over him, her paw gripping his shoulder. John felt his cheeks ruffle a bit when he realized that Jessica was nude, at least from the waist up, since the covers were only covering them to that point. Thank goodness he couldn't see anything, Jessica's arm and Kit's body were quite conveniently covering what John shouldn't see. It was just the realization that his shy, modest daughter, who triplechecked to make sure she locked the door when she took a shower, was topless and uncovered that got to him.

John urged Hannah to close the door. "Come on, dear, just let them be," he whispered again.

“I don’t want any foolishness going on in there!” she hissed in a low tone.

“Hannah, dear, you’re guarding the back door with the front door wide open,” he told her, putting his paw on her arm and gently yet firmly pulling her from the door. “Admit it, dear. They’re *already* at that point. Stopping them means nothing when they go home. And they’ll be married in less than a month.”

“Don’t remind me!” she sighed as they went downstairs.

“Answer me one question, dear.”

“What?”

“When they send you pictures of the wedding, what will you do with them?”

Hannah was quiet a long moment as they went down to the kitchen, then she laughed ruefully. “I, I have no idea. I’m still debating if I should object at the wedding.”

“If you do that, Jessica will never forgive you,” he warned.

“I know,” she all but groaned. “Do you have any idea how it feels, John? I can’t object or I’ll lose my daughter, but what she’s doing is the biggest mistake of her life!”

“Then you have two choices, dear. You can live up to the title of Momzilla, or you can do what you can to make sure Jessica has a welcoming shoulder when she needs it.”

“There’s a third option, John. Jessica sees the light and doesn’t go through with it.”

“That’s just wishful thinking, dear,” John sighed as he started the coffee. “Jessica is committed to going through with this marriage. So is Kit.”

“He’s committed *now*,” she said scathingly. “What about in a year, when our daughter has a baby and can’t go to school, and he finds some other female?”

“Dear, that’s a risk *all* furs take when they get married. Jessica and Kit are no different. We just have to support them as best we can.”

“We never took that risk!”

“Dear, we’re not special. The reason we endured is because we love each other.”

“But how do we know Kit loves her, or if it’s just a flame that’ll die out with the first stiff breeze?”

“That, my dear love, is the chance we all take. Who’s to say that your flame doesn’t blow out tomorrow?”

“Oh, be serious, dear,” she laughed ruefully. “The only way you’ll pry me off is with a crowbar.”

“But who’s to say?”

“You’re being ridiculous. We’ve been married for twenty-three years, John, but Jessica and Kit haven’t even known each other for four months!”

“So, you admit that if they’d known each other longer, you wouldn’t be half as opposed to this marriage?”

“Well, yes, of course,” she admitted. “They’re jumping into this entirely too fast, John! How do we *know* Kit will be faithful to Jessica?”

“Well, dear, how do we know *Jessica* will be faithful to *Kit*?”

“She’d better be!” Hannah said sternly as she got out eggs and bacon from the refrigerator. “I didn’t raise her to be a tramp!”

“Would you two give it a rest?” Jenny complained as she came into the kitchen. She was wearing a nightshirt that came down to her thighs that had a red star on the front.

“Go back upstairs and put on proper clothes, young lady!” Hannah barked at her, pointing to the archway. “You’ll not walk around half naked when we have a guest in this house!”

“They’re asleep, and I’m not worried about it,” Jenny shrugged, getting a bottle of water out of the refrigerator. In a bit of rubbing it in, Jennifer flicked her tail at her mother as she padded out of the kitchen, which exposed her panties. In Ohio, a tail flick like that one was considered a rude gesture among the younger generation, a snub while walking away, and though Hannah was an older femme, she was worldly enough to understand its meaning.

“Jennifer Ophelia Williams!” Hannah shouted, storming off after her daughter, who had bolted for the stairs as soon as she got into the living room.

John had to laugh. Where Jessica was shy, Jennifer was anything but. She was a very extroverted girl, social and chatty, who had lots of friends in high school and ran with the popular crowd. That had been quite a trial for Hannah, for Jessica had been a model student in school and, which very pretty, was too shy to be part of the “in” crowd. She had quite a few friends, but they weren’t the kinds of friends that Hannah worried would steer Jessica down the wrong path. Jennifer was the exact opposite. Hannah

thought she was going to have the same easy time with Jennifer she did with Jessica, but Jennifer was a complete pawful.

Well, this day was already shaping up to be quite interesting.

Kit was startled awake by the sound of yelling.

It took him a minute to remember where he was, in that groggy half-asleep world, then, when he heard a door slam, he heard Hannah's voice shouting, then her heavy footsteps stormed past the closed door. He opened his eyes and saw a wall of posters of pop singers, and realized he was in Jessie's room. He felt her pressed up against him, her arm on his back, and she shifted, her claws digging into his shoulder. "Is it morning?" she asked blearily.

"I don't know," Kit answered in a fuzzy voice. "Let's go back to sleep until we're sure."

"Mmmph, now I gotta pee," she complained, climbing out of bed. He rolled over onto his side and felt his back protest, aching from the unfamiliar mattress. He saw her pull on a nightshirt and then go out the door. He dozed off, and woke back up when she climbed back into bed. She pulled the nightshirt back off and tossed it aside, then burrowed into his arms and snuggled against him. "Mmm, back okay?"

"A little sore, but not bad," he answered, closing his eyes.

"Mmmm," she hummed, and was asleep again.

Kit tried to go back to sleep, but the sounds outside the door told him it was morning. Too many people were up and about, and now that he was

awake, the nagging ache in his back was keeping him from falling asleep. He laid there, though, and allowed Jessie to fully fall back into sleep. Besides, he was enjoying the feel of her nestled against him. He waited a goodly while, and then slowly and carefully started extricating himself from her. There was a moment where she dug her claws in to prevent him from moving, a habit she had, and he had to be careful not to get scratched up as he disengaged her claws. He finally got untangled from her without waking her, dressed while sitting in the chair by her desk, and meandered out of her room with a paw on his back. After relieving himself, he went downstairs, and found Hannah and John up and about. Hannah was in the kitchen, doing dishes, while John was sitting in a chair in the living room. "Morning, Kit," he said pleasantly. "Sleep well?"

"A little too well," he said, putting both paws on his back. "Have any aspirin? Jessie's bed doesn't agree with me."

"You alright?"

"Fine, just achy. It's a sign of my old age," he said dryly, which made John laugh. "I slept like a log."

"There's some Tylenol in the medicine cabinet upstairs," John told him. "And coffee in the coffee pot."

"I'm a tea drinker, John. I'm from Boston," he chuckled.

"Jessie bought some tea yesterday. I guess she was thinking of you," he chuckled.

Kit first went and got Tylenol, then invaded the kitchen as Hannah finished up the dishes. "Good morning, Hannah," he said. "I promise, we behaved last night."

She actually chuckled. “Jessica bought you some tea,” she said. “In the pantry, second shelf on the left.”

Kit wandered into the pantry and found it, an opened box next to a half-empty box of Lipton teabags. It was Earl Grey, and was from Twinings, an international tea company that was pretty good, but a little expensive. Kit was fond of Earl Grey from time to time as a change of pace from regular tea, but he hadn’t had any since he left Boston. People outside of New England just couldn’t seem to get it right. He preferred Harmon and Sons, an upscale Connecticut tea company, when it came to exotic or flavored teas. Jessie had been drinking the Lipton, but had gone out and bought him a gourmet tea for his visit. That was rather thoughtful of her. “Hmm,” he said, coming out of the pantry with the box. “She bought Earl Grey.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Earl Grey is flavored tea,” he told her. “It has a citrus taste to it.”

“I hope you like it. Jessie spent a long time looking for it.”

“Oh, I’m fine with it,” he chuckled. “It’s just that she bought Twinings. That’s kinda expensive.”

“She took me to four different stores until she found that,” Hannah said, a bit sourly. She went to the kitchen window and looked out, then sighed. “Look at that.”

Kit came over and looked out, and saw the backyard blanketed in about five inches of snow. “John said that snow was rare for Cincinnati this time of year.”

“I’ve never seen this much snow this early, and I’ve lived in Ohio all my life,” she told him, then she glanced at him and seemed to bristle a little. “I do not approve of this marriage, Kit,” she stated flatly. “I think you’re going way too fast, and it’s bound to end in heartache and disaster.”

“Hannah, I understand your position,” he said honestly. “I think we’ve gone a little too fast myself sometimes. We’ve only known each other for three months, but...” he trailed off. “It’s hard to explain. I look at her, and I just *know*. You know?”

“No, I don’t,” she said calmly.

“After our first date, I was thinking about the engagement ring,” he admitted in a musing kind of way as he opened the tea package. Hannah took a kettle from a cabinet and started filling it with water. “I spent a month eating ramen noodles and walking to work to save up for it.”

“You should have waited!” she said sternly.

“I waited until I was sure I was stable enough to give Jessie a good home,” he answered calmly. “I wasn’t sure when I was going to propose to her, but after I was shot, it was a moot point. Did Jessie tell you what happened?”

“No, she’s been very tight-lipped about that.”

“Well, the short of it is, Hannah, *she* proposed to *me*.”

“What?” she asked in surprise.

“She beat me to it,” he chuckled. “She did it through the magazine where I work. I can show it to you. Anyway, after she did that, I gave her the ring and proposed to her properly.”

“I can’t believe that Jessica was the one that proposed. That’s a scandal!” Hannah said hotly. “A young lady doesn’t do something like that!”

“I think my injury scared her,” Kit said sagely. “After I was shot, she said she realized how transient life really is, and she didn’t want to wait, because who was to say if we’d still be here tomorrow?” He put the box down. “Show me where you keep your computer, Hannah. I’ll show you the drawing that Jeffrey did for Jessie that was her proposal.”

Hannah led him to a den on the far side of the dining room, where they kept their computer. Kit went to the magazine’s website, and brought up the proposal strip that Jeffrey had done. “This ran in our magazine right before I was released from the hospital. I had no idea they were doing it until I read it in the magazine.”

“My,” Hannah said, reading it over and over again.

“You said she didn’t tell you about when I got shot?”

“No, very little.”

“Hmm,” he said, as the kettle began to whistle in the kitchen. They returned to the kitchen, and Hannah offered him a teacup from the cupboard. “Thank you,” he said, then began making his tea. “I’m a little surprised. I would have thought she’d have told you about that.”

“All she really said was that you were shot, that it wasn’t bad, and you proposed to her after you got out of the hospital.”

“That was wrong of her,” he sighed. “I told her that I wanted you to understand the *full* truth, and that was hiding it.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“The truth of it, Hannah, is someone tried to kill me,” he said honestly. “The leopard that shot me was a hitman. The cops still don’t know who hired him, and my sister’s trying to find out, but she hasn’t had any luck yet.”

“What do you mean? Why would someone try to kill you?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” he shrugged. “I think it was one of my uncles, making it clear how much he objects to my relationship with Jessie. I told you in the letters, most of my family are rabid, fanatical purists. The only ones who aren’t are my sister and a few of my cousins. It would certainly be something they’d do.”

“Are you saying my daughter’s in *danger* because of you?” she asked in an intense tone.

“I’m not entirely sure. I can’t rule it out,” he admitted. “When I tried to explain it to Jessie, she just blew me off. She said that she won’t let them scare her away.” He picked up the teacup and dipped the teabag into the water over and over. “My pretty kitty’s quite adamant about it, Hannah. She’s made it clear that she won’t let *anything* come between us. Not even my family. I swear, she’s ten times braver than me,” he chuckled. “She beat my fear of my family out of me in about a week. When she made it clear to me that I had to get over my family to be with her, that motivated me. It’s amazing what you can do when someone dangles the right reward at the finish line.”

“I’m a little shocked, Kit,” Hannah said seriously.

“There’s not much I can say in my defense, Hannah,” he said honestly. “All I can say is Jessie understands the situation, and it doesn’t seem to bother her. But she *should* have told you the truth. She shouldn’t have hid it from you.” He leaned against the counter, feeling his back twitch a little. “All I can say is I’m sorry. I’ll have to have a little talk with her about that, I suppose.”

Hannah was quiet a long time, but didn’t leave the kitchen. Kit stayed, sipping at his tea, waiting for her to either say something or leave. He would make himself available, he wouldn’t hide or run away. “Are you sure that she’s safe?” she finally asked.

“I think we are. Vil went nuts after I was shot, and she’s had security guards watching over us since. They keep us safe in Austin, and Vil’s been putting Boston through the wringer to find who did it.”

“I’m really worried about this, Kit.”

“So am I. You think I sleep well at night knowing someone tried to have me killed? And what’s worse for me is that Jessie is close to it. I’ve always feared that my family would threaten my happiness, but I was very worried when—“ he blew out his breath. “But Jessie has a way of making me forget that. She always tells me that I’m worth the risk. How can I say no to her, Hannah? She means everything to me.” He sighed. “That’s my one weakness, I guess. I just can’t say no to her, ever. If I think it makes her happy, I can’t say no.” He chuckled ruefully. “I guess I’ll have to join Whipped Husbands Anonymous when we get married.”

Hannah actually laughed. “I’d rather you said no to her about this, Kit. I won’t lie about that. You’re too young and you haven’t known each other long enough to get married. It’s doomed to fail. I’m a little worried now

even over that because of what you told me, but if you believe you can keep Jessie safe, well, I'll have to trust you on it."

Kit gave her a surprised look. "I thought you'd be a little more, well, vocal about it."

"I have to face the truth, Kit," she sighed. "You're going to get married, and if I try to stop it, I'll lose my daughter. She's very stubborn, and if she pushes me away, it'll take me years to get back to where she'll talk to me. All I can do is make it clear I object to this, then wait and watch."

"I'd rather you do more than that," Kit said simply. "I don't want you to feel that you're not part of our lives. You are. I don't want you to feel like I'm stealing your daughter. I don't want you to vanish after the wedding. I want you to visit, I want to visit you. I want to find out what a *real* family is like, not that insane mess that I thought was a family up in Boston."

"Well, I appreciate that, Kit," she told him as he took another sip of tea. "I guess I can see fit to invite you to Christmas."

"Hmm," he mused. "We're getting married on Friday the eighteenth, that puts Christmas on Friday. I'm not getting much in the way of time off. Vil's letting us stay at her condo in Florida for the weekend after the ceremony for a honeymoon. I guess we can do what I did, fly up on Thursday night and fly back on Saturday morning. I think Rick'll let me come in late on Saturday."

"You're welcome to."

"Thanks. I'd really like to be here for Christmas. It'll be the first one I've looked forward to since I was nine."

“How do you mean?”

“After Mom died, Christmas didn’t really mean anything to me. Dad left us to Clancy and a procession of nannies, so there wasn’t anything to it but gifts, and well, I was a rich kid. I had everything already. We either spent Christmas alone or with an uncle or aunt, who just tried to buy our favor with gifts, then took us to formal parties where all they ever did was tell us to sit up straight and be quiet while the adults talked. Over the years, it became just another day,” he shrugged. “Then after I was disowned, there wasn’t anything to celebrate.”

Hannah was silent. He glanced at her, and saw that she had a pensive, distant look on her face. He wondered what she was thinking.

“How is the tea?” she finally asked.

“Not bad,” he replied. “When you start cooking, would you like some help? I know my way around a kitchen.”

“Oh no, I’ll have no males in here interfering with dinner!” she declared. “You can watch football with the rest of them!”

“Football eh?”

“Yes, the Bengals are playing today,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Oh yeah, John’s a Bengals fan,” Kit chuckled. “So, what’s on the menu?”

“Turkey, stuffing, green beans, mashed potatoes, potato salad, beets, salad, and pumpkin pie,” she answered. “If you’re hungry, we have cereal, eggs, bacon, sausage, and oatmeal.”

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to invade your kitchen a little,” he told her. “Jessie will be up soon, and I like to have a hot breakfast waiting for her.”

“Oh no, out!” she demanded, shooing him away. “This is *my* kitchen! What do you want?”

“I can cook it myself.”

“Not in my house you won’t!” she challenged.

Kit laughed. “Well, scrambled eggs, toast, and bacon then, please. Enough for two. Jessie never sleeps for long after I get up. I’ll make her tea.”

“I’d love to know how you got her hooked on tea,” Hannah chuckled.

“I guess cause it’s always there,” he shrugged as he made her a cup of Earl Grey. “I’m a tea junkie, Hannah. I drink it the way other people drink coffee. I’m glad she’s drinking it, it’s better for her than soda.”

Much as Kit predicted, Jessie came into the kitchen as Hannah was cooking her breakfast. She yawned, showing off her small yet sharp little canines, then leaned against him and kissed him on the cheek. “Mmmm, Morning,” she greeted. “Want some breakfast?”

“I’m cooking your breakfast right now,” Hannah told her. “Now out of my kitchen!”

“Here,” he said, handing her a cup of tea.

“Oooh, is this that fancy tea I bought for you? I wanted to try it,” she said as they evacuated the kitchen. They went into the living room, and as

John greeted his daughter, she sat down on the couch with him and tasted it. “Oh, this is good!” she declared, taking a bigger drink. “What kind is this?”

“Earl Grey,” Kit chuckled. “You didn’t even look at what you bought?”

She laughed. “I’d heard of it somewhere before, and when I saw the box, I thought you might like to try it. I thought it was some kind of brand, I didn’t realize it was flavored. It’s almost like those herbal teas.”

“Did you sleep well, Jessica?” John asked.

“Mmm,” she hummed with a nod. “For the first time since I got home. How’s your back, love?”

“I took some Tylenol, so it’s fine,” he answered. “I had a little talk with your mother, Jess. Why didn’t you tell her everything?”

She winced a little and set her cup down on the coffee table. “I couldn’t think of a way to break it to her without her going nuts,” she told him in an honest voice.

“Tell her what?” John asked.

As Jessie looked a little embarrassed, Kit explained the circumstances of him getting shot to him. He pulled no punches, but also made it clear that they were being well protected. “Vil has people watching over us at home, and she’s been taking Boston apart looking for whoever hired the hitman,” he concluded. “She knows the order came from Boston, but not *who*. I’m a little worried, and I’m sorry I brought this into my pretty kitty’s life, but there’s not much else I can really do.”

“Why didn’t you tell us this, Jessica?” John demanded.

“Because I thought you’d overreact,” she answered. “Vil has it all covered, and I’m not letting them scare me away from him. If we broke it off or I left him, it would just be letting them win. Well, I’m not going to let them win,” she stated bluntly, putting her paw on Kit’s knee. “Kit is worth the risk. I won’t let them break us up.”

“Well, that does explain one thing,” John chuckled, taking a drink of his coffee. “I was a little surprised you were so willing to stand up to your mother. Well, she’s not really all that scary compared to some other things, is she?”

Jessie giggled, leaning against Kit. “Not really,” she agreed. “I guess after nearly losing Kit, the idea of standing up to Mom didn’t seem all that intimidating.”

“I see,” he smiled.

Ben came downstairs, wearing nothing but a pair of shorts. Jessie’s brother was heavily built, but yet also sleek, the perfect physique for a running back. He was the perfect combination of power and agility, strength and speed. Ben had the body of a player who could fake a defender out of his shoes, then slam into the line and move it a good three yards before someone finally brought him down. “Morning,” he called. “Is mom making breakfast?”

“Not for lazyheads I’m not!” she shouted from the kitchen.

“Aww, come on, Mom, I’m a growing boy!”

“Well get in here and take out the trash, and I’ll think about putting something on for you,” she called.

“Sure,” he said, hurrying into the kitchen.

“Benjamin Franklin Williams!” she shouted in shock. “Go put some clothes on right now, young man! I’ll not have you gallivanting around this house all but naked when we have guests!”

“And so it goes,” John chuckled. “Jenny got a similar shout-down when she came down this morning.”

“Sheesh, it’s not like I’m wearing a G-string,” he protested as he came out of the kitchen.

“Ben!” Hannah snapped.

Ben did go up and get dressed, and Jenny came back down with him. Ben was wearing a tank top and sweatpants, and Jenny was wearing an Ohio State tee shirt and a pair of knee-length jeans. “Hey,” she called, flopping in the opposite couch. She picked up the remote and turned on the TV, and to his surprise, instead of turning it to MTV or something like that, she turned it to ESPN. “So, Kit, you a Bengals fan?” Jenny asked, which made John and Ben laugh.

“He’d better be or we’ll lynch him,” Ben said. “This is a Bengals house.”

“Afraid I’m a Patriots fan,” he admitted. “Growing up in Boston will do that to a guy.”

“Well, that’s a different division, so we’ll let you slide on that one,” John grinned. “If you were a Steelers or Browns fan, we might have had to do something to you.”

“Aren’t the Browns in your own state?”

“That just makes us hate them more,” John told him.

“And I thought Red Sox fans were the only ones that hated,” Kit laughed.

“Oh, were you in Boston when they finally won the World Series?” Ben asked.

Kit nodded. “The whole city seemed to shut down. I think they celebrated for weeks.”

Kit expected Ben to be into sports, but it blew him away that *Jenny* seemed to be the real sports nut in the family. She knew about every sport, and bantered with Kit over football, basketball, baseball, and even hockey, teasing him over the Boston Bruins’ inability to do much of anything for the last several years. Kit laughed when she said she was a Blackhawks fan. “You’re gonna make some guy very happy, Jenny, at least after he gets over being jealous that his wife knows more about sports than he does.”

“Blame him,” she said, pointing at her father. “He’s the one that dragged us to Bengal games wearing face paint.”

“You know, I’d have expected a little...more, from someone that into football,” Kit chuckled.

“You haven’t taken him downstairs?” Ben asked.

“I’m saving it for game time,” John said mildly.

“What’s downstairs?”

“You’ll see,” Ben laughed.

“Breakfast is ready,” Hannah called from the archway. “Come eat!”

Kit, Ben, and Jessie enjoyed breakfast in the dining room, as Hannah got after Jenny over something, and Kit got to know Ben. Ben was a very

large male, strong and powerful, but he was also very modest and down to earth, and friendly. He was also very, very smart, who wanted to major in accounting in college. “Accounting?” Kit asked with a surprised chuckle.

“Why not? I’ve always been good with numbers. I think I’ll be a good accountant!”

“You won’t have much time to do any accounting if you make it into the NFL.”

“Yeah, well, first I have to make it, and second, I have to get there without tearing myself up. When Dad realized I was serious about football, he warned me I shouldn’t put all my eggs in that basket, and he’s right. I’m always just one bad play away from never playing in college. I want to play football more than anything, but it’s a rough sport, and I’d better be ready if I get hurt or I don’t make the cut. I have to have a plan B.”

“I know that feeling,” he sighed. “I wanted to go into the Air Force and fly planes, but when I was hit by that car, that ended that.”

“I’m sorry to hear about that,” Ben said compassionately.

“Eh, it led me to Jessie, so I won’t complain all that much. And I did get a pilot’s license out of the deal too,” he chuckled.

“Hate to sound sadistic, but I’m almost glad you were hit by that car, love,” Jessie told him. “If not for that, we’d never have met.”

“I guess there’s a silver lining in anything,” Kit said sagely. “But you have the right idea, Ben. Always keep Plan B ready in case something bad happens.”

After breakfast, Kit sat and talked more with Jessie's family as a whole, just basic chitchat that let him get to know them, and them him. Jenny was the middle wild child, with a cheeky disposition and an almost mean-spirited enjoyment out of outraging and angering her mother. She was a sports nut, but she was also very, very smart, and talked often about maybe switching over to premed instead of nursing school, but lamenting that that was a heck of a lot of money for her parents to try to put up with Jessie also being in college. It was more interesting to watch their parents interact with them, though. Hannah was definitely the authoritarian between the two, the one to give them orders and call them down when she thought they were being impertinent. John was very mild-mannered and unassuming, but Kit didn't miss that everyone in the family hopped when he said jump, including Hannah. But belligerence wasn't John's style, so he just let things go as they went and only put a word in when they went in a direction he didn't like.

But they didn't sit around in conversation for long. Hannah got up and announced that she had to start on Thanksgiving dinner, and Jenny wandered off to the den to use the computer for a while. Kit and Jessie spent some time with Ben and John, as the two of them told quite a few stories about Jessie, more than one of them making Jessie's face ruffle in a blush. She gave out a plaintive "Daaaad!" when he offered to show Kit Jessie's baby pictures.

"I'd love to," Kit said immediately.

"Kit, those pictures are embarrassing!" Jessie protested.

"Seeing you as a baby is embarrassing how?"

“Dad always shows the picture of me with no clothes on,” she told him.

Kit looked her up and down in a way that made Ben laugh and Jessie’s cheeks ruffle. “And what *more* will I see in the picture that I haven’t already seen?” he asked directly.

“Kit!” Jessie said with a gasp.

Her indignation didn’t last long, though. John retrieved quite a few photo albums, and they spent nearly two hours going through them. Kit got to see hundreds of pictures of Jessie’s family, around the house, on vacations, pictures of relatives and friends, pictures of their hold house and cars, even pictures of John and Hannah from when they lived in Columbus.

“Who is this?” Kit asked as he held up the album and pointed to a very, very old poor quality photo of a male fox and a dark-furred female cat standing in front of a car that must have been on the road in the fifties.

“Oh, that’s Hannah’s father,” John told him. “I’m sure that Jessica told you she’s mixed.”

He nodded, looking at Jessie. “So that’s your grandfather?”

“Yeah,” Jessie nodded. “I never met him, though. He died before I was born.”

“Which of these are your parents, John?” he asked.

“Oh, this one right here,” he said, turning the page and pointing to a pair of older cats, the cream-furred male wearing a suit and the gray-furred female in a tan dress, standing in front of a window. “This was taken on the day of our wedding.”

“Where do they live?”

“My father passed away six years ago,” he replied. “My mother lives with my brother Jim in Florida.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Thank you. I have two other brothers and a sister. Sam lives in Seattle, Susan lives in Phoenix, and Bob still lives in Columbus.”

“Wow, your family spread out.”

“Well, Sam went into the Navy after high school, and settled in Seattle when he retired two years ago. Susan got married, and her husband got a job for IBM, and they moved to Phoenix. I didn’t go far from Columbus,” he chuckled, “and Jim moved to Florida after he retired from the phone company. He works part-time down there for a phone company, and his wife retired from working for a county 911 organization to take a job as a disaster preparedness consultant for hurricanes down there.”

“Sounds like you had a full house.”

“Not for long. I’m the baby of the family, three years younger than Susan,” he chuckled. “Sam left for the Navy when I was eleven, and by the time I was in high school, they were all out of the house.”

“Dad, it’s pregame time!” Jenny called from the den.

“Already? My, where does the time go? Let’s go down to the Bengal Den,” he grinned.

John’s Bengal Den was a football fan’s dream. It took up most of the basement, and Bengal memorabilia was *everywhere*. Bengal posters, Bengal colors painted on the walls, complete with the stripes, pictures of Bengal

players, even a Bengal carpet under a pair of couches covered Bengal upholstery covers. Those couches faced a huge theater-style television, one of the biggest he'd ever seen, part of an entertainment center that took up the entire basement wall.

"Wow," Kit breathed, staring at it in wonder.

"Now *this* is suitable for watching a Bengals game," John said grandly, motioning at the TV with his paw. "It's not as good as being in the stadium, but it's good enough."

"This must have cost a fortune!" Kit marveled.

"I saved for it for two years," John chuckled as Jenny and Ben took seats, and Jenny turned on that mammoth TV. "It took a long time to talk Hannah into it, at least until I promised to buy a home theater to go along with the TV so she can watch movies."

"It's great for watching porn," Jenny noted with a wicked grin at her father. "They can hear the femmes screaming 'yes!' all the way down on Wilkerson Street."

"That'll do, young lady," John said coolly.

"Jennifer! Jessica! Come up here!" Hannah called from the top of the stairs.

"Oh, here we go," Jenny sighed. "Now comes the cooking lessons."

"I wouldn't mind a few," Kit chuckled.

"Then I'll pass them down when we get home," Jessie winked as she got up.

“She lets you guys off easy, doesn’t she,” Kit mused as the two femmes went upstairs.

“No, we’ll have to do the cleanup after dinner,” Ben chuckled.

“It’s only fair,” Kit shrugged.

Kit was initiated into a Williams family ritual...football. They watched as the Cincinnati Bengals played the Detroit Lions in the first game of the Thanksgiving double-header, and Kit was submerged under an avalanche of enthusiasm and statistics. John knew every member of the team by name and number, and he spouted statistics and predictions throughout the game, yelling and screaming like he was in the stands with thousands of other fans. It was almost funny to see that small, slim, unassuming cat transform into this screaming wildfur, cheering his team on to ultimate victory.

Kit guessed everyone had a secret side to themselves that only came out in certain circumstances.

Hannah seemed to time dinner with the end of the game, for it was on the table and ready when it was over. They went upstairs and enjoyed one of the best meals Kit had ever eaten, paws down. Hannah was a fantastic cook, and she’d done herself proud with that meal. The turkey was cooked to perfection, the dressing was sumptuous, the beets delightful. Hannah blended spices in with the mashed potatoes, which made them taste exceptional, and when he was stuffed, she put a home-made from scratch pumpkin pie in front of them, and it was *unbelievable*. He stuffed himself so full he could barely move, and he wasn’t the only one.

“Oh my, you’ve outdone yourself this time, dear,” John said in sated satisfaction, patting his belly with both paws.

“Thank you, dear,” she said with a smile and a nod.

“You should try to impress Kit more often,” Jenny teased, then got up and hurried out of the dining room before Hannah could respond.

“We did our part, gentlefurs,” Hannah announced as she got up. “Now it’s your turn.”

“I hope you tivo’d the game for me, Dad!” Jenny called from the living room.

“Of course I did, silly!” John called back as he stood up. “Alright boys, let’s clean up.”

After the dishes were done and the dining room and kitchen were cleaned, Hannah quite deliberately came and got Kit, and took him into the den. She sat on the computer chair, he sat on a nearby ratty old recliner, and they talked. They talked for over three hours, as Hannah grilled him over everything he’d ever written in his letters, over and over, testing him, pressing him, trying to find out what he thought, what he felt. Kit had expected this, and he answered her honestly and completely. Everything he’d written in those letters was the truth, and that truth shone through as she heard in his voice the same emotion and information he’d conveyed through his letters. He watched her as he answered her questions, watched her eyes. He could see conflict there, and was starting to feel hopeful that he was changing her mind. Hannah’s good opinion of him mattered to him, because she was going to be his mother-in-law, and he also wanted to get to know someone like her and not feel like there was hostility between them.

After those three hours, he just couldn’t resist trying to breach the subject with her anymore. “I have a confession to make, Hannah,” he told her after she asked him for what had to be the tenth time about his plans to

buy a house in Austin. He hoped to buy one, but that was going to take a while.

“What is that?”

“Well, I’d have to apologize for Jessie, really. She let something slip to me about you.”

“Let me guess,” she said, leaning back in her chair. “My past?”

“Some of it,” he admitted. “Remember that I’m a history major, so I was able to work the rest of it out myself. I learned about you in college, Hannah. I just couldn’t leave without telling you that. I promised you I’d be honest, and I couldn’t in good faith leave without being honest about that.”

“Well, I appreciate that,” she told him. “Is that why you’ve worked so hard to be nice to me? Because of who I am?”

“Well, it was more along the lines of I could understand your position a little better after I found out,” he answered. “It explained a great deal to me. I realized that where you came from was one of the big reasons why you’re so protective over Jessie, and I saw that I couldn’t really hate you for it.”

She gave him a long, searching look. “And you think I’m that transparent?” she asked pointedly, with a touch of hostility in her voice.

“No! Not at all,” he said quickly. “It’s just—well, hell. I knew I’d mess this up,” he sighed. “When I first heard about you from Jessie, I thought you were a little crazy,” he admitted. “Especially after you called the cops on Jessie because she wouldn’t talk to you on the phone.”

Hannah actually looked a little sheepish when he brought that up.

“But then, after Jessie accidentally told me who you were, I realized that everything you do has a reason,” he continued. “It wasn’t because you were crazy, it was because you had some pretty unpleasant things happen to you, and you just wanted to make sure that what happened to you didn’t happen to her. Once I saw that, well, I couldn’t really be angry with you. I just saw that I had to show you that I’m on *your* side. So I started writing you the letters, to show you who I am, prove that I’m not who you think I am. I don’t want to be on your bad side, Hannah,” he told her sincerely. “Not only because it will make Jessie unhappy, but because I think you’ve suffered enough.

“I know that I’m not the best choice you’d have made for a husband for Jessie, because of my past and my family, and the fact that my family makes any femme who goes out with me a possible target for the press, for my family, and embroils her in my own problems. That’s the last thing I want to have happen, but it’s something I can’t control, and for that much I apologize. But despite that, I just can’t help myself, Hannah. I love Jessie. I love her so much I didn’t think it was possible. When I first met her, I was afraid of my family, that they’d make trouble for me because I was going out with someone they didn’t approve of, but I overcame that fear enough to ask her out, and to make something of myself so she wouldn’t be embarrassed to be seen in public with me. Then, after we started falling in love, Jessie saw my fear and got me over it, got me to the point where I was willing to risk the wrath of my family to live my own life and go after the most beautiful femme in the world. I won’t give up on Jessie, don’t even ask me to do that, but all I can say is I understand why you object, and I’ll do my best to make sure I make her happy and ensure she *never* experiences the kinds of things that *we* did when we were kids.”

Hannah was silent for a *long* time. All Kit could do was sit there and wait for her to respond, his heart pounding in his chest the whole time. He'd just been as honest as he could have possibly been. He just told her everything, what he knew, why he wrote the letters, and admitted that keeping Jessie away from his problems may be impossible...but he had to be honest. She deserved to know the full, unclouded truth, and part of that truth was based on what he knew of her.

"I think I need some coffee," she said finally. Kit wasn't quite sure what to make of that; it was the second time she'd answered his honesty with a non-sequitor, dodging giving him an honest answer. "Why don't you go watch some TV? I'll bring out some ice cream for everyone."

Kit was being dismissed, but he was completely confused. Hannah gave no indication what she was thinking or what she had to say about his honesty. He wandered out into the living room and found only John there, who sent him down to the basement. Jessie and Jenny were watching a movie on the huge TV. Jessie patted the couch beside her, and he sat down and leaned far back, putting his paws on his face.

"Wow, she really gave you the third degree, didn't she?" Jenny asked.

"I felt like a prisoner of war," he said sourly, which made Jenny laugh.

"My poor handsome fox," Jessie said compassionately, pulling on him until he was laying with his head in her lap. She tousled and played with his hair as he tried to relax. "What happened?"

"She kept questioning me," he said. "I told her everything she wanted to know, and then she just left all the sudden without giving me any kind of indication of what she thought about it."

“Mom’s like that,” Jenny told him. “If she doesn’t want to answer you, or you’re winning the argument, she just hangs up on you or kicks you out or something like that. So, if she kicked you out, I think you scored some points on her,” Jenny grinned. “I’m glad. My sis found herself a cute guy, so I won’t mind looking at your wedding pictures at all.”

“Jenny, you’re talking about *my fiancée*,” Jessie warned.

“Hey, I can look as long as I don’t touch,” she said with a grin.

“Are you sure you’re from the same family?” Kit asked her.

Jenny laughed. “I know, we’re nothing alike, are we?” she said with a grin. “Jessie’s all shy and traditional and modest and crap, while I’m a proper child of the new millennium. Not a throwback to the fifties like her.”

“Jenny!” Jessie protested.

“No, you’re a throwback to an earlier time, *Ophelia*,” Kit said casually.

Jenny growled in her throat, then picked up a Bengals pillow and threw it at him. He just held out a paw and intercepted it, causing it to bounce off his paw and land on the coffee table. Jessie laughed, patting Kit on the shoulder.

“You’re one to talk, *Desdemona*!” Jenny challenged, then she crossed her arms and looked away pointedly. That made Kit laugh. “Sometimes I think I wanna beat Dad with a golf club for giving us those names.”

“At least he gave you different names. Every male in my entire family is named Kitstrom Vulpan,” Kit told her. “Uncles, cousins, all of them. The only things that are different are our middle names.”

Jenny laughed. "I bet that would been fun if you had cousins in your classes," she told him.

"I did. I went to private schools til I was sixteen," he related. "Four of my cousins were the same class as me, since I started school a year early and one of them started a year late."

"Ahh, that explains the math."

"Huh?"

"Well, Jessie told us all about you," she explained. "I couldn't figure out how you graduated at twenty-two when you lost an entire semester when you were hit by the car."

"I started college when I was seventeen," he answered. "And virtually all of my hours from my first major transferred to history when I changed, so I didn't lose a semester taking filler classes to satisfy the new major. I was able to focus on all my major requirement courses in my last year and graduate on time. I was taking seven and eight classes a semester in my last year, but I did it," he chuckled.

"I know that feeling. I take six classes a semester so I can graduate in four years. I'm still trying to decide if I want to go nursing or premed."

"Aren't you in nursing school?"

She nodded. "But all the classes I'm taking right now are for *both*," she said. "I figured I'd get the common ones done, so if I do decide to switch, I don't lose anything."

"Clever," Kit nodded in approval. "Why don't you go premed?"

“Cause it’s expensive,” she frowned. “And our folks are already putting Jessie through college. I don’t think they could afford it if I wanted to go premed. Hell, I stayed in state so they didn’t have to pay so much in tuition.”

“That sounded like a dig, Jenny,” Jessie said primly.

“A little one,” she grinned, holding up her thumb and finger a little apart. “But I don’t blame you for bolting, sissy, not one bit. Besides, with you in Texas, it keeps Momzilla too busy worrying about you to make my life hell,” she added with a grin.

“Sissy?” Kit asked mildly, looking up at Jessie from her lap.

She looked down at him, her cheeks ruffling a little. “That’s what we call each other,” she explained. “Ever since we were both little girls.”

“Hmm, so, I can call you a sissy, eh?”

“Jenny,” Jessie said, pointing. Jenny laughed, grabbed the pillow, then threw it to Jessie, who then used it to beat Kit about the head and shoulders. Kit laughed helplessly as he tried to protect himself with his paws and arms, until he ended up on his stomach with his face buried into the couch, arms over his head. Kit was laughing so hard he could barely breathe, kicking his feet against the end of the couch.

“Holy—“ Jenny’s voice called, then he felt strong paws come down on his lower back. He could tell almost immediately that they weren’t Jessie’s paws, he knew her touch as surely as he knew his own. Jessie stopped hitting him with the pillow, and he uncovered his head and looked back over his shoulder. Jenny was standing over them, leaning down, her paws on his bare back, bare from where he’d scooted down off Jessie’s lap and

made his shirt ride up to expose his scars. “Why are they all white?” she asked, a finger tracing the scars in a manner similar to the way Jessie did it, just not as gently.

“The docs aren’t sure exactly,” he answered. “One of them thinks I had some kind of reaction to the cauterizing scalpel they used when they did the surgeries. Whatever it was, it made my fur grow back in white where they cut into me. Thank God that didn’t happen when they operated on my shoulder after I was shot. I have enough identifying marks as it is,” he said with a rueful chuckle.

“Yeah, that ear’s a dead giveaway,” Jenny agreed as her fingers probed his back boldly. “They put a screw in here, didn’t they?”

“Two,” he nodded. “They’re still in there. I have to carry around a medical waiver with me when I get on planes,” he told her.

“I can feel one of them,” she told him, tapping his spine. “Right here.”

“That’s about where one of them is,” he nodded. “From what I was told, the other one’s on the other side.”

“Strange that they left them in there.”

“The doctors felt leaving them in was best,” he said.

“Does it ever hurt?”

“Only when I sleep the wrong way, or when I’m hit in the back the wrong way,” he answered. “I don’t have any pain outside of that.”

“Well, that’s good,” Jenny said, her paws pushing into his back slightly.

“Uh, Jenny. Wanna get your paws off my fiancée now?” Jessie asked in a slightly dangerous tone.

Jenny laughed, removing her paws. “I never took you for the jealous type, sissy,” she grinned.

“I have good reason to be jealous. Males like him are once in a lifetime,” she said with simple elegance. “I’m not about to let him get away from me.”

“You’re assuming I want to be stolen, pretty kitty,” Kit laughed, wriggling up to a sitting position and kissing her on the cheek. “Why would I even look at another femme when they can’t hold a candle to what I already have?”

“Oooh, I’ve been dissed,” Jenny laughed. “Don’t I get some sister points here? We do look a little alike.”

“I’ll take the original, thank you,” Kit said, putting his arm around Jessie. That made Jessie laugh, and Jenny give him a scowl. Then she flipped him off, which made Jessie laugh harder.

“Jennifer!” Hannah said hotly as she came down the stairs. “That’s no way to behave! Now apologize this instant!”

“Nah, I deserved it, Hannah,” Kit laughed. “I was being a jerk.”

“That’s beside the point. A lady does not act so crudely! There are other ways to punish males for being cheeky,” she added. Jenny gave her a surprised look, then laughed.

“Well, Jessie’s favorite method of punishment is beating on me with pillows,” Kit said with a grin at her.

“It gets the job done,” she said without a bit of embarrassment.

“I have some ice cream upstairs if you want it,” Hannah told them.
“And you need to think of getting some rest, Kit. John told me your flight leaves at five in the morning. You’ll have to be there in the dead of night.”

“Yeah,” he said with a grunt. “I have to be there two hours before the flight leaves. I hope you have all-night taxi service here.”

“John’s already turned in, he’s going to take you,” Hannah informed him.

“He doesn’t have to do that,” he said. “I can take a cab.”

“We wouldn’t hear of that,” she said brusquely. “Now go on upstairs, so I can tidy up down here.”

Ben was upstairs at the dining room table, eating a bowl of chocolate ice cream. “Hey,” he called as they came in.

“How was your workout?” Jenny asked.

“Freakin’ cold,” he grunted. “I hate running in the snow.”

“How far did you run?” Kit asked curiously.

“I run til I can’t go on,” he replied. “I’m up to about twelve miles. My coach really pushes endurance. He says if I can hit the hole in the fourth quarter just as hard and strong as I can in the first, I’ll really grind out some yardage. I think he’s right.”

“That’s a long walk back once you stop,” Kit chuckled.

“I run at school, and it’s only four blocks from here,” he said. “I have a key to the gate to the football field, the track, and the weight room.”

“Ah. Sounds like they trust you guys.”

“Not all of them,” Ben laughed. “Only two of us have keys and the alarm code to the weight room. We’re the ones coach thinks will make it to college, so he goes out of his way for us. He’s a cool wolf.”

“Well, at least you’re well on your way.”

“I hope so. Here,” he said, holding out a bowl of chocolate ice cream to him.

“Thanks. What kind is this?”

“Breyers,” Ben answered. “It’s the best.”

“Well, I’m partial to Ben and Jerry’s myself,” Kit chuckled.

“It’s really expensive.”

“Not in Boston,” Kit told him as Jenny and Jessie sat down and took up their own bowls. “They make it up in New England, so it’s cheaper up there.”

Breyers wasn’t bad, Kit decided. They sat around eating ice cream and just chatting, feeling more comfortable since they were all close together in age, and Kit had a pretty good time. He really liked Jessie’s family. They were kind, caring, funny, intelligent, and were very open with him...well, everyone but Hannah. They’d seemed to have been genuinely interested in getting to know him, and he enjoyed learning about them. A glance at the clock showed him that it was nearly eight, and since he had to be at the airport at three in the morning, he was looking at a very short sleep if he didn’t go to bed soon. “I hate to say it, but I have to think of getting a shower, and getting some sleep,” Kit told them, picking up his bowl and

standing up. “I have to be up at two if I want to make it to the airport on time.”

“Damn, why so early?” Ben asked.

“Because I have to go to work tomorrow,” he said.

“Ah. Well, it was really cool to meet you, Kit. I had fun today,” Ben said, standing up and offering his paw.

“Yeah, me too. You guys are great,” he said. “Jessie’s lucky to have such a cool family.”

“We’ll be in your territory next time,” Jenny told him with a laugh, giving him a hug instead of shaking his paw, which earned her a dark look from her sister. “We’ll all be at the wedding.”

“I’ll be glad to have you there,” he said honestly. “You’ll get to meet our friends and check out our old, run-down apartment,” he chuckled. “God, Marty’s gonna *love* you,” he laughed.

Jessie exploded into laughter. “Who’s Marty?” Jenny asked.

“One of the guys I work with. He’s...interesting,” he said carefully.

“Cute?”

“Well, he’s cute in a way, but let’s say that you’re not his type,” Kit said.

“Ah, he’s gay?”

Kit nodded with a chuckle. “He’s a riot, though. He’s a great guy, you’ll really like him.”

“Most girls like gay guys. They relate to us better than straight guys,” Jenny said with a grin.

“Hey, you mind if I drop you a line here and there?” Ben asked.

“Not at all. Hannah has my phone number, and knows the email address at my job. Feel free to call or write whenever you want.”

“I think I’ll do that,” Ben promised.

“I’ll be up in a few minutes, love,” Jessie told him.

“You don’t have to go to bed this early.”

“I do if I want to go with you to the airport tomorrow,” she told him.
“And not fall asleep in the car.”

“And maybe do some other things,” Jenny hinted with a grin.

“Mmmmmaybe,” Jessie hummed, giving her sister a calm look, which made Jenny burst into laughter.

“I don’t think I’m old enough for this conversation,” Ben said as he walked into the kitchen, which made all three of them laugh.

Kit couldn’t go to bed without saying goodnight. He went back down to the basement, where Hannah was cleaning the coffee table. “Hannah, I’m going to go ahead and get a shower, then head to bed,” he told her from the stairs. “I just wanted to thank you for inviting me. I really enjoyed myself.”

“Well, I’m glad you did,” she told him, putting a pillow down and coming over to him at the stairs. “I’ll probably not make it up in time to see you off, so I’ll say my goodbyes now.”

Then, to his surprise, she put her paw on his shoulder, leaned over, and kissed him on the cheek. “Have a good night, Kit,” she told him. “And a good flight home.”

“Uh, thanks, Hannah. Have a good night.”

If Kit thought he was confused before, he was *really* confused now... but also a little hopeful. She hadn’t been hostile. She hadn’t been cold or distant. She’d at least made an attempt to be cordial, and he hoped that maybe, just maybe, she wasn’t seeing him as the enemy.

He indulged in a quick shower, and partook in the full body dryer that they had in their bathroom, a single side unit that was built into the wall next to the tub. After remembering what it was like to leave a bathroom with dry fur, he definitely put a portable dryer on the list of things to buy Jessie for Christmas. His hair was still a touch damp when he returned to Jessie’s room, and she came in while he was sitting on the bed. “Do you know what your mother did when I went to go say goodnight?” he asked.

“What?”

“She *kissed* me,” he declared.

“She didn’t!”

“It wasn’t a *kiss* kiss,” he told her. “It was just a peck on the cheek. But still, that floored me. I never saw it coming!”

Jessie laughed, then threw her arms around him and hugged him exuberantly. “I’m so proud of you, my handsome fox!” she squealed.

“What?”

“Mom *likes* you!” she said. “She’d never kiss someone she hates!”

“Well, like or not, she’s still against the wedding,” he told her cautioningly.

“Well, yeah, but at least now it’s not because she hates you,” she told him, letting go of him and pulling her tee shirt off. “Unhook me please,” she said, turning around. He unhooked her bra for her, and she pulled it off and took it and her shirt over to the hamper and dropped them in. “Did you pack yet?”

“Nah, but it’ll take all of five minutes,” he said.

“I’ll help you,” she said, coming over and taking clean underwear and a shirt out of his carry-on and setting them on the desk, then collecting up his other clothes and began folding them to put them back in. He was staring at her, and she glanced at him curiously as she stuffed the shirt he’d been wearing into the bag. “What?”

“You’re sexy when you’re doing housework topless,” he said with a grin.

She laughed. “Sometimes I forget I’m not wearing clothes around you, my handsome fox,” she winked.

“I sure as hell don’t mind,” he said with sincerity as she packed his cell phone and laptop into his carry-on. “Think you can sweeten the view a little?”

She laughed brightly as she finished, then came over and leaned over in front of him, but didn’t give him a chance to ogle her. She kissed him lightly, mischievously, then put a finger under his chin to keep him from looking down at her. “I thought you said we had to behave,” she teased.

“I can look,” he protested, reaching down and grabbing the waist of her jeans, reaching for the zipper and button, undoing them, then pushing them down, giving her a wicked little smile as he undressed her.

“You’re being mean to me, Kit,” she complained, but she was smiling.

“I’m being mean to both of us,” he chuckled as she stepped out of her jeans and panties and stood naked before him. “I just have to settle for what I can see until you get home on Sunday.”

“So do I,” she told him, pulling open his towel. They spent long moments, just looking at each other, not touching, then she reached out and put her paws on his shoulders, leaned down, and kissed him quite seriously.

There was a knock at the door, startling them. Kit frantically pulled his towel back around him, but Jessie had nothing within reach to use to cover herself, so she quickly jumped onto the bed and got behind him, using him as a cover...and not a moment too soon. The door opened, and Hannah looked in, no doubt seeing her naked daughter pressing her chest up against his back, Kit reasoned from that expression on her face. “Kit, you left your toothbrush in the bathroom,” she announced, holding it in her other paw.

“Oh...thanks, Hannah,” he said.

She gave him a long, searching look. “I’ll just put it on the desk,” she offered, coming in and crossing the room, setting it down. They watched her, Jessie keeping very tight against his back, then watched her go back across the room to the door. She stopped in the doorway and turned around to regard them one more time, her expression constrained, as if she was just itching to yell at them...but she didn’t. “I’d better not hear anything out of bounds coming out of this room,” she told them as she took hold of the door

and began to close it. “So you’d better keep the noise down,” she added, then she closed the door.

Jessie gasped, and Kit just laughed. “Am I crazy, or did your mother just give us permission?” Kit asked, looking over his shoulder at her.

“I, I’m not sure,” she said uncertainly. “It *sounded* like it, but she’d never do something like that! I think she was playing with us, or trying to bait us or something.”

“Well, it’s up to you. I’m the one leaving tomorrow, pretty kitty,” he chuckled. “You’re the one that’ll have to stay for two more days.”

Jessie was quiet a moment. “I...I don’t know. I thought about it, but that was just a femme’s fantasy. But my brother and sister are in the house too, and so are my parents,” she said, as Kit heard her modest side take control over her. Then she blew out her breath. “But it’s not like we wouldn’t be doing anything they don’t know we already do,” she purred, reaching down and undoing his towel.

“Oho, already giving up all the secrets of our sex life, eh?” he laughed as she kissed his neck.

“My sister is one of my best friends,” she said huskily in his ear, as if that was all the explanation she needed to give. “I’ve never tried being quiet before,” she murmured.

“Who’s in the room beside yours?”

“Sissy.”

“Well, at least it’s not your parents,” he said a little breathlessly, leaning against her as she kissed his neck.

Chapter 12

The darkness exploded into a million shards of shimmering light. Kit started and half-arose from the bed, blinking and squinting as he tried to get his bearings. For a brief moment, he had this wild notion that someone had broken into their apartment, that he'd forgotten to set the alarm, but then his aching back made him realize that he wasn't at home. He was still in Cincinnati, and it was quite literally the dead of night.

"Time to get up in here," John's voice called softly, but then again, after turning on the light, there wasn't much more that he had to do. Kit got his eyes to work and focused them on the dark-faced cat, and he saw that John was looking away politely as he closed the door. Kit blinked a few times to get his eyes adjusted to the light, then looked beside him and saw Jessie, laying on her back with her paws over her face, when they should have been covering something else with her father in the room.

"You realize you just flashed your father?" Kit asked conversationally.

"Mmph," Jessie grunted, then she took her paws off her ruffled face and laughed helplessly. "I think *you're* the one to blame for that. If you hadn't have sat up and pulled down the blanket, my pristine modesty would be inviolate."

"So, we're awake enough to throw around the big English teacher words, eh?" he asked. "Not like it's a big deal, he *is* your dad. He's seen you naked before. Just not quite so well developed."

Jessie whacked him with his own pillow.

“Now, before we have to get up, and I don’t get another chance to see this until Sunday,” he said, grabbing the blankets and pulling them all the way down. She laughed as he looked at her from toes to ears, quite methodically. “There. That should hold me over until Sunday,” he said with a grin.

“C’mere, you tease,” she giggled, hooking her claws in his shoulder and dragging him down into a playful kiss. Their playful mood was broken, however, when a loud knocking issued from the door.

“There’s no time for dawdling, kids,” John’s voice called. “There’s not even time for breakfast! Get dressed and let’s go!”

Kit looked at the clock on her nightstand and saw that it was 2:14am, which really was running a bit late. “Oh crap!” he gasped, jumping out of bed. “He isn’t joking, pretty kitty, we gotta go!”

Dressing was a quick affair. While Jessie threw on her clothes, Kit packed his carry-on, then sat down to pull on the winter shoes he’s bought just for this trip. “I’m gonna go see if I can’t sneak a cup of tea while you finish,” he told Jessie.

She nodded. “Try to sneak two. And there are some travel mugs in the cabinet over the microwave.”

Kit rushed down to the kitchen, but to his surprise, found Hannah there, handing John a cup of coffee. “Morning,” she said in a politely neutral voice. He had no doubt she knew what they did last night, and he could see that the veiled consent she gave last night wasn’t quite sitting so

well with her this morning. “I have some hot water boiling if you want tea, but you’ll have to be quick. John overslept.”

“We all did,” Kit said with a grunt. “Mind if I borrow one of your travel mugs?”

“Over the microwave,” she said with a point.

Kit pulled two down and poured water for tea, and was steeping the bags when Jessie rushed into the kitchen. “Dad’s putting your suitcase in the car,” she said. “It looks nasty outside, I hope you can get out.”

“Huh?”

“It’s snowing,” Hannah told him, pointing to the window over the sink. Kit handed Jessie her mug and went to look, and saw it coming down pretty hard through the light on the back porch.

“Bah,” Kit grunted.

“Let me go help Dad, odds are the car’s buried,” Jessie said after noticing the cool look Hannah was giving her, rushing into the laundry room and the back door, leaving Kit and Hannah alone in the kitchen.

“Thank you for last night,” Kit said honestly, leaning against the counter with a slight wince.

“Thank John, not me,” Hannah said abruptly. “I still object to this marriage, Kit, but John used some very frank language when we discussed...what goes on in your house. As much as I think you’re making a big mistake, I guess I can’t deny that you and Jessica are adults, and you’re in an *adult* relationship.” She sighed. “I had to admit to myself last night that I can’t keep you two separated, and if I try to treat Jessica like the

child she is instead of the adult she *thinks* she is, I might permanently damage our relationship. All I can do is stay back and let her learn from the mistake she's about to make."

"I think you'll be surprised about that, Hannah," he said mildly. "I've only known her for three months, but I know her better than I know myself. She's serious about this marriage."

"That's the only reason I'm going against my better judgment to fight it tooth and claw until my last breath," she said with calm honesty. "She *is* serious about it, and it's not just some crazy Jennifer-style stunt to kick sand in my face."

"Well, I'm glad you can at least admit to that," Kit chuckled. He came over to her, leaned over, and kissed her on the cheek.

"Hey now, you're not getting your paws on every girl in this house," John said with a chuckle as he came into the laundry room. "We can't wait for the car to warm up, Kit, we have to go. The roads aren't bad yet, but they're gonna be, so we have to get you there before it happens."

"Alright. Thank you again, Hannah. I had a great time."

"Well, remember, you're coming for Christmas."

"I'm looking forward to it," he said with a smile, picking up both mugs of tea.

Outside, he saw that there was already about two inches of new snow on the ground, and it was coming down hard and steady. "You want me to drive, John?" he asked. "I'm used to driving in this."

“Nah, we get enough snow around here for me to be in practice,” John chuckled as he opened the driver’s side door.

Kit got into the back, and Jessie pushed him down and got into the back with him. “Pretty kitty—“

“Hush. I’m about to send you home, I’m not spending what little time we have left with a car seat between us.”

“Just keep it PG rated back there, you two,” John laughed as he put on his seat belt. “Put your seat belts on, kids, no chances.”

“Are you saying you’re a bad driver, John?” Kit laughed as he did as he was told.

“You’ve never driven in Cincinnati, I see,” John said without much humor.

“People here drive like maniacs,” Jessie told him. “I’ll bet you five dollars we’ll see some guy in a four wheel drive doing seventy down interstate.”

“Ah, so you have a lot of Nascar wannabes around here?”

John chuckled. “No, just people who *think* they know how to drive, mixed in with people who think that driving on snow is the same as driving in white rain.”

“Say no more,” Kit chuckled.

Jessie’s prediction turned out to be true. When they got to the interstate, they were passed by several cars that were going entirely too fast, even despite the fact that the interstate had been plowed and salted. What they didn’t take into account was that salting may clear a road, but as more

snow fell on it without cars traveling over it, eventually the salt diluted down and stopped melting the snow. But, thankfully, John was quite content to plod along in the slow lane at a reasonable and safe rate of speed, allowing others to be the ones to gamble with their lives.

John got them to the airport safely and securely, after they passed three separate incidents of car crashes or cars spun out and either sitting against guardrails or halfway down embankments, the attrition of fools who didn't understand that snow was slippery. Despite it being somewhere close to three in the morning, there were quite a few cars in the short-term parking lot, and the terminal was quite busy. The first thing they did was check the board that showed arrivals and departures, and there were quite a few "Delayed" in both columns. Kit's own flight was showing that it was still leaving on time, however. Jessie held his paw as he checked in at the counter, and walked snuggled under his arm as they meandered through other sleepy people towards the security gate. When they got there, he gave her a long, lingering kiss as John hovered nearby. "Well, pretty kitty, I'm afraid this is where we say goodbye," he told her, then he shook John's paw. "It was a wonderful visit, John, thanks for having me," he said.

"We enjoyed having you," he smiled in reply.

Jessie, however, wasn't quite ready to give him up. She kissed him again, deeply, passionately, and he had to grab onto her just to keep his knees from unlocking on him. John chuckled as she basically conquered him, and left him breathless, his paws on her shoulders basically for support as she giggled and nuzzled his cheek. "Now that was a proper goodbye kiss."

"Who are you, and what have you done with my daughter?" John asked teasingly. "I'd never have believed to see my shy little Jessica kissing

in public.”

Jessica’s cheeks ruffled when she looked around, then she laughed. “Well, I’d better get used to the idea, we have to kiss at the ceremony.”

“Just don’t kiss me like *that*, or Rick’ll have to help me off the dais,” Kit said, still breathless, but stable enough to let go of her. He shouldered his carry-on, leaned down and kissed Jessica once more on the cheek, which made her laugh. “I’ll call you when I get in,” he promised.

“I’ll be waiting,” she said. She blew him a kiss as he stepped away, and he waved to them as he passed into the security checkpoint and got in line.

Despite the snow, it didn’t dramatically affect his own flight. By the time he was through security, the airport crews were already hard at work attacking the snow on the taxiways and runway, and the “Delayed” signs on the boards began to disappear. When he reached his gate about an hour before the flight, the attendant assured him that their own delay wouldn’t be very long. Kit passed the time reading a newspaper to keep himself from dwelling too much on another stretch of separation from Jessie. At least this stretch would only be basically two days without her, and he had to work for both of them. That would keep him distracted enough. He had a good feeling that it meant that things would go smoothly until Sunday.

He really needed to learn to ignore those feelings.

It started at the gate. He was in line to board the plane, and to his surprise, he recognized someone rushing towards the gate, a short, slender bear femme whom he knew for a fact was a reporter from CNN. She got in the end of the boarding line, and Kit didn’t think much more about it until she stopped in front of his seat.

“No comment,” he said absently as he turned his *USA Today* to the sports section.

“That’s nice and all, but can you move so I can get to my seat?” she asked.

Kit glanced up and saw her putting her bag in the overhead, then waiting by his legs. *Bloody hell, that’s one dirty trick of a way to get an interview*, he thought to himself darkly. She must have found out he was on the flight, and somehow got the seat beside his! He pulled in and she inched by him, and she got in the seat beside him and buckled her seat belt. “I’m surprised you recognize me. Almost no one does,” she chuckled. “I’ve only been working there for a year.”

“Right,” he said dryly, going back to his paper. “Just remember what I said.”

She looked at him, he could see out of the corner of his eye, then she looked at him again, more closely. More to the point, she was looking at his ear, that distinctive left ear of his, then she laughed delightedly. “No wonder!” she said, laughing again. “Well, this is just dumb luck!” she said.

“Sure it is,” he muttered darkly.

“Sure is,” she chuckled. “My folks live in Cincinnati, but I’m being sent to Austin to cover a story. I have an interview with an anthropology professor at the university, then I fly to Alaska on Saturday to finish up the story.” She grinned at him. “I had no idea you were on the flight. I don’t cover furs, Mister Vulpan, I cover science. If you know who I am, then you should know that. I’m a science correspondent, remember?”

Kit considered it a moment, and finally nodded. “So you are.”

“But, I can do another interview,” she grinned.

“No.”

“Well, I had to try,” she laughed.

Her name was Lisa Gilmore, and she was an outgoing, chatty femme who just talked away. Kit basically tuned her out, not getting involved with her for fear she would try to use it as a stealth interview. She did seem to honor his personal space, though, for when the plane pulled out of the gate and it was clear the window seat was vacant, she jumped over to it to put an empty seat between them. Once they were airborne—after only forty-five minutes delay due to the snow—she slid past him again and got her laptop, and happily sat by the window clicking away on it.

“Here, let me show you what I’m working on,” she invited, turning the laptop on the tray so he could see. He glanced over, and he saw a picture of old, very unusual bones, half-buried in ice. “This is my story.”

“Bones?”

“Look at the skull in this picture,” she said, bringing up a very weird, flat-faced skull unlike anything he’d ever seen before. It had a heavy forehead and a sloping face, with no muzzle, no maw, and no lower jawbone. Everything else looked strangely close to a fur, though. “Isn’t that cool?”

“What breed is it?”

“Well, it’s not any breed,” she said with a grin. “It’s a skull from the extinct simean family scientists have never seen before, found in a glacier in Alaska,” she said. “They haven’t dated it, but since it *was* in that glacier, that means it can’t be any older than the glacier itself, tens of thousands of

years minimum,” she said in a distracted yet excited tone. “All the paleontologists say all branches of the simean species all died out hundreds of thousands of years ago, with *homo erectus* being the last known surviving species of them, but this skull can’t be more than thirty thousand years old,” she said excitedly. “If that’s true, then there were descendents of the simean lines still on earth during the Ice Age.”

“So, maybe it was some isolated little pocket.”

“That survived for hundreds of thousands of years? I don’t think so,” she said, clicking her teeth together. “The scientist I’m going to interview has a theory that the *homo* branch of the simians actually survived up to the end of the ice age, but we just haven’t found any of their fossils yet because there were so few of them,” she noted. “He thinks that competition with the early furs, the *animus proteus*, basically drove them to the edges of the earth.”

“Possible,” Kit shrugged. “Wait a minute. Proteus? He thinks there was only *one* species of fur?”

“Yup,” she nodded.

“But—“

“That’s where it gets complicated,” she winked. “He thinks the original species spawned all the breeds we know today, just like the proto-apes spawned the extinct branches of the *homo* family.”

“He’s not going to get many fans with a theory like that,” Kit noted simply.

“It sounds a little outlandish, but it does make a kind of sense if you’re familiar with paleontology,” she said. “There’s a geological boundary in the

rock history called the Ash Event. It's a layer of thin ash in the rock and soil layers from three hundred thousand years ago. but it's found all over the world, and it's a similar event to the KT boundary in the prehistoric era. The ash boundary marks a mass extinction just like the KT did, where about thirty percent of all species on Earth died out quickly, but where the KT boundary marks the end of the dinosaurs, this scientist thinks the ash boundary was the event that killed off the simians."

"What, a meteor?"

"No, volcanoes," she told him. "This kind of ash is from a volcano. He thinks a super-volcano erupted and choked the entire world in ash, and that event was a trigger that killed off the simians and gave the *animus proteus* room to evolve without competition. His theory is that the simians *didn't* die out in the ash event, but it did cut their numbers down to the point where the *animus proteus* had less competition and was able to dominate," she explained. "It's already been proved that the earliest fur fossils are in Africa. But there are furs on every continent but Antarctica. So...how did they get there?"

"They all evolved," he said, an answer right out of any textbook on the matter. "Evolved from the animals that are still there. If you buy into the science aspect. As a Catholic, I was raised to believe that God simply put us here, but I'm not quite as Catholic as they'd like. I go for the *intelligent design* idea, that evolution is real, but it was guided by the hand of God."

"Really? Then where are the American *smilodon* furs? The giant sloth furs? The three-toed horse furs? Why are there no furs of any animal that's extinct in the Americas and Australia? If we evolved from animals all over the world at the same time, then why didn't the intelligent fur live beyond the species that spawned it?"

Kit opened his mouth, but nothing came out. She had a point.

“This scientist’s theory is that the *animus proteus* spread out from Africa, and contact with the proteus triggered the evolution of all the different breeds, somehow. Even he admits he can’t figure that part out, but he has enough circumstantial data to at least back up his theory. According to his theory, that’s why there are cave bear furs from Europe, while the cave bear itself is extinct, but there are no extinct American furs. He thinks the proteus crossed over into the Americas much later than it spread through Europe, Asia, and Australia, maybe as early as twenty thousand years ago. And since there were no furs here, he thinks that the few simians that survived the ash event and managed to get here first managed to build their numbers up before the proteus fur arrived to compete with them.”

“Well, there’s a hole in that. If there was this protean fur only thirty thousand years ago, where is it *now*?”

“He thinks it died out in the ice age,” she answered.

“Okay, if the protean fur came over thirty thousand years ago, why is there documented evidence that there were furs in America way earlier than that?”

“Ah, he thinks that what we thought was evidence of prehistoric furs in the Americas was *actually* this simean race,” she told him. “The bones they’ve found have all been just pieces, shards, they’ve never managed to build even half a skeleton. And there’s just enough skeletal similarities that Doctor Browning thinks that we’ve mistaken prehistoric furs for this extinct simean race.”

“I think it’s reaching a bit.”

“Yeah, well, it’s an interesting angle that does put a different light on this discovery,” she said. “We’ve always wondered if we’re alone in the universe, if we’re the only sentient life...well, there *was* non-fur intelligence on Earth, it was just a very long time ago. They found tools with the skeleton, stone tools , proving that this creature was intelligent.”

“Okay, now that I’ll buy,” he said. “But that whole to-do about a protean fur, that’s a little too outrageous to take seriously.”

“It is a bit reaching, but there’s a hint of truth about it that tickles at me, and most other paleontologists can’t easily explain away,” she mused. “The earliest documented fur fossils are in Africa, then they spread out from there in a chronological fashion. If you put all the data of where they were found and when they were dated, it shows the spread distinctly. That part of his theory is actually someone else’s theory, that we originated from one point and then spread out, but that theory doesn’t explain why there are so many different breeds of fur. After all, if all furs originated from Africa, then why aren’t we *all* African breed furs? I don’t think there are any bears in Africa,” she grinned. “But there are foxes, just not red ones. Ever met a fennec fox fur? Their ears are *huge*!” she laughed. “But think about that. You’re a British fox. How did your ancestors become a British fox if we all came from Africa?”

“I have no idea.”

“It’s just one of the many mysteries of our species,” she said with a bright smile. “Where we came from, why different breeds can intermarry and produce mixed breeds when the animals we evolved from can’t do the same, why the animals we evolved from didn’t evolve with us and are still here, and so on and so on. That’s why so many still believe in the religious

explanation...we're here because God did it. If you don't put faith in something, somewhere, it just doesn't make sense."

"Remind me not to become a paleontologist. They sound like their entire careers are exercises in frustration."

She laughed. "They're the most determined furs on Earth," she grinned. "They know there's an answer, and they're willing to dig for it for their entire lives."

"They can have it," he shrugged.

"You mind if I ask a question, completely off the record?" she ventured.

"As long as it doesn't keep leading to another one."

"Nah, this is just for my own curiosity. Someone leaked a bunch of stuff about the trial. I haven't really read much of it, since that's not the kind of work I do, but I do remember that you're not just no part of it, you've said you don't want the money even if you win."

"I'm no part of it."

"Well, you know what I mean. What I want to know is why?"

"Why? Why what?"

"Why give up all that money?"

Kit actually laughed. "Why does everyone keep asking me that?"

"Because us mere mortals just can't understand it. I'd jump all over that money if it was me."

Kit gave the small bear a very serious look. “Money is a curse, not a blessing,” he said seriously. “If you have enough to live on, you’re good. When you have so much that money becomes an end in and of itself, it becomes a curse. I’ve lived on both sides of the money line, and given the choice between the two, I’ll choose what I have now every time. I’m happy. I have a good job that I enjoy, a fiancée I’m madly in love with, good friends, and a great life. And if I had all that money, I’d lose it all. It would change everything, and change everyone I deal with every day. My friends would treat me differently. My co-workers would treat me differently. My fiancée wouldn’t leave me, but it would change our relationship. It couldn’t help but do it. I’m happy without money. If I had money, I’d lose sight of what’s important in life and only worry about money, and all the anchor chain that comes with it.”

She was silent a long moment. “I don’t entirely understand that, but I guess it’s because I can only see it from the low side of the line,” she noted.

“My family’s the perfect example of what I mean,” he told her. “What are they doing right now? They’re fighting over the family fortune. Does that sound like a loving family to you?”

“I guess not,” she chuckled.

“Then you see the point.”

“So you’re saying that love trumps money.”

“That’s an oversimplified way to look at it, but that’s kinda correct. My family forgot what it means to be a family a long time ago. Money poisoned them, and I want no part of it.”

“How does your fiancée feel about it?”

“She doesn’t entirely understand it either, but she does understand how I feel about it,” he told her. “She’s okay with being poor, as long as we’re together, and we’re not living on the street or anything like that.”

“She sounds understanding.”

“She’s the greatest femme in the world, at least in my opinion,” he chuckled. “I’m the luckiest male alive that she wants to marry me.”

“My husband had *better* disagree with you,” she said in a tone that made him laugh.

“You’re not bad for a reporter.”

“And you’re not bad for a crazy ex-rich kid.”

“We’re called eccentric, not crazy,” he teased.

“Only when you’re rich. You’re not rich, so you’re just crazy.”

“Point,” he chuckled.

All in all, Lisa wasn’t as bad as he feared. She was true to her word and didn’t ask any other questions. They passed the rest of the flight in amiable chatter, and she even gave him her card and told him to call her whenever he felt like talking once the plane landed in Austin, about an hour late.

The second shock of the day waited for him at the airport. He came through the security gate with a large crowd, and as he opened his phone and called Rick to tell him he was back, someone crashed into him and grabbed hold. “Kit!”

He was a bit surprised, he never saw whoever grabbed him do it. He pushed the figure out, a bit roughly, and he gaped when he found himself

staring into two eyes of different colors. The left eye was amber, but the right eye was green. He swam in shock for nearly ten seconds, then he took in the entire face. Narrow, short muzzle, high cheeks, large eyes, long red hair done in a wavy, curly style that reached her shoulders. Kit recognized her, it was Sheila, Aunt Sarah's younger daughter and his cousin.

"Sheila!" he said in consternation. "What in the bloody blue hell are you doing here?"

"Kit, I just had to talk to you!" she told him, almost pleadingly, holding onto his shoulders with her paws. "I, I didn't know who else to turn to!"

Sheila, as Vulpans went, was relatively harmless. She was eighteen, the second youngest of the five children of Aunt Sarah, spoiled and shallow, a typical Boston blue-blood debutante. Sheila was very much in love with her trust fund, and was the typical rich girl. Bored, wild, and notorious. She, like Lynn and Bess, was a tramp, a drinker, a partier, indulging herself in all manner of legal and illegal vices because she had the money and had nothing else to do. Sheila had probably never had a serious thought in her life, and had just started classes this semester at Harvard as a legacy student, getting in only because her father was a Harvard alumnus, and she was a Vulpan. Kit had no doubt she didn't even go to classes, yet she had a passing grade point average.

"Turn to? What the hell are you talking about? How did you know I'd be here?"

"Your landlord said you were flying back today," she told him. "I went to go see you yesterday, but you weren't home! Oh, Kit, you've got to help!"

“Help? I have no idea what you’re talking about, Sheila! And you have a damn lot of nerve to come to me asking for help, after what the family did to me,” he added coldly.

Her eyes darted up, up to his ear, and she looked chagrined. “What could I do, Kit? Lose my trust fund? I’m not like you, I’d never make it without my money.”

Kit couldn’t really argue with that point, and he was surprised that Sheila would lower herself to the point of admitting it.

“Quite a few of the cousins felt sorry for you, but we’re just the kids! We’re not from *your* family. We don’t have any say. Our parents don’t take us seriously, not like they take you and Vil seriously. We’re not like you two. You’re from Uncle Luke’s family, the important Vulpans. We’re just the nameless masses that fill up the photographs and give the paparazzi targets to chase.”

Kit snorted. “Stop talking like that. Why are you here?”

She clicked her teeth together. “Can we go somewhere and talk about it?”

“I have to go to work,” he told her.

“You *work*?” she gasped.

“What do you think I do to make a living, girl?” he asked scathingly. “Stand on street corners and beg?”

“I, I never thought about it,” she said honestly. “Can you take me so we can talk on the way? I didn’t rent a car, I’ve been getting around in cabs.”

“My boss is coming to pick me up,” he answered, a little curious now. Just what would make Sheila fly halfway across the country on a holiday to track him down? What was so dire that the only person she could turn to for help was him? Whatever it was, it had to be serious.

Kit put the phone back to his ear after speed-dialing Rick. “Rick, where are you?”

“I’m looking at you right now,” he answered with amusement. “If Jessie catches you with that vixen, she’ll cut your tail off.”

Kit closed the phone and looked around, and saw the dingo when he waved across the crowd. Rick advanced on them quickly, his eyebrow raising when he got a good look at the vixen with him, when he saw her eyes. “My, I didn’t know you came back with a relative, Kit,” Rick said, his voice calm, but Kit knew him well and could hear the question lurking in that greeting.

“I didn’t,” he said. “Rick, this is Sheila Vance Vulpan, my cousin. Sheila, this is my boss, Rick.”

“Hi,” Sheila said, taking her paw off Kit’s shoulder and offering it to him.

“Hello there, young lady,” he said, shaking it gently. “I can’t help but ask, but why are you here? Kit’s situation with his family is something of common knowledge among his friends. I’m a bit surprised to see you.”

“Well, I had no one else to talk to,” she told him honestly. “May I ride with you when you take him back? I really need to talk to him.”

“It’s *his* car, girl,” he chuckled. “You’ll have to ask him.”

She turned pleading eyes to him. “Kit?”

He looked down at her, his ears twitching, then he sighed and nodded. “Come on,” he said to her.

They were silent as Rick led them back to his Pathfinder, but once she was in the car, sitting in the passenger’s seat, she erupted like a pent-up volcano. “Kit, I think Cybil’s trying to kill me,” she said.

Kit nearly rear-ended the Sentra in front of him in the lane leading out of the airport. “What? What are you talking about?”

“I got deposed by Cybil’s lawyers, just like you did,” she told him as they pulled out of the airport, on the highway that led back to Austin. “But when I got deposed, Cybil was there in the lawyer’s office. After they finished with me, it didn’t take long, I stopped to talk to this cute hedgehog outside an office, and I heard her voice inside. I hushed up and listened, and they were talking about the suit, and how they thought they had a real shot at getting a big piece of the family money. I didn’t think much of it and went to leave, but then Cybil asked about cousin Vil. The male in there with her told her not to worry about Vil, that he had her handled, but then she asked about you. She said something like *Is there any chance of getting Kit out of the picture*. She went on to talk about the will, and how you being in the one Vil’s trying to reinstate was a major problem. I didn’t understand why, but then the male said that Vil was too alert now, and you were totally out of reach. He said something like *there’s no way after that failed hit on him*. There was something in his voice when he said that, Kit. It wasn’t what he said, but how he said it. I, I think Cybil may be thinking of trying to kill you.”

Kit gave her a serious look, far too long to be safe since he was driving.

“I know. After I heard that, I hurried off, but she came out of the office. I glanced back, and she looked right at me. Well, to cut it short, three days ago, someone tried to kill me.”

“What happened?”

“I was at a party in Chelmsford, with a few girlfriends, and some guy took out a gun and just started shooting at us when we came out to go back to campus,” she told him. “We just got lucky. Nobody was hurt, and the guy’s gun jammed or something. He tried to shoot us, but his gun didn’t work.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t a mugging?” he asked.

“Kit, he never asked for money. He just pulled out a gun and aimed it right at *me*. His gun jammed or something, and then he ran off.”

“Why do you think he was after you?”

“I may be dumb, but I’m not stupid,” she said. “Cybil knows I heard them at the door, and not two days later, someone tries to shoot me. She tried to kill me, Kit, I know she did. My parents don’t believe me, and I didn’t know what else to do. I don’t feel safe anymore. Nothing’s stopping her from trying again.”

“Well, what do you want me to do about it?” he asked, a bit archly.

“Kit, you can talk to Vil. I tried to call her, but she won’t even take my call! Please, you have to help me!”

Kit opened his phone with one paw and hit a single button. “Vil,” he said calmly, “someone needs to talk to you.” He handed the phone to Sheila.

“Cousin Vil?” she asked tentatively. “No, don’t hang up!” she all but screamed, then she held the phone away from her ear as Kit heard a string of vile, sulfurous curses issue from his phone as Vil screamed into the phone.

Kit sighed. “Give me the phone,” he prompted. He took it back from her and waited out the loud and long epithets, then grabbed his chance when she paused for breath. “Vil, it’s me,” he said.

“Kit? What the hell is *she* doing there!”

“Scared for her life,” he answered calmly, which made Sheila give him an adoring, almost slavish look. “Now, you wanna shut up and listen to her? I think you might be interested in what she has to say.”

“Alright, put her back on.”

Kit handed the phone back to Sheila, who nodded and took it. “Vil? You have to help!” she said quickly, and then plowed headlong into the story she’d just told them.

“What are you thinking, son?” Rick asked quietly from the back seat as Sheila continued.

“I think she’s wrong about Cybil trying to kill her, but what I heard does warrant Vil taking a closer look at what Cybil’s been up to,” he said evenly. “I don’t know how much Vil looked into Cybil, but it’s something she can check out. If Cybil wants to try to get me out of the picture, that’s something Vil needs to know. I don’t think Cybil tried to kill Sheila, but it

sure sounds like she might be entertaining the idea of sending someone down here to cause me trouble. And that's something Vil needs to know."

"I, well, it sounds a little thin, but from what I've heard about your family, I don't think you should believe in coincidences," Rick told him. "Someone tried to kill your cousin, and though it could have been a mugging, I wouldn't call it a coincidence until it's proven it wasn't. If it wasn't Cybil, then it was someone else. Maybe another cousin looking to thin the number of paws reaching into the pot."

"Yah, that's why I called Vil. Let her worry about it."

Sheila talked with Vil the whole way to the office, and for nearly half an hour after they were there, as he accepted pawshakes and hugs from the crew after he got back. Sheila sat in Rick's office and kept at it while he settled in in his tiny office, and Rick came in. "Martha brought Jessie's car to the office this morning," he said. "Mike's gonna follow me to your house after work so I can drop it off, then bring me back so Martha can pick me up and take me home."

"That's nice of him," Kit said with a nod. "What's this new project sitting on my desktop?" he asked, pointing at his monitor, to an icon on his desktop called *Project A*.

"Oh, with next year being an election year and all, we're gonna do a series of pieces starting in January about college kids, politics, and whatnot. So, Mister Lead Researcher, you get to earn your pay. There's a lot of ground we gotta cover. Candidates, student attitudes, how many are registered to vote, voting trends among the young statewide and nationwide, and so on and so on. Me and Barry haven't decided which piece we'll run first, but I'd like you to gather up some general data about the points in that

file so we have a very rough overview of things and can decide where we want to go first. This should keep us all busy over the winter break. We're all gonna be doing *real* news work while the college is on break."

"Not a problem," he said easily after he opened the project file and was met with a Word document listing the information Barry and Rick wanted gathered and organized, and spent a brief moment going over it. "Looks like simple work."

"Just a lot of it," Rick told him.

"Simple work is fast work," Kit shrugged. "I'll have to do a few student surveys, though."

"Yeah, but those'll have to wait til after Thanksgiving break. And you'll only have two weeks to get them done before the semester ends."

"I can manage."

"So, what was the trip like? Did Jessie's mom cause problems?" he asked.

Kit laughed. "It actually went pretty well. Me and Hannah had a long talk, and though she still objects to the wedding, at least she admitted it's not because she hates me. She thinks we're too young and haven't known each other long enough."

"Well, a couple of years will show she's wrong about that."

"I hope so. I actually like her, and Jessie's whole family. Ben is very kind, her sister Jenny is wild and funny, and her father is mild, but sharp as a tack. It was a treat spending just one day with them and watching them be a family." He laughed. "You should see their basement. Oh, wait, I have a

picture of it,” he said, digging into his carry-on bag. “Jessie took a bunch of pictures of the house and put them on a memory card for me.”

They had to go out into the main office to use the card reader, since his computer didn’t have one, so they borrowed the main editing computer and Kit brought up the pictures. Everyone else gathered around, but Kit realized that Jessie—or Jenny, for that matter—might have put something not entirely public on that card. “Uh, give me a second guys,” he said. “I think Jenny might have put a bomb in this.”

“What do you mean?” Lilly asked.

“Jenny’s...wild,” he hedged. “She might have taken a few pictures that you don’t show in public, as a joke. She’s the kind that’ll snap a picture of you taking a shower then put it on the internet as a joke.”

“All the better!” Rick laughed, reaching over Kit and opening the card with the mouse.

A series of thumbnail pictures appeared, and to Kit’s relief, there was nothing on the card he’d consider out of bounds to show the gang. There were about twenty pictures of the house, and of Jessie’s family. Kit cycled through them, then showed them the four pictures she’d taken of the basement, which made them all gasp and gawk. “John’s like the ultimate Bengals fan, so he made this theatre in his basement so he can watch the away games,” he explained as he showed them the pictures. “He calls it the Bengal Den. I’ve never seen that kind of a setup before. It was awesome.”

“It must have cost a fortune,” Rick chuckled.

“He said it took him two years to save up for it,” Kit answered. He cycled over to the individual pictures. “This is Hannah, Jessie’s mom. This

is John, her dad. This is Ben, her younger brother, he's gonna be playing college football next year. This is Jenny, her younger sister."

"She's adorable," Mike gushed. "That black mask makes her look like a raccoon."

"Not when you look at her from behind," Kit chuckled. "She has a longhaired tail that looks almost exactly like Jessie's. Jenny's a trip."

"She sounds like a girl I should meet," Mike mused.

"You will next month, she's coming to the wedding," Kit assured him, showing them pictures of the snow. "This is what greeted me in Cincinnati. It snowed before I got there, and was snowing again this morning when I left. John said it was the earliest he ever remembered seeing so much snow."

"Clearly it was because of you," Jeffrey chuckled. "Just don't bring that snow down here!"

"It's the Yankee curse," Kit teased, using full-out Boston dialect. "And I'll bury Austin in snow by February!"

"Then we'll have to kill you, honey," Marty grinned. "Savid! Bring me, the garden hose!"

Sheila came out of Rick's office, the phone in her paw. "Kit, Vil wants to talk to you," she said, handing him the phone.

"Yeah sis?" he asked.

"I think her story's a little outlandish, but there's a little something in there," Vil told him. "I think maybe I need to take a little closer look at Cybil Whitmore Vulpan."

“And that’s why I called,” he said easily.

“I’ll get to work on it, baby bro,” she told him.

“Uh, what about Sheila?”

“What about her? She’s a grown fur, she can take care of herself.”

“Did you at least tell her what to do?”

“Hell no,” Vil snorted. “She’s an adult. She can figure it out. And I’m surprised you care at all. She’s one of *them*, bro. She sure as hell didn’t do you any favors, but as soon as she’s in trouble, where does she run to? She runs to *us*. She can go to hell.”

“Yeah well, a visit with Jessie’s family just rekindled something in me, I guess. I’ll talk to you later, Vil.”

He closed the phone and looked at Sheila, who looked at him nervously. “You going back home?” he asked her.

“No way!” she said fearfully. “Not as long as *she*’s there! Her thug said Vil had control of Austin, so I’m staying here, where it’s safe!”

“What about school?”

“I put in for a sabbatical,” she said. “I told them I’m going to rehab.”

“That won’t be very far from the truth,” Kit grunted. “Oh, yeah. Gang, this is Sheila Vance Vulpan, one of my cousins. Sheila, this is the gang. Rick you’ve met. Savid, Jeffrey, Barry, Lilly, Mike, and Marty.”

“Uh, hi everyone,” she said, shaking paws. “So, what should I do, Kit? I’ve never been, been *alone* before.”

“Get a place to live, buy a car, find a job or something,” he shrugged. “Doesn’t matter to me, Sheila. I’m not going to hold your paw.”

“But, but I don’t know *how*,” she whined. “I don’t know anybody. I don’t know where to go. I don’t know what to do!”

“Welcome to how I felt when I was sixteen,” Kit said, a bit coldly.

“Damn, you really were sheltered, weren’t you?” Barry noted aloud.

“Calm down, hon,” Rick said gently when she began to cry, her paws over her face. He put a paw on her shoulder and leaned over to look down at her. “My boys are all grown and gone, so I have some extra bedrooms. How about you come stay with us for a few days, so you have a nice place to stay until you find something more permanent. Martha, my wife, can help you find a car and an apartment. She’ll even teach you how to cook,” he smiled.

“Really?” she asked, looking up at him.

“Of course. You’re the family of someone I consider to be family, and down here in Texas, we look out for each other.”

“Oh, thank you!” she said explosively, giving Rick a crushing hug.

Kit wasn’t too happy about that. Rick had no idea what he was about to get into. Sheila was a spoiled brat, and she wouldn’t be in his house for two hours before she started treating him and Martha like servants, and getting herself into trouble. The warning look he gave Rick was noticed by everyone else, but Rick just nodded to him as he patted Sheila on the shoulder. “There are, of course, a few rules that come along with that invitation, hon,” Rick told her. “And the first and foremost of them is you behave like a lady while you stay with us. My wife and I may be simple

folk, but we're also people who don't tolerate foolishness within our house. If you stay with us, you will remember that you are our *guest*, and conduct yourself as such."

"I will, I promise," Sheila said immediately. "I just want to be safe."

"You'll be safe with us," Rick assured her. "Come on, let's go back to my office. I'll call Martha and have her come pick you up."

"I don't like that at all," Kit growled when Rick took her back to his office. "Sheila's gonna make life hell for Rick and Martha, I just know it. Rick has no idea what he's getting himself into. Sheila's a rich brat. She's nothing like me."

"Rick raised three boys, Kit," Barry chuckled. "He and Martha are much tougher than they look. I think your cousin might be in for a shock the first time she gets on Martha's bad side."

"I'd pay to see that," Lilly giggled.

"Well, I can't argue with that," Kit mused. Martha and Rick were very kind people, but they did raise three sons, and sons could be unruly. Perhaps his spoiled cousin, who was only being tractable out of fear, would find a little discipline living with Martha and Rick...at least until she got her own place.

One thing was for sure, she was about to get a rude shock. This wasn't Boston, where she could do whatever she wanted without fear because her family owned the cops. She couldn't go party every night and expect servants to wait on her, feed her, do her housework, and so on. But, there was one thing he did have to talk to her about, so he excused himself from

the gang and let them look at the pictures and went into Rick's office.
"Sheila," he called.

"Yeah Kit?"

"Did you plan this at all, or just run down here?"

"I just ran down here," she said, her cheeks ruffling a bit. "I already called Higgins and asked him to gather my clothes and some important things and get ready to have them shipped to me next-day air. I don't even have a change of clothes, just my purse," she said with her cheeks ruffling.

"So, you're not broke? Your mom didn't disown you?"

"No, no!" she said. "I still have my trust. I already wrote Rick a check so he doesn't have to pay for me staying with him til I figure out how to get an apartment."

"Does Aunt Sarah know you're here?"

"She will by tonight," she answered. "I'll tell her the truth, Kit. I'm afraid to go home, because of Cybil. Mom knows about the attack, remember? She didn't believe me when I told her, so, so she won't be all that surprised when I tell her I'm here."

"She'd better not cause Rick any trouble."

"Why should she? He's being very nice to me."

"Alright. But if Sarah starts causing problems, I'll boot your tail outta Austin so fast you won't know what hit you. Understand?"

"She won't, I promise. Mom thinks I'm a flake, Kit, but she won't get her tail twisted over this. I'm where you can keep an eye on me, and I'm not

dropping out of school, just asking for a semester off until Cybil goes back to England. When Cybil goes away, I'll come back home."

Kit felt it was a bad idea for Sheila to stay with Rick, stay in Austin, but spending time with Jessie's family made him feel like he should at least give Sheila a chance. Hannah and John were taking a chance on him despite his family and the real danger he might cause Jessie, so the least he could do was at least try to deal with his family and see where it went. He wouldn't have anything to do with his uncles and aunts, but he'd at least try to deal with one of his many cousins, especially one that had never said anything bad to him like some of the others had. Sheila had been too busy getting stoned and chasing males to worry much about the important things. The attack on her had scared her badly, so much she ran from her soft life of comfort and fun, but maybe it would be a good experience for her in the end. A few days of living as a normal person might give her a new perspective.

Martha came and collected up his wayward cousin, and it left Kit a little scattered. He called Jessie, finally, and had to apologize for not calling her as soon as he got back. He explained the situation with his cousin, then blew out his breath. "I'm really sorry, pretty kitty, but with her showing up, it totally messed up my day."

She giggled over the phone. "I was getting worried," she told him. "So, what's this cousin like?"

"Sheila? She's a typical Boston debutante, Jess. She gets drunk, gets stoned, and pretends to go to school while she parties every night and screws any guy who'll give her the time of day."

"That's a pretty ugly description."

“It’s the truth. Sheila’s just one of what the Boston gossip columns calls the Party Pack, a group of Vulpan cousins notorious for that kind of behavior. She’s not half as bad as Bess or Lynn. Lynn’s a legend in Boston.” He leaned back in his chair. “Sheila’s a good example of the curse of money, pretty kitty. She’s rich, so she has no reason to work. So all she does is pursue whatever vanity crosses her mind at the moment. She’s flighty, shallow, vain, and petty. Her whole life revolves around nightclubs, boys, and parties. But now she thinks that Cybil’s trying to kill her, so she ran down here where she thinks Cybil can’t reach her. Rick and Martha are gonna let her stay at their house for a few days, so they can teach her how to do for herself.”

“What do you mean?”

“Kitty, Sheila’s a rich brat. She has *no clue* how to make it in the real world. Her whole life, she’s had others to do things for her. She doesn’t know how to cook, she doesn’t know how to find an apartment, hell, the only reason she made it down here for two days by herself is because she knows what room service is.”

“I think you’re exaggerating a little, my handsome fox,” Jessie chuckled.

“Not much,” he replied. “She still has her money, but she has no idea how to use it for something other than parties and shopping. If she won’t go home until Cybil goes back to England, then she’ll be here for a few months. That means she needs to get an apartment, a car, and so on and so on, and she has no idea how to do that. I can bet that the monthly income from her trust won’t cover servants, so she’ll have to learn how to live on her own, which will be a first for her. She lives in an apartment just off

campus her mother rents for her, and she has her own personal butler to do her cooking and cleaning for her.”

“Hmm,” Jessie mused. “If he’s her personal butler, why won’t he come down and take care of her?”

“She probably could, but she’d have to pay to have her butler move down. If he’ll even come. Something like that may not be in his contract.”

“Contract?”

“Yeah, contract. Any Vulpan servant has to sign a contract stating they never talk to the press, but some of them get some stipulations added for their own side. Clancy has a stipulation that states he only serves at Vulpan Manor, and he never leaves, even after he retires. He literally owns his apartment on the manor. Sheila’s butler might have a similar no-transfer clause.”

“You said she’s going to stay with Rick and Martha?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to you tonight, love, I’m gonna go.”

“Alright. Be good, love.”

It was Kit’s long day, so he got busy with the new project, and quite simply let Sheila slip out of his mind as he got to work, once Martha came, fussed over her a little while, then took her back to the tiny ranch where Rick and Martha lived. But she didn’t get far out of his mind for long once he got home. Lupe came out of his apartment when Kit pulled up in the parking lot, and met him at his door. “Yo, brah, I got the apartment all ready.”

“What happened? Did the water go out or something?”

“No, no, the other apartment. Your cousin and Rick’s wife stopped by about an hour ago and signed the lease. Jessie set it up,” he said. “For that one bedroom over in building D. Since she’s your cousin and in a fix, I gave her a month to month lease for four hundred.”

“Jessie—meh,” he grunted. “So, Jessie decided to put a paw in, I see.”

“Actually, your cuz was happy about it. She said you’re the only person she knows here, so she’s glad you’re living close to her. Damn, brah, she’s *cute*.”

“That’s about all she is, Lupe. All body, no brain.”

Lupe laughed. “Hell, brah, I’ll be happy to look at her. Kinda makes me wish we had a pool. She must drop some jaws when she’s in a bikini.”

“Heh,” Kit grunted as he unlocked the door, opened it, then stepped in and turned off the alarm. “Let me call around and find out what’s going on, Lupe. I had no idea about this.”

“Hey, no prob, brah. We still on for Sunday?”

“You bet. I should have Jessie home before the game starts.”

“Dude, you sure you ain’t gonna be *busy*?” he grinned.

“I pick her up at nine in the morning Lupe. We’ll surely be finished by then,” he grinned, then closed the door as Lupe laughed.

Calling around to Rick, Martha, and Jessie built a complete picture. Jessie had called Martha not long after she got home with Sheila, talked to Sheila, then called Lupe. Lupe agreed to help and let her sign a month to month lease for the only one bedroom apartment he had available, over on

the far side of the complex, which Sheila had picked up the keys for just about two hours ago. Martha and Sheila were buying some furniture she'd need, since all Westwood apartments were unfurnished, and Sheila already had a car. Higgins, her butler back home, was driving her Mustang down to Austin for her along with carrying some of her clothes and things, and would fly back home once he delivered. It took two days to drive from Boston to Austin, so he'd be arriving with her car on Sunday. He wouldn't be staying, but Sheila had already hired a maid service to come clean her apartment starting next week, but had taken up Martha on the offer of teaching her how to cook.

Sheila, it turned out, surprised him a little. She *did* have money saved, and told Martha she was more than able to buy all the furniture she'd need and still have more than enough money to live on. Martha brought Sheila by the apartment about an hour after he got home, and his cousin looked both happy and excited. "You should see the living room suit we found at this place called Value City!" she told him after he let them in. "It was beautiful! You know, I never thought I'd find good-looking furniture in a place like that," she mused.

"Well, I'm glad you're getting set up, but you'd better behave," Kit warned. "Lupe, the landlord, is my friend, and if you cause any trouble or embarrass me, I'm gonna whip you."

"Kit! Why, I'd never do that!"

"Mmm-hmm," he hummed as he sat back down on the couch, with his laptop on the coffee table. "And who did three weeks in forced rehab last year after she got busted with a purse full of ecstasy?"

Sheila's fur ruffled. "Alright, I'll behave," she said with a grumble. "But don't think I'm not going to have any fun!"

"I'm not your mom, Sheila. I'm not going to hold your paw or tell you what to do. But, since you're living in the same complex with me, remember that if you cause trouble for Lupe, you're causing trouble for me too. And I'm not afraid to come over to your apartment and spank you if Lupe complains about you. So keep it legal. There's all kinds of places around to have fun, Sheila, hell, I'll even take you to some of them. But remember, you'd better keep it legal."

"I'd better not hear of anything like that," Martha told her, a bit sharply.

"No, of course not, Martha," she said quickly. "I don't want to cause any problems, but I also don't want to spend the time waiting for Cybil to leave Boston hiding in my apartment."

"Then you need a job, dear."

"A *job*?" Sheila gasped. "Me, get a job? Whyever for? Even after buying all that furniture and raiding the store, I still have twenty thousand dollars in the bank. I don't need a job!"

"It's to keep you out of trouble," Martha told her imperiously. "Idle paws are the devil's plaything."

"But, weren't you going to teach me to cook?"

"That doesn't take all day," she told her calmly. "I think I'll make a few calls and find you a job."

Sheila looked devastated. “I’m not supposed to work until after college,” she complained.

“Dear, a job isn’t always a chore,” Martha told her. “You just need to find something you like to do and find work that’s as close to it as you can get. Look at Kit. He loves history and reading, he loves digging through a pile of material for the truth, so he found a job where he uses his love of those things to earn money. Rick runs the magazine. Yes, it’s a job, but he loves it, so it doesn’t feel like *work*.”

“Yup,” Kit nodded. “What do you like to do?”

“Drink, have fun, and talk to people,” she said immediately.

Martha chuckled. “Well, dear, then let’s ask what interests you. What subject did you like in school? Do you have any hobbies?”

“Well, like any Vulpan, I’m good at math, and I’m a business major,” she answered.

“Not any Vulpan,” Kit chuckled.

“Present company excluded,” she grinned.

“Can you type, dear?”

“Of course I can. Who can’t type?” she asked, quite baffled at the question.

“Then I know just who to call,” she said with a slight smile. “And since you don’t need money, well, you can just work for free.”

“Huh?”

“Rick mentioned the other day that it’s always so busy in the office, they could use an intern,” Martha told her. “A job that keeps you busy and doesn’t pay, well, that sounds like it’s right up your alley, young lady.”

“Woah, woah, woah, you mean she works at the office?” Kit asked. “Around me?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“She’s part of my family, that’s what wrong with it,” Kit answered. “If you didn’t know, I don’t exactly get along with my family, Martha.”

“You seem to get along with Sheila.”

“Jessie moves her in right down the street from me, and now you want to put her in my office? What is this, some kind of conspiracy?”

“If you want to call it that,” Martha said easily. “Come along, dear, we have to get back and start dinner, and your first cooking lesson.”

“Okay,” Sheila said with a nod. “Bye Kit, and thanks again for helping me. I won’t make you regret it, I promise.”

“You’d better not,” he growled in warning.

Clearly, there was some collusion going on around here. Jessie had put a paw in from Cincinnati to put Sheila in the complex with them, and now Martha was going about her own little agenda about his deviant cousin to place her in the office. What the hell was going on?

A call to Jessie didn’t shed any light on it. “She’s alone in a big city and scared,” she said simply, the sound of water pouring in a bathtub in the background. “I thought if she lived close to us, she’d be more comfortable. Besides, I want to get to know her, Kit. You’ve talked about your family,

and I want to get to know more of them than just Vil. I want to see what the Vulpans are like outside your immediate family.”

“You’re on the road to disappointment,” Kit warned her. “Sheila is like any of the Party Pack. As soon as she gets over the change and gets more comfortable, she’ll go right back to her normal ways. Booze, drugs, sex, and parties. And Martha wants her to work at the office,” he grunted. “I have no idea what that’s about.”

“Well, Martha looks at her like she’s a little lost puppy,” Jessie giggled, then she changed the phone over to the speaker phone, and he heard water sloshing.

“Are you taking a bath?” he asked.

“Sure am,” she answered. “I put down the toilet lid and put the phone on the top of it, so it won’t fall in or get wet.”

“Be careful when you turn it off.”

“I will.”

“I showed the gang the pictures you took,” he told her. “I was cheated, you know that?”

“Huh?”

“Where’s that picture you promised me?” he teased.

She laughed. “You can take it when you get home,” she purred at him. “Actually, I should make you wait until we’re married. No photographic evidence til you’re officially mine.”

“Oh no, a Vulpan never lets someone back out of a deal. You agreed to a picture, and I’ll get one, even if I have to cheat,” he taunted.

“Cheat? How are you going to cheat?”

“Well, you’ll be easy enough to photograph when you’re asleep,” he noted.

“Kit! Don’t you dare!”

“Oho, that sounds like a challenge,” he noted into the phone as he turned on the TV to catch the news. “I think I’ll have to use the video camera though, to get the whole experience.”

“If you do that, so help me, I’ll beat you up!” she warned.

“Punish me all you want, my pretty kitty, so long as we kiss and make up afterwards.”

“We’ll talk about that when I get home,” she said darkly.

“I’m looking forward to it,” he teased. “Was your drive home from the airport safe?”

“Mmm,” she answered, which for her meant *yes*. “It snowed another three inches today, but it’s all supposed to melt by tomorrow night. You know it’s supposed to rain and be nearly sixty tomorrow? Sixty degrees with six inches of snow on the ground! I’d say that was impossible if I didn’t see it for myself!” He heard a little more sloshing. “I swear, the weather’s gone all crazy.”

“Global warming,” Kit chuckled. “Jeffrey says it snowed because I came up there,” he laughed.

“I guess so, Mister Freeze,” she teased. “But if you make it cold down in Austin, I’m gonna skin you!”

He chuckled. “Think you’ll get to sleep tonight?”

“Without you here? Dream on,” she sighed. “But the smell of you in the bed might help a little. At least I won’t feel like I’m all alone. I can bury my face in the pillow and smell you and pretend you’re with me.”

“Just don’t let the pretend me take my place,” he asked. “I’d have a lot of trouble competing with your invisible friend.”

She laughed. “He’d be no competition with you in some ways,” she teased. “But at least he’s better looking.”

“Oh, now that’s a cheap shot,” Kit chuckled. “You’re just digging your hole deeper when it comes to my picture,” he taunted. “You’re descending from artful to tawdry.”

“Tawdry? Tawdry!” she demanded.

“Oh, and who doesn’t pant like a dog when I put my paws in the right places?”

“Watch it, buster,” she called, but Kit could hear the play in her voice, something he could easily identify because he knew her so well. “Boys who can’t keep their knees locked when they get kissed have no right to throw stones.”

“You’re just too much femme for me, my pretty kitty,” he told her. “No boy could kiss you and stay upright afterwards.”

“It’s too bad I’ll never find out if my power extends over other boys,” she said lightly.

“I hope not,” he laughed.

He missed her all over again that night. They again used the laptops and the videoconferencing program to see each other, but it didn’t help him

at all. He basically gave up on trying to sleep around three in the morning, and spent most of the time waiting for the sun to rise to work on the election project from home, knocking out quite a bit of what he could do on the internet. By sunrise, he had the candidates researched, information on how Texas ran its elections completely researched and organized, and a very thorough article completed on the national election rules and procedures, about the primary system, the conventions, the national election, and the electoral college. Once the sun came up, he decided to fulfill a promise to Jessie and went to Wal-Mart to look at full-body dryers. What he found there didn't fill him with much confidence, so he just went on to work a full two hours early.

He had nothing else to do, and if he didn't keep himself busy, he'd just pine for Jessie, and he knew it.

Barry and Lilly came in together about fifteen minutes before nine, and they popped their heads in his office. "You made coffee?" Barry asked.

"Yeah, in the pot," he answered, taking a sip of tea.

Lilly gave him a single look. "How long have you been here?"

"Since seven or so," he answered, which made her giggle.

"She comes home tomorrow," Lilly grinned with a wink.

"I keep telling myself that," he grunted.

"You got the bed all ready?" she said outrageously.

Kit chuckled. "To sleep, yeah. I didn't sleep at all last night. I just can't without her with me."

"You're doomed, bro," Barry teased. "She has you totally whipped."

“Which is exactly where he should be!” Lilly said, slapping Barry lightly on the shoulder. “Males are too dangerous and silly to go around without a femme to keep them in line.”

“Only in your world,” Barry teased.

“You two in the office today?” Kit asked.

Barry shook his head. “I have an interview with the department of state for Texas today,” he answered. “It’s the first framework for the election series coming up next month.”

“Oh, I’ll send all the Texas stuff to your Blackberry and computer, then,” Kit said. “I finished up the Texas election process. That should give you something to go on.”

“Nice,” Barry smiled. “Go ahead and chuck it to me.”

“I’m in the office today,” Lilly told him. “I need to go through what I collected last night and update the website.”

“Was surprised to see you in so early,” Kit told her with a grin.

“I called it early last night. I didn’t feel like staying out after I checked out the new band playing down at the Quarry. They’re called Acid, they’re pretty good. That, and I have a lot of work to do on the *Scene* today. Lots of changes since the semester’s almost over, the bars and clubs change their hours and lots of the music acts bug out. It’ll take me most of the day to get everything updated on the site and hand in the new *Scene* section into Rick and Savid.”

Kit managed to distract himself all day with work. He got a large piece of the project either knocked out or organized so he knew what order to do

the rest of it, but it was going to take time. It was a *huge* project, and he'd have to do some polls and surveys on top of normal research. He'd probably get his part of it done before the wedding, but it'd be close. It was definitely going to dominate his time.

The wedding. It was only twenty-four days away. The rings were bought, the dress was bought, his tux was bought, and they were supposed to come down and do a final fitting on Thursday. They had an appointment on the fifth to get the marriage license blood test, and with that it was just a simple matter of handing in all the paperwork at the courthouse and getting the license. Jessie had to start getting the name change paperwork going after they had the license, so she'd have everything done before the actual wedding. Jessie wanted to walk into the church with her license already giving her name as Jessica Desdemona Vulpan, which was legal in Texas. The marriage license was all that was required, and they didn't put a marriage date on it. Spouses who changed their names could do so before the actual ceremony.

There was a knock at his door right about when he was about to pack it in and head out to the mall to look at dryers, and saw Sandy, Jeffrey, Sam, and Kevin. "Hey, we were gonna go out and wanted to see if you wanted to tag along," Sandy told him.

"Nah, I have to go to the mall and look at full body dryers," he answered. "I promised Jessie I'd get one."

"Ah, cool."

"I bought mine at J.C. Penny, and it's been pretty good," Kevin offered. "It's the Arixx model. It fits in the corner of my bedroom real nice."

Kit held up a printed page of full body dryers, features, dependability reviews, warranty options, and suggested retail prices. Arixx was one of three models that was circled on the sheet for consideration. Sandy looked at it, and laughed. “Shoulda known,” she grinned.

“It’s what I do for a living, silly chinchilla,” Kit said mildly. “Think I don’t know how to do it for myself?”

“I bet that car salesmen wet themselves when they see you coming, Kit,” Kevin laughed.

“I haven’t bought a car yet. When I do, I’ll let you know,” Kit chuckled.

After work, Kit hit the mall. He did take Kevin’s suggestion of looking in J.C. Penny, and found the Arixx model that he’d circled on sale there at a price very close to what was suggested by his research. Two hundred dollars was a lot of money, but this was a justifiable expense, and besides, Jessie wanted one. He bought what he was after, a five foot tall corner model with a raised platform to keep the hot air off the carpet, took it home, and spent nearly two hours putting it together in the corner between the wall where the bed’s headboard was and the wall that held the window. The unit was pretty comprehensive, having to be bolted to the wall and with a large base to give it stability. It had a long, wide central column from which drying ducts radiated to blow over the fur standing on the platform, and it was large enough to let him go through the motions of combing fur or drying with a towel while on the platform without banging his elbows on the unit. It had adjustable fan speeds and fully adjustable temperature, from cold to almost blisteringly hot, and what was most clever, it had a pressure switch in the floor that made it turn off if nobody was standing on it. With

that nifty little feature, it could just be left on all the time and set to a comfortable level, and it would turn itself on whenever one stepped onto it.

Jessie would be very happy with it, he was sure.

The effort to put it together, coupled with the sleepless night, did its magic on Kit. He was exhausted when he finished the job, and crawled into bed around eight to rest, but actually fell asleep.

Kit was set to go to Bergstrom at seven, a full two hours before Jessie's plane was scheduled to arrive. She'd called him at three in the morning, but he'd already been awake. She was leaving Cincinnati at seven and was scheduled to arrive at ten after nine. They stayed on the phone until she left for the airport, and Kit was so keyed up waiting for her to get home that he couldn't stay still, couldn't even get any work done. He went for a jog around the neighborhood, took a shower, then used the new full body dryer and found it to be quite satisfactory. He then dressed and was on his way out the door, when Sandy and Sam pulled up into the parking lot. "Hey, you gonna go get her?" Sandy asked.

"On the way now."

"Got room for two more? We'd like to go," Sam said.

"Sure, jump in," he said as he used the keychain remote to unlock his truck. "But mind she's not due in for like two hours. I just can't wait around here anymore."

"We figured, that's why we got here early," Sandy grinned as she locked her car. "I got shotgun!"

After they were on their way, he glanced back at Sam. “So, what do you think of Kevin?”

“I like him,” she said without blinking. “I really like him. He’s smart, kind, considerate, and charming. And I don’t know if I should hit you or kiss you for playing matchmaker.”

“Eh, I had a hunch,” he told her. “I’m glad I was right. How was the date?”

“It was great until Sandy threw up outside the theater,” Sam said, leaning over the front seat and giving the chinchilla a harsh look.

“It was the popcorn at the theater,” she said with an embarrassed look. “The butter they used on it didn’t agree with my tummy.”

“Well, maybe she was giving the future doctor a little practice in front of Kevin,” Kit said with a sly look at her.

“Oh, please,” Sam sighed.

Sam and Sandy did do wonders for keeping him from going nuts while they waited at the airport. Sam had brought her laptop, and showed him a bunch of pictures of her family and the bar her dad owned in Florida. They spent nearly an hour in the little shopping mall and ate breakfast at Dunkin Donuts, then waited near the security gate when nine o’clock rolled around.

At nine fifteen, his phone rang. It was Jessie. “I’m in the terminal and on the way,” she told him excitedly. “Where are you?”

“We’re at the security gate. Sam and Sandy came too.”

“Is Sheila here?”

“No, I haven’t talked to her since Friday.”

“Oh. See you in a few.”

Kit paced outside the security gate, then his heart soared when he saw her. She ran into his arms and crushed him in a fierce hug, then they shared a long, lingering kiss. “Hello there, future Misses Vulpan,” Kit cooed in her ear.

“Fancy meeting you here, Mister Vulpan,” she teased in return, her fingers tracing over the scars on his back through his shirt and light jacket. “Hey guys, thanks for coming to pick me up!” Jessie called, hugging each of her friends in turn. “Now let’s go get my suitcase and go home!” she declared as Kit took her carry-on bag from her and shouldered it.

“I hope you remember that Kit has poker today, Jessie,” Sam reminded as they headed for baggage claim.

“Yeah, so that means that after we get back to the apartment, you two are booted,” she grinned, which made Sandy laugh.

“Wherever did you go vestal virgin,” Sandy teased.

“She met a guy,” Jessie teased. “She thinks he’s the best thing on Earth. She’s going to marry him in twenty-three days, but she was more than willing to give him an advance on the fun parts of being married.”

Sam and Sandy both erupted into laughter, but Kit just pulled her under his arm and squeezed her shoulder gently. “So, how did it go after I left?”

“Not bad,” she answered. “Me and mom still had a few fights, but your visit really changed her. She was fighting over little things, not over the marriage itself.”

“Well, I’m glad for that. Did your family make hotel reservations?”

“Yeah, all taken care of. They’re staying at the Holiday Inn off thirty-five. It’s only about two miles from the church.”

“They flying or driving?”

“Flying. I promised them they could use my car while they’re here.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting that hunk of a brother of yours,” Sandy said brightly.

“What, you’re kicking Jeffrey to the curb already?” Sam asked archly.

“Oh, hell no. Jeffrey’s fantastic, but Ben is just pure eye candy. I want see if he’s as hunky in person as he is in pictures.”

“You sooooo need a life,” Sam grated.

Sam and Sandy said their goodbyes after they got home, and Kit hauled Jessie’s suitcase into the bedroom. She followed him and squealed in delight when she saw the dryer in the corner. “You bought it, you bought it!” she said happily, colliding with him and driving him down onto the bed, kissing him exuberantly. “I love you, Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan!” she declared, then she noticed his wince. “Did I hurt your back?”

“My tail’s kinked,” he said with a grunt, pulling his tail out from under him and its uncomfortable position. “There, all better,” he said, gripping her by her waist, near her sensitive spot. “Soooo, you want some breakfast?”

“Later,” she said, driving him down to the bed and kissing him quite seriously.

Chapter 13

With Mickey back from his trip, it made it a full table at poker, given that Sam, Kevin, and Jeffrey had joined them. Jessie didn't like poker, so she wasn't at the table, though she, Sandy, and Danielle were there. Sam had suggested they take advantage of a warm day to grill, and Mickey had dragged his outdoor grill over from his porch to do it. It had turned into quite the little party, where everyone ponied up some cash to buy some hamburgers and hot dogs, Sam brought two cases of European lagers of different brands for them to try, and Jessie, Danielle, and Sandy had offered to do the actual grilling in return for later favors. They were silent as to what this favor was, but Kit figured it would be something interesting.

It was a swift and calming return to the routine. Jessie was back home, and after their rather exuberant welcome home, it was right back to the way things should be. Poker was the Sunday ritual, and Jessie herself wanted to get back to the routine, even if it was her first day back after being gone for a week. Danielle was new to the gathering, and Sam, Kevin, Sandy, and Jeffrey were still settling into the poker group, so it wasn't entirely routine. It was a little big for Lupe's apartment, but he was happy to have them over.

"Man, Jessie, that smells awesome! What is it?" Mickey asked.

"Baked nuts," she answered as she bent over the oven in the kitchen. "I think you'll like them."

"What kind of food is that?" Lupe asked.

“It’s an appetizer,” she answered. “Just trust me.”

“How was Louisiana, Mick?” Dan asked as he shuffled the cards.

“Dude, it was hot,” he answered. “It was ninety degrees! In November!”

“Well, they had six inches of snow on the ground when I left Cincinnati on Friday,” Kit chuckled. “I guess the weather’s gone totally screwy on us. How warm is it outside right now?”

“It’s eighty, when it’s usually around sixty for this time of year,” Sam answered.

There was a knock at the door, and before Lupe could call out, Sheila poked her head inside. “Hello? Kit?”

Kit sighed. “Can she come in, Lupe?”

“Yah sure,” he grinned. “Come in!”

“Kit, Higgins just got here,” she told him. “I got my car! Oh, I didn’t realize it was a party,” she said, looking around.

“Party no, just Sunday poker,” Dan said, giving her a toothy grin. “From those eyes, she’s a relative of yours, Kit?”

“Yeah. Everyone, this is Sheila Vance Vulpan, one of my cousins. Sheila, this is the poker crew. Dan, Mickey, Sam, Kevin, Jeffrey, you know Lupe, and there in the kitchen are Sandy, Danielle, and my fiancée, Jessie.”

Jessie rushed out of the kitchen and immediately took Sheila’s paws. Kit couldn’t see Jessie’s expression, but Sheila looked up at the taller femme with her maw open. “I was hoping to meet you!” Jessie told her happily. “I’m Jessica, but you can call me Jessie.”

“We call her JD,” Sandy teased from the kitchen.

“So, you’re the cat Kit’s marrying,” Sheila said, looking at her. “I see why he likes you. You’re a cat with fox markings.”

She laughed. “My grandfather was a fox,” she admitted.

“You’re mixed? Wow, would my mother ever blow a fuse if she knew that,” Sheila laughed. “Then again, they had a meltdown when they heard about you.”

“How bad?”

“Bad,” she said seriously. “The family’s all a bunch of purists.”

“And you? What do you think about it?”

“I don’t matter,” she said simply, a little quietly. “The cousins, we don’t really count for anything in the family. Our parents never listen to us.”

“Well, I will. Does it bother you that I’m a cat?”

“Me? Naw, not really. I date outside my species all the time, and my mother would have a fit if she found out,” she admitted with a slight smile. “If I could only go out with foxes, I’d really be hurting around here,” she noted. “Though it’s not so bad at home.”

“How so?” Sam asked curiously.

“It’s *Boston*,” she said, like that explained everything.

“Boston is nearly one half fox by population,” Kit explained as Dan dealt. “Because it was a colony, and many of them never left. Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire are predominately fox, while the southern colonies are way more integrated because of the big cities and

immigration. But it's cold in Boston, so we didn't get much immigration there, and it shows today in the large segment of foxes that make up the population. In some parts of Massachusetts, you can go to a small town and find nothing *but* foxes. New England is the most unintegrated part of America."

"It's like that in some parts of bayou country," Mickey said. "Cajuns. You go to a little town and it's all one species, or just two or three."

"That'd be weird," Sandy said. "Living in a town with only one breed?"

"And now you know why purism is so rampant in New England," Kit said to her.

"Well, come to the kitchen," Jessie urged, pulling Sheila's paws as she backed up. "We have to talk!"

"Uh, well, can I come back? Higgins is still here, and I have to get him to the airport. I think he'd poison my tea if I made him take a cab."

Jessie laughed. "Sure! You know where our apartment is?"

"No, but I can just come back here and Lupe can send me in the right direction."

Sheila said her goodbyes and hurried out, and Kit grabbed Jessie's paw as she went back to the kitchen to halt her. "There's a scheme hatching in that pretty head of yours, isn't there?" he demanded.

She laughed. "Scheme? No, I just want to get to know my in-laws, that's all," she grinned.

"Is she like the rest of your family, Kit?" Kevin asked curiously.

“Sheila? No. She’s harmless,” he said dismissively as Jessie kissed him on the cheek and went back to the kitchen. “Sheila’s a party girl. She goes to Harvard, but she doesn’t bother showing up for classes. She just parties every night.”

“Harvard? Wow.”

“Don’t read much into that,” Kit grunted. “She’s a legacy student.”

“What’s that?” Dan asked.

“She got in only because her father’s an alum and she’s a Vulpan. She’ll graduate with a C average, even if she never shows up for a single class.”

“They cheat in Harvard?” Kevin said, with some surprise.

“When the student’s name is Vulpan, and the family owns the city where your college is located, you do what they want or they find ways to strangle you,” Kit said simply. “The rules are different for the rich, Kev.”

“I see,” Kevin said, scratching his muzzle thoughtfully.

The baked nuts were excellent. She coated mixed nuts with a spiced glaze and baked them, and served them while they were still warm. They were great, and went very well with the thick, tasty lagers that Sam brought with her. The Cowboys weren’t playing today because they played on Thanksgiving, so at least he didn’t have to suffer through listening to them harp on the team when Lupe turned on the late game. They put the game on hold when Jessie declared it was time to grill, so they turned off the game, turned on the radio, and moved out onto the porch and courtyard, drank beer, ate hot dogs, hamburgers, and grilled chicken for Sandy and Danielle, and had a wonderful time. They even attracted some of the other tenants,

who stopped by to chat—at least the ones that weren't on Lupe's bad side, anyway—and filch a hot dog.

Sheila got back about an hour after leaving, twirling her car keys around one of her fingers. Jessie intercepted her and pulled her into the kitchen, and there the two of them, Sandy, and Danielle talked literally for hours as the poker game raged in the living room. Mickey won the poker game at the showdown, which made Jeffrey laugh since he'd been leading the entire game. After the game, they cleaned up after themselves and said their goodbyes to Lupe. Sheila wandered back to her own apartment, and Kit and Jessie helped take Mickey's grill back over to his porch, then headed home themselves.

"So, you talked to Sheila," Kit noted as he took the camera into the den to upload the pictures they'd taken during poker into the desktop. "What did you think?"

"I think she has a serious inferiority complex problem," she called from the living room, then she came into the room. "The poor girl thinks she doesn't matter more than pond scum. No wonder she spends all her time drinking and getting stoned. If I felt I was worthless, I'd do the same thing."

"Welcome to the Vulpans," Kit said grimly as he started uploading pictures. "I don't think there's a single sane member of my family. And I'm including me and Vil."

Jessie giggled. "Well, your insanity was just temporary, my handsome fox," she told him, leaning down and kissing him on his injured ear. She laughed raucously when he put up an image of Sam swatting Kevin on the muzzle with her paw, his eyes closed and flinching. "When did she do that?"

“When you went out to start the grill. He asked her how far down her white patch goes.”

Jessie laughed. “He deserved it then.”

“She told him it goes as far on her as it does on any other skunk. She whacked him when he dared her to prove it.”

“Now that sounds like Sam,” Jessie giggled. “You know, we should set up a myspace page for the pictures so everyone can see them.”

“That would be nice. I wonder how those two get along in private.”

“Oh, I know that already,” Jessie said teasingly. “Sam *is* my best friend.”

“I’m not that curious, just hoping I didn’t do something stupid when I introduced them.”

“Oh, no way,” she assured him. “Sam and Kevin really get along. They’re going out on their fifth date tonight.”

“Fifth date in just a week? Wow. That’s, like, *us* levels of dating.”

“Yeah,” she giggled. “I just feel sorry for Tim.”

“Who’s that?”

“The guy she was seeing before she met Kevin.”

“She had a boyfriend?”

“She had someone she was dating,” Jessie told him. “He was alright with it, actually. They moved on to *just friends* after Sam met Kevin.”

“Aww, damn. I never knew that,” he grunted.

“No, it was alright. I don’t think Sam and Tim would have made it, just like Sandy and Bobby. Sam was too smart for Tim. So don’t feel bad about it.”

“Eh, well,” he sighed, then he leaned back and closed his eyes when Jessie’s paws started massaging his shoulders. “Mmm, that’s nice,” he hummed.

“You’re tense.”

“I’m tired. I’ve had about four hours of sleep since I got home on Friday.”

“Well, nothing’s stopping you from taking a nap, love.”

“Yes there is. Did you get your homework done?”

“Homework? That’s a silly question.”

“So, did you?”

“Well...”

“Uh-huh. Go. Work. Do,” he commanded, reaching up and bopping her on the forehead with the back of his paw.

“Don’t make me use those long English words on you,” Jessie teased, leaning down and biting his right ear.

“Don’t make me threaten you with a punishment that we’ll both hate if you don’t do what you’re supposed to do.”

“Oh, and what would that be?”

“How would you like to sleep on the couch?” he threatened.

“Girls don’t sleep on the couch. Boys do.”

“This is *my* apartment,” he countered. “And my back can’t handle the couch. So, no homework, no bed, young lady,” he said authoritatively.

“Oh, pulling out the nuclear weapons, are we? Threatening to withhold sex?” she giggled, purring in his ear. “You’ll cave before I do. I know where your on switch is.”

“Flirting with me is not doing your homework,” he said coolly in reply. “Go get your homework done, then we can sit on the couch and snuggle.”

“Not for too long. I have class in the morning, and I have other things on my mind,” she cooed.

“Yeah, sleep,” Kit said.

Jessie slapped him on the top of the head.

Sheila decided to come over while Jessie was doing her homework in the den. She was wearing a tank top that ended at her ribcage and a pair of cut-off hip-hugger jeans, showing off as much of her attractive stomach and long legs as possible. She was taking advantage of the balmy Texas climate, when it was below freezing in Boston and would remain so until sometime in April, most likely. It was much warmer than usual, but such warm spells like the one they’d enjoyed today weren’t uncommon. It had started off in the 40s that morning, and had warmed up to the 70s...but tomorrow was supposed to be rainy and in the 50s. “Hey cousin,” she said, opening the door and peeking in. “Can I come in?”

“Yah sure,” he said, then his brow rose when he saw how she was dressed. “That’s one way to attract attention,” he noted.

She laughed. "I had Higgins pack my summer clothes. You know it was twenty degrees in Boston today?" She patted her bare midriff, showing off her white-furred stomach, which was sleek, toned, and very attractive to any straight male with a pulse. "I have to enjoy it while I can." She came in and sat on the couch with him, grabbing a pillow and putting it in her lap. "Umm, I just wanted to tell you, I'm starting work tomorrow. At the office."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Martha said it'll be good for me, but I'm not so sure about that. I have no idea what to expect. What do you *do* when you work?"

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"Well, from what Rick said, I'll be an intern. Fetch and carry, go run errands, and I'll be doing some typing and stuff for Rick. He wants me to go with him when he goes to see advertisers, he said. I don't know why."

"Rick's a sly one, Sheila. Odds are, you're there to look pretty and distract them."

"Oh, well, that's something I can do," she giggled. "I'm good at looking pretty. It's about all I really know how to do, to be honest about it."

"Don't talk like that!" Jessie shouted from the den.

"Oh, I thought she was sleeping or something."

"Nah, she's doing homework," Kit answered.

"I'm supposed to go with you when you go to do some surveys or something. Help you out."

"I don't really need all that much help."

“Well, Rick said you’ll get more boys to talk to you if I’m there.”

Kit laughed. “Rick *is* a sly one,” he repeated. “So, there’s your work,” he told her. “You’ll be a gopher, like one of Aunt Sarah’s maids.”

“A Vulpan, a maid,” she said, making a face. “How will I ever live it down?”

“Then don’t do it.”

She looked at him. “No, I think I want to try,” she said. “I have to stay out of trouble, and I guess, *working* will help me do that,” she said, all but choking on the word *working*. “Besides, I’m kinda scared of Martha. If I piss her off, she might spank me.”

Kit laughed. “She likes you, I think. She wouldn’t be wasting her time on you if she didn’t, I suppose.”

“Well, do *you* like me, Kit?” she asked directly.

“I don’t know yet,” he answered honestly. “I’m still very angry at the family, Sheila, and you’re part of that family. No, you’re not Uncle Zach or Uncle Jake or Aunt Maxine, but when the family turned its back on me, I didn’t hear you object. When I got hit by that car, you never visited. You chose money over me, Sheila. After I went to Jessie’s house for Thanksgiving, I guess it made me curious when you came out of nowhere at the airport, and made me forgiving enough to at least be civil to you. But you have a lot of ground to make up if you want to be my friend, Sheila.”

“Well, there’s not much I can say about that, Kit,” she told him. “I was afraid of losing my trust fund. We all knew Uncle Luke would do it. Hell, he *disowned* you, and you were his own son! We were terrified of having it happen to us too. I, I couldn’t make it without my money, Kit. I’m just a

dumb, ditzy party girl, but I'm smart enough to know that much. Hell, when I decided to stay here in Austin, I had no idea what to do. Where to go. There's no way I could make it on my own. My whole life, I've had servants to do things for me, and Mom's always there to bail me out or hold my paw when I get in over my head. I guess that's why she thinks I'm still a child," she sighed. "Every time I have even a little trouble, I always run to her instead of trying to figure out what to do my by myself. So I guess when I ran to her because Cybil wants to kill me, she just blew me off cause I run to her at least once a week over some stupid shit," she sighed, leaning back on the couch. "I'm the girl who cried wolf," she mused with dark humor. "And the one time it mattered, nobody believed me."

"I don't really believe you either," he admitted. "But I can see that since *you* believe it, then it's important enough to at least act like you're right. Better safe than sorry."

"Yeah, I guess so," she said, her slender fingers digging into the pillow in her lap. "What did Vil say?"

"She doesn't believe you either, but you know her. She'll look into it."

"I just want her to go home," Sheila complained. "I won't go back to Boston until Cybil takes her mangy ass back to England. Then everything can go back to normal. I'll get out of your hair, I can go back to school, back to my friends, back to what's normal."

"Do you really go to school?"

She looked at him. "Yeah, I really do," she admitted. "Does that surprise you?"

"A little. I figured you either blew it off or slept through class."

“I miss my morning class sometimes, but it’s boring,” she complained. “But I’m there for the business and accounting classes.”

“So, business interests you?”

“Well, I’m good at it,” she said. “It’s not much of a question of being interested. I just don’t feel like a dumbshit in those classes. Then I go to computer science class and feel like a dumbshit all over again,” she sighed.

Kit gave her a slight smile. “Then maybe you should talk to Rick, and see what running a business is really about,” he prompted. “What you learn in class is much different than the real world.”

“As soon as I figure out Excel,” she said. “I just can’t wrap my brain around that thing, but that’s *all* we use in accounting class.”

“Well, I guess I can help you there,” he said. “I know Excel fairly well. I use it at work all the time.”

“You do the books for Rick?”

“Nah, I use it in my research. It does a lot more than just do math.”

“I didn’t know that. Does Rick do his own books?”

“Yes and no,” he said. “He does the books himself, but an accounting agency shadows his own accounting and does the books come tax time.”

“Oh, so he just takes his stuff to them at tax time and they check it over, then do his taxes?”

“Yeah, more or less,” he nodded.

“What’s Jessie’s major? She told me, but I forgot,” she said, her cheeks ruffling.

“English,” he answered. “She wants to teach.”

“Teach snobby, arrogant little brats? No thank you.”

“You *are* one of those snobby, arrogant brats,” Kit told her pointedly.

She laughed. “I guess I am. You have anything to drink around here?”

“Not for you,” he answered bluntly. “Remember when I said you’d better stay legal? That applies.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “I don’t want to get smashed, I just want a glass of wine!”

He gave her a glance. “Over the stove.”

“Hig—“ she started to shout, then laughed ruefully. “Uh, guess I’d better go get it.”

“If you want it, you’d better,” Kit agreed mildly.

She bounded into the kitchen, he heard glasses clinking, and she returned a moment later with two glasses of dark red wine. She gave him one and sat back down, taking a sip of it. “Ooh, nice. This a local label?”

“It’s one of those cheap Californian mass produced wines,” he told her calmly. “But, as you can tell, it’s good.”

“Who’d have thunk it,” she mused, taking another sip.

Jessie came from the den and gave them a curious look. “Contributing to the delinquency of a minor, Kit?” she teased.

“Pft,” Sheila snorted. “Vulpans start drinking wine when they’re still in the crib,” she informed her.

“That’s a family-wide trait, I’m afraid,” Kit agreed. “I had my first glass of wine when I was ten. Vulpans don’t believe in the majority age deal. Just an example of what I told you, pretty kitty. Vulpans ignore laws that don’t suit them.”

“Ooh, maybe after we get married I can start running red lights,” she giggled.

“Maybe if you were in Boston,” Sheila laughed. “Want a glass?”

“Sure. Unlike you, I *am* old enough,” she grinned.

“Like that ever stopped me before,” Sheila said flippantly, standing up. “I gotta get used to being a gopher, so lemme get it for you.”

Jessie sat down, and immediately snuggled up against him. He put an arm around her and gripped her shoulder. “Hey there, future Misses Vulpan. Got your homework done?”

“It’s printing now,” she answered.

Sheila came back out, and Jessie extricated herself from him to take the glass she offered. “Thanks,” she said, pulling her legs up under herself and sitting demurely against his side. “I guess I shouldn’t be all that surprised that your family lets you drink, Sheila.”

“Well, they let me drink something like this, but they frown on me clubbing,” she grinned. “Oh, I meant to ask. Where do you work out? Someone as thin as you has to go to a gym, and I gotta work to keep this figure.”

“I use the university, they have a gym,” she answered. “Every day after lunch.”

“What about you, Kit? Where do you go?”

“Nowhere. I just don’t eat a lot, and my work keeps me pretty busy, even if I do sit a lot. But I’ve been thinking about it.”

“Well, let’s go in with a group package, so I have a place to work out, and it’s cheaper for all of us.”

“You have money, and you worry about cheap?” Jessie grinned at her.

“I have money because I’m a miser,” Sheila said immediately. “Why do you think I had so much money saved up? I go out a lot and party, but I also learned that if I’m careful with my money in other places, I can spend as much as I want when I go clubbing and not worry about it. My brothers and sisters are all broke by the end of the month, but I’m *never* broke,” she declared, a little smugly.

“How can you be broke when you’re rich?”

“We get checks off our trusts,” she answered. “Mine are set up for every week. Every Friday, it gets deposited in my bank account. My brother Sam gets his every month, but that’s a stupid way to do it, in my opinion. He gets that huge wad of cash on the first, but by the twentieth he’s broke.”

Jessie looked around Kit and gave her a long, curious look. “You’re not as dumb as you think you are, Sheila,” Jessie said approvingly. “I think you’re actually pretty smart.”

“Aww, thanks,” she said, her cheeks ruffling. “We gotta go out and party, Jessie. Then you get to see the *real* me,” she grinned.

“How about Friday?” she offered.

“Why not tomorrow?”

“Because I have morning classes, and I don’t miss school. No way right now, because finals are coming up,” she grunted. “I get to do finals while we’re getting ready for the wedding.”

“Ooh, when!”

“The eighteenth.”

“Oh, wow, that soon? Can I come?”

“Well, I guess,” Kit said after a moment’s thought. “We have a lot to do on the way up to it.”

“When’s the blood test again? For some reason, I just can’t keep that in my head,” Jessie said with a sour grunt.

“The fifth. We have the final fitting of our wedding clothes on Thursday, and the monsignor wants to have a couple of conferences with us about the wedding, but I haven’t scheduled those yet. You know, when we give him our planned script for the ceremony, he has to know what’s going on. We have two rehearsals, on the fifteenth and seventeenth. What about your side?”

“The florists and decorations are all set up,” she answered. “The church will let them set up the arrangements the day before. The Four Corners is booked and the decorations are picked out. Vil reserved some space at the airport for her plane, and she said our flight to Boston and Florida are both filed and ready. What does filed mean?”

“She filed the flight plans with the FAA,” he answered. “Private planes do have leeway and can file flight plans sometimes literally at the spur of the moment, but the FAA does like to have planned flight plans filed as early as possible.”

“Ah.”

“You still have your pilot’s license, Kit?” Sheila asked.

“I keep it up to date,” he nodded. “That reminds me, I have to find a flight school. I have my logged hours all done this year, but I’ll need logged hours for next year.”

“You could fly us around,” she grinned.

“No, renting planes is expensive,” Kit shook his head.

“Wait a minute, you’re going to Boston?”

“Because both me and Vil promised our mom we’d get married at the Holy Cross,” Kit answered. “I’m going to have my ceremony down here, but afterwards we’re flying to Boston to have a quick ceremony at the Holy Cross before we go on to our honeymoon in Florida.”

“Oh. Well, that’s sweet of you, cousin, fulfilling your mom’s wish.”

“Jessie, wanna go help me find a dress for the wedding after w—work tomorrow?” Sheila asked.

Jessie laughed. “If you keep practicing, you’ll eventually be able to say that word.”

“It’s a four letter word to a Vulpan,” she grinned, elbowing Kit lightly. “Well, except this one.”

“Sure, I’ll go shopping with you,” Jessie answered. “We need to hang out a little anyway. You’re part of the in-laws, I need to get to know you.”

“I’m no in-law,” she said, then she laughed. “And don’t think the family’s like me. I’m just a dumb, ditzy party girl. I’m harmless. You

haven't met the *real* Vulpans, Jessie, like my mom, or Uncle Zach, or Uncle Jake, or Aunt Maxine."

"How many aunts and uncles do you have, Kit?" Jessie asked. "I've always meant to ask you that, but I guess I've never got around to it."

"I have six," Kit answered. "Grandpa had seven kids, five boys and two girls."

"My mom Sarah's the third youngest," Sheila answered. "Kit's dad was the oldest. Uncle Brian's the youngest. It goes Uncle Luke, Uncle Zach, Aunt Maxine, Uncle Jake, my mom, Uncle Tom, and then Uncle Brian." She leaned over Kit and looked at Jessie. "My mom was like grandma, she had a lot of kids. Mom had six kids. I'm the second youngest. My brother Sam's the oldest, he's twenty-six. My younger sister Christine is fifteen."

"How can you two be so close together in age if your parents are far apart?"

"Because my mom didn't have Vil til dad was like twenty-six," Kit answered.

"And my mom got married and started cranking out babies when she was eighteen," Sheila answered. "The oldest of the cousins are like, what Kit, twenty-nine?"

"Around that. I think Bridgette is thirty."

"Wow, so Vil's not the oldest cousin?"

"No, Uncle Zach was married when he was eighteen and his wife had Bridgette while my dad was still in school," Kit answered. "The oldest male Vulpan cousin is Patrick, he's twenty-seven. He's Maxine's first. Vil is

actually the third oldest of the cousins, at twenty-six, with Sheila's brother just two weeks behind her."

"Where are you in there?"

"Me? I'm on the front end of the middle," he answered. "The average age of the cousins is one year younger than me. And they've already started working on the next generation. Bridgette and Patrick both have kids of their own."

"I hope to have our own contribution next year," Jessie giggled, leaning against Kit.

"Too bad our kids'll never see another Vulpan outside of me and Vil," Kit told her.

"Hey, and me!" Sheila said indignantly.

"Seriously, love, if I showed up in Boston with a mixed breed baby, I think it would make the universe explode," he said to her. "When you get pregnant, we just stay very quiet and stay as far from Massachusetts as possible. If we raise a fuss, there might be another hitman coming down here to pay us a little visit."

"He's not joking," Sheila agreed when Jessie was about to discount him. "If you put your baby in Uncle Zach's face, he might try to kill it right on the spot. Don't judge our family by me and Kit, Jessie. Most of them are rabid purists. All my brothers and sisters are purists. My mom's a purist, my dad's a purist, all our aunts and uncles are purists, and virtually all our cousins are purists except for a couple of them. I think I'm not a purist just to rebel against them," she said clinically.

"Which ones said they're not purists?" Kit asked curiously.

“Muffy, Angela, Victor, and Steve. Vil, well, you can never tell anything about Vil anyway. I don’t know about her.”

“Muffy?” Jessie laughed. “Now that’s a rich girl name!”

“Her real name is Eugenia Minerva Vulpan, but she hates it, so everyone calls her Muffy,” Sheila explained. “Then again, she’s forgotten why we call her that.”

“She took it as a badge of honor I think,” Kit nodded, then he chuckled.

“Why did you call her Muffy?”

“She used to go around her house naked all the time, even well into her teens,” Sheila explained with a grin. “Since she showed off her muff to anyone who’d look at her, we called her Muffy. It just kinda stuck after a while. She’s *still* like that. Muffy just can’t keep her clothes on.”

“Girls who are almost there themselves shouldn’t be ragging on cousins,” Kit noted.

Sheila laughed. “I’m not shy about showing off what God gave me,” she said with an outrageous grin.

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with that,” Jessie said. “I’m not above wearing some nice things that show me off when I’m in the right company,” she said, patting Kit’s knee meaningfully.

“Ah, you two are having sex already?”

“Naturally,” Jessie told her. “We do live together, after all.”

“Good. If you don’t have sex before marriage, how do you know you’re gonna be satisfied after you tie the knot?”

“Interesting position for a Catholic to take,” Jessie giggled.

“Pft, I’m as Catholic as the Dalai Lhama,” she snorted in reply.

“Besides, you won’t find a more notorious bunch of adulterers than a Catholic family. After all, when all you have to do is confess, you’re not afraid to sin.”

“That’s an interesting way to look at it,” Jessie noted, taking a sip of wine.

“So, you two have sex, eh? He any good?” Sheila asked, giving Jessie a grin.

Jessie’s face poofed out, then she laughed. “Why am I not surprised you’d ask that?”

“Girls who dress like this aren’t afraid to ask questions like that,” she said brazenly, motioning at her skimpy attire.

“You realize you’re asking about your own cousin.”

“He has to maintain the family reputation, even if he’s not in the family anymore,” she grinned at him. “All Vulpans are good at two things, business and sex. Male Vulpans are notorious femanizers, and femme Vulpans are almost legendary for their availability. So, is he a true Vulpan?”

“Oh, he’s a real Vulpan alright in some ways,” Jessie said with her face poofed out, but giving him a naughty smile. “But if I catch him chasing after another femme’s tail, I’ll cut his off and hang it on the wall.”

Sheila laughed. “No in-law has tamed a Vulpan since Aunt Beth tamed Uncle Luke,” she declared. “Every other Vulpan cheats on their spouses, even my own mom.”

“Well, I’m tamed,” Kit told Sheila. “This is the only femme for me. She’s almost too much femme,” he chuckled, putting his arm around Jessie.

“I just know how to keep my male happy, that’s all,” she purred, nuzzling his muzzle. “He doesn’t have to go roaming to find what makes him happy.”

“You’re part fox, I guess you have a genetic understanding of a young fox’s needs,” Sheila grinned as she picked up her wine glass. “Now if I could just find a male version of you,” she complained. “Clubbing is fun, I meet bunches of handsome guys and I have lots of good sex, but I’ve been looking for something, well, *more* lately,” she said, a little distantly, swirling her wine in its glass before drinking about half of what was left in one swallow.

“I should introduce you to my brother,” Jessie offered. “You’d like him. He’s big as a barn, but gentle like a teddy bear.”

“That’s incest,” Sheila giggled.

“Not when you’re in-laws it’s not,” Jessie told her. “That way my brother can leech off your trust fund and never have to worry about money, so he can focus all his attention on playing football.”

Sheila laughed. “The true motive revealed! Wait, he plays football?” Sheila asked.

“You just lost your brother,” Kit noted to Jessie.

“I *love* football!” Sheila exclaimed. “I know that makes me a mutant, a girl that likes football, but I love it!”

“Really?” Jessie asked. “You’re talking to a girl from a football family, Sheila. Our dad’s like the ultimate Bengals fan, so we grew up with football.”

“I just love the game. So, your brother plays?”

She nodded. “He’ll be playing for a college team next year. He doesn’t know which one yet, but he should start getting offers soon. He figures as soon as his high school finishes the playoffs.”

“Cool! They good?”

“They’re *very* good,” Jessie said proudly. “Won the 4A championship for two straight years, and they play for the championship next Friday. Ben told me that colleges won’t make any offers until the season’s over, and since they’re still playing, he’s just waiting.”

“What position does he play?”

“Running back, but he also sometimes plays linebacker and plays special teams. He’s really strong, but he’s also very fast and he knows how to tackle. His coach told him that the more skills he has when he moves up to college, the more playtime he’ll get in college, and the better chance he has to make it pro when he graduates. So his coach has taught him how to play all three phases of a game, offense defense and special teams.”

“Is he any good?”

“He’s *fantastic*,” Jessie said proudly. “Whenever the team needs a first down, they give him the ball. He’s got the school and state records for rushing yards. He’ll get to pick which school he goes to, he’ll get a bunch of offers.”

“Sounds like I really wanna meet this guy,” Sheila grinned.

“I have some pictures of him,” Jessie offered.

“Oh, show me!”

Jessie got her laptop and opened it, put it on the coffee table, and dug up her pictures of her family. “That’s him. This is my family, Sheila. That’s my sister Jenny, my mom, and my dad. My cousin George was with us, and he took the picture for us. We were at King’s Dominion when we took this picture, that’s what that tower is in the background.”

“Wow, he’s gorgeous! He have a girlfriend?”

“He’s had a few,” Jessie giggled.

Sheila looked at Kit. “I’m glad I came down here.”

“Why?”

“Because now I have a good reason to look forward to your wedding,” she winked. “I think I’m gonna get to know this fine hunk of cat right here,” she said with a predatory edge to her voice.

“Keep your panties on,” Kit warned. “I have issues with her parents, Sheila. If you start going after Ben, you’re gonna make Jessie’s mom go nuclear.”

“Yeah, it will,” Jessie sighed. “Mom objects to our marriage, Sheila. She’s coming to the wedding under protest, and that’s a direct quote from her. So I’d have to side with Kit here. I’d like you to meet my family, but don’t do anything that’ll piss off my mom.”

“Well, okay, but it won’t be easy,” she said, looking at Ben in the picture again. “Vulpans aren’t used to being denied what they want.”

“Except when another Vulpan wants something else,” Kit warned. “You’re on my turf, cousin. This is Austin, not Boston. You live in *my* apartment complex, and you’re working in *my* office.”

“Yeah, yeah, I accede to your ownership,” she sighed. “I promised I’d behave when you took me in, and I’ll honor my word. If I piss you off and get kicked out, I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“Well, don’t talk like he has his finger over the trigger,” Jessie told her.

She yawned, showing off her impressive canines. Like Kit, all the Vulpans had hybrid teeth, normal fur teeth but with pronounced canines. Some carnivore furs filed their teeth down like Barry did, but some were born with their teeth that way. The Vulpans weren’t like that, and neither was Jessie’s family. “Well, I think I’m gonna head home. Lupe came over and helped me put the TV and entertainment center together. I thanked him by letting him see my boobs through the window when he left,” she grinned. “He was staring at them the whole time anyway, I figured why not just let him get the full experience. I knew he’d look back when he went out the door, so I pulled my shirt off like I was heading back to my bedroom.”

Jessie laughed. “I’d never do something like that,” she said.

“It’s easy. Just pull your shirt up,” Sheila winked as she finished her wine then stood up. “Then stand there and let him worship you like the goddess you are!” She gave them a naughty smile. “Now, if you’re sleeping with the guy, you give all your orders while you have your shirt up. When he’s staring at your chest, he’ll agree to anything you say. Males are powerless against breasts!”

“Go home, brat, before you corrupt my fiancée,” Kit warned.

“Going home,” she grinned. “See you tomorrow at work, then?”

“Not me. I have Mondays off.”

“Oh. Oh, okay. So, I’ll see you tomorrow after work then? We have to go shopping, and I hope you’ll go with us.”

“I can do that. See you tomorrow.”

“Night Sheila,” Jessie said.

“I’ll call you tomorrow before we leave, okay? Can I have your number?”

“Sure,” Jessie said, grabbing the notepad on the coffee table and scribbling down a couple of numbers. “The top one is my cell, the middle one is Kit’s work cell, and the bottom one is his personal cell.”

“Here, this is my cell,” she said, leaning over and writing a number down on the pad. “See you guys tomorrow.”

Sheila left, and Kit and Jessie looked at each other in silence for a moment. “So, what do you think?” he finally asked.

“I like her,” she declared. “I like her a lot. There’s a lot more to her than she lets on, or even thinks herself.” She stood up and squared off before him, grinning down at him. “But I’ll have to try out her suggestion.”

She reached under her shirt and unhooked her bra in the front, grabbed the hem and pulled it up, exposing her breasts to him. “Now, you will do the dishes!” she commanded imperiously. “Then we’ll watch sappy love story movies, then you will give me a foot massage!”

Kit laughed raucously. “It won’t work,” he said with a grin. “I saw this coming the instant Sheila closed the door.”

She laughed. “Another myth debunked,” she lamented, moving to reconnect her bra, but Kit’s upraised paws stopped her.

“Not yet,” he hummed, staring at her perfect glory, which made her laugh raucously.

“Maybe it’s not debunked after all,” she teased, giving him a cherubic grin.

“I can appreciate them without being enslaved by them,” he said, a little tauntingly. “Now, if you want my slavish obedience,” he trailed off, leaning forward and grabbing her belt buckle, “let’s go back to the bedroom.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” she giggled as he stood up and wrapped his arms around her. She laughed as he picked her up off her feet by his grip on her waist. “Now, if only I could get you to obey like this all the time!”

“What fun would I be then,” he hummed.

“You know, it’s not even eight o’clock!”

“Now you know why I told you to do your homework early,” he told her as he carted her off to the bedroom.

Sheila’s addition to the office and his life was surprisingly orderly.

For some strange, mysterious, downright odd reason, she didn’t seem to cause much trouble at work. She did what she was told, and spent most of the first day chatting away with the people there and learning her way around. Kit called about once an hour to check on her, and he was surprised to hear from them that she was an amiable, friendly girl that seemed

honestly curious about what they did at the magazine, and was willing to work.

That just about floored him. It made him wonder just what was going on in her head, since it was so much unlike the Sheila he knew that for a little while he wondered if she was a plant or a spy sent down by the family to check him out. Kit hung on to that idea until he talked to Vil to confirm the Thursday appointment for their final fitting, and she told him that what she'd told him had been more or less true. Someone *had* attacked her, it was a matter of police record and with witnesses.

It was as he was talking with Vil that he felt that he understood what happened. Kit and Jessie, and Rick and Martha, they *believed* her...up to a point. But the important thing was, they took her seriously. They listened to her, and they moved to help her and protect her. To Sheila, who was an issue of annoyance for her parents because she was a party girl, someone actually paying attention to her, and being nice to her, and taking her seriously was something new to her. That explained why she was so attached to Rick and Martha, and wanted to please them, because they'd been so nice to her. Sheila was a ditz, but she was also starved for attention, and she was getting all kinds of positive attention here in Austin, from both family and from friends of family. Rick and Martha gave her the kind of attention she never got from her own parents. She didn't have to compete with five other siblings, and she was listened to and her opinion was valued, but the relationship was placed in a venue which Sheila could understand and accept, at least to begin with. Rick and Martha treated her like an adult, but also gave her the attention a child would crave, and it was the perfect combination that earned them Sheila's undying loyalty.

It amazed him sometimes. Rick had taken one look at her, and seemed to know exactly what to do to help her in the way that mattered most, to start allowing her develop a little confidence and self respect, both of which she had neither.

There were a few issues, though. Kit's "no comment" policy was something that the gang and the girls over at the sorority also followed, but nobody seemed to tell Sheila. When Kit came down the office after lunch to get something out of his office, she told him what had happened. She was accosted out in front of the office during lunch, and she was more than willing to talk to the Boston Globe reporter that stopped her, who called her by name. Sheila told him *everything*. She quite happily told him why she was in Austin, getting quite a few digs in on Cybil at the same time in telling the reporter that she feared Cybil tried to kill her, which was why she fled to Austin to seek refuge with her disowned cousin, because Vilenne Vulpan protected him ever since the failed attempt on his life, had control of Austin, and she was staying where it was safe until Cybil went back to England. She told them that Kit was no part of the suit in Boston, and just wanted to be left alone, but she was quite happy to tell them all about him from *her* point of view. She told them all about him, and Jessie, and the fact that he was very happy and content living in Austin and having nothing to do with the family or its money.

"I can't believe you did that!" Kit growled.

"What, nobody told me not to talk to them!" she protested. "It's not like I said anything bad about you, Kit!"

He stalked away, muttering to himself.

Kit was a bit ticked off at Sheila, but he got over it by the time they went shopping. Kit got to watch Sheila and Jessie interact, but they weren't alone. Sandy and Sam came along with them, as well as Jeffrey and Kevin. They went to the mall, and while the girls took Sheila out to look for dresses, Kit, Jeffrey, and Kevin roamed around. They checked out some clothing stores, music stores, and computer stores. Kit bought Jessie a couple of music CDs, and Jeffrey bought Sandy a digital camera for the wedding. Kevin grilled them about Sam most of the time, asking them what she liked, what she didn't, stories about her, anything they knew about her. "Dude," Jeffrey laughed as they went into the bookstore, "why don't you ask her?"

"Because I want to surprise her," he answered. "Christmas is coming Jeffrey. I gotta find her something good, and the only way to do that is find out what she likes and doesn't like...and even though I know her pretty well, I want to make sure I get her something really, really special. Would you ask Sandy what she wants for Christmas, or would you rather surprise her with something?"

"Oh. Ohhhh, crap, I gotta buy her a Christmas present!" Jeffrey gasped, giving Kit a wild look. "Jessie's their best friend, dude. Have her tell us what they like, would ya?"

"I have to get Jessie something too," Kit sighed. "You could always tell Sandy that camera's her early Christmas present."

"Yeah, like she'll care come Christmas time," Jeffrey snorted.

"Well, you're fellow rodents, what do rodents like?" Kevin asked.

"Dude, Sam's a *skunk*. What do femme skunks like?" Jeffrey challenged. When Kevin said nothing, he just gave him a smug look. "I

thought so.”

“Jewelry, you never go wrong with jewelry,” Kit chuckled. “Buy them some necklaces or something.”

“What are you going to get Jessie?” Kevin asked.

“Not sure. I’ll be pretty much well broke after the wedding and honeymoon, so it can’t be anything big. I need to get presents for Jessie’s family too,” he said, scratching his chin absently. “John’ll be easy. Anything with the Bengals logo on it will make him happy. Jenny and Ben won’t be hard either, but Hannah’s gonna be tricky. Hmm,” he pondered, lost in thought a long moment as he considered the problem.

“So, you got very far with Sam yet?” Jeffrey asked.

“Well, that depends on what you mean,” Kevin answered. “We’ve been out almost every night since we met, so I’m doing pretty well with her. We have a lot of common interests, so our dates are always fun.”

“Yeah, but have you managed to bring it home yet?” Jeffrey asked with a grin.

“Haven’t really thought of it yet,” he answered honestly. “We’re not Kit and Jessie, bud.”

Kit laughed. “I’m not sure if that was a complement or an insult.”

“Dude, three months from meet to marry? That’s like the ultimate fast track. How long was it before you slept together? Two weeks? Three?”

“We’re a special case, Jeffrey,” Kit said calmly. “We were love at first sight. Well, it was for me, anyway. I had to work on Jessie a little to get her to come around.”

“I’d never have believed in that if I didn’t know you,” the mouse laughed. “Okay, so anyway, dudes, we still have a problem in front of us.”

“Christmas,” Kit and Kevin said in unison.

“Which is no doubt why Sam and Sandy wanted to come, and they brought us along,” Jeffrey reasoned as they left the bookstore.

Kit’s phone rang. He saw it was Jessie, and flipped it open. “Yeah love?”

“We’re done. Meet us at the food court, okay? We’re hungry.”

“Be there in a few.” He closed the phone. “They’re finished, but they want something to eat.”

“Food court!” Jeffrey proclaimed, pointing down the mall imperiously.

They met outside the seating area, then split up again to get what they wanted. They gathered at a pair of tables near the edge. Kit and Jessie went to get steak sandwiches, Sam got Chinese, Jeffrey and Kevin got pizza, and Sandy got a salad from The Salad Bowl, a vegetarian specialty restaurant. Sheila came in last with a tray holding a taco salad. “Damn, you gonna eat all that?” Jeffrey laughed as she sat down at Kit’s table.

“Every bite. Wanna watch?” she asked in a way that made Jeffrey’s grayish-white fur ruffle, and he looked at Sandy quite deliberately.

“Be nice,” Kit murmured. “What kind of dress did you find?”

“Oh, it’s gorgeous!” Sheila gushed. “It’s a spaghetti strap dress with a flared neckline and lace, in a beautiful cream color not far from Jessie’s fur,” she described.

“Where is it?”

“Already in the truck,” she answered. “What did you guys do?”

“Looked at possible Christmas presents,” Kit answered. “And we picked up a few little things,” he added, motioning at the bag on the table by his tray.

“Well, I don’t believe it, you did what you were supposed to do,” Sandy said with a grin at Jeffrey. “So, what you gonna get me for Christmas, baby?” she asked Jeffrey directly.

“You’ll find out at Christmas, won’t you?” he challenged. “I did buy you this, though. You said you don’t have a camera, so I got you a little digital one. It’s pretty good, perfect for the amateur photographer.”

“Wow, for me? You’re so sweet,” she grinned across the table at him. “I gotta get ready for the wedding too, and I do need a camera. I gotta take pictures!”

“Lilly and Mike will handle that for me,” Jeffrey chuckled. “God knows, they’ll take about a thousand of them between the two of them.”

“And we’ll have a professional photographers there too,” Jessie added. “They’re gonna make a DVD of the ceremony and some of the reception and take some pictures.”

“That can’t be cheap.”

“Vil’s paying for it, so eh,” Jessie shrugged with a grin. “She paid for everything.”

“Must be nice.”

“Yeah well, she wanted to get really crazy, but I had to keep a leash on her,” Jessie laughed. “She wanted to hire an *orchestra* to play at the

wedding, and was gonna hire Jennifer Lopez to sing at the reception.”

“Wow, that’s extravagant,” Kevin laughed.

“As much as I’d love to have Hollywood at my wedding, I had to put my foot down,” Jessie giggled. “Kit is letting me indulge a little, but he really wants to keep it simple, so I’m riding the fence between him and Vil. I do want a little pomp and circumstance, it *is* my wedding after all, but I don’t want to turn it into a Royal affair.”

Sheila laughed. “Jess, you’re *marrying* royalty,” she grinned. “The Vulpans are the royal family of Boston.”

“I’m not part of them anymore, Sheila.”

“Pft, that’ll last as long as Cybil’s in America,” she said. “I think that Vil’s gonna win the lawsuit, and when she kills Uncle Luke’s will, you’ll be back in the fold.”

“Yeah, if I wanted anything to do with them,” Kit snorted. “I’m happy here, Sheila. Why on earth would I want to go back to Boston? All my friends are here. My job is here. My and my fiancée’s life is here. There’s nothing in Boston for me but bad memories.”

“You can stay here and still be part of the family, Kit. There’s a *few* of us that miss you, you know,” she said with a smile at him. “Austin can be the southern outpost of the Vulpan family, with you running things here while Vil runs Boston.”

“No thank you,” he said firmly.

“Well, I think I’ll be down here in the winter,” she giggled.

“It gets cold here come January,” Sam told her. “If you want balmy, you have to go to Brownsville or head to Mexico.”

“Trust me, it’s warmer than Boston,” Sheila laughed. “Come May, I’m out in a bikini in fifty degree weather. We Vulpans have thick fur,” she winked.

“Kit certainly does,” Jessie laughed. “I love his fur, it’s thick and soft and cuddly.”

“That’s something I didn’t need to know, Jessie,” Jeffrey laughed.

Kit’s first day of working with Sheila actually went pretty well. She was the office gopher, doing all the fetching, carrying, and running things between Marty, Kit, Rick, and the main office, but she was a refreshing breath of fresh air in the place. She was saucy and sharp-tongued, but she had a pretty tolerant sense of humor when they gang made jokes at her expense. She fit in very well with the group, like a little sister everyone teased but also watched out for.

But she was also everyone’s assistant, and since Kit had outside work to do with Project A, Sheila was tagged to go along with him as he ventured onto campus to take student surveys. It felt a little weird going out alone with her, since she was a member of his family, and she kept wanting to talk about their childhood once she got him alone. Kit and Sheila weren’t close to the same age and would have been in different social groups among the cousins, Kit with the older cousins and Sheila with the younger ones, but there was a special relationship between Kit and Sheila’s families. His father and Aunt Sarah had been very close, and after his mother died, Aunt Sarah was the only one that really came over to check on his father in a

personal or intimate sense. That put Sarah's younger kids in the house with him and Vil quite a bit, so he'd gotten to know Sheila, Bill, and Christine better than he knew most of the younger cousins. The three of them were barely more than toddlers when his mother died—well, Sheila was five, Randy was three, and Christine was two. But as the years passed after that, Sarah kept coming over, and Kit sort of grew up with more contact with Sheila, Randy, and Christine than with most of the other cousins. It was why he knew so much about her. If Bess or Lynn or Travis had come down instead of her, he'd have rejected them outright and without question, but he knew Sheila pretty well...as far as the cousins went. Though Suzy was the first sexual encounter he'd had, his first non-normal experience with the opposite gender had been skinny-dipping in the big pool with Sheila. Sheila was the first live female outside of his immediate family he'd seen naked, though since she was age ten, there wasn't all that much to see. He'd been fourteen at the time, and three weeks after the skinny-dipping episode, Suzy would lure him into an empty room at the Boston Country Club and deflower him. Sheila had instigated the skinny dipping, as he recalled, talking him into taking off his swim trunks after she shed her one piece on the poolside, kicking her feet in the water as she basically teased him into matching her bravery. Even at a very young age, Sheila was a bit more bold than the average girl, and not just in a sexual manner. Sheila had been a very brave and daring child, willing to push the limits and test her mother, but after Kit was disowned and things changed, well, Sheila became much more timid once she realized that she could realistically lose *everything* if she made Uncle Luke angry. She toned it way down after Kit was disowned, and it took a few years before she worked up the nerve to be rebellious again. But her boldness and rebellion were just fronts in a bid to get attention, a behavior that Kit knew very well, as he'd done the same

thing himself in the years leading up to his being disowned. He'd also yelled and shouted, broke things, disobeyed, ran away, he even once set fire to one of his father's cars.

The past between Sheila, Kit, and Vil was probably why she thought to come to Austin when she got this wild idea that Cybil tried to kill her. She was one of the few cousins that had a much more extensive understanding of the enigmatic children of Uncle Luke, who were much, much different from the other cousins. Vil and Kit were raised different, had received deferential treatment, and were regarded with quite a bit of jealousy among the cousins, for their parents treated Kit and Vil better than they treated their own children...because they were the children of the family patriarch. Kit was fairly sure that quite a few of them were silently happy when Kit was disowned, glad to see the child that got all their parents' attention get what was coming to him, in their eyes. But Sheila had seen the inner workings, as it were, and knew just how dysfunctional life was in the east wing of Stonebrook Manor, which was the personal abode of the family of the patriarch. Sheila knew Kit and Vil better than most of the other cousins, knew that the bond between Kit and Vil was still strong, was probably even stronger since he'd been disowned. She knew that the key to getting to Vil was through Kit, and knew that since Vil was so protective over her younger brother, safety could be found under the umbrella she opened over the city of Austin.

Sheila was immature. Sheila was flighty, selfish, shallow, and vapid. But Sheila was *not* stupid. In fact, since she'd crashed into his life on Friday, he'd been starting to see just how clever Sheila really was. He wasn't sure if it was book smarts or intelligence in the classic sense, but she

was very clever. Cunning was a good word for it, which wasn't a surprising trait in a Vulpan.

And so she was here, and so far, Kit couldn't really complain very much. Outside of talking to the reporters, she'd been behaving herself, and he kinda liked talking to her on Sunday. But time would tell, and he hadn't passed judgment quite yet.

"So, how do we go about this?" she asked as she tugged at her high-tailed tee shirt. Sheila, like many young girls, dressed in the current midriff-baring style, despite the fact that it was only fifty degrees out. For a Bostonian, fifty was balmy in November, so she was decked out in her waist-ending tee that showed off cleavage and a pair of hip-hugger jeans that showed off a surprising expanse of belly both above and below her navel. She got a ton of appreciative looks from males on campus, but that wasn't surprising. Sheila had a rich girl's figure; toned, sleek, and buxom, and she'd turn any male's head, even Kit's own if she wasn't a blood relative.

"Well, since Rick made us an appointment, what we're going to do is sit at a table in the main rec center and try to get students to stop and answer some questions."

"What questions?"

"Well, we're asking age, if they're registered to vote, if they're registered for a party, and who their favorite candidate is for President," he answered. "When we're done, we'll compare our statistics to state and national statistics for college furs who vote and see if U.T. is mainstream."

"Oh, that sounds easy."

“Yah, it’s not bad. Lots of students know who we are, so plenty stop to talk to us.”

“How do you mean?”

“These are the furs we make the magazine for,” he told her. “College kids. Our pictures are in the magazine, Sheila, a lot of them know my face. And we have a *Lone Star* banner we keep in the rec center when we use the table that I’ll hang over us so people who don’t know me know why we’re there. When we come on campus like this, it’s because we’re looking for student feedback.”

“Ah, cool.”

The rec center was a huge room filled with tables, couches, chairs, and plasma TV screens hanging on a couple of walls. Upstairs there was a little restaurant and pool room, and downstairs there was a five lane bowling alley and a video game room. There was a bookstore on one side and a food court and a couple of little shops on the other, almost like a little miniature mall. Kit got his magazine’s banner out of the storage shed with the help of a center staffer, found the table near the door which they’d been given for the day, and set it up. Sheila and Kit sat down and he pulled out his laptop, and they got down to business, which usually meant asking passers-by if they had a minute to answer a few very quick questions. It was boring work usually, and Kit spent much of the time just chatting with students that wandered by, or talking with Sheila...but Sheila seemed dissatisfied with the pace of their information gathering. Rick was clever to send Sheila, for she was very cute, and more than one male wandered by and took the survey just to talk to her, just as Kit may have lured a female or two in with his smile to take the survey.

“How many surveys do we need to be done?” she asked after two hours.

“The more the better, that gives us a more accurate overview,” he said. “But a few hundred at least. Just settle in, Sheila, this usually takes a while. Sometimes it takes a couple of days to get a reliable sample we can work with.”

“Well then, let’s pick up the pace a little,” she said, standing up, pulling her shirt up almost to her bra, then pushing down on her jeans to make them as low as possible without getting arrested for indecent exposure. Then, to Kit’s surprise, she climbed up onto the table, turned around to face the huge room, put two fingers to her muzzle, and unleashed an ear-splitting whistle that totally stopped all activity in the rec center in a heartbeat.

“What the hell are you doing?” Kit hissed.

“Getting our surveys,” she said as she glanced down at him with a slight smile, then she looked out at the students. “Lone Star Magazine is doing a quick survey about students and voting for an upcoming article!” she shouted, hitching a hip in a very model-like pose as her tail swished behind her seductively, which no doubt got the attention of every male in the place. “Why don’t some of you handsome guys come talk to us? You’ll be doing your civic duty, and we only ask four questions! You’ll be done before you know it!”

“And that accomplishes what outside of getting us booted from the rec center?” he asked archly as she hopped down off the table.

“Watch and learn, cousin,” she winked as she pushed the chair back so anyone on the other side could see as much of her as possible, then sat back down.

Kit was a little surprised at her tactics, but she did get results. They almost had a line as students, both males and females surprisingly enough, wandered over to take the survey. Both Kit and Sheila were busy asking questions, Kit using his laptop and Sheila marking things down in a spiral, but she also made sure to chat with the males and flirt just a little bit, giving them smiles and smoky-eyed looks through her lashes. So many of them asked if they were related that it almost became annoying, but Sheila was much more cordial about it. “Yeah, he’s my cousin,” she answered for the hundredth time, leaning over and elbowing Kit lightly in the arm. “He set it up so I could come intern at his magazine. He’s pretty cool, for a cousin anyway.”

After two more hours, they had nearly five hundred surveys, because the people at their table attracted more people who wanted to see what was going on, and it kept them busy almost continually after Sheila got things moving. Another hour after that, they had enough surveys for Kit to proclaim they had a viable sample base to use for the statistics they needed.

“So, we’re done?”

“At least here, yeah,” he answered. They did take a few more surveys from some males, or at least Sheila did as Kit took down their banner and took it to the concession stand, then put it in the storeroom when a rec center worker came to help him. Sheila was chatting coyly with three males, one of which Kit recognized was on the football team, being typically flirtatious. Kit cut them short, but not before the football player asked for Sheila’s number. “Oh no, baby, I never give out my number,” she winked at him. “I’m the one who makes the calls, not takes them. So, give me *your* number, and we’ll see if you get lucky.”

Kit thought that was a bit outrageous, but the football player did it. He gave her his cell number, then the three of them wandered off, glancing back at her repeatedly.

“I thought you wanted to meet Ben,” he noted, a bit accusingly.

“Gotta have a plan B in case that doesn’t pan out,” she grinned. “And a plan C, and a plan D, and a plan E, and—“

Kit rolled up a college newspaper and whacked her with it, which made her laugh.

They returned to the office after lunch, which made Rick a bit curious. “Done already?” he asked as Sheila gave him her spiral and went into the main office.

“Yeah, Sheila decided to be a little...active, in getting surveys,” he grunted. When he described what she did, Rick just laughed. “The little twerp. I almost grabbed her tail and yanked her back down.”

“She’s certainly something,” Rick agreed with a chuckle.

“I hope I’m something good,” Sheila grinned as she wormed under Rick’s arm in the doorway and came into Kit’s office. Mike came up behind Rick holding a camera. “Where do you want me?”

“You’re his cousin, sit in his lap,” Mike grinned mischievously. “An introduction pic for Sheila we’re putting in the next issue,” Mike explained to Kit’s confused look, as Sheila spilled herself into her cousin’s lap for Mike. Sheila hooked an arm around Kit’s shoulder and waved to the camera with the other as Rick moved for Mike, and Mike took two shots. He looked at them on the screen, then nodded. “Got it. Barry’s whipping up a little

intro bio on you, Sheila. When they're done, I'll have Savid work it in and you'll get to see it."

"Cool! I've never been in a magazine that wasn't a tabloid before!"

Mike laughed. "Well, now, if you want to let me take some tabloid-esque pictures, we could talk about that," he said.

"Only if you pay me. A minimum hundred dollars per exposed square foot of fur, but there's a white fur surcharge," she said, which made both Rick and Mike laugh. "White fur costs extra. Those are the good parts, you know," she added with a wink, patting her white-furred midriff.

"I'm not that rich, not on what Rick pays me," Mike grinned, then hurried off to his own tiny office before Rick could reply.

"She's a Vulpan alright," Rick chuckled as he went back to his office.

"Was there any doubt?" Sheila called loudly after him.

Kit saw the intro they were putting in page two beside the usual group shot while Sheila was out running an errand for Rick, showing a brightly smiling Sheila sitting in his lap, waving to the camera. Barry had finished the bio as well:

The Yankees keep coming!

Everyone welcome Sheila Vulpan to the *Lone Star* family! Sheila is Kit's cousin, who is also from Boston, who's come down to intern with us and learn the magazine business hands-on while on sabbatical from Harvard University...and to get away from the cold Boston winter.

So show her some Texas hospitality, Austin. She's another Yankee, but hey, the first one turned out pretty well.

At least this Vulpan is cute! The males of the office are very, very, very, very happy she's here!

Did we mention we're happy she's here? Well, we're happy she's here.

Really.

Pictures of Sheila will be available in the new pay area of the website, at one hundred dollars per square foot of fur revealed, with an additional surcharge for exposed white fur.

Yes, this is a joke. Don't email us asking where it is.

And yes, Sheila approved of this bio before we published it.

Kit chuckled when he read it, and gave Mike a smile.

"Think she'll get her tail in a twist over that?" Barry asked.

"Nah, she'll think it's funny," he answered. "Sheila's not priggish."

Not at all. She thought it was a riot when she read it. "Oh, you gotta put a link for that pay site on the magazine website, and have it link to kid's website like Disneyworld!" she laughed when Savid showed it to him. "No, no, have it link to some anti-porn crusader website!"

Mike stopped in mid-maw opening, then broke out into laughter. "I'll go do that right now!" he said, rushing back to his office.

“Oh, I can smell the hate already,” Barry mused, then the entire office exploded into laughter.

Chapter 14

The ramifications of Sheila's talking to reporters wasn't felt by Kit and Jessie until Thursday, when the dress people came back to Austin to do the final fitting.

They brought a copy of the *Boston Globe* with the story in it with them, and while Kit tried on his tuxedo, the two foxes asked him all about everything. It was a little surprising how much they knew, and when he finally asked them how they knew all that, if Vil had told them, one of the vixens gave him the Tuesday newspaper to read, but asked to get it back.

The headline read *Vulpans Comment on Lawsuit*, and there were pictures of four of them in a square by the article. In the top boxes were himself and Vil, but in the bottom two were Cybil and Sheila, all of them obviously old file photographs. Much of the article read almost exactly as Sheila had described when she told him what she told the reporter. It stated that Kit was not an active part of the suit and really had no desire to be involved with it, which was news to most Bostonians. It explained the lawsuit and the players in it, and how the entire family was embroiled in a bitter fight over control of the Vulpan fortune. Vilenne was trying to wrest the fortune away from her aunts and uncles using Kit as a tool and an old will. Cybil was trying to take the fortune for herself using spousal rights and an attempt to declare Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan Junior as unsound when he made the will that disowned Kit. The uncles and aunts were fighting both of them to retain the current will, where the fortune was divided up evenly between the six surviving brothers and sisters of the deceased patriarch. It

was an almost a soap opera, a delicious tale of greed and conniving where the Vulpans fought like a pack of wild dogs over scraps thrown from the table, and the whole city of Boston stepped back to watch their royal family act like anything but the social paragons they pretended to be.

Sheila got her digs in as well:

When asked why she had moved to Austin and had left Harvard University, Miss Vulpan answered “It’s not safe in Boston. Someone tried to kill me, and while I can’t prove it, I’m pointing my finger at Cybil. I overheard her talking to one of her lawyers the day I had to give my deposition, and not two days later, someone tries to shoot me on the street. Well, with all the craziness going on about the will and the lawsuit, I’m not going to assume it was a coincidence until it’s proved that it was. After someone tried to kill [Kitstrom “Kit” Vulpan III], [Vilenne “Vil” Vulpan] put a lot of protection down here for him to make sure nobody tries again. Since someone’s trying to kill me, I felt this was the safest place to be. Kit wasn’t that happy to see me, but he could tell I was frightened, and he’s allowed me to move in down here until I feel safe enough to go home.”

When asked about what she overheard, she replied, “from what I heard, they were planning on doing something to Kit, almost like they were planning to kill him, you know, get rid of the focus of Vil’s case, since her case is trying to make Kit the executor of his dad’s estate. Cybil saw me at the door, and like I said, two days later someone tried to shoot me. The police said that’s not enough to go on to arrest her, and my family doesn’t believe me, so I came [to Austin], because it’s safe here.”

When asked about the contradiction in information concerning Kitstrom Vulpan III's part of the case, she explained the situation far better than the legal briefs released to the press. "It's really easy. Vil's using the original will that my uncle had before he went crazy and started trying to destroy Kit's life. In that will, Kit's the heir, so if Vil wins it un-disowns Kit. Kit doesn't have anything to do with it. He washed his paws of all of us years ago, and he doesn't want the money. But after Cybil made this grab at money she has no right claiming, I think Vil retaliated with this countersuit to block her, and using the original will was the only option she had to undercut Cybil. If you look at the cases, if Cybil proves her case, it actually proves Vil's case, and it makes her lose anyway because the children have much more of a claim on their father's fortune than a wife that signed a prenuptial agreement before they got married and was only married for like a year."

Sheila Vance Vulpan's observation is widely believed to be an accurate observation by many legal professionals. Dennis Withers of Harvard Law School...."

"Well, at least the reporter didn't get too exotic," Kit grunted as he stopped reading the article.

"So it's right? You really don't want the money?" the vixen asked as she had him raise his arms.

"Nope. I've been a normal fur for years now. I don't want to go back to that life. I'm quite happy here."

“Well, they always say that you have to do what makes you happy and go where your heart leads you,” the vixen said with a smile at him.

“True enough. Say, you could do me a favor and answer a question.”

“What is that?”

“Is Jessie’s dress pretty?” he asked.

She laughed. “Oh, no, I’m not wandering out into that minefield. You’ll find out on your wedding day, sir,” she grinned.

“Well, I brought a camera with me....”

“No!” Both vixens said in unison, which made him laugh.

The clothes were made more or less perfectly, and Kit didn’t need another fitting. His tux was bagged for him and left for him to take home. Jessie’s dress, however, needed a couple of minor alterations, so the tailoring crew was going to stay overnight and complete her dress, and deliver it to her tomorrow. Jessie had already arranged things for the wedding. The day before, she was going to go over to Rick’s house and stay the night, and that was where she’d get ready for the wedding so they wouldn’t see each other on their wedding day before the ceremony, as was tradition. She’d take her dress to Rick’s house, and there it would stay, hidden from Kit, until the day of the wedding.

When they got home, they started a period of unwilling separation. Jessie’s finals were coming up in two weeks, and she had a ten page paper to write for her English Lit class as her final, and that required her to get to work on it. Kit gave her quiet and space to get ready for finals, surrendering the den to her and staying in the living room, cooking for her, and making sure she had nothing to worry about. Kit was almost like her butler for that

time, doing all the housework, doing the cooking, making sure she had nothing distracting her from her schoolwork.

There were interruptions, to be sure. Sam and Sandy dropped by every couple of days to vent the pressure from their own finals by catching up with Jessie, and Sheila stopped by almost every day. Kit was helping Martha teach her how to cook, and she was often helping to cook three or four meals a day. She'd go to Rick's house during lunch and get a cooking lesson, then bring the result back to Rick for him to eat. Then she'd go back over and help Martha cook dinner, then come home and help Kit cook dinner, then go home and try her own paw at cooking in her own kitchen, which, if it turned out to be edible, she'd throw in a container and give to Kit for him to eat the next day.

Kit was surprised. Sheila was *fascinated* by cooking. She enjoyed doing it, and she was learning very, very fast, because it turned out that Martha taught her the basics of reading a cookbook, and she was good at following the directions either Martha or the cookbook gave her. Sometimes her food didn't look quite right, or it was a little burned, but she had the basic idea of it and her cooking wasn't poisonous.

The other main interruption was the wedding. Jessie was disturbed from her finals preparation by it a few times. On the fifth, the week before finals, they had to go have their blood test, and then the day after, they picked up the passing results and went down to the courthouse and got their marriage license. The next stop was the Department of Public Safety, Texas' version of the DMV, where Jessie spent two hours waiting in lines. But the end result pleased her to no end, for they walked out of there with her new license. There, next to her bright, glowing smiling picture, was her name.

Jessica Desdemona Vulpan.

“Well, I guess I can just call you *Misses Vulpan* now,” Kit teased lightly as she held the license out before them.

“Not quite yet you can’t, Mister Vulpan,” she grinned in reply. “There’s still that pesky ceremony to go do, you know.”

“You’re not married yet and you changed your name?” the badger behind the counter asked.

“It’s legal,” Jessie told him. “I just needed my marriage license.”

“Yeah, I know it’s legal, but most wait until after the ceremony.”

“Well, I’m just making sure he can’t get away,” Jessie told him, giving Kit a teasing look. “This is concrete commitment,” she declared, holding up her new license.

“I’m doomed,” Kit said with mock resignation, and he laughed when Jessie whacked him with a sheaf of paperwork that was sitting on the counter.

Jessie split her time between classes, studying for finals, and the wedding after that. The license was a floodgate of activity for them. Jessie was on the phone every night with Vil as they made sure they had everything covered and everyone would do what they had to do. She got her school I.D. changed to her new name, finalized their wedding cake at the caterer that was doing the reception, confirming the style of cake they wanted and ensuring it would be ready for their reception, then they had their first meeting with Monsignor Duke at the church. Jessie gave the monsignor their scripted ceremony, which was actually a very simple and straightforward affair, a very traditional marriage. They toured the large, modern Catholic church, as Jessie described where all the decorations

would go, and they talked about the mechanics of the ceremony, from the anterooms where Kit and Jessie would wait to which direction they'd go after the ceremony was over, since the front of the church was right on the street and their parking lot was actually behind it.

"We can go out the front door then just go around the building," Jessie offered. "It's tradition to go back down the aisle after the ceremony, you know."

"Oh, did you bring a copy of your marriage license?" the large bear priest asked. "I do need it for our records. Have to prove it was a legal ceremony, after all," he smiled.

"I have one out in my car, father," Kit told him.

"Very good. I'll send off the wedding form to the state after the ceremony, and they'll send you the updated license that shows the date and location of your wedding by mail."

"Texas has a weird system," Kit chuckled. "You have to have a license before you get married, then you have to get a new license after you get married."

"Well, it's the only real way to do it, son," the priest chuckled. "We can't marry you until you prove the state approves of it, but the state also needs proof you actually had the ceremony and got married. So they use the two-tiered system."

"Yeah, they explained all that over at the courthouse," Jessie told him as she stepped up on the dais, looking down at her feet, then looked around. "Oooh, I'm getting tingles," she giggled. "Twelve days, Kit. Twelve days and we stand up here for real. I can't wait!"

“Me either,” he said, giving her a loving smile from the aisle.

“Now, you said that you wish a more secular wedding?” he asked.

“Yeah, father,” Kit answered. “Jessie’s Baptist, and her parents are kinda touchy. So we don’t want a Catholic wedding. But my mother always wanted me to marry in a Catholic cathedral, and my family’s Catholic, so we compromised.”

“Well, it’ll go against my training, but I think I can make it a generic ceremony,” he smiled gently. “So, when was the last time you went to confession, my son? Have you been attending mass?”

Kit laughed. “I’m a CINO, father. Catholic In Name Only.”

He tutted. “You shouldn’t ignore your spiritual well being, my son. God is forgiving, but it’s always best not to tempt fate, as it were.”

Jessie laughed, but the monsignor was ready for her. “And when was the last time you went to church, young lady? Just because you’re not Catholic, don’t think for a moment I don’t worry for your own soul too. Even if you don’t follow our brand of Christianity, you *are* a Christian, and you should be attending to your soul’s needs.”

Jessie’s cheeks ruffled. “Well....”

“I thought so,” the father grinned. “Now, since you’re holding your ceremony in my church, I have a request. I want you to attend Sunday mass before your ceremony, just once. It always makes me feel better to know I’m marrying a couple who come with the light of the Lord still shining upon them.”

“Well, I haven’t been to a mass since I was sixteen, but...but I guess I can do that,” he acquiesced.

“I’ve never been to a mass before,” Jessie said shyly. “I don’t know any Latin. I won’t know what to do.”

“We don’t do mass in Latin anymore, child,” the father chuckled. “Just sit in the back and watch, that way the only one who sees you is me, and I won’t say anything if you don’t sit or stand at the right time,” he winked. “I think you’ll be quite surprised. Most people who aren’t Catholic are quite moved by a mass when they attend one.”

“Well, I guess I can. Just don’t tell my parents. They’ll have a conniption.”

Monsignor Duke laughed. “A priest keeps many secrets, child. I’m sure I can carry yours.”

Kit lost track of Jessie after their meeting in the church, for finals started on Monday, and she was very, very busy. He gave her her space, spent much of the time hanging out with Lupe or Sheila, who had, in the short time she’d already been in Austin, gone out with three guys and had sex with two of them, including the football player from U.T. Despite not going clubbing, she found ways to be herself, and it proved that you could take Sheila out of the Party Pack, but you couldn’t take the Party Pack out of Sheila. Kit really couldn’t say much about it. Sheila was an adult, and had the right to do whatever she wanted. But her talking about her sexual conquests while sitting on his couch drinking his wine wasn’t one of his favorite ways to pass the time.

“Sheesh, Kit, it’s not like you’re a virgin,” she protested when he took her to task about it.

“I never said stop, Sheila, just don’t harp about it when you come visit,” he snorted. “I don’t need to know how many guys you’re sleeping with.”

“What fun is it to do it when you can’t talk about it?” she grinned.

“Then go down to Jessie’s sorority and tell *them* all about it.”

“Hmm, that’s an idea,” she said with a naughty smile. “I’ve been meaning to ask to go over there anyway. I like Sandy and Sam, I’d like to meet the other girls they talk about.” She dug her phone out of her pocket and dialed a number. “Sandy? It’s Sheila. Hey, I’m a little bored, and I’d like to come down and meet your sorority sisters. Yeah, Jessie’s busy studying for finals, and it’s not much fun talking with Kit about girl things,” she said, giving him a teasing grin. “Yah, I know you have finals too, but—okay. Sure, I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

She closed her phone and gave him a smug look. “I’ll see you later, cousin. I’m gonna go talk to girls who care about my sex life.”

“They’ll be overjoyed,” Kit said dryly.

It did, however, solve another problem. Sheila needed friends to talk to, and since she only knew Kit and Jessie, it didn’t give her many options. After going down to the sorority, however, Sheila suddenly had a whole house full of other girls that she got along with almost immediately. Sheila was over there most of the afternoon, and came back well after dark all bubbly and happy. “I had a great time!” she said happily. “Jessie’s friends are awesome!”

“I’m so glad you think so!” Jessie called from the kitchen.

“What are you doing, Jessie?” she asked as she flopped down on the couch.

“Cooking, silly!” she answered. “I’ve missed it, and I’m a little tense, so I’m doing a little cooking to relax.”

“Oooh, what are you cooking?”

“I’m baking some cookies I’m gonna take over to the girls tomorrow,” she answered.

“I don’t smell any cookies.”

“I just started, silly,” she laughed. “Come on, I’ll show you how to do it.”

“You bet!”

Jessie taught Sheila the basics of baking while Kit knocked out the last bits of research for one of the major objectives of Project A, and was ready to start on the next project tomorrow. He had to get it all done before the wedding, because the gang had graciously given him nearly two weeks off for his marriage and honeymoon and Christmas. His last day at work before his vacation was Wednesday the sixteenth, because Rick figured he might need the day before the ceremony off to handle any possible last-minute problems that might arise, and also because Vil would be coming in that day... not that much work would get done at the magazine either. Rick already planned to have the issue put to bed on Wednesday instead of Thursday, and Friday they’d all be at the wedding, which was like an office-wide holiday. Barry and Lilly both already planned to do articles on the wedding, and Mike and Lilly had their cameras all charged up and ready for the event. He had the time off for four days of honeymoon in Florida,

arriving on Saturday morning after a detour to Boston and leaving again on Wednesday morning, then they'd go straight to Cincinnati for Christmas with Jessie's family. That would give them all of Christmas Eve and Christmas to be with Jessie's family, and then they'd come home on Saturday afternoon after Christmas. Kit's normal days off were Sunday and Monday, so he'd be back to work on Tuesday the twenty-ninth.

Jessie had it easier. After finals were over, she would be free, and she'd be the one running around like a maniac to make sure all of Vil's plans were executed. She already had a binder full of phone numbers from different companies, florists, the photographers, everyone Vil hired for the wedding, and she'd already started making calls and confirming, double-checking things, making sure everything would be ready on time.

That wasn't until Thursday, though. Jessie had two finals on Monday, one on Wednesday, and one on Thursday.

Kit leaned back and went through some printed material about voting, some work he'd brought home with him, when the doorbell rang. "It's open!" he shouted without looking up, shuffling through the papers in his paw looking for the one that explained how the electoral college worked.

"How...quaint."

Kit jumped up to his feet so fast that papers flew all over the living room, and Sheila gasped in the kitchen, and the sound of breaking crockery followed that sound.

Standing in the doorway, wearing her typical pantsuit, was Sheila's mother and his aunt, Sarah Vulpan.

She looked much as he remembered. Sarah was a short, slender, aloof woman with a mask-like beauty, but she had a very unfriendly demeanor to most people. She didn't show emotion very often, much like his father had been, but she did have emotion. She had been close to his father, and he'd seen her compassionate side...but after he began fighting with his father, Sarah sided against him to try to rein him in and restore order to the house, and he'd had a very rough relationship with her since then.

"Sarah!" Kit barked in shock and almost instant anger. What on earth was she doing here? Did she come to get Sheila, or was there some other motive for her to fly halfway across the country? "What are you doing here?"

"Well, since you have my daughter, I think that's a question you just answered," she said as she stepped into the apartment. "Is she here?"

There was nothing but silence from the kitchen.

"What do you want her for?"

"To put an end to this nonsense," she said with a sniff. "Usually, just letting her run away is the best course of action. She always comes back. But this time she's latched onto you, and it's apparent she has no intention of returning anytime soon. I've come to take her home."

"Home? I'm not going anywhere near Boston while *she's* there!" Sheila shouted angrily as she came storming out of the kitchen. "She tried to kill me!"

"That's just a child's fantasy," Sarah said coldly. "Cybil may be a greedy bitch, but it's utter fantasy to think she may have tried to kill you."

There's no earthly reason to hide down here. So let's go gather what things you may want to keep and go home."

"I am *not* going home!" she shouted hotly. "I don't care what you think about it, mother, I know what I heard, and I know what happened! Someone tried to kill me! Doesn't that matter to you? Don't you care?"

"It was a random mugging, you silly girl," Sarah told her in a commanding tone. "For which you should be grateful you weren't hurt! Now let's go back to your hotel. Higgins said he—"

"Why won't you listen to me!" Sheila screamed.

"Because you're not worth listening to," Sarah said coldly. "Not while you act like a stupid child!"

"Hey, hey, hey!" Jessie said in outrage, stomping out of the kitchen. "How dare you speak to your daughter like that! No wonder she came running down here to Kit. He may not believe what she says, but at least he *cares* what she thinks!"

"Who are you, little girl, and by what right do you address *me* in such a manner?" Sarah asked in a dangerous tone.

"That's my fiancée you're about to threaten, Sarah. You'd better think *very* carefully before you say it," Kit said in a cold, dangerous manner, balling up both his fists.

"Fiancée? *Her*? My God, they weren't kidding! You really are going to marry a, a, a *cat*! Have you lost your mind?"

Jessie had to move very fast. Kit was already around the coffee table by the time she realized what he was going to do, and she was there with

her paws outstretched, standing between them. “Kit, no!” she barked commandingly. “If you hit her and get thrown in jail before our wedding, I won’t ever forgive you!”

“Hit *me*? I think not,” Sarah scoffed, slapping Jessie’s paw off her shoulder.

“He was one step from it,” Jessie told her with a surprisingly calm voice, her eyes steady.

“You bet your ass I was,” Kit growled, taking a step back from her. “Now get out of my house!”

“I think you need to leave,” Jessie agreed, in a surprisingly cold voice that made Kit very proud. By God, she wasn’t afraid of his family at all! What a femme!

“I will do no such thing,” Sarah snapped. “I won’t be ordered around by *children*!”

“You are standing in *my house*, Sarah,” Kit hissed in a voice that almost sounded like nails on a chalkboard. “In under a minute, you’ve insulted me, insulted Jessie, insulted Sheila, and now you’re making demands? Why don’t you get off of yourself and look around. This isn’t Boston, and your name and your money don’t mean *shit* here,” he sneered. “Now, you can walk out of that door, or I’ll throw you out. Then I’ll call the cops and have you arrested for trespassing. Take your pick.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“Try me.”

It hung there for a long moment, as Sarah's eyes seemed to weigh the situation. Then she sighed darkly and stepped back to the door. "This is not over, girl," she said, pointing at Sheila. "We'll talk again very soon, you mark my words."

"Why don't you try *talking* to her instead of ordering her around!" Jessie erupted on Sarah, no doubt speaking something she'd been holding back. "She's your daughter, for Christ sake! If my mom talked to me the way you talked to her, I'd slap her!"

"You have no idea what you're talking about, *cat*," Sarah sneered.

"Do I? You treat your daughter like she's a servant!" she raged at the older vixen. "You don't listen to her, you don't respect her, you insult her and denigrate her, no wonder she acts out against you! If you were my mom, I'd be getting bombed every night and sleeping with any guy with a pulse too! At least that would make the pain go away!"

"Jessie—" Sheila called, but Kit put an arm up to stop her as she rushed forward.

"Let her go," Kit said as Sarah backed up against the door in the face of Jessie's advance.

"You know why she came down here? Because she had nowhere else to go because you wouldn't even pretend to care that she was afraid!" Jessie shouted at her. "Kit's a better fox than your entire family put together! He took in a member of the same family that abandoned him when she needed his help, which is something *you* would never do! Does Kit believe her story? No, he doesn't. But at least he sees that she's really scared, so he's at least trying to do good by her by trying to make her feel safe and protected! Did *you* do that? Did *you* see that she's terrified and try to comfort her? Did

you try to assure her she was wrong without treating her like a baby, or did you just tell her what you wanted her to do despite the fact that she was afraid?”

“It was preposterous—“

“THAT DIDN’T MATTER!” Jessie shouted at her, which made her flinch. “The only thing that matters is you didn’t see that no matter what you believe, what you believe wasn’t what really mattered, it was what *she* believed! All you had to do to avoid all this was say ‘I don’t think you’re right, but why don’t we do something so you feel safe?’ But you didn’t even do *that*!”

“You have room to talk, cat, telling me to treat her like an adult, but coddle her like a child, in the same sanctimonious declaration,” Sarah told her with narrow eyes.

“Isn’t that your *job* as a mother?” Jessie snapped. “To make her feel like an adult, but be there to comfort her when she needs it?”

“She needs to grow up,” Sarah said coldly. “And so long as she acts like a child, I’ll treat her as one.”

“Then she has no chance!” Jessie said in exasperation. “The one time she *did* act like an adult, when she came to you with her worries, you treated her like a child!”

“That was the act of a child, a frightened little girl too stupid to see the truth.”

“You know, when you call your kids stupid long enough, eventually they’ll believe it themselves,” Jessie said curtly, putting her paws on her

hips and squaring off against the smaller vixen. “How can she ever prove she’s an adult when all you ever do is denigrate her?”

“I’ll not be lectured by a child of a cat in how to be a parent when it’s clear you have no idea what you’re talking about,” Sarah said coldly.

“Then you can leave any time you like,” Jessie hissed, her ears laying back.

“I will be staying at the Armitage,” she declared in a cold voice. “So don’t for a moment believe that I’ll be leaving without you, Sheila. One way or another, when I fly home, you will be going with me.”

“Not so long as that English bitch is in Boston I won’t,” Sheila retorted.

“We shall see, girl. We shall see.”

She opened the door and swept out as if she owned the place, but she did slam the door as hard as she could.

Jessie turned around, and her paws were trembling, but her expression was a little defiant. “That’s my pretty kitty,” Kit said with absolute pride, giving her a warm hug. Sheila took in a ragged breath, then slammed into both of them. Kit and Jessie put their arms around her, comforting her, and she clung to them for a long moment. “Now you see what I put up with when I was a kid?” she said raggedly, trying hard not to cry. “Sometimes I think she’ll never take me seriously.”

“Well, you don’t exactly help with your clubbing and shenanigans,” Kit said honestly. “But as a former wild child myself, I can say I know exactly how you feel, and why you do it.”

She gave him a long, earnest look, then she did break down into tears, clutching at them. “You’re too good to me, Kit,” she sniffled. “Even after I abandoned you, you still helped me. I can’t thank you enough for that, ever.”

“At least you never set fire to your mom’s car,” Kit told her, which made her laugh. “Now then, let’s take care of your mother,” he offered.

“Huh? How?”

“Silly cousin, this is *my* city,” Kit told her with a chuckle. “Or more to the point, it’s Vil’s. I think it’s about time for Aunt Sarah to get an ugly lesson in just who’s in control down here.” He patted Sheila on the shoulder and let go of her, then went to the bedroom and got his phone. He called Vil, who picked up on the first ring. “Vil.”

“Hey, baby bro. What’s up?”

“We just got a visit from Aunt Sarah,” he announced as he went back to the living room.

“What?”

“She came down in person to get Sheila. Can you do something about her? She was very, rude.”

“You bet your tail I’ll do something about her,” Vil said in an ugly tone. “I specifically warned them to leave you alone, and bothering you is bothering you, no matter what excuse they have for it. Let me make a few calls. I *guarantee* you, Sarah will be back in Boston by tomorrow morning.”

“Thanks, sis. You’re a lifesaver.”

“No problem, bro. Let me get on this. Call you tomorrow, okay?”

“I’ll be looking for it.” He closed the phone and looked at Jessie and Sheila, who were still in an embrace as Jessie comforted the young vixen. “Vil said your mother will be back in Boston by morning,” he told Sheila.

“Thank God!” Sheila exclaimed.

“How’s she gonna do that?” Jessie asked.

“You don’t want to know, pretty kitty. You really don’t.”

Vil was as good as her word.

By ten o’clock the next morning, Aunt Sarah was back in Boston.

Kit didn’t know how Vil did it exactly, but whatever she did, it worked. Sarah was on a seven o’clock flight out of the city, and Sheila wasn’t with her. Sarah made no other attempt to talk to Sheila after she left their apartment, but the visit had spooked Sheila so badly that she stayed over at their apartment and slept on the couch. That was something of a shock for Kit the next morning, because they both forgot she was there. Kit heard someone come into the bathroom while he was in the shower, and he turned off the water and threw the curtain back before looking...and found himself staring down at Sheila as she sat on the toilet, wearing a black tank top with one strap hanging down to her elbow and her panties around her ankles.

At least he didn’t react like a little kid. He just calmly picked up his towel and wrapped it around himself, which made her laugh. “Sorry about that, I thought you knew I was here,” she apologized.

“I thought you were Jessie,” he told her, stepping out of the tub.

Jessie just added to it when she meandered to the bathroom door, naked as the day she was born. It was an increasing habit of hers as she settled into the apartment. When she first moved in, she wouldn't set foot out of the bedroom without a towel around herself, but as she got more and more comfortable in the house and with him, comfortable with the idea that the entire house was her personal, private domain, her willingness to leave the bedroom naked and take the six steps required to reach the bathroom from the bedroom door increased. She took no notice of Kit at all, but she gasped when she stepped into the bathroom and found Sheila already sitting on the toilet, ducking back out and peeking in from around the doorframe, using it to conceal herself. "Ohmygod, I'm sooooo sorry!" Jessie gasped, then she blinked and took in the situation, realized Kit was in there with her. "Hey!"

"My fault," Sheila laughed. "He thought I was you. And pardon me if I don't get up, or I'll be showing him what you just showed me."

Jessie's face frizzed out, and she laughed ruefully. "I shouldn't be so embarrassed. You're a girl!"

"Dear God I hope so," Sheila grinned outrageously. "Cause what Kit showed me when he got out of the shower doesn't match what I have down here at all!" she laughed, pointing to her lap.

"Flashing your own cousin? Shame on you!" Jessie laughed.

"I thought she was you," Kit grunted as he edged around Sheila's legs in the small bathroom and got out into the hall. He stopped and looked back, saw Jessie still hiding behind the doorframe as she started talking to Sheila, not seeming to realize that she was hiding yet she seemed to have no qualms about looking at *Sheila*...not that Sheila would care. Sheila would

have no qualms about walking around naked in front of both of them, because Kit was her cousin and Jessie was her friend. Sheila was like that. There was that, and her bare bottom was both a beautiful and inviting target. He took off his towel, snaked it, then snapped it at that pretty posterior. Jessie squeaked in surprise and pain, jumping out into the doorway with both paws on her bottom, and she whirled around and glared at him. “You creep!” she accused as he laughed and ducked into the bedroom and moved to close the door. She charged at him and got to the door before he could close it, and tackled him as he tried to run away, driving him onto the bed. He laughed helplessly as she grabbed a pillow and straddled his back, beating him with it, covering his head with his arms and kicking at the mattress.

“What the hell’s going on?” Sheila asked from the doorway.

“He snapped me with his towel!” Jessie told her, wailing on him with the pillow. “You sneak!”

“Does she beat you up like this often, cousin?”

“Yes!” Kit gasped for breath between gales of laughter. “I give, I give, I give!” he surrendered, putting his arms out. Jessie whacked him in the back of his unprotected head with the pillow one more time, then she gasped and laughed helplessly. He looked out of the corner of his eye and saw she had the pillow pulled up against her chest, because Sheila was standing in the doorway, leaning against the doorframe in her tank top and panties.

“What’s wrong with you, Jessie?” she asked.

“If you didn’t notice, I’m naked, Jessie’s naked, and we’re not used to having an audience,” Kit answered for her.

“That’s the truth!” Jessie laughed nervously.

“Well, I can either go get dressed or meet you on your level,” Sheila teased. “Unlike you two, I’m not afraid to show off what God graced me with.”

“Go get dressed, you exhibitionist brat!” Kit told her. Laughing, Sheila went back to the living room to get her clothes. “Uh, can I get up now, love?”

“Let me think about that. No,” she answered, leaning down to where her muzzle was by his ear.

“I do have to go to work. And you have school in an hour.”

“I haven’t decided how to punish you quite yet,” she said archly, putting her paws on his shoulders to hold him down when he moved to rise up off the bed.

“I’m getting the bed wet.”

“It’ll dry off.”

“Your leg’s on my tail.”

“It won’t break.”

“Uhhh, so, now what?”

“Now you think very quickly how to deflect my wrath,” she told him quietly in his ear.

He laughed. “I’ll just give you puppy-dog eyes until you forgive me.”

“Oh, that’s not going to work this time, baby,” she breathed in his ear. He felt her take her weight off of him, and thought she was letting him up.

But then he yelped when she slapped him on the backside, and she was not gentle. She literally spanked him, the first time in his entire life anyone had ever spanked him, and it wasn't entirely pleasant, even though he was laughing through most of it. "And you call your cousin a brat, you brat! Now get dressed!"

"Yes, mommy," he wheezed, scrambling across the bed. Jessie kept her stern demeanor up until he scampered to the fur dryer with both paws on his posterior to protect it from her, which made her burst into laughter.

Kit dressed and found Sheila and Jessie sitting on the couch having tea when he came into the front part of the apartment. Sheila hadn't dressed yet, and Jessie had put on one of her droopy nightshirts. "You two have a great relationship," he heard Sheila say as he went to the kitchen. "You play like kids, but nobody can look at you and not see the love there."

"We're made for each other," Jessie said with a giggle. "We've only known each other for almost four months, but it's like we've been together all our lives. When I went back home over Thanksgiving, I didn't know what to do with myself when we were apart. I couldn't even sleep."

"So you just jumped right into bed?"

Jessie laughed. "Oh no, that took a while," she admitted. "I had to make sure he was ready."

"Him? Usually it's the girl."

"I had to make sure there was just me and him," she told her. "When we first met, he was still terrified of your family. I had to coax him into declaring independence before I could deepen our relationship. I had to

know he was coming to me his own fur, without strings tying him to the family that might pull him away from me.”

“Ah. I can understand that. No doubt he’d get pretty torn up between those strings and your claws.”

She laughed. “You see the points,” she grinned, holding up her paws and showing Sheila her small yet sharp little claws. “I would have dug in and refused to let go.”

“I’m glad you would,” he said with a smile as he came out of the kitchen with a cup of tea.

“So, she let you out of your room, eh? I thought she was going to ground you there for a minute,” Sheila grinned.

“She spanked me,” he said sourly, rubbing his backside with his free paw, which made Sheila explode into laughter.

“You deserved it,” she told him archly, but she was grinning at him.

“Eh, so I did,” he chuckled. “I think I got a little too enthusiastic there. I think Sheila brings out the worst in me.”

“Don’t blame that on me!” Sheila protested.

“Your brattiness is contagious,” Kit winked.

“Pft, what you call brattiness, I call taking what you want when you want because you can,” she grinned. “If that makes me a brat, then I’m a brat. Guilty as charged,” she giggled.

“I wish I could be brave like you, Sheila,” Jessie laughed.

“Oh, I dunno, beating up your fiancée in front of his cousin while you’re naked is fairly brave,” she noted, which made Jessie’s face poof out and caused Kit to laugh.

“You’d better get a shower, hon,” Kit urged. “And you’d better get dressed, cousin, we have work in half an hour.”

“Lemme run over to my place and get dressed. I’ll drive myself in,” she told him as she grabbed her jeans from the floor and started pulling them on.

“Works for me. I’m gonna go ahead and go,” he said, leaning over the couch and kissing Jessie on the cheek. “Do me a favor, cousin.”

“Yeah?”

“Pick up some bagels or donuts or something on the way in.”

“Get it yourself!” she said indignantly.

“You’re the intern. Grab a box and bring it in, the gang’ll love you for it.”

“Oh, well, that’s okay then. I miss The Teacup,” she sighed.

“What’s that?”

“A little tea and pastry shop near Harvard,” she answered. “They had the best tea there, and all kinds of great pastries.” She pointed at the teacup on the coffee table. “Way better than *that*.”

“This isn’t tea country, cousin. You take what you can get.”

“They gotta have something better. I need to go check out the grocery stores.”

“They do, but it’s expensive down here,” Kit told her.

“So what? I’ll pay through the nose for a good cup of tea.”

“Hell, if you’re willing to pay, get me some,” Kit teased.

“Why don’t you kiss my furry ass?” she retorted tartly. She turn turned her back to him and presented her panty-clad backside, sticking her tail straight up. “You want a road map, or did Jessie at least teach you where to go? Want me to pull my panties down so you don’t get that silky aftertaste?” she added, hooking her thumbs into the waist of her panties, then deliberately pulling them down, mooning him.

Kit laughed. “Now that’s the Sheila I remember from home,” he grinned, then he hurried out the door.

“Hey, everyone else showed me their asses today, it was only fair you got to see mine,” she teased, pulling her panties and jeans up as Kit laughed his way out the door.

The visit from Sarah was smoothed over and basically forgotten in the whirlwind of activity leading up to the wedding, a whirlwind that caught Sheila up with it.

Kit kept mothering Jessie through her finals preparation, and got help from Sheila to boot. Sheila helped him cook all week after coming back from Rick and Martha’s, and on Friday, Sheila took Jessie, Sam, and Sandy out clubbing to help them relax. Kit settled in at home, at least until Lupe came over and told him to keep next Saturday night clear, because they were going to his bachelor party. Kit had honestly never thought about that, but clearly others had been.

“Well, I think I can handle that,” Kit told him.

“Oh, brah, have we got something special in store for you!” the chihuahua laughed. “You’re gonna love it!”

“I’d better, it will be a party, after all,” Kit grinned. “But tell Mickey that strip poker is absolutely out of the question.”

Lupe broke down laughing, pounding on the back of the couch with his paw.

Jessie and Sheila showed up at home around three in the morning, and they were totally smashed. It startled Kit awake because Jessie didn’t turn off the alarm, and Kit had to get that off before ADT sent the police automatically. Sheila tried to get Kit to go back out with them, but she passed out in the dining room while trying to find her way to the kitchen to get some wine. Jessie just swayed in place near the door, her eyes unfocused and jittery, as her tail twitched behind her.

“I don’t believe it,” Kit breathed reverently. “Jessie, you *drank Sheila under the table*. I’m shocked!”

“Who is Sheila?” Jessie asked disjointedly, then she literally passed out where she stood.

Kit didn’t get much more sleep. He put Jessie to bed and put Sheila on the couch, then had to help Jessie endure the inevitable effect of someone like her drinking so much so fast...nausea. He helped her to the bathroom so she could kneel in front of the toilet for a while, then carried her back to bed and tucked her in. Kit napped a bit, but when the loud sound of Sheila retching in the bathroom woke him up, he gave up trying to sleep and got up and went into the den. “Hey,” Sheila said raggedly from the doorway. He

glanced back at her and saw that she was half dressed, in her bra and panties, and that wasn't how he left her. "Sorry about the noise."

"You're coherent," he noted lightly. "I wasn't sure you'd be able to form sentences until sometime tomorrow. I had to scrape you off the dining room floor."

She grunted sourly. "I'm gonna have one hell of a hangover in the morning," she admitted, putting a paw to her head. "I never shoulda tried those Jäger bombs."

"Sheila, Jessie out-drunk you. You're slipping."

"I had about ten times more than she did. She got that bombed off just two daiquiris and a screwdriver. You need to toughen her up, Kit. She's a lightweight."

Kit chuckled. "Did Sam and Sandy get home alright?"

"Sam was the designated driver, so I'm sure they did," she answered.

"I'm glad you thought ahead."

"Sam did," she said, then she gave a slight moan, then put her paw over her mouth. "Sczzmfh," she gurgled, then ran for the bathroom again.

Kit had to tend a pair of very hung over ladies the next morning. He called Rick and told him he'd have to come in late, and when he explained why, Rick just laughed and told him to take his time. Jessie didn't even get out of bed until after ten, and Sheila laid on the couch with a rag over her eyes all morning. When Jessie did appear, she was a mess. Her hair was wildly askew, going off in every direction, wearing a nightshirt and a pair of panties. She clung to the wall for support, squinting through bloodshot eyes.

“Kit?” she asked weakly. “Am I dying? Please tell me I’m dying. I don’t think any fur could live through this.”

“Welcome to the morning after,” Sheila groaned from the couch.

Jessie winced. “Don’t shout!” she admonished, which made her wince from the sound of her own voice.

Kit collected her up and helped her over to the table, then sat her down and handed her a cup of tea. She took it in shaking paws, but didn’t raise it to her lips. “I’m gonna throw up if I drink this,” she warned. “I might throw up anyway.”

“Trust me. People who drink like the Vulpans know how to nurse through a hangover. Small sips, love. Very small sips.”

She raised the cup to her maw with trembling paws and took a very small sip of the tea, then put it down, pushed it away, and sank her head to the table. “I’m dying!” she moaned, her tail trembling.

“You just learned the first rule, love,” Kit told her. “Never try to out-drink a Vulpan.”

“She did this to me!” Jessie accused, her head coming up and pointing at the couch. “I’m gonna kill you if this doesn’t kill, me, Sheila! I swear I will!”

“If my head doesn’t stop pounding, I’ll gladly let you take it off,” Sheila grunted from the couch. “She wasn’t the one I had to out-drink. That little chinchilla was a freakin’ monster,” she groaned. “I’ve never seen someone so small drink so much and still be able to dance, let alone walk!”

Kit just had to laugh. “So, spurred on by some twisted sense of pride, eh?”

“I thought I could put any femme under the table,” Sheila groaned, putting her arm over her eyes. “How the hell did Sandy do it?”

“Odds are, Sandy’s probably in about the same position you two are,” Kit chuckled. “Ones like her don’t get hit until after she slows down.”

“I hope she spent all night with her face in the toilet,” Sheila said spitefully. “I hope she drowned in the damn commode!”

“Such hate,” Kit chuckled. “Come get some honeyed tea, cousin.”

“If I can get there without falling down,” she said, dragging herself up to a sitting position.

“You have to work today, don’t you?”

“No, I have the same hours as Rick,” she answered as she wobbled over to the table and collapsed into a chair. Kit made some honeyed tea for her and put it in front of her, and she took an unsteady sip and then buried her face in her paws. “Aspirin!”

“After you finish the tea.”

Once they had something stable in their stomachs, he banished both of them back to the bed and the couch. “The best way is to just sleep it off,” he told Jessie as he put her back in bed. “You’ll feel better when you get up, trust me.”

“I’m dying, Kit!” she said melodramatically.

“You’re hung over. It only feels like death,” he told her calmly as he tucked her in. “Now, I have to get ready for work.”

“Don’t leave me! You need to give me last rites or something!”

He chuckled. “Oh, and by the way.”

“What?”

“Remember when you spanked me?”

“Yeah?”

“I love it when you get revenge on yourself, and I don’t have to lift a finger,” he said as he leaned down and kissed her on the muzzle, then wandered out of the room humming to himself.

“If I wasn’t dying, I’d beat you up!” she called loudly from the bed, then she groaned when her own voice intensified her headache.

“Promises, promises.”

“Grroah!”

They were both feeling much better when he got home after only four hours at work, though they were still rather indisposed. They were both sitting on the couch wearing nightshirts, watching a DVD when he got back. Sheila was laying on the couch, her feet in Jessie’s lap, who had her own feet propped up on the coffee table. “And how do you two feel?” he asked when he carried his laptop carrying portfolio into the den. He still had some work to do, but he could do the rest of it from home, and Rick knew that he’d get everything done no matter where he was.

“My head isn’t going to explode now,” Jessie said. “But I still feel kinda groggy and queasy.”

“Well, when you’re ready for food, I’ll make something hangover-safe for you.”

“What’s hangover safe?”

“Chicken soup, I’m thinking. Nothing greasy or heavy or spicy,” he answered. “Pasta with it, maybe, depending. A light salad too. Until then, I have some work to do, so I’ll be in the den if you need me.”

There would be a reckoning for his dig on Jessie while she was hung over, and he knew it...but keeping things interesting was just one of the fun parts about living together.

Kit had all his work done on Project A by Monday, which basically gave him little to do and little to distract him from the upcoming wedding. The gang was happy to distract him, though, and Rick gave him a few small projects to do to keep his mind occupied, the main one of which was to do his first bit of real writing.

“What is this?” he asked when Rick handed him a file folder.

“Your first work as a reporter,” he answered. “We’ve been publishing your writing for a while, but I want you to try your paw at doing something more traditional. I got you an interview with the assistant dean about the budget issues coming up next year that might raise tuition. Usually I’d send Barry, but Barry’s working on the election project, and Lilly’s doing a different story about what students will be doing during the winter break, so it’s time for you to cut your teeth on actual journalism,” he smiled. “So, now, instead of just researching what we bring you, think about what you want to ask him, do your research, and then go do the interview and write a report.”

“Hmm,” he said. “When’s the interview?”

“Thursday,” he answered. “If you need any help, I’m sure Barry and Lilly will give you some pointers on how to do an interview and write a report based on it.”

“No, I think I can do it,” he countered, tapping the file to his muzzle as what he needed to do began to collect in his mind. “Oh yeah, Saturday night, my landlord is giving me a bachelor party. Wanna come?”

“Did I hear those magical words?” Mike said excitedly from his office. The thin wall was usually no barrier to hearing what was going on between the two of them. “Did I hear bachelor party?” he shouted.

“Yeah, you heard right,” Kit laughed as Barry, Jeffrey, Mike, and Savid all crowded in the hallway outside the door. “Lupe hasn’t told me where or when yet. I’ll let you know.”

“I hope Lupe knows how to do it right,” Mike grinned. “Strippers, booze, the whole experience!”

“We’ll see,” Kit chuckled. “I haven’t heard anything about a party for Jessie yet, though, but I’m sure her sorority has something planned.”

“Oh, they do,” Sheila called from the office with a laugh. “It’s supposed to be a surprise, so don’t say anything!”

“I’d never do that,” he called. “Are they going crazy?”

Sheila laughed. “They went beyond crazy about five days ago!”

“Oh honey, now that’s my kind of party!” Marty called from the front.

“So, you counting hours yet?” Rick asked.

Kit laughed. “Nine days, seventeen hours,” he looked at his watch, “and sixteen minutes.”

“You’re so whipped,” Mike teased, then he yelped as Sheila slapped him on the rump as she went by.

“So are you,” she told him as she went to Marty’s desk out front.

“You tell ‘em, sister!” Lilly called with a laugh.

Kit had never done his own story from front to back before, and it was a refreshing challenge and also kept him from going nuts with anxiety and eagerness waiting for the wedding. He had two days to prepare for it, and when he did finally talk with the dean, he had a mountain of researched data to use. The ferret was very kind and talkative, but she was also a bit surprised that Kit had dug up enrollment figures and tuitions from almost all the major colleges and collated them into a statistical trend that showed that U.T. was projecting a tuition increase higher than the norm for other major 1-A schools compared to enrollment rates.

“Where did you find all this?” she asked curiously as he showed her the graph on his laptop. “I haven’t seen work this complete out of my own office!”

“I’m a researcher mainly, ma’am,” he chuckled. “So I made sure to come prepared.”

“Wow, did you!” she laughed, patting his wrist.

It was a good interview though. Kit was polite and friendly, he asked in-depth questions and allowed her to answer them fully, and he was sure to give her the chance to highlight what she saw were the good points even as he challenged her over the bad ones.

What was the ultimate complement for a researcher, the dean asked for a copy of his findings to take with her and study, and also to present to the president of the college as ammunition when they talked about the budget that might raise tuition.

When he got back to the office, he spent the rest of the day writing the article. He revised it several times, then had Barry edit it for him to see if he did it right. “Looks pretty good,” Barry told him. “You’ve learned how to write a magazine article pretty well,” he grinned, showing off his sharp teeth. “Go ahead and make those changes I suggested and send both the original and this revision to Rick and let him doublecheck my changes.”

“You got it.”

“So, the big party is on Saturday,” Barry noted as he leaned back in the chair in Kit’s office. “Has your landlord told you about it yet?”

“Only that it’s not at the complex,” he answered. “So it must be in some hotel or strip club. Lupe’s a pretty lowest common denominator kinda guy, Barry. He’s into football, beer, and don’t tell Jessie this, but porn. I have no doubt he has strippers lined up for it.”

“Jessie’s in for a shock with her party,” Barry laughed. “Sheila ain’t telling you about it because she thinks you’ll spill, but she told Lilly, and Lilly told me. Her sorority’s gonna have a big party at their house for her tomorrow, complete with male strippers. The theme is *virgin no more*. They even went out got a big banner saying that.”

Kit laughed raucously. “Oh, that’ll be awesome. Are you going?”

“You bet I am!”

“Get some pictures!”

“Oh, I’ve got Mister Sneaky right here,” she said, pulling a tiny digital camera out of her pocket, a very, very tiny model. “I’ll get some great pictures!”

“Make sure you get a picture of Jessie giving a tip to one of the strippers,” he said after looking around, then telling her in a low tone. “I have a plan.”

“For what? Divorce?”

“No, no, it’s gonna be a joke,” he told her. “I’m gonna put that picture in what’ll look like an email to Hannah and leave it on the desktop when I go to work. Jessie’s last final was today, so I’m sure she’ll find it next week when she’s using the computer.”

Lilly gave him a look, then erupted into helpless laughter. “Kit, that’s mean!”

“But it’ll be great!”

“She’s gonna skin you!”

“That’s what makes it fun,” he winked. “If there was no threat of getting beat up, it wouldn’t be worth doing in the first place. Besides, I have to keep life interesting for her. If I’m boring, she’ll think our life will be boring too. So I have to misbehave from time to time, to keep her on her toes.”

Lilly laughed and patted him on the shoulder. “You’ll get your picture,” she grinned conspiratorially.

When he got home, he found Jessie in the kitchen, elbow-deep in a mixing bowl and food scattered all over the kitchen counters. “Holy cow,

what happened in here?” he asked.

“Finals are *over!*” she actually sang happily. “I think I did well, so I’m celebrating!”

“Celebrating with food?” he asked curiously, picking up a box of Bisquick.

“I’m making a big dinner for the girls at the sorority!” she told him. “Some of them still have finals tomorrow, so I’m gonna make sure they’re all well fed! Homemade Italian bread, lasagna, chicken curry, a cake, salad, pasta salad, everything!”

“You’ll never finish all this by dinnertime.”

“I will if you help,” she said, giving him a bright, innocent smile.

“And what payment will I receive for this service?” he teased.

“You got that payment last night,” she said archly. “I wasn’t exactly in the mood last night, love, but I’m not going to deny you when you’re feeling frisky. Mom told us that’s one of the fastest ways to poison your marriage.”

“You didn’t seem like you were against the idea,” he protested.

“Well, I wasn’t quite so against it by the time we got going,” she giggled with her cheeks ruffling. “Girls are different than boys, love. Boys are on all the time. You have to get a girl going, and you kinda did, even if I wasn’t ready to go when we started.”

“Well, now that my masculinity has been appeased, let me help here,” he laughed. “What’s left to do?”

“I got two lasagnas in the oven and rolls and a loaf of Italian bread ready to go,” she told him. “Can you chop the salad veggies, get the rotini on the stove, and put on the chicken for the curry?”

“Wow, you are going all-out,” he laughed.

“I’m about halfway done here.”

Kit helped her out, but excused himself to go to the bathroom. While inside, he took out his phone and called Sandy. “Jessie’s coming over to the sorority tonight,” he whispered. “You’d better—“

“She already told us she’s coming to feed us,” Sandy cut him off. “Said she made dinner for us.”

“We’re doing that now,” he affirmed. “So hide everything.”

“Who told you?”

“Silly girl, you’re dealing with a Vulpan. We are omniscient!”

Sandy laughed. “Suuuure you are. Was it Sheila?”

“Nobody told me, you just need to keep better secrets,” Kit teased.

“Does she know?”

“Of course not. You think I’d ruin this for her? She’ll have fun!”

“I’m glad you’re saying that now, cause you’ll change your mind when she tells you all about it,” Sandy laughed.

“Do your worst,” Kit challenged. “Gotta go, talk to you later.”

They finished the meal up by around seven, and it took Kit’s Pathfinder to get it all over there in one trip. The girls were almost jumping

around them like happy dogs when they brought in a meal capable of feeding eleven starving college femmes. Kit came back and let her celebrate with her sorority sisters, and went back to pick her up when they were all done and she was ready to come home. While they were pulling out away from the sorority, Jessie hummed and put her elbow on the side of the door. “They’re up to something,” she finally proclaimed.

“What do you mean?”

“Sandy was way too...bubbly. I think they’re up to something.”

“Well, did she finish her finals today like you did? Maybe that’s why.”

“No, I—I know them, love. Sandy’s planning something. I think she’s gonna throw a bachelorette party.”

“I guess that’s always possible. Lupe’s giving me a party on Saturday...then we get to go to mass on Sunday,” he chuckled.

“A *week*, baby,” she giggled. “Only one more week! By this time next week, we’ll be on a plane to Boston, and I’ll be *Misses* Vulpan!”

“I can’t wait either,” he said, reaching over and taking her paw, then he had to let go to change gears. “Is everything ready?”

“Yup, it’s all ready,” she said with relief. “There’s not much to do now but wait.”

“We do have two rehearsals, remember. Tuesday and Wednesday.”

“I thought they were on Tuesday and Thursday.”

“The father called and changed them. He has to perform a wake on Thursday.”

“When did he do that?”

“Yesterday. He called me at work.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well, you stayed up til after midnight studying, then there was me being frisky,” he said, ticking off his fingers. “Then you were up and at school before I even got up this morning.”

“I wanted to get some cramming done,” she told him.

“And I find you cooking when I get home,” he told her. “So, that’s why.”

“Can’t argue with that,” she giggled, then saw he wasn’t going home. “Where are we going?”

“You just finished the semester, love, and tomorrow’s my late day, so we’re gonna go celebrate in a way that doesn’t involve you working your cute butt off.”

She laughed. “Ooooh, lead on then, my handsome fox.”

The first part of the celebration was something Jessie never expected in a million years, but she didn’t mind at all. When Kit pulled into Northcross Mall, she was giving him a surprised look. “Oh no, you want to make me go home bruised!” she complained, but she was grinning at him.

“We never did finish that lesson,” he smiled as he parked. He pulled a battered old pair of skates out of the back seat. “And these were in the stuff that Vil sent me from my apartment in Boston, so why not see if they’re still good?” He got out of the car and went around to her and helped her out, giving her a warm smile. “And there’s more to do after this.”

“Oh really? And what other activities have you planned that involve things you like to do?” she grinned at him.

“You’ll see.”

They spent about an hour skating, as Kit taught Jessie more about how it was done, then they went back into town and to one of the larger and more well-known coffee bars near campus. Kit brought her in and ordered tea for them, just as a weasel got up to the microphone in the corner and began reciting poetry. “You said you like Milton, well, it’s Milton night,” he smiled.

“Now you’re talking,” she said with a glowing smile, and she held his paw as she listened to the recital. Kit wasn’t particularly into poetry, but being a rich kid, he was more than good at feigning interest and zoning out until it was time to go.

She was excited and animated when it was done and he took her home at nearly eleven, and they shared a glass of wine on the couch in contented silence, Jessie snuggled up against him and purring between sips of wine. “Thank you,” she said.

“Hey, I realized we haven’t been *out* for a while, you know? What kind of marriage will we have if we just sit around at home all the time?”

She giggled. “Like that’s a bad thing,” she told him. “I like being a homebody.”

“Mind being a teddy bear?” he asked. “Neither of us got much sleep last night, and I’m getting a little sleepy.”

She laughed. “Sure, as soon as I finish my wine.”

“Well, I’m gonna go get ready for bed,” he announced, standing up with his empty wine glass. He put it away, locked the door, and set the alarm, and she joined him just a moment after he got into bed, undressing and slipping under the covers, the snuggling up against his back. “Kit.”

“Hmm?”

“Sandy’s planning something, isn’t she?”

“I have no idea,” he answered.

“Kit, you’re a bad liar,” she chuckled, digging her claws into his shoulder and side.

“I can state with total truthfulness that I have no idea if she’s planning anything, and if she is, what it might be,” he told her calmly. “And even if I did, you think I’d tell you?”

“I thought so,” she giggled, rising up enough to nip playfully at his ear.

“Hey, hey, careful, there’s not much left of that ear,” he warned, which made her laugh.

“Then you’d better start talking if you want to keep it,” she teased.

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” he intoned, which made her laugh, pick up her pillow, and bop him with it. He rolled over to face her, and she snuggled into his arms and sighed in contentment.

“Now this is better. Hugging your back just isn’t the same,” she said in a dreamy kind of voice, then he could tell she was falling asleep.

He was right behind her.

Though Jessie suspected skullduggery, Kit didn't squeal. Jessie came over to the office that evening to bring an early dinner to him and do some writing for her part of *School Daze*, closeted with Jeffrey as they discussed strip ideas. She was surprised, but not *too* surprised when Lilly and Sheila intercepted her on the way out of the office and then dragged her off.

"It must be party time," Savid noted as Kit brought some slices of pie out for the others that Jessie had brought.

"Yup. I guess I'd better go get some honey for tea, cause she'll be hung over tomorrow," he chuckled.

"Your party is tomorrow?"

"Yeah, you coming?"

"I hope to. Any word where is yet?"

"Nope, Lupe said he'd tell us where to go tomorrow after work," Kit chuckled. "He's keeping it all secret."

"How many can I invite to your wedding?"

"Well, from the number of replies we got back, as many as you want," he laughed. "The church won't be half full, and Vil paid for an army's worth of food at the reception. So invite everyone, I'd hate to see all that food go to waste."

"Never tell an Indian that, Kit. I have *lots* of relatives."

Kit laughed. "Well, as many as you feel comfortable bringing," he amended. "And mind that they'll be serving beef there, in case any of your relatives are devout Hindus."

"Hamburgers even at your wedding?"

“I gotta have *one*,” he laughed. “They’re making one super-special deluxe hamburger for the reception, and that’s mine. But they’re also serving filet mignon, and that’s beef. But they’re also serving chicken and vegetable dishes.”

“I will sure to warn,” he nodded. “I hope your party has lots of fun.”

“Lupe’s a debased kind of guy, Savid. You’d better check your morality at the door, it’s liable to be wild.”

“Indians *love* wild parties,” Savid grinned. “Indians are original party civilization. Who wrote the Kama Sutra?”

“Okay, you win that argument, if only for finding a way to mention the Kama Sutra,” Kit laughed.

Kit went home and waited, but wasn’t bored. He finished the last of the work he’d been doing that day, then talked with Hannah when she called looking for Jessie. “She’s at her bachelorette party,” he told her. “Her sorority sisters are throwing it.”

“Oh dear, I hope she doesn’t get too wild.”

“I hope she does. It’s her night, let her have all the fun she wants,” Kit answered.

“I’ve never heard a groom say that,” she noted.

“I trust Jessie, Hannah,” he said easily. “So why wouldn’t I want her to have a night to remember?”

“Because she may never forget it.”

“Pft, if I can’t keep her, I don’t deserve her,” Kit scoffed.

“That’s not what I mean. She might be guilty.”

“There’s nothing she can do that she should feel guilty over.”

“Even if she cheats on you?”

“She won’t,” he dismissed easily. “A marriage is built on trust, Hannah. I trust Jessie.”

His trust was rewarded at five in the morning, when Jessie staggered home. She was absolutely and totally smashed. She was staggering towards the kitchen when he came out from the bedroom, barely able to stay on her feet, and he rushed over and steadied her when she nearly fell. “H-H-Hi,” she stammered, collapsing against him.

“How did you get home?” he asked immediately.

“Caaaaab,” she slurred as he collected her up. “Shoooo, wanna make thish little kitty purr?” she asked, then she literally passed out in his arms.

“Maybe later,” he chuckled.

Kit had nursed her through one hangover, but this one was the mother of all hangovers. She spent nearly an hour staggering back and forth to the bathroom to throw up. When not throwing up, she laid in bed, at least until the headache came. Kit waited until she was more coherent, when the alcohol wasn’t clouding her reason, and came back into the bedroom carrying a baby’s sip cup. “Here,” he said, as she pulled the wet cloth from over her eyes and looked up at him blearily.

“I don’t even want to think about food right now,” she groaned, putting her paws over her face. “I’m so embarrassed! I must look like an idiot!”

“No more than you did when you got drunk with Sheila,” he chuckled.
“Drink that as much as you can, it’ll take the bite off.”

“What is it?”

“A mixture of wine, tea, and honey. An old Vulpan family hangover tonic. I won’t taste that good, but it’ll help.”

“Wine?”

“Think of a hangover as fast-track withdrawal shock,” he told her.
“Drinking more delays a hangover, but that’s just it, delays it. It doesn’t make the hangover go away. But, a *little* alcohol during a hangover does at least take the edge off that headache. You’ll go from feeling like your brain is melting to simply having a bad headache.”

“Gimme!” she gasped, taking it in shaking paws and attacking it.

Kit let the small amount of wine in the tonic take the biggest part of the edge off her headache as he got dressed for work. “I’m going to go ahead and go in,” he told her. “Just sleep, love. I should be done by noon, so I’ll be home early, okay?”

“I just hope I’m still alive by then,” she groaned.

“I’m sure you’ll live,” he chuckled, kissing her on the forehead.
“Tylenol’s on the nightstand, and I made you a light lunch for when you’re feeling up to eating.”

“I love you,” she said honestly, but weakly.

“I love it when drunk girls tell me they love me.”

“I’m not drunk anymore, I’m hung over,” she corrected.

“Well, be ready to give what you’ve received.”

“Huh?”

“My party’s tonight, so I expect to be nursed through my hangover tomorrow without any nagging or snide comments,” he teased lightly as he turned off the light.

“Girls who get drunk have no right to throw stones,” Jessie managed with a weak laugh.

“See you soon, love.”

“Thanks, love.”

Kit got the lowdown on the party last night from Lilly, who dragged into the office with bloodshot eyes nearly an hour late. “It...was... *awesome!*” she finally declared, then she laughed. “The sorority must have hired every male stripper in the entire state of Texas, and there were like fifty girls there!”

“How did they fit them all into the house?”

“I have no idea,” she laughed. “It was awesome, though! Strippers, food, a band, and so much beer I thought they emptied out the distributor! They must have saved for months to pay for that bash!”

“So, you get any good pictures?”

“Oh, did I get pictures, or did I get pictures?” she grinned, holding her little digital camera up before her and waggling it like a prize.

“Well, pictures are for viewing!” Kit prompted, dragging her into the main office.

She got about a hundred pictures, and they showed the party in all its ribald glory. It was any college guy's dream; dozens and dozens of pretty coeds, boozed up and excited, posing for the camera when they knew it was there, but the pictures Lilly got by ambush were much better. One picture showed Sandy hanging all over one of the male strippers, who was without his G-string. When Kit made note of that, Lilly laughed. "They paid the strippers to go full nude," she explained.

"That's illegal in Texas," Kit chuckled.

"I don't think they cared," she grinned in reply. She cycled through a bunch of pictures showing the girls at the party going absolutely wild with the strippers, one picture almost making it look like one was having sex with a stripper right on the floor to an audience. "Oh, they weren't," Lilly chuckled. "The guy grabbed her and pulled her down onto the floor with him and pretended. That made the party go nuts!" she laughed. "I bet they could hear us screaming and cheering in San Antonio!" She plugged in a different memory chip with a grin. "This is the one you wanted," she winked. She cycled through quite a few pictures, until she got to the one she wanted. Jessie was sitting on a stripper's lap, her eyes hazy and her fur all disheveled, being handed a plastic cup of beer by a large paw that had to be the other Jessie's. "I couldn't get one of her giving them tips cause she didn't, but there's this one. The stripper tried to get her to pretend to give him a lap dance as practice for your wedding night, so she could give you a really sexy one."

Kit laughed delightedly. "Did she?"

"Nah, even drunk, she was too shy to do it," she laughed. "That's about as far as it went, what you see there." She snorted. "But there was one girl that wasn't afraid to do something like that," she laughed. She cycled

through the pictures, and then showed him a picture of Sheila, totally naked, leaning over with her bare butt and tail pressed up against the stomach of a tall, muscular wolf stripper, who had his paws behind his head and his tongue lolling out of his mouth in an over-the-top, theatrical expression. “The strippers issued a strip-off challenge to any girl brave enough to dance naked with them,” she laughed. “Sheila took them up on it!”

“I’m not surprised,” he chuckled. He had to admit, despite being his cousin, Sheila had a hot body.

And damn, was she limber.

“She earned fifty bucks off a bet to boot,” Lilly grinned. “I’ll delete this one as soon as I have a chance, bud. I don’t think your family needs pictures like this drifting around, but I just had to show it to you,” she told him with an evil smile.

“That’s forward-thinking of you, Lilly, but save a couple of copies. Now, whenever Sheila gives us backtalk at work, we just mention *the picture* and shut her up.”

Lilly laughed delightedly. “Okay, okay, we save two copies, one of your and one for me. Sheila’s not the only one that got caught on camera doing something naughty, though,” she winked, showing the next image in the memory card. It was Sandy, also totally naked, standing straddled over a leopard stripper that was kneeling in front of her, both paws on his head and a surprised look on her face as the leopard bit her belly button. “Sandy couldn’t let Sheila beat her in sheer audacity,” Lilly laughed.

“So, it was a wild party,” he noted. “Oh, you’d better hide that picture from Jeffrey,” he added.

“I will, and yes, it was a very wild party,” she grinned. “They’ll talk about that party on campus for *years*.”

“Any trouble?”

“Nothing major. A couple of instances of sex in the upstairs bedrooms and a visit from the cops to keep the noise down, but nothing noteworthy. It was wild, but it wasn’t *too* wild.”

“Wasn’t it femmes only?”

“Well, a couple of girls negotiated some private performances with the strippers,” she winked. “And, not all the femmes that went to the party were straight.”

“Ah.”

“So, I expect pictures of your party.”

“I’m sure Mike’s taking his camera,” he replied.

“Here, take this one. Lemme get you some empty memory cards for it,” she grinned. “I want good pictures!”

“I’m sure they’ll be good.” He stopped her before she went to the desk. “Take all the pictures and put them on a DVD for me.”

“Including Sandy’s?”

“Oh, you know I want that one,” he said with an evil tilt to his voice. “I may need blackmail material.”

Lilly burst out laughing. “Done, as long as you bring back pictures just as good!”

“I can’t make any promises, but from what I know of Lupe, I think I will.”

Kit made two copies of the DVD and left them the office, and took the original DVD back home with him and placed it in a conspicuous place in the den, where Jessie was sure to stumble across it. He then went about nursing his hung over fiancée. Jessie was still feeling poorly when he got home, but she was well enough to sit on the couch in nothing but a nightshirt and her panties, a quilt over her legs and a cup of honeyed tea in her paws. Sheila came over not long after he got home, as he was cooking French toast for Jessie, and she looked haggard but happy. “You look like hell,” Kit noted as she came in.

“It was worth it,” she laughed, sitting at the dining room table. “What are you doing?”

“Cooking,” he said mildly.

“Show me!” she said, hurrying in. “What are you making?”

“French toast, and I saw quite a bit of you this morning,” he said with a slight smile.

“Huh?”

“Lilly took pictures,” he told her.

For the first time in his life, he saw his bold cousin’s fur on her face stand on end. “She didn’t!”

“Oh, you know she did,” he laughed. “She got a great shot of you grinding your tail and naked butt into the stomach of one of the strippers.”

“Oh, God,” she said morosely, putting her face in her paw. “She caught that on camera?”

“Ohhh, did she,” he chuckled.

“*Please* tell me she destroyed it?”

“Silly femme, and where would that leave us when we want something from you?” he asked mildly, stringing her along.

“Kit, if my mom sees that, she’ll go nuclear! They know I party, but I’ve never crossed *that* line before!”

“What line, getting wild at a party?”

“No, getting *photographed* getting wild at a party,” she told him seriously. “If a pic of that like me ever got to the tabloids, can you imagine what Mom would do to me?”

“True. Alright, I promise not to show it around. But I will keep it for blackmail purposes,” he grinned at her.

“Where is it?”

“In an undisclosed location,” he told her. “And I have lots of copies.”

“Bastard!”

“I’ll be sure to bring back some compromising pictures of me from tonight, so you can hold onto those,” he winked.

She laughed then. “Alright, maybe you’re not a bastard. Let the threat of mutually assured embarrassment hold us in check!”

“Sounds like I’ll have to get crazy for my picture,” he grinned.

“I expect nothing less than full frontal nudity and a compromising position with a naked stripper,” she declared.

“He’d *better* not!” Jessie said sharply from the living room.

“And I have a picture for you, Jessie. It involves a naked dog and an attempted lap dance,” he called teasingly.

“Oh my *God*! Lilly said her camera had no film in it!”

“Hon, since when does Lilly use anything but a *digital* camera?”

“I’m gonna kill that squirrel!” Jessie said angrily, then she laughed helplessly. “That’s what I get for being drunk, I guess. I hope you’ll forgive me!”

“Baby, I was hoping you’d have fun,” he chided her. “I’m not so insecure that I’d think some hot stripper with better equipment than me would woo you away. I *trust* you, Jessie. You could have been naked sitting on his lap in that picture, and it wouldn’t matter to me at all. I know you, and I trust you.”

“Well, I’ll remember that the next time a naked stripper’s trying to get me in his lap,” she teased from the living room.

“Be my guest,” he told her.

Sheila helped him cook, and he brought Jessie to the dining room to eat. She ate slowly, and so did Sheila, but she didn’t look sick when she was done, going back to the couch. “Alright, Kit, show me the picture,” Jessie said.

Kit laughed. “Lilly gave me a DVD full of ‘em, lemme bring out a laptop,” he said.

Jessie's cheek fur didn't flatten itself for the next hour. Sheila laughed and commented on the hundreds of pictures, some of them very naughty, but few matched the downright sexuality of Sheila and Sandy's naked stripper challenge pictures. "I don't remember that!" Jessie gasped, blushing so deeply her tail fur frizzed as she looked at Sandy's picture. "She's *naked*!"

"Very naked," Kit laughed. "Now I can tell her I've seen her rack, and it's not bad at all."

Jessie elbowed him in the shoulder.

"When you have naked furs dancing in the living room in front of a crowd, it was a good party," Sheila laughed, then her cheeks ruffled when Kit showed her her picture.

"Naked vixen, naked wolf, naked vixen pretending to do the deed in the middle of the living room, cheering onlookers, yup, it was a good party alright," Kit chuckled lightly.

"How do you know we were pretending?" she asked with a grin.

"I don't think that's *yours* hanging right there," he noted, pointing at a part of the photograph that made Jessie gasp and blush anew, and made Sheila laugh riotously.

Sheila grabbed the front of her jeans, pulled them out away from her stomach, and looked down. "Nope, that's not mine. So I guess he just wasn't in the mood," she noted absently, which made Jessie erupt into embarrassed laughter.

Kit left them to look over the pictures themselves, Jessie making all kinds of surprising comments that made her seem not shy at all...but that

was just the company. Jessie was very comfortable around Sheila, almost as comfortable as she was with her sister, and Jessie was much bolder when she was in private. Kit had all kinds of personal experience with Jessie's boldness when they were alone.

Sheila hung out with them for a couple of hours and then went home, but it was a short reprieve. About twenty minutes after Sheila went back to her apartment, Kit saw Lupe bounding towards his door. He opened it without ringing the doorbell, a wide grin on his face. "Yo brah, it's time! Let's go!"

"Where are we going?"

"A warehouse in south Austin," he grinned.

"A warehouse?"

"Trust me, brah," he said.

"Dude, I have friends who don't know where to go."

"Alright, call 'em and tell 'em it's the old Deuce Warehouse, off one seventy and Congress."

"That's not far from here," he realized.

"Then it won't take long to get there! Spread the word, I'll give ya ten minutes brah!"

Kit did that, telling the gang, then calling Kevin and asking him if he wanted to come. "Hell yes!" he laughed. "They got me doing this stupid defamation suit, I'd kill for a breath of fresh air!"

"Alright, know where the restaurant we ate at is? You go about two miles past that, over the bridge, and it's a big warehouse at the corner of

Congress and state route one seventy.”

“I’m on the way. It’ll take me a bit to get down there, so save me a beer!”

“Remember cab fare, I don’t want you driving back.”

“Dude, I’m gonna park at the firm and take a cab from there, I’ll be safe,” he assured him.

“Smart male.”

“I’m a lawyer, bud, I don’t do stupid stuff like that,” he chuckled, then hung up.

Lupe drove him there. It was an old warehouse, the parking lot overgrown, but the cavernous interior showed that it was actually a nightclub, with neon chaser strands, a disco ball at the top of a huge empty area, and lots of tables along one side of the warehouse, facing a large stage that had a deejay on top of it. “Welcome to the Underground, brah,” Lupe told him as they entered, his brown face excited. “Dude, you’re gonna love this!”

There were already quite a few males there, already drinking as the music blared in the background. Mike arrived about three minutes after they did, a camera in his paw as he greeted Kit and Lupe. About fifteen more males, and a few females, filed in, many of them Kit didn’t know, and then the lights went low and the music changed to a techno beat. “Alright, guys, give a big welcome to the real stars of this bachelor party, the lovely ladies of the Top Hat Club!” the deejay called from the stage.

It was a mirror of the sorority party, he saw. About fifteen furs of different species sauntered out of a back door by the stage and strutted

through the open space between the stage and the tables, all of them wearing skimpy little stripper outfits. One was dressed a cop, one wore a little-girl dress, one wore a sleek black teddy and carried a pair of fans, and other various costumes that were either based on real clothes or professions or were patently revealing and sexy. The males whistled and cheered as they strutted through the open area, then Lupe pushed Kit out into the open area.

“And here’s our doomed male!” the deejay called, which got him some calls and laughter. “Send him into marriage with a smile on his face, ladies!” the deejay prompted. Mike took a ton of pictures of the strippers sliding against him, running their paws all over him, rubbing themselves against him, and then, while the other strippers held him more or less out by himself, one of them began to do her striptease act. She was a cute red fox vixen, a rather well stacked vixen, wearing a hunter’s outfit. Kit smiled and enjoyed the show as she sensually stripped down to a G-string, but he was a bit surprised when she made quite a show out of taking that off as well, taking care to show him everything as she wiggled out of her G-string and bent down to step out of it. She picked it up and sidled around him, her tail caressing him as the other femmes backed off to give her room, then she gave him a grin and took her G-string and dropped it on top of his muzzle, which made the males watching cheer and howl in appreciation. It hung off his nose by its small waist strap, and Mike got a great picture of it.

Kit figured that was that, but she took his paw and dragged him back to his table, then climbed into his lap as the other strippers sauntered into the crowd to tease and mingle before they did their striptease dances, and the music began to play again. “It’s a shame a handsome fox like you is taking himself off the market,” she told him with a throaty purr, leaning back

against him, grinding her tail against his lap and stomach. “Am I as pretty as your girl, baby?”

“Dude, this ain’t no legal strip club,” Lupe grinned at him, reaching over and brazenly cupping the vixen’s breast, and she made no move to stop him. “You wanna touch, touch away. She’ll even let you get a taste, but that’s between you and her, and she’ll charge extra.”

“I thought strippers couldn’t let you touch,” Kit noted.

“These aren’t just strippers, brah. This is both a strip club and a whorehouse. These ladies are both available and willing, if you got the money for a ride. And you won’t find ‘em any hotter anywhere in Texas.”

“Where did you find this place, Lupe?” Jeffrey, who had just arrived, asked in surprise. “I always thought this was an empty building! I never knew it was a bordello!”

“Dude, I know people,” he grinned in reply. “And don’t you worry about nothin’. This is all paid for, even the beer. We got four kegs to drain before we gotta start buyin’ drafts, so drink up!”

“I might have to give you a little something for free,” the vixen said seductively, reaching back and putting her paws on his muzzle. “Seeing as you’re about to trap yourself with one femme.”

“Hon, you’re gorgeous, you’re sexy, and I’m quite flattered, but I happen to find the idea of spending the rest of my life with that femme to be the best thing that could ever happen,” he chuckled in reply. “But,” he said. “You can help me with one thing.”

“And what is that?”

“I need a picture,” he said with a chuckle. “A rather, compromising picture. Would it bother you to have your picture taken with me?”

“Ohh, we can do that,” she assured him. “Go find a camera, I’ll give you a picture that gives you wet dreams for the next ten years.”

“Brah, I hope you’re giving out copies!” Lupe laughed.

The stripper was more than happy to give him that picture. Mike snapped it, of her giving him a lap dance, looking right at the camera with a sultry look as Kit held her by her slender waist. Kit wasn’t about to do what Sheila wanted, but a picture like that would satisfy her need to see her cousin misbehaving. The stripper surprised him by twisting around in his lap and kissing him on the side of his muzzle, and Mike caught that in a picture as well.

The party only got going at that point. Each of the strippers performed for them, not on the stage but in the open area before it, and then she would wander naked into the crowd to perform lap dances, mingle, and tease tips and money out of the party-goers...and a couple of them led males through the door by the stage to continue certain negotiations in private, Lupe being one of them. Kevin bought a lap dance from a black cat, which Mike caught on camera, and Jeffrey made a hilarious picture as a fellow mouse stripper who was sitting on his lap facing him, kissed him on the cheek as Jeffrey’s arms were held out, his fingers straight as he reacted to her sudden act. Mike was there to get pictures of a raccoon femme dancing naked on a table near the bar, who kept looking down at him with inviting smiles and ghosting her tail over his face as she undulated atop the table.

They kept pushing beers at him, but Kit wasn’t about to do what Jessie did. He drank in slow moderation, at least for a Vulpan, which got virtually

everyone else smashed out of their minds. Vulpans were champion drinkers. Mike could barely keep his camera aimed after two hours, staggering around with a silly grin on his face, then falling into the arms of the raccoon femme who seemed taken with him earlier. She giggled and nuzzled him, whispered something in his ear which made his tail stick straight out, its fur frizzing, and then she gave him a deep kiss that made his tail go crazy.

Kit was sure to get a picture of that.

About midnight, everyone was drunk, and all inhibitions were gone. Kit got a picture of Jeffrey dancing on a table with the mouse femme that had kissed him, and a rather surprising picture of Savid with his paws on the hips of a naked ferret. Savid was happily married, so that was a surprise, and a picture that wasn't going to leave the club. He got a picture of Barry putting his paw on the top of the head of a short lynx stripper, making fun of her short stature since she didn't come up to his chest, but he got another picture of Barry's eyes all but popping out of his head when that short lynx put her paw in his jeans with an evil grin on her face.

Rick was there too, but Rick wasn't about to get tangled up with the strippers, for Martha would rip his fur out. He got there late since he had to finish dinner before joining them, and he sat at Kit's table and drank beer, laughed, talked, and had a good time without getting close to the strippers... but he *did* enjoy watching their stripteases.

The strippers were fun when they mingled, but the games were funny too. Kit had never seen naked femme wrestling before, nor had he ever seen naked karaoke, but the best part had to be their "let's shoot a porn scene" gig, driving the guys wild with it, then bringing a male from the audience up to join them. They tried to get Kit, but Kit backed out of that...Jessie would tear out his spleen if he went that far. The lucky male was Dan, and

the lion had a ball having two sexy femmes hanging all over him, even undressing him. Kit had to snap a picture of that, too.

In all, by the time it started winding down around two in the morning and males started to leave, Kit had to admit that that was, by far, the wildest bachelor party he'd ever heard of. Lupe had outdone himself in spectacular fashion. Lupe was in no condition to drive, so Kit drove them back...though Kit wasn't entirely sure he was legal to drive himself. But he was the safest choice, and Kit was very careful to get them home safely. He walked the singing chihuahua back to his apartment, then went home himself.

Jessie was asleep when he came into the bedroom, but she stirred and sat up, turning on the lamp on her nightstand as he undressed. "How was it?"

"Lupe will be known as the bachelor party god from this day on," Kit said with amused reverence in his voice. "That was the wildest party I've ever attended. And I've been to some real doozies."

She looked at her alarm clock. "But it's only two!"

"We've been at it since seven," he told her.

"Oh. Did, you, uh, do anything wild?"

"No," he chuckled. "Because I knew you'd disapprove. I did get a picture for Sheila, though, of one of the strippers giving me a lap dance."

"Oh. Was she pretty?" she asked shyly.

Kit laughed. "You're jealous!"

"I'm trying not to be," she said quietly, looking away. "It makes me feel rotten to be jealous when you're not jealous."

“I’m a little jealous, I can’t deny that,” he told her, putting his paw on her shoulder. “But that doesn’t mean that I don’t trust you, my pretty kitty. I trust you to honor my wishes, just as I honored your wishes tonight by not getting too wild. I was even careful not to come home too drunk,” he grinned.

“I see. Well, since you’re home, and you’ve been looking at big-boobed strippers all night,” she hinted, sliding her paw down his shoulder and back suggestively, “need to vent a little, love?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” he said, climbing into bed and biting at her neck as she giggled and put her arms around him.

Chapter 15

Kit did have a very mild hangover the next morning, but it wasn't anything a single glass of Vulpan tonic couldn't knock out.

This was it. The last week. The home stretch. In just five days, they were going to marry, and now there was nothing but two rehearsals standing in their way. Kit had a copy of the wedding script before him as Jessie cooked breakfast, humming to herself. Jessie had opted for a completely traditional wedding. The vows were textbook, and there would be no special "speech" vows like some couples gave. The whole time, the only thing they'd be saying were "I do" and "with this ring I thee wed." The monsignor would give a little sermon-like speech at the beginning of the ceremony, which was his own choice (Jessie gave him leeway to create his own, she wanted to be surprised), then came the vows, then the exchange of rings, and then it was done. They would kiss at that point and then go back down the aisle and out the front door, in traditional fashion, then circle the church to the parking lot, and take the waiting limo that would drive them to the reception. It would take about twenty minutes or so, a traditional ceremony, but a little non-traditional in Jessie was hustling them straight to the Four Corners to minimize any chance her mother might have to embarrass her during the ceremony. Kit figured that Jessie would rather deal with her hostile mother there instead of in a church.

Kit saw that he had to make arrangements to get to the church. Rick could probably take him, he'd have to ask.

“Breakfast!” Jessie called from the kitchen. “Crepes and fruit!”

He came over to the breakfast table and sat down, and Jessie set down a plate stacked with crepes, and a bowl of strawberries, blueberries, and bananas mixed in a light syrup. She leaned down and kissed him on the ear fondly, then sat down herself. “Feeling better?” she asked.

“The headache’s just a dull throb now,” he told her as he piled a few crepes on his plate, then drizzles mixed fruit over them. “That’s a lot of crepes, hon.”

“We probably won’t be alone for long,” she grinned. “Sheila—“ There was a knock at the door, which made Kit laugh. “Sheila will probably drop by,” Jessie finished. “It’s open!” she called loudly.

It was indeed Sheila, carrying an umbrella, wearing sweatpants and a sports halter to protect against the rain outside. “Hey, I’m about to go to the Y now that we have memberships,” she told them. “Wanna come?”

“We’re a little busy right now,” Jessie told her. “Want some breakfast?”

She laughed. “Giving me something to work off?”

“I guess so,” she grinned.

“They’re open this early?”

“Kit, it’s nearly eleven,” Sheila told him.

“Really?”

“Yeah, really, you goob,” she told him as she stood her umbrella in the corner and bounded over.

“Aww, damn!” he realized. “We missed mass!”

“We did?” Jessie asked. “I thought those started at noon. That’s why I didn’t wake you up!”

“Dammit, we did,” he sighed. “Well, we can go to evening mass. That way we’re still keeping our promise. We’ll have to leave poker early.”

“I don’t mind,” Jessie told him.

“Oooh, crepes! So, how was the party last night?” Sheila asked as she sat down at the table.

“Wild, as expected,” Kit chuckled.

“You get my picture?”

“I got you one, yeah,” he answered.

“Well, where is it?”

“Can I finish breakfast first?”

“No.”

“Brave words,” Kit chuckled as he took a bite. “Now shut up and eat.”

After breakfast, he dug up the camera and a handful of memory cards and hooked it up to the computer. “Mike took lots more pictures than I did,” he said, “but Mike did give me the memory cards from his camera...or, more to the point, I took them while he was drunk,” he chuckled. “So, let’s see what shenanigans Mike managed to capture.”

Jessie’s face poofed out at the very first picture, showing the raccoon and mouse strippers dancing together on either side of Lupe, who had both thumbs up and a huge grin on his face. “They’re *naked!*” she accused.

“So were your strippers,” Kit chuckled.

“Well, well, that’s different!” she complained.

“I’ll say,” Sheila noted clinically. “These strippers just don’t do anything for me at all.”

Kit laughed, and Jessie slapped Sheila on the shoulder. “You’re not helping!”

“Why are you getting your tail in a knot?” she asked. “Did you cheat on Jessie, Kit?”

“No!”

“Then there ya go,” she said simply. “Now show me some *good* pictures!”

“I don’t know what kind of pictures Mike got,” he repeated, and they started cycling through them.

In all, the pictures from his party were much wilder than the ones from Jessie’s, mainly because the female strippers at his party were much more... free-wheeling than the male strippers had been. Jessie gasped more than once when he cycled through them, showing friends and males he didn’t know in all kinds of compromising situations with the numerous strippers, who had been quite happy to be photographed. “He didn’t!” Jessie gasped when they reached the picture of Jeffrey and the mouse dancing on the table.

“He sure did, and it looks like he’s having a blast,” Sheila laughed.

It took a while to find his picture. Oh, Mike had lots of pictures with him in them, but that wasn’t the picture they were looking for. When they finally found it, Jessie’s face poofed out, and she gave him a surprisingly

unfriendly look for a moment before she caught herself and forced a more neutral expression. “And here’s yours Sheila,” he grinned. “The vixen was more than happy to pose for it.”

“I’d say she was having fun,” Sheila laughed. “God, I’d pay money to have knockers like hers.”

“I think they’re done,” Kit said, looking carefully at the picture. “So you probably could pay money to get knockers like hers,” he added with a chuckle.

“No thanks. I have an aversion to plastic surgery since that disaster with Bess.”

“What happened?” Jessie asked.

“She had a boob job and got an infection,” she answered. “She was really sick for a couple of months, and they had to do two more surgeries to fix it. She kept the implants though,” Sheila chuckled. “Nothing can stand in the way of Bess and her vanity.”

“Is that the exhibitionist?”

“No, that’s Muffy,” Kit answered for her. “She was a pretty interesting femme,” he told them, pointing at the picture. “Her name is Allison, and she’s a grad student at U.T.”

“You’re kidding!” Jessie gasped.

“Not a bit. She’s a chemistry graduate. She works there to pay her tuition as she earns her Master’s and earn extra money. She said she’ll have so much money saved up by the time she gets her Master’s that she may not even have to work. *Very* smart young lady.”

“And she gets that stripping? Holy cow.”

“Among other things,” he noted. “The place Lupe took us wasn’t a strip club, it was an illegal brothel.”

“No way!” Jessie protested, but Sheila just had a knowing smile on her face.

“Yup. Every one of these ladies were...for rent.”

“And did you rent one?” Jessie had to ask.

He snorted. “And piss you off? Hell no,” he declared. “Why would I pay for something I can get at home for free with the lady I love, and have a heck of a lot more fun doing it?”

“With her or with me?” Jessie asked archly.

“With you, dip,” Sheila laughed. “You can stop being jealous now, Jess. He had a chance to cheat on you and he didn’t. He passed the test.”

Jessie looked away from her a moment, then looked at the picture. “She’s gorgeous. How did she end up a prostitute?”

“Love, I’ve known a *lot* of prostitutes,” Kit told her. “Hanging out in homeless shelters like I did brings you into contact with them. Not all of them are drug-addicted runaways like some people think. After she gave me the picture, we talked a while, and I got to know her. You know me, love, she had a story and I had to hear it, so I coaxed it out of her. Allison got into it for the money, and for no other reason. And she makes a *hell* of a lot of money doing it. When she graduates, she’ll quit. Someone as pretty as she is can make a killing as a callgirl, though.”

“That’s the truth. They’ve got some escort services in Boston where the girls charge five thousand dollars an hour,” Sheila told her. “They’re all drop-dead gorgeous, of course, and they’re all elegant and sophisticated. You’d never know they have sex for money looking at ‘em.”

“They work at a place called the Top Hat Club,” he explained as they moved onto the next picture, showing Barry and Mike being kissed by a raccoon and a lynx. “It’s a bordello that caters to upscales. They have a bar and nightclub there, but they only allow males in who are members, and the girls charge upwards of a thousand dollars an hour for sex. That money’s on top of the tips they earn doing their strip dances and working the floor.”

“Damn!” Jessie gasped. “No wonder this Allison is earning lots of money!”

“Yeah, she’s one of their highest priced girls,” Kit nodded. “You can tell just by looking at her,” he noted. “I just wonder how the hell Lupe managed to get our party there, since most of the guests weren’t members, and a place like this doesn’t stay in business long when the cops get wind of it being there.”

“Cousin, Lupe’s not squeaky clean,” Sheila told him. “He’s got a few mob friends. He may have called in a favor.”

“He had to do something. And it must have cost a *fortune*. It was a private party on a Saturday night in a place like that. He even bought the beer.”

“We need to ask him,” Sheila grinned.

Jessie seemed a little distant as they cycled through the rest of the pictures, as Sheila made all kinds of comments typical for her, until they

came to a picture of one of the wilder moments, showing one of the males Kit didn't know engaged in a sex act with a black cat stripper while males with cups of beer in their paws stood around them and cheered them on.

"Oh my," Sheila breathed, giving the picture a long look.

"Yeah, I told you it got wild," Kit told her.

"God, that wolf's cute," she noted. "Too bad that cat's in the way, I'd like to see what he's sporting down there."

"You never change," Kit accused as he moved on to the next picture.

"Not til I'm married, and maybe not even then," Sheila giggled in reply.

Sheila went on to work out after they finished going through the pictures. Kit took the cards to the den and put all the pictures on a DVD, then made several copies of it. He arranged them chronologically using the timestamps on the pictures from the camera, and put captions under some of them using his picture software before burning them to DVD. Jessie wandered in as he was making copies, and he saw she was still a little pensive. "What's the matter, pretty kitty?" he asked.

"I don't know, I guess I'm a little jealous, but I feel stupid because I am," she told him. "That Allison was much prettier than me, and she sounded much smarter than me and more interesting than me."

Kit laughed. "Now you're being totally silly," he admonished her. "I had her naked in my lap, and what did I do? I came home to *you*. Who was the one that got ravished last night, hmm?"

She gave him a shy smile. "I guess that was me," she affirmed, "but Kit...did she make you excited at all?"

“Hon, I’m a male. Of course I was turned on by her. No straight male on earth would fail to be excited by *that*,” he admitted. “After all, that’s what she does for a living, and she’s good at it. She knows how to be sexy and enticing, it’s how she pays for college. But all it made me want to do was come home to *you*,” he told her, reaching out and pulling her into his lap. “What’s an empty ten minutes with a total stranger when I have *this* waiting at home for me, silly girl?” he said, nuzzling her neck as his paws slid up and down her sides and back. “Sure, she was sexy, sure, she was pretty. I can admit that I saw that in her. But she doesn’t hold a candle to *you*. You are the most beautiful, sexiest, most interesting and fascinating femme on the face of this earth,” he told her. “It would *take* some pretty femme taking her clothes off to make me even look at her.”

Jessie gave a giggling sigh, then pushed out enough to look down into his eyes. “I guess I can’t help it,” she told him. “You’re so...amazing, Kit. I love you so much, I’m afraid of losing you. I feel threatened when you look at other femmes, because I know I’m shy and I’m traditional, and I must not be that exciting to you at all. How can I compete with someone as interesting as Allison, when she’s so pretty, and you’re attracted to her? I’m not wild and exciting like her or Sheila. I’m just a stick in the mud, traditional and shy.”

“Pretty kitty, when we close the door and we’re alone, you are *not* shy,” he grinned up at her. “No femme who teases her male into bed is shy.” She laughed, her cheeks ruffling slightly. “And don’t sell yourself short, you sexy beast, you’re easily just as gorgeous as she is. Why do you think I want pictures of you out of your clothes? Allison had to get surgery to make herself anywhere near as sexy as you are. And like I said, you are the most interesting femme on earth,” he told her. “You think you’re boring? Ha!” he

scoffed. “You’re intelligent,” he said, kissing her neck, “and complicated, and very, very interesting. I can spend all day just talking to you about absolutely nothing, because I love the way your mind works, and it’s a delight to have a conversation with you. So don’t you *ever* think you’re boring, my pretty kitty. I’m attracted to your body, I’m attracted to your mind, and I’m attracted to your soul. All Allison had was a story. You, my lovely Jessica Desdemona Vulpan, have *me*. ”

“I love you,” she declared vehemently, wrapping her arms around him and hugging him tightly.

“You’d better, you’re marrying me in four days, one hour, and twenty-two minutes,” he teased.

“How would you like those pictures, love?” she whispered in his ear.

“How about you give them to me when you’re not feeling jealous over my bachelor party,” he breathed back. “I want pictures of you at the height of your own self-confidence, when you’re at your sexiest and most sensual, not pictures you give me because you’re jealous of another. So, I’ll get my pictures on our wedding night,” he breathed in her ear. “When you’ll know beyond all doubt that I’m yours, and what you do is for you, and not for me.”

“That’s a promise,” she told him, running her paws over the scars on his back.

“You bet it’s a promise,” he agreed.

Kit couldn’t let it go without knowing. About an hour before poker, Kit came over to Lupe’s apartment and helped him get it ready. Lupe looked haggard, but he had a silly kind of afterglow about him that came from

having such a good time last night. “Okay, Lupe, how the hell did you pull that off?” he demanded as they brought in a new, larger table that Lupe had got for poker night.

“I know people, brah,” he grinned mischievously as they put the extender leaf in the old, scratched-up hardwood table.

“Dude, that had to cost thousands of dollars!”

“Didn’t cost a penny,” he said with a wave of his paw.

“Liar!” Kit laughed. “Renting an upscale illegal bordello *and* the strippers *and* four kegs? Not a penny my furry butt!”

“Didn’t cost a penny,” he repeated. “That party was the work of a couple of folks who know you and know of you, who swore me to secrecy. They wanted you to go out in style.”

“Did Vil put you up to that?” he demanded.

“I shall name no names,” he said with surprising adamance. “But don’t feel obligated no matter what. Didn’t cost me anything but a couple of easy favors, and the furs in question *also* got to enjoy the party.”

“Some of the furs there I didn’t know?”

“A couple of them. Some others were some high-bankroll members of the club that the owners wouldn’t shut out no matter what, so they got to come in. The main backer wouldn’t go for that kind of party, though.”

Kit slammed the extender leaf home. “Sheila!” he realized.

“I shall name no names,” he repeated, but he gave Kit a wink.

“Why that sneaky, dirty little vixen,” Kit mused as they pushed the table together to close the gaps in the leaf. “It must have wiped out her savings! That had to be a five thousand dollar party, at *least!*”

“I couldn’t tell ya, brah, but she’s the one that paid for most of it.”

“She’s gonna get it,” Kit growled.

“I ain’t complainin’, brah, the distributor gave me a deal on a keg cause of that party! We got a keg of Michelob for poker tonight!”

“Mickey—“

“Mickey gave me the beer money,” Lupe told him.

“That reminds me, Lupe, I’ll be cutting it short tonight,” Kit told him. “Me and Jessie promised the preacher marrying us we’d go to church today. We kinda missed morning mass, so we’re gonna go to evening mass tonight. That starts at seven.”

“No problem, brah, no problem.”

Sheila came over while they were moving the old table out. Kit dropped it, grabbed Sheila, and before she could register much protest, kissed her square on the lips. She laughed when he let her go. “What the hell was that for!” she demanded.

“For being a devious, sneaky little vixen,” he told her. “*Thank you.*”

“You ratted me out!” she accused Lupe.

“He tricked it out of me, babe,” he said defensively. “He ain’t dumb, ya know! It took him like two minutes to put it together!”

“Well, that’s true,” Sheila acceded. “I’m glad you had fun, cousin. It’s the least I could do after you took me in, and hey, parties and general debauchery *are* my specialties.”

“Are they!” Lupe laughed. “Having it at the Top Hat was her idea.”

“Didn’t take much to get in, either,” Sheila grinned at Kit. “All I had to do was say the word *Vulpan*, and they fell all over themselves. Oh, by the way, cousin, you’re now a member,” she winked. “Show up at the door, and they’ll let you in.” She admired her short, manicured claws. “I’m a member too,” she said casually.

“I never knew you were into female strippers,” Kit teased.

“I’m into sex, cousin, and they cater to femmes too,” she answered, giving him a direct look. “They have *males* working there too. It’s not a whorehouse as much as it is a sex club, but just with some rentals if you don’t bring your own. Didn’t you go upstairs?” she asked curiously.

“No.”

“Well damn, cousin, you missed the good parts,” she told him. “They have another bar upstairs, as well as a huge playroom, full of all kinds of fun things,” she grinned.

Lupe’s tail was twitching spasmodically.

“Males, femmes, gays, lesbians, parties, shows, they do it all. The first floor is just the nightclub with the stuff they show the cops when they come snooping around, and it ain’t nothin’ illegal. The second floor is where the real action is,” she announced. “That’s why the place is members only. Not because it’s a whorehouse, but because it’s a sex club.”

“Allison never told me about that,” Kit mused.

“Who?”

“I had a talk with one of the strippers.”

“Only you would talk with the femmes instead of doing what you were supposed to do,” she sighed in disappointment. “Why should she tell you about stuff she thought you already knew? I’m sure the owner told the femmes you were a new member. Hell, cousin, you *had* to be a member to even have the party there!”

“I guess. Though I’m not sure being a member of a sex club is something that interests me,” he chuckled.

“Take Jessie to it,” Sheila grinned. “That would be a riot!”

“Lupe, you went upstairs. What was up there?” Kit asked.

“Brah, I just went to a bedroom,” he told him, “and it was on the first floor. Say, think you can take a guest back there when you get back from your honeymoon?” he asked with a grin.

“Ooo, so Lupe got some booty last night, eh?” Sheila grinned at him. “What was she?”

“A ferret,” he coughed.

“Was she hot?”

“She *worked* there, babe,” he said, his leg twitching. “Did you see those femmes?”

“Yeah, I did,” she grinned. “Kit showed me a bunch of pictures of them. I hope the males are even half as hot as the femmes they got there.”

“You haven’t seen them?” Kit asked.

“I haven’t been there yet,” she admitted with a wink. “I set up most of this over the phone.”

“But you made it sound—“

“I told you what the owner told me,” she answered. “But I *am* going there. Tonight, maybe,” she said with a leering grin. “Sunday is Ladies’ Night in the nightclub, when the male strippers are featured. But these strippers will take you into a room and boff you senseless if you pay for it,” she said with a dreadful kind of eagerness.

Lupe was almost panting.

“Aww, did I get Lupey all excited?” she asked, reaching out and putting her paw on his cheek, patting it like a parent.

“You’re a bitch, Sheila, you know that?”

“I know I am,” she grinned. “And you’re a horn-dog.”

“I’m Latino, babe, we’re *all* horn-dogs. Why you think they call us Latin Lovers?”

“I’ll call you a peeping tom,” she winked. “I caught you looking through my window last week when I took off my shirt.”

Lupe’s cheek fur stood straight out.

“Did you like what you saw?” she grinned at him.

“You know I did, babe,” he answered. “But that was an accident. I was on your porch, it wasn’t like I was peeping through your bedroom window!”

“Yeah, that’s why I took my shirt off in the living room,” she grinned. “You’d been staring at my rack all day, I decided to reward you for your persistence.”

“You did that on purpose?”

“Does it make it hotter to know I know you were looking, or did you think it was hotter thinking you were peeking when I didn’t know you were there?”

“Lupe, don’t play with Sheila, you’re not old enough,” Kit interrupted what was surely going to escalate into something Kit didn’t want to hear.

“Spoilsport,” Sheila accused. “Anyway, what I was here for. What am I bringing?”

“Chips and dip,” Lupe told her, a bit unsteadily.

“Got it. I’ll go run down to IGB and pick some up. Need anything else?”

“Plastic cups, we got a keg this time.”

“I’ll get some,” she promised, then she sauntered away, making sure to swing her tail back and forth in a way that made Lupe’s breath catch in his throat.

Kit nudged him, and they went back to the table and picked it up. “Don’t do it, bro,” Kit warned.

“Do what?”

“Get involved with her,” he warned flatly. “Sheila is not the girlfriend type, and she’ll chew you up and spit you out.”

“Brah, I wasn’t thinking that.”

“Don’t do *that* either,” he warned. “Sheila isn’t even the one night stand type, Lupe. And I’m not saying that just because I’m her cousin. I’d warn any of my friends away from her.”

“Brah.”

“Trust me. You heard her, that’s what she’s like. That’s not a front, and she’s not playing with you. That’s who she is. You’re nothing but her next conquest, and she won’t care a bit when she dumps you and moves on to the next guy. Males don’t have feelings in her world. We’re all just toys for her amusement, and she’s like any child. The instant the doll loses its appeal, she moves on to the next one. Do you really want to get involved with someone like her?”

Lupe gave him a surprised look. “Brah, I never thought of that.”

“Sheila can be a great friend, Lupe, but don’t ever walk into that trap. Keep it where it is, save yourself a *whole* lot of trouble.”

“I think I’d better.”

“That’s only smart. Oh, and be ready.”

“What for?”

“She knows she gets to you. She’ll keep teasing you.”

“Let her, I’ll handle it,” he said with a grin.

There were some bloodshot eyes at poker, but they were happy ones. They spent more time talking about the party the night before than they did playing poker. Sam and Sandy got to hear all about it, and they spent quite a bit of time glaring at Jeffrey and Kevin, who looked decidedly

uncomfortable...which amused Kit. Sandy had been five times wilder than Jeffrey, yet she was offended that he danced with a stripper. He had to turn the tables on them while Mickey dealt. “Well, Sam, I heard some things about the party at the sorority house,” he noted. “Naked male strippers? That’s not much worse than Lupe’s party.”

“Well, they didn’t touch,” she said frostily, looking at Kevin.

“No, but they did bite,” he noted.

Sandy’s fur stood straight out, and she gave him a strangled look.

“What does that mean, Kit?” Jeffrey asked.

“Uh, nothing, baby, it was just something one of the strippers did,” she told him. “It was part of his act.”

“Oh. So, was the bachelorette party good?”

“Yeah, we had a lot of fun,” Sam nodded. “The house hired the strippers, who did a great job. They were very good. JD was mortified through half of it. We had to get her drunk before she had any fun,” she chuckled.

“I didn’t have to get drunk!” Jessie protested.

“Your fur was sticking straight out til we gave you those jello shots,” Sandy told her with a grin.

“Well, it was entirely improper! Naked males gyrating about in the living room, femmes putting their paws all over their privates! It was disgusting!”

“Spoken like a vestal virgin,” Sandy teased. “You weren’t half so prudish once you were drunk. She even sat in a stripper’s lap,” Sandy told

the males with a laugh.

“Don’t be embarrassed, Jessie, it was your bachelorette party,” Kevin told her with a smile. “You were supposed to get wild and have a night to remember.”

“I don’t remember half of it,” Jessie said, her cheeks ruffling.

“She got *real* drunk,” Sandy laughed.

“So did you!”

“We all got drunk,” Sam admitted. “I woke up on Saturday with the worst hangover I’ve ever had. I don’t think anyone in the house even got out of bed until three in the afternoon.”

“It took us four hours to clean up,” Sandy told them.

“Well, I’m glad you had fun,” Kevin said. “We had fun too.”

“A little too much fun,” Mickey laughed. “Lupe, dude, how did you manage to put that together? That was the most awesome party in this history of the universe!”

“A magician never reveals his secrets,” Lupe said with a toothy grin.

“Dude, you can plan my bachelor party any time!”

Kit and Jessie bowed out of poker day early, dressed in nice clothes, and headed for mass. Kit wore the same clothes he’d bought for his job interview, and Jessie wore a gorgeous blue dress with long sleeves and black buttons up the front, that reached her knees, complete with a wide black belt and black pumps...one of the rare times Jessie wore shoes. But Jessie never felt comfortable wearing a nice dress without shoes. It had been a long time since he’d been at mass, but it was like riding a bike. He

remembered enough, and Kit explained some of the rituals to Jessie while they sat in the back row. Monsignor Duke was leading the mass, and he looked right at them after he took the altar and began his sermon.

The father couldn't let it go without saying something. At the end of mass, before the benediction, he motioned towards the surprisingly full church. "Before we say our farewells, I'd like to welcome Kit Vulpan and Jessica Williams, who will be giving their vows in our chapel on Friday. Please give them your congratulations," he said. Many faces looked back, and there was even a round of applause, which made Jessie's cheeks ruffle and he could feel her resisting the urge to hide her face in his shoulder.

Kit retaliated when the monsignor stood at the doors to greet and shake paws as they left. "Just couldn't pass it up, eh?" he accused as he shook the father's paw.

"Of course I couldn't, my son," he grinned. "A marriage is a cause for celebration, not something you hide! The congregation will be happy for you, even if they don't know you. After all, you had the foresight and wisdom to have your wedding in our church," he winked.

Jessie laughed. "What time is the rehearsal, father?" she asked.

"Five o'clock on Tuesday, and four o'clock on Wednesday," he answered. "Please have your attendants with you for the Wednesday rehearsal, it's a full rehearsal, and please bring the rings."

"We'll have them here," Kit assured him.

"You know, this will be the first non-Catholic wedding we've held," the monsignor told them with a smile. "I hope you'll forgive me if I seem a little out of place in it."

Kit laughed. “No greeting at the door, no liturgy, no cross-bearer, no flowers.”

“Yes,” he chuckled in agreement. “But there will be a homily, and the ceremony will be close to Catholic tradition. Some of the congregation is a little, unsettled, that I’m performing an out-of-faith wedding in the chapel,” he chuckled with a smile.

“Well, I’m sorry about that,” Kit chuckled. “I didn’t mind a Catholic wedding, but Jessie’s parents, are, well, not happy about it.”

“Well, your sister was quite generous with her offering to the church,” the monsignor admitted. “So generous that certain...accommodations could be made. But, to be honest, I was happy to help you, even without her donation. I’ve read about you, my son, and after so hard a road, it would be my pleasure to bring some joy back into it.”

“I appreciate that, father,” he said honestly.

“Now, miss Williams, do remember, please, that it’s long been a custom of the church to keep the floral arrangements after the ceremony. They’ll decorate our church for days to serve as a reminder of your happiness and blessing,” he told her.

“I don’t mind, father,” she smiled. “If they make other people happy, then it makes me happy.”

“That’s a nice thing to say,” he said, taking her paws and shaking them. “You’re a very generous and kind femme, Miss Williams. Kit was lucky to find you.”

Jessie smiled shyly, her cheeks ruffling.

“Now remember, Tuesday at five,” he told them.

“We’ll be here,” Kit answered.

They got home to find Sheila and Lupe sitting on their porch, drinking beer and listening to salsa music on Lupe’s boombox. “How was the salvation of your souls?” Sheila asked with a grin.

“Same old same old,” Kit answered. “What are you two doing?”

“Just passing time, brah,” Lupe answered. “You don’t mind, do ya? Your chairs are better than mine.”

“Nah, I don’t mind,” Kit answered.

“You’re our friend, Lupe, use our porch any time,” Jessie agreed, patting him on the shoulder as Kit unlocked the door.

“Hey, what about me?” Sheila protested.

“You’ll use it whether we let you or not,” Jessie winked.

“Well, that’s true,” she laughed in agreement.

They went in, and Jessie went back to the bedroom as Kit turned off the alarm. He joined her as she was taking off her dress. “I wonder what they’re up to out there,” Jessie giggled. “I hope it’s not more planning for another party. I’m partied out after Friday.”

“Eh, I think they like each other, hon. Not romantically, that is. Sheila’s a rough customer, but Lupe’s not afraid to take her on at that level.”

“I hope he doesn’t get tangled up with her.”

“I warned him off. He’s a smart male, hon, he won’t fall into that trap. I think they’ll just be good friends, and someone Sheila can tease when

she's feeling peevish," he added with a chuckle.

"Good. She intimidates all the girls at the house, but they do like her," Jessie giggled as she pulled her slip off. "She's so wild and fearless. Sandy's really jealous of her."

"She's a bad role model for your sorority," Kit laughed.

"She just needs some stability in her life, and someone that'll make her feel special and wanted," Jessie sighed, looking towards the door, where she and Lupe were sitting on their porch. "But not someone who'll try to stifle or control her. She needs someone like you, my handsome fox," she told him, kissing him on the muzzle as she turned her back to him. "Unhook me, love."

"Well, I'm not marrying her," he declared as he unhooked her bra for her, which made her laugh.

"I hate this thing," she complained. "Underwires suck."

"Then don't wear it," he told her as she shrugged out of it.

"Then I don't look right in a dress," she told him patiently as she put her arms through her new bra, shrugged it over her shoulders, then hooked it in the front. Jessie wore front-clasping bras because her claws gave her issues with bras that hooked in the back, which was why she had Kit hook and unhook them for her. "Dresses require a bit more..." she said, making a lifting motion under her breasts.

"Well, that bra does a good job," he noted with a smile.

"No, these don't sit right under a slip," she explained. "Be lucky you're a male, love, you don't have these problems."

“Pretty kitty, you could wear a moomoo and I wouldn’t care,” he told her, kissing her on the cheek as he came to the dresser.

“Oh, you say that *now*,” she teased.

“I’ve already seen you at your worst, love, and as you can see, I’m still here,” he said, patting her fondly on the bottom. “A moomoo would not scare me in the slightest. It’s what’s underneath it that’s truly beautiful,” he added, sliding his paw up her back as he kissed her cheek, “and that is what I will always see.”

She began to purr, then she laughed. “So you imagine me naked every time you look at me?”

“Why not? What’s wrong with a husband thinking his wife is gorgeous when she’s naked? You *are* going to marry me,” he teased.

“You bet I am, mister,” she told him with a playful smile, putting her arms around him. “There’s no escape for you now. I’ve even changed my name,” she declared.

“Yes, I know, Misses Vulpan,” he affirmed.

“Aaat, you can’t call me that yet. Call me *Mizz* Vulpan. You can’t call me that until Friday.”

He laughed. “Technicalities, technicalities.”

“The world is built on technicalities,” she teased, nuzzling his neck as she purred away.

The gang was merciful to him.

Since Jessie was now free to focus on the wedding, Kit was immersed in it, and the office crew gave him very light duties and were very understanding...because his cell rang almost constantly. Everyone was calling him, asking him questions, making confirmations, and the biggest caller was Jessie. She called him almost every hour, giving him updates as vendors and family members touched base with her. She drove him crazy with it, to be honest, running around all over town in his truck with her phone plastered to her ear, touching base with the florist, with the caterers, with the jewelry store owner to pick up the rings, and she called Vil almost every hour, or Vil called her. She continued her whirlwind of activity that night, calling Vil, calling her parents, talking to her aunts and uncles who were also coming, calling everyone even remotely connected to the wedding. Almost Jessie's entire family was coming; all of her aunts and uncles, her grandmother, and all her cousins were coming to the wedding.

And Vil paid for all their air fares.

Tuesday was no better. Kit got a headcount of all the people from work who were coming, and he was rather shocked at the final total; between parents, relatives, and friends, the gang was bringing 27 people to the ceremony and reception. Add that to the 23 members of Jessie's family that would be there, Vil, Lupe and their friends, the sorority girls, Kevin, Sheila, a few people from Kevin's firm, and some advertisers that bought space in the magazine that Rick had invited, that put the total at a whopping 89 people expected to attend. The caterer had prepared food for twice the number they originally given, which was 50, so they were going to be just fine as far as food went.

Vil had been adamant about that. Kit had a feeling that she was bringing more people than he thought.

That afternoon, Jessie picked up Kit from the office and went straight to Our Lady of Fatima. There, Kit and Jessie walked through the ceremony with Monsignor Duke, from where Jessie would wait, then went through the ceremony. Kit got a little thrill out of hearing Jessie say “I do,” and she gave him a dazzling smile when he did the same during the rehearsal. “Now, this is the point where I’d tell you to kiss the bride,” he said with a smile.

“We’d better practice that,” Kit teased, wrapping his arms around her.

“Yes, let’s,” she mirrored, then gave him a lingering, tender kiss.

Monsignor Duke cleared his throat, and Jessie showed mercy on him and let him go. His knees were a little weak, which made her giggle when he put his paws on her shoulders for support. “Don’t do that during the ceremony,” he complained. “I don’t think I want pictures of them picking me up off the floor.”

Both she and the priest laughed. “Now, according to the request the videographer made, at this point you’ll pause for photographs a few moments. When the videographer gives you an all clear, you’ll go back down the aisle, stop a moment in the antechamber for one more picture opportunity for your immediate family, and then you will go out to your car to take you to your reception.”

“Sounds easy,” Jessie said with a nod.

“Now, let’s rehearse it once more, but this time I think we can dispense with the kiss,” he smiled. “I don’t think sending the groom to the hospital three days before his wedding is a good idea.”

Jessie laughed delightedly, her cheeks ruffling in an appealing manner.

They were both anxious and antsy the next day. Kit could barely hold a thought in his head all day at work, but since this was his last day before his vacation, he tried to get as much done as he could. He put a month's worth of writing in for *School Daze*, helped everyone else as much as he could, and could barely sit still through their issue meeting. They were putting the issue to bed a day early because of the ceremony. It had turned into an office-wide holiday, and everyone had Friday off to attend the wedding and reception, and Rick would be busy tomorrow because Jessie was going to be at his house.

They all went out to lunch at Applebee's, as the gang gave him a little impromptu wedding party.

After lunch, Kit was officially off work, because he had things to do. He reminded Rick to be at the church at four, then picked up Jessie and headed to the airport, for Jessie's family were scheduled to arrive at 12:30pm. They got there almost late because Kit went to the wrong parking lot, going to long term instead of short term, but they managed to meet John, Hannah, Jenny, and Ben before they had a chance to wonder where they were. Kit hugged Jenny, shook John and Ben's paws, then turned to Hannah. She shook his paw aloofly, then smiled and gave him a warm hug. "We thought you forgot us!" she laughed.

"We had a problem in the parking lot," Jessie said with a wince. "I'm so sorry!"

"No matter, no matter," John chuckled. "Now, if you'll escort us to the Avis desk, we have a rental car reserved."

"He got a *minivan*," Jenny sighed. "You shoulda got a convertible, Dad!"

“A convertible won’t ferry around your grandmother,” John chuckled.

“Aww, come on, Granny Pearl would think it’d rock to drive around in a convertible!”

“At least it’s warm down here,” Ben noted. “Oh, did I tell you, Kit? I got offers!”

“From who?”

“Fifteen schools!” he said excitedly. “Including *Ohio State*!” he beamed.

“Well, there goes any chance of U-Mass getting you,” Kit laughed, shaking his paw. “Congrats, Ben, you got what you wanted. Have you signed the letter?”

“Not officially, but I did give them a verbal commitment,” he answered. “It wasn’t an easy choice, though.”

“Why? You’ve always wanted to play there.”

“Yeah, but they already have a good running back there, and he’s only a sophomore,” he answered. “A couple of schools offered to start me. I told that to the Ohio State people, and they offered to let me play ironman until I could start.”

“Both sides?”

“Yeah,” he grinned. “I’ll be the backup running back, but also play linebacker in some packages, and of course, I’ll play special teams. I love covering kickoffs,” he grinned. “I really get to hit people.”

“Damn, Ben, you’re gonna be busy. You’ll have to learn both sides of the playbook.”

“I’ll manage. It’s what I want. I want the NFL scouts to see a guy they can put on either side of the ball and be able to make plays. I prefer running back, but I’ll make sure they see I can be a linebacker too.”

“Well, I made my own choice, Kit,” Jenny told him. “I quit nursing school, and I entered pre-med.”

“Is that what you wanted?”

“Yeah, it is,” she told him as Jessie hugged her parents. “I didn’t think we’d have the money, but I lucked out.”

“How so?”

“Your sister Vil helped me get a scholarship we didn’t know about,” she answered. “It’s called the Macon-Foster Fellowship, for medical students. It pays for everything, because I have a three point four-two GPA. As long as I keep it over three point zero, they pay for my tuition, books, and give me a stipend for living expenses. She told us about it, and wrote me a letter of recommendation, and I got it!”

“Well, good for you, Jenny,” Kit told her.

“She just got it last week,” Jessie told him.

“Yeah, I just got all my paperwork done to switch to pre-med,” she added as Kit took Hannah’s carry-on bag and slung it over his shoulder, and they started towards the terminal.

“When are your other family members coming in?” he asked.

“All today and tomorrow. They need to kneel down and kiss your feet, Jessica, you really went to the endzone getting all their reservations,” John

beamed at his older daughter. “My mother lives with my brother Jim, but we might be ferrying her around if Jim and Penny are busy.”

“It won’t be that bad, dear,” Hannah assured him.

“So, you only have two days left, Sissy,” Jenny teased Jessie. “Run while you can!”

“I’ll run, all right, straight to the altar,” she giggled. “And I’ll drag him with me!”

“You won’t have to drag me at all,” Kit chuckled.

“So, we were going to go out for dinner tonight, and we’d like you to join us,” John offered.

“It’ll have to be either early or late,” Jessie told him. “We have a rehearsal tonight. Remember? I told you that.”

“You did, you did,” he nodded. “Four, you said?”

She nodded.

“Well, I think if we leave at two, we can go out to eat and then make your rehearsal. We’d like to attend.”

“Well, the priest didn’t say we couldn’t bring visitors, so I don’t see why not,” Kit said, looking at Jessie. “You have to be there anyway, John, you’re part of the ceremony.”

“They can meet Rick, Martha, Sandy, and Sam,” Jessie agreed.

“Where are you staying, dear?” Hannah asked Jessie. It was a casual remark, but there was an edge behind it.

“At home, mother, until tomorrow,” she answered. “I’m going to spend the night before the wedding at Rick and Martha’s and get ready there, then they’ll take me to the church for the wedding.”

“Mind driving us by your apartment? I’d like to see it,” Hannah asked.

“Of course, we’d love to have you,” Kit said, and Jessie nodded. “It’s not very large, though.”

“I hope it’s clean,” Jenny teased, nudging her sister.

“Kit won’t let it get dirty,” Jessie laughed.

They split up. John and Jessie went to the rental car counter while the rest of them retrieved their luggage. Kit listened to Jenny talk about her change in Ohio State, and teasing her younger brother about his imminent entry into her school, which he took with a gentle smile. Kit wasn’t surprised that Vil had meddled with Jessie’s family, but she didn’t do anything overt. She didn’t pay for Jenny’s school, she instead helped her get a scholarship. Kit wouldn’t be surprised to hear that Vil may have dropped a word at Ohio State for Ben, but maybe not...he did get fifteen offers, after all. Ben really was a good football player, and he may not have needed Vil’s help. Ben had his heart set on Ohio State since he was a little boy, but at least he’d had the foresight to consider his career and wrangled some concessions out of the school if they wanted him. That was very wise of him.

“Those are ours,” Hannah called as a pair of black suitcases dropped down onto the conveyor.

“How many total?” Kit asked.

“Five, four and a garment bag,” she answered.

Kit and Ben carried the suitcases as Jenny carried the garment bag, which was a folded soft suitcase often used by women to carry dresses. They met John and Jessie by the Avis counter, where a steward loaded their bags onto a cart for them. “They’re going to take us to the lot,” John told them. “Jessie’s going to go with us to guide me to your apartment, Kit. So we’ll meet you there.”

“*We’ll* meet you there,” Jenny announced, grabbing Kit’s arm with a grin. “Come on, Ben, this is our chance to ditch the parents and have fifteen minutes of peace!”

“No, you will go with your father,” Hannah told them sternly. “I’m going with Kit. We have things to discuss.”

“It was nice knowing you, bro,” Ben told him with a slight smile.

“Benjamin!” Hannah snapped, which made all three of her children laugh and John smile.

“Come along, kids. I don’t think Kit will appreciate being scolded in public.”

“I’ll do no such thing!” Hannah barked at her husband, which made him laugh. “Oh, get on with you!”

Kit and Hannah separated from the others. He carried her carry-on bag for her as they walked through the terminal in silence for a moment, then she began to talk. “I still haven’t changed my mind about this, Kit,” she told him.

“I didn’t expect you to, Hannah,” he said calmly. “I have a lot of ground to cover before you come to approve of our marriage, and I

understand that. Just don't condemn us before we have a chance. That's all I want."

"Well, against my better judgment, I'll give you that chance," she told him as they walked out into the fifty-five degree Texas December afternoon. "It's warm down here."

"This is about normal for December, my friends tell me. The really cold weather doesn't come until January."

"It's been freezing at home since the snow melted," she said as they walked along a sidewalk towards the short term parking area. "Have you and Jessie been getting along?"

"Of course we do," he answered. "We've had what you might call a rather boring home life, Hannah. We haven't been going out very often, but I've been moving to fix that. I guess it's because of the wedding, and the end of Jessie's semester. It's just been so busy," he sighed. "I hadn't taken her out for weeks, but I took her out last week to ice skating and a poetry recital."

"Well, that's a good start. You shouldn't take her for advantage, Kit. John and I still go out on dates, at least once a week. It keeps us interested in each other. If you become static, if everything becomes *normal*, then the magic fades."

"God, I hope it never does," he said immediately.

"You have to work to make sure it doesn't," she told him, a bit archly. "I'm still not sure you'll stay with my daughter, Kit, but I'll admit it won't be because you don't love her now. I think you'll just get bored with her, the way my father got bored with my mother. I don't want to see Jessie hurt,

so...I'll give you what advice I can to help you stay together. I won't just stand back and let you hurt my Jessica, Kit. If you want my help, if you think your marriage is turning stale, then call me. I'll give you what advice I can to keep you together."

Kit stopped them, took her paw, then leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "Thank you," he said gently and sincerely. "That means a great deal to me, Hannah."

"I still think this marriage is a mistake."

"But you're willing to help me work to keep it together," he noted with a gentle smile.

She coughed uncomfortably. "Well, I don't want you to hurt my daughter, Kit."

"Hannah, I don't want to hurt her either," he told her with complete honesty. "Jessie is my life now. My whole life. I never want to ever hurt her, but I also know that a lifetime is a long time to manage to avoid that. I can only hope that the fights we have are over stupid little things that don't damage our relationship."

"Well, you're wise enough to understand that the honeymoon doesn't last forever," Hannah said with an approving nod. "Relationships are like plants, or pets, Kit. They starve to death if you don't feed them and take care of them. You have to nurture them, care for them, and pay a great deal of attention to them, or they won't flourish. You have to be very careful to mend the injuries quickly, or they fester."

"That sounds quite sensible."

“You also can’t ignore it, Kit,” she told him. “That requires three things. One, you can’t ignore even the smallest problem. Small problems can become big problems. Two, you can’t ever go to bed angry, Kit. Never allow that. Problems must be worked out immediately, or they fester in your minds and can change your marriage. And thirdly, you can’t ever deny Jessica...sex,” she said with a short pause to take in her breath. “Never say no to her, even if you’re not in the mood. Denying her that is a fast way to making your marriage turn stale. You should never deny her, and she should never deny you. Don’t accept any excuses. If she starts denying you, then there might be something wrong. Talk it out with her. That goes your way too. If you ever say no to her, she’ll think there’s something wrong, and she’d better call you on it and make you talk it out. If she doesn’t, then confront her, because that’s not how I taught her to behave in a marriage.”

“That took some courage to say, Hannah. Thank you for being honest with me.”

“They’re simple rules for a good marriage, Kit. I’ve taught them to Jessica, and Jennifer and Benjamin for that matter, and now I’m passing them on to you. Living by them can keep your marriage healthy and fulfilling.”

“Well, I can honestly tell you that Jessie lives up to your teaching,” he admitted. “We’re not married yet, but we do live together, and she treats me the way you’ve described. She always communicates, she’s quick to jump on any problems she thinks she sees, we never go to bed angry, and she has never said no to me...and I’ve never said no to her.”

“Well, you’re young and it’s still exciting. Wait three years, Kit. Familiarity breeds boredom. You have to keep your marriage interesting, different, exciting, and that includes the bedroom. Even after twenty-three

years of marriage, John and I work very hard to keep the spice in our marriage. It's necessary to keep both of us happy and interested."

"Really? And would you maybe give me a hint what you do to keep it exciting?"

Her cheeks ruffled when she looked at him. "You're not old enough yet for that," she told him.

He exploded into laughter.

"Teasing me does not put you on my good side," she warned.

"Well, if I don't tease you, you'll think I'm just sucking up," he replied lightly when they reached his Pathfinder. "Vulpans are not timid, Hannah. None of us are."

"Yes, I remember your sister. She was by no means timid," Hannah said as he used his remote to unlock the doors. "This is yours?"

"Yeah, Vil kinda bought it for me," he said, a little self-consciously. "I didn't want it, but she put me on a guilt trip and kinda tricked me into it."

"Oh? How so?" she asked curiously as she got into the passenger's seat.

He went around and got in. "Seat belt please," he urged as he buckled his own belt. Hannah fumbled with it, and got it on as he started the car. "Well, her guilt trip was about Jessie. She told me that I needed a car for her, to take her out, to be there to give her rides, and I needed it in case there was an emergency. She used Jessie like a hammer on me, cause she knows I can't say no to anything that involves making Jessie happy."

"But didn't Vilenne buy Jessie a car?" she asked, in a little confusion.

“She didn’t tell *me* she did that until after I agreed to take the truck,” he told her, sticking out his tongue a little as he remembered that. “Once I agreed, she had me. *Then* she told me about Jessie’s car,” he grunted.

“Why didn’t you just back out?”

He gave her a look. “Hannah, a Vulpan *never ever ever* breaks his word. I may be disowned, but that’s a fundamental tenet of everything I was taught. When you give your word, you honor it. You never make a promise you know you won’t keep, and you never make a promise to someone you don’t think will keep his word to you. When I caved in to Vil and took the truck, I wouldn’t break my word, even if she did trick me into it. Besides, and I’ll admit it, I did like the idea of it. I’d been without a car for a long time, and I was willing to cave in after at least a token fight over it to keep Vil from thinking she could get crazy.”

“What do you mean, crazy?”

“Hannah, Vil would stick me in a mansion if she thought she could get away with it,” he answered honestly. “But I don’t want her help, and I don’t want her money. I appreciate her concern for me, but I want to be my own fox, and live my own life away from my family’s money, and that life is with Jessica. I want to see if we can make it on our own, not with Vil there giving us handouts. Jessie understands how I feel about it. She wonders sometimes what it would be like to be rich, but she can see the hook and line in the bait that Vil puts out for us. She can see the trap in it.”

“The curse of money?”

“The curse of money,” he affirmed. “I’ve described it to her. I don’t think she fully believes we’d fall under that curse, but she understands why

I'm so against it. I saw money destroy my family, Hannah. I don't want it to happen to *us*."

"You're a very wise young male, Kit," she said appreciatively.

"Thank you," he said with a glance at her.

Kit and Hannah reached the apartment first. He walked with her through the courtyard and described the place and their friends. "It's an old complex and doesn't have many perks, but the furs who live here are good furs. Our landlord, Lupe, is one of our best friends, and a few of us get together every Sunday and play poker. It's become a real gathering," he laughed, "because a couple of Jessie's friends and their boyfriends have been joining us."

"I hope you don't gamble."

"Well, each person puts in two dollars," he admitted. "Whoever wins poker that day uses that money to buy the beer for next week. So it's not *really* gambling."

"Ah. Well, that doesn't sound that bad."

"It's not," he said as he took out his key to unlock the door.

"Kit!" someone called. He looked up, and cursed silently when he saw Sheila hurrying towards them. "Oh, boy," he breathed. "I forgot to warn you."

"Warn me?"

"One of my cousins has come to Austin," he told her as Sheila rushed towards them.

"Jessica told us about her. She said she's very...wild."

“That’s an understatement. *Please* don’t hold her against me. But Sheila is a good example of the younger members of my family, and the curse of money.”

“I’d like to meet her.”

“She’s right there, so your wish is granted,” he said with a point.

Sheila was wearing a tank top and a pair of knickers, and she hurried up to them. “Hey cousin!” she said. “Oh, are you Jessie’s mom?” she asked Hannah.

“I am. You are Sheila, right?”

“That’s me!” she said with a cute grin, shaking Hannah’s paw. “I hope Jessie didn’t scare you when she described me.”

Hannah gave a slight smile. “She did describe you as being very....”

“Out of control?” Sheila grinned.

“Yes, that’s one way to say it,” Hannah said with a laugh.

“Well, she wasn’t lying,” Sheila admitted boldly. “I do tend to be a naughty vixen from time to time.”

“Sheila,” Kit warned.

“Oh, come on, Kit, I’m just being honest,” she teased. “Kit was kind enough to take me in after his stepmom tried to kill me,” she said bluntly.

“Jessica explained why you came to live here,” Hannah said. “When do you intend to go back to school?”

“As soon as Cybil, Kit’s stepmom, leaves Boston,” she answered. “Though I have to admit, I’m starting to like this place. There are some

good people here, and I really like Kit. Kit's been better to me than my own mother."

"Well, that's nice, dear," Hannah told her as Kit unlocked the door and turned off the alarm. "Come in with us, please, I'd like to talk with you."

"Sure!"

"Already taking over my house," Kit sighed.

Hannah laughed. "I'm your elder, Kit. You're supposed to defer to me. And I seriously doubt you've never allowed your cousin into your house."

"I'm housebroken," Sheila grinned at him.

"Barely," Kit snorted.

"At least I sit on the toilet, so I can't possibly miss," Sheila said flippantly. Kit gave her a warning look, Hannah gave her a startled look, then she laughed delightedly.

"I see Jessica was not kidding about you, Sheila."

"Not a bit," she grinned shamelessly. "I'm sure Kit's gonna beat me up for being so forward after you leave, but I gotta be me."

"You aren't what I expected out of Kit's family."

"Well, I'm exactly what you'd expect if you knew them, Misses Williams," she said honestly.

"Please, call me Hannah."

"Hannah. Our parents are all money-hungry boors, and all their children are drinking, drug-snorting, sex-chasing, party-going brats. The

Vulpan children are a legend in Boston, Hannah. They call us the Party Pack,” she admitted.

“And yet you’re here.”

“Only because I was afraid for my life,” she admitted. “I *am* part of the Party Pack, Hannah. I’m actually a bad girl,” she said freely.

“Well, Jessica told me you have a job, and you’re a very good friend to her. So you can’t be all that bad.”

“I love Jessie like a sister,” Sheila laughed. “She’s so sweet and kind. And she’s fun to embarrass,” she added with a grin at Hannah.

“Well, Jessica is a very shy young lady,” Hannah admitted.

“Not all that shy, once she gets to know you,” Sheila grinned with a wink.

“Well, that’s a good thing. We’ve always been worried that she might be a little too shy,” Hannah told her honestly.

“We gotta work on her, though,” she said clinically. “We had to get her drunk at her bachelorette party before she’d even have any fun.”

“Sheila,” Kit warned.

“She didn’t do anything bad,” Sheila protested. “But it’s hard to celebrate the last of your freedom when you’re too embarrassed to look at the strippers your friends went out and got for you!”

“It sounds like you’re a bad influence on my daughter, Sheila,” Hannah told her.

“Well, I’m *trying* to be,” she said in exasperation. “But she’s hard to corrupt!”

Hannah gave her a startled look, then actually laughed. “Then I must have raised her right,” Hannah surmised with a surprisingly pleased expression.

Jessie and the others arrived, and Sheila hurried off to meet the rest of Jessie’s family. Hannah pulled Kit towards the living room. “Your cousin is very...unusual, Kit,” she said.

“She’s very honest, Hannah,” he said with a sigh. “But despite all her faults, she is my cousin, and I guess I love her. Sort of,” he grunted.

“Well, I think she’s good for Jessica,” she said, which surprised Kit a great deal. “She’ll push her and try to urge her out of her shell, but Jessica will know where the line of impropriety is and not cross it. So I don’t disapprove of their friendship.”

“I’m so glad,” he said with an explosive sigh. “I was sure you’d hate Sheila because she’s...well, she’s Sheila.”

“Is she really an example of your cousins?”

“More or less,” he nodded. “Sheila is an example of the curse of money, Hannah. My cousins never have to work a day in their lives, so many of them are totally absorbed in hedonism. They have all that money, but no purpose in life, so they drift through it pursuing whatever entertains them. But I’m hoping Sheila is going to be different. She’s actually working now, and she seems to have fun at the office. She works at the magazine with me,” he explained. “Maybe Jessie will be a good influence on her. Jessie’s teaching her to cook, and trying to get her interested in doing

something with her life that's more than going to parties and chasing males."

"Cook?"

"Sheila's fascinated by cooking," Kit nodded. "She's learning very fast, too."

"Well then," Hannah said, tapping her muzzle. "Kit."

"Yes?"

"If I invited Sheila to Cincinnati for Christmas, would she come?"

"Probably. You can ask her. Why?"

"If Jessie's trying to make something of her, I'll have to see what I can do as well. My fingers just itch at the thought of a girl that wild. She has to be tamed."

Kit laughed. "Oh my, Hannah, you have no idea what you're getting into," Kit warned her. "But if you want to try, I have no right to say no. Just let me say right here, right now, that you were warned."

"Duly noted, Kit."

"At the end, though, I think you'll wonder just who was taming who," he added with a grin. "Sheila can be very...corrupting."

"If my daughter can resist her, she has no chance against *me*."

"It'll be a fun show, at least."

Hannah elbowed him in the ribs.

“Here’s your first lesson about Sheila,” Kit said, pointing. Sheila was talking to Ben, and Ben was a little unsettled as Sheila ran her paw up and down his bicep, complementing him on his physique.

“She wouldn’t!”

“Yes, she would,” he said honestly. “Ben is fair game in her mind, Hannah. He’s no relation to *her*.”

“He’d better not!”

“Well, you’d better hope that all your children are just as uncorruptable as Jessie, or Sheila will subvert them in short order. That’s the risk you take if you bring her into your house. As you work to change her, she’ll be working to change you and your family. She might seduce Ben, and just think of what might happen if you put Sheila and Jenny together and left them unsupervised.”

Hannah gave him a look, then laughed ruefully. “You did warn me.”

“I did.”

“I’ll have to think about that, I suppose.”

“It would be a good idea. John, would you like some coffee? We went and bought a can just for your visit.”

“You’re a lifesaver, my boy!” John said with bright eyes. “I’d love a cup!”

As Jessie’s family looked around his apartment and got to know Sheila, he also got another visitor. Lupe knocked and opened the door, “yo brah,” he called.

“Lupe!” Jessie said with a smile. “Mom, Dad, guys, this is our friend Lupe,” she introduced. “Come in and say hi!” she demanded of him.

Lupe came in and shook some paws, smiling and being himself, which was loose and friendly. “It’s nice to meet you guys, Jessie goes on about ya,” he told them. “I’m glad they’re here. Not only are they my best tenants, they’re some of my best friends!”

“You’re the manager here, Lupe?” John asked.

“I own the complex,” he answered. “I didn’t plan on getting into the rental business, but I had an opportunity, and I took it. It’s been pretty cool so far.”

“How long have you been doing this?”

“Six years,” he answered. “I make a decent living, at least when I keep the party jocks out of the complex,” he chuckled. “But things are lookin’ up. Jessie, Kit, I just got word. We’re gettin’ a pool!”

“Really? How?”

“Well, that dentist’s office beside us is closing, the guy’s gonna retire. He already agreed to sell the building and land to me. That land’s just big enough to put a nice pool in there, a big one with diving boards and a slide and everything. I just got the funding for the pool today, just came from the bank. They’re gonna start building it next month, and it should be ready by spring.”

“Well, grats bro,” Kit said. “You’re not gonna raise our rent, are you?”

He laughed. “Not *yours*,” he grinned. “I gotta keep my friends here, ya know! But I am gonna bump it by ten dollars a month on all the other units.

I think that's a fair increase in return for getting a pool. And that's just one of my plans. Westwood's making good money for me now, brah, and the banks'll loan to me, so I got plans. I'm gonna expand and upgrade the complex, brah." He was grinning broadly. "I'm already in negotiations with the houses on the other side of where the pool's going to buy them out. I wanna expand the complex to take up the whole block, build a new complex on the other side of the pool, move everyone over there, then tear down these old units and replace them with new ones. The banks'd never listen to me before when I tried to do it, but now that the complex has been making a good profit for a few years, they're willing to back the plan."

"Sounds nice," John said with a nod. "You're a shrewd businessman."

Lupe laughed. "I don't look it, I know," he grinned. "I'm from the barrio, *jefe*. I think the fact that I don't look like I know what I'm doin' is one reason why the banks wouldn't loan to me."

"Lupe, you gotta design some *special* units, just for us," Sheila grinned at him.

"Way ahead of ya, babe," he laughed. "How'd you like a four bedroom super-apartment, brah? You're gonna need room for your kids!"

"Oooh, that sounds nice!" Jessie exclaimed.

"I'm gonna have everything from efficiencies to four bedroom condo-style apartments," he told her. "And you know you get dibs at them, guys. I can't leave my friends out in the cold!"

"Sounds really nice, Lupe," Kit agreed.

"When you get back after your honeymoon, I'll show you the plans the contractor I hired brought me for the new Westwood," he offered. "It's

gonna be *awesome*, brah! If everything goes well, the pool will be in by April, and we'll start building the new units by summer! Westwood will be the biggest apartment complex in Austin, and we'll have everything! A pool, a workout gym, internet and cable in every unit, dedicated parking, security, furnished appliances, some furnished units in addition to unfurnished units, I'm even negotiating with AMTA for a shuttle bus that'll go to U.T.!"

"AMTA?" John asked.

"Austin Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the city bus," Kit answered.

"Well, we're about to go have lunch before the rehearsal," John told Lupe. "Would you like to come with us?"

"Aww, I'd love to, but I'm kinda busy right now, brah," Lupe told him. "But hey, thanks for the invite! Bring me a doggy bag," he winked.

"We can do that," Kit chuckled.

"Would you like to come, dear?" Hannah asked Sheila. "You *are* family, after all. Or soon will be."

"I'd love to!" she agreed.

Sheila was added to the procession as Jessie's family got a good look at their apartment, then they all piled into the rented minivan to go to the hotel so they could check in and drop off their luggage. It was a tight fit in the van, because it was designed to hold seven and seven was exactly what they had. Sheila sat between Ben and Jenny in the back seat, and Kit and Jessie sat in the middle row behind John and Hannah up front. Ben and Jenny were a little intimidated by Sheila's raw audacity, but she soon had

them laughing and carrying on like kids, turning on her charm...and Sheila had a lot of charm. They reached the hotel and filed out, and Ben joked that soon the Williams clan was going to take the place over. "It's gonna be like a family reunion," he laughed. "The whole family is coming for the wedding!"

"Are you and Vil the only ones from Kit's side coming, Sheila?" Jenny asked.

"I hope so," she said honestly. "If anyone else shows up, they'll probably be carrying guns. They're *violently* opposed to this marriage, Jen. There's only a handful of cousins I'd feel comfortable having come to the wedding, and no way in hell I'd want to see any of the parents there. They're all rabid purists, all but like four or five of us."

"Sad that furs have to be like that," Jenny sighed.

"Just goes to show you, Jen, that money isn't the same as smarts," Sheila said sagely. "Our great-grandfather was a genius to build the shipyard and turn it into what it is, but the rest of the family doesn't have to be smart. They just get to be rich."

Hannah gave Kit an approving nod at that remark, and it just went to show that Sheila was much more than the party girl she appeared to be.

Virtually the entire second floor of the hotel had been booked for the Williams clan, and to Kit's surprise, John and Hannah's family weren't the first ones to arrive. A portly femme cat with gray fur and wearing a red sweater and red slacks opened a door, gave a cry, and rushed out towards John as they came down the hallway. "Penny!" John said happily, hugging her.

“That’s our aunt Penny,” Jessie told Kit and Sheila. “She’s married to Uncle Jim.”

“How was your flight, dear?” Hannah asked her as Penny hugged her.

“It wasn’t bad at all,” she smiled. “Oh, and this must be Kit! It’s so good to meet you!” she said, giving him a rough, impressive hug. This portly femme was *strong*!

“Penny, right?”

“That’s me,” she said with a darling smile. “My, you’re a handsome young fox,” she said, holding him by his shoulders and looking him up and down. “I love your eyes, dear, they’re very striking. We’ll have to do something about that ear, though,” she noted.

“You leave his ear alone, Aunt Penny!” Jessie warned. “I like it that way.”

“Penny, this is my cousin Sheila,” Kit introduced.

“Well, it’s good to meet you!” she said, giving Sheila a rough hug but looking at Kit. “But I thought John said only your sister was coming to the wedding?”

“I’m not quite like the rest of our family,” Sheila explained.

“Ah, well, we can talk about that later. Did you just get in?” she asked John as she moved down and crushed Jenny in a hug, the masked cat struggling a bit in her powerful arms.

“We made a detour to go see Jessica’s apartment, but yes, we just got in a bit ago,” he answered.

“John!”

“Jim!” John returned. Kit saw a very tall, lanky tabby-furred cat step out of the open door, with a very short, frail-looking elderly femme cat with gray, wiry fur and wearing an old-fashioned dress behind him. John gave his taller brother a warm hug, then he bent down and hugged the elderly femme. “Mother, you’re looking as radiant as ever!”

“Florida agrees with me, Jonathon,” she chuckled in a surprisingly strong voice. “So this is the young fella that’s stolen my granddaughter away!” she said with a cackle. “Come here, young fella and give us a hug!”

Kit attended to that, trying to give her a chaste hug, but she wrapped a very strong arm around him and crushed him against her. Good Lord, was there something in the water in Jim’s house that made them all so strong? “It’s nice to meet you,” he said with a bit of a wheeze.

“You don’t look like the son of a rich man, young fella,” she grinned at him.

“I used to be, but I’m normal now,” he said mildly, which made her laugh. “How may I call you?”

“Call me Grandma, I answer to that,” she grinned.

“Well, Grandma, I’d like to introduce my cousin Sheila. She’s come down to stay in Austin for a while.”

“Such a pretty young vixen!” she said appreciatively, then she crushed Sheila in a hug. “My, those eyes must run in your family!”

“They do,” Sheila giggled. “All the Vulpans have them.”

“You need to be a little more modest with your clothing though, little missy. That’s almost scandalous!” she said, taking in Sheila’s tank top and

knee-length pants.

Sheila laughed. "I'm a scandalous kind of girl, Grandma," she winked. "I'm a rich girl. We're bad at heart."

Jessie's grandmother laughed delightedly. "Oh, you're gonna be a fun one, girl, yes you are!" she proclaimed. "Why are you three hiding, you gooses! Come give your grandmother kisses!" she ordered Jessie and her siblings.

"Just letting you scope out Kit and his cousin, granny," Jenny grinned as she hugged the aged femme.

Kit shook Jim's paw when his mother got busy greeting her grandchildren. "John's told me a great deal about you, Kit. Most of it was even good," he said with a smile.

Kit laughed. "Well, I'm sure John was kind about the bad parts."

"I'm very curious to meet your sister," he admitted.

"You will. She flies in early tomorrow morning, and we planned a dinner for everyone tomorrow evening at a steakhouse so your family can meet Vil and some of my friends and co-workers."

"Ah, yes, John mentioned that. It should be fun."

Kit helped John and his family push the luggage cart holding their luggage into their rooms. John had arranged adjoining rooms, with him and Hannah in one and Ben and Jenny in the other. Sheila got caught up with Jim and Penny, talking to them with a smile at the door, but Jessie's grandmother came straight to him and Jessie. "So, Friday's the big day, eh?" she noted. "Looking forward to it?"

“You know we are, Grandma,” Jessie laughed.

“You found yourself a handsome young fella, Jessica.”

“Aww, thanks, Grandma,” Kit said modestly.

“Pretty broad shoulders for a fox,” she said, clapping her paws on his arms. “Nice and strong. What kind of work do you do?”

“I’m a researcher for a magazine,” he answered. “I sometimes do some writing for it, too. And I help produce a comic strip, along with an artist and Jessie. She’s part of it too.”

“Really?” she said. “I love funnies! Which paper carries it?”

“It’s in our magazine,” Kit told her. “But I can have Jeffrey put paper copies of the ones we’ve done in a binder for you to read if you’d like.”

“I think I’d like that,” she nodded. “I adore funnies. If you can’t laugh, you got no reason to keep on living!”

“My part isn’t that big,” Jessie said modestly. “There’s the main plot, and a little side plot involving two characters, Missy and Cutler. I do the side plot, while Kit writes the main plot.”

“Is it funny?”

Kit laughed. “It’s *hilarious*!” he exclaimed.

“Then don’t be modest about it, girl,” Grandma Pearl told her. “Be proud of something that’s worth doing!”

“I’m proud of my strips,” she said, a little defiantly. “I work very hard on them!”

“Good, good! I’m looking forward to reading them.”

“I think you’d like them, Grandma,” Jessie told her. “They’re very funny. Jo-jo almost makes me pee my pants sometimes.”

“The main character,” Kit explained when Grandma Pearl looked at her curiously. “She’s something of a ditzy mad scientist, very smart but kinda oblivious to the chaos she causes with her inventions.”

“It sounds interesting, my boy,” she grinned, showing off an upper plate of dentures, but worn lower teeth that were obviously her own.

After dropping off the luggage and chatting with John’s brother and his wife and mother for a while, they went on to eat dinner. John took them to Denny’s, which surprised Kit a little, but the food wasn’t bad and it was nice to sit and talk with them. Kit and Jessie described the city to them, then they talked about the wedding and their honeymoon plans. “We’ll fly up to Boston first to have a little ceremony in a cathedral there to honor my mother’s wishes, then go on to Florida,” Kit told them. “My sister’s letting us use her vacation condo in the keys. We’ll fly up to Cincinnati on Wednesday afternoon and stay with you until Saturday, then fly back home.”

“It doesn’t give us much time for a honeymoon, but we don’t need that long,” Jessie smiled. “Kit has to get back to work. They’ve really been kind to him with giving him time off, given he’s not even been there four months.”

“Yeah, I really owe Rick and the gang for all their help,” Kit agreed. “They didn’t have to be this nice to us.”

“From the way Jessica talks of them, they sound more like family than co-workers,” Hannah noted.

“Yeah, we’re all pretty tight,” Kit agreed. “We are more like a family than a business.”

“Yeah, Lilly’s almost like a sister, and Rick’s like a second father, always there to help,” Jessie agreed.

“I hope I’m not being replaced,” John lamented, which made Jessie laugh and slap him playfully on the wrist.

“Don’t be silly, Dad,” she chided. “But Rick’s very kind, to all of us. We’re like his kids, not his workers.”

“We?” Jenny teased.

“I work there too,” Jessie told her sister, a bit strongly. “I’m not in the group photo, but I get paid for doing the comic strip, and I’m listed in the credits on page two.”

“Hmm, we need to fix that,” Kit noted. “You *are* on the staff, love.”

“I am too, and I’m not in the group shot,” Sheila complained.

“You’re an intern,” Kit retorted with a grin. “Mike’s just really attached to our old group shot because it’s such a good picture.”

After dinner, they went on to the church, a little early. Hannah and John looked a bit reluctant as they saw the Catholic church but Monsignor Duke was waiting by the side door for them, smiling mildly. “Kit, Jessica,” he said, shaking their paws. “Did you bring the rings?”

“Yes, father, I have them,” Kit nodded.

“Father, this is my family. My father John, my mother Hannah, and my brother Ben and my sister Jenny.”

The monsignor greeted them in turn with kind words and smiles, then he gave an even milder smile when he reached Sheila. “This is my cousin Sheila,” Kit introduced.

“A fellow Vulpan,” he noted. “I thought that Kit had separated from his family.”

“A couple of us still keep in touch with him, father,” she said as she took his paw and shook it.

“Are the others here yet?” Kit asked.

“I’m afraid not, but it’s still nearly a half hour til four. They have time.”

“Well, let me track down my bridesmaids,” she said, taking her phone out of her purse.

“Let me thank you for allowing them to hold the ceremony here,” the monsignor said to John and Hannah. “They’ve asked for a non-denominational ceremony, and I’ve agreed to it.”

“Well, we’re not Catholic,” John said honestly.

“Yes, but that’s just fine. I’ll be honored to join Kit and Jessica in marriage outside of Catholic traditions. Please, come in, and I’ll show you the chapel.”

Rick and Martha arrived as the monsignor showed Jessie’s family and Sheila around the church. Rick and Martha seemed to get off on the right foot with Jessie’s parents immediately, and they were joking and laughing within two minutes of being introduced. Sandy and Sam arrived about five minutes later, bouncing into the church laughing and smiling, and they too

met Jessie's family. "So, this is the face behind the voice on the phone," Sandy grinned when she shook Hannah's paw.

"And you must be the saucy-tongued young lady who always gives such impertinent answers," Hannah said with a faint smile.

"She called me saucy!" Sandy said with a happy grin as she hurried over to greet Rick.

A trio of raccoons piled quickly into the church. "Monsignor," the tallest of them called, and he came up to them. "Hello, we're from Tricoon Video Productions," he introduced. "This is the Vulpan-Williams rehearsal, right?"

"That's right," Jessie said, stepping up. "Are you Steven?"

"Yes ma'am," he said with a smile and a nod. "From that voice, you must be Jessica Williams."

"Yes, that's me. It's nice to meet you."

"Glad to meet you too. My brother Tom, and our cousin Violet. We're here to observe the rehearsal so we know how and where to set up."

"Please, join us then," she said with a nod, motioning for them to come up to the front of the chapel.

After everyone got settled down, they rehearsed the ceremony. Sheila, Hannah, Ben, and Jenny sat in the pews and watched as they went over the wedding in detail twice, then staged a full rehearsal from start to finish. When they finished, they paused for coffee and tea the monsignor supplied, and then did it again. "Father, where do the rest of us sit?" Jenny asked him as they prepared for the second run.

“By many Christian traditions, the parents, immediate family, and most important guests of the couple sit in the front row with their families,” he answered. “Your parents will occupy the seats by the aisle, and were Kit’s parents alive, they would occupy the same seats on the other side of the aisle...but those seats will probably be occupied by his sister and cousin, given they’re the only members of his family that will attend. Beyond that, the guests sit in whatever order pleases them, taking up the remainder of the seats. By custom, no one will sit in the first row without being invited to do so. Some weddings have the first few rows with arranged seating, but Jessica’s wedding plans don’t do that. With the lack of an organized plan, it’s just first come first served.”

“I’ll need at least one spot on the front row where I can sit when I’m not taking pictures,” the femme raccoon, Violet, announced.

“You can sit on my side, it’s going to be fairly empty up front,” Kit chuckled.

“The video won’t be a problem. I’m going to have two cameras, both in the back of the chapel. One on the aisle set to zoom for the ceremony, and one in the balcony up there,” Steve said, pointing to the second floor balcony over the front of the chapel. “When will you be opening the chapel for the florists, Monsignor?”

“Oh, whenever they arrive,” he answered.

“Will there be someone to let us in around two so we can set up our equipment?”

“That’s a touch early, isn’t it?”

“I want to have plenty of time that everything is working and the spots we picked to set up don’t interfere with the floral arrangements.”

“Ah. Yes, someone should be here. I have to perform a wake tomorrow, but I’ll make sure someone is here to help you.”

Their final rehearsal went smoothly, except for one little hitch. Just as the monsignor reached the point where they would kiss, Sheila jumped up and shouted “put him on the floor, Jessie!” Kit was about to chide her, but Jessie grabbed him by the neck and planted a kiss on him that made him forget where he was, what he was doing, and why he’d been angry in the first place. Jenny and Sheila burst into laughter when Kit’s knees unlocked.

“Jessica, didn’t we have this discussion already?” the monsignor asked in a mild but amused voice.

“Oh,” she said, showing mercy on him by ending it. Kit wobbled a little, but Jessie just gave him a mischievous smile. “Sorry Father, I was just practicing, that’s all.” Jessie’s cheeks were ruffled, and her eyes were demure, but Kit could tell that she’d enjoyed that moment of being brazen in front of her family and friends.

“Yes. I can see you were,” he said in a voice that dripped with sarcasm.

The rehearsal wrapped up as the monsignor talked to them by the door to the parking lot. “Now remember, you need to be here an hour before the ceremony, at least,” he told them. “If you intend to put on your dress here, Jessica, be here two hours before at the minimum.”

“I’m going to put on my dress before I get here,” she answered.

“Then you need to be here an hour early,” he answered. “And make sure you don’t arrive at the same time if you want to honor the old tradition

of not seeing each other before the ceremony.”

“We can manage that,” Kit nodded.

After the rehearsal, instead of going back to the hotel room, Jessie’s family broke up. John and Hannah decided to go out with Rick and Martha, and Sheila gathered up Ben and Jenny and told them she’d take them out in her Mustang and hit some clubs. Kit’s ears burned when she said “oh, I don’t know, maybe we’ll go to the Top Hat,” she said idly, but when he glared at her, she just grinned and winked at him.

“Uh, Sheila, I’m only seventeen,” Ben said in a low voice, out of his mother’s hearing.

“Oh, that’s not a problem,” she grinned in reply. “Wanna go see what adults do for fun, Ben?”

Kit tried to head that off, but Sheila was one step ahead. She’d called a cab, and it was already in the parking lot waiting. She all but abducted Jenny and Ben, and the cab was gone before he could intervene.

“Oh...my...*God*,” he whispered.

That was *not* going to end well. Sheila was—she would really do it!

“What’s wrong, Kit?” Jessie asked.

“Sheila just took Jenny and Ben,” he answered quietly, so her parents wouldn’t hear.

“Yes, well, they asked if they could go, and our parents said yes.”

“What? Hannah—oh great,” he sighed. “Jessie, you know Sheila! She’s going to take them clubbing!”

“Have a little faith, Kit,” Jessie told him. “Sheila knows we’d kill her if she did anything like that.”

“Then why didn’t she take us, or Sam and Sandy?” he pressed. “She took them *alone*.”

“I—oh my,” Jessie realized, putting her paws to her muzzle. “Call her!”

Kit had his phone out and hit her speed dial in half a second, but she wouldn’t answer. “She has her phone off,” he growled when he got her voice mail.

“What can we do, Kit?”

“There’s nothing we really can do,” he grunted in reply. “Just wait until tomorrow, and kill her.”

“We should warn my folks.”

“And listen to Hannah scream all night? No thanks. Let’s hope that your brother and sister have more sense than my cousin and they come home at a reasonable hour.”

Kit didn’t sleep well, because Sheila didn’t come home.

He was up at sunrise and on the phone trying to find his cousin, but she was nowhere to be found. She wasn’t at home, she wasn’t answering her phone, and she wasn’t over at the sorority. He was very worried about it until Hannah called him at about seven to find out when they were meeting Vil at the airport.

“At nine,” he answered. “When did Ben and Jenny get back last night?”

“Around ten,” she answered. “Sheila took them to some of the college hang-outs that Ben could get into, and she dropped them off last night. They said they had a good time.”

Kit blew out his breath explosively. “Well, that’s good,” he said. “We’ll meet you at the hotel around eight-thirty.”

“That sounds good.”

“She took them back to the hotel,” he told Jessie with a relieved sigh, who had just woke up, and was getting out of bed to take a shower. She came around the bed and leaned down and kissed him on the ear.

“I guess we really can trust her,” she chuckled.

“Trust who?”

Jessie started and jumped onto the bed, behind Kit, at that voice. Sheila was standing in the doorway, then she leaned against it with a grin on her face.

“There is this thing called knocking, Sheila,” Kit chastised her as Jessie huddled behind him to conceal her nudity from his cousin.

“The door was unlocked, so I knew you had the alarm off,” she grinned. “I took Ben and Jenny back around ten, so don’t worry. They were back and in bed like good little children.” Then she sighed sensually. “But they’re not children anymore,” she all but purred.

“You *didn’t*!” Kit gasped.

She laughed evilly. “And get killed? Do you think I’m crazy?” she laughed. “I took them to the mall, and then to a couple of clubs where they’d let me bring them in. But, to satisfy my need to break the rules, I bought each of them *one* beer,” she grinned. “So, I had to do a little corruption, and before I took them I just had to make you sweat a little bit. Can’t let you think I’m getting tame in my old age,” she winked.

“Shame on you!” Jessie told her, then she laughed. “But I guess *one* beer didn’t kill them.”

“Jenny’s drunk before, but Ben didn’t like it. He said it tasted like sewer water,” she laughed.

“You kinda wanna go wait in the living room so I can dress, Sheila?” Jessie asked.

“Pft, I’m a *girl*, you silly femme!” she laughed. “You don’t have anything I haven’t seen in a mirror!”

Jessie blew out her breath, then slid out from behind Kit and scooted off the bed.

“There ya go!” Sheila laughed. “Show it off, baby! Swing that tail! Shake those boobs! Woohoo, shake what God gave ya, sweet buns!” She clapped her paws and gave one of her shrill, ear-splitting whistles as a catcall.

Jessie picked up her pillow and threw it at the vixen. It hit her dead in the face, knocking her backwards and out of the bedroom. Kit heard her fall down onto the floor in the hallway.

“Did that taste too silky for you, Sheila?” Jessie demanded as Kit exploded into helpless laughter. “Now go wait in the living room, you brat!”

“Nooooo, I must see you naked!” Sheila wheezed from the hallway, then she too broke out into laughter.

“You wanna look at something? Look at *this*!” she shouted, then she slammed the door, hard.

Kit literally rolled off the bed, gasping for breath.

Sheila made tea for them as Jessie took a shower, and she was a little nervous. But then again, Kit could see why, since Vil was coming. Vil intimidated Sheila, and most of the other members of the family. Jessie joined them after a while, wearing a white sweater and a pair of jeans, and she took Kit’s paw and kissed him on the ear. “Tomorrow,” she purred happily. “Tomorrow you’re mine.”

“He’s been yours since the first time you screwed him, Jess,” Sheila grinned. “He proves that males are slaves to what a girl keeps in her bra and panties.”

“Stop being nasty,” Jessie chided her.

“Guess I’m just anxious. *She* is coming today.”

“Vil is nothing for you to worry about,” Jessie told her, sitting down at the table. “You’ve been living down here for weeks, and we love having you. You’re a good friend, even if you’re a bit outrageous sometimes,” she teased with a smile.

“Have to be me,” she laughed. “And I have to honor the tradition of the sorority to make you loosen up! I’ll have you dancing naked in the living room by next year, or I’ll shave off my fur!”

“You’re going to look silly like that,” Jessie noted, which made Kit chuckle. “Are we going to the hotel or are they coming here?”

“Dunno, Hannah didn’t say. We should call.”

“Why is everyone going to the airport to see her arrive?” Sheila asked.

“Because it’s *Vil*,” Kit responded.

“Well, I guess that explains it,” Sheila sighed.

They went to the hotel, and from there, along with Rick, Martha, and all of Jessie’s family, they went to the airport. Directions from the airport staff sent them to a small hangar at the end of the airport, a private hangar, and there they waited only about ten minutes before the hangar workers informed them that Vil’s jet had touched down and was taxiing to the hangar. The plane taxied in, and then its engines powered down and the hangar workers allowed them to approach. The hatch of the plane opened, and Vilenne Vulpan stepped out of her plane, down the stairs, and onto the concrete. She then laughed like a little girl and ran over to them, embracing Kit with a laugh and a pat on the back. “Hey, baby bro!” she said, kissing him on the cheek. “It’s so good to see you!”

“Hey you,” he said happily, picking her up and swinging her back and forth, which made her gasp and laugh delightedly.

“So, you ready to become respectable, baby bro?” she grinned.

“Him? Respectable? Never!” Sheila laughed.

Vil pushed out of his arms, then embraced Jessie. “Hey Jess,” she said, kissing her on the cheek. “You got everything ready for tomorrow?”

“I think I do,” she laughed. “I’ve been running around like a maniac since Monday.”

“Well, I’m here now, I’ll make sure of it,” she said confidently. She looked at Sheila critically, which made the taller vixen’s cheeks ruffle slightly and take an unconscious step back. “Sheila,” she said calmly. “Have you been behaving?”

“As little as possible, cousin Vil,” she answered with a nervous chuckle.

“Any complaints?” she asked Kit directly.

“Well, aside from an unhealthy desire to see Jessie naked, not really,” he replied, which made Jessie gasp and Sheila laugh. “She’s been behaving, and she actually does her work, and she gets along with the gang.”

“She’s like the office mascot,” Rick chuckled. “We’ve never had a pet before, so we still like her.”

“Well, when she starts peeing on the floor, call me and I’ll take her back to the pound,” Vil said calmly, which made quite a few people laugh.

“You’re looking very well, Vilenne,” John told her as she stepped up to Jessie’s parents.

“I’ve had a good year,” she smiled broadly, patting Hannah’s arm fondly. “A very good year,” she said, almost purring. “Are you ready for tomorrow?”

“I’m prepared,” she said in a neutral tone.

Vil smiled at her. “I guess I can accept that,” she said, stepping away from them. “Rick! How are you feeling?”

“I’m well, Vil,” he smiled, offering his paw. “I’m still thanking you for your gracious gifts. You did a great deal for us.”

“All of it was deserved,” she smiled, giving him a pat on the arm. “And you must be Martha. Rick’s gone on about you in our emails, ma’am.”

“Please, call me Martha, hon,” she smiled. “It’s nice to finally meet the femme behind the mysterious messages.”

“Vil, this is my mother, Pearl, and my brother Jim and his wife Penny,” John introduced.

“A pleasure,” Jim said, shaking her paw. “It’s nice to meet what part of Kit’s side of the family he’s willing to reveal.”

Vil laughed. “Me and Sheila are the only ones I’d allow within a thousand miles of Austin, Jim,” she said with frankness. “But there were a few others that wanted to attend,” she said, looking back to the aircraft.

Kit followed her gaze, and realized that others were also disembarking. The first one was a young, very attractive vixen, her fur a bit lighter in shade than Vil and Kit’s, her eyes amber and her hair black instead of red. It was Suzy!

“Suzy!” Kit gasped in disbelief as she came down the stairs and rushed over to him. She gave him a fond hug, kissing him on the cheek with a laugh.

“How have you been, you pain in my butt?” she asked with a bright smile. “I’ve missed you!”

“Jessie, this is Suzy, Vil’s best friend and someone who’s been very kind to me,” he said, putting his paw around her shoulder and squeezing her. “If it wasn’t for Suzy, I don’t know how I’d have made it since I was sixteen.”

“Kit just doesn’t have the temperament to be alone,” Suzy smiled at Jessie. “I’m so glad he found a femme crazy enough to take care of him!”

“It’s not insanity,” Jessie said with a shy smile. “Any femme who knew him would marry him.”

“I know,” she said, with a bit of a wistful smile, gazing up at him. Then she blinked and gave Jessie a warm smile. “You have to take care of him, hon, he’s very special.”

“I know,” Jessie said with a grave nod.

“Suzy, this is John and Hannah Williams, Jessie’s parents,” Vil introduced, but Kit’s eyes were back on the plane. An old fox male was shuffling down the stairs, one at a time, and Kit almost couldn’t believe his eyes. He hurried over to him and held out his paw, and when the aged fox looked to him, he gave a warm, knowing smile. “Ah, thank you, my boy,” he said fondly, patting Kit’s paw with his old yet steady paw. “These steps are a bit too steep for a fox my age.”

“Clancy,” he said thickly. “How have you been?”

“I’ve been waiting for you to send me letters, that’s how I’ve been!” he complained, then he chuckled. “I’ve been quite fine, lad, quite fine. Retirement is right around the corner for me.”

Kit escorted him over and brought him to Jessie. “Jessie, this is Clancy, the butler that served in our house while I was a kid. He was almost like a

father to me,” he said with a fond look at the old fox, with his graying fur and his wrinkled eyes.

“It’s nice to meet you, Clancy,” she said, taking his paw and shaking it. “Kit’s stories about you are funny, but he always speaks of you with the highest respect.”

“Such a beautiful young femme, Kitstrom,” he said approvingly. “Of course, your father must be rolling in his grave.”

Kit chuckled. “This has nothing to do with spite, Clancy. The only furs this has anything to do with are me and Jessie.”

“That relieves me beyond measure to hear, my boy,” he said with a nod. “She may not be accepted by your family, but that’s a moot point by now, isn’t it?”

“Exactly,” he agreed. “They gave up on me years ago. I’m not going to live by their rules anymore.”

“Well said, my boy. Well said. It was quite unusual to ride with them, on the way to your wedding.”

“Huh? Them? Don’t you mean Vil?”

“No, my boy, *them*,” he said, looking back to the plane.

Kit followed his gaze. There at the door, looking almost cold with fury, was none other than his aunt, Sarah Vance Vulpan, and his uncle Brian Vulpan. Behind them were two of his cousins, Muffy and Victor. Victor was the third of Maxine’s five children, and Muffy was the oldest of Brian’s three children.

Was Vil insane? Did she lose her mind? What in the bloody blue hell possessed her to bring *family* to his wedding! She *knew* how they would react to this! Didn't she understand they'd do anything they could to stop the wedding, to prevent a Vulpan from marrying outside their species?

Kit could only gape at them, dumbfounded as they came out of the plane.

"Kit?" Jessie whispered in confusion. "Are those...your family?"

He could only nod mutely.

Sheila literally hid behind Kit as her mother and Uncle Brian came up to him, his cousins behind them. Kit looked at them in confusion, but when they looked at Jessie, his expression became flat and hostile. "What are you doing here?" Kit demanded, all vestiges of his good mood gone in an instant.

"We've come to witness your wedding, Kit," Brian told him calmly. "And *not* to interfere in any way. We are only here to watch. That is my word to you."

Kit gave him a suspicious look. "Sarah?"

She nodded. "We won't cause a scene, Kit," she affirmed. "We've come only to attend, no more, no less. We will not interfere with your wedding."

"Why are you here, then?" Kit demanded. "What reason would you possibly have to come to my wedding?"

"That is something you're best taking up with your sister," Sarah said with a sniff. "She'll explain it to you."

“You wouldn’t believe us if we told you, Kit,” Brian elaborated. “But if Vil tells you, you’ll believe it.”

“Sheila,” Sarah said sternly.

“Uhh, M-Mom?” she stammered, staying behind Kit.

“You can come out now. I won’t force you to go back to Boston if you don’t wish it,” she declared, a bit unwillingly.

Sheila laughed nervously. “Excuse me if I don’t believe you,” she answered, staying behind Kit.

“So, is this her?” Brian asked, looking at Jessie.

“It is,” Sarah nodded.

Jessie gawked at the pair, and Kit almost moved to intervene when Brian stepped up to her, afraid he might try to hit her or something. “So, you’re the one,” Brian said, looking down at her. “She’s rather cute,” he noted to Sarah.

“For a cat, yes,” Sarah said arrogantly. “At least she has fox-like markings. She’s a mixed breed, Brian, part fox.”

“Well, that explains Kit’s attraction,” Brian nodded. He then offered his paw to Jessie. “I’m Kit’s uncle, Brian,” he said. “A pleasure to meet you.”

“I, I’m not so sure you’re being honest,” she said after a brief hesitation.

She did not take his paw.

“Ah, you’re both well prepared and observant,” he said with a surprising smile. “The family is very much opposed to this wedding, Miss Williams. But, we’ve come to...accept that we can’t stop it. So, since we can’t stop it, at least some of are here to at least try to mend some fences, as it were. Like it or not, Kit has moved on from us and is establishing his own life. We can accept that, but we do have to establish some common ground, some rules of courtesy between the Boston and the Austin Vulpans so we don’t embarrass each other, and stake out our territories that the other side will respect. We object to this marriage, but we can’t stop it. And since we can’t stop it, we have to salvage what we can from this situation to minimize the damage to our family reputation.”

“So that’s what I am? An *embarrassment*?” Jessie asked icily, putting her paws on her hips and glaring up at his uncle defiantly.

God, what a femme!

“To *us*, this is an embarrassing situation,” Sarah said with surprising calm. “Our family does not believe in marriage outside our species, Jessica. We are, what some call...purists. That one of our own is marrying a non fox *is* an embarrassing situation for our family in our social circles back home. But, we are here to admit that this is something we cannot stop or prevent,” she said with contained calm. “We accede that fact, Miss Williams. We hope that in exchange for what will be the closest thing that will come to a blessing from us, we can extract some compromises from you and Kit that allows us to pretend you aren’t here.”

Jessie flared at that rather arrogant and self-centered declaration, but Vil was there, with a paw on Jessie’s forearm, patting it to stall the impending retaliation.

Good thing, too. Hannah looked about ready to slug Sarah in the head. Jim and John had to interpose themselves between Hannah and Kit's aunt and uncle.

"What Sarah is saying, while painting it in the best possible light for her, is *you win*, Jessie," she said with a calm word and a smile. "The Vulpans can't deny this is happening, and can't ignore you and Kit. Sarah and Brian are here in hopes of finding...reconciliation," she said, giving Kit a slight, smug, and knowing little smile.

That smile told him volumes.

The uncles and aunts thought that Vil was going to win the lawsuit, and through that victory, Kit would be installed as the heir and executor of his father's estate, and the Vulpan fortune.

They were here to try to bargain a favorable outcome out of him when he gained control of the Vulpan family fortunes, by acknowledging him and his marriage...no matter how much doing so would burn at their souls like acid. They were here, literally, to beg for their money, and in the mother of all ironies, beg money from the one member of the family that almost all of them had rejected when the one that controlled their money before him had disowned him.

For an awful moment, he considered rebuffing them, doing to them what they did to him, but he discounted that. Money was all they were, and money was both their drug and their curse. Far be it from him to separate them from the source of their suffering and pain.

He was beyond revenge. All he wanted was peace.

He would honor his promise. If his suspicions were right and they were here to beg for their money, he'd give it to them. He didn't want a penny of it. Not a single penny.

Kit nodded to Vil slightly, almost imperceptibly, and she smiled slyly. Such was the depth of communication between the two of them.

He put his paw on Jessie's shoulder. "You know, there was a time when I dreamed of a day like this. But now, I find that it was a stupid wish," he told his aunt and uncle.

"What do you mean?"

"You're afraid Vil is going to win the lawsuit, so you're here to try to bargain your money back from me."

They gave him sheepish looks.

"I'm not an idiot, no matter what you may think. But let me put you at ease, Aunt Sarah, Uncle Brian. I don't *want* the money. If Vil wins, I'll leave it all just the way it is now. On that, you have my word as a Vulpan... for what that's worth," he snorted. "So, you have what you came for. You can go back home and tell Uncle Zach and Aunt Maxine that your mission was accomplished, and you can kindly leave me the hell alone."

"Well, that does make me relieved to hear that, because the family's been in an absolute uproar this week. But, we are here to attend your wedding, and we will see it through," Brian said with surprising candor.

"I don't want you here," Kit said bluntly.

"We promise to cause no scenes and do our best not to infuriate you or her family," Brian said, raising his paw solemnly. "We only wish to be there

at your wedding. That's all."

"Kit, indulge me," Vil said steadily to him. "I'll keep a leash on them. On that, you have my promise."

"I—well, it's not my decision to make, really," he sighed. "This is Jessie's wedding, and it's her ultimate decision. Pretty kitty?"

She looked at Vil for a long moment, then finally nodded. "They can stay. But if they put even one toe out of line, I want them gone, Vil."

"You have my word."

And so, it was a very quiet and tense group that left the hangar, as Hannah and John glared at Sarah and Brian...and walking in the middle of them, in an easy, almost childlike skipping gait, was Vilenne, looking like the cat that caught the canary.

Oh, yes, there was something more going on here. This had *scheme* all over it. Kit absolutely could not wait to get Vil alone and drag this out of her. She was up to something, and what was more, she knew much more than she'd intimated to him.

And whatever that information was, it was making her almost giddishly happy.

Chapter 16

Things were a little chaotic outside the hangar, and Kit was a little disjointed over the bomb that Vil dropped on him, but his desire to get Vil alone was satisfied almost immediately. Marcus, one of Vil's panther bodyguards, drove their car back to his house as Kit and Jessie rode in a limo with Vil, Sarah, and Brian, and the three cousins, Victor rode in a second limo that had also been hired for them, and Sheila abducted Muffy and drove off with her in her Mustang. That was a lot of people in one limo, but the limo was a huge stretch model, so there was room for everyone to literally lie down on the seats without touching.

Before the door of the limo even closed, Vil held up her paw to quell his impending questions. "Not until we're moving," she told him.

Jessie held his paw nervously as they waited for the other panther to get behind the wheel of the limo, start it, and then pull out.

"Alright, what the hell is going on?" he demanded. "*Something* sure as hell is!"

"The lawsuit is over," Sarah told him with a sigh.

"Over? It hasn't even started!"

"It's over," Vil beamed. "Well, not *officially*, but it's over. We have that stuck-up English bitch hanging over hot coals," she declared with a vicious, almost predatory smile.

“Wanna can the dramatics and get to the point?”

“The point, brother dear, is she screwed up,” she said calmly. “I’ve come into...possession, of some very interesting emails and phone records that will totally destroy her case, and send her running to England for fear that I might hand them over to the police.”

“We weren’t the ones that tried to have you killed, Kit. It was *Cybil*,” Brian told him.

“Cybil? Cybil was the one that did it?” he gasped.

All three of them nodded. “Vilienne unearthed the evidence just a couple of days ago,” Sarah continued. “It seems that my wayward daughter was good for *something*. When she fled to Austin with her ridiculous story —“

“I started looking into Cybil a lot more closely,” Vil completed. “I never suspected her of it, baby bro, so I didn’t check her out. I had *way* too many suspects in the family.”

“Unfortunately,” Brian nodded. “Cybil had her claws more deeply into the family than we thought. She had a couple of members of the board under her thumb, and had a mole in the legal firm that Vil uses.”

“She saw what I was planning to do, and hatched her rather clever little scheme to kill two birds with one stone, brother,” Vil continued. “By killing you, it would have seriously crippled my suit to get you back into the family, which also basically blocks her suit. If you’d have been dead before I filed the suit, I’d have had to do it completely differently. Your status only became moot *after* the suit was filed,” she told him. “If I’d have walked into court trying to get my dead brother named executor of the estate, we’d have

been laughed out of Boston. And since your death would have sent me over the deep end, she felt it would tie me up and allow her to waltz in and snatch up a good half of the family's fortune and go back to England before the Vulpans could call a truce and work against her. She wasn't aiming at all of it, just half of it. It was a clever plan. If it wasn't aimed at my own brother, I could admire it for its subtlety and effectiveness."

"When you got involved with...Jessica, it gave her the perfect cover," Sarah told him. "She knew the family would go up in flames when we learned of it, and it was the perfect opportunity. Vilenne would focus on *us*, and that would only make it that much easier for *her*. Even with the assassination attempt failing, it was a benefit for her. It angered Vilenne and set the family against itself, which she hoped would cause enough discord to allow her to slip through and go back to Britain with a share of the family fortune beyond what was granted to her by her prenup. Even if that failed, her hope was to tie us up in court and try to force us to settle with her at a fraction of what her suit was demanding, which the family, still in disarray from Vilenne's crusade, would accept just to have it over with...thinking it was better to willingly hand over ten percent rather than risk losing it all. She felt that no matter what happened, she would win, and go home richer for her trouble."

Kit leaned back as Jessie gripped his paw tightly, taking it in. They were right. Nobody would suspect Cybil, who had never even *met* Kit before the funeral. She had no motive if one looked at the picture Cybil presented, no motive at all. But when one looked at the fact that Cybil did know about Vil's planned lawsuit and how it involved him, then everything just snapped into place neatly. If Kit was killed, then it destroyed Vil's suit and would turn the family into chaos as Vil exacted her revenge against the

family. But even its failure was a boon, for nobody would ever suspect Cybil, and it still set the family against itself, as Vil tore into the family hunting for the perpetrator, believing that it had to be the purist family using a hit man to prevent a marriage they would not accept. No matter what happened, it was all gain and no loss for Cybil, and it had been. Vil had gone crazy on the family, and while her back was turned to the treacherous British vixen, Cybil made her move, filing her lawsuit while the family was in disarray. But what Cybil didn't count on was Vil being ready to move herself. She underestimated Vil's resilience and ability to manage multiple complex issues at once. Vil did not go as crazy as Cybil hoped over the attempt on her brother, and was ready to act when Cybil made her move.

"Well...hell," Kit breathed.

"It does make a kind of sense, Kit," Jessie said quietly. "You once told me that Vil said that odds were, Cybil was filing the suit knowing she couldn't win just to get *something*."

"And she used *me* against the family," he sighed. "Even when I just want to be left alone, I just can't get away from this damned family. So, have they arrested Cybil yet?"

"Oh, no," Vil purred ominously. "She has no idea we have this information. She has no idea. And we're going to use it against her."

"We're going to allow her to go on with her lawsuit, and then allow her to dig her own grave," Brian told him. "She'll leave Boston with *nothing*, and unless she's extraordinarily careful, she'll do it in the back of a police car."

"Ah, so, this evidence can't—"

“Nope, bro, it can’t,” Vil told him. “I got this evidence illegally. If I could hand it over and get her arrested, she’d already be in jail, because sending her bony ass to prison would be the ultimate revenge,” she chuckled darkly. “Hell, if the cops knew how I got it, *I’d* be thrown in prison,” she said seriously. “But, if we let Cybil dig her own grave and my lawyers present some select parts of it in court as rebuttal, we don’t have to explain where it came from, and it doesn’t fall under the same rules as criminal evidence. It will *destroy* her case, and put her in a spotlight she does *not* want to be in,” Vil said with bright eyes. “Then, after she gets her ass kicked in court, I drop the rest of it on her and blackmail her into giving up everything she gained out of the marriage, or I take it all to the British tabloids. I’ll get her convicted of your attempted murder in the court of public opinion, and for British aristocracy, that’s a deahtknell. It may not be admissible in a criminal trial, but once people find out what she did, she’d be totally ruined, and facing investigation after investigation on both sides of the Atlantic. She’ll avoid all that and knuckle under, so she can go back to England with at least a modicum of dignity...at least until I start on her on that side of the pond.”

“But that doesn’t punish her!” Jessie protested. “She tried to *kill* my Kit!”

“Jessie, there are punishments, then there are *punishments*,” Vil told her seriously. “Prison would be a punishment for Cybil, there’s no doubt about that, but what I’ll do to her goes *way* beyond simple punishment. I will *destroy* her. I will take her reputation, her status, her wealth, and her good name.”

“Then that’s what you should do, not buy her off with blackmail!”

“Jessie, remember what I promised you when Kit was shot? That I could punish people far beyond the pitiful reach of the law?”

“I remember.”

“Did you trust me then?”

“Yes.”

“Well, trust me now. I can *destroy* Cybil Whitmore, in ways the law could never manage. Will you allow me to do that?”

“Only if you do to her what she did to Kit,” Jessie said vindictively.

“Not *literally*, but I’ll crush her, Jessie. Just leave it to me.”

“Make her *hurt*.”

“She’s going to hurt, Jessie. She will *hurt*.”

“Good,” she said with a nod, leaning against him.

“My little barbarian,” Kit chuckled, kissing her on the cheek.

“They tried to hurt you, Kit,” she said with surprising calm. “She tried to *kill* you, and for no reason other than to run home with a little more money in her pocket!” She looked at him. “I mean, I could understand if you raped her baby sister or something, but that’s just cold-blooded *murder*, and over nothing but *money*. Now I understand what you’ve been saying, love. I understand the curse. You’re very smart to want nothing to do with it.”

“Curse?” Brian asked.

“The curse of money,” Kit said calmly to him. “The cancer that destroyed this family.”

“Well, I’ll respectfully disagree with that opinion, Kit,” Brian said. “I see nothing wrong with having money.”

“There’s nothing wrong with having money. But when money becomes your entire life, then it becomes a curse instead of a blessing,” Kit told them. “And from my point of view, it *has* destroyed this family. We’re not a family anymore, not the way a family should be. We’re a collection of vain, arrogant, greedy, hedonistic foxes sharing a common name as we fight over money and reputation, even among ourselves.”

“That’s a silly concept,” Sarah snorted.

“Really? Then here’s a question for you, Sarah. Am *I* a Vulpan?”

“Of course you are,” she answered.

“Even though I’m disowned and poor?”

“Your eyes show us who you are, nephew.”

“And I’m a member of this family?”

“In a way, yes. Unofficially, as it were.”

“Fine. Then where the hell were you when I was laying in a hospital bed with a broken back?” he asked directly.

Sarah looked away.

“If you were *family*, you would have come to see me. You would have helped me when I couldn’t pay my hospital bill. But I didn’t see any of you. Not once. Why?”

“You were disowned,” Brian told him.

“And?”

Sarah sighed. “And Lucas threatened to disown anyone who helped you,” she admitted.

“So, you chose money over me, one of your own family, in my hour of greatest need.”

She was silent a *long* time. So was Brian, for that matter. “We did,” she finally admitted.

“I rest my case,” he said eloquently. “The only *family* I have is Vil. The rest of you can go to hell.”

Brian gave a rueful chuckle. “You went into the wrong profession, Kit. You’d have been one hell of a lawyer.” He slapped his paws on the knees of his suit pants. “And we need to do something about that, nephew. I for one am starting to think that Lucas was very wrong about you. I’d like a chance to get to know you a little better.”

“Well, you can just stuff that wish up your ass, Uncle Brian,” Kit said flatly. “When you leave this city, I pray to God I never see you again. The time for apologies passed a *long* time ago. You didn’t just burn your bridge with me, you *nuked* it. You can take your damn money and get the hell out of my life.”

“Well, I can only hope your opinion of me will change the same way it did for Sheila.”

“My opinion of Sheila never changed,” he retorted. “Sheila is harmless. She’s a self-absorbed hedonist who lives only for the pleasure she gets out of her trust fund, and when I was disowned, she was too young to really understand what was going on. She was only twelve. Later on, she was too afraid of losing everything she knew to help me, and I can’t really

blame her for it. Sheila couldn't survive without her money, and surprisingly, she's wise enough to admit it to herself. You, on the other hand, are one of the uncles. You aren't like the cousins. You know what's going on, and you don't live for the next bottle of vodka, hit of ecstasy, or cute fox you can lure into bed. When you turned your back on me, you did it fully knowing what you were doing, and fully understanding that I might die because of it. You *threw me away*, Uncle Brian, and I can never forgive you for that."

"And now you hold our futures in your paw. Fate has a dark sense of humor," he said with a chuckle.

"I see it as justice, not fate," Jessie told him bravely. "If Kit does end up holding the key to your fortune, then you have to look at him and remember what you did to him, and I think that's going to haunt some of you for the rest of your lives. Not because you care about him, but because you drove away someone who came back to hold power over you, and there was a time, however brief, when you had to look at yourself in the mirror and see what you did and what might happen because of it. You had to face the consequences of your actions, maybe for the first time in your whole life. You had to face the prospect of being *poor*, just like he was, of having him do to you what you did to him. But Kit's not like you. Kit's kind and gentle and caring, and he wouldn't do that to you, no matter how much you deserve it. And when *he* was faced with helping a member of his family, despite what your family did to him, he *helped*. That's something you would never do." She patted Kit's paw. "You may have the money and the power, but right here is the best part of your family, and it's just one reason why I love him so much."

“I do believe we’ve just been spanked by this little femme, Sarah,” Brian said with a rueful chuckle.

“You deserve it,” Vil said bluntly. “I risked my ass to help my brother, Uncle Brian. It was *possible* to help, you just didn’t *care* to help. Even after I begged it of you.”

“I know, I know,” he sighed. “I can admit that that was a huge mistake. And I can’t say I’m sorry enough times.”

“The only person you need to apologize to is sitting right there, and it seems he just told us he won’t accept it,” Vil told him.

“If Kit wishes to be recalcitrant, then let him,” Sarah told her brother simply. “We told him why we’re here, and we offered our apology. If he rejects it, that’s his affair, not ours. At least we tried.”

“Way to stay on his good side there, Sarah,” Vil said with dark humor.

“I will not grovel and beg like a dog,” Sarah said with pride staining her voice. “If that leaves me broke and homeless, then so be it. At least I’ll still have my self respect.”

“Brave words since he *already* gave his word,” Brian told her, a bit acidly. “I was hearing quite a different tone from you on the flight up. It sounded strangely like raw panic. Admit it, sis, you’re just as helpless and afraid as the rest of us.”

“Now see here, Brian—“

“That’s enough,” Vil growled in a low voice, that instantly silenced her elders. “Fighting just proves Kit’s point. Act with a little decorum,” she told them, looking out the window. “Ah, we’re almost there.”

Kit looked out, and realized they were on Congress near the capitol building, going to their apartment.

“So, brother, you’ve heard the truth. What do you think?”

“I think you need to kick Cybil’s ass,” he answered immediately.

“Yes!” Jessie agreed fervently.

“So you’ll let me handle it?”

“I trust your sense of moral outrage,” he told her with a nod. “You’ll do what needs to be done.”

“And I’ll enjoy it,” she grinned. “Oh, keep your calendar somewhat clear in late January. That’s when the trial starts. I’d like you to be there to watch the beginning of the end for Cybil Whitmore. I want her to be able to look into your eyes when she realizes that we know she tried to have you killed. And, you’ll need to be there to sign some papers once I win the suit, so you can wash your paws of it and come back home.”

“I’d be happy to. The sooner I can get rid of you, the happier I’ll be. Well, not all of you,” he corrected.

“I love you too, baby bro,” she said, sticking her tongue out at him.

The limo pulled into their parking lot a few moments later, and he saw that one of the panthers was waiting by his truck, having driven it back. He opened the door of the limo, and Kit urged Jessie out. He followed her, but Vil didn’t exit the limo. Kit and Jessie looked in at her as she grabbed the door handle. “I’m going to drop them off at the Armitage, then go on to the church to make sure everything is to my satisfaction,” she told them. “I have my phone with me, so call if you need anything. Remember, we’re

going to dinner at the steakhouse at four. Do you have any other plans for today?"

"We're going over to the hotel a little later to meet more of Jessie's family," Kit answered.

"Alright. Drive everywhere. Don't take any rides. Keep your car with you, just in case I need you to come to me."

"We can do that," he nodded.

"Alright then. I'll see you two later. Be good."

"See you soon, Kit," Brian offered.

The panther closed the door to the limo, gave Kit his keys, then got into the front. They watched the limo back out of the lot, and then drive off.

"Well, that was...informative," Jessie said, which made Kit laugh helplessly. "Can you believe the nerve of your uncle to act like nothing they did to you mattered?" she flared indignantly.

"I'm so glad I wasn't the only one that felt that way," he chuckled, putting his arm around her.

"I can't believe them! They're so stuck up, they must walk around on their tiptoes because of the steel rods in their butts!"

Kit laughed. "Wow, that's the closest thing to a dirty remark I've ever heard out of you in public," he teased as he turned them towards their front door and started for it. "They must have really made you angry."

"Oh, *slightly*," she said with vast scorn. "And not just me. Did you see Mom lunge at that vixen in the hangar when she said that horrible thing to me?"

“We should have let your mom get to her,” Kit grunted as he unlocked the door. “Getting her ass whipped might be just what Aunt Sarah needs.” Kit turned off the alarm, and Jessie filed in behind him. “Who were those two younger ones?”

“Victor and Muffy.”

“Oh, the nudist is here?” Jessie giggled.

“Yep, she’s here,” he answered. “Here’s hoping she keeps her dress on during the ceremony...if she attends, anyway. I hope they don’t. Muffy’s harmless, but Victor’s a nasty bastard. He thinks he’s God’s greatest creation, and he has a temper.”

“He’s that bad?”

“He doesn’t get physical, but he’s ruined people in Boston over *imagined* slights,” he answered. “He once got a waiter fired for dropping a fork. He got the manager at Castle Cinema fired because the movie he was watching melted during the show, and they had to give the people refunds.”

“Oh, he’s like *that*,” she sighed.

“Yeah. Anyone who does not cater to his every whim must be destroyed. Sheila may be a brat, but Victor is the spoiled brat to end all spoiled brats. If anyone disrupts our wedding, it’ll be him...and probably because he’s bored and wants to leave.”

Jessie had her phone open almost immediately. She hit two buttons and put it to her ear. “Vil? Jessie. Listen, that Vulpan boy that you brought with you, Victor? He’s *not* invited to our wedding. No, no, Kit just told me about him, about what kind of male he is. I don’t want him anywhere near our

wedding. Okay. Okay, I will. See you at the steakhouse. Bye-bye.” She closed the phone. “Problem solved,” she told him with a slight smile.

“I love you, Jessica Desdemona Vulpan,” he laughed, swinging her back and forth in his embrace.

“You’d better, Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan, you’re marrying me tomorrow,” she grinned, then she began to purr as he caressed her back. But she was startled out of her purr when he laughed richly. “What?”

“As soon as Victor hears that he’s been banned, he’ll be on the phone to his mother instantly. He’ll throw a tantrum, and Maxine will try to get him into the wedding,” he said, laughing again. “Banning him will make him want to come, if only because someone is denying him something. Of course, he’d cause a scene and ruin the wedding out of revenge, but he won’t be able to tolerate *not* being invited.”

“Well, then, sounds like he’s about to learn that you don’t get everything you want,” she winked.

“That’s blasphemy in the Vulpan household,” he teased, leaning down and kissing her.

“Mmmm, let’s do that again,” she said, and she began to purr as she laced her arms around him and kissed him again. She kissed him for long, wonderful moments, then nuzzled his neck. “You know, this might be our last chance before it’s moral,” she breathed in his ear.

“I will bet you a thousand dollars that if we do, someone will come over or call us before we’re done,” he said with a rueful, lamentful chuckle.

The doorbell rang, and Jessie almost fell down, she was laughing so hard.

“Who is it?” Kit called loudly, a bit irritated.

The door opened, and Sheila peeked in. “Hey, cousin,” she called, opening it fully. Behind her was Muffy. The older Vulpan cousin was nineteen, a little taller, but thinner and more built than Sheila. Muffy’s red hair was cut short, in a pixie style, and she was wearing a tank top-style halter that ended just under her breasts and a pair of very tight spandex workout pants, clothes Kit recognized...they were Sheila’s. She had three piercings in her left ear and two in her right, which was rather unusual for a Vulpan. Most Vulpan femmes only had one piercing in each ear. “We just got back from the airport, and I’m gonna take Muffy down to the Y so we can work out in advance of all that food we’re gonna eat.” She stepped in, and then looked back and motioned. “Come on!” she urged.

“But it’s *his* house, Sheila!” she said fearfully.

“You can come in,” Kit called as Jessie steadied herself, and he let go of her. “I only bite the aunts and uncles and older cousins, Muffy. I don’t have too much against the younger cousins.”

“Oh, well, better safe than sorry,” she said with a grin, fluttering the lashes of her Vulpan eyes. “Oh, you’re Jessie, right?”

“That’s me. And I’ve heard a few things about you,” she said with a bright smile.

Muffy’s fur started to rise. “Well, I’m sure they’ve told you *those* stories,” she said, elbowing Sheila knowingly.

“With every deliciously naked detail,” she answered brazenly, slapping her cousin on the rump.

“They’ll never let me live it down,” she sighed morosely.

“What fun would that be?” Sheila grinned.

“Why didn’t you go to the hotel, Muffy? You need to get settled in,” Kit noted.

“Kit, my stuff is already there. They sent it on in the second limo,” she answered. “When Sheila offered to take me to work out, I came with her so we could change. Her clothes fit me pretty well,” she said, patting her chest. “A little tight, though.”

“Just the way you like it,” Sheila teased.

“So, there any fun places to go in this town, guys? I hope we can go have some fun before I go home, it’s warm down here!”

“Oh, I have a couple of places in mind,” Sheila grinned in a predatory manner.

“Sheila.”

“What? She’s a *cousin*, cousin! You think she hasn’t *done* all those things?”

Kit was about to say something, then he chuckled. “Point. I won’t say a word.”

“A word about what?”

“Oh, where I want to take you,” she grinned. “It’s called the Top Hat, and it’s pretty awesome.”

“What makes it so awesome?”

“It’s members only. And bring lots of cash with you.”

“Oh? Oh. *Oooooohhhhhh*,” she said, her eyes brightening. “Can we go tonight? We can take Jessica, give her a last gasp bachelorette party!”

“Oh no, don’t drag me into this!” Jessie laughed. “I’m going to be busy tonight. And if you guys show up at my wedding hung over, I’ll strangle you with my veil!”

“Well, damn, I forgot about that,” Muffy sighed. “If we have to be at the church at noon, well, that’s just not enough time to have proper fun. I’ll have to pass tonight, cousin...but there’s always tomorrow night.”

“Yeah, there is,” Sheila grinned. “Ready to hit the Y? Now that I think of it, this is the last chance Kit and Jessie will have to be alone til after the wedding. We should really give them some half-dressed quickie sex time.”

Jessie’s cheek fur stood straight out. “Out, you hussy!” Jessie demanded, pointing at the door.

Sheila laughed. “Just remember, Jess, it only takes about five or ten minutes when the only thing you do is drop your pants and bend over.”

“Maybe it does with *your* boyfriends,” Jessie retorted, crossing her arms beneath her breasts in an aggressive posture. “Now go work all that energy out of your system so you’re too tired to be nasty.”

“All exercising does is turn me on, but I have until four to get satisfaction,” Sheila grinned, and she herded Muffy out, who was waving goodbye, then closed the door after locking it for them and giving them a knowing little grin.

“She has a one track mind,” Jessie sighed, leaning against him. She looked up at him. “What?”

“Ten minutes,” he said with a speculative hum.

She laughed and pushed him playfully, then she saw the look on his face. “Wanna try?”

“She did lock the door for us.”

“I am *so* not just pulling my pants down, though!” she declared as she laughed and hurried past him towards the bedroom.

“That’s not half as sexy as you naked,” he laughed as he followed her quickly.

Fortunately, nobody bothered them for a while, which allowed them to fully experience enough pre-marital bliss to hold them over until their wedding night. When they were finally bothered, they were sitting on the couch, snuggling in silent contentment, with Jessie’s purring the only sound Kit cared to hear. It was their last hurrah. They’d had their last fling as singles, their last instance of living in decadent, sweet sin, and now they were enjoying their last moments of quiet, private intimacy before the events of the day and the near future got them too busy to enjoy one another’s company. At the dinner tonight, they would go their separate ways. Jessie would be going home with Rick, and Kit would be spending tonight alone in advance of the wedding. Jessie was traditional, and she believed that they shouldn’t see each other on the day of the wedding until she was walking down the aisle. Kit could respect that, but he was going to miss her in their bed tonight.

But tomorrow...tomorrow it would be *official*. They were going to marry, and they’d begin their *happily ever after* a little after one o’clock

tomorrow afternoon, the time of the ceremony. She wouldn't be his girlfriend, she would be his wife. She'd be entwined completely and irrevocably into his life, bound together with ties that he prayed would never fail. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, he wanted to grow old with her. She was his match. She was his soulmate. She was the femme God put him on this earth to find and love for all his life.

He couldn't wait.

Many grooms were nervous about their weddings, but Kit wasn't in the slightest. He was looking forward to it, like a kid and Christmas, the chance to finally claim this femme and cry from the rooftops that they were a pair, they were a couple, they were *married*, that he was the lucky male that would have her on his arm for the rest of their lives. He was the one that would have children with her, he was the one that would hold her paw when she was frightened, cower from the wrathful blows of her deadly pillow when he teased her, hold her in his arms as she cried out in ecstasy while they made love. He would love her, and take care of her, and want her and need her, for the rest of his life.

But that all started tomorrow. Today, well, today was the day before the rest of their lives, and it would be filled with family. Kit was certain that they wouldn't leave them alone before the planned dinner at the Double J. *Someone* was going to call or stop by to see them, but that was alright. They'd had their time to be alone, and the marriage was about more than just them. It was about family, about the coming together and celebrating the happiness of one of its members. It was a time for the two families to meet more deeply—which in his case was just Vil and Sheila—and a time for them to be together.

But, surprisingly, they were left alone until nearly noon, when Jessie's phone began to ring.

"Do we have to answer?" she asked quietly as she just snuggled deeper against him.

"Yah, I guess we do," he sighed, reaching down and picking her phone up off the coffee table, and handing it to her.

"Hello?" she called after opening it. "Hi Mom. No, not really. Me and Kit are just enjoying a little peace and quiet before all the craziness starts." She giggled. "No, you didn't interrupt, we did *that* already," she said, poking him in the side gently, then she laughed. "I'm surprised you'd dare to ask me that, Mom. No! Well, it's just not *you*, especially since you keep saying you don't approve of us." She traced her finger along his stomach as she listened; Kit could hear Hannah's voice from the phone by her ear, but couldn't make out her words. "Let me ask." She put her paw over the phone. "Did you finish your Christmas shopping, love?"

"Kinda. I still haven't bought a gift for you or Hannah yet."

"Brave words to say this close to Christmas," she teased.

"Well, have you finished?"

"It's been so crazy..." she hedged, her cheeks ruffling.

"Then hush, Miss Kettle."

She laughed. "No, Mom, he hasn't. I haven't either, to be honest." She looked up at him. "Mom wants to know if you'd like to go shopping with the family. They're going to go out and do some Christmas shopping, and

you can also meet Aunt Susan and Uncle Sam and Uncle Bob. They just got in a bit ago.”

“Sure, we can do that,” he nodded.

“Okay, Mom, we’re coming. No, she and one of her cousins went out, so they’ll have to pass. No, that’s okay. Sure, we’re on our way. Bye.” She closed the phone. “She wanted Sheila to come too, but she’s not here to ask, so....”

“Yah, she and Muffy will probably hang out all day. They’re friends.”

“I could tell when they came over earlier.”

The doorbell rang. “Kit! You two done yet?” Sheila shouted from outside.

Jessie laughed. “Guess we can ask now,” she amended.

Kit got up and opened the door, and saw Sheila and Muffy. Sheila was in a sleeveless half-shirt that was barely more than a halter or glorified bra, that showed off her sleek stomach and a pair of low-rider jeans, with a white linen shirt thrown on over it and left unbuttoned to give her some protection from the fifty degree air. Muffy was wearing a black miniskirt with a white blouse that had the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. “We were about to go hit the mall, cousin, wanna come?” Sheila offered. “We got Christmas shopping to do.”

“Actually, we were going to ask you along with us,” Jessie said as she came to the door. “My mom invited us to go shopping with my family, they’re going looking for Christmas presents.”

“Umm, what about me?” Muffy asked.

Jessie was on the phone before she finished. “Mom, Sheila just got home, and she still has her cousin with her. Is it alright if we bring her too? Okay, see you soon.” She closed the phone. “You’re welcome along, Muffy.”

“Cool!” she said with a grin.

After getting their stuff together and packing an overnight bag for Jessie, who wouldn’t be coming back to the apartment tonight, they were in the Pathfinder and on the way. “What’s your family like, Jessie?” Muffy asked her.

“You’d find them boring, but I do need to warn you about one thing.”

“Don’t spew any purist crap around them,” Sheila told her. “Jessie’s a mixed breed, so you’ll offend her family.”

“Wow, you are? You don’t look it at all,” Muffy said in surprise.

“I know, but my grandfather was a fox,” Jessie answered her. “That’s why I have these,” she added, holding out her black-mittened paws.

“Yeah, you do have fox markings,” Muffy nodded after looking at her ears.

“What do you do, Muffy?” Jessie asked. “Do you go to school or work?”

“Work?” she said with a laugh. “No, I don’t work! I go to Yale. I’m a Business major. When I graduate, I want to open my own nightclub in Boston!” she said excitedly. “I’m going to call it The Fox Den, and have a big bar on one side and glass-bottomed stage, and—“

“We’ve heard that description a million times,” Sheila interrupted her.

“So, you actually want to *do* something after you get out of school?” Jessie asked curiously.

“Yeah. Most of the family goes to work at the shipyards after they graduate, or don’t work at all, but I want to do something different. I love to club and party, so the best thing I could ever do is open a club that I think is *perfect*, so I have a place to go where I have fun and I can provide fun for other people!”

“It’s a lot of work to run something like that.”

“I know, but think of how cool it’ll be when it’s up and running!” she said with a trill in her voice. “I’ll hire a manager that knows the business and runs the little details, and I’ll handle the big stuff, so it also gives me time to enjoy it.”

“Sounds interesting,” Jessie noted. “You have bigger plans than this one,” she said, poking her finger towards Sheila.

Sheila laughed. “Hey, I’m getting better!” she protested. “I’m actually thinking of doing something after I graduate now.”

“Really? What?” Kit asked.

“Well, Rick told me the other day that if you do something you like to do, it’s not really work. Well, I doubt I could make a career out of partying, but I *really* like cooking. I never thought it could be *fun*, but it is. Maybe I’ll open a restaurant.”

“Just so long as you don’t do all the cooking,” Kit noted, which earned him a slap on the top of his head.

Jessie teased more out of Muffy as they drove to the hotel, and learned more about her. Muffy was smart, as smart as Sheila, but the difference between them was that Muffy actually had a plan for what she wanted to do after college, she had a dream she wanted to chase, and that was *hugely* different from most of the other cousins. As Kit listened he realized that Muffy's idea was simply to basically hire people to do all her work for her, so she could sit in her office and just be the boss, and then go down and party in her own club. But, for a Vulpan cousin, she had a different outlook and plan, and that set her apart from the rest of the Party Pack. It was actually surprising to hear it, a Party Pack member actually talking about doing something with her life...such as it was. She was just going to build her own nightclub so she had a place to go to party every night, her perfect party place. But it was a start. Muffy would find out that there was real work involved in her dream, but on the other hand, Kit felt that she could handle it. She'd do that work to recognize her dream of owning her own nightclub, and in the bargain she'd be actually producing something, being a contributing member of society rather than a leech. Sheila was starting to come to see things the way Muffy already did, that there might be something productive she could do out in the world that would keep her occupied. Muffy wanted to open her own nightclub, an extension of her love of partying and fun. Sheila could open a restaurant, an extension of her growing interest in cooking. For both of them, they'd be doing something they liked, something that would make their parents respect them for at least *trying* to live up to the family name by trying to establish their own businesses.

“Just make it members only, so you can dance naked as much as you want,” Sheila teased.

“See, she never lets me live it down,” Muffy said, her cheeks ruffling.

“She has a point, though,” Kit chuckled. “You *were* an exhibitionist when we were kids.”

“She still is,” Sheila laughed. “When we party together, she wears miniskirts with no panties so she can pull them up and flash boys in the clubs. She’s not wearing panties now,” she declared.

“I don’t like panties, the elastic seams rub the my fur off my waist, bikini lines, and butt,” Muffy said, a touch primly. “My fur is thinner than yours, Sheila, and it’s a little brittle, so tight clothes rub my fur off. *That’s* why I go without them, not because I like to show off my equipment. I don’t even own any panties.”

“None at all?” Jessie asked in surprise.

“Not a single pair,” she nodded.

“Hon, miniskirts with no panties is...dangerous.”

“Now you’re getting the idea of it, Jess,” Sheila laughed.

“The only reason I wear bras is because I don’t want my boobs below my belly button when I’m fifty,” she added. “If it wasn’t for that, I wouldn’t wear a bra either, cause it rubs the fur off my back.”

“I had that problem too til I switched to Silk Sensations,” Jessie told her. “For some reason, that brand doesn’t chafe the fur off at all, and it does it while providing lift and support.”

“Really? I’ve never heard of that brand.”

“Well, you don’t find them in upscale boutiques,” Jessie laughed. “I buy mine at Wal-Mart.”

“Wal-Mart? Can we stop by and show me today?”

“Sure.”

“We can do that right now, we’ll pass one on the way to the hotel,” Kit offered.

They did just that. They detoured to a Wal-Mart and Jessie showed her which bras she bought, and Muffy bought several of them before they went on to the hotel.

The second floor of the hotel was crowded now, almost like a convention. Doors were left propped open as members of Jessie’s family visited each other. Jessie waded into them with kisses and hugs, and Kit and his cousins were introduced to Jessie’s cousins, aunts, and uncles as they went to her parents’ room. “Mom, Dad, we’re here!” she called as they entered the room. It was a fairly small room with a pair of beds, like most hotel rooms, with it clear that the pair were only using one of them. Hannah hugged her daughter, then hugged Kit. “Mom, this is Muffy, one of Kit’s cousins,” Jessie introduced.

“Muffy? Is that a nickname, dear?” Hannah asked directly.

Muffy laughed. “Yeah, cause my real name is even worse,” she answered as she shook Hannah’s paw.

“Eugenia Minerva,” Sheila teased, which earned her a murderous look from Muffy.

“Minerva? I’ve always adored that name,” John said as he shook Muffy’s paw. “Had Ben been born a girl, it would have been his middle name. It’s a traditional British name, dear, nothing to be ashamed of. There are many women named Minerva.”

“And I’m sure they hate their parents as much as I do,” Muffy declared, which made John and Hannah laugh.

“Well, we need to get everyone’s attention to find out who’s going shopping and who’s not,” John said.

“You want attention? No problem,” Sheila winked, marching out the door. Outside, she put two fingers to her muzzle, then unleashed an ear-splitting whistle that stopped all conversation and made furs look out their doors at her. Just how did she *do* that? “John needs to know who’s going Christmas shopping!” Sheila shouted once she had everyone’s attention. “Come on, shake your tails, we don’t have much time before the dinner tonight!”

“I knew I liked that girl,” Grandma Pearl cackled as she came through the adjoining door from the other room.

“She’s always been fearless,” Muffy said, a little jealously. “Ever since we were both little girls.”

“So, where are we going?” John asked. “You’re the resident expert on Austin, Jessica.”

“The mall,” she shrugged in reply. “We can go to Northcross. It has the skating rink and a video game arcade in case the kids get bored while we’re shopping. The steakhouse is right beside it, too. That way if we run late, we don’t have to go far to get to the dinner.”

“That’s not a bad idea, pretty kitty,” Kit nodded.

“Okay, show us where it is on the map,” John said, picking up a street map of Austin. “I’ll spread that information so everyone knows where to go in case they get lost.”

“Maps? Clever.”

“Everyone has a copy of one, just in case. The Williams clan is always prepared, Kit,” he chuckled. “Oh, I’d like to swing them by the church along the way, so they know how to get there.”

“It’s not far out of the way.”

Kit ended up leading a procession of sorts out of the hotel. Six rental cars followed him as he drove them by the church, then went back to the interstate and took them to Northcross. Kit had a warm spot in his heart for the area, since he’d met Jessie at the Java Joint, and they’d had their first kiss on the ice in the skating rink in the mall. Once they were there, the fifteen adults and children that came with them split up, as did Kit and Jessie. He wanted to get her a Christmas present, and he wasn’t going to do that with her along. He ended up with Hannah and Muffy, as Sheila went along with Jessie and John to get Kit a Christmas gift. They paused at the rail overlooking the ice skating rink, and Kit had to chuckle. “This is where me and Jessie had our first date,” he told Hannah. “Right there. I took her ice skating.”

“An unusual choice, cousin,” Muffy noted.

“It was a date of opportunity,” he answered. “We were at a coffee shop just outside the mall, it was close, and it was something for us to do. I just asked her out of the blue, and she accepted.”

“You could have taken her to a restaurant.”

“I was homeless and broke then, Muffy,” he told her evenly. “I didn’t have the money to do anything else, not really. And it would have been so

impressive for me to ask her to wait with me so we could take the bus to get there.”

Muffy giggled and nodded. “Ah, I can see why you did now. I should have brought my skates, I didn’t know they had ice skating in Texas.”

“You skate, dear?” Hannah asked.

“I’m from Boston, Misses Williams,” Muffy laughed.

“Call me Hannah, dear.”

“Muffy’s actually pretty good. She took lessons when she was a girl.”

“Yeah, I was crazy about figure skating when I was a little girl, so I took lots of lessons,” she answered. “So I’m a pretty good skater.”

“Maybe we should take a try at it,” Hannah noted.

Muffy’s cheeks ruffled. “Umm...maybe some other time? I’m not really dressed for skating, Misses Hannah.”

“I doubt wearing that skirt would cause you too much trouble. It’s not tight.”

“Umm, it’s what I’m *not* wearing under it that might,” she said in a low tone, almost a whisper.

“Really?” Hannah said, her eyebrow raising.

“I, uh, kinda have some issues wearing underwear,” she said, giving Kit a look. “They chafe off my fur, so I kinda don’t wear them.”

“And yet you’re wearing a miniskirt?” she asked pointedly, looking down at her black skirt.

“I didn’t think I’d be ice skating,” she said delicately, putting an unconscious paw over her skirt, as if a sudden breeze at any moment might lift it up.

“Well, this is a *mall*, dear. I’ll find you something that won’t rub your fur off,” she said quite forcefully, taking her paw and marching her towards J.C. Penny’s. She gave Kit a strangled look as Hannah took charge of her, but Kit just smiled and shooed her along.

Kit took advantage of the isolation to do his shopping. He bought Lupe some new lounge chairs for his porch since he said his own were too old, and started hunting for something for Hannah and Jessie. Jessie was not easy to shop for. She didn’t really like jewelry, and was actually quite content with things. But she loved books and reading, so he went to Borders and bought quite a few books for her from many different genres. He bought her a sexy bikini at a boutique for their trip to Florida, with tiny little cups on the bra and what amounted to a G-string for the bottom. It was part joke, part tease for her. He wanted to see her in it, but he knew she’d never wear it in public. She’d die of embarrassment if she wore that in public, despite the fact that she had a body that could make that bikini look awesome...or would look awesome in that bikini. He could imagine the look on her face when she took it out of the box and realized it wasn’t a frayed napkin. He bought her a new blouse and a skirt, too, for he knew her size and he knew her sense of style, and felt comfortable buying clothes for her.

Hannah was trickier. He looked around for quite a while until he found something he felt was suitable for her. He spent a great deal of money on her. He bought a new food processor for her, since he remembered that the one she had at home was fairly old, and she’d complained about it. He also

bought her a knitting set for advanced knitters; Jessie was very good at knitting, and had told him that Hannah was the one that taught her. Unable to resist a little joke present, though, he bought her a Cincinnati Bengals jersey nightshirt, like the thigh-length nightshirts that many femmes wore for sleeping in them. He also bought her a pair of Bengal colored panties, really sexy tiger-striped orange and black panties out of Spencer's that would probably make John quite excited to see her wearing, given his... fetish for his football team.

The only bad thing about that joke was he'd be there when she opened it, and she could get him for it...but it was worth it.

And the beauty of them was they were tie-on panties, the waist cords of the panties tying together at the hips, so he didn't have to guess her size and potentially mortally offend her.

He bought a bunch of little knick-knacks and such, small gifts for the gang, he bought a couple of cookbooks and a spice rack for Sheila, and realized he really should get Muffy something, since Jessie seemed to like her. He got her a little music box with a little vixen ballerina in a pink tutu that spun when it was wound up and played. It was cheap, but Muffy had always like figure skating and ballet, so it would appeal to her.

He took his gifts to a wrapping booth in the mall and had them all professionally boxed and wrapped. Hannah and Muffy tracked him down not long after that, laden down with shopping bags, and Muffy looked a little skittish. "There you are," Hannah told him. "When we came back to the rink, you were gone, dear, so we went ahead and did our shopping."

"I had to buy *your* presents, Hannah," he chuckled. "So, you're all done?"

“I have a few yet to buy, but I’m done with her,” she said, nodding at Muffy. “Did you know this girl did not own a *single* pair of panties?”

“Yeah, I knew,” he chuckled. “You should ask her why we call her Muffy. Well, actually you don’t, now that you know that little piece of information.”

“Kit!” Muffy gasped.

Hannah gave him a sharp look. “That’s totally improper, so we found her some panties that won’t chafe off her fur,” she said, giving Muffy a steady look. “And you had *better* wear them,” she added in a flinty tone. “It’s a scandal for a pretty young lady like you to go around wearing a skirt like that with nothing under it!”

“I will!” she squeaked. When Hannah directed them to a jewelry booth, she fell in by Kit and whispered “at least while I’m in Austin.”

“I heard that, young lady,” Hannah said curtly, looking at them and wiggling her ears. “They don’t just decorate my head, you know.”

Muffy laughed.

As Hannah drifted away from them looking at necklaces, Muffy pulled him to a bench and they sat down. “Jessie’s mom is really pushy, but I kinda like her,” she giggled.

“She’s a great femme,” he nodded. “I just wish she liked me more,” he sighed. “She objects to the marriage, you know.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “She thinks we’re jumping into this too fast. I just wish I could explain to her how I feel,” he sighed. “If she knew how I felt in my

heart, she'd see we're not going too fast at all. We're going at just the right speed."

"Well, tell her."

"I've tried, but I just can't find the words."

"I think you're being too critical of yourself, cousin," she told him. "She does like you."

"Yeah, but the marriage is there in her face, and it's hard not to hate the messenger in this case." He looked over at her. "I'm surprised you're taking all this so well. No trouble at all talking to me, eh?"

She laughed. "Well, Sheila told me about you after she came down here, and I was curious. So when I overheard my mom and dad talking about you, and Dad said he was coming to the wedding, I asked to come along. I wanted to see if Sheila was just blowing smoke out her butt or if you really were nothing like what the elders say you are."

"What do they say I am?"

"Depends on which family member you ask, Kit," she told him. "Uncle Zach says you're a miserable scumbag who betrayed the family, so you were disowned. Dad always told me that you were a pretty brave kid who stood up to his father and tried to live his own life, even after it cost you your money and place in the family. Dad's always been pretty impressed by you, you know. You get disowned at sixteen, and not only did you make it, you graduated from college and got a good job and made something good for yourself. He always told me that you're a *true* Vulpan, rolling with the punches and coming out on top, just like our great-granddad did when he built the company."

“Well, it’s nice to know I’m not universally despised. What do you think of Jessie?”

“I think she’s beautiful. The family hates her, though,” she giggled. “Even my dad does. Says no Vulpan should marry outside the species, even a disowned one.”

“Well, I expected that. But I don’t really care. I don’t answer to the elders anymore, Muffy. I’m my own fox now.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen that,” she said, nudging him with her shoulder. “I think I have to get Sheila for spreading those stories of me,” she noted.

“You’ll have to get me too,” he chuckled.

“You didn’t!”

“Muffy, you really *did* do those things.”

“And you won’t let me live it down either!”

“You still do it.”

She laughed. “Well, I guess I do, but do you have to tell every fur you come across?”

“What’s the point of being an exhibitionist if you don’t want people to know?”

She gave him a look, then laughed helplessly. “I’m not an exhibitionist! I just like not wearing clothes. There’s a difference,” she said primly. “Exhibitionists show off. I just like being nude. I like being nude at home, but I *do* put on clothes when I go out. If I was an exhibitionist, I’d have no problem going ice skating in this skirt without underwear, after all,” she pointed out.

“So you’re a nudist rather than an exhibitionist. Pretty fine line there,” he smiled. “Guess there’s nothing wrong with that as long as you’re not too nuts about it.”

“Well thank you so much for not finding me to be a freak,” she teased, nudging him.

“All the cousins are freaks, Muffy, even me and Vil. You can’t be raised in that family without being a freak...at least when compared to *normal* people.”

Muffy laughed. “Well, at least we have each other. And now you have more than just Vil. If Dad’s right and they invalidate the will that keeps us from contacting you, I’d like to see more of you, cousin. I think Dad’s right about you. I’d like to get to know you.”

“I came to realize recently that I have nothing against the younger cousins, Muffy, not really. You all were too young to really understand what was going on when I was disowned, and you’re still under your parents’ thumbs, even now. But your dad and the older cousins, well, I want nothing to do with them. I’ll never forgive them, Muffy. Not after what they did to me.”

“I, I can understand that, I guess,” she said. “I’d be totally pissed off at them too if they did to me what they did to you. I’m just glad you’re not blaming *all* of us, I’m glad you see that when that happened to you, I wasn’t even in high school yet.”

“Well, when I was hit by that car, I didn’t get any visits from you either, Muffy,” he said pointedly.

She looked away. “I was terrified, Kit. Uncle Luke made it very clear, anyone caught talking to you or helping you would be kicked out of the family with absolutely nothing. We were scared to death of him, even Uncle Zach was. You know what it takes to scare Uncle Zach?” she asked pointedly. “He threatened to strip us naked and toss us out the front gate, Kit. Literally. What would you expect me to do? Risk everything for a cousin I barely knew, and risk the wrath of someone who did something like that to *his own son*?”

He sighed. “I guess not,” he said. “But it still hurt.”

“I can imagine it did,” she said compassionately, putting her paw on his knee and patting it. “Does it matter at all if I tell you I’m sorry?”

“It does matter, Muffy,” he said after a moment, putting his paw over hers and squeezing it gently. “And thank you for that.”

“Hey, no problem. So, what did you get me for Christmas?” she grinned.

“Absolutely nothing,” he retorted.

“Aww! I bought you something!”

“Well, I guess I’ll have to stop by the claw machine in the arcade and get you something.”

“You jerk!” she laughed, slapping him on the shoulder.

Kit and Muffy were joined by Penny and Susan, John’s sister, on their way to a music store so Hannah could buy some CDs for Ben. “Ah, so you ended up herding the Vulpan kids, Hannah?” Susan asked with a grin at Kit.

“Herding is a good word,” she said, glancing back at Muffy.

“Oh, stop teasing the poor girl, Sue!” she laughed. “This poor vixen has been teased by about everyone today! Don’t let them bully you, sweetie, I’m on your side,” Penny grinned, patting Muffy on the shoulder.

“Penny, right?”

“Good memory, hon!” she grinned. “You only saw about fifteen new faces today, you know,” she added with a pat on her shoulder. “So, where are you headed?”

“Tower Records,” Hannah told her.

“Well, mind if we tag along? We’re all done,” she declared, holding up her eight shopping bags from various stores.

“Please, we’d love to have you,” Hannah said, and they fell into step with them. “How is Arizona, Sue?”

“It’s been pretty good. Jack got moved to a new office last month, and he’s just settled in at his new department.”

“A promotion?”

“Not technically a promotion, just a transfer to a new department.”

“What does he do?” Muffy asked.

“He works for IBM,” she answered. “He’s an engineer, dear. They moved him from small business computer to mainframe production. It’s not technically a promotion, but it’s a better position.”

“He’s a hardware engineer or a software engineer?”

“Ah, I could learn to like you, hon,” Susan laughed. “He’s a hardware engineer. He designs circuit boards and electronics. What do you do, hon?”

“Me? I go to Yale,” she answered. “I’m a business major.”

“Yale? Wow!” Susan said, her voice obviously impressed. “You’ll make a pretty penny when you get out of school, young lady!”

“Me Nah,” she laughed. “Most of us Vulpan cousins go to Harvard or Yale, and it’s not because we’re good students,” she said modestly. “I don’t want to work at the shipyard, like most of my family does. I want to open a nightclub!” she said enthusiastically.

“My, that sounds exciting, dear,” Susan told her. “What kind of nightclub?”

“Oh, the best kind!” she said, getting very animated. “It’ll have three floors. I’ll have dance floors on two of them, and the top floor will have a restaurant, bar, and a lounge. I’ll have different styles of music on each floor, and the first floor will have a stage big enough for popular bands to play to large audiences! The second floor will have a *huge* bar on one wall, and a big dance floor, with a stage for bands or a deejay with a glass floor that has lights in it.”

“You’ve put a lot of thought into it,” Susan said with an approving nod.

“It’s been my dream since I was sixteen,” she said. “And since I don’t matter, nobody cares if I do it.”

“What do you mean, don’t matter, dear?” Hannah asked.

“I’m the second of three, and I’m a girl,” she said simply. “Boys follow in the family footsteps in our family, Hannah,” she explained. “Victor, our cousin that came with us, he’s an example. He’s dumb as a stone, selfish, and whiny, but he’ll be a vice-president somewhere in the shipyard when he graduates from Harvard, probably for some unimportant division, what they

call a graveyard department. Where they put the stupid people,” she explained. “If he even works. He doesn’t *have* to, but the boys are expected to work. Not like they do much, really. Cousin Vil, Uncle Zach, Uncle Jake, and my dad are the only ones that really do important work at the shipyard. Uncle Zach and Uncle Jake are on the board, and my dad works in the Navy liaison office as one of the main foxes who deals with the Navy about our ship contracts.”

“What does your cousin Vil do?” Susan asked.

“That’s Vilenne, Sue,” Hannah said.

“She runs the company, Miss Susan,” Muffy said, a bit proudly. “The first female CEO of Vulpan Shipyards!”

“What do the other femmes in your family do?”

“Get married and have kids,” she answered. “Work if they want to, but they’re never put in any important jobs. If I worked at the shipyard, my uncles would make sure I was the vice president of the south drydock mail room or something. They think girls can’t do male work, not even Vil. That causes a lot of problems. They keep trying to take away her power in the company, but she keeps them all on a tight leash, and that drives them nuts. My family’s still in the stone age, Miss Susan. Girls aren’t supposed to do anything important. It was a major shake-up in the family when Vil became the CEO, but Kit kinda made that necessary. *He* was supposed to be the new CEO, but he didn’t want it. When he left the family, the only kid Uncle Lucas had left was Vil. He either had to have Vil replace him, or give up his chair to one of the other uncles.”

“Which he’d never have done,” Kit added. “Dad was all about power, and he wouldn’t give up any of it. He wanted *his* family to keep control of

the shipyards, so he broke three generations of tradition and named his daughter to succeed him after I was disowned. The rest of the family wanted Uncle Zach to take his place, because they didn't want a femme to control the company."

"My, your family sounds..."

"Bigoted. You can say it, it won't offend us," Kit told her evenly.

Muffy laughed and nodded. "So, instead of going through all that, I want to open a nightclub. I love to go to clubs, and opening my own club will give me the chance to make what I've always dreamed of in the perfect nightclub." She shrugged. "But I don't even have to do that. We all have trust funds, Miss Susan. I never have to work a day in my life if I don't want to. My weekly allowance from my fund is more than enough to live the lifestyle a Vulpan is accustomed to, and still let me go out and party every night. Some of my cousins, like Bridgette and Bess and Lynn, they've never worked a day in their lives, and they've all been out of college for years."

"Idle paws are dangerous paws," Susan said calmly.

"Yeah, I guess they are," Muffy giggled.

After Hannah bought a few CDs at the music store, they found themselves with about an hour to kill. "Let's go ice skating!" Muffy urged as they walked back towards the rink. "Now that I can, anyway!" she added with a laugh.

"Sure, let's go put all these in the truck, and I'll skate with you," Kit told her.

They put all their bags in his Pathfinder and then they went to the skating rink. She rented figure skates, and he first asked for hockey skates, but Muffy talked him into figure skates. Hockey skates allowed a fur to be more agile than figure skates, tighter turns and more control, as well as faster skating, but figure skates let a fur do some other things like spins. She stowed her purse in a coin-op locker, then darted out onto the ice. Muffy had taken skating lessons, and she was *damn* good, floating on the ice like an earthbound angel. The others on the ice, most of them novices or worse, stopped and watched the willowy vixen whiz by them, turn sharply, turn around and skate backwards, then curl up in the middle of the rink and perform a spin that lasted nearly a minute, starting off slowly and ending so fast her tail kept trying to stick straight out. A few furs watching from the rails over the rink actually applauded, which made Muffy laugh and give a little curtsy in reply.

“You still skate I see,” Kit noted as he skated up to her.

“Every week,” she nodded, holding her paw out. “Let’s do some laps!”

They weren’t by themselves long. Sheila appeared on the ice about five minutes later, weaving between some kids who were floundering near the entryway and whizzing by them, then turning and skating backwards in front of them and slowing down so they could catch up. “You guys finish?” she asked.

“Yeah, we’re done,” Muffy answered. “How about you?”

“We finished too,” she nodded. “I was with Jessie and her grandmother. Damn, that old lady’s a riot,” she laughed. “Uh oh, someone’s coming to challenge our superiority on the ice,” she grinned, looking back to the entryway. Kit looked, and saw Jessie coming out onto the ice. She

was about the same as most of the others in the rink, but to him, she looked beautiful and graceful, even as she staggered towards them before remembering how it worked and settling into a more easy and graceful stride. Ben and Jenny came out just behind her, along with a couple of the young children that the Williams clan had brought to the wedding. Ben looked like he'd never been on ice skates before, but Jenny zoomed right by her sister with ridiculous ease. Jenny knew how to ice skate.

It seemed quite the surprise to Jessie. "Hey, where did you learn that!" she demanded as Jenny negotiated the turn easily.

"They got a rink right by the campus at school!" she called across the ice as she went by on the other side.

"Well, *someone* in their family is civilized," Muffy said, which made Sheila burst into laughter.

"Well, excuse me while I give someone a private lesson," Sheila said with a leering grin, looking at Ben floundering at the rail. "If I'm lucky, I can grab his butt."

"Be nice!" Kit called as she skated across the rink to him. He and Muffy came around and picked up Jessie from behind, and they skated backwards in front of her as she tried to look as graceful as her younger sister. "Hey, pretty kitty," he said, "doing okay?"

"I need to learn how to do this," she said competitively as Jenny blew her a kiss teasingly as she skated by.

"You're talking to the right foxes," Muffy grinned. "If there's anything any Vulpan can do, it's ice skate!"

“Kit’s told me that before,” Jessie laughed. “You make it look so easy!”

“It is easy if you do it enough,” Muffy answered her calmly, taking her paws, pulling her ahead, then getting behind her and putting her paws on Jessie’s waist. “Okay, feel my paws? I’ll put pressure on you, up or down, just follow by putting your weight on that side. You’re moving your feet the right way, but you just need to get a sense of balance. And don’t fight the skates, hon. Figure skates are flat on the bottom, remember that. You’re going to go in one direction until you push an edge into the ice to alter your direction. You can literally skate sideways if you do it right, because they have no edges to catch on anything and things move in a straight line on the ice. You’re going to have a little play, hon, they’re not hockey skates that bite into the ice all the time, or roller skates that change your direction with the tiniest shift in your weight. I notice you try to correct every time your feet move sideways. You don’t have to do that, just slide your feet back the way you want to go and use the edges of your skates to gently turn you back in the direction you want to go. Now follow my paws. Left...and right... and left...and right...” she urged, helping Jessie get a feel for the way it felt to skate comfortably.

Jenny zipped up to his side and slowed to his speed as Jessie started going faster and faster under Muffy’s professional tutelage, at least until they reached the turn. Muffy had to teach her how to make a turn skating at anything faster than a crawl. “Wow, your cousins are pretty good,” Jenny told him as she looked to Sheila, who had Ben by the paws and was coaxing him out onto the center of the ice.

“It’s cold in Boston, Jenny, so ice skating is popular. You’re not bad yourself.”

“Eh, the rink was a cheap way to have fun,” she shrugged. “I used to skate every weekend, cause it kept me out of the clubs and it was decent exercise.” She slapped him on the shoulder. “Let’s see what you’ve got, you pansy! Real males don’t wear figure skates!”

“Brave words, femme,” Kit teased.

“The Bruins should wear figure skates, at least then they’d look pretty while they lose!”

“Hey, them’s fightin’ words, you infidel!” Sheila shouted, pointing at Jenny threateningly. “Don’t you rag on our Bruins! We’ll kick yer butt!”

“Go Blackhawks!” Jenny shouted, pumping her fist in the air. “The ‘Ruins suck!”

“I’m sorry, but we have to kill you now,” Muffy told her, letting go of Jessie and moving to cut Jenny off.

What happened next almost got them thrown out of the mall. Jenny tried to evade both Sheila and Muffy, but she was in no way prepared to out-skate those two. Jenny was good, but she was nowhere near as good as Muffy. Jenny knocked a few other skaters down, and a few others fell down out of terror when Muffy and Sheila whizzed by them and weaved through them, until the two of them had Jenny cornered at the far end of the rink. Muffy caught her and dragged her to the center of the ice, where Sheila spanked her with her paw as Jessie’s sister laughed almost uncontrollably. “Who’s the best team in hockey?” Sheila demanded before every strike, and when Jenny didn’t answer, Sheila whacked her on the rump. A rink employee scrambled out onto the ice on his sneakers and broke it up, gave the three of them the rough side of his tongue, then threatened to have them kicked out if they didn’t behave themselves.

Jessie came up and stopped by Kit, and she laughed when the wiry bobcat femme lambasted the three of them, pointing her finger in each of their faces and read them the riot act. “Do your cousins even know who the Bruins are?” she asked Kit.

“Oh, yes,” he chuckled in reply. “Jess, love, hockey is *huge* in New England. They know their hockey. Any native Bostonian who doesn’t know who Bobby Orr is would be lynched.” He put his arm around her. “The Vulpans own a luxury box at the garden, I’m sure they’ve been to games. Actually, I know Sheila has. I remember going to game once with her and a few cousins and Aunt Sarah,” he recalled as the bobcat stalked off the ice, leaving a few of the Williams kids to giggle at the chastised trio.

They were pulled off the ice not long after that, because it was about time for the gathering at the Double J.

It was a quick affair to move the truck to the steakhouse, and he saw two limos already sitting at the back of the lot and quite a few rental cars parked out front, as well as several cars he recognized. Lupe’s pickup was there, and all the gang’s cars were here, as well as Sandy’s Festiva and Kevin’s Acura. Kit helped Jessie out of the passenger side as Sheila and Muffy started for the front door. She looked back into the cargo area and laughed. “Look at all that,” she said, motioning at all the gifts. “How much did you buy?”

“A few of those bags are ours,” he said, taking her paw. “Now let’s go eat, I’m starving.”

The steakhouse was jumping. Fully half of the dining room had been reserved for the party, and most of it was occupied. There was quite a bit of applause when Jessie and Kit became noticed, and they were herded to the

table where Vil, Clancy, Sarah, and Brian were sitting. "Save room for Jessie's parents," Vil warned when Sheila and Muffy looked to join them. Sheila stuck her tongue out at Vil, then the two of them moved to sit with Ben and Jenny as they looked for a place.

Kit looked around, and noticed someone missing. "Where's Victor?"

"On a plane back to Boston," Vil answered. "The little punk threw a tantrum when I told him he wasn't going to the ceremony, so I sent him packing."

Jessie laughed, and Kit gave Vil a curious look. "Any trouble?"

"Just the usual 'my mom will fix you' crap," she answered, which made Brian chuckle. "He didn't want to get on the plane until I had Stav take him by the ear and drag him in."

"That might have been going a touch too far, Vilenne," Sarah noted. "You know how Maxine coddles him. She'll be upset with you."

"Let her," Vil shrugged.

Amanda, the German shepherd waitress with whom he used to work, hurried up. "Kit! It's great to see you!" she smiled. "How have you been?"

"Wonderful, Amanda. How's it been going here?"

"It got great when the Blimp quit," she grinned. "Our new night manager's really cool!"

"Well, that's great to hear."

"So, what can I get you?" she asked as John and Hannah took seats on the far side of Jessie. She took their orders, using up several pages of her

order pad, and then hurried off to get them started. “So how did your shopping go?” Vil asked John and Hannah.

“It went quite well,” Hannah answered. “At least after I had to take that young one, Muffy, in paw.”

“Muffy’s harmless,” Sarah noted. “Whatever did she do?”

“I had issue with her choice of dress,” Hannah said in a way that made Jessie giggle.

“I hope she didn’t cause you any problems. I’m her father, Misses Williams, if she did, just let me know.”

“Please, call me Hannah. Well, then perhaps you should be the one to keep a foot on her. That young vixen *doesn’t wear underwear*,” she said in a low tone, leaning over the table.

Brian laughed. “Oh, that? It’s what you can call one of her little quirks. She doesn’t cause any trouble with it. She’s been like that since she was a little girl. She says it rubs her fur off, and she’s always been a little obsessed over her fur. Her coat’s not as thick as most, so she’s compulsive about keeping it looking thick and healthy.”

“I’m surprised you don’t see such scandalous behavior as unusual, Mister Vulpan,” she noted.

“It’s not scandalous, and please call me Brian,” he smiled. “It’s just a quirk. She doesn’t run around naked, well at least not anymore,” he chuckled. “We had trouble keeping that one in her clothes when she was a child.”

“Yes, we had the same problem with Jenny, as I recall,” John agreed with a smile.

“Your youngest?”

“No, she’s our middle child.”

“So is Muffy. It must be some middle child thing,” Brian said absently.

Quite a few friends and members of the Williams clan came over to their table and talked with them for a while, introduced themselves to Kit, or were introduced to Vil, Sarah, and Brian. Kit wasn’t too happy to be sitting with them, but he kept his peace. He only had to put up with them until tomorrow, and then he could leave them behind forever. He didn’t directly speak to them, though.

There was no talking once the steaks arrived, though. Vil’s eyes lit up when she saw her huge porterhouse set before her, and rubbed her paws together eagerly. “You’re in for a treat,” she said. “This place serves the best steaks I’ve ever had. I’ve been looking forward to this,” she hummed, then picked up her knife and fork and got down to business.

“I’m impressed!” Sarah called after the first bite. “This is better than any steak I’ve had at home!”

“They really know how to make steaks here,” Jessie told her. “Grilling steaks is a Texas tradition. They take it seriously.”

“And to think, I’d never stop to eat here if I were alone,” Brian chuckled as he took another bite. “It just goes to show, I guess, that diamonds aren’t always cut and polished.”

They ate their dinners in happy silence, and after many of them were done, they began talking among themselves again, or moving to visit other tables. Lupe and Rick came over to their table, and Kit introduced them. “This is my friend Lupe and my boss, Rick,” Kit said.

“I’m surprised to see other members of Kit’s family here,” Rick said, shaking Brian’s paw.

“Well, a few of us would like to try to reconcile with him,” Brian said simply.

“Well, you can keep dreaming,” Kit told him bluntly.

“Kit, that’s rude,” Hannah said immediately.

“Sorry, but it’s how I feel,” he told her.

“We’ve got a room all ready for you, hon, and Martha’s almost as giddy as a schoolgirl over the idea of getting you ready tomorrow,” Rick chuckled. “We don’t have any daughters, only sons, so she’s getting to experience a wedding from the femme’s side this time, and she’s in heaven.”

Jessie laughed. “Did you give the directions to your house to my parents?”

“He did,” John told him. “We’ll be arriving early in the morning. You’ll have both Martha and your mother fussing over your dress.”

“That may not be a good thing,” Jessie said with a laugh.

“Oh hush, Jessica,” Hannah said with a slight smile. “Even if I object to this marriage in principal, at least I can enjoy the idea of helping my oldest put on her wedding dress.”

“We didn’t know you had reservations about this, Hannah,” Sarah said.

“They’re too young and haven’t known each other long enough,” she answered immediately. “But I’ve agreed to at least give them the benefit of the doubt and allow them to try to prove me wrong.”

“That only took a month,” Jessie grunted under her breath.

“I’ll make sure Kit don’t oversleep, brah,” Lupe grinned, patting him on the shoulders.

“Dude, I don’t have to be there until noon,” Kit protested.

“Yah, like you’ll sleep much past six,” Lupe grinned. “But I’ll make sure you’re ready to go.”

A lioness wearing a manager’s uniform approached their table. “Miss Vulpan,” she said, almost bowing, handing her a small clipboard.

“You’re sure everyone’s done, Miss Lewis?” Vil asked.

She bobbed her head. “I’m sure if someone orders something by now, we can just let it go,” she answered.

“You’re paying?” Kit asked curiously.

“Of course I am,” she said dismissively. She took a credit card from her small purse and put it on the clipboard, then handed it to her. “I’ll handle the tip with cash,” she added. “Could you have our servers come see me at once?”

“I’ll be right back with them, ma’am,” the lioness said, taking the card and clipboard and hurrying off.

“Your sister is very generous, Kit,” Rick said with a smile at her.

“I am where he’s concerned,” she grinned, pointing at Kit. “Did you send your projections for next year?”

“I’m not done with them yet.”

“Projections?” Kit asked curiously, looking up at his boss.

“I told you, Kit, I’ve *invested* in the magazine. All that equipment wasn’t free. Rick keeps me up to speed on the magazine’s business health. I watch over it the same way I do my other business investments.”

“But she doesn’t interfere,” Rick said quickly.

“Oh no, never that. So far, I’ve seen an increase in profits since I invested in the magazine, and that’s what I want to see. Soon, the magazine will be ready to expand.”

“I’ve been considering it,” Rick said. “Increasing our circulation, maybe taking on another new hire and expanding our pages per issue. We’re almost ready for it.”

“Well, I know you’ve been considering it. Hell, I’ll be first to admit that we needed Sheila. She took a lot of pressure off the office.”

“I’ll need to replace her soon, she’ll go back home after your stepmother leaves Boston, so I’ve talked to the journalism department at U.T. over offering internships for the students that gives them capstone credit.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Kit noted. “You get a free worker, and they get real experience.”

“There is one problem, though,” he grunted. “Our current office is going to be too small. I’m afraid we’ll have to move to a new office.”

“And get out of my closet? I’d love that,” Kit laughed.

“Be glad you have that closet,” Rick said. “You and Mike are the only ones with your own offices outside of me. The gang doesn’t begrudge you two for it, because of what you do, but still, be thankful.”

“You’re talking to the right vixen, Rick,” Vil said. “I’ll make some inquiries and see if I can’t find you new office space that gives you room to grow and won’t cost you an arm and a leg. My name might take a little off the rent.”

“I’ll miss our building,” Rick sighed. “We’ve been there since we started. But the rest of the building is completely full. I already talked to the building manager about expanding or moving to new offices there in the building, but there’s just nowhere for us to go.”

“Well, we’ll get you going, Rick,” Vil smiled. “You’re one of my investments. I have to make sure you remain profitable.”

“I’ll call you about it after the wedding.”

The manager returned with the three servers that had been working their tables. Vilenne stood up and complemented them on doing a good job, and gave each of them a hundred dollar tip. Amanda looked ready to faint, thanking Vil about twenty times a second and all but bowing as they were herded away by the lioness. “Well, it’s about that time,” Vil said. “Are you ready to go, baby bro?”

“I guess so. It’s going to be lonely at home without Jessie.”

“Well, I think we can manage one more night alone, cause after tomorrow, we’ll always be together,” she said teasingly, kissing him on the cheek.

Kit again saw that look of disapproval flash through Aunt Sarah’s expression, but she said nothing.

They began filing out of the steakhouse, and Kit pulled Jessie aside by Rick’s car after they put her overnight bag and the things she’d bought at

the mall she didn't want him to see in Rick's car. He held her close and kissed her lingeringly, then nuzzled her cheek. "This is it, Jessie," he breathed in her ear. "The next time we see each other, it'll be at the wedding."

"I can't wait," she whispered in his ear. "Tomorrow, you will be mine, Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan."

"I've been yours since the day we met, Jessica Desdemona Vulpan," he answered honestly.

"Well, you'll be *officially* mine," she giggled, kissing him on the nose playfully, then she pulled his left paw up between them. "There's going to be a little something on this finger," she winked.

"I can go put it on right now," he offered.

"Don't you dare!" she laughed. "No jinxing!" She kissed him one more time, lingeringly, longingly, then she let go of him and got in the back seat of the car as Rick and Martha approached. Martha gave him a little hug and assured him it would be over before he knew it, then he stepped back and watched Rick back out of the parking space. They all waved to him as they pulled out, and he waved back and watched them go. She was on her way, and their separation made it clear that they were truly in the home stretch. *By this time tomorrow, we'll be married and at the reception*, he thought to himself, and that thought only made him smile eagerly.

He couldn't wait.

A paw touched him on the shoulder. He looked and saw that it was Vil, sliding it up until she had her paw around his shoulders and back. "We're almost there, baby bro," she told him. "Just a little bit more."

“I can’t wait,” he said honestly. “Thanks, sis.”

“For what?”

“For everything. And especially for keeping your meddling where I can’t see it.”

She laughed. “I told you I don’t take no for an answer,” she grinned. “I’ve been dealing with Rick for a good couple of months now, and he naturally keeps it hidden from you. I don’t do anything outrageous,” she assured him. “He keeps me up to speed on what he’s up to, basically.”

“Did you meddle with Lupe?”

“Huh?”

“He got a loan to expand the complex.”

She laughed. “Nope, I had nothing to do with that. I didn’t even know about it. He got that all on his own. But, I’ll have to look into it and see if I can’t make it smoother for him,” she winked.

“Well, that makes me strangely proud of him,” Kit laughed.

“I’d rather see you in a house.”

“Vil, we’re *happy* there,” Kit told her. “We have friends there, and I don’t have to mow the lawn or fix anything.”

“You don’t have to do any of that if you just say the word.”

“And give up my independence? No,” he said simply.

“You always were a headstrong young man,” Clancy chuckled as the aged fox came up to them.

“Ah, gonna talk now, Clancy?” Kit teased.

“You know your aunt and uncle consider me to be the hired help, my boy,” he said simply. “Vil had an argument with them just seating me at their table.”

“I should have guessed,” he grunted.

“Now, I need to go see what kind of horrible conditions you’ve put yourself in, Kitstrom. Take me to your apartment. We can sit down and talk and help while away the time until your wedding.”

“I’d love to,” he said. “Mind riding with me, Clancy?”

“It would be my pleasure.”

“I’ll be along in a bit,” Vil told them. “I can’t miss out on a little family reunion. There’s a few furs I want to talk to first.”

“Just don’t invite Sarah and Brian,” Kit warned. “I don’t want them anywhere near me.”

“I won’t,” Vil nodded.

Kit brought Clancy to his home, and after he inspected their apartment with a disdainful sniff, they sat down for tea. They talked of old times, happier times, and then Clancy told him what it was like in the manor now that everyone was gone from it. “It’s been taken over by your uncle Zachary,” he sighed. “Vil lives in her home in Chelmsford, and since it’s still owned by your family, there’s no one there for me to serve, as Zachary keeps his own staff in the west wing. There’s little he can do to us really, since the manor is still owned by *your* family. He’s brought in his staff to take care of the manor, but we are still charged with the upkeep of the east

wing, so he leaves us to our amusements. So we keep your old apartments clean and the manor hosts some Vulpan family events, such as your cousin Travis' wedding in September. But the staff and I have little to do, really. We keep it clean and wait for Vil to decide when she will evict your uncle from your ancestral home."

"I'm surprised she hasn't done it already."

"Zachary wants to force Vilenne out of her position of power in the family, so he fights her in court over Stonebrook. He wants possession of it. As you know, whoever lives within Stonebrook has always been considered the head of the family, so Zachary tries to hold the manor for the status it gives. Vilenne prefers her home in Chelmsford because it is to her tastes, but she will not give the manor to him."

"Typical for the family," he sighed. "I'm glad I left it sometimes."

"Well, for one, I miss you, my boy," Clancy told him with a smile. "You certainly made life interesting around the manor."

"I missed you too, Clancy. You, Vil and Suzy were really the only friends I had. I wonder why she didn't sit with us."

"My boy, Suzy has had a crush on you since you were kids," Clancy told him. "The news that you were getting married was a mixed blessing to her. She's happy you've found happiness, but even now, she laments that *she* wasn't the one who captured your heart." He patted Kit's paw. "She's giving you space, my boy, both for you and for her."

"I didn't know she felt that way. She should have said something!"

"My boy, you forget," he sighed. "Your father would have had no qualms over destroying *her* family if she took up with you. That's why she

always operated in secrecy, helping you while keeping it hidden. She had to keep her distance from you to protect her own family. But don't regret it too much, Kitstrom. Suzy is dating a wonderful fox that takes good care of her, and I think she'll be happy with him. She's just regretting the past rather than looking forward to the future."

"Well, I wish she would have said something. I knew she liked me, and we did have a—you know. A little fling. But she never hinted that she thought more of it than that."

"Before you begin to doubt, Kitstrom, answer yourself this. Are you unhappy at all you ended up with your cat than with Suzy?"

"Hell no!" he said immediately and adamantly. "Jessie is my life, Clancy! She's the femme I was put on this earth to marry!"

"Then don't worry a bit about Suzy. She is still your friend, and she always will be. She doesn't blame you, and she won't hate you. Just be her friend, my boy. You were fast friends before, you still can be."

"I—yeah, you're right. I love Suzy like a friend, and if I can, I'd like to be her friend again."

"You never were anything but her friend, Kitstrom. That never changed."

"Yeah. I do need to talk to her, though."

"That would be a good thing."

The doorbell rang, and Kit had to put a paw on Clancy's arm to keep him from going to answer it. "You're a *guest* here, Clancy," Kit chuckled. "It's open!" he shouted.

“Sorry, my boy, an old habit,” he chuckled.

Vil appeared in the doorway, along with Suzy, Sheila, and Muffy. They came in, and Kit stood up and greeted them. “Please, come in, I have some tea on,” he said.

“I hope it’s good tea,” Suzy grinned.

“As good as you’ll find for a poor fox in Texas,” he answered.

“It’s not bad. Not what I would expect, but not bad,” Clancy noted, taking another sip.

“Wow, it’s been *years* since I’ve seen some of these faces,” Suzy laughed, looking at Sheila and Kit. “And even long for others. When was the last time we saw each other, Muffy?”

“Seven or eight years,” she answered. “I think we only met once, at a party at Stonebrook. It was Vil’s eighteenth birthday. You still in school?”

“Me? No, I work at Yankee Bytes now,” she answered. “I’m the vice president in control over the stores in Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire.”

“Nice, that’s a lot of work.”

“Yeah, I know how Vil feels sometimes,” she laughed. “It’s pretty tough, but it’s rewarding. Dad’s been slowly pulling back and letting us kids run things. I think he wants to retire soon and enjoy the wealth he built up. Can’t blame him, really. I think he’s had all of one week off since he started the chain. He wanted to be here for the wedding, but he couldn’t make it. He’s negotiating to expand the franchise west.”

“Nice. Where?”

“Western Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, West Virginia maybe. He doesn’t want to expand anywhere he has to change the store’s name,” she giggled. “Yankee is a slur in some places.”

“It is down here,” Kit chuckled.

“So, you’re marrying a cat, Kit,” Suzy said with a grin at him. “Did you pick her on purpose to piss off your family, or was it something you kinda stumbled into?”

Kit laughed. “It wasn’t deliberate.”

“Jessie’s an absolute doll, Suzy,” Vil told her. “Sweet, kind, a little shy, but once you get past her shell, she’s totally charming and lovable. Sometimes I think she’s way too good for a fox like my brother.”

“I’d have to agree with you sometimes,” Kit agreed.

“And to think, I missed my chance,” Suzy sighed, a little self-mockingly.

“Nah, I think you’d never have worked out, Suzy,” Vil told her seriously.

“It would have been nice to try,” Suzy said, giving Kit a coquettish look.

“Well, I’m sure Corey would object,” Vil grinned.

“Corey? Who’s that?” Muffy asked.

“Corey Reeves,” Sheila told her. “You know, the Reeves! Cape Cod Shipping?”

“Oh! Them! I’ve never heard of Corey,” she complained.

“He’s one of their cousins,” Suzy said. “He’s from California, not Nantucket. I met him at a mixer on Nantucket two years ago.”

“What does he do?”

“He’s a filmmaker,” she answered. “He hasn’t hit it big yet, but he has done some work on a few projects that got some attention at the Sundance Festival.” She laughed. “He directed a commercial for the shipping company that seemed to go over well. You know, the one with the bicycle that went a thousand miles an hour?”

Muffy gave her a look, then burst out laughing. “Oh, that commercial was *hilarious*! He did that?”

“He did,” she said proudly.

“I remember that commercial. Indeed, it was very funny,” Clancy chuckled in agreement.

“I guess we’d never see it down here,” Kit noted.

“Oh, it was great!” Muffy exclaimed. “It shows this guy on a bicycle going a thousand miles an hour, riding over the ocean while some narrator talks about overseas shipping and how you can do it cheap, then the bicycle comes up on the coast and rams a lighthouse!” All of them started to laugh. “And there’s this big hole shaped like a fox and a bicycle, while this old fox that was inside looks through it with this all confused expression on his face, then he looks back and sees the guy and his bicycle pasted on the other wall, flat as a board!”

“Then the narrator says over that, ‘save a lighthouse, go with Cape Cod Shipping’,” Vil laughed. “It was a very good commercial. I might have to

talk to him to make a couple of shipyard commercials, put something fresh in it.”

“He’d probably go for it, Vil,” she told him.

“He’s a great guy,” Vil noted.

“Yeah, he’s a sweetie. But you always were my first love, Kit,” she admitted, reaching out and putting her paw on his arm. “I had the biggest crush on you when we were kids.”

“Yeah, we heard about that,” Sheila grinned. “We heard you’re the one that took his virginity.”

Suzy’s cheeks ruffled. “Well, I think we did do something like that back when we were kids,” she said with a naughty little smile, patting his arm fondly.

“So, was he any good?”

“That’s something you’ll never know, Sheila,” Suzy teased.

“And something you’d be wise to drop, so long as I have your mother’s number,” Clancy added, which made everyone but Sheila burst into laughter.

It was a good time. They talked for hours, well past sunset, drinking tea and talking of old times, and giving Suzy a chance to get familiar with Sheila and Muffy. No subject was left untouched, which surprised Kit, as they talked about his father and the fights between him and both his children, Kit’s leaving, and then him getting hit. “I carried *so* many messages to the hospital,” Suzy laughed. “I felt like a mailfur.”

“Suzy was my most frequent visitor,” Kit told his cousins. “Since Vil and Clancy couldn’t visit often or Dad would find out about it.”

“There wasn’t much to do for the first couple of months, cause Kit was always stoned out on the painkillers,” she sighed, holding the back of his paw as she remembered. “But after he got coherent again, it was nice to talk to him. I’d deliver Vil and Clancy’s messages, then take messages back for them.” Suzy turned his arm over to expose the white scars on his forearm, touching them with her finger. “Did they ever explain why these turned white?”

“Not really. They think the ones on my back were a reaction to the cauterizing scalpel they used. The only guess I heard that might make sense is that this was friction burns from sliding over the pavement after it hit me. It took some meat off my arm, and of course, it did this,” he said, pointing at his half-missing ear and the white streak in his hair just by his ear. “For some reason, Jessie’s totally fascinated by the scars on my back. She’s always touching them.”

“Compassion,” Vil told him. “The same reason Suzy’s tracing the scars on your forearm right now.”

Suzy gave a cough and quickly let go of his arm, which made Sheila and Muffy laugh.

While the girls continued to talk, Kit and Suzy took a walk in the courtyard, under the guise of showing it around to her. They walked in silence for a few minutes, then she took his paw. “I’m sorry if I embarrassed you, Kit,” she told him. “But I’ve always wanted to tell you that.”

“No, it’s alright. I just wish I would have known sooner.”

“Second thoughts?”

“Oh, hell no,” he chuckled. “But I think it would have been fair to give you the same chance Jessie had.”

“Aww, you’re sweet,” she said, kissing him on the cheek fondly. “Do you love her?”

“With all my heart,” he answered immediately.

“I’m glad to hear that. I really like Corey, Kit. I think there’s a chance there for love. He’s a wonderful boy, kind and caring, and right now it’s a long distance relationship while he’s shooting a movie in Mexico, but he does love me. So don’t you worry about me.”

“Do you love him?”

“I think I’m almost there,” she answered honestly. “I think about him all the time, and I miss him terribly. What is Jessie like?”

“Pretty much how Vil described,” he answered as they came around the corner, towards the back side of the complex where Sheila and Dan lived. “She’s very kind and sweet, and she’s also very shy and modest. She’s from a traditional family, so she’s a little old-fashioned in some regards, but she’s very strong, Suzy. She has steel in her, and even though she’s shy, I’ve seen her stand up when she felt it was necessary. She shouted down Aunt Sarah,” he said with pride in his voice.

“That take some guts alright,” Suzy laughed. “So, you’re marrying a prude?”

“She’s no prude in private,” Kit chuckled, nudging her. “And she’s loosening up a little. Sheila’s been working on her.”

“Oh my!” Suzy laughed. “Do they get along?”

“Amazingly, yes. Jessie thinks of Sheila as a little lost puppy she needs to nurture. Sheila loves Jessie, says she’s a lot of fun and she’s a wonderful friend. She is, too. She’ll give you the last dime in her pocket if you need it. She has a big heart.”

“She has big boobs too,” Suzy noted clinically. “Bigger than mine.”

Kit laughed. “Those are just an added bonus,” he grinned. “She’s fun to tease. I get into a lot of trouble doing that,” he said slyly. “Her weapon of choice is a pillow, and she’s deadly with it.”

“You like being a tease,” she grinned.

“Yeah, guess I am,” he noted. “I used to tease you enough.”

“It was fun though,” she said with a smile. “Kit?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you miss *us*?”

“Of course I do,” he told her. “You were my first girlfriend, Suzy. You were my first lover, too. I still get excited at the thought of leather sofas, thanks to you.”

Suzy laughed, leaning against him.

“But, even though it’s the past, and I’m about to get married, and you have a boyfriend, I’d still like to be your friend. I want to send you stupid birthday cards, and come hang out with you when I’m in the neighborhood when I’m at Boston, and I’d like you to get to know Jessie and hopefully come to love her as much as you love me. Now that it looks like the sword of Damocles that my family put over my head is being removed, I’d like to

invite you back into my life, Suzy...just in a new role, that's all. If you don't mind just being friends."

"Just friends is fine with me, Kit," she told him as they turned back towards his apartment. "It's just fine with me."

Chapter 17

It was the first day of the rest of his life.

This was it. *The* day. The day that would change his life—for the better, as far as he was concerned. He hadn't woken up on the day he was disowned, or the day he was hit by the car with the same feeling of the inevitability of change, but then again, had he known what was coming on those days, he'd never have gotten out of bed. Today, he would be married. Today, he would stand at an altar and before God and recite irrevocable vows binding himself to the femme he loved, taking her to be his wife.

It was strange, really. Jessie and Kit were already virtually married. They lived together, and shared their lives with each other completely. They were completely entwined with each other, from sharing a bed to sharing bank accounts, living as married couples lived and having done so for nearly two months. A marriage between them was almost a *technicality*, and yet Kit was looking forward to it more than he'd ever looked forward to anything in his life.

It was the officiality of it, he guessed. They'd be *moral*, as Jessie jokingly put it the day before, living the way society expected them to live. They'd be publicly declaring their commitment to each other, standing up and telling the world that they had chosen to be together, to be a family rather than a pair. Jessie wouldn't be his girlfriend, she'd be his wife.

Wife. Just thinking about that sent a thrill through him. Jessie would be his *wife*. She would be giving him the one thing she could give him that she

hadn't given him already, a family. It would be just her to start off, but with luck and God's favor, they'd have babies to increase their family. Both sides of their family seemed prodigious when it came to kids, so it was a good sign. Kit hoped they had lots of kids, and Jessie wanted to be pregnant already, so she shared his desire for children.

He looked at his clock. 5:27am. He rose up a little and looked at Jessie's clock, on the other side of the bed on her nightstand. 5:32am. Jessie liked to set her clocks a couple minutes fast to motivate her to get out of bed without being late, because when she just woke up she didn't remember that the clock was fast. He laid back and felt how empty the bed was, how hard it had been to sleep without her there with him. He kept reaching out for her in his sleep, and when his paw found nothing but empty bed, it woke him up.

There was no reason to even *try* to go back to sleep. He knew it would be absolutely impossible. He got up, sitting on the edge of the bed for a moment as he shook off the last of the grogginess, then stood up and stretched. His back popped loudly, and he almost expected Jessie to give a squeal at that sound; it always creeped her out. He also almost expected a teasing complement of his butt or hear her slide across the bed and put her paw on him as she loved to do in the morning. Jessie was a very tactile femme, almost needing to touch and be touched.

But there were none, because she wasn't here. She was at Rick and Martha's, and he'd bet that she was already awake and getting down to the business of getting ready.

Kit needed to as well.

He attended that business. He wandered sleepily into the kitchen and started the teapot, turned on the radio to listen to the news, then wandered back to the bedroom. After checking for the thousandth time to make sure the rings were still sitting on the dresser, he put on a robe, went back out, turned off the alarm, and picked up the newspaper off the porch. He sat down and tried to relax with a cup of tea and the newspaper, but it was almost impossible. All he could do was wish it was time to go already, and he had over six hours to go!

It startled him when the phone rang. He had to go back to the bedroom to get it, and saw that it was Jessie's phone calling him. It could be Jessie, or someone in the house. "Hello?"

"Today you will be mine," came Jessie's playful voice.

"Isn't this bad luck?" he asked.

"Only if you *see* me before the ceremony," she giggled in reply. "Did you sleep?"

"Not much. You?"

"A little," she answered. "I was too excited to sleep."

"I just couldn't sleep without you here," he sighed.

"What, you're not happy to marry me?" she asked archly, then she laughed before he could reply. "I'm about to take a shower."

"Then why did you call me?" he asked.

"Because I wanted to talk to you, silly," she laughed. "Do I need a reason to want to talk to my husband?"

"Aaat, you can't call me that yet," he teased.

“Forget the rules,” she giggled. “I’m exercising my option to just go ahead and call you that. It’s a guarantee, after all. There’s no way you’re getting away from me now,” she said in a purring voice. “Because everyone’s here, it’s the day of our wedding, and they’ll drag you to the altar if you try to back out.”

“You make it sound like I’m against the idea,” he challenged.

“You’re a *boy*,” she said simply. “You were getting it all without marrying me, you know, a cook and a housekeeper and a sex kitten. Never know, you mighta decided you liked not paying for it and tried to run at the last second.”

Kit laughed. She tried to sound all serious, but she just couldn’t do it.

“Someday you’ll learn how to lie,” he teased.

“God, I hope not,” she giggled. Kit heard a muffled voice in the background. “Mom, stop being a silly goose. I’m in my own bedroom!” she said away from the phone. “Mom just walked in,” she told him. “I’m sitting at this antique makeup table, and I’m not wearing anything,” she said in a husky voice.

“I’ve created a monster,” he teased with a laugh.

“It *is* your fault. I never slept without clothes until I moved in with you, now I can’t stand even wearing panties when I go to bed,” she laughed. “No, I’m not teasing him, Mom. It *is* his fault, isn’t it?”

Kit laughed.

“Well, Mom’s already eyeing the dress, so I think I’m in for four hours of fitting,” she sighed. She was silent a moment, then laughed. “No, a light

breakfast, then two hours of meticulous preparation, then two hours of putting on my dress, then we go,” she recited as Hannah’s voice droned in the background, then she giggled. “She said I have to be absolutely perfect, and so do you. So she says get in the shower and spend at least an hour combing your fur before getting dressed for the wedding.” She laughed again. “She said if you fail her inspection, she won’t let you marry me.”

“Oh dear, sounds like I’d better start getting ready,” he said dryly. “Maybe I’ll go get my fur shaved off, that way I don’t have to worry about how it looks.”

Jessie almost dropped the phone as he heard her laughing. “If you do that, *I* won’t let you marry me,” she retorted. “He said he’s going to have his fur shaved off so he doesn’t have to comb it,” she told her mother. Then she laughed again. “Mom says it’ll be an improvement.”

“Tell her I’ll give her an improvement at the reception,” he said with a chuckle. “But I’ll leave you to your mother’s tender mercy. Such as it is. I sense a long bath in your future, along with two hours of combing fur,” he teased.

“I don’t mind. I want to be beautiful today,” she purred to him.

“I keep telling you, if you want to look beautiful to me, go naked.”

She laughed. “I want to look beautiful to *more* than just you,” she corrected.

“I think all the males would side with me.”

“Well, they can go home and cry,” she said tauntingly, then he heard a scraping sound.

“That’s about enough, Kit. She’s still my daughter until one o’clock, so I’m taking her from you now,” Hannah told him.

“Make her pretty, Hannah,” Kit told her.

“Even if I have to get plaster and spray paint,” she said, which made Kit break down in helpless laughter as she hung the phone up.

He chuckled as he put the phone on the table, then went back to his paper to try to calm down and forget the magnitude of the day...if only because he had so long to wait before it started getting important.

He wasn’t left alone long, though. Sheila came over about half an hour after Jessie called and talked him into going to the Y with her. They played racquetball for about an hour as she kept teasing him over the impending wedding, until he intentionally whacked her with a racquetball after a serve. But, the exercise did give him something to do, and it was good to banter with his cousin while doing it. When they got home, it was almost nine, and that was close enough, at least to him, to start getting ready. He took a very long, thorough shower, and after getting out and drying off, he did more or less as Hannah ordered and sat down with a comb. But he forgot to lock the door, and Sheila was ever one to impose if she found the door unlocked. “Woo, sexy,” she teased as she came to the bedroom door and saw him sitting on the bed. She was dressed in a little satin red dress that had a very short skirt and managed to show off her cleavage, along with a rather saucy little hat that had a fluff of red lace around its fringe. “Want some help?”

“Help with what?”

“With what you can’t reach, goof,” she teased, coming over and quite deliberately pushing him onto his stomach on the bed. He felt a little weird laying there as Sheila began pulling the comb through the fur on his

shoulders, but she wasn't doing or saying anything strange, so he let it go. He did jump a bit when she dared to comb the fur on his backside and the base of his tail, but she moved on to his tail, pulling the comb through the thick fur on his tail slowly but thoroughly, teasing every strand of fur into perfect position, even teasing the black tip just over the white band before licking her fingers and pressing it to a perfect point. "There, now that's a gorgeous tail," she said critically, pushing it aside before pulling the comb through the fur on the back of his leg.

"Kit! Brah, you here?" Lupe shouted from the front door.

"We're in the bedroom!" Sheila shouted in reply, and put a paw on the small of his back when he moved to get up. "I'm not done with you yet," she told him.

"But—"

"Yo, brah, I didn't know you were kissing cousins!" Lupe said with a laugh from the doorway. He was wearing a dark blue zoot suit-like suit of all things, but he looked *astounding*. The suit fit him perfectly, with its perfectly fitted pants, blue shirt and vest with a pocket watch chain stretched across the front, and long, knee-length jacket with suspenders and a wide red tie, and he looked amazingly dapper and suave in it. He completed his stylish look with a fedora tilted ever-so-slightly over his right eye. In a way, he looked like a throwback to the swing era, but he looked *very* nice. The style and look was perfect for him, and he looked more handsome than Kit ever believed a chihuahua could appear.

"Lupe, you look awesome!" Sheila told him honestly.

"Aww, thanks babe," he said modestly. "What are you doing to him anyway?"

“Combing his fur,” she said simply. “This is his wedding, brah, he’s gotta look his absolute best. That includes a full body comb.”

“Brah, your cousin is doing it,” Lupe chuckled.

“If I wasn’t a relative, he’d be spending too much time keeping my paws off his butt,” Sheila said simply, which made Lupe laugh. “That’s why he’s safe with me doing it.” Then, if only to tease him, she patted his bare backside fondly, which made Lupe explode into laughter.

“Sheila, get on with it,” Kit told her dryly.

“I’m just working up to where you turn over,” she said, blowing a kiss to him when he looked over his shoulder at her.

“Well, I was gonna see if you needed my help with anything, but you look good to go,” Lupe noted.

“I’m going to need a ride to the church.”

“You’re not riding in Lupe’s old truck,” Sheila said sternly. “You’re riding in *style*, cousin. You’re going in my Mustang!”

“I’m going to kick both your butts if you don’t clear out and let me finish getting ready,” he told them. “I can get the rest of it, Sheila. Thanks for the help.”

“He uses me then throws me away,” she sighed. “I’d better warn Jessie that she’s next.”

“You won’t say a thing like that around Hannah,” Kit said with dead seriousness in his voice. “That’s one of her major buttons, Sheila. Don’t *ever* even *joke* about something like that in front of her. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, sure, Kit. Why is she like that?”

“Because she thinks I’m going to lose interest in Jessie and leave her,” he answered honestly.

“That’s like impossible, brah,” Lupe chuckled.

“Tell that to an obsessive mother, Lupe,” Kit answered.

“Eh, true. Come on, babe, let’s go give Kit some space so he don’t dress to an audience.”

Kit combed his front himself, brushed his teeth, then meticulously dressed in the tuxedo Vil had made for him. It took him about half an hour to be dressed to his satisfaction, only leaving the spats that would go over the tops of his feet off. He’d put those on at the church. He carefully combed and styled his hair, a rare instance where he’d use hair spray. He then inspected himself in the mirror and found that he looked presentable.

He was straightening his tie when his phone rang. He picked it up and unfolded it after seeing that it was Vil. “Hey sis,” he said. “I’m getting ready now.”

“Good, cause I’m in the limo on my way to pick you up,” she answered. “Clancy and Suzy are with me, so you need to be presentable.”

“I’m done dressing,” he told her calmly. “Just making sure I did it right.”

“Clancy says he’ll make sure of that when he gets there,” Vil chuckled, then she hung up.

They got there about five minutes later. Clancy immediately took him to task for his terrible dressing of himself, then carted him to the bedroom

and helped him dress again, this time the way he was supposed to do it. He didn't really see much difference when he emerged from the bedroom about ten minutes later, but Kit had the feeling that Clancy had been looking forward to the idea of helping Kit don his tuxedo, and was going to do just that. Vil and Suzy whistled at him when Clancy brought him back out, Vil even making him turn around to look him over. "They did a good job on that tux," she noted. "And you remembered to comb your tail," she winked.

"Sheila did that, actually," he admitted.

"Well, you look very handsome, Kit," Suzy told him with a smile.

"She did a good job," Vil nodded. "Okay, where are the gifts you're taking to Cincinnati? I'll have them shipped up for you."

"In my truck still," he answered.

"Where are your suitcases?"

"In the bedroom."

"Everything packed?"

"I'm pretty sure. I have a carry-on bag for our necessities and cameras. I want to use them at the reception."

"Okay, you got the rings?"

"They're in the bedroom."

"Go get 'em, bro, I'll have Stav get your suitcases and we're on our way."

"Hold on, I need to give my keys to Lupe," he said. "He's going to watch over our cars and the apartment while we're away. He's gonna clear

out the fridge for us, which for him means he'll eat it all," he chuckled. "That's okay, though, it'd go to waste otherwise."

After Kit got the rings and dropped his keys off with Lupe, and Sheila objected to Vil taking Kit to the church which Vil dismissed scornfully, they were in Vil's limo and on the way. He felt...giddy. This was it. They were going to the church, and in about ninety minutes, the ceremony would begin.

He was so excited he could barely sit still.

They arrived at the church at 11:45am, an hour and fifteen minutes before the ceremony. Monsignor Duke was there, wearing his canonical attire, which Kit felt was sure to rile Jessie's parents a little bit. But he gave them a warm smile as they came into the church, and Kit had to stop and gape. The church was *unbelievable*! Flowers were absolutely everywhere, yellow and pink arrangements side by side with blue and lavender arrangements, and the entire area behind the altar was a literal wall of floral beauty. The pews were decorated with tiny bouquets and gentle yellow and soft blue ribbons, using their favorite colors. Yellow was Jessie's favorite color, and blue was his. A red carpet had been laid down the center aisle, and there were even floral curtains hanging off the balcony's railing at the back of the chapel. The walls had white and yellow wall floral arrangements, with tassels dangling from them, hanging under the stained glass windows, and there were huge wreaths of yellow roses flanking each side of the altar.

The decorations were *amazing*! The church was absolutely gorgeous!

"It's beautiful," Kit whispered as he looked around.

“Yes, they did a great job, didn’t they?” Vil said approvingly as she looked around. “Glad you didn’t get interested and it was a surprise?” she grinned.

“Actually, I am,” he said honestly.

“What company did this, Vil?” Suzy asked. “If Corey ever asks, I might contract them. They did a fantastic job!”

“It’s a local place,” Vil said. “But they had very high recommendations.”

“I dare say those accolades are well deserved,” Clancy said with an approving nod.

“Quite lovely, isn’t it?” the monsignor said happily. “They’ll grace our church for days and enrich it with their beauty and fragrance.”

The raccoons from Tricoon were already here, and the female of the three siblings was snapping quite a few photos of the arrangements while the church was still empty, as one of the males swept a very professional-looking camera about on his shoulder, panning through the church to capture it on film. The femme raccoon was wearing a very pretty dark gray satin dress with straps reaching from the bodice to her upper arms, but the dress looked comfortable and well suited for a femme that would be moving around a great deal. The male was wearing a black suit with a gray tie.

“Now, my son, you have to stay out of the front part of the church,” the monsignor said with a smile. “Miss Williams is already here, and is currently in the front antechamber dressing room being preened and prepared for the ceremony. She arrived about a half hour ago,” he informed them.

“I brought her here in the limo, then came to get you,” Vil grinned. “I already have *your* limo positioned, and it’s not gonna move til you get in it to go to the reception. I don’t want anyone trying to take its spot. I got you a nice white stretch, you’ll ride in style,” she chuckled.

“If you wish to sit down or rest, we have a nice waiting room right through that door there,” he said as he pointed to the door on the left side of the choral box behind the altar. “There’s also a restroom back there you can use, if necessary. I’m afraid until we start preparing for the ceremony, there’s little for you to do,” he smiled.

“Except be nervous,” Suzy laughed.

“I’m too excited to be nervous,” Kit snorted.

Kit was too keyed up to sit around and wait, so he spent most of the early time talking to Vil, Clancy, and Suzy. As they got closer and closer to the ceremony, however, friends and family began to show up, and Kit made a point to greet them and talk with them a few moments. A whole lot of strangers also showed up, people he didn’t know, who didn’t greet him as they came in. Kit had no idea who they are, but they were dressed to be here, so they had to be friends and relatives of the gang or Kevin or Lupe or the guys from the apartment complex. The place really began to fill up, nearly three quarters full, but Kit saw that everyone he knew was already here...almost. He hadn’t seen Mickey or Kevin yet, but they may have slipped in without Kit seeing them. Several strangers filed by as he greeted his cousin Muffy. Muffy seemed a bit confused when she arrived and didn’t find Kit and Jessie at the entry to the chapel to greet them, giving him a strange look when he took her paw near the back of the chapel. “What’s going on, did she back out or something?” she asked.

“It’s not a Catholic ceremony, cousin, she’s not going to come out into public until it starts,” he told her.

“Oh. I was expecting to greet you at the door,” she grinned.

“Nah, it’s a more protestant ceremony to appease her parents,” he told her. “I start the ceremony already at the altar and everything.”

“Ah, okay. Now I know what to expect,” she giggled. “I’m surprised the father agreed to do it in a Catholic church.”

“He was amenable to it, actually,” Kit told her.

“Can I go see her and say hi before we start?” she asked.

“I guess so, she’s back in the waiting room back there,” he said, pointing to the right side of the back of the church. “The only one not allowed to see her really is me,” he grinned.

He went through that again almost immediately with Sarah and Brian, with whom Muffy had driven to the church. “Where on earth is your bride?” Brian asked as Sarah looked a little happy. “And why aren’t you and the Monsignor at the door greeting the guests?”

“Jessie’s hiding,” he answered. “We’re not having a traditional Catholic ceremony because she and her parents aren’t Catholic, and her parents didn’t want a Catholic ceremony.”

“What? This is a *Catholic* church!” Sarah said in a scandalized tone.

“Yes, that’s the compromise we reached,” Kit told her calmly. “Catholic church, Catholic priest, but a Protestant-style ceremony. And before you say another word, the Monsignor fully agreed to do this for us.”

“Why I never!” she said gratingly.

“If you cause a scene, I’ll have Vil skin you, Aunt Sarah,” Kit warned in an ugly tone.

“No, I’ll hold my tongue, nephew,” she said, taking a cleansing breath. “I should not have made assumptions. Which side is your side?”

“The right, naturally,” he said.

“May we sit in the front row?” Brian asked, quite cordially.

Kit considered it for a moment, then sighed and nodded. “There won’t really be anyone in it anyway, but mind that I gave the photographer permission to sit there too when not taking pictures.”

“We’ll save her a spot between us and the children,” Brian nodded.

Rick arrived almost immediately afterward. Kit shook his paw, then fished the two black velvet boxes out of his pocket. “Here, these are your job,” he said with a grin.

“I remember the rehearsal, son,” he chuckled. “You ready?”

“I was ready a month ago. I just want this to be done.”

“Stagefright?”

“No, I just want to be married.”

Rick laughed. “Here’s hoping that feeling never fades, son.”

“Amen, Rick. Amen.”

Sandy and Sam came out from Jessie’s waiting room. Both of them were wearing lovely yellow satin dresses with a modest neckline, flared sleeves with actual goring in them, gored with brocade, and with lace floral designs flowing down the bodice and along the outside edges of the skirts.

Kit accepted a kiss on the cheek from each of them. “Hannah sent us out to see if all the participants are here yet,” Sam told him.

“You’re here, I’m here, Rick’s here, John’s here, all the altar people are here,” he replied. “We got, what?”

“Twenty minutes,” Sandy said, checking her watch. “Is the piano player here?”

“I, I’m not sure, I have no idea who that is,” Kit said, looking around.

“He’s here,” Rick said, pointing to a tall bear talking with the monsignor on the other side of the chapel.

“Then everyone’s here,” Sam noted as Kevin entered the chapel and hurried right over to them. He kissed Sam on the cheek.

“Sorry, I had a little problem at my apartment. I had a broken water pipe greet me this morning,” he grunted.

“On no! Is everything alright?”

“For me, yeah. It was behind my bathroom wall. The apartment downstairs got soaked though,” he sighed. “It ruptured early this morning and had to have been pouring water into their apartment for a good half hour before they realized it.”

“Ouch. So, plumbers are there?” Kit asked.

“As we speak,” he nodded. “They fixed the pipe just as I left, and were working to put the wall back in. But there was some damage downstairs, they’ll have to replace some wallboard and dry out the carpets down there.”

“Well, that’s good at least,” Kit said. “I’m just glad you could make it.”

“My lawfirm’s senior partners are here, and Sam invited me, so they’re not riding me for missing work today,” he laughed, pointing at some furs in the pews already. “You’d think that Austin bigwigs would miss something like this?”

“What do you mean?”

“Look there,” he said, pointing. Kit followed his gaze.

Sitting a few rows back from the front, on the groom’s side of the aisle, was a slender, handsome badger. He was Rick Perry, the *Governor of Texas*!

Kit gaped. “Nobody ever said he was coming!” he gasped.

“He probably wanted to keep it quiet,” Kevin chuckled. “When the memo was spread about the wedding at the firm, we were warned specifically not to make the wedding public knowledge, not to talk to the press about it. Orders straight from the Vulpan family, the memo said. No doubt your sister made it clear that anyone who came had better not make a media circus out of it, because of just who’s getting married. But *not* to show up would be a big snub to the Vulpan family, and you do *not* snub the Vulpans. Not even half a nation away from their power base, not when they have steel mills, coke plants, and other businesses operating in your state, you don’t.” He chuckled. “It hasn’t gone totally under the radar, though. There were two news trucks out in front of the church when I pulled up.”

“I never even thought of that,” Kit sighed.

“I’ll guarantee they won’t be allowed inside,” Kevin chuckled.

“I don’t remember seeing those names on the guest list.”

“Vilenne Vulpan invited our senior partners,” Kevin told him. “I’d guess she has her own guest list, and names like Governor Perry and Senator Hutchison are on it,” he noted, pointing towards the back of the chapel. A middle-aged femme ferret was walking down the aisle, wearing a sober gray dress and blazer. It was Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas. “I’ve seen a couple of state Senators and Congressman Lamar Smith in the pews too. We’re in Smith’s district,” he said when Sam and Sandy gave him curious looks.

Senator Hutchison came up to him and offered her hand. “Congratulations, Mister Vulpan,” she said in a stately voice. “I’m happy to be invited to your special occasion.”

Kit laughed ruefully. “I think you need to thank my sister for that, not me,” he admitted. “I had *no idea* you’d be here, Senator.”

“Well, I hope you won’t throw me out,” she said with a disarming smile.

Kit laughed. “No ma’am, we have plenty of room in the chapel for you.”

“It’s getting a little crowded in here, though,” she noted with a smile. “A few familiar faces to me.”

“They were stealth invited by my sister as well,” Kit chuckled.

“Well, I hope you don’t object to us being here,” she said with a compassionate look.

“No, not at all, not at all,” he assured her. “As long as you remember this is a *family* ceremony, not a public one.”

“Yes, Vilenne made that clear when she invited me,” she nodded. “This is a private affair. I didn’t even put my trip back to Texas on my schedule until yesterday, and didn’t disclose why,” she said with a knowing smile.

“Thank you for that discretion,” Kit said honestly. “Me and my bride are actually very private people. I just have bad luck when it comes to family, and she has the bad luck of being my bride.”

“She wouldn’t call it bad luck,” the Senator laughed. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll take a seat now. We’ll be starting soon, won’t we?”

“About ten minutes, ma’am,” Rick told her.

“Well, I’m nervous now,” Kit said with a laugh as the Senator went over and sat beside the Governor.

“I think I’ll have Barry ambush them on the way out as part of our article about your wedding,” Rick chuckled. “Oh, that reminds me, I need to go make sure Mike and Lilly got pictures of Jessie in her dress. Be back in a minute,” he said, hurrying off.

Sam and Sandy stayed with him for a moment and chatted until the Monsignor motioned to them. They came to him, and he put his paw on Kit’s shoulder. “It’s about time, my son,” he said. “I’ve sent an altar boy back to give Jessica the five minute warning. If you would, please take the seats behind the altar until it’s time to begin. Where’s Rick?”

“He went to go talk to Jessie real quick, father,” Sam told him. “Your messenger should run into him.”

Kit, Sam, and Sandy went and sat on the bench behind the altar, which seemed to quiet down the chapel...which was *packed*. There were still a few stragglers hurrying in and finding seats, but every pew was either

completely full or nearly full. Their wedding was playing to a full house! Rick joined them a moment later, sitting down by Kit, and he doublechecked that he had the rings in his pocket, they were set to hand out properly, and were clean and otherwise ready for use. Kit was almost unable to sit still, his tail writhing behind him, he was so excited and anxious to get started. They were almost there! He forced himself to calm down. *We're here, and I don't want to look like a spaz on the video and pictures*, he told himself. *Just calm down. We're here and it's happening. Just enjoy the moment.*

Two altar boys appeared at the back end of the chapel and took up positions at each side of the doors leading into the chapel. That was the signal that the bride was in position and ready to begin. Two more furs hurried in past the altar boys and quickly took seats at the very back of the chapel as the Monsignor approached the altar from the side and stepped up onto the dais, then motioned to those sitting behind it. That was their cue to get into position. Kit and Rick stood to the left side of the Monsignor, and Sam and Sandy stood a bit off to his right, leaving an open space for Jessie to stand by Kit's side before the priest. Two of Jessie's cousins appeared in the doorway at the end of the aisle, two adorable little femme kittens, gray-furred sisters who had been pressed into service to be flower girls in a last-minute change to the ceremony. They were holding little baskets in their paws, and they stood there in fidgety silence as they waited for the music to start. The femme raccoon snapped a few photos of the groom, best male, and bridesmaids before the ceremony began, all of them looking back down the aisle in expectation. Hannah appeared on the right side of the chapel and scurried down to the front row, then took her seat quickly on the left pew, leaving the spot immediately by the aisle open for her husband, who would take that seat after giving Jessie away.

The Monsignor nodded to his right, and the bear made a show of sitting down at the organ. The music began seconds later, and Kit felt a strange sense of relief, not nervousness, to know that the ceremony had now officially begun.

Almost every head in the church turned and looked back as the bridal march began, and Jessie didn't disappoint. She appeared from the side and stopped at the doorway for a moment as the femme raccoon and quite a few others took pictures of her, and Kit was absolutely amazed by how radiantly beautiful she and her gown was, even from that distance. Her gown was a traditional wedding dress, made of glowing white satin and a modest neckline, but with a lacy material that filled the gap from her bodice to her neck. The sleeves of her gown were satin, but sequined with embroidery, almost looking either gored with brocade or brocade themselves, though from that distance he couldn't make out their patterns. The bodice had a slender stomacher belt that circumnavigated her waist, embroidered with a rose, and the gown flowed down into a full skirt that dragged the floor, complete with a train. Jessie's hair was done in a beautiful wavy style, curling around her little tiara that held her veil in place, a veil of diaphanous lace that did little to hide the perfectly prepared face beneath it. Jessie had make-up on, but only just enough to accent her natural beauty, rather than trying to induce beauty that didn't already exist. She carried a bouquet of yellow roses and lilies, and her father, dressed in a black tuxedo that closely matched the tuxedos worn by Kit and Rick, had her paw on his forearm.

She was, by far, the most beautiful femme he'd ever seen in his life, or would ever see. She was an angel, and earthbound angel, gracing them all with her radiance and perfection.

The march part of the music began, and John escorted his daughter down the aisle in step with the music, treading on yellow rose petals strewn in their path by the flower girls. Every eye in the chapel followed them as they solemnly came down the aisle, as flashbulbs flashed everywhere in the audience, which was actually quite against tradition and custom. But Jessie was so beautiful, the guests forgot themselves and took pictures of her. The femme raccoon, Violet, snapped a few pictures of them as they approached, then melted out of the way as John led Jessie to the altar. He didn't step up upon it. He paused at the edge of the dais, then helped her step up onto it and beside Kit, who gave her a gentle, loving smile and accepted her paw from John. John then silently retreated to his seat, and they turned to face the Monsignor.

"Today, we come together to celebrate the union of this fox and this cat, as they publicly declare the love they share for one another and stand before God to exchange vows of holy matrimony," the Monsignor called in a powerful yet gentle voice. "It is the most beautiful and wonderful thing a priest can do to perform this happy sacrament...or what would be a sacrament for me most of the time," he said with a light smile, which produced a few chuckles from the Catholic members of the congregation. "But today's service will be as unique as those I join today into the vows of marriage. He, is a fox. She, is a cat. Different species, different families, different faiths and different traditions, but they teach us all that love is a universal joy, available to all, shared by all, and given to all, just as God shines his love down upon every species on Earth. Does it matter that he is a fox, and she is a cat? Some may say so," he said, his glance ghosting over Sarah and Brian, "but some would say no. And while it is not our place to judge the will of God, we can all stand forth here today and bless the love

this fox and this cat, this male and this female, profess before us and before God in this, the most joyful of all ceremonies of our Christian faith.”

Kit zoned out slightly as the Monsignor continued to speak about love and devotion, faith in God and the joys of family, devotion, and togetherness. He was lost in Jessie’s blue eyes, gazing lovingly into his own through her veil. She was so beautiful! And in just a matter of moments, they would be married, they would be a family, and she would be his for the rest of their lives.

God, he couldn’t wait!

He blinked when he realized he’d lost about five minutes of ceremony gazing into Jessie’s eyes, for the Monsignor began the vows. “Do you, Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan, take this femme to be your wedded wife in the eyes and laws of God and fur? Do you promise to love her and support her, nurture her, honor her and cherish her, stand together with her for richer and poorer, through happiness and despair, through triumph and tribulation, and through sickness and health, for as long as you both shall live?”

“I do,” he said with quiet conviction, though his voice resounded throughout the chapel.

“And do you, Jessica Desdemona Williams, take this male to be your wedded husband in the eyes and laws of God and fur? Do you promise to love him and support him, nurture him, honor him and cherish him, stand together with him for richer and poorer, through happiness and despair, through triumph and tribulation, and through sickness and health, for as long as you both shall live?”

She paused for just long enough to make him look her in the eyes. “I do,” she said with a radiant smile.

Rick stepped forward and handed Kit Jessie's ring. "Take this ring, and place it on her finger as you utter to her these words; 'with this ring, I thee wed'."

Kit slid the ring onto her finger with a gentle smile. "With this ring, I thee wed."

Rick handed Kit's ring to Jessie. "Take this ring, and place it on his finger as you utter to him these words; 'with this ring, I thee wed'."

Jessie took his paw and put the ring at the end of his finger, then slowly, almost leisurely, slid it up the length of his finger. "With this ring, I thee wed," she said with a slightly impish smile.

Monsignor Duke raised his arms to each side of the couple, then put his paws on their shoulders and urged them together. "Then it is my happy honor to pronounce you Kitstrom and Jessica Vulpan, husband and wife, bound by the vows to Almighty God and brought together in the presence of this joyful congregation," he proclaimed. "What we have witnessed and God has blessed, may no fur bring asunder. You may kiss the bride," he said, taking a single step back. "Carefully," the Monsignor whispered, which produced a giggle from his new bride.

Jessie beamed at him when he lifted her veil, as the applause seemed to fade away to silence as the world contracted down into that moment. It was done. They were *married*. The waiting was over, and now they were husband and wife. There was only one thing left to do, and Jessie looked up at him with adoring eyes, inviting him. She put her paws on his shoulders, he pulled her into a gentle embrace, and he leaned down and kissed her. It was an exquisite kiss, tender and gentle, sweet and touching, professing to her all the love he felt for her in his heart. He felt her quiver against him,

felt her respond to that declaration of love as she felt him tell her with his kiss how much he loved her.

It wasn't Kit that nearly ended up on the floor, it was Jessie. She clung to him for dear life as the kiss ended, gazing up into his eyes with almost tearful adulation, then they remembered themselves and looked back to the congregation. They were on their feet, clapping and applauding as flashbulbs went off *everywhere*. Violet, the raccoon, was kneeling in the aisle before them, taking picture after picture, as Mike and Lilly joined her to stay out of the line of sight of the video camera at the back of the aisle. Kit felt Jessie shudder slightly, and realized that she seemed a little surprised by something...probably all the flashes half-blinding them. Kit and Jessie remembered to stay there until Violet cleared the aisle, which was their cue they could move. When she did so, they strode down the aisle with her paw on his arm as guests reached out and patted them on the shoulders or shook their paws, but those guests did not get in their way. They strode back to the antechamber between the entrance and the chapel, and there they paused while quite a few furs snapped photos of them, and one of the raccoon brothers hurried out with a video camera, taking footage of them posing for their final pictures before leaving the chapel, as guests rushed past them to take up positions for the customary send-off to their car, pawfuls of birdseed ready to cast upon them; Texas had banned the use of rice because it killed birds who ate it, so it had become the new custom to throw a special kind of white birdseed that resembled rice but was no danger to the birds. They were waved forward, and Jessie laughed delightedly as they were showered with birdseed as they came down the stairs of the church, then reached the sidewalk leading around the church and followed it. More furs had come out of the side doors and were positioned there, continuing to shower them with birdseed and congratulate

them, giving them a constant shower of seed until they reached the parking lot. Stav and Marcus, Vilenne's bodyguards, were flanking the open door of a white limo. They both bowed quite ceremonially as Kit and Jessie reached them, and one of them offered his paw to help Jessie into the limo. Kit collected up the train of her dress and then climbed in behind her, and then the door was closed, leaving them alone.

Jessie looked over to him, then snuggled up against him. "Kit."

"Yes love?"

"Now you can call me Misses Vulpan," she announced, quite seriously.

Kit laughed. "It would be my pleasure, Misses Vulpan," he answered. "May I kiss you now? It would be our first kiss in something almost private as a proper husband and wife, you know."

She grinned at him. "Kiss away," she invited, wrapping her arms around him. He leaned down and gave her a toe-curling, intimate kiss as the one of Vil's panther bodyguards got in the front seat with the hired driver, and the limo began to pull out. Kit and Jessie were oblivious to the wellwishers that cheered the limo as it pulled out, also missed the two news crews that got footage of their limo as it passed them at the edge of the street and was on its way to the reception at the Four Seasons.

It was the culmination of a dream. He just sighed as their kiss ended and nuzzled her cheek and neck. "It's done, my love," he whispered to her. "We're married. Finally."

"Finally," she agreed. "I'm now *Misses* Vulpan," she said with a little thrill in her voice. "And you're *mine*!"

"All yours. Forever and ever," he breathed.

“It’ll take that long to get my fill of you, my love,” she said with a kiss on his neck.

“I’ll be happy to try to make you sick of me,” he chuckled, cuddling with her. “Now, we go on to the reception. What kind of decorations did you and Vil decide for it?”

“You’ll see,” she winked. “It was actually *fun* to pick a theme and decorations without you. You know, try to surprise you, see if I know you as well as I think I do,” she grinned. “Did you like the church?”

“Oh, God, pretty kitty, those decorations were *gorgeous!*” he said emphatically. “You’ll really have to be on your game to outdo those.”

“We’ll see,” she smiled at him, then she laughed. “Did you see some of the furs at the wedding, Kit? I saw the *Governor* sitting behind Vil!”

“Yeah, and a Senator, and the Representative from our district,” he added.

“I almost peed my dress when I recognized him!”

“Vil would have murdered you,” he laughed. “Wait, I think I remember that. Was that when we were posing on the altar after the ceremony?”

“Yeah. I was looking at the guests, and recognized him from the crowd.”

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t realize until after. I didn’t want you to be nervous.”

“I didn’t see anything at all except for you,” she told him, nuzzling his neck.

“You were so beautiful walking down the aisle,” he responded. “I thought you were an angel.”

“Do you like my dress?”

“It’s *perfect*,” he stated, running a paw over the embroidered satin covering her stomach. “That train might cause some problems, though.”

“It comes off,” she admitted with a giggle. “It’s part of an outer layer of my gown that comes off. It attaches to the gown under my stomach. I have another satin layer under it that’s formal length. I’ll take the train off when we get to the Four Seasons so I don’t trip all over my dress during the reception, and I can dance in it.”

“Now that’s very clever,” he said with an approving nod.

“I thought so too.”

The Four Seasons was in the affluent west side of Austin, just outside the city limits, a large building built on the side of the hill that marked the beginning of the central hill country. It was a huge mansion-style reception hall with large columns dominating its front, but the limo didn’t pull up to the front. It pulled up to a side entrance instead, and they waited while the panther opened the door for them. “Now come with me, love, I’ll show you our reception,” she grinned as the panther helped her out of the limo, and Kit helped settle her train so it didn’t get caught in the car. She waited for him to get out, then walked arm in arm with him through the side door.

They had the entire building booked for the reception, and the entire building was decorated. The place was divided up into four main reception halls, thus its name the Four Seasons, each main hall decorated in a color pattern that hinted at a season. But the temporary walls had been removed

on one side to form one huge reception hall for their party, while the wall was retained on the other to form two smaller rooms. The main hallway was themed, clearly, with a march of the past years. A pair of statues flanked the opening, one a female cat looking like Jessie wearing a Victorian dress, and the other a male fox vaguely resembling Kit wearing an English waistcoat, trousers, and wearing a derby hat. The main hall was decorated with mannequins and models wearing clothing from different past eras, from medieval dresses to one mannequin dressed as a 20's flapper, with the buntings, tablecloths, and hangings done in blacks, grays, yellows, and blues. He saw that each table represented a different era, from the ancient Greek table in one corner to the psychedelic color patterns of a table representing the 60's. The decorations were subtle, and might be lost on some guests, but the history major in Kit could identify the props on the tables, silverware and china, and color patterns and identify the time and place each table represented. Their own table was decorated to be Kit's favorite historical era, ancient Rome, with a Praetorian standard making up the tablecloth and miniature models of Roman architecture and artwork sitting on the table among the china and silverware. They even had an old medieval tapestry hanging on one wall, as well as a suit of armor. The tables were scattered around the edges of the huge room, leaving the center open for the long banquet tables holding their huge amount of food, and on a rolling cart at the end was their wedding cake, a four-tiered monster done in white and yellow curled frosting, the lower three tiers angel food, coconut, and German chocolate as one moved from the bottom to the top, and the top tier a fruitcake, as was the old tradition. There was a stage holding a set for an actual live big band, their instruments there and waiting for them, as well as a deejay booth in the corner beside and behind the band stage. They were going to have live music in addition to a deejay. "You always accuse me of

being old fashioned,” she teased, elbowing him. “So here it is, old-fashioned in all its glory.”

Kit laughed. “It’s beautiful,” he said honestly. “And since I’m a history major—“

“You’ll feel right at home here,” she finished, kissing him on the cheek playfully.

“I *love* it, baby!” he said happily, looking around.

“We have two other rooms. One’s basically for the kids, filled with things that’ll keep them entertained and happy, and the other room’s a more sober and quiet place where people can go to find a little peace and quiet.”

“Where are we dancing?”

“In here. They’ll remove the tables after dinner,” she pointed to the long tables in the middle.

“Ah, I see,” he noted.

Vil entered the huge room with his family behind her. Sheila and Muffy looked very happy and excited, but Sarah and Brian looked pensive. “Hey hey,” she said with a dazzling smile. “There’s my brother and his new *wife*.”

Jessie gave Vil a shy yet triumphant smile. “Thanks, Vil.”

“Stav has your carry-on, bro. Want me to take a few pictures for ya?”

“Yes, I’d love it,” he said. “And I want to get a shot of these awesome decorations with the video camera before the crowd ruins it!”

“I didn’t like them, but Jessie does, and that’s what counts,” Vil said honestly, looking around.

They took quite a few pictures of Kit and Jessie, and then them with various members of the family, with more than one camera. Sheila, Muffy, and Vil had their own cameras, and they took pictures alone, then together, then with Vil, then with Sheila, then with Muffy, then with combinations thereof...even two pictures with all six of them, taken by one of the Four Seasons servers. After that, Vil took Jessie to a side room to help her remove her train while Kit used the video camera to take detailed footage of the reception room, making vocal notes as he panned around, then berating Sheila for striking a model’s pose for the camera as he panned her into the shot. Jessie returned while he was still shooting, and he got a great shot of her in her now-shorter gown, no longer dragging the floor and having a long bridal train, but instead ending just at her ankles, revealing her unclad feet.

“I thought you had shoes on,” Kit noted.

“I did for the ceremony, but I can’t dance in shoes,” she laughed as she put her paws before her, giving the camera a shy smile. “Do you like the active bride’s dress?”

Kit laughed. “It’s just as lovely as the train,” he said. “Where did you put it?”

“I had someone put it in your limo. She has to take it with you, she’ll use it again later tonight,” Vil answered.

“I forgot about that. When does the reception start?”

“It already has,” Vil grinned. “But we won’t start doing anything until the guests start getting here. There was quite a procession behind us, but

they didn't have a police escort," Vil grinned. "They should start filtering in any minute now."

Vil wasn't far off from right. Rick, Martha, Sam, and Sandy were the next to arrive. Kit and Jessie accepted quite a few hugs, kisses, and pawshakes as they greeted them. "Vil lost us," Rick laughed. "We were in a *limo*, son, one just for the bridal party, but Vil had a motorcycle cop escorting her limo, and they lost us at the light right there by the Mo-Pac. Our driver didn't follow behind her." Rick laughed. "I hope they take us back to the church! Our cars are there!"

"We'll get you back to your cars, Rick," Vil chided him

"I'd never ridden in a limo before," Martha said with a smile. "It was a very fun experience."

"It was awesome!" Sandy exclaimed. "It had its own bar and TV!"

As was traditional, Kit and Jessie greeted the guests to the reception, standing near the door and accepting congratulations. Gifts for the couple were placed on an empty table near the stage, getting higher and higher as more and more guests arrived. They stood there by that door for literally an hour, in what seemed a nearly endless procession of males and females in suits and handsome dresses, shaking their paws, kissing them on the cheek, or hugging them fondly. They greeted furs they'd never even met, and Jessie gaped a little when Governor Rick Perry stepped up to them and shook Kit's paw firmly. "Sorry I'm running late," he apologized. "I had to return to my office for a quick bit of business. Congratulations to both of you."

"Thank you, sir," Kit said with a nod. "I'm honored you decided to come to the reception."

“Your sister invited me. I think she has something she wants to talk about,” he chuckled. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all, Governor! It’s your state, after all,” Jessie said quickly.

He laughed delightedly. “But it’s *your* wedding,” he said simply. He kissed Jessie’s paw gallantly, then stepped on to take Vil’s paws, talking animatedly with her as she came out to greet him.

“I feel so stupid,” Jessie groaned. “I don’t believe I said that to him!”

“I think he got a kick out of it,” Kit chuckled, leaning over and kissing her on the muzzle.

They greeted guests for another fifteen minutes or so, then they sat down to eat. The caterers had gone crazy, serving an absolute ton of food, very fancy and carefully prepared, but quite a few people chuckled when one of the servers set down a super-deluxe hamburger down in front of Kit, who had an excited, eager grin as he eyed that angus beef monstrosity. Kit’s favorite food was hamburgers, so the caterer made him the grandpappy of all hamburgers.

“Don’t you dare stain that tux,” Jessie warned as she spread a large napkin over her lap to protect her dress from accidents.

“I’ll be careful.”

“That hamburger has no liquids on it, just in case,” Vil chuckled. “No mustard, ketchup, or mayo.”

A deejay arrived and played soft background music as the reception ate, just loud enough to be audible but not so loud that it drowned out conversation. Kit and Jessie had a wonderful time chatting with the guests

at their table, which were Vil, Sarah, Brian, Hannah, John, Rick, and Martha. The large table seated ten, but they left the tenth seat vacant, the placecard before it simply reading *dearly departed*, a nod to Kit and Vil's deceased parents. Sheila, Muffy, and Jenny kept flashing them unhappy looks that they didn't get to sit at the main table, but there was only so much room.

After dinner, the tables and leftover food was moved to the far wall across from the main table, flanking the main doors to allow people to continue to enjoy the food in a buffet style, and the cake was wheeled over to the main table, a slight break with the usual tradition of cutting the cake after a round of dancing. There was a great deal of applause as the attendants brought the cake up to the main table, and Kit and Jessie stood and went over to it to engage in the old tradition with the cake. They took up a silver knife, both holding it as furs laughed and took pictures and video of them cutting the cake at the bottom, then came the similarly age-old tradition of making fun of the moment. Kit fed Jessie a piece of cake, pushing it into her mouth carefully as everyone laughed, but failing to do it cleanly. She wiped the icing off her muzzle, gave him a light smile, and did the same to him. She was a bit more playful about it, threatening to smash it into his face, but then she delicately fed him with all grace and style. After the applause, Jessie cut pieces for her parents, then Kit cut a piece for Vil, since his parents weren't there, and then a caterer took over and began cutting pieces for the rest of the guests, as was tradition.

After the cake, desserts were served, and while people finished up dinner, the band filed in from a back door. But before the dancing, Vil stood up and struck her glass with a fork, politely getting everyone's attention. "I know it's tradition for the best man to give the first toast, but I think we've

had just enough innovation in this wedding to allow me to go first.” She turned to Kit and Jessie and raised her glass. “You were a pain in my butt sometimes, baby bro, and I’m glad that you’re now someone else’s problem,” she announced, which made both of them, and quite a few others, laugh. “But you’ll always be my little brother, and I think you’ve got a lot of happiness ahead of you. And you, Jessie, were the perfect femme at the perfect time. You dragged my brother out of his nomadic lifestyle and made a respectable fox out of him,” she grinned. “Thanks to you, I don’t have to go to bed every night wondering where he is, what he’s doing, and if he’s alright. You gave him a reason to rejoin society, and a reason to be happy again. So, to Kit and Jessie, may life be as good to you as you are to each other.”

There was a rumble of assent, and everyone drank to them. Vil sat down, and then Rick stood up. “I’ve never been very good at this kind of thing,” he said with a humble smile. “But I can say something from the heart. Kit, Jessie, you two are something special, and I honestly think that God made sure that you two would find each other. Kit, you’re a kind and intelligent fox, a hard worker, and a wonderful friend. Jessie, you’re just amazing, hon. There’s nothing else I can say but that. You’re the kind of girl I’d marry in a heartbeat if I didn’t already have one just like you,” he said, reaching down and patting Martha on the shoulder. So, to cut it short, here’s to you. May God bless your union and keep you together as long as he’s given me and Martha, and many years more.”

After that toast, John stood up. “I could stand up here and spend an hour telling everyone all kinds of interesting stories about our Jessica, but teasing her just isn’t as much fun as it used to be, at least after she got so good at throwing pillows,” he teased her with a smile. “I can say that even

though you two are young, and haven't known each other as long as some might think healthy for you to get married, all I can tell you is hang in there, kids. I think you have what it takes to be married as long as your parents, or Rick and Martha. You have a beautiful and special love, and I think it'll carry you through your entire lives as long as you treat each other well and keep your relationship honest and sincere. I lost a daughter today, but I gained a son-in-law...and I think I got the better part of the bargain," he winked, which made Jessie laugh ruefully.

Kit stood up. "I'm even worse at this than Rick, so all I have to say is this. Jessie, I love you. I'm glad I married you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. And that's all." He raised his glass to her, and she smiled and toasted him.

They all drank again, and then they prepared to dance.

Kit and Jessie were expected to perform the first dance, and they did so to a great deal of ruffled fur from his new wife as the band played a waltz. Jessie knew how to dance, but she was mortified to be out there dancing in public, so she wasn't exactly the absolute example of grace and elegance. But she also didn't trip over her own feet, and acquitted herself without major embarrassment.

The band was very versatile, playing traditional reception fare mixed in with big band swing, and then the deejay took over to play more modern music for the younger guests. Kit helped a laughing Jessie sit down as they rested after trying to dance a jitterbug to a swing tune. "I thought my tail got tied in a knot!" she exclaimed as he helped her sit down. "That was fun!"

"And better music than that tweenie pop crap," Kit teased as the deejay began playing a Shakira tune, which got quite a few of the guests Kit and

Jessie's age out on the floor.

"You just have no taste for good music," Jessie teased.

"Real music takes an orchestra, not a master sound mixer," he challenged.

"Yo, Kit, Jessie, grats my buds!" Lupe said happily as he came over to them. "When you gonna throw her garter, brah?"

Kit laughed. "It won't be long now. It's nearly six, and we have a plane to catch around seven," he said.

Lupe gaped. "Brah, you'll never make it!"

"It's a private plane, no security to go through," Jessie laughed. "We're scheduled to leave at seven, so we'll be wrapping up in about twenty minutes."

"You're not changing for the flight?"

"We're changing in the airplane," Kit told him.

After a few more dances, the deejay announced that the throwing of the bouquet and garter would take place out front in ten minutes, which would also herald the end of the reception. The gifts were tactfully gathered and taken, to be placed in their apartment for them to open when they got back home, and the guests came around for one final chat or to wish them farewell. Vil was one of the last, hugging Kit, then hugging Jessie. "I guess I can't think of you as my baby brother anymore," she teased. "And I've lost my monopoly on you. I have to share taking care of you with Jessie."

"He's too much trouble for just one of us, Vil," Jessie giggled as she hugged his sister. "It's going to take both of us to keep him respectable."

“He’s such a troublemaker,” Vil grinned at him.

The reception wound down. The rooms cleared as the guests moved to wait out by the limo, and Kit and Jessie took the top layer of the cake from one of the attendants to take home and freeze, though Rick was going to hold it for them until they got back. Kit and Jessie then made sure that their bags were in their limo, the gifts were handled, and everything was ready for them to leave. “You ready, Misses Vulpan?” he asked, nudging her.

“Oh, I’m ready, Mister Vulpan,” she smiled up at him. “I have my garter on and everything.”

He laughed. “Well, I’m going to enjoy taking it off you,” he teased.

“That won’t require you to push my dress up all the way to my waist,” she said primly.

“No, but it’ll be fun to do,” he said casually, which earned him a smack on the shoulder.

Out in the parking lot, over a hundred guests formed a throng around their white limo. Jessie and Kit posed for just a few more pictures, then Jessie stood up at the top of a trio of steps at the edge of the parking lot and held her bouquet up. Quite a few ladies gathered in front of her, and some of them gave a few ugly looks at Marty, but the sheep was nonplussed. Jessie turned around and threw the bouquet over her shoulder, and there was a great deal of applause when Sam erupted from the throng holding it over her head. “No fair, she threatened to spray me if I didn’t let her catch it!” Sandy shouted, which produced some laughter.

Kit then got to throw the garland. Jessie’s cheek fur ruffled when she came down the steps and put her foot back on the step, then Kit knelt and

raised her gown up to her knee and reached under it. She raised a threatening open paw and cocked it over his head, which made him laugh and not do anything that would get him slapped. He pulled her garter off, and she stepped back as he went up to the steps and flung it into the gathered males. To Kit's surprise, Mike came up with the garter, and he made a show out of putting it on his upper arm, wearing it like an armband, which made Jessie's cheek fur ruffle and made her laugh ruefully.

With that done, they were ushered with fanfare and more pseudo-rice birdseed to their limo. One of Vil's bodyguards opened the door for them, and Kit had to pause to hug Vil, John, and Hannah one final time. "Is everything taken care of?" he asked.

"Yup, bro, everything's all set," she told him. "I had your cameras put in your handbag, Jessie, and Rick has your cake and will take it home with him. Lupe's gonna watch over your apartment and he has your keys. Your jet is waiting for you at the airport to take you to Boston and we'll be right behind you, so just wait at the hangar until we arrive. Then we'll go on to Holy Cross and do the other ceremony, and you'll be on your way to Florida before you know it. I have a limo set to pick you up in Miami, and it'll drive you to my condo in the keys. Your plane tickets to Cincinnati are already bought and waiting for you at the condo."

"Sounds like we're free to go," Jessie giggled, hugging her mother. "We'll see you in five days, Dad, Mom," she told her.

"We'll be waiting for you, dear," she answered. "And though I still oppose this, I think it was a beautiful ceremony and I'm glad I attended."

"Thanks, Hannah," Kit said, giving her a hug.

"Enjoy your honeymoon, kids," John told them, shaking Kit's paw.

“Oh, we will, Dad,” Jessie said with a naughty smile that made her father clear his throat.

Kit and Jessie climbed into the limo to a round of applause, and Kit heard John call to his wife, “well, if anything, Kit’s made our little girl a lot more confident,” he chuckled.

“I liked her better when she was meek and compliant,” Hannah sniffed, then she laughed.

Kit and Jessie waved through the open window as the limo pulled away, and then they were on their way to the airport. “Well, we’re alone now,” Kit purred, pulling her close and kissing her.

“Not yet we’re not,” she giggled, pointing to the driver and one of Vil’s bodyguards that were behind the dark glass separating the front seat from the passenger’s area.

“We’ll be on a private plane, love,” he said huskily in her ear. “Want to join the mile high club?”

Jessie gasped and laughed, pushing at him, then nuzzled his neck. “Mmmmaybe,” she teased. “We’ll have to change clothes you know, and something might...happen,” she said, sliding her paw up his arm sensually.

“Seems silly to change clothes on the plane just to change right back into wedding clothes for the other ceremony.”

“Vil said we’re not wearing the formal stuff for Holy Cross, just something nice.”

“Wedding clothes are wedding clothes.”

Jessie laughed. “Wedding gowns aren’t usually meant to be recycled, you silly goose,” she told him. “It’s a one-shot deal! I brought a nice dress for Holy Cross, and I know Vil had you pack a suit for it.”

“I still say we should marry naked,” he teased.

She slapped him on the arm. “Then our minds wouldn’t be on the ceremony at all,” she countered.

They nuzzled almost all the way to the airport, so much so that Kit was surprised when the limo stopped outside of a large hangar at the far end of the airport. The panther helped them out, and escorted them to the plane as he and the driver carried their luggage. Kit was a bit started to find himself staring at probably the top of the line Windstream model of private jet, the Vulpan Shipyards logo emblazoned on the tail. “What the hell?” he gasped.

“It’s Miss Vulpan’s new corporate jet,” the panther told him. “She just received delivery of it last week. She hasn’t even ridden in it yet. She wanted you to be the first passengers.”

“Aww, that’s so sweet of her!” Jessie called.

“If you would, please board and settle in. You’ll be leaving in just a few moments. I’ll place the garment bag with your Boston clothes in the private room.”

“Private room?”

“This is literally an RV with wings, Misses Vulpan,” the panther told her. “It has a seating area for Miss Vulpan and her guests, a galley, an enclosed small area with a desk for when Miss Vulpan needs to do work, and a private room with a fold-out bed.”

“Vil thinks of everything,” Kit chuckled.

“Miss Vulpan spends a great deal of time in the air, Mister Vulpan,” he said as he led them to the stairs leading into the jet, and at the hatchway stood a maned middle-aged lion and a stag wearing uniforms. The stag had his antlers professionally trimmed, leaving nothing but two small bone spurs over and to each side of his eyes. “So she decided to upgrade to an aircraft that better suits her needs. Her old jet will be reassigned to free use by the board members.

“Welcome aboard,” the lion said with a smile as Kit and Jessie climbed up towards them. “I’m Captain Avery, your pilot. And your co-pilot, Captain Smith,” he introduced the stag.

“We’ll be ready to leave as soon as you’re settled in, Mister and Misses Vulpan. And congratulations on your wedding!”

“Thank you,” Jessie said sincerely as she shook the stag’s strange paw. His fingers ended with hoof-like growths, almost like nails or claws, but they made up the entire ends of his fingers from the first joint to the tip. They were meticulously filed and shaped to resemble normal fingertips.

“There’s a fully stocked galley behind the private compartments,” Avery told them as they stepped into the aircraft and looked inside. There were seats there, but instead of facing forward, they were six single seats, three to each side of the aisle, that looked to pivot, almost like captain’s chairs in a van. The wall on the left side at the back had a couch against it, a couch that wrapped around the fuselage wall, under the windows, and each couch had a coffee table bolted to the deck before it. On the right side there was a table with a bench against the fuselage wall, and swivel chairs bolted to the deck on two sides, leaving the side facing the center empty of any

seats. Kit noted that there was a large panel in the ceiling, looking almost like a hidden plasma TV monitor on a hinged back that allowed those sitting at the table and couch to watch TV but not have it in the way when not in use. Behind those six seats, couch, and table were walls that cut the interior fuselage space in half. "The restroom is also behind the compartments, the door's at the back of the galley. The compartment to the left is an office with a computer if you'd like to use the internet or send email, and there's a folding bed in the private compartment on the right. You can call the cockpit any time using the intercom."

"Thank you," Kit said for the information.

"We'll begin preparations for take-off now, so if you'd please settle in and make yourself comfortable."

Kit and Jessie sat in the front chairs, facing the wall separating the cockpit from the passenger cabin, and on each side there were plasma televisions hung for the enjoyment of the passengers. A little recessed rack hiding behind a sliding door under it revealed a DVD player and a satellite descrambler for television stations. The seat had a foldaway tray that rose up from the right armrest and swung over the chair, giving them a flat surface if they wanted one.

"Wow, this is nice! And to think, Vil's gonna fly around in this all the time!"

"She does spend a lot of time on the move," Kit noted. "I guess she wanted something that made that comfortable," he said as he patted the chair in which he was sitting. He then got up and led her back to the couch, and urged her to sit down. "Umm, aren't we taking off?" she asked.

"We probably are," he chuckled.

“Shouldn’t we sit down and buckle up?”

“Jessie, this is a *private* jet,” he told her. “Those rules don’t apply in here.”

“Oh. Well, far be it for me to be a prude,” she giggled as they settled on the couch.

The panther finished stowing their luggage, then stood before them. “I set out your dress and suit you’ll wear in Boston. They’re laying on the bed for you. I placed the garment bag for your wedding clothes in the closet in the room so you can store them when you change. I’ll dismiss the limo driver, and handle his tip for you. I checked the galley, and there are refreshments and light snacks stocked if you’d like them. I’ll be on Miss Vulpan’s jet to Boston, so I’ll see you when we’re back on the ground.”

“Thank you for all your help,” Jessie told him. “We really appreciate it.”

“Yeah, you were a lifesaver,” Kit agreed.

“Any time,” he smiled, then he hurried out of the plane. Smith closed the hatch and went into the cockpit with the lion, and then Avery’s voice called over the intercom. “We’re going to be leaving in about ten minutes, so please find a comfortable seat that faces forward and be ready to take it when we’re ready to take off. If you’d like we *do* have to empty seats in the cockpit if you’d like to watch a take-off from the front,” he offered.

“Oh, I’ve gotta!” Kit laughed.

“I don’t mind either,” she smiled.

They went up to the cockpit and sat in folding bench chairs behind the pilots. “All we ask is you be quiet and don’t press any buttons,” Smith told them with a smile as he put on a headset.”

“I have a pilot’s license, so I know better,” Kit laughed.

“Oh, really? What do you fly?”

“Nothing right now. Whatever I can afford to rent, but I’m rated on multi props.”

“You should get a jet endorsement,” he said.

“I’d love to,” Kit chuckled. “I haven’t flown a plane in like eight months, though.”

The engines started, one and then the other, and Kit and Jessie watched through the cockpit window to see the hangar workers clearing out. The plane began to move, and they taxied out onto a large tarmac at the far end of the airport. Large passenger jets were on the move, as a Southwest plane landed in their view and slowed down as it approached their side of the airport, then turned off before it reached the end of the runway and started along a taxiway towards the terminals. They listened in silence as Avery talked to the control tower, and then the jet joined a short line of commuter planes and large passenger jets waiting to take off. Kit and Jessie got a good look at the back of a Boeing 777, the United jet in front of them. “Make sure you’re belted up,” Smith noted as they turned onto the runway, and then, after they had permission to proceed, Avery pushed up the throttle. Jessie watched in interest as the nose raised, and then they were in the air. The plane kept an ascent angle for nearly five minutes, climbing and banking to cruising altitude and heading, and then Smith looked back to them. “And there you are, your first cockpit take-off. Did you like it?”

“It was really cool!” Jessie said enthusiastically. “I didn’t think you’d have your vision cut like that. I thought you’d be able to see a lot more, but the nose of the plane is in the way.”

“We can’t really see the runway at all when we land,” Avery chuckled. “Since the jet is leaning back as it descends. It’s like driving a car, though. You may not be able to see your bumpers when you park, but you know where they are.”

“Well, it’s three and a half hours to Boston, Mister and Misses Vulpan,” Avery said. “Would you like me to put out the plasma TV at the couch for you so you can watch TV or a movie?”

“I think we can do without that,” Kit said as Jessie gave him a sly, inviting look. “After all the noise and business today, I’d just like a little quiet time.”

“This dress might look nice, but it’s not too comfortable after a while,” Jessie giggled. “I’d like to change.”

“Consider the jet your home,” Avery told them. “We don’t leave the cockpit unless you ask us back,” he said, glancing at them with a smile. “We have a fridge, a folding cot, laptops, and our own head up here, so we’re good. Consider everything on the other side of that door your personal space. Just call us on the intercom if you need any help, okay?”

“We will, Captain,” Kit said as he undid his seat belt, helped Jessie with hers, and then helped her stand up.

They went to the slightly cramped private room, which had a bed taking up most of the space, and Jessie’s soft beige dress and Kit’s dark suit laying flatly on a cover emblazoned with the Vulpan Shipyard logo, a three

masted schooner in front of steamship in a circular background, representing the past and the present. Jessie picked up their clothes and hung them in a cramped closet by the bed, then turned her back to him. “Start with the buttons at the back of my neck and work your way down,” she said playfully.

“Your wish is my command,” he laughed.

It was no different—well, outside of them being on an airplane—but it was. They had the same intimacy and joy with each other, but now they were husband and wife, and it felt, somehow...closer. They weren’t a fox and a cat in love, expressing that love, they were a husband and wife sharing their love and desire with each other. They laid in each other’s arms for a while afterward, as Jessie purred her contentment and he kept his head against her chest, her arms cradling him, to listen to that wonderful sound. “Sometimes I wish I could purr for you,” he chuckled softly as he heard her purring reverberate through her chest and through his ear...and through his heart and soul.

“I like you just the way you are,” she hummed, stroking his hair. “You don’t need to purr to show me you love me, my handsome fox.”

There was a crackling that startled them. “We’ll be landing in about half an hour, Mister and Misses Vulpan,” Captain Avery’s voice called over the intercom. “The ground crew just called in and reported that your limo has arrived and is waiting for you, and that everything is ready and waiting at your destination.”

“And the real world interrupts,” Kit laughed ruefully.

“This isn’t exactly the real world,” Jessie giggled, tousling his hair. “We’re in your sister’s private jet, love. And we’re *married*,” she said with

an excited squeal.

“So, how was your first *official* time?” he asked with a smile, rising up and kissing her on the nose.

“Heavenly, just like all the other times,” she said with a naughty smile, sliding her paw across his chest. “I just wish I could get pregnant already,” she complained. “I mean, we’ve been having sex for three months! Here I am *trying* to get pregnant and zilcho, when some girls get pregnant after forgetting about the condom just once!”

“Typical ironic justice I guess,” Kit chuckled. “The harder you try, the longer it takes. At least we’re having fun trying,” he said, tickling her sides. She laughed after a short gasp and struggled against him as he tickled her sides. “And at least now our first kid won’t do the math and realize he was conceived before we were married,” he added.

“I don’t think that would bother him. It doesn’t bother me,” she said with a grin. “My parents were married *eight* months before my birthday,” she winked. “I was conceived before they were married, and it just makes me see how much they loved each other, if they couldn’t wait until after the ceremony.”

“Ah, so the invincible armor of Hannah Williams shows another chink,” Kit mused, which made Jessie laugh.

“Don’t you dare tell her I said that, or she’ll spank me.”

“You’re a married femme now, love, she can’t do that to you anymore. That’s my job,” he grinned reaching under her and pinching her bottom.

“Ow! Kit, they have pillows on this bed, you know!” she warned, which made him collapse against her, paralyzed by laughter.

Despite excessive playing around and a little teasing, as Kit started lamenting that Jessie was already getting boring—which earned him a whack on the head from a pillow—they managed to be cleaned up, dressed, and ready when the plane landed at Logan Airport in a bitingly cold December night and taxied into a private hangar. Jessie and Kit waited on the plane for Vil’s plane to land, for they were all going to the Holy Cross together. Kit started to feel a little edgy when the hatch was opened and stairs lowered, for the excitement of the day and the fun with Jessie were fading to the knowledge that they were now in Boston, back in hated Boston, and any number of bad memories immediately started creeping into his mind. Boston had been a bad place to live for him, starting when their mother died and going through all the fights with his father and the uncertainty and the anger, and then there were the two years after he was disowned where he attended public school, living in the little apartment Suzy secretly rented for him, working any job he could keep through his father’s machinations to keep enough food in the fridge to keep him from starving while he finished. He left Boston after graduation, going to U-Mass and its main campus in Amherst, which was across the state, getting out from under his father’s crushing heel...though Amherst hadn’t been much better. The Vulpans basically owned Massachusetts, and Kit had to deal with the reach of his father even all the way over there.

The other plane taxied into the hangar and shut down, and Kit sighed as he stepped out into the chilly hangar. Two limos were waiting for them, uniformed chauffeurs standing by the back doors patiently. Jessie held his paw as they walked towards Vil’s plane, as the hatch opened and stairs came down. Vil was on her way down before they were even locked into place, and she kissed Kit on the cheek and patted his shoulders. “Where’s your coats?”

“Still in the plane,” Kit chuckled.

“Go get them, and your shoes. It’s snowy out there. You won’t need anything else. We’ll go do the ceremony and then come straight back here, and you’ll be on your way to Florida. Did you like my new jet?” she asked with a smile.

“It’s so *nice*,” Jessie said honestly.

“Did you initiate my bed?” she asked with a grin. Jessie’s cheeks ruffled, which made Vil laugh delightedly. “Good! I was hoping you would. Now my jet is properly christened and ready for use,” she winked. “Well, your jet, really. It’s taking you to Florida, too. You can get some sleep on the way down, then it’s a limo ride over to the helipad, and a half hour ride in a helicopter to my condo at Marathon Key. I wish you could stay here overnight, but you don’t have much time, so I gotta get you down there to have your honeymoon with what time you do get,” she winked. “Now, you guys take the first limo, and the rest of us will be in the second. We’ll have you back on the plane and on the way to Florida in an hour tops.”

“It can’t be too soon for me,” Kit said uneasily. “Just being here gives me the creeps.”

“Well, bro, let this be the first in a set of new memories for you to have of Boston,” she said in understanding, patting him on the shoulder.

Kit and Jessie were placed in the lead limo after they got their coats and shoes, and they were on the way. It was dark in Boston, but Kit knew those streets, knew them well. Despite the cold and the late hour, the sidewalks were populated with quite a few pedestrians, out doing their Christmas shopping, and Jessie seemed to take notice that a

disproportionate number of them were red foxes. “So many,” she said in surprise, looking out the window.

“Welcome to Boston,” Kit told her simply.

“I can see how purism keeps a foothold up here,” she said. “I mean, I’ve heard you talk about it, but it’s so much different when you *see* it, see so many of just one breed on the streets of a city this big. It’s almost incredible!”

“From here north, foxes are the dominant breed,” Kit told her. “All the way up til you hit Canada. Then it mixes between British foxes and French wolves. A lot of French wolves settled in Quebec, and they still represent a large segment of the population that borders New England.”

“Are there a lot of foxes in Canada?”

“Eastern, yeah,” he nodded. “Western Canada is more mixed with wolves, hounds, and rabbits, all British. There’s a *lot* of rabbits from Britain,” he chuckled.

“Then why so many foxes here? Why not more balance?”

“Guess because of culture,” he shrugged. “In Britain, the different breeds all have their own little subcultures, so when the colonies were made, they segregated by breed. That’s why there’s so many rabbits who live in the southeast, and lots of wolves in Virginia and Maryland. The lemmings and rodents settled in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. And of course, the foxes settled in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire. It’s a big joke around here that the other breeds just can’t handle a New England winter, so they left it to the hardiest breed in Britain to show them how to do it.” The limo turned on the street he knew the

cathedral was on, and chuckled. “But, since this *is* New England and the winters are so cold, there isn’t as much integration up here as there is down south. Immigrants came and thinned out the domination of the British breeds in the other colonies, but here in New England, it’s still a majority of foxes. The only cities where you really see other breeds are Boston and the cities where U-mass has campuses, like Amherst and Worcester.”

“Wow. It’s just so strange to *see* it,” she breathed.

They arrived at the venerable Cathedral of the Holy Cross at about eleven. The cathedral was very old, showing its age, but had beautiful stained glass windows that here backlit by the lights within. Jessie gawked at the huge cathedral as they went around and parked in a lot beside it, then the chauffeur opened the door for them. They were met at the side entrance by the Archbishop O’Malley of Boston *himself*, who was an Irish fox. Vil’s limo pulled in beside theirs as the Bishop shook their paws. “It’s nice to meet you, Mister Vulpan,” he said with a smile. “We’ve arranged things to your liking, and as to your family’s wishes. It will be a simple affair, a simple liturgy and vows, and since we’ve been warned that your bride isn’t Catholic, we’ll go slow and give her a chance to understand what we’re doing since she’s had no chance to practice.”

“It’s going to be Catholic?”

“That’s a slightly ridiculous question, son,” he smiled lightly. “Of *course* it’s going to be a Catholic ceremony. We’ll be conducting it in the main chapel.”

“Well, as long as you don’t mind me looking a little silly, I guess I’ll try,” Jessie said with a nervous laugh.

“You won’t look silly at all, dear. You may not know our ways, but we applaud you for giving him this. We’ve been told that you’ve already been married, and are performing this second ceremony to honor Kitstrom’s mother’s wishes.”

“We are,” she nodded.

“Then you’re giving out of love, and nothing given out of love can ever be anything but beautiful,” he said, patting her paw fondly. Now please, come into the nave. It’s cold out here,” he smiled.

They waited only a few minutes before Vil, his aunt and uncle, and his cousins came in, and while they did that, Kit quickly explained the mechanics of a Catholic wedding. “It can’t be too traditional, since it’s so unusual,” he surmised. “But odds are, we’ll walk down the aisle together behind the Archbishop, kneel at the altar, then he’ll conduct a short liturgy.”

“What’s a liturgy?”

“Mass, or what you’d consider to be mass. He’ll recite scripture,” he answered. “Then comes the homily, which is his sermon, but that can’t be very long. After that, we exchange vows and rings—well, we’ll have to take them off and do it again, I suppose—and then that’s basically it. The conducting priest will give us the opportunity to lead prayer, and since this isn’t a mass, he’ll recite the Lord’s Prayer, and it’s over.”

“What’s this about mass?”

“Marriages usually are conducted during a mass,” he told her. “It becomes a part of the mass.”

“Oh, I get it,” she said with a nod. “So they must have other customs when it’s not part of a mass?”

He nodded. “They try to keep it as similar as possible, but yeah, they do have some different customs when it’s just the wedding by itself.”

The bishop came back to them. “Now, Miss Vilenne has asked to be your maid of honor, Jessica,” he said. “I’m afraid we have no best man for you, Kitstrom. I can have a monsignor or monk serve that function for you, if you’d like.”

“No, I’m alright with going solo, Bishop. I’ll just carry the rings myself.”

“Very well then, if you’d follow me, we’ll take our places and wait for the music.”

Kit and Jessie were hustled to the doors leading to the chapel. Jessie took off her ring and handed it to him quickly, and he did the same, just as the doors opened into the magnificent chapel with its stained glass windows, ancient altar and huge, grand, imposing edifice behind it which housed several statues, and rich wooden pews. The famous stained glass windows of the chapel almost seemed to glow from their lighting, and the huge chapel was largely empty, except for attendants and altar boys at the far end, a few furs sitting in the pews near the altar, and the organist playing the Catholic wedding music.

It felt a little odd doing it in the massive main chapel, which was empty. There was a much smaller side chapel in this cathedral that would have been much more fitting for a small, private wedding ceremony, but they were doing the ceremony in the cathedral itself.

“What do I do?” Jessie whispered.

“Just walk behind the Bishop, it looks like he’s conducting the ceremony,” he answered, taking her paw and putting it on his arm. “We’ll kneel just as we come to the first row of pews, genuflect to the altar, then we’ll walk down to it and kneel at it when we get up on the dais.”

“Okay.”

They did that. The Bishop led them down the aisle, and Kit’s anger rose when he realized that those few furs in the pews by the altar were members of his family! Fifteen of them, meaning eleven of them were Vulpans who had come to this private ceremony...probably at Vil’s invitation. He relaxed slightly when he considered that. Vil wouldn’t invite anyone that would embarrass them or disrupt the ceremony. He couldn’t see any faces clearly from that distance, but they all looked rather young. They had to be some of his cousins. As he neared, though, he realized they were *not* just his cousins. His uncles and aunts, *all of them*, were sitting in the second row, and from the looks on their faces, they were almost white-hot with fury and indignation.

Kit gave Vil a strangled look, but she just gave him a sly little smile from the other side of Jessie and nodded him ahead.

“Are you crazy?” he demanded in a harsh whisper.

“They won’t say a word,” she answered in a similar whisper. “They *asked* to come, bro. Just ignore them.”

Kit could feel the hot stares of Zach and Jake on him, and the cold look of Maxine freezing his blood, but it was too late now. They were there, they were doing the ceremony, and he had to carry through with it...but he was going to *strangle* Vil when this was over. They came up to the altar and knelt, and the Archbishop took his place between them. He offered a short

prayer, and then Kit urged Jessie to stand. “We come together this night, in unusual circumstances, so a son can honor the wish of his mother,” the Archbishop intoned, resplendent in his formal robes and mitre as the spotlights shone upon him. “It was her wish that her children marry here, in this cathedral, and tonight we join this male and this female in the bonds of holy matrimony to both celebrate their love, and also honor the ties of family.”

The Archbishop conducted a very short liturgy, reading from the Bible, select passages often used during weddings that professed love and described the holy union of matrimony to the couple and the congregation. Then, much to Kit’s surprise, he skipped over the homily completely and had them turn to face each other. He had them exchange their vows, and now that he was to the side of the family instead of his back to them, he glanced at their faces. His aunt Maxine and his uncles looked angry and mortified, barely containing themselves. The cousins that were there looked either bored, curious, or similarly offended that their cousin was marrying outside their species.

The Archbishop kept it short and sweet. After they exchanged vows, he led through the exchange of rings, and then raised his paws and uttered a short prayer. He then recited the Lord’s Prayer, and when he finished, the ceremony was over.

“Now what?” Jessie asked fearfully.

“Now we leave, quickly and quietly,” Kit whispered back, stepping back from the dais, genuflecting, then turning back up the aisle with Jessie in tow.

“Wait a minute, bro,” Vil called as she came up behind them. Kit slowed to a stop and turned around, and found himself staring at his uncles, Zach and Jake, and his aunt Maxine, as they hurried out of the pews and started towards them.

“*No*, Vil,” he hissed. “I have no idea what insanity possessed you to bring them here. You know how I feel about them, and I’m very disappointed in you.”

“They asked to come, bro, and promised not to say a word. And I wanted them to be here. I wanted them to see it, bro, see that you won’t knuckle under to them. I wanted them to see you and Jessie get married and know they couldn’t do a damn thing about it, so they can’t possibly deny that you are your own fox and are no part of them. And, I wanted them to see you. I wanted them to see that you’re happy, and you’re happy because you broke away from the family. Call it a little bit of poetic justice, but I wanted them to see that you made it *despite* them.”

“Why would they want to be here?” he asked.

“That’s obvious, bro,” she winked. “Very soon now, you’re going to have the keys to the castle, and they know it. The lawsuit’s a moot point, and they’ve agreed not to challenge me killing the old will and reinstating you as a member of the family. They have to acknowledge you now, no matter how much they hate you.”

“She’s right about that, Luke,” his uncle Zach said through a tightly controlled voice, shooting dark glances at Jessie, who inched behind Kit protectively in the face of so much open hostility. “We can’t deny that Vil is going to win, and so we must make...concessions.”

“Don’t call me that,” Kit growled. “My name is *Kit*. Do not *ever* call me by *his* name!”

“The past is over, Kit,” Maxine told him. “It’s time to reconcile the family and move on, even despite this marriage.”

“The family can go to hell, Maxine,” Kit told her coldly. “You wrote me off for dead years ago, so just go right on pretending I don’t exist, because I’ll never give you so much as the time of day.”

“You’re such hypocrites,” Jessie flared at them, stepping out from behind Kit and staring them down in a moment of bold anger. “Where were these calls to reconcile after his father died? Nowhere, that’s where! I’ll bet you knew then that you could reverse his father’s will and get him back in the family, but you didn’t do anything! You just abandoned him, and *now*, when he’s about to get control over you, you want to reconcile and bring him back, and act like all those horrible things you did to him don’t even matter? You’re so arrogant, you can’t even say *I’m sorry*! If I were you, that would have been the first thing I said if I was in your position, but you can’t even do that! The only one of you that even came close was his uncle Brian, and he only gave that after Kit backed him into a corner over what you did to him when he was a young fox! You don’t care about Kit. You don’t really want to reconcile with him, you’re just trying to keep your money! You’re so transparent it’s almost funny!”

“What else would you have us do, little miss?” Jake said, in a surprisingly honest tone. “We honestly have no idea what else to do. We were just as much subject to his father’s demands as he was. Lucas held all the keys to our family’s power, and we were subject to him. After he died, well, I guess none of us really thought to go against him, even in death. And, honestly, Kit has not exactly offered any olive branches to us, either.

When his father died, he could have asked to come back to the family, and we might have tried to help him. But he chose instead to flip us off at the funeral, and he has married you, which is very much against our wishes.”

Vil actually laughed. “Oh, that was rich!” she said with a giggle.

“Why should he? You’re his *family*!” she said in a heated tone. “You were supposed to be there for him, and you left him all alone! Do you want to see why he’ll never forgive you? Just look right here!” she declared, pointing at Kit’s damaged left ear. “How much worse could it be for him, laying in a hospital bed, in all that pain, not knowing if he’s going to live or die, and being *all alone*!”

His three elders fell silent. Against that argument, they had absolutely no defense, and they knew it.

“Did you come here to hear what Vil told you from his own lips? Well, let *me* tell it to you so he doesn’t have to talk to you. We *don’t want your money*,” she declared in cold, concise words. “Kit told me that money is a curse, and God he proved it once I got to see how his family is. You *deserve* that money, because you deserve the misery it’s put into your life! So take your money, and I hope you all choke on it!”

She took his paw, turned, and stormed down the aisle with a surprised Kit in tow.

And in that moment, he’d never been prouder of his wife.

She led him back to the side door leading to the limo, the door through which they came, and Kit slowed her down and gathered her into his arms. He kissed her, gently and tenderly, then nuzzled her neck and just held her. “I love you, my pretty kitty,” was all he could say to show her how much he

appreciated her standing up for him, and for *understanding*, truly understanding. He never felt closer to her than he did at that moment, and knew beyond all doubt that his place would always be at her side.

She *understood*.

“What is it about you that just cows my aunts and uncles?” Vil asked with a laugh as she reached them. “First Brian and Sarah, and now Zach, Jake, and Maxine! You’re something else, Jessie,” she grinned.

“It’s because your aunts and uncles are so shallow and stupid,” she answered.

“Not stupid, just so arrogant they can’t possibly see anything from another point of view,” Vil chuckled. “And certainly unable to bring themselves to admit that they don’t rule the roost. Well, bro, you ready to leave Boston?”

“It can’t be soon enough for me,” he said honestly.

Vil rode with them this time, taking them back to the airport in their limo. Kit’s paws were shaking from the brush with his family, and Jessie held his paw reassuringly. Just seeing them brought back so many bad memories, and he found himself almost feeling physically sick, how much he wanted to get out of Boston, get away from them. But it was a thankfully short ride back to the airport given it was late at night and traffic wasn’t bad, and in short order they were again at the hangar holding the jet. Vil got out with them and walked them into the hangar with her bodyguards following them. “Now, I’ve taken care of everything,” she told them as they went into the warmer hangar. “If you have any questions, just call me. Oh, here,” she said, handing them a digital camera. “Are you going to be alright, bro?”

“I guess. I’m very mad at you right now, sis.”

“I know, and I’m sorry about that. But you had to face them eventually, if only just to show them one last time that you’re free of them. I think you’ll understand after you think it through. And I still love you, Kit. I always will. You’re my brother.”

She pushed herself into his arms, and he hugged her despite his anger.

Vil hugged Jessie fondly. “It’s so cool to know you’re my sister now,” Vil told her with a bright smile. “You take good care of him, Jessie. He’s very special.”

“He’s the most special male on Earth,” she said with a contented sigh, grabbing his arm and leaning against his shoulder.

“Just sit back and enjoy the ride, guys,” she smiled. “I’ve taken care of everything. And I’ll see you in Cincinnati.”

“You’re coming?” Jessie said with an excited gasp.

She nodded. “Your parents invited me and Sheila, and I accepted. I don’t know about her.”

Kit snorted in laughter. “She’s actually going to do it,” he realized.

“Do what?”

“Bring Sheila into her house, despite my warning.”

“Well, you did warn her then,” Vil chuckled. She kissed Kit on the cheek, then kissed Jessie on the cheek, then turned them around and started pushing them towards the jet. “Now get going! You only get four days, so don’t waste them standing around here! Get out of Boston, you crazy kids!”

Kit and Jessie climbed the steps into the plane, then turned and waved. They didn't wave just to Vil, they also waved to her panther bodyguards, who had been so helpful to them. "Take care of her!" Jessie called to them, and one of them—Kit couldn't tell them apart—just smiled and nodded, then placed his huge paw on her back gently in a display of that promise. Her bodyguards urged her back as they went into the jet, and they saw them standing well away as the jet's engines were started, and it began to turn to taxi out.

"Please find a seat, we're already cleared to taxi and take off and we'll be in the air in just a few minutes," Avery's voice called over the intercom.

"Are you okay, love?" Jessie asked as they sat on the couch, and she leaned against him.

"A little angry. A little scared. Too many bad memories all at once on top of it," he said with a sigh, taking refuge in her arms when she opened them to him. She pushed him down until his head was in her lap, and he just closed his eyes and accepted her gentle, soothing attention as she stroked his hair and gently pinched and played with his ears. She urged him to relax, and as the plane took off and lifted into the air, pushing him into the couch and against her stomach, he grabbed hold of her gorgeous longhaired tail and draped it over his shoulder. She laughed softly and teased his nose with it, then stroked it down his shoulders and side as her paw played with his hair and ears. She soothed him, soothed in ways even he didn't understand completely, and he took solace in the comfort of her presence. He relaxed, and the momentous nature of the day took its toll on him.

As the plane leveled out, Kit drifted off to sleep.

Jessie just leaned back and kept her paw and tail on him, letting him feel her, smell her, be reassured by her presence and sleep peacefully. She was touched and thrilled that she could bring him peace, that he loved her so much that he trusted her with his most intimate secrets, allowed her to know him completely and utterly to such point that she could understand the deepest parts of him, that he would sleep with his head on her lap, a tender demonstration of his love and trust in her. She loved him so much, it was so...*fulfilling* to not just hear him return her love, but show it to her, show her in ways he didn't even notice, such as this.

They were married now. She was now *Misses Vulpan*, and nothing on Earth could possibly make her happier than that one simple thought.

Chapter 18

Marathon Key in Florida was a beautiful place of green palm trees, luscious grass, old Spanish architecture, and blue seas.

And it was entirely too short of a stay.

Kit could learn to live here, that was for sure.

Vil's condo was everything one would expect from a rich woman's vacation home. It was huge, some nine rooms, luxuriously furnished, and lavishly appointed with all the toys, gadgets, and appliances rich people would want in a vacation home. It had a huge TV and entertainment center, a large balcony overlooking the ocean and a hot tub large enough for four furs in the master bedroom, a hot tub that faced a large bay window with a similar view of the ocean. The condo was in a twenty story building that catered specifically to be the vacation retreat for the rich, and had every luxury one could imagine as part of their offered services, from a concierge to a private helipad for the residents to fly back and forth to Miami to all manner of activities, services, and merchandise offered...and not all of it entirely legal. The concierge delicately and politely informed them when they arrived that he could get them *anything*, even that which the law considered to be illegal, and they had a certain club on premises that catered to the more...*adventurous* clientele. The manager, a short lemming, further expanded on that by telling them to consider themselves on a private island where the laws of America didn't exactly apply, an oasis of liberty where people who could afford it could indulge themselves, so long as they

remained on the building's properties. And it had a *lot* of properties. A private harbor was near the private beach, where multi-million dollar yachts, sailboats, and charter boats were moored or anchored. The building had a private golf course, tennis courts, gym, running track, rock-climbing wall, four pools, a water park, miniature golf, and a small amusement park for the children of the tenants. The condo building and its compound took up nearly a quarter of the island, an elite retreat for the rich, isolated from the nation without leaving it, and treating its tenants like royalty.

It was the time-share of the rich, catered to and for the rich, and it was four days of absolute bliss.

Kit and Jessie didn't even leave the condo for two days after they arrived. They spent the time together, from sitting in front of that huge TV watching DVDs ordered from the concierge to enjoying the hot tub at night, looking out over a moonlit ocean. Napping on the couch, sitting on the floor nude as they ate delivered Chinese and threw noodles at each other like children, making love, sitting at the table on the balcony reading books and newspapers as they let the warm Florida breezes invigorate them, they had no desire to leave the condo until the third day, Monday. On that day, they took a helicopter tour of the Florida keys in the morning, Kit introduced Jessie to one of the games he liked to play, tennis, and they spent the afternoon sitting on the beach, under a huge beach umbrella that protected them from the heat of the sun while they enjoyed the salty breezes. Jessie actually shocked him by wearing the bikini he'd bought for her as a joke out of the condo, and he couldn't keep his eyes off her when she took off her wrap and sat down on her beach chair and picked up a novel and read it. She was just so unbelievably sexy wearing that bikini, the first time he'd ever seen her to look sexier wearing something than she was nude. He

couldn't keep his eyes off her—neither could any male that happened by their beach chairs, for that matter—and she seemed to soak up his attention like a puppy, unable to not grin like a misbehaving child when she looked at him. She drove him wild with that bikini, until he just couldn't take it anymore, all but dragged her back up to their condo, and made wild, passionate love to her.

And there were the pictures. Jessie finally relented to give him his pictures, pictures of her in the nude in tasteful, elegant, sensual poses, nothing nasty or pornographic, but she also demanded nude pictures of him. He obliged her, having as much fun taking the pictures as he did taking pictures of her, and then they marked the camera they used to prevent them from using it for anything else, and also knowing exactly which memory card held those most private of pictures.

The other reason he was glad Vil lent them the condo was because it was a gated community, closed to the public...and that mattered. News of Kit's marriage did hit the tabloids, and speculation surfaced that the estranged Vulpan family might be on the verge of reconciliation. It was common knowledge that he'd married a cat, a major affront to the purist Vulpan family, but it also became known that the elders of the Vulpan family had attended his private and very secret wedding ceremony at the Holy Cross, so secret it was held in the dead of night, and the outcast Vulpan literally flew in, drove to the church, married, then drove right back to the airport and flew out. Those conflicting signals confused many in the tabloid community, him doing something his family would oppose violently yet having them at his wedding, and set the gossip columnists and ambush reporters into an absolute frenzy to try to get the truth of what was going on. Kit surfed the gossip internet sites on Tuesday and was highly amused by it,

one site going so far as to hint that the Vulpans were invited to the wedding and had no idea Kit was marrying a cat, that it was an ambush and Kit's last act of defiance...because the rogue Vulpan left Boston in a great hurry after the ceremony and was currently in an undisclosed location....

It amused him a little bit, seeing all that speculation on gossip sites that covered it. He knew it was going to happen, and he was also glad that he wasn't anywhere near home for a while. No doubt they were camped outside the apartment complex looking for them.

He was sitting at the table on the balcony on a warm, sunny Tuesday morning, wearing nothing but a pair of swim trunks, going over it. Tricoon had delivered the video and pictures of the wedding by express courier just a bit ago, and Kit had his laptop out, watching it with Jessie sitting on his lap, wearing a more modest blue two-piece bikini that was practical for going in the water, her tail swishing back and forth as they watched from the beginning. They'd done a fantastic job so far, professionally edited footage from multiple cameras that began with Jessie's arrival, showed her getting ready in the antechamber with her bridesmaids and her mother, as Jessie tried to ignore the camera as she fidgeted with her little tiara and the veil that it held, and as Sandy was making all kinds of dirty jokes about their wedding night. Kit was surprised when Jessie shot back with a rather naughty comment that there was nothing they could possibly do on their wedding night they hadn't already done, which made Kit erupt into laughter and made Jessie's fur stand on end from head to toe.

"I can't believe she put that in the video!" she gasped in embarrassment.

"I dunno, I liked it. I love seeing you get all huffy," he chuckled, putting his arms around her waist and pulling her closer.

The video then showed him arriving, greeting the Monsignor, and him milling around, looking both nervous and excited, talking to anyone who came close to him. Then the video panned through many of the guests. When the Governor arrived, the video cameras caught it, and they caught him shaking Vil's paw and kissing her on the cheek.

"It's so strange to see it from another point of view," Kit noted.

"It's nice to see what I missed staying in the room," Jessie laughed.

The video then more or less fast forwarded to the ceremony itself. They watched the ceremony from three camera angles, one behind, and one to each side of the altar which surprised Kit quite a bit. He didn't remember them talking about setting cameras there, and he didn't see them. But, they were good angles, and to his surprise they zoomed in and out as if they'd had a paw there using them. "They had to be remote controlled," he realized. "They had a pretty big video board up in the balcony, I'll bet the raccoon up there was running the cameras."

"I've never seen remote control cameras," Jessie mused.

"They have ones that have basic little remote functions. These must be some pretty expensive cameras to have that kind of remote control ability."

Kit held his wife closely, her proximity and the fact she was sitting on his lap wearing a bikini getting to him, stroking the fur on her slender stomach as they watched the ceremony. Jessie kept twisting her wedding ring around her finger as they watched, as if to remind herself that it was there, then she gave a contented little sigh when she heard herself say *I do*. They watched the ceremony end, and then saw them standing there for a moment as their guests applauded and took pictures, as *Endless Love* played, dubbed into the background with the audio. The camera at the end

of the aisle got a great shot of them coming back down the aisle at the end of the ceremony, and then the handheld camera the femme raccoon used captured video of them standing in the front of the church for a final picture opportunity.

“We sure didn’t give them much time,” Jessie giggled. “When Jim and Penny were married, their video people held them at the church for nearly an hour. They were soooo late getting to the reception!”

“They seem to have coped very well,” Kit noted.

“Who? My aunt and uncle?”

“No, the raccoons,” he said, motioning at his laptop. “Your script didn’t allow for extended photo shoots.”

She giggled “Vil’s suggestion. She said that if I made it clear we’d be first to the reception to greet the guests, it set the tone for the video people that we meant business. Where are the pictures?”

“They sent us DVDs for now. This note says we’ll get the photographs and the albums when we get back home,” he told her, holding up a letter included with the package. “Mike and Lilly’s pictures are in here, too,” he said, holding up two other DVDs. I need to send them our pictures,” he said with a husky tone, sliding his paw up and down her stomach.

“Don’t you dare!” she giggled, slapping his paw. “Those are *our* pictures, and nobody else had better see them but us!”

“Hmm, I may have mixed the other pictures in with them on that memory card,” he mused.

“You *better not*,” she warned. “If you used that camera for anything else, I’ll erase that card, I swear!”

“Then I’ll just have to take the pictures over again,” he breathed, reaching behind her and pulling on the strings of her bikini top, undoing the knot.

“Always trying to get me out of my clothes!” Jessie accused with a giggle as Kit undid the knot, causing the bottom of her bikini top to drift away from her very shapely chest.

“Just keeping you pretty,” he teased, pushing her top aside to put his paw on the delights it concealed.

Her breath caught in her throat. “Kit, baby, we have an appointment, remember?” she said in a protesting voice, but she did nothing to stop him, and she began to purr.

“Not until ten,” he retorted, sliding his paw down to the waist of her bottom and snagging the material, sensually sliding his fingers under it.

She gave a shivering sound. “I’m willing if your back can take it,” she cooed in his ear.

He laughed against her neck and shoulder. “I’m gonna be spending our time in Cincinnati wearing a heating pad strapped to my back,” he admitted. “A bed that’s too soft and a wife I have to satisfy...I’m gonna be in sorry shape come the time we go home.”

“Oh, no, don’t blame that on me,” she teased. “Just who untied my top and started pawing me?”

“And who tackled me in the kitchen yesterday and all but raped me right there on the floor?”

“You can’t rape a boy. They’re always willing.”

“You sure as hell tried to prove that wrong,” he teased.

Jessie laughed, burying her face against his neck. “I thought you’d enjoy it,” she told him apologetically. “You know, me being all wild and wanton,” she added with a giggle. “Give you some memories of our honeymoon, since this wasn’t where our physical relationship started.”

“Memories are good. Scars, well, that’s another story.”

She laughed. “I guess I’m giving you quantity to make up for not being able to give you those memories. I don’t think we’ve ever had so much sex in three days.”

“I’m more than willing to go for the record,” he hummed, sliding more of his paw into her bikini bottom and making her gasp.

She grabbed his wrist and quite deliberately pulled his paw out of her bikini, then got up off his lap. “Well, you’re going to finish what you just started, my handsome fox,” she told him in a playful yet authoritative tone, pulling him up out of the chair and dragging him into the condo. “I think it’s time I give you another reason to get excited at the idea of leather sofas,” she grinned.

“Oh, be still my heart,” he breathed.

They snuggled on the couch afterward, and Jessie seemed bold enough to ask him about Suzy. “I could tell she still loves you when I met her,” she

told him, rolling over on top of him and rising up, her paws on his chest as she looked down at him. “Did she talk to you about it?”

“Sorta. She admitted it, but also said she wanted to move on. She has a boyfriend now I think she hopes will propose to her,” he answered, unable to resist fondling her breasts with them right there and so deliciously available. She laughed and dropped down onto his chest, giving him a long kiss.

“I thought we just took care of this little problem,” she teased.

“That’s a task you’ll be working on for the rest of your life,” he answered.

“I can handle it.”

“So can I,” he said, squeezing her breasts deliberately.

She laughed helplessly, then she gave him a playful kiss. “We spent two whole days making love, I *would* like to spend our last day here at least seeing more of this place than the beach and tennis courts.”

“Why Misses Vulpan, are you saying you don’t love me anymore?” he said with a mock gasp.

“I’m saying I can love you when we get back from the tour,” she grinned, opening her maw and biting him lightly, playfully, across his nose and muzzle. “Now heel.”

“I’m a fox, not a dog. Foxes don’t heel,” he challenged.

“Neither do cats, but I’ll have to give you the rough side of my tongue if you don’t obey,” she warned with a mischievous grin.

“Oh, I’m so afraid of a naked femme,” he chided, slapping her bare bottom to accent his point.

She took her tongue and grated it right over his nose. She’d never done anything like that before, even when they french kissed, so the middle and back of her tongue, which were very rough, assaulted his tender nose with a sensation that was both unusual and actually painful. She’d licked him before, and licked him in some *very* sensitive spots, but she’d never licked him so hard, with so much force before, and it gave him an appreciation of what a cat’s rough tongue was capable of doing. He’d bet that she could scour the skin off his nose with that tongue if she was serious about it. He struggled under her, his arms windmilling wildly as that tongue tried to strip the skin off his nose, and when she finished, he very nearly sneezed before he burst into helpless laughter. “Now, don’t make me do that again,” she winked.

“I’ve never felt anything like that before!” he gasped as he fought for air.

“I’m a *cat*, baby,” she teased, digging her claws into his chest and sides lightly to remind him of that fact. “All my best weapons are always with me. Now don’t make me give you the rough side of my tongue again. Behave.”

“But I *liked* that punishment!” he protested. “Do it again,” he said with a grin.

“If you keep it up, I’ll do that someday when I’m doing *something else* for you.”

His eyes widened, and he shuddered almost involuntarily. “Okay, now *that* is a threat,” he laughed. “I’ll be good.”

“Don’t be *too* good,” she said impishly. “You make life fun with your antics and shenanigans.”

“Now I feel like I married an English professor,” he said seriously.

Jessie grabbed a pillow and bopped him with it. “You *did*,” she shot back.

“Oh. That explains it. You’re pretty hot for an English professor, you know that?”

She laughed helplessly.

The helicopter tour was breathtaking, flying them down to Key West along the land route, U.S. One, which went from key to key along bridges that connected each one to the mainland. In Key West, they and the other couple, a pair of martens, were treated to a carriage-ride tour of the city and lunch at one of the most exclusive restaurants in town. They then toured Ernest Hemingway’s house and were given two hours for shopping or personal sightseeing before the helicopter returned them to Marathon. Kit made sure to collect on Jessie’s promise when they returned.

She was right about one thing...they *were* having an awful lot of sex. Maybe she was right and they were just making it feel like a honeymoon with quantity, since their honeymoon wasn’t about the traditional reason of the pair getting to know each other physically. But for him, it was just one simple idea; she was *his wife*. That got him so turned on it wasn’t funny, and he couldn’t keep his paws off her...and she certainly seemed to be quite willing to succumb to his attentions. He had no idea why it got him so excited, but it did. Just knowing that that *fine* example of female cat was now his wife just made him want to touch her, and that touch made him want to kiss her, then undress her, then make love to her. Even the most

casual contact between them could initiate a heated, passionate session of lovemaking, and it soothed his ego a little that he wasn't the only one that seemed vulnerable. Yesterday, the simple act of pulling Jessie's hair away from her face was what caused her to take him on the kitchen floor.

Maybe it was knowing that they'd be going from a condo where they could make love anytime, anywhere, to her parents' house, where they'd be much more restricted was what was making them both so bandy.

They watched the wedding video again in bed, laying on their stomachs side by side with the laptop in front of them. Jessie had her chin and muzzle supported on her paws, kicking her foot back and forth behind her, ghosting her tail over his back and legs as it swished back and forth. They smiled and commented and laughed and gasped through the second viewing of the video, then Kit loaded up the picture DVDs and they went through them all, both the Tricoon pictures and the ones that Lilly and Mike sent them. They laughed quite a bit, because the gang all had great senses of humor and they weren't afraid to show it for a camera. Lilly and Marty had decided to mimic the cake feeding tradition, but their idea of it was to smash pieces of cake into each other's faces, leaving them both a mess. There was also a good picture of Sheila and Muffy basically fighting over Ben, both of them hanging off him and kissing him on each cheek as Sheila pushed at Muffy's shoulder and Muffy poked one of her short claws into the side of Sheila's neck. They got a picture of Kevin and Sam, Sam holding up the bouquet, while giving each other a cool, speculative look. There was a great picture of Rick dancing with Hannah, and a picture of Jeffrey threatening to stab Sandy with one of the model replicas of a gladius that was on one of the tables.

"Oh!" Kit gasped.

“What?”

“I forgot to check the website,” he said, minimizing the picture viewer and bringing up his web browser. The condo had wireless through the whole compound, and it had taken all of two minutes when they arrived for them to add their laptops to the network. He brought up the magazine’s website, and there it was, just as Mike threatened. A picture of Kit and Jessie kissing at the end of the wedding ceremony, with lettering above and below the picture. *Kit and Jessie Vulpan* graced the top, and below that was *It’s about damn time!* There was an article posted on the website, written by both Barry and Lilly from the bylines. It described the wedding in detail, and made note of the fact that it was attended by quite a few notable people. They’d put up a bunch of pictures from the wedding on the website as well, but there wasn’t a single pictures on the site that they hadn’t sent on the DVD...except for one. It was a picture of Jessie putting on the garter that Kit threw at the reception, with her beautiful gown hiked all the way up to her thigh as she pulled the garter into place.

“Ooooh, be still my heart,” Kit said as he checked out the picture, and Jessie’s cheeks ruffled.

“That rat! I told her not to use that picture!” she complained.

“And you believed her? Hon, we gotta talk,” he laughed.

“At least my hose doesn’t let any of the perverts see anything,” she fumed.

“But it gives away the shape of those lovely legs,” he teased.

“Not another word, or you won’t touch those legs again for a week,” she said primly.

“I have pictures of them. And better things,” he winked.

“Yeah? Well, remember, buster, I have pictures of you too!” she reminded him. “If you don’t want me to send some *really* revealing pictures to the tabloids, you’ll watch your step.”

Kit laughed. “Oooh, so we’ve resorted to blackmail already?”

“It’s not blackmail. It’s the tactical use of available assets to gain an advantage over your opponent. Vil says so,” she said with a grin.

“I knew there was a good reason to keep you away from my family,” he sighed. “You’re just too young and impressionable.”

“I’m only seven months younger than you!” she protested.

“That’s a lifetime for some,” he noted sagely.

She reached over and swatted him on the snout. “Bad fox!” she admonished. “Be nice to your wife!”

“But I like being punished,” he protested.

“I think I need to find punishments you don’t enjoy,” she said musingly. “Duct tape, maybe.”

“Pft, that would rock if you used it right,” he suggested with a naughty tilt to his voice.

“Mmm-hmm. Then I pull it off you,” she noted.

Kit shuddered. “Alright, I take that one back.”

“Thought so,” she said with a teasing smile, then she leaned over and nuzzled his muzzle. Then she opened her jaws and clamped them down over his snout, forcing his head down. Jessie was a biter. She always had

been, and this kind of bite, a clamping bite, was an impulse she often had, but had become much more prevalent in the days since they were married, now that Jessie felt that she was fully and completely his wife and lifemate. She would clamp her jaws on parts of him, most often his muzzle or neck, and hold onto him, or force him in a direction she preferred. It was behavior he'd expect from a wolf or a fox, but not from a cat...and was one of the subtle ways her fox side showed itself. Foxes too were biters, and clamping was an instinctual behavior among mates. Her jaws forced his head to the bed, which made her giggle at dominating him, then she rewarded him for his obedience by kissing him on the top of his muzzle. "You big faker," she taunted. "Acting all big, but you knuckle to me without a fight."

"And threaten my lifetime supply of the sexiest femme on earth? Dream on," he said calmly. "Besides, I didn't realize we were going to fight like animals for dominance in this marriage."

"Only over certain things," she said, then she began to purr as she nuzzled the top of his head. He winced slightly when she bit his right ear and held on, but she let go and lowered her head, clamped her jaws over his snout, and pulled to urge him to raise his head off the bed. She was just flaunting it now, teasing him by flagrantly controlling him. But she again rewarded him for his obedience, letting go of him and kissing him, which turned into a laugh when he flinched away, opened his jaws, and clamped them down over her shorter snout. Jessie could barely fit her jaws over his snout, but Kit had no trouble getting a firm grip on her muzzle, and he didn't let go of her. Kit had her jaws locked shut from his grip on her, exerting just enough force to hold her jaws shut without hurting her, so when she tried to talk, she had to do it through clenched teeth. "Leggo," she ordered. When he didn't release her, she slapped him lightly on the

shoulder. “Kit, leggoame,” she commanded. “Kit! Leggo, you’re scarinme!” Kit couldn’t speak with his jaws pried open like that, but he exerted just a tiny bit of pressure on her muzzle, which made her flinch slightly. “Kit, leggopleeze!”

He released her. She flinched away and opened her mouth, rotating her jaw side to side as her paw checked her snout and chin for puncture holes, then she glared at him. “That wasn’t funny!” she complained.

“All you had to do was say please,” he said with a slight, evil little smile.

“Oh, so you wanna play, do you?” she called, then she lunged at him. Kit fought her off with paws pushing at her shoulders, but she overwhelmed him, rolled him over, then pinned him down with her paws on his shoulders and her weight holding him down, her legs straddling his stomach and legs, her tail writhing behind her. “Now who *owns* you, Mister Vulpan?” she demanded, grabbing his wrists and pushing them down to the bed over his head. “Huh? Who owns you? Come on, say it! You’re not getting up until you do!”

“Well, I’ve leased myself out to you with the option to buy,” he answered. “The rate was quite favorable and I could live with the down payment. But you never know, some rich old lady might come along and try to execute a hostile takeover.”

She gave him a startled look, unready for such a response, then she laughed. “Lease? I didn’t lease you, you silly male, I *won* you. I *own* you! You’re my trophy husband, after all! Soon, I’ll start my plan to steal your family fortune, then I’ll have to decide if I want to keep you,” she winked.

“Oooh, and what if you do?”

“I guess I’ll have to take you to Costa Rica or some other tropical getaway and crush your will by offering you unlimited love and devotion. Oh, and sex, of course. Lots of that,” she winked.

“You know me well,” he said in a mock serious voice, as if he were addressing a business rival. “I might have to find a way to torpedo that attempt at a hostile takeover.”

“You’d better,” she said with a teasing smile, dipping down and kissing him. Then, with a laugh, she clamped her jaws down on his nose and the end of his muzzle.

“Next time, dear, use a different angle and clamp my jaws shut,” he said, took in his breath, then blew into her mouth, hard. The sudden air startled her into letting go. “Or that happens,” he chided, pushing her head away from him with a paw to her upper chest.

She laughed and wiped her mouth with the back of her paw. “That was a creepy feeling.”

“Live and learn.”

One of their phones was ringing. Kit reached over Jessie and grabbed the ringing one off the nightstand and saw that it was Vil. “It’s Vil,” he said, putting it on speaker and holding the phone in front of both of them. “Hey sis,” he called.

“Sorry to disturb you two, but I had to call,” she said, her voice a little tinny through the speaker. “Having fun down there?”

“Your condo is awesome, Vil!” Jessie gushed.

“Yeah, I like it. Did you try the six hour sailboat excursion?”

“No, we took the helicopter tour and shopping trip to Key West,” Jessie answered.

“Ooh, that must be new,” she mused. “Then again, last time I was there it was summer, they offer different things at different times of year. You pregnant yet, Jessie?”

She laughed. “I’m trying!”

“She’s *really* trying,” Kit noted, which made Vil laugh and Jessie smack him on the shoulder.

“Ah, so, you really did have a honeymoon,” Vil teased.

“Oh, did we,” Jessie giggled, her cheeks ruffling. “It’s not over yet though,” she said teasingly.

“Well, it’s a tiny bit shorter,” she said. “There’s been a schedule change. I refunded your commercial tickets because I rearranged my schedule, and I’m coming to get you myself. I’ve already contacted the concierge and building staff about it and made the arrangements. Tomorrow at eleven you’re getting on a helicopter for Miami. I should be on the ground by the time you get there, so we’ll be on our way to Cincinnati. All the gifts you bought are already there, I put them on my plane and had them fly them over after I got home.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem bro. Sheila is going to come, just to warn you,” she told them.

“I don’t see a problem with that,” Jessie said.

“You will the first time she catches Ben under the mistletoe,” Kit chuckled.

“Ben’s a big boy, he can handle her.”

“Jessie, no male can handle Sheila when she’s being militant,” Vil said seriously. “It’ll be up to your mother to keep those two separate.”

“Oh, I’m not too worried,” Jessie giggled.

“So, remember guys, schedule change. Be ready to leave by ten thirty, and in case you forget, I’ve arranged to have the concierge call you tomorrow morning and remind you that you’re leaving.”

“I’m going to miss this place, it has everything,” Jessie sighed.

“Oh, don’t worry too much about that,” she said. “You won’t be living in squalor for long.”

“Huh? Vil, what did you do?” he demanded.

“Me? I didn’t do a thing,” she said, a little too sweetly. “See you tomorrow little bro, and brand new sis,” she said, then she hung up.

“That little—“ Kit grunted, but Jessie put her paw over his and looked at him.

“Leave her alone,” she said. “She enjoys pampering you, and it’s Christmas.”

“Oh come on, pretty kitty, I thought you understood.”

“I do understand. You don’t want money to poison us, and it never will. But look at it this way, love. Vil enjoys giving you the things she believes you deserve but were denied. Right?”

“Yeah, she does, but I don’t want it.”

“You mean to say you haven’t enjoyed this condo?” she asked archly.

He laughed. “Okay, you got me there. This place is awesome.”

“So, as long as she doesn’t give us *money*, and she doesn’t try to make us move away from the complex, why worry?”

He laughed. “Well, that’s a point, I suppose.”

“I’m going to ask her for a favor.”

“What?”

“Well, Lupe’s going to move us into the new buildings. Since they have to build them, I think I’ll ask to see if we can’t get a hot tub like the one here,” she said, her cheeks ruffling. “We can pay her back a little at a time.”

“You just said the magic words, love,” he said with relief.

“What?”

“*Pay her back*. That makes me totally confident about it now. You really aren’t letting all this go to your head,” he noted, motioning at the luxurious room.

“Well, it is nice here,” she admitted. “And I could get used to living in a place like this. But I also love our apartment, and our friends, and I don’t want to leave them. Vil tried to get me to talk you into letting her give us a house,” she admitted, “but I told her no. Partly because I knew you’d never do that, but also because I’m *happy* in our apartment. I love living right near Lupe and Dan and Mickey, and being so close to the campus and sorority so

the girls don't have to go far to come see me. We have great friends, we have a great life. I want to keep it the way it is."

"I love you," he said honestly, nuzzling her by putting his muzzle under her chin and pushing up against her.

"Prove it," she teased lightly as he started nipping and biting gently at her neck.

"You're gonna have to wait a while, but eventually I'll do just that," he promised.

She laughed. "So I finally wore you out, eh? I knew I could do it eventually! Now I can get some sleep!"

"It only took three days. Doesn't that count for something for my ego?"

She giggled. "Your ego should be very proud of itself. It acquitted itself with full honors."

"It'll feel better once it gets you pregnant," he noted. "It's a major blow to my ego that I can't give you the one thing you want."

"Aww, you're so sweet," she gushed, nudging him with her shoulder. "What do you want to do tonight after we go on that scuba trip and have dinner down in the restaurant? The last night of our honeymoon," she noted. "We could go see that Broadway show, you know."

"I wouldn't mind trying to give you what you want," he said teasingly.

"You just made a deal," she hummed in her throat, and began to purr as he nibbled lightly at her ear.

Jessie was one cat that didn't mind water.

Kit, despite being from Boston, was actually a very good swimmer. It was easy when one spent lots of vacations in the tropics and had an indoor, heated, private pool. But Jessie showed that she bought her swimming two-piece out of experience, not out of fashion sense. The swimming two-piece was still sexy, but it also was practical for swimming, and Jessie proved it. They went scuba diving at one of the reefs off the keys, and Kit was amused at how they did it here. Usually one had to take several lessons to scuba dive, but Jessie received a two hour crash course in scuba diving, and when they went on it, trained scuba divers escorted them closely at all times... most likely to make up for the lack of individual training. There was a trained diver literally at arm's length for their diving adventure, swimming along a shallow coral reef, seeing quite a few colorful fish, and even seeing two rays and a small nurse shark.

They got back from the scuba excursion around five, and they showered to get the salt out of their fur and hair, dressed in very nice clothes—him his black suit and Jessie in a very sexy black dress she'd bought in Key West—and went to the five star restaurant down on the second floor of the building. The food was absolutely heavenly, the wine selection was outstanding, and the dining room was serenaded by a pianist at a grand piano on a raised pedestal in the center of the dining room. The entire pedestal raised and lowered, and also slowly rotated, which made Kit muse that they must interview quite a few pianists to find professionals good enough to play here without getting motion sickness up there.

Kit just thanked God he didn't have to pay for the meal. They were there on Vil's private account, everything they did paid for by her...and it was a damn good thing, for the cost of that meal was nearly a thousand

dollars. The waitress brought him a check, and then the skunk realized that she'd made a mistake and took it back with a ruffled face and about fifty apologies.

“How much was it?” Jessie asked curiously.

“You don't want to know,” he said seriously.

Kit kept the wine. At four hundred dollars, he was damn well taking the whole bottle with him, and he wouldn't have wine of that quality again for many years.

They finished that bottle of wine up in their room, and they ended up going to bed early, but getting to sleep late.

The next morning, they had to get ready. The concierge called them at nine o'clock and gently reminded them that they had an eleven o'clock appointment to be picked up by a helicopter to fly them to Miami, and offered housekeeping servants to come help them pack their belongings and get ready to go. Kit declined the offer politely, and they regretfully packed their suitcases, put out their cold-weather clothes and shoes, and Jessie wrote a little thank-you note to the maids that came in and tidied up for them while they were there, then apologized for not having a tip for them to which they'd be accustomed given what kind of place it was.

Kit didn't have the heart to tell her that their tips were covered in Vil's account.

A steward pushed their luggage cart for them as they left Vil's condo, and he went down to the condo building manager and returned the key to him. “You still have nearly thirty minutes, Mister Vulpan, Misses Vulpan,”

the rabbit told them with a smile. “Perhaps you’d enjoy some breakfast before you go?”

“I am a little hungry,” Jessie noted. “Would that be alright, since we’re kinda not guests here now? And can we afford it, Kit?”

The manager laughed. “Madam, you’re the brother and sister-in-law of one of our most important permanent owners,” he told her simply. “If I didn’t show you the hospitality you’re due, she’d sell her condo and find other accommodations, and I won’t stand for it. Miss Vulpan has always been one of our most prestigious and most thoughtful and pleasant tenants. To lose her would be devastating to the building and quite a blow to the people who work here, who always look forward to her visits.”

“And her tips,” Kit noted.

“Which is one reason why they’re always glad to see her,” he agreed with a smile. “The entire staff loves her, and they’d kill me if I snubbed her brother at the end of his honeymoon. Now, if you were the brother of one of the time-share tenants,” he mused and trailed off, which made both of them laugh.

“Sounds like we need to sneak down here without telling Vil someday,” Jessie said with a sly look at Kit.

The manager laugh. “Misses Vulpan, you’re more than welcome to do just that. I can put you up in a special condo we keep available for special guests, and I’m sure we can reach agreements over reduced rates and fees for our services for you.”

“We might have to do that, Kit!” Jessie beamed. “This place is *fantastic!*”

“I’m overjoyed you enjoyed your stay here with us, Misses Vulpan. Now, let’s get you some proper breakfast before you begin your trip. Going home?”

“Going to visit my parents for Christmas,” she answered as the manager led them from his office.

“Ah, going to the arctic tundra, from the look of you.”

She laughed. “Cincinnati,” she told him.

“For a Florida lemming like myself, that *is* the arctic tundra.”

The manager treated them to a breakfast of quiche and freshly squeezed orange juice, and then walked them personally to the helipad. He even helped the steward load their luggage onto the commuter helicopter. “I do hope you come enjoy another visit with us,” the manager said, shaking their paws, then he helped them into the helicopter and stepped back with the steward to watch them take off.

The flight up to Miami was uneventful. They landed at the Miami International Airport about a half hour after leaving Marathon Key, and there was a limousine waiting at the helipad. A burly badger took their luggage from the pilot as he unloaded it, and then told them he’d take them to the hangar. Kit thought it was a bit silly to ride a limo from a helipad to a hangar, but that was how they’d went when they got here, so they were doing it again going back. The badger ferried them across the airport on a five minute trip, and the limo pulled up to a private hangar in an annex off the main terminal area. “Miss Vulpan is on final approach now,” the badger told them as he opened the door for them and helped Jessie out. “Her flight was caught up by a ground delay that put the entire airport behind schedule.

“Oh no, allow me, Mister Vulpan,” he said as Kit picked up one of their suitcases.

“You don’t have enough paws to carry everything, and there’s nothing wrong with my arm,” Kit told him.

“Me either,” Jessie said with a smile as she shouldered their carry-on bag, holding their important things, their cameras, and both their laptops.

The badger chuckled and closed the trunk with two suitcases. “Very well, follow me please.”

They were given seats in a small lounge as they waited, but they didn’t have to wait for more than ten minutes before a member of the hangar staff came in. “Miss Vulpan’s jet is just outside and waiting to board you,” the black-furred rat told them with a short nod. “Please come with me.”

The jet was sitting outside of the hangar, its engines still running as a fuel truck refilled its fuel tanks. The hatch was open and stairs were down, and Vil was standing in the hatchway. She waved to them excitedly when the rat led them out onto the tarmac. “You’ll be passing in front of the engines,” he called loudly over the noise. “You’re going to follow me, but please listen as I give you a little safety briefing concerning operating around a jet with its engines going. Remember to always approach the jet from the nose and don’t go past the stairs. There’s no danger at all as long as you stay on the far side of the stairs from the engines. It’s going to be noisy. I can get you earplugs if you’d like.”

“We’ll be fine. Where is our luggage?”

“I have workers bringing your luggage as soon as you’ve boarded,” he answered. “Three suitcases and a garment bag, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Alright then, follow me please.”

The rat led them to the jet from the nose side, and then helped Jessie up the steps. Vil hugged her as she reached the hatch then ushered her inside, then she hugged Kit. Her panther bodyguards were in the jet, sitting on the chairs near the hatch, but Vil led them past them and towards the couch. “Close the hatch, Avery!” she shouted to the captain as she pulled Kit into the jet.

“But our luggage—“

“We have cargo doors, silly,” she told him. “You’re looking good! Did you like my condo?”

“I want to move in there,” Jessie laughed. “I never knew a place like that existed! It was like a cruise ship on dry land, and you own your stateroom!”

“Yeah, it’s awesome,” Vil agreed as she had them sit down. “That condo cost me six million dollars, but it’s worth it,” she noted, which made Jessie’s eyes bulge. “Sorry I’m late, there was some equipment thing that kept us from landing.”

“You and everyone else, from what the hangar people told us,” Kit added. “Oh, did you get a copy of the wedding video?”

“Of course I did!” she laughed. “Did it get to you?”

They nodded. “We have it with us.”

“You get some pictures of Key West?”

“Yeah, and we took a lot of pictures of the condo’s areas too, and the manager reminded us not to let anyone see them,” Jessie laughed.

“Yeah, they take privacy very, very seriously there. You can’t even show pictures of the grounds to people who aren’t owners or relatives of owners. So, show me your pics!” she demanded with a grin.

They fished their video camera and the camera they used out and showed them the pictures they took on the camera’s viewing screen. “We haven’t put them on DVD yet. The scuba guys had an underwater camera and they took some pictures of our scuba dive,” Jessie said, digging a DVD out of the carry-on. “That was so much fun!”

“Oh, I never did that when I was there. I was too chicken,” she laughed as Jessie dug a laptop out of the bag and booted it up. The jet began to move as Jessie put the DVD in the drive and accessed the pictures. “We went with another couple, a pair of wolves that were from California,” she said. “They totally snubbed us when they found out we weren’t rich,” Jessie laughed, pointing at a picture the divers took of all four of them in the water, near the boat.

“We’ll be taking off in a few minutes,” Avery’s voice called over the intercom. One of Vil’s bodyguards picked up her teacup and hurried it back to the galley.

“Thank you, Stav,” she called to him, then pointed to the monitor. “Wow, Jess, you look awesome in that bikini.”

“Thanks Vil,” she said with her cheeks ruffling slightly. “Look, here’s one of the stingrays we saw at the reef, the diver caught a pic of it. Oh, and they said this big floating jellyfish is called a Portuguese Man-O-War. They said it’s dangerous, so they kept us away from it. They even moved our dive

site further away because it was drifting where they wanted to take us. I guess it has a bad sting.”

“Got me. I was a business major, not biology.”

“I was history,” Kit chuckled. “If the professionals think it’s bad, that’s good enough for me.”

The plane took off as Jessie showed Vil the diving pictures, then she dug into the carry-on and came up with a toy ukulele on a little stand, with *Vilenne* written on the neck. “Here, we got you this in Key West to put on your desk,” Jessie told her with a smile. “Merry Christmas.”

Vil laughed. “If this is all you got me for Christmas after everything I did for you, you’re in soooo much trouble!”

Kit and Jessie both laughed. “We got you a rock too,” Kit told her.

“Oh, I’m so blessed. Did you buy this rock, or was it something you picked up out of the golf cart path?”

“You’ll see. We wrapped it for you.”

Vil looked through the pictures and video again as her panther bodyguards served them tea and small sandwiches, then opened up the big TV screen that folded into the roof of the plane and started a DVD of *The Shawshank Redemption* that Jessie had bought in Key West. Vil’s brow raised noticeably, and she handed Kit the small silver camera they’d used for their private pictures. “I don’t think I need to see those,” she said delicately, which made Kit laugh and Jessie’s entire body of fur stand on end.

“I *knew* those wouldn’t stay private!” she complained.

“Relax, I saw *him*, not *you*,” Vil winked. “He’s gotten a little more impressive since the last time I saw him naked, but it’s still nothing I haven’t seen before.”

Kit’s cheeks ruffled, and Jessie erupted into laughter.

“I suggest you pull that memory card and hide it. Hannah seems like the snooping type to me,” Vil suggested delicately.

“That’s a good idea,” Jessie said, pulling the small memory card out of the camera and reaching for her purse.

“Well, I’m glad you seem to have had fun while you were there,” she added with a mischievous wink.

“You should see the video,” Kit said in a deadpan voice. “It’s a good thing they don’t enforce American law there, or we’d both be going up the river for years after what we did to that poor chipmunk.”

Vil gave him a startled look, then exploded into laughter. “That’s another reason why I sent you there, so you could be wild and uninhibited,” she grinned.

“We were about as wild as a box of corn flakes, thank you very much,” Jessie said primly, stuffing the memory card deep into her purse and putting it back on the floor by the couch.

“I think those pictures on that card say you were as wild as a box of Rice Krispies, not Corn Flakes,” she winked.

Kit laughed despite himself.

It took them about three hours to get to Cincinnati, landing in a cold, miserable drizzle. Airport workers unloaded their luggage into a waiting

limo that pulled up by the plane on the tarmac, and one of the panthers held an umbrella for Vil as they disembarked. Kit held an umbrella for Jessie, carrying their bag as she carried her purse, moving quickly to the limo. Kit climbed in beside Jessie on the seat facing Vil, their backs to the driver, and one of the panthers got in with Vil as the other one got in the front seat. “Take us to the Williams house,” Vil ordered. “You two are staying there, aren’t you?”

“Well, nobody’s said we’re not,” Jessie laughed.

“From feast to famine,” Vil said with a sly little smile.

“Oh, hush,” Jessie replied primly.

Vil called ahead and warned Jessie’s parents they were coming, and they arrived about twenty minutes later, as the rain began to pound down with surprising vehemence. The panthers and the driver escorted them up to the front door with umbrellas, where John and Hannah were waiting for them on the porch of their rarely used front door. Jessie hugged her mother as Kit shook John’s paw, then Hannah embraced him as well, patting him on the back. “I’m glad you made it safely, we were worried with this rain,” she told him as the panthers and the driver brought their luggage up to the porch.

“It wasn’t raining at all until we landed,” he chuckled. “How was your flight back?”

“Boring, naturally. Your cousin arrived yesterday morning, she and Ben and Jenny are out at the mall right now,” she informed him.

“Oh? Have you locked her in the basement yet?”

John laughed. “She’s staying at the Sheraton, the closest hotel to here,” he explained. “We’re just out of room with you and Jessica here as well as Ben and Jenny. We offered her the couch, but she decided to go with a hotel.”

“Well, that’s not where I’m staying. I should pick her up,” Vil said as she hugged John, then hugged Hannah. “I’m staying at the Cincinnatian.”

“That’s not a surprise, dear,” Hannah chuckled.

“It’s not quite what I’m used to, but I got curious about it from what I read about it when I was looking for rooms here. It’s *only* four stars, after all,” she said airily. “However will I manage such *dismal* accommodations?”

“Be nice,” Kit warned.

“I’m just joking, bro, and they know it,” she grinned.

“Yes, she only pretends to be a stuck-up snob,” Hannah noted, which made Vil laugh. “Are you staying for dinner, dear?”

“I wish I could, Hannah, but I have a lot of work to do. I murdered my schedule for the wedding, and I’m still trying to catch up. I’ll have to pass tonight, and probably tomorrow as well.”

“But tomorrow’s Christmas Eve!” she protested. “We always have a family dinner on Christmas Eve and open one present. You have to be here!”

“I—alright, I’ll find time,” she said with a nod. “What are you having?”

“We have a small ham on Christmas Eve and turkey on Christmas day,” she answered.

“And leftovers for a month afterward,” John added lightly.

“Do I need to bring anything?”

“Well, we keep no spirits in the house, so if you want wine, you have to bring your own.”

“I’ll bring a bottle,” she said with a nod. “Oh, just one warning.”

“Yes?”

“If I bring wine, and Sheila’s there, she *will* want some.”

“She’s underage,” Hannah said simply.

“That’s a relative concept in our family, Hannah,” Vil told her. “The Vulpan children have had wine with dinner since they were twelve. Some of us even younger. It’s *our* tradition, just like the family dinner is *your* tradition. If you want, I won’t bring any. But you have to know what’s coming if I do, and be ready for it.”

Hannah looked torn for a moment, then nodded. “She *will not* drive, though,” she said. “If she takes a single sip, she will not leave this house under her own power.”

“I’ll pick her up and bring her to my hotel, so I can keep my thumb on her, Hannah,” she informed them. “You have her cell number, bro?”

“Yeah, I do,” he said, taking his phone out of his pocket. Vil read it and added it to her phone, then called her.

“Sheila. It’s Vil. Fine, just listen a sec. Pack your stuff, I’m moving you to my hotel so you don’t have to worry about getting back and forth. Well *leave*, silly femme, you can go again later tonight.” She glanced at Hannah and smiled. “She’s at the movies with your children,” she said, then returned to the phone and listened a moment. “You can stop trying to weasel out of it, girl. You *will* be moving to my hotel, or I’ll run you out of Cincinnati personally. I’m sure I’ll find it. Go back to your room and pack your things and meet me in the lobby.” She put her paw over the phone. “Do they still have taxis going here?”

“Of course dear, this isn’t a backwater village,” Hannah said with a smile.

“Okay, Ben and Jenny can either take a taxi back or they can go with us and I’ll have the limo bring them home. See you in ten minutes.” She turned off her Blackberry phone and put it back in her small purse. “I knew that was coming.”

“What happened?” Jessie asked.

“She has mischief on her mind, that’s what. She didn’t want to come to my hotel, even though it’s much more luxurious.” She looked to one of her bodyguards. “Would you mind terribly escorting Ben and Jenny back?”

“Not at all, madam,” he said with a nod.

“Thank you, Stav, you’re always a lifesaver,” she said to him gratefully.

“No need to usher the kids around, Mister Stav, they’re grown and in their hometown. But don’t worry about them, I’ll follow you to the hotel and bring them home,” John offered.

“That’s very kind of you, sir, but unnecessary,” he said, motioning with a large paw. “We can give them a ride in the limo, which they might enjoy.”

“It’s no trouble at all. And it gets me out of the house while Hannah works herself up to asking Jessie about her honeymoon,” he grinned. “Or I could just go with you and ride in the limo myself,” he proposed.

Hannah gave him a cold glare.

The panther laughed. “Well, if you insist.”

“That’s a deal, John,” Vil agreed.

“No problem at all, let me get my coat and boots,” he said, stepping back in and hurrying back to the laundry room, where they kept their outdoor gear.

“I’ll see you all tomorrow afternoon, then,” Vil said, giving Hannah another short hug, then she embraced Jessie and Kit at the same time, an arm over each of them. “I’m so glad to see that ring on your finger, little bro,” she chuckled in his ear.

“You’re next,” he teased.

“The planet would explode if I ever got married,” she snorted as the limo driver stepped up and prepared to cover her with an umbrella, and John returned with his boots and coat.

They came through the living room and kitchen, back to the laundry room that served as an entry area for the back door, and Kit took Jessie’s coat for her and hung it on the rack by the door, then removed his own as she bent down and took off her shoes. Hannah took Kit’s coat and hung it for him as he took his shoes off, then went back and picked up two of the

suitcases from the porch and carried them up to Jessie's old room. Jessie was right behind him with the third suitcase, and Hannah carried the garment bag. "Is this—"

"No, Mom, it's not," she answered before she could finish. "I shipped my dress and Kit's tux to Rick the day after we got to Florida. I was going to just carry them, but Vil didn't want to take any undue risks with them. She had them shipped back to Texas like they were a Ming vase," she laughed. "We'll pick them up from him when we get home."

"What's in here then?"

"The dress I wore and the suit Kit wore in Boston. We're not quite as attached to those," she giggled.

"Amen," Kit grunted in approval. "I might burn that suit."

"Oh dear, tell me what happened, Kit."

"My sister invited my *family* to the ceremony in Boston," he grunted. "And I had no idea they were there. I literally saw them when the bishop led us in to begin the ceremony."

"Oh my. Why did she do that?"

"I still don't entirely understand why she did that," he said as he hung the garment bag in the closet. "I avoided murdering them if only because of the sanctity of the church," he said, glancing at Jessie, "and because this little trooper here did the talking for me," he added, which made her laugh.

"They were so arrogant and stuck-up, I just couldn't go without saying it," she told him.

"I think I need to hear this entire story in order," she noted.

“There wasn’t much to it, Hannah,” Kit said as he put a suitcase up on the bed and opened it. “The ceremony in Boston was already planned, to honor the wishes of my mother. Well, we get there and everything’s fine outside the fact that the Archbishop of Boston is there to do the ceremony himself,” he said with a frown.

“We walk in at the start of the ceremony, and they’re all sitting on the pews by the altar,” Jessie continued as she took a pawful of folded clothes from Kit and put them in the dresser. “They didn’t disrupt the ceremony or anything, at least. They were quiet all the way through. After it was over, we just tried to get out, but Vil stopped us and his family came over while she was talking to us. They were so *rude*!” she said angrily. “You should have heard it, Mom! They just talked like they never did a single thing to him, and then all but demanding him to do what they wanted! Like he was just one of their *servants*!” she flared.

Kit put a paw on her shoulder, and she blew out her breath and nodded. “Right about there, this little soldier here went off on them. I was never more proud of her,” he chuckled. “She dressed them down right there in the church and told them what they really were. I don’t think anyone has *ever* talked to them like that,” he chuckled. “But, they got what they wanted.”

“How so, Kit?”

“They heard it from us that we don’t want their damn money,” he told her honestly. “Actually, they heard it from *her*,” he corrected, patting Jessie on the shoulder. “That’s what it’s all about to them, Hannah. Money. I don’t know if we told you, but the lawsuit’s basically over.”

“Jessie mentioned something about it. She didn’t go into specifics, she just said that Vil had a lock.”

“Yeah, it’s over,” Kit said. “We can’t really say how or why, but it is. Vil’s going to win, and that means I’ll be named heir and executor of Dad’s estate. That had my family in a panic, because the deal that split the family fortune up among them will get nullified when Vil wins the case. *I’m* the one that’ll have all the money. Every penny.”

“Ah. So, they began kissing up.”

“No, they can’t even do that, Hannah,” he chuckled.

“You’d think they would, but you should have heard them, Mom! They talked like them disowning him had nothing to do with anything, and his aunt just basically *ordered* him to rejoin the family! You’d think that if you were in that position, you’d at least try to be *nice* to him! Their arrogance was absolutely unbelievable!”

“Love, the very idea that they’d have to submit to me is just beyond them,” he told her. “I’ve broken from the family, and I married a *cat*. That one fact made me amazed that Uncle Zach didn’t pull out a gun and try to shoot us right there in the cathedral. Zach is the most rabid purist that ever walked this earth. I’m amazed he could even manage to talk to me without trying to punch me in the nose.”

“That’s why he couldn’t suck up to you. He’s blinded by his hate, but not so blinded that he did something that would make *you* disown *him*,” Hannah said after a brief moment. “Greed is more powerful than hate, but that hate tainted his attempts to be nice. So, what are you going to do with it, Kit?”

“Give it back. Every penny,” he said honestly and immediately, giving another stack of clothes to Jessie. “I don’t *want* that money, Hannah. It’s a curse. It’s tainted. It would never bring me any happiness. That money is

why I have this,” he said, pointing at his ear. “If I take it, it’ll change my marriage, it’ll change everyone around us, it’ll even change my relationship with you. It’s just not worth the baggage it comes with.”

“It’ll change those relationships either way when your friends find out you had it and gave it up.”

“Not as much as it would if I had it and they knew it,” he answered. “Money does things to furs, Hannah. It corrupts. It destroys. I don’t want any part of it.”

“I think you’re not the only opinion here, Kit,” Hannah told him. “I think *Jessie* has a say in this, or your vows don’t mean that much, do they?”

“He’s right, Mom,” she said seriously. “When I saw the rest of his family, I finally *understood* what he’s been saying all this time. Seeing it in action was like a slap in my face. He’s right, he really is. The Vulpan family fortune is a curse, Mom, it’s a curse that’s destroyed his family. I don’t want our marriage cursed, so I told his family *myself* that we don’t want a dime of their fortune. I fully support his plan to just give the money back to them, because he’s right.”

“You’re sure, dear? Think very carefully. I’ll agree that when you have too much money, it changes you, but a small amount, invested wisely, could supplement your working income quite nicely and allow you to never worry about money.”

“We already never have to worry about money, Mom,” Jessie told him. “If we ever have an emergency, we can always ask Vil for help. She’ll help us. She wants to do a lot more than help us, but Kit won’t let her. And since it’s not our money, and we fully know we’re taking it from someone else, it’ll keep us from getting crazy.”

“You really have thought about this,” Hannah said after a moment, as Jessie finished putting the clothes in the suitcase away.

“How could I not, Mom? Sure, Kit’s disowned, but the money’s still there, and even I thought about *what if* a few times. But when Vil offered to pay for the wedding, I realized then that she’d never let us slip into a deep hole. If we ask her for help, she’ll help us. But since we’re asking for something that’s not ours, we can’t go crazy, or we’ll lose respect for ourselves, and Vil will lose her respect for us.”

“You raised one hell of a daughter, Hannah,” Kit said appreciatively, opening the next suitcase. “Now do you see why I love her so much? She’s got quite a mind.”

“That’s not her mind talking, it’s her moral upbringing,” Hannah said. “But I’m proud of you, dear. You’ve certainly kept your head about this.”

“It was keep my head or lose my husband,” she said honestly. “Kit would have left me if he thought I was a gold-digger.”

“In a heartbeat,” he admitted honestly, handing her a few pairs of jeans.

She looked around curiously. “Isn’t this more than what you left with?” she asked.

Kit laughed. “Jessie kinda went crazy on a shopping tour of Key West,” he told her. “The condo place had to find us a third suitcase to fit it all.”

“Not all of this is *mine!*” she said quickly. “I seem to remember seeing you walking out of Emersons with several bags!”

“True, but you bought more than me.”

“Well, that’s *technically* true, but I’m a girl. Girls have more clothing demands,” she said primly.

“You don’t have to dress up for me,” he chuckled. “As far as I’m concerned, the less you have on, the prettier you are.”

“Kit!” she complained, her cheeks ruffling as he pointed at Hannah.

“We’re married now, love, I’m allowed to say things like that in front of your mother,” he said with a sly smile.

“Kit.”

“Yes, Hannah?”

“Behave.”

“Yes ma’am,” he said, coming over and kissing Jessie on the cheek, which made her giggle and put her paw around his shoulder.

After they unpacked, they went back downstairs to look at the tree. It was a seven foot artificial tree with a large number of delicate glass ornaments, some bulbs, some blown glass, some sculpted. Hannah seemed to collect Christmas ornaments, for there were many different kinds on the tree, interspersed with tiny glass candy canes with frosted stripes and twinkling white lights. The tree was curiously without the kind of color one would expect to see on a Christmas tree, but it was still very beautiful. The glass caught the white light of the bulbs on the tree and refracted it, and at some angles the tree seemed to be alive with a thousand scillinting rainbows. It was a stunningly beautiful effect.

“Woah,” Kit breathed as he stared at the tree, the area beneath it absolutely stuffed with gifts and presents in a riot of different colors and styles of wrapping paper.

“John has his Bengal Den, I have my Christmas tree,” Hannah said modestly, stepping past him and patting him on the cheek, then sauntering into the living room as if she’d just won some kind of argument.

They added the gifts they’d bought in Florida to that huge pile, so many that they had overflowed the tree and were stacked against the wall behind it, taking up almost half of the wall. Just by casual glance, there had to be well over a hundred presents under and around the tree! Kit inspected them, and realized that over two-thirds of them were from Vil, to all the members of Jessie’s family, and there were also quite a few from Sheila. That unsettled Kit just a little bit. Vil loved to meddle, and it looked like she was starting to meddle with Jessie’s family as well, starting, as she usually did, by worming her way into their heart with gifts and kindness, which put her in a position to exert her influence on them. Kit loved his sister, but he also wasn’t blind to her faults, and that was one of them. Vil *was* a Vulpan, and she shared many of the family traits. She sought to dominate, and unlike his aunts and uncles, Vil’s type of domination was from the kindly overseer point of view, in her mind doing it for their own good. Vil would shower Jessie’s family with gifts, but there were hidden hooks in those presents that would snare Jessie’s family and give Vil a measure of control over them.

But then again, John and Hannah were very wise and down to earth, and wouldn’t be easy to tempt with Vil’s presents and her money. But Jenny and Ben, on the other hand, might be easier for her to sway.

“These are from Vil. These are too. And so are these,” Jessie said, frowning. “She’s trying to buy my family, Kit!”

“I doubt she’ll have much luck,” Kit told her. “Hannah’s not the type you can buy.”

“We fully expected something like this,” Hannah said as she came back into the living room, carrying two cups of Earl Gray tea, copying what Jessie had bought for his visit. “Vilienne *is* a rich woman, Jessie, and she’s flaunting it just a little bit for us by showering us with gifts. But, I think there’s also some love there,” she said with a slight smile. “Vilienne is very attached to you, Jessica. She’s just trying to show you how much she cares about you by being lavish.”

“Well, this is a bit too lavish,” Jessie complained. “There has to be thirty gifts here from her!”

“Closer to fifty, if you add the gifts she got you two and Sheila,” Hannah corrected.

“Vil bought gifts for Sheila?” Kit asked in surprise.

Hannah nodded. “Sheila brought a whole trunkful of gifts as well. About thirty of them down there are from her. Sheila got here yesterday and immediately had Jenny and Ben take her to the mall,” she chuckled. “I think they just had to flaunt their wealth a little bit.”

“That’s not far from the truth,” Kit nodded. “I think it’s going to be a pretty interesting Christmas for you, Hannah. Vil and Sheila have very deep bank accounts, and neither of them are afraid to spend it.”

“Well, I have a son-in-law now, so that automatically makes it different,” she told him.

“I’ll do my best to make sure you hate me, just as a proper in-law relationship should be,” he said in a light voice, stepping up and kissing her on the cheek.

Hannah gave him a frosty look as Jessie laughed, then she actually dared to reach down and swat him on the bottom. “You’re already on thin ice as it is, young male,” she warned. “Don’t go looking for trouble that’s already looking for you.”

“Well, I don’t have to be nice anymore,” he teased flippantly. “We’re already married. Now the real me can ooze through the cracks in my polite and gentlefurly veneer.”

“Jessica,” Hannah said, snapping her fingers and pointing. Kit didn’t see what that meant until the throw pillow from the couch appeared in Hannah’s paw, and she belted him right in the head with it. Kit staggered back, nearly spilling his tea, and retreated as Hannah advanced on him threateningly with the pillow, then ran for the stairs.

“Now I see where she gets her pillow skills,” Kit laughed as he ran upstairs and to safety as quickly as he could while carrying a half-full cup of tea.

“I taught her well!” Hannah shouted after him as he fled, then he heard the two femmes share a laugh as he retreated to the safety of Jessie’s room.

Kit wasn’t surprised that Hannah wasn’t afraid to play, but he was a little surprised that Jessie got her deadly pillow combat skills from her mother.

John returned not long afterward with Ben and Jenny, and Sheila arrived not thirty seconds after he pulled into the driveway. The limo was

pulling away from the house, but there was also a rental car sitting out on the street. Sheila hugged Jessie, then patted her on the belly. “So, there something growing in here yet?” she asked.

Jessie laughed. “I don’t think so, but I wish there was,” she answered.

They spent the evening just hanging around in the basement. Kit sat at the end of the couch, and Jessie sat snuggled against him as they chatted with Jessie’s family, then showed them the video and pictures from the wedding using the big TV and their DVD player, and the family showed Jessie and Kit the pictures they’d taken. While they watched, Kit moved all their pictures taken during the honeymoon they were willing to show to others onto a DVD, then showed those after they went through all the wedding pictures. Jessie’s family was amazed by the pure luxury of Vil’s condo, for they’d never seen or heard of a place like it before.

“They don’t advertise, Hannah,” Kit told her. “You either know about it, or you don’t.”

“Like *Fight Club*,” Jenny giggled.

“More like *Eyes Wide Shut*,” Sheila amended. “Places like that don’t just cater to what you can get legally.”

Jessie nodded. “When we arrived, the concierge said as much. I was a little shocked.”

“The rich have their own rules,” Kit told them.

Sheila got her first cooking lesson from Hannah that night. While everyone else was watching a movie downstairs, Sheila helped Hannah prepare broiled salmon, mashed potatoes, asparagus, salad, and banana pudding for dessert. After dinner, Kit volunteered to do the dishes, which

John joked would set a bad precedent for the males in the house to volunteer for chores, at least until Hannah gave him a cold look and told him to take out the garbage.

Though Vil was too busy to come visit, she wasn't too busy to call. She talked to everyone in the house by turns for about five minutes that evening, while they were watching another movie down in the Bengal Den. It wasn't all that exciting of a movie to Kit, and he nodded off somewhere in the middle of it. Much to his surprise, he woke up some time later in bed, of all places, all undressed and with Jessie wrapped up with him. He blinked and tried to get up, but that was quite impossible with Jessie's dead weight pinning him to the bed. He got his head up enough to see that it was nearly one in the morning, and he couldn't remember getting up and coming up to bed.

"Ben carried you and I undressed you, now go back to sleep," Jessie murmured, getting a better grip on his shoulder and hiking more of her weight up onto his chest to push him back to the mattress.

They lounged in bed until nearly eleven. Kit woke up groggily and realized he'd slept over twelve hours after looking at the clock, and boy, did his back register that amount of time in an incompatible bed when he woke up. He untangled himself from Jessie and sat on the edge of the bed, hissing in pain with both paws on his lower back, his tail shivering.

Did he really sleep that long? The last he remembered, it was around ten, and they were watching one of John's favorite movies, *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World*, and he didn't remember falling asleep. He didn't remember coming up to the room, or anything. One minute he was

watching the movie, the next he was here, some thirteen hours later, with a sand-filled head and a back that was threatening to go on strike. He stood up and stretched, which made his back pop loudly, and he looked around to try to get his bearings as his brain attempted to re-engage itself.

A paw on his tail told him that Jessie was awake. He looked back and saw her sitting up even as she pulled his tail, forcing him to sit back down, then she snaked her arms around him from behind and kissed him on the corner of his neck, where his white ruff bordered his red fur. “I can’t believe we slept so long,” she said sleepily, resting her muzzle on his shoulder.

“Guess those four days in Florida caught up with us,” he chuckled, leaning against her.

“How’s your back?”

“A little gimpy this morning, but I’ll make it,” he answered.

He heard her hum in her throat, then began to purr, sliding her paws down his chest as she cuddled up more against his back. Kit knew her well, and knew that she was in the first stages of pulling him back down into that bed. “Jessie,” he said as she started biting gently at his ear.

“Mmm?”

“I’d usually never say no to you, but I’m not sure my back is ready for that. Can we wait a while?”

She giggled in his ear. “We need to get back to reality anyway,” she agreed, grabbing his shoulders and kissing his ear. “But I’m going to hold you to that *later*. I think I’m going to make sure Santa skips us tonight, because I’m being a bad girl.”

Kit's tail shivered at her husky tone, and he laughed. "Tease. I'm going to go down and get some breakfast."

"I'm going to take a shower, I'll be down in a bit," she told him.

Hannah was already busy cooking when he came down, but she had a kettle of water waiting to be put on for his tea. "It's about time," she noted. "I was afraid to come wake you up. I wasn't sure if you were sleeping."

"I think it was the crash after the honeymoon," he said, scrubbing his face with his paws. "I don't even remember falling asleep last night."

"Ben carried you upstairs," she told him.

"Well, that explains that," he said as he went to where they kept the tea last time he was there, and found it waiting for him. It was a new box of Earl Grey, no doubt Hannah just mirrored what Jessie bought over Thanksgiving. "I was wondering how I got up there."

"You feel alright?"

"Stiff, Jessie's bed does not like me. Where's the aspirin?"

"Medicine cabinet," she answered as she began to glaze the small ham.

Kit made a cup of tea for himself and Jessie, and after taking some Advil, he sat at the table and read the newspaper that John had left. Jessie came down while he was reading the sports section, a towel around her hair and wearing a bathrobe, going straight for the tea sitting in a cup on the table and swallowing almost all of it in one long draw.

"Morning, Jessica," Hannah said from the kitchen. "You alright?"

"I slept way too long," she complained, putting her paw to her head. "I feel like I have a headache."

“Honeymoon crash,” Kit chuckled.

“Probably,” she laughed in agreement.

The day was spent more or less idly. Kit was introduced to Ben’s Xbox 360 by Ben and Jenny, and found out that Jenny was one of those rare creatures on earth, a girl that knew how to play Halo, and wasn’t that bad at it either. He also found out that playing Xbox on that huge TV downstairs was awesome. Jessie wasn’t a gamer girl type, she instead spent the time watching her husband and siblings play while she sat on the far couch, legs tucked under her, knitting using her mother’s knitting supplies. Kit often forgot that Jessie was very good at knitting, because she’d been too busy lately to indulge in what was for her a stress-reducing hobby. She didn’t knit seriously, only for fun, but she was more than capable.

“Making baby booties over there, Jessie?” Jenny teased as she took up the needles from her mother’s knitting bag.

“Nah, thinking of a potholder,” she answered. “You still knit?”

“Hell no!” Jenny laughed. “I hate it.”

“At least you can make your own clothes,” Kit chuckled.

“I’ll have people make my clothes for me, thank you,” Ben said as they loaded up a new game.

“I’m being left out,” Jenny complained. “My sister marries a rich guy, and my brother’s gonna pull down millions of dollars a year once he reaches the NFL. I’ll be the family pauper!”

“Suuuure, Miss Future Doctor,” Jessie teased. “If anyone’s gonna be the pauper around here, it’ll be me. Kit’s not rich, he’s just from a rich

family that he hates.”

“Pft, you’re still rich, even if you’re broke. You know, that snooty blue blood. Kit’ll infect you with it.”

“Infection’s a good way to look at it,” Kit chuckled. “I always did look at being rich as a disease.”

“Well, as long as I don’t lose my head,” Ben said modestly. “I just hope I don’t. I don’t want to be one of those spoiled guys like T.O., no matter how good I get. Guys like him forget that football is a *team* sport. It takes the other ten guys on the field to help you look great.”

“Well said, son, well said,” John said as he came down into the den. “Now, we just have to hope that Cincinnati drafts you when you get out of college. I’d suffer a nervous breakdown if you went to the Browns or the Steelers.”

“Your son playing for your most hated enemies,” Kit laughed. “That would be cruel to you!”

“I wouldn’t know what to do with myself,” John chuckled as he nodded in agreement. “At least this will be the year!”

“He says that any time the Bengals reach the playoffs,” Jenny told Kit.

“Hey! You have to back your team with your heart and soul, Little Miss Doubter!” he told her. “The Bengals are winning the Superbowl this year!”

“I’ll put a bet on that, Dad,” she teased.

“What is this I hear? You spend one year in Columbus, and now you’re doubting the Bengals? That’s it, young lady, you’re coming back home and

finishing school here!”

Jenny laughed. “No way! I still love my Bengals, Dad, but I’m a football *realist*. They’re gonna lose their first playoff game, and the Colts are gonna go to the Superbowl.”

“I’ll take some of that action,” Kit said immediately. “The Patriots had a damn good year this year.”

“Is that an offered bet I hear?” Jenny said tauntingly.

“Ten bucks on the Patriots to go to the Superbowl,” Kit offered, digging a ten out of his pocket and slamming it down on the coffee table.

“You’re on!” Jenny said immediately. “I’ll put my ten on the Colts!”

“And I’ll put my ten on the Bengals!” John added.

“And if nobody wins, that money goes to the house,” Hannah said as she came down into the basement. “Thirty dollars would be a nice start on a dinner fund for Outback the next time I feel like going out to eat.”

“You have a deal, hon,” John told her.

Sheila and Vil arrived that afternoon, and they had the Williams traditional Christmas Eve dinner. Stav and Marcus seemed reluctant when Hannah pushed them to the table, but gave in and seated themselves to eat with the family, though they said not a word. The food was excellent, but it was the company that made it wonderful. Vil gelled very well with Jessie’s family, but he was surprised by how well Sheila got along with them. She bantered with Hannah almost dangerously, teased John and Jenny, and was a bit too forward with Ben, but Jessie’s family accepted her despite those issues. They coaxed her into telling her life story to them, about what it was

like growing up a Vulpan, and her new life as a semi-autonomous young woman going to Harvard. “It’s not that bad,” she said. “My morning class sucks, but I enjoy my business classes, and I’m actually getting decent grades!” she said proudly.

“Wow, Harvard, I wonder what it’s like,” Jenny mused.

“It’s kinda boring, actually,” she said. “The students are all stuck up, either because they’re rich or because they managed to get into *Harvard*. There’s a lot of mutual butt-kissing going on on campus. The only fun furs are the legacy students, like me. At least we know how to have fun,” she grinned.

“I was there for the degree, not because it’s what was expected of me,” Vil said. “I went from Harvard to Oxford,” she explained. “I got my political science Master’s from Oxford, and my Bachelor’s and Business Master’s degrees from Harvard.”

“Prestigious,” John chuckled.

“You don’t get legacied into Oxford,” she said, a touch smugly. “You *earn* it.”

“You have two degrees?” Jenny said, a bit surprised.

“For what I do, understanding both politics and business is essential,” she nodded in explanation. “Being a CEO of a company like ours requires someone who deals with both politicians and businessfurs, so I covered both bases. Oxford won’t take legacies and it’s fearsome competition to get in, so my getting into Oxford for my political science Master’s program just proved to my father how serious I was about running the company after

him.” She sighed. “He died just a few months after I finished my thesis and took my MCE.”

“You getting a Doctorate?” John asked.

“I’m already working on it,” she nodded. “It’s very hard because of how busy I am, but Harvard is letting me slide on the time limits on some of the required coursework. I do what I can when I can, the only real problem I’m gonna have will be when it’s time to do my dissertation.”

“Doctorate in what?”

“Business, but I wouldn’t mind eventually getting my Doctorate in political science too,” Vil answered. “Unlike the rest of the family, I’m actually entertaining the idea of going into politics after I’ve done the CEO thing for a while, and one of us has an heir to take my place,” she chuckled.

“Oh, no, don’t even *think* of trying to get my kids in the chair,” Kit warned.

“Well, I’m thinking more along the lines of *me*,” she said. “I’m coming up on thirty, bro, and I don’t have any kids. I’m starting to hear the ticking coming from down here,” she said, pointing under her ribcage. “The problem is, I can’t find any males that even remotely interest me. Maybe I’ll go to England and look,” she mused. They all can’t be like Cybil over there.”

“There’s lots of males around, Vilenne, you just have to look,” Hannah told her.

“Yeah, well, I do have a few prerequisites,” she said with a smile. “He has to be accomplished, intelligent, and, well, no offense, but a fox. I’m no purist, but to be honest, I just don’t get turned on by males outside my

species. I could go for a gray or silver fox, but I'm not attracted to males who aren't foxes. They just don't do anything for me at all."

"There's nothing wrong at all with that, dear, as long as you're honest about it," Hannah told her. "And that you'd look at grays and silvers shows that you're *not* a purist."

"Thanks, I was hoping that wouldn't offend you," she chuckled.

"Well, dear, no doubt you'll have no trouble attracting a male."

"Yeah, but attracting the *right* male is the trick," she said. "I don't want a male version of Cybil."

Kit nodded in agreement. "One of the curses of money, Hannah. The leeches."

"That's a good term for them," Sheila laughed. "You have no idea how many guys hit on me cause I'm a Vulpan. They want to marry into the money. So I just screw them and leave them. That way they get a taste of what they'll never have again," she smiled.

"Sheila, that's not very proper," Hannah said disapprovingly.

"Hey, I'm not a proper girl," she grinned in reply.

"It's a losing battle, Hannah," Vil said with a chuckle.

"Yes, and she'll lose it," Hannah said frostily, giving the young vixen a steady look.

After dinner, Jessie's family traditionally opened one present, and they moved to the living room for it. Hannah was the one that chose them, pulling gifts at random from the huge pile, one for each of them. Ben was the first, getting a small box from Sheila. He opened it to reveal a necklace

with a medallion of the Ohio State logo, a huge **O** with the words *OHIO STATE* curved through its lower half, gold letters with a silver background, connected to a thick silver chain. There was a single small diamond and a single small ruby above and below the text of the logo, representing the school colors of red and white.

“Wow, it’s beautiful, Sheila!” he said with wide eyes. “Thanks!”

“I had to get you something with your school logo on it,” she grinned.

Jenny was handed a small box from her father. When she opened it, she pulled out small piece of paper. “What’s this?” she asked curiously.

“A gift card good anywhere on campus at Ohio State, dear,” he told her. “We got you some real presents, to be sure, but we also thought you might like to have a little extra spending money next semester.”

“Aww, thanks Dad!” she said sincerely, kissing him on the cheek. “No doubt I’ll get some mileage out of this!”

“It’s rechargeable, dear, just like a pre-paid credit card,” he told her.

Jessie was next, being handed a medium sized box that was from Vil. She opened it to reveal a Blackberry, the same model as what she and Kit had. “I figured it was time to subvert you into the ranks of the Crackberries, Jess,” she grinned.

“Well, I love Kit’s,” she laughed. “Thanks for getting me one of my own!”

Hannah picked out a smaller box for John, also from Vil. He opened it and removed a small letter. He read it, and his eyes widened. “Vilenne!” he gasped.

“What is it, Dad?” Jenny asked.

“It’s a luxury box at the stadium!” he said. “And four season tickets for next year on the first row at the *fifty yard line*!”

“Kit said you were a nut for your football team, so I had to do something about it,” she grinned. “I figured you wouldn’t be happy unless you were right on the field, so the tickets are for you, and the luxury box is for your guests or when you don’t feel like sitting in the rain.”

“A *true* fan endures the same elements as the team!” he said with a laugh. “But still, this is wonderful! I can invite people to the box and let them watch the game while I sit in the stands like a *real* fan!” He got up and hugged Vil, then gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Hey, you’re family now, and I love spoiling the family I care about,” she winked.

“I’m looking forward to tomorrow now,” Jenny laughed.

“You better, hon, I have plans,” Vil said with a smile.

“It’s going to be hard to top that one,” Hannah laughed as she picked one at random for Kit. It was from Sheila, about the size of a shoe box. He opened it and found a box, then opened the box and gawked.

It was a metal statuette of Jessie.

Naked.

“Umm, this one’s not fit for family viewing,” he said, his cheeks ruffling as he put the lid back on, which made them all explode into laughter.

“Sheila!” Vil chided. “What did you get him?”

“Lemme see,” she said, coming over and looking over his shoulder. “Oh Kit, give it up, this isn’t dirty! Not saying there aren’t a few dirty ones in there, but this one’s *art*.”

“Jessie might disagree.”

“Pft,” she said, reaching into the box and pulling it out. “See, it’s just a figurine. Since Kit has this thing for cats, I got him one of a cat.”

Hannah looked closely at the figurine. “Sheila, that statue has Jessica’s face.”

“Yes, well, the artist needed something to go on,” she winked. “So I gave him some pictures of Jessie.”

“That’s me? I’m not wearing any clothes!” she protested, her face poofing out.

“Well it *is* quite a nice piece,” Vil said professionally, taking it from Kit. “It’s very good. Did he do this as a cast?”

“I dunno, I guess, I don’t know anything about how artists do this crap,” she shrugged. “It just looks good, that’s all I know.”

“There’s nothing nude about it, either, Jess,” Vil said. “Look. It’s just a silhouette, no detail. It’s very nice. Who did this for you, Sheila? I might commission one for myself, it’s quite lovely.”

“Well, the proportions are right,” Jenny grinned, which earned her a smack from Jessie.

“I think I’ll avoid Sheila’s presents from here out,” Hannah said, which made them all laugh. She pulled a gift out from John, and opened it to show them a very handsome blue dress. “Why John, it’s lovely! Thank you!”

“It made me think of you when I saw it in the window, hon,” he told her. “It’s definitely *you*.”

“It is at that, dear,” she nodded, standing up and holding it against herself.

Hannah handed a gift to Sheila, and Kit recognized it as one they’d bought in Florida for her. “Uh, Hannah,” Kit said, “pick another one.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I don’t think *that* gift would be appropriate.”

“Oh, it’s a dirty gift? A joke? Gimme!” Sheila said, snatching it out of Hannah’s paws and tearing it open. She exploded into laughter when she revealed a latex blow-up doll, Horny Harry. Hannah gave Kit and Jessie a heated look, then she laughed ruefully as the entire room exploded into laughter. “We found it in Key West, and we naturally thought of you, Sheila,” Kit told her with a laugh.

“Oh baby, and he’s cute too! I’ll try him out tonight and let you know. You have a bike pump I can borrow, John?” she winked. Hannah gasped, but Kit and Vil almost fell off the couch laughing.

“Oh my,” Hannah, sighed. “I should have fought this marriage, I see.”

“Oh, go on, dear, and give Vil a present,” John chuckled.

Vil received a small gift from John and Hannah, and opened it to reveal a pair of very elegant chain and diamond earrings, three diamonds hanging from mounts that dangled from an emerald at the post, by delicate little golden chains. “Oh my, these are lovely. Thank you,” she said, removing the ruby earrings she had in her ears and immediately put them on.

“We thought they’d go well with the kinds of suits you wear, dear,” Hannah said. “And they look elegant enough to be worn by a woman of your means.”

“That they are, Hannah,” Vil nodded.

“Now then,” Hannah said, taking out two small black-paper wrapped gifts, and offering them up and across the room, where Stav and Marcus stood near the front door. “We couldn’t very well ignore you two, now could we?”

“You’re quite gracious, madam,” one of the panthers said with a surprised look. He read the tag and then handed it to his brother, then opened it. Inside was a pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses, and not the cheap ones, which made him chuckle and hold them up. “How thoughtful! And they’re even my size,” he said, putting them on.

“Well, you two just looked the sunglasses type,” John chuckled. “We hope you like them.”

“I’ll wear them quite a bit, sir,” the other panther said with a sincere smile, trying his on. “Good sunglasses are a requirement for our line of work, so onlookers can’t tell exactly where our eyes are looking. And you even got the proper tint,” he said with a satisfied nod. “Just dark enough to hide the eyes but not so dark we can’t see in dimly lit rooms. Very well done, sir.”

“Way to make me feel rotten there, Hannah,” Sheila said darkly. “I totally forgot to get them anything!”

“There’s still time if you hurry, dear,” Hannah said with a slight smile.

“That’s quite alright, Miss Sheila,” the first panther said with a wave of his large paw. “We quite understand, and honestly weren’t expecting any gifts at all. But we do appreciate that you’d get us one if you could.”

Kit and John cleaned up after dinner so the girls could relax, and Vil and Sheila left not long afterward. To her credit, Hannah had never said a word about Sheila drinking wine at her table, and after Vil and Sheila left, Jenny gave her mother a strange smile. “So, Mom, think I might try a glass of wine at dinner tomorrow?”

“Over my dead body,” she answered immediately. “I bent for Sheila because it’s a tradition of her family, and for no other reason.”

“We need a tradition like that.”

“When you have children of your own, you can *start* one,” Hannah told her sternly. “But you will not taste a single drop of alcohol in this house until you are of legal age.”

“Why couldn’t I be born into a *fun* family?” she sighed as she walked away.

“I’ll show you some fun, young lady!” Hannah barked, which made Jenny laugh and run away, retreating for the stairs.

Kit was feeling a little tired after dinner and presents, and lounged about downstairs as the family watched a movie on the big TV. Jessie and him took up a whole couch since he was laying on his side with his head in her lap as she played with his hair. About halfway through the movie, he yawned and sat up. “I think I’m gonna head to bed guys,” he said. “All that sleep I got last night has messed up my internal clock or something.”

“I’ll come with you, love,” Jessie told him. “I’ve seen this movie anyway.”

“Sleep well, you two,” John said as they got up.”

“You’d better not wake me up,” Jenny called, wagging her tail at them. “So get it done *before* I go to bed.”

“Jennifer Ophelia Williams!” Hannah barked, which made Ben laugh. “Behave yourself!”

“I am, mother,” she answered calmly. “They’re married and going to bed *way* too early to be sleeping. You’re not the one whose bedroom is beside theirs. I’m not sure I want to hear all that moaning and the bed knocking against the wall while I’m trying to sleep.”

Jessie’s entire body of fur stood straight out, but John laughed with his son. “Leave her alone, dear, she does have something of a valid point,” he smiled, which made Jessie gasp.

“Dad!”

“Go on, and have fun, you two,” John said mildly, though he was smiling.

“Well, I think we can do that,” Kit said, taking Jessie’s paw and leading her away from her family.

It was certainly the most momentous Christmas ever for the Williams family.

Vil and Sheila arrived at seven in the morning, sharp. Vil was wearing, of all things, a sweater and a pair of jeans, the first time Kit had seen her out

of business clothes since before he was disowned, and Sheila was wearing a brand new black Cincinnati Bearcats tee shirt and a pair of jeans. Kit and Jessie woke up around six thirty, got dressed, and went down to help Hannah cook breakfast of omelets and sausage for everyone. Vil and Sheila arrived as they were sitting down to breakfast, and Hannah cooked them up something as well. Jenny kept looking at the huge stack of gifts like a child, until her parents finished breakfast and announced it was time to open the gifts.

Kit was a little unsettled about it. If the football tickets were any indication, then Vil had gone nuts with the shopping, and Sheila wouldn't be that far behind...and his fears turned out to be justified. Hannah seemed to wisely sense that anything opened after Vil and Sheila's gifts would seem paltry by comparison, so all other gifts were opened first. After that, though, they started on the gifts from their rich in-laws. Vilenne's gifts to his wife's family were *extravagant*. Each member of Jessie's family got their own digital camera, top of the line Sabletech laptop, and BlackBerry. She showered Hannah with kitchen appliances, nice clothes, jewelry, a plasma TV for their room, and tickets to a March two week cruise through the Caribbean for a vacation. John received clothes, electronic gadgets, a blazing fast desktop for the house, and a football signed by every member of the Cincinnati Bengals in a glass case. Ben was given two game consoles in addition to a laptop, a desktop for his dorm when he went to Ohio State, and all kinds of other gadgets and toys a college kid would love. Jenny too received a plethora of useful equipment for a college student, a lot of clothes, her own laptop and desktop, and a mess of software for medical students, some of it quite expensive. Vil gave Kit and Jessie all kinds of things for their apartment, some jewelry for Jessie, new software for Kit so he could play more with photo and magazine editing, clothes, two new

laptops to act as backups in case theirs were damaged, and an ultimate kick-ass desktop that could handle absolutely anything Kit could throw at it, a desktop that put his at home to shame. She also gave them some vouchers for new furniture, since their furniture at home wasn't exactly coordinated, being a mix of bought and donated pieces that served their purpose, but didn't look like they belonged together.

Sheila too went crazy with the gifts, but Sheila also showed she had a sense of humor. Each of them got one or two gag gifts, like the vibrator that Sheila got for Jenny, which made her explode in laughter and make Hannah hastily try to take it from her, to the voucher for one free lap dance at a local strip club for Ben. She bought a leather teddy for Hannah and a pair of bondage leather underwear and a vest for John, which made John laugh for almost ten minutes as he brazenly stood up and put them against his waist to check the size.

Vil wasn't done yet. When most of the gifts were opened, she reached into her portfolio and withdrew two small jewelry-sized gifts. "For you," she said, handing one to Ben, and the other to Jenny. Ben and Jenny were stunned when they opened tiny boxes that held keyrings, with two keys on them each. One was obviously a key to a car, and the other looked to be a housekey.

"What is this, Vil?" Jenny asked, holding it out.

"Just your new keys," she said with a bright smile. "Wanna see what they're to?"

"Uhh...sure?"

"Then come with me," she said as she stood up.

Outside, with big red bows on them, were identical Ford Mustangs. One was black, and the other was red. “Oh my *God!*” Jenny gasped, jumping up and down. “Which one is mine?”

“Go try your key and see,” she winked.

Jenny bolted into the wet grass without her shoes and coat, and excitedly tried the red Mustang first, which opened to her key. She jumped inside it and closed the door, and the engine started with a loud yet smooth purr.

Kit could hear Jenny screaming in delight even from inside the car, over the engine, all the way across the yard.

Ben stood there in the doorway holding the other set of keys numbly. “That’s *mine*, Vil?” he asked in humble tones.

“All yours, Ben,” she smiled. “Just *please* do me a favor and don’t go crazy. I don’t want to hear that you crashed it next week.”

“I’ll be very careful with it, Vil. Thank you very much.”

She kissed him on the cheek. “No in-laws of mine bum rides off people,” she winked. “Now go play with your new toy.”

“I’m not sure I approve of you giving them such expensive cars, Vilenne,” Hannah said as they looked on.

“Well, I can’t go and let you think that, Hannah, so I’m bribing you too,” she said, holding out another key. “Right over there,” she said, pointing. Kit joined the others, and they looked in the driveway, where a brand new white Ford Freestar minivan was parked.

Hannah gasped.

“Oh, and there’s one more in here,” Vil grinned, digging a final key out and handing it to John. “I hope you like SUVs, John, because I got you a Ford Escape. Right over there,” she said, pointing at a black SUV parked on the far side of the street.

“Vilenne, this is too much!”

“Pft, it’s just right,” she snorted. “I saw those cars you were driving, they’re too old! These are brand new, and I made a special deal with Riverfront Ford, who sold them to me. They’ll never cost any of you a dime if you take them back to the dealership, guys. They’ll do your oil changes, tune-ups, and all repairs for you for free. The only thing you should ever pay for these cars is gas and car washes. They’ll pay for *everything* but gas, John, Hannah. Take it back even if you just need the windshield washer fluid refilled.”

“Dear, this is a true gift!” Hannah said reverently.

“I’ve made a deal with a Columbus Ford dealer, Baxter Ford, to handle maintenance for your kids’ cars when they go to school,” she added. “Oh, and those other keys on their rings? Those are for apartments.”

“Come again, dear?” Hannah asked.

“I’m not letting my brother and sister in-law live in a *dorm*,” she snorted. “I looked around and found a very nice apartment building about a mile from the campus. Each of them has a spacious one bedroom in an upscale complex, filled with amenities. They have security, dedicated parking, a gym, a pool, the whole deal. They have unlimited leases there, those apartments are theirs for as long as they’re at Ohio State.”

“Oh my,” John said quietly. “Vilenne, dear, this is too much! All those gifts, and the vacation, and cars for us all, and apartments for the children at school?”

“Oh, *and* these,” she chuckled, digging a quartet of credit cards out of her portfolio. “These are debit cards, John, connected to special accounts. Each has ten thousand dollars in its account, one for each of you. Every September the accounts roll over. Every September first, ten thousand dollars more is added to the balance, so you don’t lose whatever you had left on them when that time comes around. Use them for living expenses, trips, gifts, mad money, whatever you want. They work anywhere that takes Visa. This way, you and your family always has something to fall back on if you need it. Just use them responsibly,” she smiled. “Don’t let Jenny go out and burn through her whole ten thousand in a month.”

“You’re serious!” Hannah gasped.

“Deadly,” she said simply. “You’re now my family, Hannah, and I *take care of my family*.”

“I wish I could compete with her gift-giving skills,” Sheila chuckled as John and Hannah stammered to try to either thank Vil or tell her she went too far.

“She has a bigger checkbook than you do,” Kit told her simply. “Notice that she set the rollover date well before Christmas.”

“I did notice that,” Sheila giggled.

“So, what are you doing standing here?” Vil demanded at them. “Go check out your new cars!”

John and Hannah gaped at her, then they both laughed, took the keys, and did just that.

Chapter 19

Returning home restored a sense of normalcy, despite their marriage.

They'd lived together for months before their marriage, so living together, for them, was nothing new. They were used to it, and coming home was just a return to the routine, a return to real life after a nearly surrealistic wedding, honeymoon, and Christmas visit with Jessie's family.

Poor Hannah. Vil had blindsided her with her gifts, and she had basically been backed into a corner...or would have been had Vil not bought her a van. Hannah, it turned out, had secretly wanted a new van, was about to broach the subject with John, and Vil went and surprised her with a brand new minivan.

It wasn't *entirely* back to normal, though. For one, there were a ton of gifts, still wrapped and waiting, sitting on their table from the reception when they arrived that afternoon. Rick and Lupe had brought them to their house and there they sat, gifts from the reception guests, and a few that looked to have been dropped off afterward. "I totally forgot about those!" Jessie laughed as they came into the house after picking up their keys from Lupe.

"Oh, God, I hope we have room for all this stuff," Kit realized. "The Christmas gifts will be here tomorrow."

Vil had brought all their gifts to Cincinnati, but certainly wasn't about to leave them there without a plan. Though Kit and Jessie flew home

commercially—Vil was on a tight schedule and couldn't detour to drop them off, and the other jet was being used by a member of the board—Vil had a professional shipping company show up the day after Christmas, pack up all of Kit and Jessie's gifts, and ship them to Texas next day shipping. They would be there at *exactly* nine o'clock tomorrow morning, six boxes filled with clothes, electronics, jewelry, music CDs, DVD, two new laptops, a desktop, and other assorted trinkets. Some of it had come with them, though, like the furniture gift certificates from Wentmoore's, an upscale furniture store in Austin which they *would* be quite happy to use. All of their furniture was mismatched and the vast majority of it was used.

For another, there was the knowledge already eating at him that he'd have to return to Boston sometime late next month for the trial. He wasn't looking forward to the idea of that, but he *did* want to be there when Cybil realized that they knew, and defeat crept into her eyes. He wanted to see that moment. In that respect, he was a full-blooded Vulpan. He wanted to be there to taste the blood, maybe sink his fangs into Cybil himself.

God, Rick was going to murder him for asking for *more* time off. He was starting to feel like he really didn't work there anymore.

As Jessie went to the bathroom, Kit rooted through her purse, digging for the true prize out of this entire affair. He found it just as she came out, leaning against the hallway. "Looking for something special?" she asked teasingly.

"Very special," he said, holding up the memory card. "Priorities are priorities."

"Kit! Take it off the internet before you upload!" she commanded as he rushed by her, towards the den. "And delete them off the computer when

you're done! Straight to a DVD we *hide*! And one copy only!"

"One copy of what, babe?" Lupe asked from the open door.

"Our wedding pictures," she said, her cheeks ruffling. "The kind you don't show to others."

Lupe laughed. "Babe, taking pics like that is a *necessity* on a honeymoon," he smiled. "Sheila come back with ya?"

"She'll be back tomorrow," she answered. "She went to Boston with Vil to see her mother, and then she'll be back down here."

"Ah. Hope everything goes okay with her. So, how was Christmas?"

"Pretty good," she answered. "Well, come in, silly! Just stay away from the hallway!"

Lupe laughed as he stepped in. "Better close the door to the den so I don't see nothin' by accident either," he grinned. "Need help with anythin'?"

"Nah, I think we got it, but thanks for the offer."

"What's your food plans? There ain't much in your fridge, I had to toss some stuff."

"Takeout," she laughed.

"I'll go in if it's pizza," he offered.

"Deal," she said immediately. "Pizza Hut?"

"Better than Domino's. Pony up, I'll go get it. It takes that Pizza Hut dick way too long to deliver here."

“Get something—“

“Without mushrooms, I know,” he grinned as she handed him a twenty dollar bill. “I’ll get you a no-mushroom special and me and Kit a couple of supremes, ‘kay?”

“Sounds good to me!” Kit called from the den.

“Hey brah, I’m trying to steal your wife!”

“Try harder, I don’t hear any gunshots!”

Lupe laughed. “I’ll be back in a shake babe, and you can show me your honeymoon pics.”

“In your dreams, Lupe!” she called as he hurried out.

Kit came out holding up a DVD, with the pictures on it. “This is it,” he smiled at her. “You in all your naked glory.”

“And *you*,” she pointed out, then she gave him a sly smile. “Put it where we can look at it when we want to, but nobody can find it,” she winked.

“Bedroom closet, in the document box,” he grinned.

“And remember, keep it off the computers! DVD only!” she called as he took the DVD to the bedroom. “I don’t wanna log on some day and find my naked pictures on some porn site!”

“I knew being married would suck all the joy out of life,” Kit said loud enough for her to hear. He expected to hear her run in to whack him, but she didn’t. He put the DVD away, but when he turned around, she nearly scared him out of his fur by grabbing him and throwing him onto the bed.

“What was that I heard?” she said loudly, climbing on top of him. “I can oblige you, baby!”

Kit laughed. “Was that a threat or an invitation?” he asked.

“You figure it out,” she said, slapping him on the snout like a misbehaving child.

“Wow, you think I’ll choose the punishment over the reward?” he laughed.

“Then motivate me,” she said, leaning down and kissing him.

“Mmm, Jess, Lupe is coming back,” he said against her lips.

“Then I guess you’re getting the punishment,” she said with a teasing smile, deliberately picking up a pillow.

“Nooooo,” he laughed, covering his head with his arms as she started whacking him with it.

Kit was punished for a good minute until she relented, dropped the pillow, and pried his arms apart to kiss him on the nose. “There, you bad boy, all nice and punished,” she teased as he put his arms around her. “Now behave.”

“But then we can’t kiss and make up,” he chuckled.

“You’d get more than kisses if you didn’t misbehave,” she winked.

“Oh, sure, *now* you tell me that,” he retorted, which made her laugh. “Let’s get our clothes back in the dresser while we have a chance, you know Lupe’s gonna be talkative tonight.”

It was a welcome return to routine...almost. Lupe returned with pizza, and they ate, told him about their trip, then decided to open the presents. Most of the presents were what they'd expect from furs giving gifts to newlyweds...small appliances, silverware, china, knick-knacks, small denomination gift certificates and gift cards for various stores around town, and so on...presents for them to set up their new home. Even though they'd lived together a while and everyone knew it, most of their friends also knew that all their things were mismatched and used, so the new dishes and silverware and such were very much welcomed. There were a couple of stand-out presents, though. The Governor of Texas gave them a little porcelain replica of the state capitol building signed by him and all the members of the state congress, which Kit rather fancied. They were also given a curious little picture frame with an LCD monitor in it, into which they could download various photos that would display a chosen photo all the time, or slowly cycle through multiple pictures like a little picture show. Jessie was taken with it, and immediately downloaded quite a few pictures of their wedding into it and put it on top of the TV.

Lupe hung out with them for a couple of hours, then left them to wind down and settle in after their long trip. Jessie ran to the grocery store to restock on their badly needed groceries, and Kit called around and told everyone that they were home now and everything was fine. After Jessie got home, they just sat on the couch and vegged out by watching the news on TV, then watching the DVD of their wedding again as they cuddled.

“Well, now what?” Jessie giggled as the DVD ended.

“Well, we could put in a movie.”

“No, now what? Isn't this supposed to be, well, different now that we're married?”

“Heck no,” Kit chuckled. “The only difference between before and after is now we have more jewelry.”

“Well, and the fact that I’m *Misses* Vulpan now,” she smiled, reaching over and patting his muzzle.

“I could get used to calling you that.”

“I could get used to hearing it.”

“Just don’t expect me to call you that all the time. It’s way too formal considering we have an informal relationship.”

“Informal? Just how is our relationship informal?” she demanded.

“Well, a formal relationship is what you’d have with your boss. I don’t want to think of you as a boss,” he grinned.

“I *am* your boss, buster,” she teased, poking him in the chest with a clawed finger.

“Oh, God, I’m sleeping with the boss,” he realized, which made her laugh. “You better hope I don’t have you brought up on sexual harassment charges.”

“Oh, I can stop that,” she smiled.

“And how do you think you will?”

“Simple, love. If you turn your back on it, you never get it again.”

“Ooh, the heavy artillery eh? I can always just go find some bimbo somewhere,” he said flippantly.

“Kit. Love.”

“Yes?”

“Remember when you vowed to stay with me til death do we part?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t make me exercise that clause of our contract.”

Kit laughed. “Duly noted,” he said, putting his arms around her and kissing her. “My little barbarian.”

“Vulpans play for keeps. I’m just learning from you.”

“Well, I’m more than happy to give you more lessons,” he said, running his paw up her side.

“Mmm, teach away, my love.”

Kit and Jessie had two days off before he had to go back to work, and they needed it. When the Christmas presents arrived the next morning, they simply stowed them in the bedroom with the wedding presents, because they had furniture to get. They had to bow out of poker that day because they were too busy, had way too much to do, and the guys understood. They’d just gotten back from their honeymoon, after all, and they all knew about the big pile of gifts sitting on their table. They understood that the pair had a lot of work to do to go through them and write thank-you cards, but they did promise to drop by and at least say hello to everyone.

They went to Wentmoores with nearly five thousand dollars in gift certificates, and they used almost all of it. They got a proper dining room set with a china closet to hold the china set they got as a gift, they bought a pair of recliner chairs, corner closet for knick-knacks, coffee table, a stand

for the little capitol building that the Governor gave them, and a wide entertainment center-shelf combination that would take up the entire wall. It consisted of an eight foot long lower flat cabinet with two covered shelves all the way across its length, filled with doors, and two small shelves that rose from both ends. The gap in the middle was large enough to hold the new large TVs, up to a sixty inch LCD or plasma panel TV, and was also raised on a small shelf unit that would hold a DVD player and cable converter box.

After measuring it, they found it would just barely fit against the wall where they had their current TV, framing the window, the shelves of one end just a mere nine inches from the door. Kit wasn't sure he liked the idea of it being that close to the door, but Jessie adored it, saying that the shelves would give them plenty of room to display stuff...and Kit just couldn't deny Jessie what she wanted.

The gift certificates also resulted in their first fight. After finding a bedroom suit that matched the bed, Jessie wanted to look at furniture for the den, but Kit was looking at TVs. Jessie didn't think they needed a new TV, because they already had a pretty decent one, but Kit saw that if they kept the TV they had now, which was a tube TV, they'd have to pull the shelf out to accommodate its bulk...that shelf wasn't designed to hold a tube TV, it was designed to hold a flat panel TV. Jessie didn't want to listen to that, however. "We only have a thousand dollars left, and we're not wasting it on a TV!" she said adamantly. "Not when we can buy two desks and a shelf unit for the den, so we can use both our computers and have someplace to store our other tech stuff!"

"Jessie, this isn't about the TV," he protested.

“Oh yes it is,” she flared. “You got used to that TV in Vil’s condo and the one we have in the basement, and now you want a big one too! We can look at TVs *after* we get what we *need*.”

Kit learned an important lesson about Jessie...that Hannah hadn’t been joking. Jessie was *incredibly* stubborn. She made her decision, dug in her heels, and she wasn’t about to budge an inch on the matter. Even when assaulted with the logic of his argument, that their TV would not fit on the new entertainment center, she wouldn’t listen. “Fine,” he sighed after he grew tired of arguing with her. “But I’ll expect an apology when we get the furniture home.”

They bought the two new desks shelf unit, and a bookshelf for the den, as Jessie wanted. They went home literally following the truck holding their furniture, then were basically pushed into the corner as the delivery males brought in and assembled their furniture, then carried the old furniture out onto the porch as they requested. The sorority furniture was going back to the sorority, and they were donating the rest of it to Lupe to store and use as needed.

When the entertainment center was assembled and placed where Jessie wanted it, Kit just stepped back when the large raccoon came up. “Ma’am, it won’t work there,” he said. “Your old TV is too wide, the unit wasn’t exactly built to hold one. We can put it there, it’ll fit, but we can’t keep the shelf flush against the wall. We’ll have to pull the shelf out from the wall more.”

Jessie gave him a surprised look, then sighed and put her paw over her face. “Alright, I apologize,” she said in a low tone. “Just put the shelf against the wall, please. We’ll move the TV back to our bedroom for now.”

“Yes ma’am,” he said with a nod and returned to his partner.

“Don’t you say a word,” she grated, pointing with her finger nearly touching his nose.

“I don’t think I have to,” he replied calmly. “How much is left on the certificates?”

“We used them all,” she answered. “They gave us a gift card with the balance, but it’s not even a hundred dollars.”

“We can just pull the shelf out.”

“No, I’m the one who wouldn’t listen, so now I get to live with it,” she sighed. “We’ll just put the TV on that rolling stand and put it in the bedroom. It’s not like we really watch much TV anyway. How’s the bank account?”

“Pretty much well empty,” he said. “We cleaned it out buying Christmas presents. We’ll have to wait until payday to look at TVs.”

“You’d think someone would have given us one,” she complained.

“That’s a pretty expensive gift,” Kit noted.

After all the furniture was in place, they spent the rest of the day settling it in and catching up. They put away their clothes in the new dressers, Jessie loaded the new shelves with the knick-knacks she most fancied from their wedding presents, and Kit put the ceramic capitol building on the little table he’d bought just for it. He took a picture of it and sent it to Mike out of pride. They then went over to Lupe’s and said hi to the poker crew, but they saw that Christmas had depleted the usuals to just Lupe, Dan, Mickey, Sam, and Jeffrey. Sandy was at home for the holidays,

and Kevin had his big first case and couldn't make it today because he was doing research and preparing his case. Mickey gave them a bottle of wine as a welcome home gift, and they returned home to continue settling in the new furniture. Sam came over after poker, and her being in Austin surprised Kit. He would have thought she'd go home for the Christmas holidays after the wedding like Sandy had, and he was partially right. She had stayed in Austin because of the wedding, then went home for Christmas, but had come back yesterday to settle in before the next semester that began in two weeks. That seemed a bit thin to Kit, and when he asked if Kevin had called, the ruffling of her cheeks told him everything he needed to know. She came back because of him, not because she wanted to get an early start settling in.

"He's been busy with his first case, though," Kit heard Sam complain to Jessie as she started cooking dinner. "We talk on the phone, but he hasn't had time to go out with me."

"Stop thinking like a teenager, Sam!" Jessie admonished. "Do you know how much I enjoy just being in the same room with Kit, even when we're not doing anything? Ask him if you can come over and just hang out!"

"But, he might think that's too forward," she complained. "Or that it's an invitation to go to bed with me!"

"Well, does the idea of that bother you?" she asked directly.

Kit heard a long silence from the kitchen. "Uh...no," she finally answered. "You know I'm not a virgin, JD. But it's...well...different with him."

"How so?"

“Well, I don’t want him to think I’m cheap or easy,” she explained. “He might not respect me.”

“So,” Jessie said with a laugh. “That’s where it is.”

“This isn’t funny!” she complained. “I could handle Mitch and the other boys because there weren’t any expectations out of it. We were just enjoying each other’s company. But Kevin—“

“Kevin is potential husband material,” she finished for her. “So you’re playing by the bride’s rules, eh?”

“I guess so. I don’t want to blow it. I’m not lucky like you, JD. You found the male you were meant to marry. I think I love Kevin, but it’s not the same with us.”

“Kit didn’t fall into my lap, Sam. I had to work for him,” Jessie contested. “So do you. And the first thing you need to do is show Kevin you want to be with him. So call him. Ask him if you can come over and just hang out with him while he does his work. Offer to cook him dinner, since he’s probably too busy to do it himself. Promise him you won’t interfere, you just want to be with him. And if he thinks it’s some kind of invitation, disabuse him quickly,” she giggled. “Establish your interest but make it clear that he has to *work* to get you in bed.”

“I don’t know if that’ll work,” she complained. “Kevin’s a lot different from Kit.”

“Not as different as you think,” she replied. “Trust me.”

“So if this idea of yours goes down in flames, I can blame you?”

Jessie laughed. “I guess you can.”

Kit heard Sam call Kevin and admit that she was a little lonely, and would like to come to his apartment to cook him dinner so he could keep working on his lawsuit. Kevin must have agreed, because Sam was borrowing Jessie's car and on her way to Pflugerville before Kit realized that Sam had hung up the phone. "She took your car?" Kit asked curiously. "How did she get over here for poker?"

"She walked, Kit. It's not that far, only about two miles. To Sam, that's well inside walking distance. She runs five miles a day, a two mile walk is nothing for her."

"Oh."

Sam didn't bring Jessie's car back that night. She returned it in the morning, almost waking them up in the process. Kit was making tea in a pair of shorts while Jessie showered when she rang the doorbell, and he turned off the alarm and opened it for her. "Morning," he said as he ushered her in. "How was it?"

"How was what?" she asked with an edge to her voice.

"Bringing Jessie her car back the morning after?" he asked lightly.

"And walk home after dark? No," she said calmly. "I'm wearing different clothes, if you didn't notice," she added, pointing at her U.T. tee shirt and running shorts. "I'm about to go running."

"You run without shoes?" Kit asked absently.

"I only wear shoes with dresses, so the males can't see my tomboy feet," she chuckled picking up a foot and showing him the bottom. The pads on her feet were thick, tough, and rugged, the feet of a fur who ran five miles a day without running shoes.

Kit laughed. “Well, I like the natural femme,” he told her. “Want some tea?”

“Sure.”

Kit made her a cup of tea as she looked around at the new furniture. “Snazzy,” she said. “Where’s the TV?”

Kit laughed. “It’s in the bedroom, it won’t fit on that shelf. And don’t mention it to Jessie. We had a little argument over it.”

“She lost?”

“That’s why you don’t mention it to her,” he said as he put the tea on the dining room table for her.

Jessie came out into the living room wrapped in a towel. “Sam?”

“Hey JD.”

“How did it go last night?”

“Pretty well. I made Kev some dinner and didn’t poison us thanks to your cooking lessons,” she laughed. “I just read while he did his work, then we watched a little TV, then I came home.”

“What’s his apartment like?”

“Well, it’s pre-furnished, so it wasn’t like I could get a sense of his style, but he is an art buff. He collects paintings and has a few sculptures in his apartment. He like impressionism for paintings, but prefers Roman and Greek era sculpture. He has a tiny replica of that famous statue of the woman with no arms sitting on a table in his living room.”

“I’m disappointed in you,” Kit told her as Jessie went to dry off and dress.

“What? Why?”

“You were in his house and didn’t short sheet his bed? Shame on you.”

Sam laughed.

Sheila was back, but to his surprise, she wasn’t preparing to return home. They talked the morning before his first day back to work, while working out at the Y, riding stationary bikes. Jessie had been feeding him so much, since she had all that free time to cook, that he’d been gaining too much weight, and so he’d begun to work out in the mornings with Sheila before work, taking advantage of the membership to the Y she’d set up for him. “I’ve already missed the next semester, and well, I kinda owe it to Rick and Martha to stick around until he can replace me,” she explained as they rode stationary bikes side by side at the Y one morning the week after they got back. “I’m going to hang down here until Rick has that deal in place with the college’s journalism school and he has an intern. I’ll be back home this summer, and back in Harvard for fall.”

“And staying where it’s warmer than Boston has nothing to do with it?” he asked.

Sheila laughed. “Well, that *does* make me wanna stay a little,” she admitted with a wink. “Among other things.”

“Like what?”

“I *like* it here, cousin,” she admitted. “I like having you as a friend, and I like Lupe and Dan and Mickey. I love Jessie like a sister, and her friends are awesome. I don’t mind working at the magazine, and the guys there are great, and they take me seriously. I feel, well, *accepted* down here. Rick and Martha look out for me, Martha and Jessie are teaching me to cook, I get to hang out with you and the sorority girls when I want to have fun, and I get to torment Lupe when I’m feeling mean.”

“Well, it’s nice to know you approve of my life,” he chuckled.

“I’m glad I came down here,” she told him, “and not just because of Cybil. I didn’t really *do* anything at home, Kit. I just walked through school, went to parties, and screwed a ton of guys. Well, that part wasn’t that bad,” she noted, licking her chops in a manner that made him laugh. “I ran away down here, but I found something more than just a place to hide, ya know? I found out that work can be cool if you’re working in the right place. I found out that I actually love cooking, and now I want to open a restaurant when I get out of school. And you taught me that I don’t have to be what the family expects...not that they really expect much out of us youngers. I don’t have to get married to who they say and crank out babies the way my mom did. I can go start my own business, find something I like to do, ya know, *do something* with my life.”

“Well, it sounds like Sheila Vance Vulpan has grown up quite a bit,” Kit noted.

“Bite my ass,” she said directly, then she laughed and pushed at his shoulder.

“If I did that, Jessie would kill both of us,” Kit pointed out. “Me for straying, and you for seducing your own cousin.”

“Kit.”

“Yah?”

“We have *got* to take her to the Top Hat.”

Kit almost fell off the bike. “Are you nuts? Take Jessie there? She’d have some kind of seizure!”

“She’s married now, cousin, think of it as expanding her horizons. She has to be a freakin’ prude in bed. We gotta make her worldly.”

Kit laughed. “She’s worldly enough already. She doesn’t need any outside help.”

“What, she knows two whole positions? I’ll bet she doesn’t go down on you or anything fun at all,” she pressed, which seemed to attract some unwelcome attention, since they weren’t alone in the exercise room and Sheila wasn’t exactly keeping her voice down.

“I don’t think this is the place for a conversation like this, Sheila,” he said in a low tone.

Sheila looked around, then chuckled ruefully. “True. But at least you haven’t been turned into a total prude,” she grinned. “Still willing to talk sex with your cousin, that’s a good sign. Hannah didn’t turn you to the dark side.”

Kit laughed. “And how did your own campaign of turning to the dark side go?”

“I got him,” she grinned wickedly. “Remember when Ben went to go answer the phone?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you see me anywhere?”

Kit laughed. “Damn, femme, that was fast work. He was only gone like fifteen minutes. We thought he was talking on the phone.”

“He was, to *me*,” she winked. “I called and asked for him to separate him from the rest of you.”

“And so you did exactly what I warned you not to do.”

“I didn’t screw him, cousin,” she laughed. “Though I’d love to. But I did get one hell of a kiss out of him and got my paws on that monster he keeps in his pants. He’s a *great* kisser,” she purred victoriously. “And he’s got a *huge*—“

“I don’t need to know that.”

She laughed. “I was considerate, too. It didn’t take much coaxing to get him to put those big paws on me,” she giggled. “I could have those paws on me every day for the rest of my life. His touch was...*magical*,” she said with a little sigh.

“All I can say is be very, very careful,” he said calmly. “I’m not your mom, and I’m not going to tell you what to do. But if you chase Ben, you’re going to be climbing a tree full of beehives. If you’re not very careful, you’ll be stung before you reach the top. And you might take me with you when you fall out of the tree, since I’m climbing it too.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it, Sheila. You’re exactly the kind of girl Hannah has worked to keep her daughters from becoming. You’re wild, you’re loose, and you’re wanton. Hannah sees you as a girl she needs to tame, to set back

on the right and narrow. Hannah already doesn't like me, well, she'll have a *fit* when she finds out you're starting to court Ben. So what you do will affect my relationship with Jessie's family."

"Hmm," she noted, stopping her pedaling and leaning over the handle bars. "So, you won't interfere?"

"If you poison my relationship with Hannah, I'll kick your ass. But outside of that, no. You're a grown femme, and it's not my place to tell you what to do."

"Duly noted, cousin," she said calmly, then she started pedaling again.

Kit wasn't too worried about it, really. Sheila would find out that Hannah wasn't her main opponent if she went after Ben, it would be Ben himself. Ben was too down to earth, modest, and grounded to take a girl like Sheila seriously. He might be curious about her, play with her a little, might even go out with her and sleep with her, but he wouldn't get too involved with her, because he'd see the trap in her and avoid getting too attached to a femme that wasn't attached to him. He knew what kind of femme she was, and he'd keep his distance. Sheila would discover that a male like Ben wouldn't accept her the way she was, and if she wanted Ben, she'd have to change to get him.

It would be educational for her, that's for sure.

Kit called Hannah and warned her about the development while Sheila was with Rick on a trip to an advertiser. "You're serious," she said after he told her.

"She seems to be," he answered. "Sheila's never looked a male the way she's looking at Ben before. She's never seen males as anything but the next

night of fun, but she's looking at Ben like a possible boyfriend. It must be shaking up her world," he chuckled.

"We can't let that happen, Kit. I don't want Ben mixed up with her."

"Hannah, you raised Ben to be prudent and proper. Just let *him* deal with her. He'll do the right thing."

"My children seem to have very poor judgment when it comes to your family," she said directly, which made him laugh.

"Well, maybe they see things in us you don't," he teased.

"Maybe I see what they refuse to," she countered.

"Well, Jessie's seen a lot more of me than you, I'd have to debate that point with you."

There was a startled silence, then she laughed. "Kitstrom, don't you dare start getting so familiar with me. I'm your mother-in-law!"

"And that's why I'm allowed to get familiar. If I can't talk about these kinds of things with the only mother I have, who can I?"

"Sweet talk will not get you out of this."

"You're too far away to threaten me with a pillow, so I'm not too worried about it," he said flippantly.

But getting beyond the reach of Hannah Williams wasn't quite that easy. When he went home and sat down to look over a little work he brought home with him, he was hit in the back of the head with a pillow. He covered his head with his paws, but another strike didn't appear. "What did I do?" he demanded as Jessie walked back towards the bedroom.

“Don’t ever think you’re out of Mom’s reach,” she called back. “She can have you beaten by proxy.”

Kit almost fell over laughing.

Life settled back into routine for them. When school began again, Jessie was back on a schedule, and a better one than last semester. She had five classes this semester instead of six, three on Monday and Wednesday, and two on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. Her earliest class was ten o’clock, and her latest class was her Tuesday/Thursday contemporary American literature class, which let out at five thirty. With the return of school came the return of the sorority girls and Sandy, and again there was almost always someone visiting them in the evenings, be it a friend from the complex or one of Jessie’s sorority sisters or someone from work. Sheila came over to hang out about every other night.

Work quickly settled back down as well. They started their election articles, and Kit found himself writing more and more when he had no research to do. Rick had him doing small articles about the elections, working off his own research to do background articles upon which Barry built with his main articles. Marty tagged him and the others to do a new section of the mailbag, where they answered a question sent in by email or letter. Two questions were answered every issue, and Marty promised in the new section, called *Ask Away*, that questions would be picked at random, and wouldn’t be edited beyond the need to keep them in decent taste.

And he meant it. Kit ended up being one of the two tagged for the first answer, and Marty made him answer the question *what was it like to grow up rich?*

That turned into a two column article, because Kit answered it honestly and without much sugar coating, making it plain that being rich wasn't as carefree for kids as he thought it might be. He made it clear that every perk he got from money was balanced by an expectation placed upon him a normal child wouldn't have. That there was a hidden price tag that came with having money.

Kit had told Rick and the gang about the lawsuit and his need to go to testify, and they were alright with it. "Nothin' we can do about that, son," Rick told him. "You gotta do what you gotta do. We'll be fine as long as they don't hold you for like two weeks."

"Oh no, Rick, I'll make sure that doesn't happen. I'll fly back and forth every day if I have to, and you can just email me some of my work. I can do it from there. I'm not gonna burden you guys again so soon after the honeymoon."

"Well, we can work something out. And I think Barry was talking about flying up to cover some of it. Since we've been keeping the readers up to date on your personal life, with the marriage and all, Barry did a piece on the lawsuit too...and now folks are curious to see how it turns out for you."

Kit laughed. "I spend years avoiding tabloids, and my own job tabloids me!"

"A good story is a good story, and this *is* a magazine, Kit," he chuckled.

But there was change coming, too. The first hint of it was the construction fence that went up beside the apartment complex. Lupe was so happy he could barely sit still when the construction company showed up

and began demolishing the closed dentist's office. "They say two months, brah," he said as Lupe, Jessie, Sheila, and Mickey were standing by the building closest to it, looking out behind the building and at the new fence. That building was the one behind the one that had Kit and Jessie's apartment, so they were fairly close to where the new pool was going. "It'll take them two weeks to tear down the building and pull the foundation, then they dig the pool. The pool should be totally done and ready by April no sweat. The contractor said he'll have it done by late March, but I won't open it til late April."

"How much will it cost to put in?" Kit asked.

"Not as much as you'd think, but our insurance went up," he grunted. "I done sent out the rent increase notices, but nobody bitched. Seems they agree that an extra ten a month is worth it to get a kickass new pool. And it'll be *kickass*!" he all but screamed. "Olympic size, brah! With a high dive and a slide of the kids!"

"Any word on the other project?" Mickey asked.

"It's a go," he said. "I made a deal with the last two families to buy them out. One of them's just gonna move into the complex," he laughed. "I had to promise them one of the four bedroom luxury units with a secured lease in exchange for them selling. They stay there til they decide to move out. It was worth it, though, cause they'll be paying rent like everyone else, just not as much. They bargained me down to half their current mortgage, but again, that's cool. I just added six more of those luxury units to the plans, so we'll have plenty."

"I hope they don't make a lot of noise," Jessie said hesitantly.

“They’ll do a little bangin’, babe, no help for it, but they won’t be working after six, so they won’t bother nobody at night,” Lupe answered. “They’ll be workin’ ten to six, six days a week.”

“That’s not too bad,” Mickey said. “Then again, I’m not living right behind the construction site, either.”

“Come on, I’ll show you the plans for the new Westwood,” he offered. “They’re in my office.”

Lupe certainly had a grand vision. He had both drawings and an artist’s conception of the new mega-complex, that would take up the entire city block. Lupe had bought out every other house and building on the block, and the apartment complex was going to expand both down the block and across it. “The pool will be the center of the place,” Lupe said as he pointed to it on the drafting sketches. “This big building right here is the gym and community center. I’m gonna have a gym and a couple of big rooms for dances and shit like that, and I’ll have pool tables and some other good shit in it. I’m gonna have a big playground right here, and this right here’ll be a daycare center for the tenants that got little kids.” He pointed to a series of smaller buildings in a cluster around the pool and community center. “These are the luxury units. See, they got their own parking, and they’re right by the pool and center. This is where we’ll all live,” he grinned. “They’ll go from one to four bedrooms, with the four bedrooms being a double-duplex style with no stackin’. Each side of this is its own place, kinda like townhouses, two-story with a deck. Out to the corner will be mixed units, from one to three bedrooms, to cover the furs already livin’ here so they can move in when it’s done. But the rest of the complex’ll be a little more organized by unit size. Each of the buildings in the units built after the

initial build'll be separated by size. One buildin'll be nothing but one bedrooms, another two bedrooms, and so on.

"After we get this corner here built and I can move our current tenants over, we tear down the rest of the block and get going. They say they'll finish in a year."

"A year? That's it?" Kit asked in surprise.

"Brah, I'm gonna have a freakin' *army* here buildin' this place," he answered. "The banks demanded it be up in a year from groundbreakin', so they covered the cost of hiring enough to do it in the loan. When it's done, we'll have four hundred units, from one bedroom efficiencies to the twelve luxury four bedrooms. Most of 'em will be one bedrooms for the college crowd, but those'll be on the far side of the complex from the two and three bedrooms, so I keep the families safe from the college brats," he said, giving Jessie a grin.

"Watch it, this kitty has claws," she teased, showing him her small claws. "And ain't afraid of a little puppy dog."

Lupe laughed.

Things moved at work as well. Two days after they started on the pool, Rick called them all into the main office, a big grin on his patchwork face. "We got new digs," he announced.

"Eh?" Marty asked.

"A new office," he said. "In the Willis Building."

"Dude, that's like two blocks from the capitol!" Mike gasped.

“Vilenne helped us out,” he said. “Called in a favor. We got office space three times this size on the sixth floor, at the same rent we’re paying on this office. It used to be a lobbying agency, but it closed down. It’s perfect for us, guys. It has a large central room where they used to have calling zombies in cubicles. We’ll clear that out and form a new main office, but this time everyone has an office of their own too. It has twelve offices on both sides of the main room, and the main room has a bank of windows that looks out over Congress. Oh, and Marty, you’re off the phones,” he said. “You’re being moved to staff, I’ll hire a receptionist just to do that.”

“I love promotions!” the sheep grinned.

“When do we move?” Savid asked.

“We start tomorrow. When the building owners found out I signed a lease for another office, they terminated our lease here, probably out of spite. We have until the end of the month to clear out, so we have to move quick. Remember all that gear you guys took home? Well, we need it back now,” he chuckled. “We need to put a temporary network up over there to help us transition while we move. Mike, we’re going back over there so you can check it out. They had a computer network, and while the computers are all gone, the wiring is still there. They gave me a wiring plan for you to go on, but we need to go look and see if this is something you wanna tackle on your own, or if we bring in a networking company to install the network for you.”

“Let some stupid snotty kids touch my network? Hell no!” Mike said immediately. “If I do it, it gets done *right*.”

“Dude, you *are* one of those snotty kids,” Jeffrey laughed.

“Bite me, mouse,” Mike grunted. “Kit, Savid, you need to come too. I may need some help pulling floor or checking in the ceiling, and you two are trustworthy enough.”

Kit, Savid, Mike, and Rick went over to the new building after lunch. It was a glass building, new and modern, and the offices that still had *Woolbanks Lobbyists* signs and logos up were deserted. The furniture and equipment were gone, and it was as Rick described. A large central office where cubicles were built dominated the middle of a huge room, with rows of doors on either side leading to private offices. The office took up an entire half of the building, allowing the offices on both sides to have windows, with the two offices at the ends being corner offices. Mike had a wiring diagram in a technical manual before him as they surveyed the place. “They had a server room right here, behind this wall behind the receptionist’s desk, forming a big room that separates the front receiving area from the main office,” he said, pointing at the drawing. “I’ll use it for the same, and it’s big enough for me to stack some racks in there and make a real damn network and website. I can put my office in there, I have to be near the rigs. It has no window, which is perfect for a geek like me. This big corner office is Rick’s office, naturally. That leaves one other corner office. Guess they’ll fight over that one.”

“Nah, Savid has seniority, it’s his,” Rick said.

“Many thanks, Rick,” Savid said with a nod.

“We’ll put Lilly, Barry, and Kit in these offices here on your side, Rick, and Jeffrey and Marty on Savid’s side. That leaves five open offices, since I’ll put my office in the server room.”

“Let’s stagger them. Leave this office open so we have a hard storage room, and put Kit and Barry on each side of it. They’ll be the ones digging through those records. Leave this office here open between Savid and Jeffrey that we can turn into a dedicated office for the graphic artists, you know, for their shared computers, which we can also use for the big printer to keep it out of the main office. We turn this office here into a break room with a fridge and microwave and a table. We can hang the big plasma right there,” he said, pointing at the wall facing the bank of windows. “The building maintenance people will be here tonight to clear all these cubicle desks out. We keep a few of them, put the main table right here in the middle, and put some desks over in those areas for equipment. I want to put in a couple of open workstations for anyone to use when they come out into the main office, and we’ll need a desk for our intern.”

“We can stick Sheila in a spare office until she leaves. Since she’s Kit’s cousin, we can be nice to her and just treat the next intern like shit,” Mike grinned.

“No, put her at a desk right there,” Kit said, pointing towards the windows. “Halfway between Rick and Savid. They’re the ones she’ll be dealing with the most, that way she can’t hide from them when they need her. That also puts her in the main office and completely visible to anyone who sticks his head out the door looking for her.”

“True, true, I think that’s a plan,” Rick nodded. “There is one thing, though. Jessie does work for us, and we have empty offices, so I’m going to give her one.”

“Better keep it on the far side from Kit, so we don’t walk in on some workplace shenanigans,” Mike grinned.

“That would not stop them,” Savid said, which made everyone laugh.

“Jessie would love it, Rick.”

“Alright then, she’ll take the office beside yours. So, what do you think?”

“I think it’s perfect,” Mike said. “Not too big, but we have room to grow. It has the same intimate sense as the old office, but it’s big enough for everyone to feel like they have their own space.”

“Yes, just so. Having my own office will be nice,” Savid said with a nod.

“It’ll be nice to be in an office bigger than my armspan,” Kit chuckled.

“Hey, you *have* an office,” Savid told him. “And you are the youngest there!”

“Well, that little fight will be moot in a couple of weeks,” Rick chuckled. “Lemme go get the building manager so we can talk this over, and I can see how much of this old stuff the last tenants is going and what we can keep.”

“Let’s make sure their network cabling is where this says it should be,” Mike said. “Sometimes they like to move it and not document it.”

They returned to the office with big grins. “We can start moving tonight,” Mike announced. “I’ll begin moving over the non-essential equipment after work. Everyone’s offices are already assigned, so you can start moving stuff you want into them. I’ll draw up a plan for us to do it, but we’ll spread it across an issue no matter what.”

“Well, if we know the issue’s gonna be affected by the move, let’s do it on purpose,” Jeffrey noted.

“Huh?”

“We warn everyone we’re moving in the next issue, and then the issue after we make it a mess. Bad editing, typos, you know, make it look bad on purpose. I think the readers would get the joke.”

Rick laughed. “I think that would be fun to do,” he nodded.

It was hard work, but it was worth it.

Over the course of the next two weeks, the magazine moved to its new office. Mike worked his butt off, first establishing the new network, then moving machines over bit by bit. Rick had to buy some new furniture, and as it was delivered, they moved in. It was a little weird there for a while, with half of them in one office and half in the other, but they worked through it.

Poor Sheila. Mike worked her to the bone, and that poor girl must have made five hundred trips between the offices moving boxes.

It was very hurried, but it worked. Mike ruled them for those two weeks, keeping careful track of everything. He used the backup servers to take over as he moved the main servers first, established the core of the network, then started adding things piece by piece. Vil’s laptops were critical during the move, allowing them to literally use them for the entire transition issue outside of the main editing computer, which was moved first as soon as the servers were up and a new round table was delivered and set up.

Kit, oddly enough, was the first to move over. His office was generally in the way when Mike had to pull cabling, so Kit had to be out of the space between the servers and the main office. He moved over to the office two days after they began, with a brand new desk and chair and a nice set of shelves on one side of the office. His came with only his box of personal stuff, which he set up in his office as he put his laptop on his desk and took the plastic off the chair. Mike delivered his computer the next day and they set it up. “Remember, keep all the stuff for the next issue on your laptop,” Mike told him. “The network over here’s not fully ready to go yet, not til I get all the other machines over here and set up and then update the main servers with everything they’re doing over there.”

“Got it.”

With Kit anchoring the new office, the others began to move over, one by one. Barry moved over next, and then Lilly. After Lilly came over, the next morning Kit showed up at the office with Jessie in tow, as she moved some little things into her own office—that she’d rarely use—just so it felt like her own place, and found a young, petite little female ferret standing outside the locked doors. She couldn’t have been five feet tall, thin, almost scrawny, wearing a black blouse and a gray pleated skirt. “Are you Kit Vulpan?” she asked. Though she was small, her voice was rich and quite lovely.

“I am, who are you?”

“Denise Jacobs,” she told him. “I’m the new receptionist. Rick hired me yesterday. He told me to be here at nine o’clock and you’d let me in and show me my desk.”

“Uh, sure. My wife, Jessie,” he said, introducing her.

“I read about your wedding in the magazine. You’re really lucky,” she said with a shy smile.

“Thank you,” Jessie said as Kit unlocked the door, then turned off the alarm. “I hope you’re tough, Miss Jacobs. They’re mean around here,” she said, grinning at Kit.

“We’re not mean, we just destroy the weak,” he replied flippantly. “But you’d better be able to take a joke, Denise. We’re very fond of them around here.”

“I can handle it, Mister Vulpan.”

“Kit. Nobody calls me that but my wife, and only when I’m in trouble.”

That made the diminutive ferret giggle. “It sounds like you hear that name a lot.”

“Way too much,” Jessie agreed with a sigh, which made her laugh.

Jessie put her things in her office while Kit showed Denise her desk. “Well, this is it,” he told her. “As you can see, there’s no phone here yet. Our office is kinda a mess right now, we’re still in the middle of moving over.”

“Rick explained it. He said I’ll be helping Sheila move stuff for the next few days.”

“Sounds like he filled you in. Looks like Rick got you a chair, at least,” he chuckled. “Go ahead and look it over, I’ll call Rick and tell him you’re here.” Kit relayed that information on his work phone, and Jessie came back out and kissed him on the cheek.

“I’m on the way to school, love. What do you want for dinner tonight?”

“I don’t really care,” he answered. “But it sounds like you’re cooking.”

She giggled. “Yeah, I feel like it tonight. I’ll just surprise you.”

“Sounds good to me,” he said, giving her one more kiss. “Have a good day at school.”

“I’ll try,” she smiled as she went out the door and to the elevator.

“I read about your wedding in the magazine,” Denise repeated as she tested the chair, then raised it as high as it would go.

“Are you a student?”

“I wish I was,” she sighed. “I just got out of the Army three weeks ago, and kinda stumbled across this job. I’m gonna get some night classes started next semester, though.”

“The Army? Really?” he asked in surprise. “What did you do?”

“Administration. I was a paper pusher,” she admitted with a laugh. “My last post, I worked for the Army Times as a secretary,” she said. “It got me interested in journalism, and now I want to be a reporter. That’s why I lucked out getting this job. I’ll be working in a magazine!”

“A small and very unusually run magazine, but a magazine,” Kit laughed. “We don’t do things the way real journalists do, Denise.”

“It’s still good experience.”

“True. You certainly don’t look like you were in the Army,” he noted, looking at her.

“I know, I’m short,” she laughed. “They had trouble finding uniforms that fit me in basic training,” she admitted.

“Just don’t let them ride you. Mike especially. The first time he tells you a short joke, whack him. If you don’t stand your ground, he’ll hound you until the end of days.”

“Which one is Mike?”

“The raccoon.”

“I’ll show him what I learned in the Army,” she grinned. “I can deal with people who make fun of my height.”

“I’m going to like you, Denise,” Kit chuckled.

The addition of Denise to the crew helped with the transition. She helped Sheila move stuff the rest of the move, and then, after Rick had the magazine logo removed from the old office and installed behind Denise’s desk in the new one, she took her place as their new receptionist. She spent half a day with the phone people learning how the new phone worked, and it was Denise that briefed the rest of the staff about how the phones worked, teaching them what the phone people taught her. Denise got along well with the gang, and was quite capable of dealing with the jokes and pranks. She was a lively femme, chatty and funny, but she was also very brave and level-headed, more than capable of dealing with irate callers. She was a perfect fit.

Their transition issue was very funny. Instead of running a new issue, they instead did a “best of” issue, but they made sure it looked almost amateurish. Editing errors, spelling errors, the page numbers were out of sequence, and one page was printed twice. The only new thing in the issue

was a new strip of *School Daze* where Kit and Jeffrey played on the idea to make Jo-Jo and Oxnard trade personalities, but give no explanation nor reason for it. The issue was so messed up the printer called after Rick sent it in and asked if they'd gotten a corrupted copy of the issue.

Eleven days after their old building terminated their lease, they were done. The old offices were bare, even the network cabling pulled out of it—Mike was leaving them absolutely nothing that wasn't there when the magazine started, not after what they did to them—and they were all now comfortably moved in in the new office. Their network was up and running smoothly, all their computers were up, they were getting used to having their own offices—well, everyone but Mike, Rick, and Kit anyway, and they couldn't get over how much more space they had. Marty felt a little weird being off the front desk, being listed as a staff writer and editor now instead of just an editor, and they had to take a new group photo. Jessie, Sheila and Denise were in the new one, all of them gathered around their new main table with the windows behind them, waving to the camera.

Their first issue in the new office mentioned the move itself, but was right back to business as usual covering Austin for the college crowd. The cover showed a picture Mike took of the office before they moved in side by side with the new group photo, with the caption *We're Here!* under it. Barry did an article about the move on page three, as well, short and to the point.

Moving sucks!

Lone Star has finished its move, everyone! We were getting a little cramped in our old offices with the addition of Kit, Jessie, and

Sheila, so we've moved to larger offices if only so we don't walk in on Lilly naked anymore.

Sure, we could blame the Vulpan clan, but we got new offices out of it, so we're not going to complain all that much.

We've moved a whole five blocks north. We're now in the Willis building, 500 Congress Avenue, on the fifth floor. Our office hours are still the same, and all our internet services are back up and running at full strength, thanks to Mike and his godly computer skills.

But Jeffrey still kicks his ass in *Halo*. Mike can't handle a console controller.

We've also added another friendly face to the family! Everyone welcome Denise Jacobs. She's a spunky little thing (and we do mean little) who'll be answering our phones and greeting our visitors as she pursues a degree in Journalism, and we destroy any chance she'll ever have of getting a respectable job anywhere in the journalism business. So stop by and say hello and make her feel at home!

And no, she's not a Yankee. We've got enough of those damn Yankees in the office already. Denise is a native Texan, hailing from College Station.

Rest assured, Austin, we're back on the job and as dedicated as ever to bringing you the best Austin has to offer for the students of the University of Texas. We hope you enjoyed last week's moving issue, and promise we'll never do anything like that ever again.

Until the next time we need an emergency filler.

Kit chuckled when he read it, and laughed when Denise did. “Little?” her voice called from the intercom to every phone in the office. “Little, am I? Who told you to write that, Barry? I’ll cut them down to my size!”

“We can’t be cut down that far!” Mike’s voice came over the intercom, which had replaced the shouting that had taken place in the old office.

“Dude, your office is right beside her desk,” Jeffrey called over the intercom. “Is that a good idea?”

“I can always lock the—Aii!” he gasped, and they heard him get smacked several times, which made the whole office erupt into laughter.

“Remember to *lock* the door next time!” they heard her say, but Mike got the last word.

“Oh, my poor kneecaps!”

Yes, Denise fit in *perfectly*.

The good times couldn’t last forever, unfortunately.

Four days after they finished the move, early Saturday morning, Kit got the call he knew was coming but dreaded getting. Vil called him on his personal phone while was typing up some notes from an interview he did with the dean of the college of liberal arts about their new Portuguese language major program. “Hey sis,” he called as he put the phone on speaker and set it on his desk. “You get those pics of the new office?”

“Yeah, it looks really great. Spacious?”

“We have empty offices,” Kit laughed. “Jessie has her own office now, too. Too bad she only uses it once a day. She’s in it right now, doing her

writing for Missy and Cutler. Earning that paycheck,” he chuckled. “Jessie! Vil’s on the phone!” he shouted.

“Be right there,” she called over the intercom.

“Well, this isn’t a personal call, bro,” Vil told him. “Do me a favor and turn on your laptop and jump on video.”

“Uh, sure, give me a couple,” he said, turning around to the little table behind his desk, under the window, and picking up his laptop. He opened it and waited for it to wake up, then started the videoconferencing program. It connected, and Vil’s face appeared. She was in her office, looking down at her own laptop, adjusting the microphone on her face so he could hear her. He hung up the phone as she finished, then he put on his own microphone as she greeted him. “Hear me, bro?”

“Loud and clear,” he answered as Jessie bounded into the room. She came around the desk and leaned over his shoulder, then got her muzzle right by the mic.

“Hey Vil!” she said. “You get that email I sent ya?”

“Sure did, Jessie,” she answered. “Listen guys, this is business, not personal. It’s about the trial.”

“Date set?” Kit asked.

She nodded. “It starts February Eleventh. Since Cybil filed the suit, she presents her side first. I want you here starting on February Twelfth. It’s going to take her lawyers a day to get through opening arguments, so I want you here and in the courtroom from then on, cause I’m not sure when they’re gonna nail her ass. So you need to be here and be ready to stay for a while if this gets dragged out.”

“How long will we be in Boston?”

“Hopefully no longer than a week. You may be coming back the same day, it may take a week, I really can’t tell. It all depends on how Cybil’s lawyers present their case, which witnesses they call. As soon as Cybil hangs herself, you sign the legal document holding the current agreement in place, then you go back home. You won’t even have to be here when the judge throws out her case and mine moves on unopposed by the family. That makes everyone happy except Cybil.”

“I can live with that.”

“Clancy asked me to ask you to *please* come home,” she said. “He wants you to stay at Stonebrook.”

“Absolutely *not*,” he said immediately. “Not so long as Uncle Zach is in that house. I will not bring Jessie anywhere near him.”

“Love, I can’t go,” Jessie told him. “I have school now, remember?”

“Then I’m really not staying there,” he grunted. “I couldn’t face staying one night in there without you there with me, love. If you’re not going, I won’t go anywhere near it.”

Vil sighed. “Can we talk about it later?”

“It’s not up for negotiation.”

She frowned and nodded. “I’ll find you a hotel room near the courthouse, then,” she told him. “I’ve already called Rick and told him. He’s making arrangements for you to come up. Don’t bother making reservations, bro, I’ll send the jet for you.”

“Alright.”

“Don’t look so down, bro. You come up for one week, hide in your hotel room, watch Cybil crash and burn, sign some papers, and you’re free of us forever.”

“Now that’s something to look forward to,” he said honestly.

“Alright then. I’ll let you get back to work then, bro. I’m working now too,” she said, motioning at the view behind her. “I’ll call you tonight, okay?”

“As long as it’s not just business, sure.”

“I always have time to rag on my little bro,” she winked, then she ended the conference.

“Well, love, it looks like it’s almost done,” Jessie said, leaning down and kissing him on the top of his muzzle.

“And I’ll dance down to the harbor when it is,” he sighed, leaning back in his chair, taking the microphone off. He was tense all the sudden, and a little worried. He knew it was coming, but to know it was coming didn’t help all that much. Jessie put her paws on his shoulders and massaged them, then reached over him and closed his laptop. “Why don’t you ask Rick to finish your article at home,” she urged.

“No, no, I’ll finish it. I’m done for today when I do,” he said. “Go ahead and finish up and go home, I’ll be along in a few hours.”

“Alright, love.”

Jessie pampered him when he did get home, around three, feeding him a nice dinner, then sitting on the couch with him laying with his head in her lap, something that never failed to relax and calm him. There, feeling the

warmth of her legs against his face and muzzle, smelling her closeness, feeling her paw tousling his hair, it never failed to make him feel safe, secure, and wanted.

It seemed like a blink of his eyes.

It had only been two weeks from knowing of the trial until he found himself sitting on Vil's private jet, watching the city of Boston appear through the window as he looked from the couch, and the time had blurred by.

The gang was *so* understanding. They helped him get ready for his trip by helping him clear his desk of all his work, and they gave him a going away party with a banner that read *Glad You're Staying Poor!* Jessie gave him an extra-special parting gift the night before he left that made his back ache and his knees rubbery the next morning, but he didn't mind a bit. He'd take that kind of attention any day of the week.

At least he didn't feel quite so dreaded about this. This would be it. The last time he saw Boston. After this was done, he'd sign that paper that maintained the current agreement, flip off his family one more time just for the hell of it, then fly home to Austin, to where he belonged, and be rid of them.

"We'll be landing in five minutes, Mister Vulpan," Avery called over the intercom. "If you could secure anything loose and prepare for landing please. There's a car waiting for you to take you to the courthouse, and I'll make sure your bags are sent on to your hotel."

Kit hit the button on the side of the wall. “Thanks, Avery,” he called back, then he took his teacup back to the galley and returned to the couch and sat on the forward-facing half.

He was actually looking forward to this now. He was going to watch Cybil hang herself in court, hopefully today, which would be very satisfying, then he’d get the chance to look in the faces of his family and give them everything they wanted, and leave them totally mystified as to why. Why he didn’t take the money, why he didn’t punish them for their sins against him. But that was the point, a point they’d never understand. He saw that money for what it was, a curse, a blight on a family he hated, and he could not punish them any more than by giving them exactly what they wanted. He would give them their money, and they would continue to believe they were the kings of all creation, continue to be rich, and continue to be miserable and wretched. They wouldn’t understand was that the ultimate revenge against them wasn’t to punish them, but to leave them in their gilded cage, where they could eat away at each other like starving rats, find nothing in their lives but their love of their money and status. They would die alone, they would die unhappy, and they would die unwanted.

And there was no better revenge than that.

A few of them had escaped that fate. Vil certainly, but Sheila had also come to understand that there was more to life than money. Sure, Sheila couldn’t live without her money, but at least she understood that there were some things money couldn’t buy, like real friends, or love, or *happiness*, and she understood how important they were. Kit was better off poor than he’d ever been rich. And though it was fun to be spoiled by Vil a little bit from time to time, to fly in her jet, eat nice food, the truth was, he’d be just as happy if Vil never gave him another thing again, as long as she stayed in

his life. Vil was much more important than her money. His sister mattered to him much more than her toys and her wealth.

Family was more important to him than family.

The plane touched down, landing out of a cloudless sky in the early morning. They'd taken off in the darkness of predawn, and they'd literally be going straight to the courthouse. The trial was scheduled to resume at 9:00am, and given that he moved into Eastern time, it was 8:27am now... and from what Vil told him, *nobody* knew he was going to be there except the uncles and aunts and Vil. Not even the cousins knew he was coming, so his appearance in the courtroom was certain to be significant to Cybil and her lawyers. Kit's split from his family and his hatred of this case was well known, so for him to show up in court was a huge issue. *Something* had to make him come up from Austin to attend the trial, and Cybil's lawyers would go nuts trying to figure out why.

It was cold in Boston. The hatch let biting air in, and he pulled his coat around him and shivered his tail, almost feeling like he did the day of the funeral, almost a year ago. That day had been dreary, though, but today was bright and sunny. A limo was waiting before him, with one of Vil's bodyguards standing there with his paws folded before him. Kit nodded to Avery as ground crews came to open the cargo hatch and get his luggage, and he shouldered his carry-on and stepped down onto the tarmac on shoeless feet.

If Sam could do it, so could he.

It wasn't that bad, though. He went without shoes almost all the time, so his pads were thick and durable. He could feel a little bit of cold through

them, but nothing that would make him dance in place. Now if it was wet or raining or snowing, he'd probably be looking for a shoe store, however....

"Stav or Marcus?" Kit asked as the panther opened the door of the limo for him.

"Marcus," he answered with a smile. "We'll be at the courthouse in about twenty minutes. There's tea and warm bagels inside for you."

"Thanks," he said as he ducked in and settled in the luxurious seat of the limousine. Marcus climbed in with the driver in the front seat, and the ground crews put his suitcases in the trunk, closed it, and waved to the driver that he was clear to go. Kit turned on the small TV in the back and poured a cup of tea for himself, then watched the local news segment on the *Today* show. The trial was actually on the newscast, the last little sound bite before returning to the network program. "And finally, the Vulpan civil trial continues today," the vixen anchor said, "with the widow of Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan beginning her case to try to claim the Vulpan estate, which is contested by the Vulpan family. Full details at five o'clock."

"Don't they have anything better to do?" Kit complained loudly.

"This is Boston, Mister Vulpan. No," Marcus said from up front, which made Kit chuckle.

The limo jumped briefly onto interstate and then dove down into the new Big Dig, tunnels under Boston that were such a scandal just about everywhere, all new and pristine but costing a ridiculous amount of money. The limo moved against the flow of rush hour traffic, but that was a relative concept downtown, so it moved through crowded roads as it exited into the heart of Boston, and then traversed the distance from the exit to the venerable courthouse in Boston. Reporters and news vans were all over the

place around the courthouse, and cameras zoomed in on the limo as it drove by the courthouse, trying to get footage of who was arriving next for the high-profile case. “We’re going in through the garage,” Marcus told him as they went by the courthouse and turned at the corner, then turned onto the ramp leading to the underground parking garage by the courthouse.

“Thank God,” Kit breathed. “Am I the first here or the last?”

“The last,” he answered. “Seating in the courtroom is first come first served, so some have literally been camping out on the courthouse steps. But since you’re a potential witness, you’re guaranteed a seat.”

“Lucky me,” Kit grunted as the limo came to a stop by an elevator door, just beyond a concrete barricade complete with a metal detector and a security guard, a tall and rather burly fox.

Marcus opened the door for him and walked with him to the guard, who took one look at his eyes and almost dropped his clipboard. “Mister Vulpan sir,” he said, almost stammering, motioning him through. “Just ignore the metal detector, sir, go on through please.”

“Thank you,” he said with a nod as he stepped around the metal detector, followed by Marcus. “Oh, hey, you hungry?” he called back to the guard.

“Sir?”

“I have some bagels in the limo I couldn’t eat. All yours if you want ‘em, you can split ‘em with the limo driver.”

“Uh, thank you sir!” he said with a sudden smile. Marcus pressed the elevator button for him, and it opened immediately. He got a smile when he saw the limo driver handing the security guard a bag of bagels.

Marcus led him through quite a few furs on their floor, many of which gave ground to an obvious Vulpan and his bodyguard, staring at him as he passed. Many of them identified him, but then again, his half-missing left ear separated him quite distinctively from the rest of the Vulpan family. Marcus brought him to a large set of open double doors at the end of the hall, the room beyond probably the biggest courtroom in the courthouse, and it was filled nearly to capacity of quietly murmuring furs, the vast majority of which were foxes. Marcus led him to the second row on the right, where Vil and her other bodyguard were sitting right on the aisle. The aunts, uncles, and quite a few cousins were sitting in the rows behind and beside Vil, and they were all looking at him both fearfully and with relief that he was there. “Bro,” she smiled, standing up and hugging him, then motioning him to sit beside her, the two panthers flanking them on the padded bench. “How was the flight up?”

“Boring,” he said. “I napped through most of it. Where do things stand?”

“Opening statements are done, and Cybil’s team has already gone through two witnesses,” she answered. “They’ve established that Dad’s actions were unhinged to lay the groundwork for their case. I think they’re calling the witness *I* want them to call today, Basil Hawthorne,” she whispered behind her paw to even hide her mouth from the lawyers that were looking at them from the other side of the aisle. “He’s Cybil’s personal butler who’s going to put the nail in the coffin concerning Dad’s obsession with you by testifying from the inside, you know, since he was there right up to the end. He’s the one I want to get crossed.”

“What if they don’t call him?”

“Then we will. He’s already on the witness list, so they can’t object if we call him.”

“Ah.”

He looked past Vil and saw someone across the courtroom looking at him. The sharp muzzle and red hair, done perfectly, revealed that it was none other than Cybil Whitmore Vulpan, daughter of Earl Chester Whitmore. She gave Kit a strange, curious look, then her brows furrowed and she leaned forward to talk to her lawyers. The lawyers looked at him, whispered to her, then nodded.

The bailiff called the court to order, and the judge entered. He was an elderly fox, his red fur almost white, wearing wire rimmed glasses. He seated himself with an absent nod, then banged his gavel. “Court is in session. Mister Strahan, call your first witness.”

A fox on the far side stood up. “We call Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan the Third,” he said in a loud voice.

Kit started, the entire courtroom gasped, then he glared at Vil with unholy murder in his eyes. “You said I wouldn’t be called!” he hissed.

“I didn’t think she had the guts,” Vil mused in a whisper. “Well, go sic her, bro,” she said with a sudden grin.

“I will *get you* for this, sis,” he growled as he stood up. The bailiff showed him to the witness stand, and he took the oath. The tall fox approached the stand and squared off in front of him as the bailiff asked him to state his full name for the record. “Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan,” he recited, then he was motioned to sit.

“Your honor, permission to treat the witness as hostile?” the lawyer asked.

“I dare say you should,” the judge said, which caused a titter from the courtroom. “Granted,” he said with a smile, motioning at the lawyer with an aged paw.

Kit was very unhappy, but he also wasn’t about to do anything stupid. He answered the lawyer’s questions truthfully and honestly, since he asked questions pertaining to Kit’s very hostile relationship with his father, and it was testimony that would only help *Vil* when the time came. The lawyer made him tell the court about his being disowned and the terrible things that happened to him, which everyone knew his father had done after the lawyer produced all kinds of evidence linking every act that Kit could recall to his father. The lawyer seemed to take almost ghoulish delight when he said, “Mister Vulpan, I seem to notice that there’s something wrong with your ear. Could you tell us how you lost it?”

Kit gave him a look that could have peeled the enamel off the snarky lawyer’s teeth. “I was hit by a car,” he answered. “But I’m sure you know that’s not the only thing it did,” he added bitingly, holding up his scarred left arm. “Here, have a good look,” he grated, turning his arm to and fro from the lawyer. “Want me to show you the scars on my back, too? So you can get a nice long look at all my injuries and milk it for everything it’s worth?”

“That’s enough of that, young male,” the judge warned before the lawyer could even look at him.

“As a matter of fact, Mister Vulpan, I think you should show the court your back, so they can fully appreciate the extent of your injuries,” the

lawyer said with an evil little smile that only Kit could see.

Kit growled in his throat, and stood up aggressively. He took off his suit coat, pulled his shirt out of his pants, turned around, and raised his shirt to reveal the white scars on his lower back.

“Is it correct that you still have screws in your back from the surgeries?” the lawyer asked.

“It is.”

“Thank you, sir. Please, return to your seat.” Kit did so. “Do you have any lingering effects from the accident?”

“What do you mean?”

“Any residual pain? Stiffness? Physical impediments or limitations?”

“Not really. My back gets sore if I sleep on a bed that’s too soft,” he answered. “Outside of that, it doesn’t bother me that much.”

“Isn’t it a bit odd that a fox of your means carries such dramatic scars? I mean, sir, you’re missing your ear. Surely reconstructive surgery could restore it.”

“It could, I guess, but I’m used to it now. Besides, my wife has never seen me any other way. She said I’d look weird if I had a whole ear.”

The lawyer’s mouth twitched when there were a few chuckles from the spectators. “Why didn’t you have your ear repaired immediately after the accident?”

“I couldn’t afford it,” Kit told him with a steady look. “Look, can you get to the point? I’d like to get this done sometime today. Just ask what you’re digging at instead of trying to be Perry Mason.”

The audience broke out into laughter, and the lawyer glared at him darkly. Kit glanced at the judge, who actually looked a little amused. “You can move along, Mister Strahan,” the judge smiled. “The young male does actually have a valid issue. I’m not sure where you’re going with this.”

“The point, Mister Vulpan, is that you, a member of one of the richest families in America, *couldn’t pay your hospital bills*,” he said intensely. “Would you please tell the court why?”

“I was disowned,” he shrugged. “And at the time, I was in college. I was just as poor as any other college student.”

“And would you please explain to the court what happened after you were injured?”

“Well, that’s a lot of ground. Could you be more specific?”

“Very well,” he said, going to his table and picking up a file. “Petitioner’s exhibit seventeen, your honor,” he said. “The hospital payment records from Boston Mercy General. Who paid for your medical bills, Mister Vulpan?”

“My sister.”

“Despite the strict policy of your father to disown anyone caught giving you assistance?”

“Well, after word got out I was hurt, the scandal made him back off,” he answered. “God forbid anything stain the Vulpan family reputation like being outed as a heartless bastard.”

“Your honor,” the lawyer sighed.

The judge chuckled. "Mister Vulpan, try to keep the color commentary to a minimum. Just answer his questions."

"I'm trying, he just doesn't want to hear the whole truth," Kit grunted, "which is what I swore to tell. My father *was* a heartless bastard. If you don't hear that fact, then my answer isn't the whole truth."

Vil gave him a huge, amused grin, but his uncles looked a little annoyed.

"Sometimes one fox's whole truth is another's conjecture, Mister Vulpan. Try to stick to the facts."

"Yes, sir," Kit sighed with a nod.

"So, you're here to tell the whole truth?" the lawyer asked with a predatory smile. "Even if it hurts your sister's case?"

"I don't particularly care about my sister's case," Kit told him immediately and forcefully. "I have no part of this. I'm being used by my sister just as much as Cybil is trying to use me now, and I don't particularly damn well appreciate it. I walked away from this family years ago. All I want is to be left alone to live my own life, away from Boston, away from the Vulpans, and away from money. Yet no matter how far I go or how far I run, I still can't get away from them, from it, or from *you*."

"So if Misses Vulpan wins this case?"

"I couldn't care less," Kit growled.

"I find that slightly hard to believe," the lawyer noted. "Given they are your family."

"Would your family do *this* to you?" Kit snapped, pointing at his ear.

The lawyer just smirked. "No more questions."

He went back to his table and sat down. One of the foxes at the table in front of Vil stood up. "I have only one matter to discuss with you, Mister Vulpan," he said. "Did you experience any other unusual or dangerous incidents after your father died?"

Kit blinked, and nodded. "I was shot. Someone tried to kill me."

"How do you know this, Mister Vulpan?"

"The Austin Police told me. They also told me the guy who shot me was a mob hit fur, and he was trying to fulfill a contract on me."

"So, someone hired him to kill you?"

"Yes."

"How did you survive the attempt?"

"My boss shot and killed the leopard that attacked me," he answered. "If not for him, I'd be dead right now."

"Have the police solved the case and tracked down the fur who hired the hit fur?"

Kit caught the clever wording in the question, and answered it truthfully as it was asked. "No. Not yet."

"Do they have any suspects they've discussed with you?"

"No one solid."

"After you were shot, what was your opinion, Mister Vulpan? Who did you think tried to kill you?"

“Given my family’s...position, I believed it was a member of my family.”

“Why would a member of your family try to kill you, Mister Vulpan? After all, you were disowned and no threat to anyone, living halfway across the country.”

Kit wasn’t quite sure what point the lawyer was trying to make, so he just answered the question. “Because of my wife. Well, at the time she wasn’t my wife, but my girlfriend. She’s a cat.”

“And this is a matter worth trying to kill you?”

“In the Vulpan family, yes. It would be,” he said honestly, staring directly into Uncle Zach’s eyes. “The Vulpans are purists,” he announced boldly. “They don’t believe in marriage outside the species. When I was shot, I knew they knew about my relationship with Jessica, and there are a few members of my family that are fanatical enough for me to believe would be capable of it.”

The lawyer nodded. “Thank you, Mister Vulpan. No more questions.”

Kit was a little startled, but the murmur in the courtroom made him understand. Vil wasn’t toying with Cybil, she was giving Kit a chance to say that publicly, to finally call down his family over his wife. She gave him the chance to reveal that the Vulpans were purists, which would forever protect him and Jessie from his family even after he gave them back the money. If anything ever happened to him or his wife, then almost every camera in America would turn on the Vulpan family, who were now exposed as fanatical purists whom Kit feared so much that he once believed that one of them tried to kill him because of his relationship with a cat, who was now his wife.

“Redirect?” the judge called.

“No questions,” the other lawyer said after standing.

“You may step down, Mister Vulpan,” the judge told him.

“You owe me,” Vil said in a singsong kind of whisper as he sat down beside her.

“Thanks, sis,” he whispered back, patting her knee.

It was poetic justice that the next witness was the one Vil wanted, Basil Hawthorne. He was a small, reedy rabbit, fairly old, and walked with a cane. Kit listened as the lawyer for Cybil painted the picture Kit’s testimony laid out, about how his father had tried to bury his son’s accident from the press, denied paying his hospital bills, even sought to have the hospital discharge him to a private care facility, whom the rabbit said that Lucas Vulpan confided would kill Kit with a drug overdose. This new tidbit infuriated Kit, but it also wasn’t that big of a shock. His father would have seen killing Kit as the ultimate act of control, to decide life and death. The hospital refused that demand, and that refusal saved Kit’s life.

Kit was quite curious after Cybil’s lawyer sat down, and Vil’s lawyer stood. “Mister Hawthorne,” he said, taking something out of his briefcase. “Do you recognize this?”

He held out a cell phone.

“Uh, it’s a cell phone,” he said, not quite sure what to say.

“Yes. Do you recognize it?”

“No sir, I do not.”

“So, this cell phone does not belong to your employer, Cybil Whitmore Vulpan?” he asked.

“I can’t honestly answer that question, sir. She owns more than one phone. I can’t confirm or deny with complete authority.”

“Can you testify to Misses Vulpan’s cell plan, sir?” he asked.

“Excuse me?”

“You are Misses Vulpan’s personal butler, privy to the secrets of the Vulpan family. Does Misses Vulpan have a contract with a cell provider, sir? Or does she use prepaid cell phone services?”

Kit was looking at Cybil. She seemed to start slightly at that question, and glanced at the lawyers sitting at the table in front of her. She leaned forward and whispered to them, and one of them whispered back as the butler answered.

“Why, she has a plan, sir,” he answered. “Why would Misses Vulpan use prepaid cell phones? Those are for the destitute,” he scoffed.

Vil’s lawyer almost beamed. “So, Misses Vulpan would have no earthly business using a prepaid cell phone?”

“No sir,” he said in confusion.

“Objection!” Cybil’s lawyer called. “Where is this going, your honor?”

“If I may, your honor?” the lawyer said, going back to his table. “Give me a little latitude? I’ll make my point momentarily.”

“Alright, but don’t dally about, counsel.”

“Thank you, your honor. Now then, sir, you state that your employer would have no business using a prepaid cell phone. Now, if we examine Respondant’s exhibit nine, already introduced, we see the phone logs of the assailant on Mister Vulpan, who was called in Atlanta from an untraceable pre-paid cell phone. Exhibit ten demonstrates that the origin of the call, according to cell tower records, was in Boston.”

“Yes?”

“In fact, if we examine the cell tower logs on exhibit eleven, we discover that the call had to come from somewhere in this area,” he said as his partner picked up a large posterboard map of the Boston area, pointing to a red circle. “That is the reception area of the cell tower that logged the call. Quite a large area, is it not?”

“Counsel,” the judge warned.

“Sorry, your honor. This point here, Mister Hawthorne, is Stonebrook Manor. It appears to fall inside the range of the cell tower that captured the cell call,” he noted. “So, is it not theoretically possible that the call that put out the contract on Kitstrom Vulpan could have originated from Stonebrook Manor?” he asked.

Kit saw where he was going now. He looked at Cybil. She was grinning broadly, and then Kit understood that Vil *had* baited Cybil. Cybil, and many in the audience, were going to remember Kit’s testimony and jump to the conclusion that a Vulpan had called out the hit from Stonebrook. But it was Cybil, and Kit’s testimony actually helped hide the trap until the lawyer dropped it on the rabbit. It wasn’t planned, but Kit’s own testimony was the bait that was going to lure Cybil into the cage.

“Uh, yes, sir, it looks possible,” the rabbit said, glancing at Cybil, who just smiled at him and nodded slightly.

“Very good. Now, Mister Hawthorne, do *you* own a prepaid cell phone?”

“Me? No sir, I use a phone provided by Misses Vulpan.”

“And the staff at Stonebrook Manor? Do any of them use prepaid cell phones?”

“Not to my knowledge, sir. I can’t answer that with complete veracity, however, but I would think not. Why would they when they are provided their own phones?”

“Explain, please, sir.”

“The staff members are issued cell phones by the manor that double as two-way radios. Everyone, from the gardeners to the chief of staff, carries such a phone, and they’re allowed to use their phones for personal calls.”

“So no one on the manor would have a reason to use a prepaid phone?”

“No sir, at least no legal reason,” he said.

The lawyer snapped his fingers. “Ah, there’s the crux of the argument, sir, no *legal* reason,” he said quickly, reaching for something. The other lawyer picked up a piece of paper and handed it to him. “Your honor, might I introduce a piece of evidence unearthed just recently?” he asked, holding up the paper.

“What is the nature of this evidence, counsel?” the judge asked as the other lawyer took a copy and handed it across the aisle, to the opposing counsel.

“It’s a federal wiretapping document. This, your honor, is a certified text transcript of the conversation that arranged the attempt on Mister Vulpan’s life, captured by a roving federal wiretap. This affidavit, from Special Agent Brown of the FBI, verifies the validity of this transcript.”

Kit was staring at Cybil. Cybil’s eyes widened, her jaw dropped, and she leaned forward to hiss angrily at the lawyers at the table before her.

“Why wasn’t this turned over sooner, counsel?” the judge asked testily after the bailiff handed it to him. “It’s dated over a month ago!”

“We had problems procuring it from the bureau, your honor. They refused to turn it over to us.”

“And you can verify that?”

“If you read the affidavit from the agent, your honor, you’ll see the difficulties we had in attaining this evidence,” he stated. “We received these affidavits late last night.”

There was tense silence in the courtroom as the judge read the affidavit. “Alright, counsel, proceed.”

“Your honor, I object!” Cybil’s attorney called, standing quickly. “It’s too late to introduce new evidence now that we’re already at trial! They had their chance during discovery!”

“Overruled,” the judge said quickly. “This affidavit gives counsel more than enough latitude with wrangling this evidence away from the FBI, given it was attained by a wiretap that looks illegal.”

“Then this evidence can’t be presented!”

“If this were a *criminal* trial, you’d be right,” the judge noted calmly. “But this is a *civil* proceeding, counsel. The fact that the government broke its own laws to tap cell phone calls is a moot point in this proceeding. The only matter here is that the evidence presented is viable and truthful. And it is. So overruled. And your exception is noted,” he said, holding a paw up when the lawyer was about to say something else.

Cybil had her snout between her lawyers, whispering at them heatedly.

“Mister Hawthorne, would you read the highlighted portion of the transcript?” the lawyer asked.

He took it from the bailiff, and then did so. “No, no, you can’t do that,” he said, reading in a monotone. “I thought you couldn’t take a gun through an airport. Yes I can if I fly a private plane from a local airstrip. I have a license. I’ll just put my guns in the trunk and drive over to the airport and fly over in a private plane. Nobody will ever know. Trunk. What is a trunk.” His eyes widened slightly, and he looked to Cybil with a startled expression.

“Continue reading please.”

“A trunk, you know, where you put things in a car. Like your golf clubs and luggage.”

He fell silent.

“Mister Hawthorne?”

“Oh. A boot,” he said in a whisper.

“A what, sir?”

“A boot,” he said in a louder voice, which caused a storm of whispering.

“What is a boot, sir?”

“It’s a car’s cargo box, sir,” he said, glancing at Cybil. “Where one keeps the spare tire and jack and such.”

“Really? I’ve never heard it called a boot in America before, Mister Hawthorne. Isn’t that a *British* word for a car’s trunk?”

Hawthorne was silent a long moment. “Yes,” he finally admitted.

And there it was. Cybil looked over towards Kit, and she found multiple sets of Vulpan eyes staring back at her coldly. Kit saw her eyes widen, and then her fur try to ruffle, and then fear crept into her startled expression. She knew. She knew the Vulpans knew. And she knew they had her dead to rights.

She knew she lost. And Kit found tremendous satisfaction in the chagrin that swept over her proud, haughty face.

“Very well, sir, might you explain why the prepaid cell phone that ordered the hit on Mister Vulpan, which could have been used at Stonebrook Manor, is demonstrated here to be used by someone who uses British terminology? Unfortunately we have no audio of this call sir, so we can only go by the words. Mister Hawthorne, how many British people live at Stonebrook?”

“A few,” he said quietly. “Misses Vulpan’s personal staff.”

“And Misses Vulpan herself?”

“Yes,” he said, looking down.

“No further questions,” the lawyer said simply, turning and walking back to his seat and sitting calmly as his companion stacked a shuffle of

papers on the desk and then put them down.

Cybil issued several low commands to her lawyers, and one of them stood up. “Your honor,” he began. “We request an adjournment for the day so we can study this new evidence and get in contact with the agent who issued this affidavit.”

“Granted. Court is adjourned until nine o’clock tomorrow morning.” He banged his gavel, and then pushed his chair back from the bench.

“All rise!” the bailiff called. Everyone did so, and the judge filed out of the room. There was a great deal of hushed whispering, and several furs at the back charged out of the room, most likely reporters to report on the bombshell dropped in the courtroom seconds ago.

Though the accusation wasn’t made directly, the inference was definitely there. A British person had tried to have Kit killed, and the only British people at Stonebrook were Cybil Whitmore Vulpan and her personal staff.

“It’s over now,” Vil breathed, patting him on the shoulder. “Sign a few papers, bro, and you can go home.”

“Gladly,” he said as Marcus stepped into the aisle and motioned Kit ahead with his paw. Kit stepped out, but he stopped and stared right at Cybil until she looked at him. Their eyes met, and Kit took his paw out of his pocket, raised it, and quite deliberately flipped her off with cold eyes boring into her. Then he mouthed the words *you lose* at her, and then turned his back and walked out of the courtroom.

In a private conference room, Kit, Vil, and Uncle Zach sat at a table with Vil’s lawyer and two other foxes who stood behind him. “This is an

agreement, explained in the presence of two notary publics to serve as witness,” he explained, “that mirrors the current standing will of your father, Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan Junior, Kit. This agreement retains the current asset sharing agreement between your family members, dividing your father’s fortune and assets up amongst them evenly, except for your sister Vilenne. Instead of money, she receives the stocks that give her ownership and control of Vulpan Shipyards and Vulpan Steel. Included in this document, Mister Vulpan, is a statement that severs you completely from your family interests,” he said in a steady voice. “By signing this agreement, you surrender any future attempts to claim your portion of the family assets or inheritance, legally severing you from your family, which means that you can never file a lawsuit or make a claim against your father’s estate, except for one point. By agreement between Vilenne and the rest of the family, the property known as Stonebrook Manor will retain your name on the deed as a co-interest. Vilenne will be named primary owner, you will be named co-owner, and Zachary tertiary owner. What this means is upon the death of Vilenne Vulpan, should you remain living, ownership of the manor will revert to you. If both you and Vilenne were to pass away, ownership reverts to Zachary. If all three of you are deceased, it falls to your children in order of their parents on the deed, beginning with Vilenne, then you, then Zachary. Do you understand this?”

“I do,” he answered.

“Included in the Stonebrook agreement is a clause that allows Zachary to remain in the manor as a resident, with power to maintain the grounds, access the manor’s financial accounts, hire and fire all staff except for Clancy MacArren, and domicile his children within the manor until they reach the age of twenty-one. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, I understand.”

“This agreement is set up so it will supersede the prior version of your father’s will, should Vilenne win her case and have your father’s current will nullified, except for one point. The clause forcing your family to surrender its family assets for associating with you will no longer be valid. This means that you will be allowed to communicate and socialize freely with your family, and they with you, and they will be permitted to grant you any property or monies they so desire from their own personal share of the Vulpan estate. Do you understand this?”

“I understand.”

“Have you read the document as I instructed, Mister Vulpan?” he asked Zach.

“I have.”

“Is it as I’ve described?”

“It is.”

“Have you read this document as I instructed, Miss Vulpan?” he asked Vil.

“I did.”

“Is it as I’ve described?”

“Exactly.”

The lawyer nodded. “Very well. If you agree to this, Mister Vulpan,” he said, turning the pages of the document to the back, “then sign here, on this line.”

Vilenne offered him a pen, her eyes a mystery. He took it, and with absolutely no hesitation, he signed it. “And once more, on this line,” the lawyer said, turning to the back page. Kit signed it again.

“And would the witnesses please sign and affix their seals?” the lawyer asked, pushing the document to the side of Kit. He watched as the two foxes signed the document, then used their seals over their signatures to validate them.

“Very well, this business is concluded. If Vilenne wins the lawsuit, Kit, then this contract will be put in effect, maintaining the Vulpan legal situation as it currently stands.”

“Then I’m done here?” Kit asked.

“You are done. You just signed away your control of the Vulpan family fortune, Mister Vulpan. I do hope you understand exactly what you’ve done here today.”

“I saved my soul, counsel,” he breathed explosively. “I saved my soul.”

“I do not understand you at all, Kit,” Zach told him, his eyes totally mystified. “You had *everything*, and you just sign it away without a word, without a second’s thought.”

“I got everything I wanted out of it, uncle Zach,” Kit told him. “I got my *freedom*. I’m going home now. I pray to God above I never see you or Boston again.”

“We won’t come looking for you,” Zach told him. “Not after you married a cat.”

“Then you stay up here, I’ll stay down there, and we can forget all about each other.”

“I can live with that.”

Kit left the conference room feeling like a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Now, finally, he was *free*. The family had no reason to ever look for him again. He had no control over them, no power over them, and now that the public knew about their purist attitude, he and Jessie were safe from them. They were free to drown in their money and leave him to his life in Austin with his wife, his friends, his job, and what few members of the family he still loved.

He was free of them, at long last. He was free of them.

He put his paws in his pockets and walked down the hallway, whistling idly to himself.

“Kit! Wait!” someone called. He stopped and turned around, and saw Muffy rushing towards him. She hugged him tightly, patting him on the back, and then kissed him on the cheek. “It’s already hit the family. Thank you!”

“For what?”

“For being what I hoped you would be,” she told him, “instead of what they were afraid you were. You’re better than them, Kit, and you proved it. Can I come visit you in Austin?”

“Sure,” he said with a rueful chuckle, patting her on the shoulder.

“Cool! I’m looking forward to getting to know my cousin better, but right now I gotta go! We’re gonna celebrate!”

She ran off down the hall, and he had to chuckle. “Enjoy it, Muffy. For what little pleasure it gives you,” he added, then Marcus fell into step beside him. Together, they headed for the parking garage, where a limo was waiting to return him to a life of quiet, middle-class, blissful normality.

“No Vil?”

“She’s not sure she can talk to you right now,” he answered simply. “She’s so proud she could cry.”

“Because she thinks I’m a lunatic?”

“No, because I think she finally understands you, Kit,” he answered. “She sees that you’re not crazy at all. What you have in Austin makes you the richest Vulpan of them all, son. And your sister is finally starting to see it.”

“I’m glad someone does,” he chuckled.

“Let’s get you home, Kit. There’s a pretty young lady waiting for you to come home.”

Kit again rode in a limo, and flew in a private plane, and then was dropped off at the airport. But instead of a limo, Kit took a taxi home. He was a normal fur again, just another fox, and he couldn’t be happier.

He carried his suitcases into his apartment, suitcases he didn’t even use, then flopped down on the couch and stared at the brand new LCD TV sitting on the entertainment center, bought last week after he and Jessie spent two days shopping around for the best model at the best price. It made him laugh. A Vulpan wouldn’t do that. They’d go straight for the best, the

most expensive, and buy it without even thinking twice. But he wasn't a Vulpan, at least not anymore.

In many ways, he never was.

He looked around at their modest apartment, filled with gifts and quality furniture, showing the duality of his life. He was a rich kid who was broke, trying to be a normal guy, but that life just kept intruding on him. Sometimes, he hated it. But sometimes, he didn't mind so much. Money couldn't buy happiness, but it could buy some damn fun toys.

All he ever wanted was for the family to leave him alone, let him live his own life, be his own fox. And now, finally, he achieved that goal. The family's money was now solidly theirs, all challenges either crushed or signed away, so they were secure. Kit was severed by his own paw, removed from the family, and now he felt they would honor his departure from the family. They would leave him alone, let him enjoy his life with his wife, but at least now those few in the family he did love could visit him, be a part of his life without any threat of repercussion from the ghost of his dead father, who had finally been put to rest.

His father had lost. Finally. The last strings were cut that held his ghost to Kit's life, and now he was free to fall into hell.

The door opened and Jessie rushed in. No doubt Sheila or Vil had called her, and she'd cut her afternoon class to come home, he realized. She stood in the doorway, her eyes on him. "Well?"

"It's over," he told her simply. "Cybil hung herself in court. I signed the papers. I'm never going back."

"Regrets?" she asked simply.

“Not a single one,” he said immediately. “Nothing in Boston could ever compare to this, or to you.”

She sat down on the couch, and cuddled up to him. “Welcome home, my handsome fox,” she cooed, and she began to purr.

“I love you, my pretty kitty,” he said with a contented sigh, putting his arm around her and snuggling, feeling her warmth, hearing her beautiful, wonderful, mesmerizing purr.

“Kit?”

“Yes, love?”

“I’m glad you came home so early. I have something to tell you.”

“What?”

“I just found out an hour ago. I’m pregnant.”

Kit gave a start, and pushed her out so he could look into her eyes. “Really? You—we—oh my God!” he said, then he laughed and hugged her tightly. “You’re going to have a baby! I’m so happy, Jessie!”

“Me too,” she said, sighing and nuzzling his neck, just holding onto him. “You got what you wanted, and I got what I wanted, my love. Today was a good day.”

“It was a good day,” he agreed, kissing her ear, then leaning his head against hers. “It was a very good day.”

“So, now what?” she asked.

“Now? Now we *live*, my love. Free of my family. Free to be whatever we want. Free to raise our children. We live, and we love, and we raise our

children, and we be happy.”

“Mmmm, I can live with that,” she giggled, and she again began to purr, purring her happiness, purring her contentment, and telling him without words that she was, at that moment, the happiest femme in the world.

And that made him the happiest male on earth.

Chapter 20

It took Kit quite a while to rationalize Jessie's news, given everything else that had happened in just one day. The euphoria and relief at finally freeing himself of the chains of his family was just a platform the news of his impending fatherhood used to catapult his mind into a state of near rapture. It was the next day before either of them thought to start spreading the news.

News that would have different reactions once it reached certain ears, he was sure. Some reactions were easy enough to predict. Vil, Sandy, Sam, the crew, the friends in the complex, the sorority, they'd be ecstatic. But when word of Jessie's pregnancy went past Vil and reached the aunts and uncles, he was rather sure that there wouldn't be any celebration. Another reaction that would be very hard for him to gauge would be Hannah. She had been against the marriage, and now her daughter was pregnant, something Hannah would fear given that she was still convinced that Kit was going to leave Jessie within two years. How would she react? Some part of her, he was sure, would be overjoyed. Even if she wasn't so sure of the ability of the marriage, the idea of being a grandmother would have a certain unmistakable appeal.

They should have started making phone calls that very night, but Kit was all but shellshocked from Jessie dropping that bomb on him the day he freed himself from his family. He walked around in a kind of giddy stupor once the true impact of it hit him for most of the afternoon, and Jessie was forced to keep a handle on him, which precluded her from starting the tasks

of making phone calls. Jessie had been forced to make Kit heel by evening by keeping him entrenched on the couch, snuggling him through his happy disorientation, giving him a fuzz therapy only Jessie could really supply. When she decided that he had too much nervous energy, she took him back to the bedroom and wore him out.

Since he was back and had no excuse—truly, had not even told anyone that he was home—the crew was quite shocked to see him all but dance into the office the next morning, a huge, stupid smile on his face. “Kit!” she gasped. “I thought you were in Boston!” She nearly smacked him when he pulled her out from behind the desk and spun her around the lobby, then looked utterly confused when he set her right back on her chair and all but did a jig on his way down the hallway into the main office. She followed behind him as the rest of the office saw him, and he was swarmed over by the crew.

“Trial? Oh, the trial’s over,” he said with a huge grin.

“Already? Sheila isn’t back yet,” Rick noted. “It was supposed to last at least a week—“

“Well, it’s still going on, I suppose,” Kit shrugged, scratching his muzzle. “*My* part of it’s over, I should say.”

“Why didn’t you call and tell me you were back, son?” he asked. “And why didn’t Sheila check in last night? I was about to call her. She may be up there for her family trial, but she’s *also* up there to keep us informed.”

“Call? Oh, sorry. It’s been kinda wild since yesterday morning.”

“Well, why? We’re dying to know!” Mike chimed in.

“I think you’d better tell us what’s going on, son,” Rick said, sitting at the main table.

“There’s so much, I don’t know where to start.”

“Try starting at the trial,” Barry said.

The offices emptied and everyone gathered around the big table. Kit sat on the edge of it and went over what happened the morning before, about what happened at the trial. They gaped when he told them about him being called to testify, and then the fatal testimony of Basil Hawthorne. The crew had *not* known about Cybil’s involvement in Kit’s shooting, and they were floored by that bombshell when Kit described how Vil’s lawyers verbally strangled Cybil’s case when they cross-examined the rabbit butler. “I have no doubt that Cybil is back in England,” he finished. “The look on her face when she realized we knew was just sheer terror. I’ll bet money she had her driver take her straight to the airport after the courtroom adjourned. If she hangs around here, she might have an arrest warrant being nailed to her door.”

“Well, that does explain a great deal of it,” Rick said with a nod.

“Why didn’t they arrest her right then?” Lilly asked.

“Because Vil got hold of the evidence illegally, and the evidence was itself illegal. It was part of an illegal federal wiretap, part of that homeland security crap. I guess they’ve been illegally tapping pre-paid cell phones,” Kit answered. “But that doesn’t matter in a *civil* trial. As long as the evidence is factual, it’s admissible. And Vil had an affidavit from the FBI and everything to prove it was factual.”

“Ohhh,” she said, nodding.

“But, now everyone knows that Cybil tried to kill me,” Kit continued. “And it was all just a part of a plan to distract my family long enough for her to sneak back to England with half of my family’s money.”

“What a bitch,” Lilly grunted, which caused nods of assent.

“Anyway, all of that is over,” Kit said happily. “I don’t need to be there for the rest of it. I have no doubt that Cybil is back in England, and the bombshell destroyed her case. My family has already agreed not to oppose Vil’s case, so I figure that it’ll all be done by Friday.”

“So, Vil will win and you’ll get the money?” Jeffrey asked eagerly.

“Vil will win, but I won’t get the money,” Kit answered. “I’ve already signed an agreement that leaves the part of my bastard father’s will intact that dealt with the division of the family fortune. Since *that* was what my family was fighting to maintain, they had no objection to allowing Vil to void the will. They just care about their money. The voiding of the will does mean that my sister and cousins can socialize with me all they want without any fear. In a way, that’s what my sister has been fighting for, getting me un-disowned. Her case will do that. I’ll no longer be disowned, but I *still* will have nothing from the family fortune. Given that, and Jessie, and my feelings about my family, it’s still the same to me. I disowned *them* six years ago. I want nothing to do with them.”

“So where exactly does that leave you, son?” Rick asked.

“At work,” Kit grinned. “I’m still the poor kid you all know and love. I signed away control of that money before I ever *had* control of it,” Kit chuckled.

“Wow,” Jeffrey breathed. “You signed away over a *billion* dollars!”

“Without batting an eye,” Kit nodded. “I want nothing to do with it. That money is curse, it *is* a curse, and I’m more than happy with *this* life.” There was a long silence, and Kit laughed. “So, get those dreams of yachts and Lamborghinis right out of your heads, you pack of leeches!” he barked with a teasing smile.

They all laughed, and Rick patted him on the shoulder. “Well, for one, I’m glad you came home, son. This place just wouldn’t be the same without you.”

“Him and Vil,” Mike grinned.

“Well, that might explain why Sheila hasn’t called or touched base,” Barry said. “If the Vulpans feel the trial’s over and they won, I think there’s some celebrating going on up there. Sheila may still be drunk.”

A few of them chuckled, and Kit could only nod. “Muffy said something about them going out to celebrate, and Vulpans know how to party.”

“That’s parr-*taay*,” Marty corrected, snapping his fingers.

“How do your family thinks of you?” Savid asked.

“They think I’m stark raving mad,” Kit answered honestly. “They don’t understand. They *can’t* understand. All they have ever known is money. It’s all they know, and all they ever want to know. They can’t fathom that anyone could ever be happy without it.”

“Well, I guess I’ll just have to *try* being happy poor,” Marty said melodramatically. “All my dreams of a handsome sugar daddy, dashed! Oh, the anguish of it all!”

“Keep tryin’, Marty,” Rick chuckled.

“So, no more extended time off, eh? You’re gonna be like the rest of us wage slaves?” Mike grinned.

“Thank God,” Kit said with an explosive sigh. “Believe me, I appreciate you guys being so understanding. First I get shot, then the marriage, then this. I swear, I owe Rick so many vacation days I won’t be setting foot out of the city for two years.”

“You’ll earn it back, son,” Rick grinned.

“Now, the other news that rocked my world yesterday,” he said with building excitement, “which was why I was so scattered I never told you guys I was back.” He put on a foolish grin. “Jessie’s gonna have a baby!”

It was as if he dropped a bomb at the table. There was instant bedlam as the crew all laughed and shouted and jumped up, and he was pulled six different ways as he was hugged and his paws were shaken, often at the same time. “Ohmygawd, I gotta call Jessie!” Lilly squealed, reaching for her Blackberry.”

“Jessie’s in class, so don’t bother her!” Kit warned. “And don’t spread it around just yet. Me and Jessie are going to tell everyone today, so let us tell the important people. If Vil finds out from someone other than me, she’ll have a conniption. And God help us if Hannah hears it second hand,” he said with a shudder.

“Now that I can understand,” Mike laughed.

“When is baby due, Kit?” Savid asked.

“We’re not entirely sure. Jessie’s only between one and two months pregnant, she got suspicious when she missed her period, and went to the university clinic yesterday and they did a pregnancy test. One of the things she asked me to do today was start researching obstetricians, we need to find one.”

“I’ll have her call Martha,” Rick said quickly. “Our doctor knows every doctor in Austin, he’ll know exactly who to recommend, given how shy and modest Jessie is. Let me go put her on the job,” he said, then he hurried into his office.

“So, there’s going to be the pattering of little feet in the Vulpan apartment,” Lilly grinned, hugging him yet again.

“Not the one we’re in now,” Kit chuckled. “Lupe says we’ll be in our new apartment around August. They start construction on the Westwood expansion in a couple of weeks, as soon as they finish getting all the permits, and from what Lupe said, they’re building our apartments first, ours and Lupe’s. It’s gonna be a townhouse-style condo by the pool. We’ll be in one and Lupe will be in the one next door, connected to us.”

“I should talk to Lupe about moving into Westwood,” Jeffrey said. “My apartment is getting small, and my roommate is getting totally annoying.”

“Go for it, Lupe’s a great landlord,” Kit told him.

Kit did have one more important person to tell today, and after he extricated himself from the others and got into his office, he attended to that. He used his work cell phone, his Blackberry, to call Vil. Kit was tasked to tell his side of the family and the crew, and Jessie would tell her side of the family and the sorority. Kit would also tell Lupe and Kevin, that was

how they decided to divide the task of letting everyone know. Vil didn't answer her phone, it went straight to voice mail, which told him that she wouldn't answer it. He realized that she must be in court, since he was pretty sure that the trial didn't just end yesterday. They had other things to do, and Vil would be there while it was happening, as would most of the family. Kit had no doubt that Vil was sitting in the same aisle with his aunts and uncles—except maybe Uncle Tom, he always was a reclusive one—and most of the older cousins. He couldn't just let it go, though. She wouldn't answer the phone, but he had no doubt that she'd read it if he text-messaged her, something he rarely did:

Sis. Important news. Call me ASAP.

He waited for about five minutes, and when she didn't reply, either by text or calling, he sent her another message:

CALL ME NOW!

He put the Blackberry aside and put his attention on his computer when it beeped, warning him that Rick was putting something in his in-box. His Blackberry started ringing with the short tone that told him it was a text, and he picked it up as his assignment appeared in his in-box:

Bro, trial still on! My lawyers moved 2 throw out bitch's case. Judge hearing arguments, no ruling yet. Will call @ lunch break. TTYL.

He texted her back:

OK. Don't forget 2 call. BIG BIG NEWS!!!

He turned his attention back to his job, and saw that he was being assigned another interview. Rick, that sly dog, was already abusing the connections he'd made during Kit's wedding, for Kit was being assigned to interview Congressman Lamar Smith. Smith and Rick had met at the reception and had had a very congenial conversation, and Rick knew that Smith would never dare to decline an interview with Kit, for fear of angering Vilenne Vulpan. Politicians tread very lightly and carefully around the name *Vulpan*. Kit and Barry had interviewed quite a few local and state politicians and election officials already, part of the extensive and detailed coverage the magazine had devoted to the upcoming national election, turning the magazine into a *real* magazine. Smith would be the first federal office holder the magazine would interview, and Rick was wisely assigning the reporter to which Smith could dare not say no when he requested the interview.

He considered the assignment. He'd need to research Lamar Smith exhaustively before the interview. Kit wanted to know absolutely everything there was to know about the man; his voting record, his personal history, his platform, his vitals, his job goals. He should also research

Smith's potential competition for his House seat, both any possible challengers in his primary, as well as the candidates in the other party. And make sure there were no serious third party contenders as well. Kit wanted to be armed with every possible scrap of information he could find to ask tough yet fair questions to Congressman Smith, so the readers could fully understand where he stood and be able to decide for themselves if he was a fur for which they could vote or not. He would approach the interview as a neutral observer, with the objective to give the readers as much information about Smith as possible without ambushing him, but also asking tough questions about controversial issues, so the readers would know exactly where he stood.

He got so involved with his assignment he lost track of time. The ringing of his phone surprised him as he was putting the finishing touches on a detailed outline of information Kit needed to research to prepare for the interview, and he saved it with the mouse as his other paw picked up the phone and connected the call. "Lone Star Magazine, Kit Vulpan," he said in his ritual greeting used on the company cell phone.

"Now, what's this big news?" Vil asked, her voice a touch amused.

Kit laughed. "Are you sitting down, sis?"

"No, I'm standing out in the atrium in the courthouse, with a pack of nosy reporters hovering around me. That's right, nosy!" she called loudly, away from the phone.

"Well, this can wait until you're somewhere more private," Kit chuckled. "I don't want you looking un-Vulpan in public. Image, you know."

“Okay, you just got me *real* curious,” she told him. “Let me find an empty room somewhere, and I’ll fill you in on what happened today while we’re moving.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

“Okay, basically, it’s over,” she began. “This morning when the trial resumed, Cybil wasn’t here. She’s back in England. From what I was told, she went straight from the courthouse to the airport, and boarded the very first plane to Europe she could find. She ended up in Paris, and took another flight from there back to London. That bitch was in no mood to stay where I can get my claws in her,” she said with a dark laugh, “but she’s gonna find out I can reach all the way to England. Anyway, her lawyers tried to ask for a continuance, but the judge shot them down. Then my lawyers moved to have her entire case thrown out. They argued about that all morning, and the judge adjourned us for lunch by saying he’d rule on it tomorrow. We should have adjourned for the day with that, but we’re going back in after lunch so the lawyers for the family can drop their opposition to *my* case and allow it to move forward with only Cybil opposing it. That’s much simpler, so the judge should rule on that today, which is really him just acknowledging it. The main message it sends, though, is that the Vulpans are moving forward united, and that will probably influence the judge’s ruling on dismissing Cybil’s case. I mean, Cybil doesn’t really have a legal leg to stand on, and now it comes out that she’s the prime suspect in your attempted murder,” she said with a wicked little snicker. “That *does* put just a little bit of a shadow over her entire case,” she said lightly. “We’re also going to introduce the agreement you signed this afternoon, so everyone can just get it in their heads that you’re no longer part of this, and to leave you

the hell alone.” There was a brief pause. “Okay, I’m in an empty room, bro. What’s this earth-shattering news?”

Kit laughed, took a deep breath, then blurted it out. “Jessie’s gonna have a baby!” he said gleefully.

Vil actually *screamed*, a high-pitched squeal, and it sounded like she dropped her Blackberry for a second. “Oh my *God!*” she cried ecstatically. “I can’t believe it! Congratulations, bro!”

“Thanks, sis,” he said happily. “Jessie told me yesterday, but it was so crazy with me coming back and the trial and signing the agreement and all, this was the first chance we’ve really had to start spreading the news.”

“Who cares about that!” she laughed. “Oh, bro, I’m so happy I could cry! I *am* crying!” she announced, then she sniffled as if to prove it. “I—I have to call Jessie! Does she have a doctor yet? When is the baby due? Have you told her folks? *Please* tell me you’re moving out of that closet and getting a proper house!”

Kit laughed lightly. “Jessie’s in class, so don’t call her. Rick and Martha are asking their doctor for the name of a good obstetrician right now, we don’t know exactly when the baby’s due yet, I don’t think Jessie told her folks yet, that’s her job, and we weren’t planning on moving out of the complex. We’re staying right where we are, thank you very much. I *like* not having to mow the lawn!”

Vil laughed again. “Don’t even *think* of telling me I can’t put a paw in about this, bro! My sis-in-law and my bro are having a baby! I’m going to find the best OB-GYN on the freakin’ *planet* and send him to Austin, on me.”

“I don’t think we have to go quite that far, but I’ll gladly let you pick up the tab for the doctor. This is about the health of my wife and my baby, I won’t say a word.”

“You damn well better not!” she said with a happy little giggle.

“Watch your mouth, young lady!” Kit teased.

Vil laughed brightly. “I can’t wait to tell the family. God, will they ever blow a fuse! You know this won’t stay secret for very long, bro. The press has been all but crawling up my skirt since the trial started. I wouldn’t be surprised if there was a reporter hiding in the air duct listening to me right now.”

“That can’t be helped. I just didn’t want you to look flabbergasted when someone mentioned it to you, sis. You deserved to hear it from me.”

She laughed. “Well, thanks for that much. I’m gonna be an *aunt*,” she said with a thrilled lilt to her voice. “I’m so happy I could walk across the harbor!”

“Given it’s probably frozen over, I think you might pull it off,” he teased.

“Stav is giving me the warning, court’s about to go back in session, so I gotta go, bro. I’ll spread the word up here.”

“Okay. Tell Sheila as soon as you can, and you can call Jessie later tonight. She’s gonna call her folks as soon as she gets out of class.”

“Alright, I’ll make it a late call,” she promised. “Talk to you later tonight, bro, and congratulations!”

“Thanks, sis,” he said, and he ended the call. He wasn’t done yet, though. Vil would spread the word to the family and to Sheila, who was up there to attend the trial, but Kit still had two more people to inform, Lupe and Kevin. He dialed Lupe first, since now it was very important to know *exactly* how this construction and move was going to go. Kit didn’t want to be hanging in limbo waiting when Jessie was nine months pregnant. He wanted to move *before* the delivery if at all possible, he did not want to try to execute a move with a newborn child.

“Westwood Apartments, Lupe speakin’.”

“Lupe, it’s Kit.”

“Yo, brah! How’s Boston?”

“I’m back home. Didn’t you see me leave for work this morning?”

“Brah, I was late gettin’ into the office this morning. Why didn’t you call me or drop by? What happened up there to bring you home after just one day?”

“Things were crazy,” Kit chuckled. “But I’m home for good. I never have to go back.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Listen, speaking of home, when did you say they’d have our part of the new apartments finished and we could move in?”

“Umm, July, brah, at least that’s what I was told. They’re starting construction on them on Thursday, and they’re gonna go twenty four seven til they’re done. They gotta get the far side up so we can move everyone over and tear down these old buildings.”

“You’re positive about that?”

“Pretty sure, yah. Why?”

Kit beamed at the phone, which Lupe naturally couldn’t see. “Lupe, Jessie’s pregnant.”

He flinched when Lupe whooped loudly into the phone. “It’s about time, brah!” Lupe laughed. “All that sex you two have, I’m shocked you didn’t get her knocked up sooner! Congratulations!”

“I’d like to be moved before she delivers, Lupe, so it’s kinda important we’re sure about when we’re moving.”

“Shit yah,” he agreed. “I sure as hell won’t want you two in limbo with a baby on the way! Lemme call the contracting company and get a solid estimate, brah. I’ll have to make sure they’re available to move in before Jessie’s so big she can’t stand up by herself!”

Kit laughed. “I wouldn’t say that to her. She’ll sock you.”

“When she’s too fat to do anything but waddle, I’ll get all kinds of brave, brah,” Lupe said wickedly. “Lemme get on this. I sure as hell don’t want you two trying to move when Jessie’s big, or you already have the baby. Only problem is, if you move *too* early, you’ll be next door to a major construction site,” he grunted. “I dunno if the baby’s gonna like that. May have to hang in your apartment until they’re about to tear them down, *then* move over. Eh, lemme talk to my guys and get an idea. I’ll call ya back, brah.”

“I’m at work, so call me here.”

“Got it.”

Kit moved on to the last person he was tasked to tell, Kevin. Kevin, like all associates in his firm, had both a private number that reached him directly and an office number that could reach him through the office switchboard. The direct line was for his clients, so they could always call him directly without going through the switchboard. “Kev,” Kit called before he could go through his ten second long introduction.

“Hey, Kit! How cold is Boston?”

“I have no idea, I’m back home,” Kit answered.

“Already? How did it go?”

“For me, great. For Cybil, it was brutal,” he answered, which made Kevin chuckle. “I have some different news for you, though.”

“Cool, what is it?”

“First off, don’t tell Sam. Jessie wants to tell her herself.”

“I’m interested,” Kevin told him.

“Kev, Jessie’s pregnant. We’re gonna have a baby!”

“Really? That’s wonderful!” Kevin gushed. “I’m so happy for you! When is Jessie due?”

“We don’t know exactly yet, she has to go to an obstetrician and get an exam,” he answered. “Now remember, don’t tell Sam. Jessie wants to tell the sorority girls herself tonight.”

“No problem. Let’s have lunch to celebrate!”

“Sounds good to me,” Kit said. “Chinese?”

“You know it! I’ll be down in twenty!”

“Mind if I bring company? I doubt the crew’ll let me sneak out, I already told them.”

“No problem, I’ll bet a couple of partners will want to come too. They’re still trying to get me to talk you into retaining the firm,” he laughed. “Just the *prestige* of representing a Vulpan would be a major coup, even if we never actually did anything.”

“Them? Pft, *you’re* our lawyer, Kev,” Kit snorted.

“Wow, thanks, Kit,” Kevin said cheekily. “Does this mean I can bill you for lunch?”

“Bite me.”

Kevin exploded into laughter.

They met at the Little Dragon, and it did turn into an impromptu celebration. The entire office cleared out, they locked the doors, and hung a note on it as the entire magazine went to the restaurant to meet Kevin, and found that every partner and several associates had come down with him. The Little Dragon was still about the best place to get Chinese food in Austin, so they had trouble finding enough tables close enough together to remain concentrated. Kevin sat at a table with Kit, Rick, and Delores Kittimer, one of the partners at Kevin’s firm, a small, thin cat with tabby fur and a serious expression. Delores was one hell of a lawyer, sharp and highly educated, and Kevin always had praise for her when he talked about his bosses around poker. Delores did break her professional veneer by hugging him and telling him “I’m so happy for you!”

“Aww, thanks, Delores,” Kit chuckled as several of the crew rushed towards the buffet.

“I haven’t heard Martha cry that much since the wedding when I told her,” Rick chuckled as they sat down. “Poor Jessie. The second she gets out of class, she’s going to be bowled over by calls.”

“That’s why she left her Blackberry at home,” Kit grinned.

“Martha’s bringing over a dinner and a cake for you tonight, son,” Rick told him. “She started working on it as soon as I told her.” He took a bite out of his sweet and sour pork. “She doesn’t want Jessie to cook tonight. She figures you and her will be too busy.”

“God, I love that femme,” Kit laughed.

“She’s taken, son,” Rick grinned.

“Have you told your sister yet?” Kevin asked.

“And get murdered if she heard it from someone other than me? Do you think I’m insane?” Kit asked, which caused the whole table to erupt into laughter. “I have no doubt that my aunts and uncles know by now, and are cursing me out.”

“Screw ‘em,” Kevin said. “They have no right to say anything.”

“Amen,” Kit agreed.”

The group of them made it something of a celebration, even paid for by Kevin’s firm, and neither the crew nor the firm got back to their offices before three o’clock. Kit found quite a few messages on his Blackberry—which he’d intentionally left on his desk—and office phone voicemail, all of them from his cousins Sheila and Muffy, Suzy, Clancy, and surprisingly one from his uncle Brian, all of them congratulating him. Vil seemed to have quickly spread the word, even outside the family, and Kit grimly

guessed that the press had to have wind of it by now. He didn't get much more work done as he called them back, Clancy first and then Suzy, then Muffy, then Sheila. He chatted animatedly with all of them, but only breached another subject with Sheila. "Now that Cybil's gone, are you gonna change your plans about leaving Austin in the fall?"

"I'm kinda working on that right now," she answered. "I'll have a solid answer for you probably tomorrow."

"Alright. Were you at the trial today, or out getting drunk?"

Sheila laughed into the phone. "Both," she answered. "Man, what a circus," she mused. "But it's basically over. The judge may finish it all tomorrow."

"Vil told me about what happened up til lunch. What happened after that?"

"That's the only part of it I caught," Sheila giggled. "I was out with the Party Pack last night."

"Well, what happened? You know if you come back with nothing, Rick'll skin you. You're up there to work, you know!"

The family is letting Vil's case move forward unopposed," she told him. "But made it clear they'll still fight Cybil. But that's a moot point, just about everyone expects the judge to toss out Cybil's case, even the press."

"So, not much."

"Nope. I'm jut glad that the bitch is gone," she said with a sigh of relief. "Finally, I feel safe walking the streets of Boston again!"

"And free to return to your life of sex, drugs, and parties," he noted.

“Sex, drugs, and parties aren’t as much fun as they used to be,” she admitted with surprising candor. “Well, the sex is,” she hummed, which made Kit laugh.

“Do my ears deceive me, or have Martha and Hannah done the impossible and *tamed* Sheila Vance Vulpan?”

“Bite my ass,” Sheila grated, which made Kit explode into helpless laughter. “I’ll probably be back tomorrow afternoon.”

“I’ll be here,” Kit assured her.

“Oh, and grats again, cousin.”

“Thanks.”

After quite a few happy parting words, Kit left the office and drove home. Lupe rushed out of the office and shook his paw, and Mickey and Darn intercepted him before he made it to the door and added their own well wishes. Jessie still had a half hour before she got home, so Kit put on some water for tea, and had barely managed to take two steps out of the kitchen before the doorbell rang. “It’s open!” he shouted, and saw Martha rush inside. The tall great dane laughed and gave him a crushing hug, slapping him almost painfully on the back. “I’m so happy for both of you!” she bubbled. “I brought you some dinner, Kit. I’ll get to work heating it up for you. When will Jessica get home?”

“In about a half hour or so,” he answered. “Need help?”

“Come help me get it out of the car,” she told him.

The dinner she brought was almost a banquet. Tupperware dish after tupperware dish put in IGB bags, what had to be six courses, and a large

rectangle holding a dark-frosted cake. “Rick said you were going to ask your doctor about obstetricians.”

“I talked to our doctor,” she nodded. “He knows just about all the doctors in town. He suggested a doctor named Sandra MacNair. She’s supposed to be the best obstetrician in Austin, but she also has a very gentle and nurturing bedside manner. Given Jessica’s personality, that’s a very, very important quality.”

“Yeah, it would be,” he said as he got the last bag out of her dusty minivan and closed the back door. “She’d freeze up if it were someone with a gruff demeanor.”

“She’s such a dear,” Martha said with a little smile and laugh. Since the wedding, Martha looked at Jessie as something of an adopted daughter, and called Jessie at least once every two or three days. “Have you told Hannah and John yet?”

“Jessie’s going to do that when she gets home from school,” he answered.

“I’m *so* glad I didn’t call them, then!” Martha laughed. John and Hannah had struck up a very strong friendship with Rick and Martha after they met at the wedding. The two couples called each other often, and Rick was even talking about trying to go on the same cruise that Vil had given his in-laws for a Christmas present, sharing a vacation.

“Me too. We’d have seen the light from the explosion from here if Hannah gets the news from anyone but Jessie.”

Martha laughed delightedly as they returned to the apartment. They unloaded everything on the kitchen counters and dining room table, and

Martha swatted Kit on the backside when he started unpacking one of the bags. “Out, you!” she commanded. “This is no time for you to be worrying yourself with the little things. I’ll handle this!”

“Just wait til I tell Rick you’ve been pawing my butt,” Kit threatened, then he danced out of range as she sought to swat him again, and much harder. He laughed and evacuated himself from the kitchen, and turned on the radio while Martha’s voice emanated from the kitchen, singing to herself as she took over the place. In moments, the smell of country fried steak wafted enticingly through the apartment as the matronly canine started heating up the expansive meal she’d brought over, enough food to feed the two of them for five days.

Jessie got home right about on time, laughing as she opened the door. Lupe, Mickey, and Dan were with her, Dan carrying her backpack, Mickey a Wal-Mart bag, and Lupe had his arm over her shoulder. “—just so thrilled for yah, hon!” Lupe was saying to her as they came in.”

“Aww, thanks, Lupe,” she smiled dazzlingly, then hugged him fondly. “And I’m not delivering tomorrow!” she accused Dan, giggling as she took her backpack back from him. “I carried this *all day*, all by myself, you know!”

The lion grinned at her. “Hush, you! You’re more than entitled to a little pampering. You deserve it!”

“Stop putting the moves on my wife, guys,” Kit warned playfully as Jessie gave him a loving hug, and kissed him on the muzzle.

“Then keep her happy, so she don’t come to Doctor Looove,” Lupe retorted, which made them all laugh.

“What are you cooking, love?” Jessie asked, sniffing the air in the apartment.

“*He’s* not cooking anything!” Martha called, padding out from the kitchen and burying Jessie in a crushing embrace. “I’m so happy for you, sweetie!”

“Aww, thanks, Martha,” she said with a laugh, patting the great dane on the shoulder.

“I’m cooking enough for a good sized dinner, if your friends would like to stay. I figured you’d have company tonight,” she smiled.

Lupe laughed. “I don’t *never* say no to free food!” he said. “But, I’ll have to come back later, I’m still working on something.”

“Yeah, we should give you some privacy to make some calls, hon,” Dan told her. “We’ll come back around six-thirty or so. That alright with you?”

“That’s fine,” Jessie told them.

“Now if you need any help with anything, you know where we are,” Mickey told her. “We can’t have you straining yourself in your condition!”

“*Boys*,” Jessie accused, pushing them towards the door. When the three of them left, laughing, Jessie gave Martha a challenging yet fond look. “I *can* still cook for myself, you know,” she teased. “You of all people, Martha! I’m shocked!”

“Tosh,” she sniffed, smiling. “You’ll be much too busy today to cook anything wholesome, and you’re eating for two now!”

“It sure doesn’t feel like it yet,” Jessie laughed, patting her very slim belly. “I haven’t even started getting morning sickness yet, knock on wood.”

“How far are you along, dear?”

“I don’t really know, somewhere between four and six weeks,” she answered. “I found out because I missed my period. And I’ve been paying real close attention to it, kinda hoping this would happen,” she said, smiling at Kit. “As soon as I realized I missed, I went to the clinic on campus and they gave me a pregnancy test. They gave me three different ones, just to make sure! I need to find an obstetrician now so I can get an exam and find out where I am.”

“I found you a very good one, dear, who came *highly* recommended.”

“Really?”

“Our own doctor recommended her personally,” she answered with a nod. “Doctor Kantrell said she was the best OB-GYN in Austin, and we trust him explicitly.”

“Is that who it is?”

“No dear, that’s our doctor. Her name is Sandra MacNair,” she said as she padded back towards the kitchen. “I have her number, and she’s expecting to hear from you tomorrow to make an appointment. But you have a few other calls to make,” she prompted as she turned the corner and vanished from sight.

“Yeah, I do,” Jessie said, blowing out her breath. “I guess we can’t put it off forever,” she said, steeling herself as she pulled her Blackberry out of

her purse. Ever since she got it for Christmas, she almost never used her other cell phone...she just kept that one for emergencies.

Hannah's reaction was very much a wild card, and it was one of the reasons that Jessie wasn't entirely enthusiastic to make the call. Hannah had *just* started getting used to the idea that they were married, and now it was going to be complicated by this. It might make Hannah that much more paranoid that the marriage she felt was doomed to fail would be complicated by a child. Kit could see that Hannah would feel that Jessie would be that much more vulnerable; pregnant, still in school, and growing increasingly dependent on a husband that Hannah didn't entirely trust. That was one way she could look at it—the way Kit expected—but there was also the simpleness of it. Despite the situation and her reservations, some part of Hannah would have to be happy about the idea of being a grandmother, no matter how problematic it might be for her daughter. Kit left Jessie to give her a little space to make the call, joining Martha in the kitchen to help her.

“Is she calling Hannah?” Martha asked as Kit poured Jessie a cup of hot water for tea.

Kit nodded. “Now we find out if Hannah will be happy about this or not.”

Martha tutted. “She'll be happy about being a grandmother, dear. How can she not be happy about that?”

“Hannah will find a way,” he said darkly. “You know how she feels about our marriage, Martha. She thinks I'll abandon Jessie the instant things start getting anywhere near inconvenient. She's afraid I'll abandon Jessie the way her father abandoned her mother.”

“Kit. If you have proved anything to Hannah, it is that you *are not* her father.”

“God, I hope so,” Kit prayed fervently as he heard Jessie begin to talk.

There was no shouting from the living room, which was a good sign. Jessie’s voice sounded reasonable, then she giggled, then she was too quiet for Kit to hear as he poured green beans from a tupperware container into a pot on the stove, and Martha turned on the oven. Kit got too busy following Martha’s orders to pay much attention, at least until Jessie called his name. He hurried into the living room, and Jessie held out the phone to him. “Here,” she said, giving him a warning look.

“Hello?” he said, almost timidly.

“That was very quick work, Kit,” Hannah’s voice said darkly over the phone, as if on the verge of an explosion. Kit’s tail stood straight out in sudden fear, which caused Jessie to erupt into laughter, and he heard Hannah laugh over the phone. “Congratulations, dear,” she said in a much happier voice, but not *too* happy.

“Thank God!” he said explosively. “I thought you’d be angry! And *you*, you little sneak, are in so much trouble!” he said, snapping an accusing finger at Jessie. “You put her up to that, didn’t you?”

“Mmmmaybe,” Jessie grinned, putting her paws behind her back and assuming an almost unbearably cute pose and expression.

He heard Hannah laugh over the phone. “But seriously, Kit, this has come at a very awkward time. Jessie still has two more semesters to go. How is she going to finish school? What about her hopes to earn a Master’s?”

“I know,” Kit nearly groaned. “We didn’t plan this—well, I didn’t. Jessie’s been hoping it would happen. But we’ll have to find a way. Jessie’s so *close* to graduating. She just has to finish school!”

“I’m glad you agree,” Hannah said in a satisfied tone. “Now, what you two need to do is sit down and seriously think everything through. There is a *lot* you need to think about now. For instance, Jessie needs to find an obstetrician, and quickly. A girl can never have an obstetrician too soon when she’s expecting.”

“Martha helped us with that,” he told her. “She had her doctor recommend one to us. Jessie’s making her first appointment tomorrow.”

“That’s very good.”

“And we will sit down and talk about this. I’m sure we won’t think of everything though, that’s why I’m so glad we have you, and Rick and Martha, to give us advice.”

“I’m glad you’ll be looking to them,” Hannah said approvingly. “They’re good people with a great deal of common sense. If you can’t talk to me, dear, then Martha is your best alternative.”

“She’s here with us now,” Kit chuckled. “When she heard, she rushed over to make us dinner!”

“She’s there? Put her on,” Hannah ordered.

“Martha! Hannah wants to talk to you,” he called, going into the kitchen and giving her the phone.

“Hello, Hannah,” Martha said happily. “Yes! I was shocked, but I’m very happy for them! Oh, country fried steak and lots of different dishes. I

want them well fed today,” she chuckled, and Kit wandered back into the living room. Jessie gave him a kiss, but she squealed and laughed when he grabbed her, turned her side to him, then reached down and spanked her.

“Bad kitty! I nearly had a heart attack!” he admonished her as she continued to laugh helplessly and struggle with her gorgeous longhaired tail writhing as he smacked her backside. Jessie struggled for a moment more, then surrendered by kissing him on the muzzle, which made him give her a gentle embrace. “How did she take it when you told her?”

“A lot better than I thought she would,” Jessie answered. “She was speechless at first, and you know, that’s when you wait for the explosion. But then she laughed and congratulated me.”

“How did John take it?”

“Dad’s still at school. He teaches an afternoon class on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Mom will tell him when he gets home.

“Well, that’s a hopeful sign, at least,” Kit said. “I was so afraid she’d blow a fuse when she found out.”

“I’m sure she’ll be less joyful when it sinks in,” Jessie said. “But I think as long as I keep calling her and asking her advice, I can keep her mollified to where she doesn’t start thinking negatively. I have to keep her focused on the *good* and not let her dwell on the *bad*.”

Kit laughed and rocked her from side to side. “Good God, what did I do to you, my pretty kitty? What happened to that moral young femme who would never discuss manipulating her mother so blatantly I fell in love with?”

“I’m a Vulpan now,” she giggled. “Am I proving it?”

“Wayyyy too much,” he agreed. “I have got to get you away from Vil and Sheila before they do any more damage. But God help me, I *love* you.”

“You better. I still own your contract,” she grinned, giving him a passionate kiss that made his knees weak.

His Blackberry started to ring, and he held onto Jessie with one paw as he dug it out. “It’s Vil,” he said, reading the display, then he connected the call on speaker so Jessie could hear. “Hey sis,” he said. “You done for today?”

“Yeah, we’re all done,” she said. “Is Jessie home?”

“I’m right here, Vil,” she announced.

“Congratulations, hon!” Vil said brightly. “I’m so happy for you!”

“Thanks,” she said with a light laugh.

“Kit has already knuckled under to me,” Vil said victoriously. “I want you to go to an obstetrician, Jessie. Kit said you’d find one yourself, but when you do, give me the number to their office. I’m going to take care of all the doctor bills.”

“Aww, that’s so sweet!” Jessie gushed.

“This is about *family*, hon, and I won’t let Kit’s pride jeopardize your baby!” she said vehemently. “You’ll get the medical care you *deserve*!”

“Well, I won’t say no, Vil.”

“You’d better not!” she declared, quite seriously.

Jessie laughed. “I’ll call you tomorrow about it, alright? I’m going to make my first appointment.”

“What’s the name of this doctor?”

“Umm. Sandy MacNair.”

“Sandra MacNair,” Kit corrected.

“Give me her number. I want to call her and arrange paying for your appointment.”

“Uh, Vil, can I *make* the appointment before you do that? She’ll have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh. Right,” she said in a very unusual tone, which surprised Kit a little.

“Calm down, sis,” Kit told her.

Vil laughed. “I know, but I’m just so *excited*,” she said giddily. “Guess I’m going all spazzy on you guys, aren’t I?”

Jessie laughed. “That’s alright, I think it shows how happy you are for us,” she said affectionately.

“God, am I ever!”

“How did the family take it?” Kit asked.

“About how you’d expect,” she answered. “Muffy and Sheila are overjoyed, most of the other cousins don’t really care all that much, and the aunts and uncles are up in arms. All but Brian, that is,” she mused. “He seems really happy for you. He asked me to tell you congratulations from him, he knows you’ll never talk to him if you know it’s him.”

“He’s right,” Kit said adamantly.

“But, it was good timing,” Vil mused. “This news coming right behind us winning the trial. They’re too busy celebrating keeping their money to worry too much about you.”

“It’s all over?”

“Not officially,” she informed them. “The judge accepted the family’s dropping their objection to my suit this afternoon, and said he’d rule on the motion to dismiss Cybil’s case probably tomorrow. Everyone’s predicting it’s over, including Cybil’s own lawyers,” she snickered. “Bro, to say they were *floored* by our evidence was the mother of all understatement. You should have heard them today. They had nowhere to go, they had a dead case, and they knew it. We *murdered* their case. Where can you go when you find out the petitioner tried to have a member of the respondent’s family assassinated just to help you win your case? Their arguments for not dismissing the case were pretty weak, on top of it.”

“What happened to Cybil?” Jessie asked.

“She ran back to England before the judge finished banging his gavel yesterday afternoon,” she answered with a wicked little chuckle. “She caught the first plane to Europe out of Logan, didn’t even take any luggage with her. She *ran*, and everyone noticed it. It was all over the Herald this morning.”

“Now what?”

“Now? I give her maybe five or six days to think the Vulpans aren’t going to chase her across the pond, get her hopes up, then she wakes up and finds a damning story in the *Globe* and reporters banging on the gates of her manor in Cheshire,” she said. “Then I’ll call her and tell her that her bony ass is *mine* and would she *please* try to do something about it. Because I’ll

enjoy crushing her that much more if she fights than I will if she just meekly accepts it,” she said with a vindictive growl in her voice.

“That’s my bloodthirsty sister,” Kit laughed.

“I’m glad you’re keeping your promise to me, Vil,” Jessie said heatedly.

“You bet I am, sis, I will make her *hurt*,” Vil said intensely. “I will crush her and leave her totally destroyed. She’ll have *nothing* when I’m done with her.”

“My little barbarian,” Kit laughed, squeezing Jessie.

“So I’m a barbarian,” Jessie shrugged, which made Vil laugh. “Mind if we call this a little short, Vil? I still have some people to call.”

“No problem, Jessie,” Vil said. “I want you to call me the instant you get that appointment made. And I want you to push to get it as soon as possible. Tell her you’ll pay him triple the usual fee if he moves you up to, say, tomorrow.”

“Her. It’s a her. *Sandra* MacNair,” Jessie corrected.

“Thank God,” Vil grunted. “Why males want to be obstetricians is beyond me. It’s creepy. I always think they’re sex perverts who are too ugly to go into porn.”

Kit and Jessie both laughed. “I’ll see what I can do, I promise,” Jessie said. “But I do have class tomorrow.”

“Pft, class is not your biggest priority now, sis,” Vil said seriously. “You can always take classes over, but you only get one shot to have a healthy pregnancy.”

“Well, I think I can have my pregnancy *and* stay in class,” she said. “I’ll finish this semester before I deliver. It’s just the fall semester I’m worried about. I don’t know when I’m due, so I don’t know how that’s going to go.”

“Well, we’ll find out soon, and then we’ll all sit down and work something out,” Vilenne said confidently. “Now I’ll let you go so you can get some of that food Martha’s cooking for you and finish making your calls.”

“I will, thanks Vil.”

“Aat, call me sis!” Vil said playfully.

“Sis,” Jessie laughed.

“There, I feel better now,” Vil giggled, then she hung up before they could say another word.

“Wow, she’s all pumped up,” Jessie laughed.

“Yeah, she sounds excited about it,” Kit agreed. “Now call Sam and Sandy before Kevin spills the beans.”

“You told Kevin already?”

“You told me to!”

“Oh. I did, didn’t I?” she laughed, taking Kit’s phone from him and speed-dialing Sam.

Kit could predict the squealing gushiness of Jessie informing the sorority, so he left her to it to go help Martha in the kitchen. He helped her knead homemade dough for bread while she finished up a pan of spiced

cheese potato casserole and popped it into the oven. “How did Hannah sound to you, Martha?”

“Excited, but a touch nervous,” she answered. “The same as any future grandparent. Don’t worry, Kit, she didn’t sound angry.”

“I just can’t stop asking,” he sighed as he took his Blackberry back from her. “I’m terrified she’s gonna change her mind and go against us, somehow.”

“Show her the same faith she’s showing you, dear,” Martha chuckled, patting him in the shoulder. “Give her a chance.”

“You’re right, of course,” he said, pocketing his phone.

“Of course I am, dear. I’ve been around the block a few times, after all,” she smiled.

The dinner turned into quite a gathering. Rick was the first to arrive, and Kit was surprised to see that he wasn’t the only one that decided to drop in on Kit after work. Jeffrey and Mike came over with him, since Jeffrey didn’t have much else to do and Mike lived only about two miles away, and as soon as Sam and Sandy heard the news, they rushed over with the other Jessie, Danielle, Sherry, Lisa, and Charlotte from the sorority. Their apartment wasn’t big enough to hold everyone, so it spilled out into the courtyard as Lupe, Dan, and Mickey came over. They set up tables, Rick went and got hamburgers and hot dogs, Mickey brought his big grill over, Kevin arrived with a big bottle of wine and a few pizzas, and it turned into a party. It was a bit chilly for some to be out grilling in February in forty-five degree weather, so Kit handled the grill while friends milled in and out of their apartment. Everyone was energetic and chatty, as some of their friends who didn’t often see each other interacted. The sorority didn’t often see the

crew outside of Jeffrey, and it was fun to see the wolf, Charlotte, flirt with Mike as Danielle teased Jeffrey and Sandy, and the other Jessie talked to Rick about running his own business; Jessica was a business major herself. They had a great time. Jessie was radiant as the center of attention, and Kit was quite content to let her have her moment in the sun. So often, Jessie was overshadowed by Kit's family name, and she never complained. He was glad that this was about *her*, and almost exclusively her, and it was so wonderful to watch her smile and talk to their friends, and be so completely happy and content. Yes, everyone congratulated him, but she was the one that was pregnant, and she was the one that was the complete focus of their celebration...and he couldn't be happier for her.

God, what a femme.

Sandra MacNair was a gray vixen who wore large-lensed square glasses with gold rims, had a lustrous coat of charcoal-gray fur with a lighter gray ruff, a dark stripe over her muzzle, and sober amber eyes. She was middle-aged, thin, athletic, and wore a white coat over a University of Illinois tee shirt and a pair of black denim jeans. She called them by their first names, and insisted they call her "Doc Mac" or just "Mac." She didn't *look* like the best obstetrician in Austin, but Kit was never one to judge by appearances.

Someone had definitely pulled some strings, Kit figured. Jessie had called her first thing that morning, calling between classes from school, and it was just so *lucky* that Doctor MacNair just *happened* to have an open slot on her schedule between four and six...and Jessie just *happened* to get out of class at three o'clock on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

It smelled strongly of Vil. They'd told her the name of the doctor, and Kit had a strong suspicion that Vil had had Stav or Marcus track down Sandra MacNair, M.D., and *convince* her to open her schedule for Jessie.

But, Kit wasn't going to complain. MacNair was unusual in that she demanded that Kit be there for the examination, feeling that having the husband there reassured the wife and also kept the husband completely in the know as to the needs of the femme, and it was time that Rick was more than willing to give Kit so he could leave early to take her. Jessie was just a little nervous and shy, at first, a reaction that got a little more intense when the doctor made her take her clothes off and gave her a thorough exam, which Kit saw in its entirety, even the embarrassing parts. She then took some of Jessie's blood and gave her a smile. "Now, how long ago did you realize you missed your period, hon?" she asked.

Jessie's cheeks frizzed a little. "About a week," she answered.

"And your period last month was normal?"

"Uh, yeah, I think so."

"Have you been taking any medicines since last month and this month?"

"Just Tylenol a few times," she answered.

"Alright, now, let me check this tummy one more time," she said, having Jessie lay back on her exam table, and probing Jessie's stomach with clawed hands. Kit wondered how she did her job with those wicked looking weapons sticking out over her fingers, but she seemed to have no trouble. She gently prodded Jessie in several places from her ribcage to her hips, then she nodded to herself. "Now, the blood test will give me a clearer

picture, but I'm feeling a little something here. I'd say you're definitely expecting, and you're somewhere between three and six weeks into your term."

"How can you tell?"

"Changes in your uterus that someone with training can detect," she smiled, showing teeth just like Kit's, normal teeth with elongated canines on her upper and lower jaws. "Now, those I found with the cervical exam, not this," she winked, which made Jessie's fur ruffle again. "But your abdominal cavity feels entirely normal and capable of letting you bring a pregnancy to term with no problems. Now, since I need those test results back before I can do much else for you, I'll let you get dressed," she smiled. "You look perfectly healthy, so all I can really tell you right now is keep right on going, don't change or stop your routine because of your pregnancy. I want you to keep exercising, but I'd also like you to start taking multi-vitamins and make sure you get plenty of vitamin C and D. Your pregnancy will put a bigger demand on your body for vitamins, so you need to increase your intake."

"Okay. We'll stop at the store and buy some on the way home. Which brand do you suggest?"

"Any complete multivitamin will do," she said. "If you want to buy some expensive specialty brand from GNC, go for it. If you want to get the cheap Centrum clone from Wal-Mart, that works just as well. Just make sure it's a complete multivitamin, and make sure you take in at *least* a full one hundred percent RDA of Vitamin C and D from today on. My best suggestion is a glass of orange juice and a glass of milk every morning with breakfast to wash down that vitamin, and you're just fine."

“Okay. Umm, when will the morning sickness start?” Jessie asked nervously.

Doctor MacNair laughed. “It could start tomorrow, it may never start. But, you’re about to enter the barf window,” she winked. “So be ready for it.”

“I will.”

“Now, since you are pregnant, that means that there are some no-nos,” she said seriously. “No more drinking, and if you smoke, then stop.”

“I don’t smoke, and I don’t really drink much, so I won’t miss it,” she nodded.

“Good. Don’t take anything stronger than Tylenol or Advil without consulting me first, make sure you keep exercising. As far as diet goes, at this stage, there’s not much you need to worry about. Just make sure you get enough to eat, *no dieting*,” she warned, “and take your vitamins. Your figure had better be the last thing you’re worrying about right now. If you want to keep your figure, do it with exercise, not with dieting. I prefer to see you active right up until your labor, I’ll never put you on bedrest unless you have a complication, so keep right on exercising, hon. Outside of that, if you wanna chow down on hot dogs and bacon three meals a day, go for it. Kit, do you take any medicines?”

“Me? No,” he answered. “And I don’t smoke, and the most drinking I do is an occasional glass of wine with dinner,” he added.

She laughed. “Well, I’ve found that a femme is more likely to stop when her husband stops with her, so you’re becoming a dry house,” she ordered.

“Not a problem,” he nodded. “I’ll give my wine to a friend of mine, so it’s not even in the house.”

“That’s a good attitude,” she said approvingly. “And since she needs to exercise, then so do you,” she told him. “That way you keep each other on the program. You’ll keep her exercising, and she can take it out on you,” she grinned.

“We have a membership at the Y,” Jessie told her. “That’s no problem at all.”

“When you’re further along, Jessie, I’ll give you some exercise regimens to follow so you don’t stress your belly or endanger your baby. But for right now, feel free to do any exercise you want as long as it’s not something like boxing.”

Jessie laughed. “Alright.”

“She doesn’t need to train for boxing, doc, she gets enough of that kind of exercise beating me up at home,” Kit said dryly.

“Ah, she’s a scrapper is she?” MacNair grinned. “Claws?”

“Pillows.”

She laughed. “Ah, one of those. Well, she’s free to keep you on the straight and narrow for a while,” she winked at Jessie.

“I have him well trained,” Jessie said primly. “Anymore, I only beat him up because he intentionally goes looking for trouble.”

“Then it sounds like you have a good husband,” she said with a laugh. “Males who don’t stir up trouble are boring!”

“I’d have to agree,” Jessie said seriously.

“Now, I’ve already been contacted by Miss Vilenne, Jessie, and she’s already paid for your visit today, so you’re free to go as soon as you’re dressed. Stop by the store and pick up some vitamins on the way home, and I’ll call you when your test results come in and schedule your next appointment, okay?”

“Okay. Thanks a lot, Doctor MacNair.”

“Just Doc, or Mac, honey,” she smiled. “You make me feel old when you call me that.”

“Old? You?” Kit said with a scoff. “You look too young to be a doctor as it is, let alone the most recommended OB-GYN in Austin.”

“You *do* have him well trained,” the doctor said with a bright smile at Jessie.

“Of course I do,” she said with a prim little smile.

Kit helped Jessie into the Pathfinder after finishing up the visit, and Jessie seemed quite excited. “I can’t wait to find out when I’m due,” she said happily, reaching over and patting him on the paw as he put it on the gearshift. “I was almost mortified when she made me undress in front of you!”

“Uh, love, explain how that matters,” he said.

She laughed. “It’s a difference between *private* and *not private*,” she told him. “I don’t mind taking my clothes off for you, it was taking my clothes off for a medical exam in front of you that made it creepy,” she told him.

He chuckled “I’m so sorry for compromising your modesty,” he teased. “I do hope this doesn’t mean you’re gonna start hiding under towels and robes at home.”

She slapped him on his scarred forearm. “I wonder how she’ll figure out when I’m due,” she mused. “Do you think the blood test is that precise?”

“I think it’s a combination of things,” Kit said. “But if she couldn’t predict your delivery date, she wouldn’t be a very good obstetrician, would she?”

“I guess not,” she giggled.

The next day was busy for Kit, and not just because of the life-changing news. He had an interview to do, and he spent all morning digging every scrap of information about Congressman Lamar Smith out of every dusty back corner of the internet and the Austin Public Library. Kit assembled an exhaustive bio on the fur, to the point of digging up the names of his four grandparents, then putting it all together to create an overview of his life history, his education, his political career, his platform and ideals, and his known aspirations for the future.

The crew was still a little giddy, but then again, so was he. He entertained quite a few pawshakes and hugs through the morning, and not one of them failed to come to his office and ask about Jessie. He told them all they’d see her tonight, for she was going to come to the office after class, and would get there around five-thirty, right around the time they did their Thursday wrap meeting.

Given it was Thursday and the last day of the issue, there was the usual bustle. Rick and Savid were making last-minute changes. Marty was riding Lilly about finishing the question posed to her in *Ask Away*, and was also editing down a mailbag letter that was going into the issue. Jeffrey was busy drawing for *School Daze*, working off writing Kit had already given him. Mike was working on *The Scene* on the website, for he was about to change the website's layout. Barry was out doing an interview with one of the Austin City Councilfurs, part of the election special. Denise was up at her desk, reading something Rick had given her. It was just another typical day at work.

But it wasn't a typical day. Kit kept daydreaming about Jessie's pregnancy, often going ten minutes just staring into space. What would it be like as her belly grew? What kind of food cravings would she get? Would she get morning sickness, and if so, for how long? He'd heard that some femmes had wild mood swings due to hormones, but had also heard that pregnancy seriously mellowed many femmes out. Both were probably correct, so he wondered which way Jessie would swing. How active would she be? Would her being mixed influence her pregnancy in any way? Would her sex drive change? Just what went on during a pregnancy anyway?

Clearly, Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan III, professional researcher, needed to do a little research about pregnancy. Since this was their first baby, Kit wanted to have an idea of what they could expect.

Of course, he still got some calls. Vil called him about an hour before lunch, and she was almost smugly happy just from the sound of her greeting him. "Let me guess," he prompted.

"It's *over*," she declared triumphantly. "The judge threw out Cybil's case. My case went through unopposed, and the judge voided Dad's will

and accepted the agreement we drew up. Congratulations, bro, you're no longer *officially* disowned. The family's happy, I'm happy, you're happy, Cybil is fearing for her life...it's a wonderful day."

"Well, that's good to hear, sis," he told her. "I'm happy it all worked out for you."

"Not entirely," she grunted. "Uncle Zach is *still* trying to take my job at the company, but at least he can't badger me about Stonebrook anymore. Did I tell you he tried to sue me for ownership?"

"Yeah, you did," he answered.

"The bastard," she growled. "Anyway, I'm sure that Zach's gonna lay low a while and get his nerves back after he had to face the possibility of you disowning *him*, and once he feels himself again, he'll be back at it. One good thing about the deal is that Zach had to admit he doesn't own the estate in writing."

"Yeah, but you agreed to let him live there."

"He can live there all he wants," she snorted. "It doesn't change the fact that *I* am the one in the big chair. And our deal makes it clear to the family that I'm *letting* him live there, out of the kindness of my heart."

"I didn't think you had a heart."

Vil laughed. "I have a small one, and it's very well hidden," she told him playfully. "But, I'll enjoy the vacation until he starts stirring up trouble again. So, what did the doctor say?"

"To wait for the blood tests to come back," he answered. "She estimates Jessie's three to six weeks into her pregnancy, but she wants to

look at the tests before she makes a more precise guess. Outside of that, Jessie's perfectly healthy, and the doctor doesn't foresee any complications."

"That's fantastic news, bro," she said with a sigh. "Just to warn you, Muffy's coming back with Sheila today."

"What about her school?"

"She's only taking two days," she told him. "Sheila said she has to start making arrangements."

"Yeah, I figure she'll go back home as soon as Rick finds an intern to replace her. Maybe not even that long."

"No, she's making arrangements to move down there."

"What?" Kit gasped.

"She's serious about it, bro," she told him. "From what I found out, she's made a deal with Harvard. She's going to transfer to U.T. and take culinary arts, but still do her business classes at Harvard through correspondence, through the internet and private correspondence with the professors. Harvard agreed to accept all her U.T. credits and shadow her through the crap requirements so long as she pays the tuition for them, and only come back up here for one semester to do her capstone project. That way she can graduate with her B.A. from Harvard in business and also get a B.A. from U.T. in cooking, since U.T. will take credits from Harvard. She has a pretty sweet deal. She'll only take cooking classes down there, only business classes through Harvard, and will graduate with two degrees in three years. I guess she's dead serious about opening her own restaurant, bro. She's taking steps to make it happen."

“Well, good for her,” Kit said with a chuckle. “I’m surprised she wrangled that kind of deal out of Harvard.”

“Well, bro, the Vulpan name is a big club here. But, I suspect she probably bribed them to agree to let her shadow the requirement classes, accept her credits for her classes down there, and just do the business classes, and still graduate. Sheila knows how to schmooze people.”

“Knowing her, she banged the dean,” Kit grunted, which made Vil laugh.

“She very well may have,” she agreed. “But, her setting up this deal shows she’s smart, she knew what to do to get what she wants, and she made it happen. She acted like a *Vulpan*,” she said, with a little pride.

“She did at that,” Kit agreed. “I think Great-grandpa would be proud of her.”

“You know, I think he would. Sheila showed she’s much more of a Vulpan than her mother,” Vil told him. “After all, *that’s* what being a Vulpan is about. It’s about coming out on top despite the odds, about winning, not about being rich. And Sheila *won*.”

“In a weird way, I’m glad she’s staying here. God help me, I think I’d miss her if she left.”

“She grew on you, eh?”

“Like mange,” he grunted, which made Vil laugh delightedly.

“I can’t deny, I’m kinda fond of her myself,” Vil admitted. “She’s definitely a piece of work. There’s a mind hiding under that oversexed exterior.”

“It took it long enough to start showing up.”

“No, it just took her believing in herself,” Vil said seriously. “When she ran down there to you, she found that she *can* make it on her own, I think. You and Jessie and Martha were a good influence on her.”

“Martha and Jessie more than me,” Kit admitted. “I just put up with her. Those two nurtured her. I guess I should tell Lupe she’s here to stay,” he mused, pondering it. Sheila really did prove that she was quite smart with this move, and displayed amazing logic and methodical execution. Kit realized that Sheila had, probably for the first time in her life, been confronted with the possibility that she wouldn’t get what she wanted. But, instead of whining about it or running to her mother to have her make everything just right, she instead tackled the problem herself, took action to accomplish her goal. She wanted to open a restaurant, learn to cook, and what was most surprising, she wanted to stay in Austin. So she identified her goal, analyzed the obstacles keeping her from her goal, devised a plan of attack to remove, circumvent, or counteract those obstacles, then executed that plan. Kit was quite impressed that his cousin, who seemed a Party Pack femme to the core, would demonstrate traits more in line with her parents or Vil than her other cousins. It just went to show that even someone like Sheila could change her tune when she wanted something bad enough. “Pretty amazing,” he chuckled, mainly to himself.

“Sheila? Yeah,” Vil agreed. “Next thing we know, Lynn and Bess will become nuns.”

Kit laughed so loud that Mike stopped at his open door and looked in curiously, but Kit waved him on. “I have to ask, did you meddle with the doctor?”

“Just a little bit,” she admitted cheekily. “I offered her triple her usual office fee if she could see Jess the same day.”

“I thought so.”

“Don’t you *dare* bitch,” she warned. “This is about Jessie and your baby!”

“Did you hear me complain?” he asked calmly. “I told you, when it comes to Jessie, I’ll turn a blind eye as long as you don’t go nuts.”

“Good. You just saved yourself a hell of a lot of grief, bro,” she told him bluntly.

“Like I think I could derail you over this. Like I would want to!”

“Ooh, sounds like I can slip in some first class meddling under the guise of the baby,” she teased.

“Vil!” Kit barked.

“I gotta be me,” she laughed lightly.

“You’ll find your number blocked and your email on ignore,” he warned.

“Well, better put on your fighting cap, bro,” she taunted. “Because you and me are going to have a few little chats about your living arrangements.”

“We *like* our apartment,” he told her. “Even Jessie will tell you that.”

“You’re starting a family, you need a *house*,” she challenged strongly.

“But they’re so expensive,” he complained, and immediately winced.

“*Kit!*” she gasped in shock. “You think I’d throw you a key and forget about you? Shame on you!”

“But that’s the problem, isn’t it?” he challenged. “How can I ever prove to myself that I can make it if you’re always standing at the rudder, Vil?”

“You’re being silly,” she told him. “You don’t think *surviving* Dad answers that question? I’m not trying to take away your life and turn you into one of the Party Pack, bro. I just want to give you what you need, and what you deserve, after everything our father and our family did to you. If I really did do what you’re suggesting, you’d be back up here in Boston, living with Jessie in Stonebrook, and you’d be sitting on the lion’s share of the family fortune.”

“That’s a quick way to make me miserable.”

“Pft,” she snorted. “Bro, I think you’d be the *best* Vulpan to have that money, and the responsibility that goes with it. You understand what it means more than any of us, even me. I’ve never lived a day without my comforts. I wouldn’t appreciate it the way you would.”

“I don’t want that curse.”

“I think you can handle it.”

“I don’t want to find out.”

“Pft. Baby bro, you *are* a *Vulpan*,” she said seriously. “Now that you’re doing more than slumming around hiding from me and the family, I don’t see how you could possibly do anything but succeed. I’ll bet you half my shipyard stock here and now that you’re a self-made millionaire by the age of thirty-five.”

“I doubt Rick will ever earn enough to pay me that much, Vil.”

“I know you, bro,” she said with a curious little lilt in her voice. “I know how that mind of yours works. Where do you keep the business plan you drew up about the magazine one day when you were bored?”

Kit’s cheeks ruffled. There was indeed such a business plan, buried in his computer, which was a plan to expand the size and circulation of the magazine by increasing its coverage to more than just the college crowd. He was glad Vil couldn’t see him at that moment.

“You are a Vulpan, bro, down the marrow in your bones, just like me,” Vil teased. “Dad always thought you hated business, but he was wrong. You didn’t hate business, you just loved the idea of being a pilot *more*. You hated him never giving you a choice. But you’ve chosen your battleground now, and now you’ll start climbing that mountain. I give you one year before you’re a partner at the magazine. I give you five years before you’re running it, and Rick retires off the income you bring in for him. I give you ten before you’re pulling down two hundred grand a year *net* off your profits.”

“I seriously doubt that, unless you cheat.”

“Cheat? Why would I even bother?” she challenged lightly. “You forget, bro, I *talk* to Rick. Who has he taught his accounting, and who does his books when he doesn’t have time? Who does he send to meet with advertisers when he’s busy? Who did he talk to when he wanted input on his idea to expand circulation? *You*. You have business in your blood bro, and Rick knows it. You have enough formal training to let those instincts run wild, and Rick knows he’d be a damn fool not to make use of *all* your talents. And Rick is no fool.”

“Well,” he hedged, but Vil cut him off.

“So, bro, either take my bet or shut up.”

“I’m going to pass on that one,” he chuckled.

“Wise decision,” she murmured. “I’m making a special note of this day, bro, so when you make that first million, I’ll be sure to remind you all about this little conversation.”

I’m sure you will,” he teased.

“Anyway,” she chuckled. “We’re sending you a little *we won* gift, bro. Believe it or not, it’s from the whole family.”

“No,” he growled.

It’s not just from me, Kit,” she said seriously. “I told you, it’s from the whole family. Think of it as a token of appreciation that you didn’t disown them all and leave them broke and homeless.”

“What is it?”

“You’ll find out tomorrow.”

“I don’t like it, and I don’t want it,” he said hotly.

“Kitstrom!” she snapped, which got his attention *quick*. She never called him that unless she was sincerely angry with him. “You don’t have to like it, but you will *not* bitch about it,” she said hotly. “You will accept it with all the fake smile you can muster, and you won’t say a *single* word! If you pitch a fit, I will come down there and beat you senseless myself!” she warned in an ugly tone. “I busted my ass to get Dad’s will voided and get you back to at least this point with the family. You have no idea what I had to do to make them agree to it! The family sent you this gift in good faith, in

gratitude for you not being an asshole and taking everything from them, and *you will accept it with grace*,” she railed at him. “I’ll be damned if I let your temper piss off the aunts and uncles to where they hate you even more than they do now!”

“Well, Jessie’s pregnancy probably put them over the top.”

“It certainly didn’t help, but they’re still giving you this gift. But I swear to you, Kit, if you raise a stink about the gift the *whole family* sent you as a token of good will, I will *never forgive you*.”

“Alright, alright,” he sighed. He could tell just how serious she was, and he knew better to cross Vil. She could be the Ice Queen even to him, for she would see his behavior as a direct insult after all the hard work she did on his behalf. She may love him, but she was still Vil, and he knew it. “But I don’t want money, Vil. You know that.”

“If we send you money, you will put it in a trust fund for your baby!” she told him.

Kit considered that...it was a pretty good idea. Knowing his family, they all chipped in their petty cash and sent it to him, the pitiable, broke, destitute Vulpan, who now that he was no longer officially disowned, might affect their social standing if people thought he was still dirt poor despite again being part of the Vulpan family. So, to alleviate their guilt over his poverty, each member probably chipped in about five hundred dollars, and they were sending him a check for maybe ten or fifteen thousand dollars. He was certain that it was a cash offering, either a bribe so he wouldn’t embarrass them or some kind of token offer. Since they had money and he didn’t, they couldn’t understand that he was happy without it. They just

couldn't understand, so they'd do the only thing that made sense to them, offer him money.

He wouldn't touch a penny of it, but that money would do quite well paying for his child's college education.

"Now that I can do, sis," he said in a mollifying tone. "I'd never touch that money, you know I wouldn't, but I can't deny that it would be well spent on my baby."

"Good. I'm going to go now, bro. I'll call you later," she said in a much calmer tone.

"Alright. I love you, sis."

"I love you too, Kit," she said, and she hung up the phone.

He sighed. That was close. She was *really* mad, and she was serious. He knew better than to rile his sister, so he'd take the cash and just drop it in an annuity for his baby.

It took him a little time to calm down, but he eventually got back into work. But after lunch, Doctor MacNair called him with information about the test results. "Barring any unforeseen complications, Jessica will deliver on September Thirtieth," she said with absolute confidence. "I've already called Jessica, and her next appointment is scheduled for Monday, February Twenty-fifth, at ten a.m."

"Next Monday at ten o'clock, got it," he said, scribbling it down on his planner. "You know, Jessie could have told me all this, Doctor. You didn't have to call me."

“Kit, I make it a policy of keeping the husband fully informed,” she told him. “It ensures that you never miss an appointment, just in case one of you writes it down wrong. It also keeps the husband involved in the pregnancy, and as I told you, I like to keep the husbands as involved as possible.”

“That makes sense,” he agreed. “Oh, Doc, let me apologize for my sister.”

“No apologies necessary, Kit,” she chuckled. “Vilene’s a sweetheart, and she’s very, very concerned that Jessica gets the best care possible.”

“That’s one way to say it.”

“Well, she’ll learn that she can’t buy me,” MacNair said with a challenging little catch in her voice. “When she called and offered me triple my usual fee to get Jessie in the same day, I already had an open slot from a cancellation,” she admitted to him. “So I took her money and put your wife in the empty slot. I got triple fee, and nobody got bumped. The first time she tries that when I can’t swing it, she’ll find out I’m not quite so easy.”

Kit laughed. “You’ll do just fine, Doc. Not many can swindle my sister. And you keep right on doing it. It keeps her on her toes.”

“Oh, I’ll do that,” she giggled, then said her goodbyes.

Kit hadn’t thought much about the “present” that the family was sending him. He’d told Jessie about it, warned her that Vil had put some ugly warnings that he take it with a smile to keep the peace, and then let her putter through some banks checking annuity rates while he finished up his Lamar Smith research. Jessie was rather happy about the idea of it, certain

that their child could easily go to Harvard on what that annuity would be worth when the child was 18.

He was right...and wrong.

It arrived at nine the next morning, and it was just luck that they were home. Kit and Jessie had gone to the Y to exercise, he was teaching her how to play tennis and she was teaching him to play racquetball, when the courier arrived. They hadn't even been home thirty seconds when the doorbell rang, and Kit answered it wearing his sweatpants and jacket. He recognized the courier for what he was immediately, a gray-furred wolf wearing a dark suit and carrying a briefcase. "Kitstrom Vulpan?" he asked.

"I think you know I am," Kit said calmly.

He chuckled. "The eyes are better than a fingerprint, sir," he said with a nod. "I'm carrying a package for you, from Boston."

"They told me it was coming," he said.

The man stepped inside when Kit invited him in. "Would you like some tea, sir?" Jessie asked him as she came out of the kitchen.

"Oh! Yes, please, thank you very much," he said with a grateful smile, taking the cup from her and sipping at it. "Ah, Lipton," he smiled. "Always a reliable fallback."

"It's about the best we can get down here," Kit grunted, which made the wolf nod knowingly. "These people don't know anything about tea."

"That's the honest truth," the wolf nodded. He drank down the tea despite it being piping hot, then handed the cup back to Jessie. "Thank you

very much, ma'am," he said with a smile. "Now, on to the package. May I sit?"

"Please," Kit said, motioning. The wolf seated himself at the couch and put his briefcase on the coffee table.

"I have two things here for you, sir," he said. "I was told to tell you that one of them is from your sister. The other is from your entire family." He first held out a small packet. He opened it, curiously, and found himself looking at a thick stack of bearer bonds; special bonds that were negotiable no matter who carried them. With them was a note, which he read to Jessie. "Bro, Dad bought these for you when you were born. They're yours, and always have been. This isn't a handout, it's giving you what was always yours to begin with," he recited, then leafed through them. All of them *were* dated 1986, which was his birth year. Each of them was tendered at a face value of five thousand dollars, but that was just their face value. These bonds matured after twenty years, so each one was worth probably about six thousand dollars now, after two years of added appreciation.

And there had to be about twenty of them. So, a little over a hundred thousand dollars. He was impressed, they tried to buy him off with much more money than he expected they would.

But, he was right about the gift. Money. If he just dropped them in a safe deposit box, they'd be worth about three hundred thousand when their baby was ready to go to college, which should be more than enough to go to any college he or she wanted. Wise investments in annuities, other bonds, and other investments would probably stretch it out to half a million after twenty years. That was enough to send more than one child to any college they wanted to attend, and get them a Master's degree.

That worked for him. The future of his children was secure, thanks to these bonds. And in some kind of strange irony, he guessed he had his father to thank for that, a father who would roll over in his grave if he knew, and would rise from the dead to stalk and kill Kit if he knew Kit was married to a cat.

“What are they, love?” Jessie asked.

“Savings bonds,” he answered. “It looks like they were bought when I was born, so Vil wasn’t lying about that. Yeah, here, this was a week after I was born,” he said, pointing at the date on one of them, which was April 2, 1986. “These can put all our kids through college by the time they’re old enough, if we invest them wisely.”

“Good,” Jessie said with a nod. “If there’s anything I would ever want from your family, love, I just got it.”

“There’s a second item, Mister Vulpan,” the wolf prompted, taking a small black box from his briefcase and presenting it to them. It looked like a jewelry box...some old piece of jewelry? Maybe the necklace his mother had always worn? Kit took it and opened it curiously, but found no jewelry inside.

Inside were a set of keys.

“What is this?” Kit asked, a bit harshly. “Keys? Keys to what?”

“A Cessna 400, sir,” the wolf answered calmly. “Currently parked at Bergstrom. I take it you have a pilot’s license, sir?”

“Well, yeah, I do,” he said, his mind swimming. They gave him a *plane*? And not just any plane, one of the most expensive private planes one could own! It was one of the biggest planes a pilot could fly with a personal

license, so long as they were qualified for instrument flight rules and was rated for a utility plane...which Kit was. Kit had a commercial license, earned from a Part 141 flight school in Massachusetts, and he was rated on utility class aircraft.

“Cessna? What is that?” Jessie asked.

“It’s a plane, ma’am,” the wolf told her. “A personal aircraft. It’s *very* nice,” he said with a chuckle. “I flew it down. I’m so glad I have utility rating,” he said with an impressed expression.

“They gave me a *plane*,” he said, a little dumbfounded. A *seven hundred thousand dollar* plane!

“Well, that’s my delivery, sir. If you’d just sign this,” he said, taking a form out of his case, which Kit numbly signed. “Thank you. You’ll find all the paperwork for the plane in the plane itself, sir. It’s already registered to you, no doubt through your family’s connections. It’s parked at Bergstrom, in their general aviation area, slot G fourteen, between hangar one and hangar two. The keys will get you inside it, and the paperwork is in the glove compartment. Good day to you, and enjoy your plane. I did,” he smiled, then let himself out with quiet professionalism.

“Kit? Kit? What’s wrong?”

“Jessie, love, do you have any idea how expensive that plane is?” he finally erupted. “It’s almost *three quarters of a million dollars*!”

“*Woah*,” she breathed. “Kit, we can just give it back.”

“No. No, I can’t. Vil made it clear she’ll disown me if I raise a fuss about this,” he said, thinking furiously. “I, I’ll have to keep it,” he told her. “I can buy a space somewhere, maybe there at Bergstrom, maybe at a

smaller airfield somewhere near the city. Space isn't that expensive. Buying gas for it won't be cheap, though."

"You don't sound too unhappy," she noted, then she giggled. "So, Vil found something you *wouldn't* throw back in her face."

"I—well—I guess not," he laughed sheepishly. "Jessie, love, having a plane is very *liberating*. We can fly to the beach on weekends, or fly up to Cincinnati to see your parents. Cincinnati would be about five hours from here in a plane like that. We could leave on Saturday afternoon and come back on Monday evening. When we can afford the gas, anyway. It'd cost about a thousand dollars in gas to fly up to Ohio and back."

"Well, that does sound nice," she said. "Are you sure Vil would have a fit if you gave it back?"

"You didn't hear her, love," he said seriously. "She *meant it*. For some reason, she wants me to have the plane. And I guess I'll cave, just like I did with the car," he sighed. "I don't really need it, but what good is having a pilot's license when I don't have a plane?"

"Well, I think you can give yourself a *little* luxury, love," she giggled, giving him a kiss. "And I certainly won't mind being able to fly up to Cincinnati to see my family on weekends."

"When we can afford it," he grunted, clutching the box holding the keys in his paw. "We're still trying to recover from Christmas, and the wedding."

She laughed. "Well, I think we'll manage, love," she told him, giving him a gentle hug. "How much will it be to park the plane?"

“Depends, probably around a hundred fifty a month. Then there’s maintenance, and gas, and registration, and taxes, and a lot of other things. Owning a plane isn’t cheap, Jessie.”

“Well, I think the first time we go see my folks, it’ll be worth it.”

“It can pay for itself if you use it a lot, just in not paying to fly commercial,” Kit chuckled. “But I don’t see me flying all that much. And don’t expect to fly up tomorrow,” he warned. “I have to do a lot of work before I can fly the plane. I’ll have to get familiar with it, make sure my license is still good, and I think it’s time for my yearly physical. So it’s going to be a couple of weeks before we do more than take it for a spin around the airfield.”

The phone rang, and Kit sighed when he read the display. “Vil,” he told Jessie, and put it on speaker. “Hey sis.”

“So, can I give gifts or can I?” she said with a laugh.

“He actually wants to *keep* it,” Jessie laughed.

“I’m a little overwhelmed, sis,” Kit said honestly. “Do you have any idea how much a Cessna four hundred costs?”

“Well, since I’m sitting here looking at the receipt, yeah, I think I do,” she giggled. “And don’t worry about paying for it, bro. It’s a *gift*, it won’t cost you anything. I didn’t get you a space at Bergstrom, though, because I can’t find any available hangar space anywhere in central Texas,” she said with a grunt of annoyance; Vil wasn’t used to *not* getting her way. “I bought you two months of tie-down space there at Georgetown, at least for now. I wasn’t sure if you’d want to deal with Bergstrom and the rules for landing there, so I went with the closest small airport that still offered all the

services you need. I'm still trying to find some hangar space, though. When I get my hands on some, I'll let you know."

"Thanks, sis."

"I just don't want you to have to drive up to that airport every time you want to use the plane, it's like thirty miles," she fretted. "Like I said, let me see what I can get. Maybe I'll buy some hangar space from one of the small airlines for you to park your plane inside. Anyway, I set you up with one of those transport credit cards you can use to buy fuel and pay for parking and maintenance and such at airports."

"I, I don't know what to say, sis," he said, a little bewildered.

She laughed. "Well, you can say thanks," she said winsomely.

"Vil, *thank you*," he said.

"It's the least I can do for my brother," she answered. "But I didn't do it alone. That plane is a gift from the *family*, bro. It's not money, it's not an empty token, it's something that I assured them you would appreciate and find useful. Everyone chipped in to help pay for it, even Uncle Zach and Uncle Jake."

"I think I'd better have it checked for bombs."

Vil gasped, then laughed helplessly. "That may not be a bad idea," she agreed with a little extra giggle. "But, I hope you enjoy it, bro."

"We were talking about flying to Cincinnati to see my parents before you called," Jessie said.

"That's *exactly* why I had the family buy it for you," Vil told them. "So you have more mobility, more freedom. You may even be able to use it for

work, bro. Rick can send you out to interview people out of state, and you can do it on the cheap. You can fly out in your own plane.”

“Well, it’s a little small to take the whole crew, but I could carry a few passengers,” he noted. “And when I first interviewed for the job, I told Rick I had a pilot’s license, but wasn’t sure what use it’d be to the magazine,” he laughed.

“Well, it might be useful now,” Vil told him. “Is it alright?”

“What do you mean?”

“I couldn’t remember what kinds of planes you can fly, so I went with the safest bet. I remembered that you’re rated to fly planes with two engines, but the new ones I looked at had the same basic abilities as the one I bought. Hell, that plane I bought you has more range than most of the two engine planes I looked at,” she snorted. “That plane looked to be really nice, and the dealer said that anyone with a pilot’s license could fly the plane I bought you, and he said it’s about the best single engine plane for flying long distances, even better than some two engine planes. But if it doesn’t work out for you, or it’s too small or something, I’ll replace it with something bigger.”

Kit chuckled ruefully. “I’m not going to complain. How can I complain about a gift?”

“Well, that’s sweet, bro, but if that plane doesn’t work out for you, let me know, and I’ll replace it with something that will. Did you get the bonds too?”

“Yeah, we have them, Vil,” Jessie answered.

“*Mother* bought them for Kit when he was born,” she told them. “They’re *his*. They have nothing to do with the family, and nothing to do with Dad. So take them and use them well. Buy a house, invest for the future, it doesn’t matter, so long as you don’t burn them or throw them away. They didn’t come from Dad, Kit, they came from Mom,” she made sure to stress a second time. “So don’t throw them away, bro. You’d insult Mom’s memory if you did that. Use them. Invest them. Do something good with them.”

“We will,” he promised. “These bonds are sending our kids to Harvard,” he declared. “Why did you hold onto them for so long?”

“Bro, the bonds fell under the proscription in Dad’s will,” she told him. “I couldn’t give them to you until after it was voided, or I’d lose everything. Mom may have bought them, but they were considered Dad’s assets because Mom died before you were eighteen. But notice, bro, that they got to you the day after the will was voided. I wanted you to have them, I wanted both of you to have them. I wanted to know that even if you won’t come to me, you’ll always have an emergency nest egg to fall back on when times get tight, and have something to ensure that your kids never have to worry about anything.”

“You’re such a sweet femme, Vil,” Jessie said with a snuffle.

“I love you too, Jessie,” Vil said gently. “And think, bro, if it wasn’t for Jessie, you could have been rolling in money with no responsibilities or cares.”

“I’ll take Jessie over money any day,” he said with conviction, putting his paw on her shoulder.

“And that’s why you’re the richest Vulpan of them all, bro,” Vil said thickly. “Go check out the plane, you two, I want you to pick up that Transport card. You have to call a number on it to activate it, and I want you to do that today. And the airport wants you to do the safety briefings and walkthroughs, and they want a copy of your license.”

“I can handle those later, but we’ll go up and get the paperwork out of it before I have to go to work, I promise,” he told her.

“Works for me. I’ll call you guys later, alright?”

“Alright. Thanks again, Vil,” Jessie said.

“Yeah, thanks, sis,” Kit agreed.

“Any time, bro, any time. Goodbye.”

Kit lowered the phone, then hugged Jessie. “God, I love that sister of mine.”

“So do I, love, so do I.”

Chapter 21

It. Was. *Gorgeous*.

The Cessna 400 was brand new, right off the assembly line, and had only been flown once outside of whatever tests the manufacturer did, and that was to fly it from Richmond, Virginia, where it was bought, to Austin. It was very sleek, with sloping, graceful lines, low wings, and fixed gear in flared housings. It was painted the same colors as the logo of Vulpan Steel, red white and blue, with a white overcarriage and a blue belly with two horizontal red stripes along the fuselage broken by the registration number, running just under the cockpit and back along the centerline of the plane, with the plane's registration letters and numbers in red.

The inside was even more amazing. It was like a luxury car inside, filled with leather and sleek glass and rich wood. The control sticks were offset at an angle off the sides of the cockpit, not in the center or between the pilot's knees, and the seats were beige and covered in leather, split down the back to accommodate tails. The instrument panel was almost all glass, two panels holding a Garmin navigation system and electronic instruments, with a center console holding the radio, throttle, and some of the controls for the Garmin and other systems. It was all top of the line, new...it even *smelled* new. The doors were gull wing, opening to give them access to a surprisingly roomy cockpit reached by stepping up onto the bases of the wings.

Jessie gaped inside the cockpit from the copilot's side, almost afraid to get in, as Kit confidently climbed into the plane and opened the glove compartment, which for the plane was on the side of the center console facing the pilot. He noticed the sleeves in the side for maps or magazines, and all the little niceties...though it had no sun visor. The cockpit glass was rounded and high on the front, giving one a fantastic overhead view, but it had no sun visor. Sunglasses would be a must in this plane.

“Can...can I get in?” she asked.

Kit laughed. “Don’t be silly, pretty kitty,” he teased. “Climb on in, have a seat.”

“But there are controls up here,” she protested, pointing at the control stick jutting from the rest on the side of the cockpit.

“Just ignore it, love,” he told her as he found the paperwork the courier mentioned. The plane was already registered in his name, which meant that Kit could fly it that day if he wanted. He rifled through the legal papers to make sure everything was in order, then he pulled out the operator’s manual. He didn’t really need it, since he’d already downloaded absolutely everything he could find on the Cessna 400 yesterday, which was printed out and in a big binder that was still in the truck, but the manual matched up to everything he’d read online. And what he’d read told him that he’d need some time to adjust to this plane. He’d been trained in two planes, a single engine Cessna 172 and a twin engine 341, and had flown a Cirrus a few times, but those weren’t even half as luxurious as this plane, though they did share the Garmin G1000 navigation system. It had just *everything*. TKS anti-ice system, a rarity in a single engine plane, a Mode S Transponder, a 4.2 G rating, which would let the plane do some pretty hard flying, HVAC climate control, speed brakes, TCAS collision avoidance system,

multichannel transceiver with push to talk switch right on the joystick, the plane had almost every system someone would find in a more complex plane like a twin engine except retractable landing gear. The Garmin G1000 system was just *godly*, incorporating electronic flight instruments, real-time traffic locations on the map taken from transponder data received from beacons, autopilot, computer-assisted navigation, GPS, plane functions, timers, flight plan generators, fuel mix calculations, and since Vil had bought a totally decked out plane, it had XM satellite radio and real-time weather radar imagery, and was also outfitted with a Blue Sky satellite internet system and a wireless router, allowing them to use their laptops in the plane to surf the internet. From what he read, it was one of the fastest piston engine planes in production, since Vil bought him the turbocharged variant. It was capable of 254 knots, which was around 300 miles an hour, but that was at high altitude and burning fuel like a son of a bitch. Its load rating wasn't the greatest in the world; if he carried four people and luggage, he couldn't completely fill his gas tanks and still get the plane off the ground, it would be overloaded. But, given the plane had a range of over a thousand miles on a full tank, he could easily fill to load rating and just land more often for refueling stops. With just him and Jessie and modest luggage, the plane could fly from Austin to Cincinnati in one leg without refueling, as he could completely fill their tanks. According to the Garmin's navigational database, it was 812 nautical miles from Georgetown to Cincinnati, which was nearly 300 nautical miles within the maximum range of the plane with full tanks. At a listed cruising speed of 174 knots, they could make it in about six hours, including takeoff and landing delays. Closer to seven hours if he factored in driving to the airport, then driving from the airport in Cincinnati to her parents' house.

“Wow, it’s almost like being in a car,” Jessie said, keeping her paws in her lap, fearful to touch anything.

“It’s just like driving after you get used to it,” Kit chuckled. “I haven’t flown for like eight months. I hope I’m not rusty.”

“Kit!” she gasped, a little fearfully.

He put his paw on her shoulder. “I was joking, pretty kitty,” he said, gently. “I’m sorry if I scared you. I didn’t realize the idea of flying in a plane made you nervous.”

“It does, a little. I’ve never been in a plane like this before,” she told him.

“Well, love, they’re just as safe as an airline. After all, how often do you hear of planes crashing?”

“Not often.”

“Now think of how many planes are in the air right now,” he said, motioning at the runway of the small municipal airport, where two personal planes were waiting as a third took off.

“I see what you mean. They’re really safe, I guess.”

“Safer than driving, because pilots take flying much more seriously than most furs take driving.”

“So, when can we go to see my folks? I’d love to drop in on them!”

Kit chuckled. “Maybe next week,” he told her. “We’ll see how I feel about it after I have some time learning this plane’s systems. I have a lot to study here, and I’m one of those pilots who takes this seriously. I need to get comfortable with this cockpit, and learn how the plane’s unique systems

and autopilot work. I've never had that in a plane before, at least not a good one. The 341 I trained in during flight school had autopilot, but it was dumb as a box of rocks."

"What were the planes you used to fly like?"

"Well, when I was in flight school, they were pretty nice," he told her. "Cessna one seventy-twos with Garmin navigation, so they were pretty nice to fly, and Cessna three forty-one twin engines, so we could learn complex planes and older navigation systems that weren't as modern as the Garmin. After I got my license, though, all the planes I flew were old," he chuckled. "I rented planes to keep logging hours after I got my license, but not much else, and old planes are cheap to rent. I tell you, those old planes made me appreciate the Garmin system in the Cessnas."

"I've always wondered about that. How did you afford it? I mean, I heard that it's really expensive to get a pilot's license."

"Well, my scholarship and grants covered most of my flight school, believe it or not," he told her as he settled into the pilot's seat. "Since I was in ROTC and I wanted to fly jets after I graduated and went into the Air Force. Vil helped me with the rest of it. After the accident, I actually earned money with my license," he laughed. "I was paid by my dorm buddies to fly us all to Nantucket one weekend. And it was even legal."

"Legal?"

"Love, there are different types of licenses," he told her, "just like with driving. I have a *commercial* pilot's license, because it's the baseline for flight school in the Air Force. If you have a commercial license or better, they give your application for flight school much more weight. I spent over a year in a flight school near campus getting a commercial license, and it

wasn't cheap," he grunted. "Anyway, there's a junior license, which is like a learner's permit, then there's a standard pilot's license, then a commercial license, then there's a flight instructor's license, and finally an air transport license, which airline pilots have to have. Only a commercial pilot or better is allowed to earn money flying a plane," he explained. "Commercial pilots are rated for instrument flying, which is *huge*, and we're trained to deal with many more emergency situations and to deal with air traffic controllers. Standard pilot licenses run on what's called *visual* flight rules, where commercial and above are allowed to run on *instrument* flight rules. Right now, if there was a cloud deck above us, those planes over there waiting to take off would have to wait if their pilots weren't instrument rated, because they couldn't *see*."

"Oh. So, you could land a plane at night in the rain?"

He nodded. "I'll have to learn this plane before I'm comfortable doing that, though," he noted, motioning at the dashboard. "It has a hell of a lot more bells and whistles than anything I've ever flown before."

"You don't have to take tests on this plane to get your rating?"

"Nope. Once you get your license, the FAA assumes you're responsible enough to know what the hell you're doing if you fly a plane with a new instrument system that's in the same class of plane you're already rated to fly. But this plane is just a little different than the usual personal plane. This is what's called a utility class plane, love, and those have special rules...but this particular plane doesn't. Usually, I'd have to be rated on a plane classified as utility—and I already am, truth be told—but this model is part of a loophole. It technically falls into utility rating because it can go faster than two hundred knots, but it's also a private model airplane, so the FAA waives rating requirements for it, since it's *not*

meant for the same utility as other planes in the class. Most utility planes are helicopters and small commuter planes, like most dual-engine prop planes. This is a private plane, so while it's classified as a utility plane, I don't have to rate on it to fly it, I can treat it like any other private plane. That means that I'm the one who's responsible for understanding the plane and being able to operate it safely, and that means studying its systems. I learned to fly using a Garmin, the same system in this plane, so at least I don't have to learn that much. I just need to study the manual and learn how the plane operates, learn how its anti-icing system and such work. Those are new to me."

"Oh. Well, show me some of this. If you teach me, it'll reinforce you."

He chuckled. "Sure, we'll go through it together," he told her, pulling out the key to bring up the plane's electrical systems. "Maybe I'll make a pilot out of you," he grinned.

"Just think of it, my handsome fox," Jessie mused, watching him as he put the key in the plane and enabled its electrical systems, causing the dashboard to light up and boot. "Being able to see my family whenever we want. I never really thought of what it would mean to have a husband with a pilot's license," she giggled.

"It never really meant anything until right now," he answered. "I've been too busy with work, and we've had no money, I couldn't really use it until now. It would be cheaper to fly commercial than it would be to rent a plane to fly to Cincinnati, pretty kitty. I guess I can't *completely* hate my family now," he chuckled. "I know they bought me this just to alleviate their own guilt, and maybe pacify Vil a little bit, but I'll take it. I guess my vaunted resistance to money is a sham," he said ruefully. "The instant they

dangled something shiny in my face, I snapped it up like any other greedy bastard.”

“Not at all,” she protested. “You accepted what was given to you in good faith, love, and something you could both appreciate and use. And you didn’t take Vil’s offer to buy you a house or give you a lot of money, did you? You took *one* thing, something you can use and will appreciate, and I think that’s all you’ll ever take. After all, what else do we need?”

“God, I love you,” he said sincerely, reaching over and putting his paw on her shoulder.

“I’m so glad you do,” she said with a teasing smile. “Else I’d have to kill you.”

He laughed delightedly. “That’s one way to defend your honor, I suppose. Knock off the only guy who’s ever besmirched it.”

“It wasn’t besmirched,” she grinned. “You *did* follow through and marry me, didn’t you?”

“I guess I did. I have no idea what insanity came over me,” he sighed forlornly, then adroitly put his paws over his head to deflect the inevitable whack. Jessie did try to playfully smack him, but then her face turned fearful and she looked around.

“I didn’t hit any buttons, did I?” she asked nervously.

“Jessie, love, calm down,” he told her soothingly. “Nothing’s going to happen with us on the ground. You couldn’t get the plane moving no matter what you hit in here, the parking brake’s engaged.”

“Well, I could hit that, couldn’t I? Or start the plane by accident?”

“I guess you could, but do you know which buttons to press in which order to make the engine start?”

“Umm, no.”

“Then don’t worry yourself one little bit,” he chuckled. “We won’t be here long, I promise. I know this must be boring for you.”

“No! I think it’s really neat! I have a husband who’s a pilot,” she smiled. “I’m going to use this for the subject of a paper I’m writing for my English composition class. Our professor wants us to write a paper based on something in our lives, complete with three topics of research comparing my experience with other people’s. So I think I’ll do it on people who have pilot’s licenses and how it makes their lives different from others.”

“Sounds fun,” he said honestly. “I’m looking forward to seeing how you do it.”

“It should be interesting. The professor said it’d be more fun if we picked something that was interesting to us. She’s right, of course.”

“Naturally. Writing about something that’s boring or sucks makes it a chore. Now, back to what we were doing, showing you how this all works.”

They spent nearly four hours sitting in the cockpit, interrupted only by trips to the small terminal to go to the bathroom, as Kit studied the plane’s systems and went over the checklists for preflight, startup, takeoff, landing, postflight, and shutdown. Jessie was right in that teaching her all about it made him pay much more attention, and allowed him to memorize it himself more quickly. Kit refreshed himself on the Garmin—it had been a year since he’d flown and used one—and had everything come back to him quickly. The Garmin almost made learning to navigate the normal way

obsolete, since it told you exactly where you were, where you were going, and which direction to go. It even showed an expected time of arrival, elapsed flight time, fuel burn ratios, weather or air restriction warnings, and kept a log of it all. He moved on to the weather system, a very handy little integrated part of the Garmin that streamed weather data in from XM satellite through the satellite antenna, and also gave him internet connectivity since the Blue Sky system used the same antenna. With the weather system, he'd never find himself flying headlong into a thunderstorm, it was literally like having weather radar in his plane. The plane had a very good TCAS system, the same system that had been in the 172s, part of the Garmin suite, which even gave audio warnings in addition to warnings on the right monitor multi-function display, the MFD. The MFD would let him put up a map that showed the ground terrain, his projected route, other planes in the area, and any weather features all in one easy to read display. After that, he taught her about radio etiquette, and how it was used. "Some planes don't even really need radios," he told her. "Small planes flying out of private airstrips using visual flight rules and staying away from restricted airspace, they technically don't need them, though no pilot in his right mind would fly without one. If you had an emergency, how would you warn anyone or get help?"

"I can see that," Jessie nodded. "What does VHF mean?"

"Very High Frequency, it's a range of radio frequencies set aside mainly for aviation, commercial, and military use. Virtually all aviation radios use either VHF or UHF, Ultra High Frequency. UHF doesn't have as much range, though."

"Oh," she said, typing on the laptop she had in her lap.

Kit did a radio check with the little local tower for her, showing her how it worked, and explained how certain frequencies were dedicated to certain things. “Love, how do you know where to go?” she asked. “I mean, you have the plane, but how do you know where you’re going? Does the GPS tell you?”

“You mean how will I know where to land if I need gas, or I’m going to a city I’ve never visited before?”

“Yeah.”

“Come on, let’s go to the terminal and warm up, I’ll show you,” he said with a smile.

They locked up the plane, and he took her into the terminal, which was pretty close to where the plane had been parked, in a short-term tie down parking area. Kit also needed to go in there and find out where the space that Vil had rented for him was located. She hadn’t really noticed much when they came in that morning because she ran straight to the bathroom, so he took her into the pilot’s lounge, which was actually much more. He wasn’t sure what they called it here, but up in his old flight school they called it the lounge. It was a large room occupied by three other furs at the moment, with a huge map on one wall and four computers at desks under it. Books were lined into bookshelves near the desks, filled with manuals, flight books, and old navigation books. “This is how we do it, pretty kitty,” he said, motioning at one of the computers. “Of course, this is the fast and easy way. When I did my flight training, we had to be able to do it all the old way, using maps and a calculator and lots of books with airport information. See, the computer has a list of every available airport in North America,” he explained as he sat down at one of them and brought up the nav program. “I tell it where I want to go, and it gives me a list of available

places to land at the destination. It even tells me things like what radio frequencies the airport uses, how much their parking fees are, if they charge landing fees, if they have maintenance facilities, and if there's a rental car agency either close by or that will deliver a car to the airport. Here, let's put in Cincinnati," he said, typing it in. Immediately a list of six airfields popped up, with icons by the names to represent the services they offered. "Here we go, this is where I'd land if I were going to Cincinnati. It has overnight parking for visiting planes, it's real close to your house, they offer a courtesy car for visiting pilots as well as a rental car agency that will deliver a car if we make a reservation, and it has a hotel right beside it. It's also a municipal airport, so I wouldn't have to deal with all the crap I'd take landing at a big airport, like Bergstrom. This one has a control tower and two strips," he continued, pointing them out when he clicked on the airport. "It also has a maintenance shop rated for working on all models of piston and small-size turboprop planes. Ooh, this one has jet mechanics available, too," he noted. "Guess some private jets are parked there. So, now that we know where we're going and where we want to land, next we'll file a flight plan," he said, minimizing the window and bringing up the FAA program. "Since we'll be flying above the visual ceiling of eighteen thousand feet, we have to tell the FAA. They need to know where I'm going, when I'm going, and what altitude I intend to fly at. So, let's tell them that we're going to Cincinnati, and landing at Regional Municipal Airport," he said, inputting the information. "Now, we're leaving next weekend, so our flight plan is for Saturday the twenty-fifth. So, we'll tell them we're leaving at approximately six p.m. Now, they're asking here how many stops I need to make to refuel, which is something I'd have to work out using my plane's weight and the size of my gas tanks to determine my safe maximum range. Pilots *do* use math," he chuckled, pointing at the next field. "Our plane can

make the trip nonstop as long as it's just the two of us, so I'll tell it none. If I did need to make a stop, it would recommend an airfield along our planned flight path where we could land and refuel."

"What if you have to go to the bathroom?" she asked.

Kit chuckled. "Well, if you're not carrying a portable urinal in the plane, or you need to a real toilet, then you make an unscheduled stop," he winked. "Those are allowed. These flight plans aren't set in stone with us private pilots like they are with commercial planes, they're just to help the FAA better control traffic. If we need to stop or change our flight plan, we radio in to whichever controller's jurisdiction we're in and tell them. They make the changes for us and we're good to go."

"Ah, I see. It's not that bad, is it?"

"Not at all," he smiled. "Now, if we stayed under eighteen thousand feet the whole time, we wouldn't have to file a flight plan at all," he told her. "That's visual flight rules. We'd just have to avoid restricted airspace and obey any traffic control orders radioed to us, that's the only real rule."

"I see. So, if we fly at, what was it, twenty five thousand, won't we be sharing the sky with big airline planes?"

"Not really, miss," one of the furs interrupted. He was a tall, lanky canine, looking like a mixed canine mutt, with black fur but a brown face, and a single brown mitten on his right paw. "The FAA keeps things layered. The big planes fly over thirty thousand most of the time, while us private planes usually occupy the area underneath."

"Oh, I see."

"Hi, by the way," he chuckled, offering his paw. "Brad Hennings."

“Jessie Vulpan,” she smiled, taking his paw. “My husband, Kit. He’s the pilot, not me.”

“Well, it sounds like he’s teaching you well,” Brad smiled warmly.

“I’m trying,” Kit chuckled. “Local?”

“Yeah, it’s my weekend with the plane,” he grinned. “I’m fractional.”

“What’s that?” Jessie asked.

“It means me and a few other pilots jointly own a plane, and we share it,” he answered. “This is my weekend with the plane, so I’m going to go have a little spin around with my girlfriend. I’m thinking of going to El Paso. Never been there.”

“Nice, what kind of plane?” Kit asked.

“A Cessna Skyhawk, but we bought it new, so it has a Garmin in it. It’s *really* nice. What do you have?”

“We have a, um, Cessna four hundred,” Jessie said, looking at her laptop.

“*Nice!*” Brad said animatedly. “I read that Cessna didn’t change a single thing when they bought out Columbia. Is it all the same?”

“I never really looked at the Columbias, so I’m not sure,” Kit said. “I’ve been kinda out of the game for a while.”

“Yeah, it can happen,” Brad nodded. “I went about two years without any logged hours. God, I hated getting the physical after that,” he laughed. “I was halfway through my instrument rating, too. I had to do it all over again.”

“Eww,” Kit sounded. “I feel your pain. Getting IFR was such a freakin’ bitch.”

“Amen, brother, amen,” Brad chuckled. “But it’s all over now. I’m thinking of trying for my commercial. I have all the logged hour requirements three times over, and I have my IFR. I’d just have to do the tests.”

“I’d recommend it. I did it through a one forty-one program when I went through flight school. When I graduated, I had my commercial.”

“That’s the best way,” Brad nodded. “All at once, no redundant crap. Thinking of trying for an instructor’s license?”

“Nah, not really. It’s a lot of money for something I’d almost never use.”

“True. But, you could teach your wife without having to pay for it,” he grinned.

“I can do that anyway,” he chuckled. “They don’t know *who* is controlling the plane once you take off,” he winked.

Brad laughed. “True, true. I’ve let my girlfriend fly, but haven’t let her land or take off. You can teach her that way, it just looks a little fishy when it comes time to document for her license.”

Kit laughed. “Yah, true.”

“So, you gonna settle in here?”

“We live in Austin, the plane was just parked here after I took delivery,” Kit said. “I need to find hangar space for it.”

“Good luck,” Brad said with a frown. “I was on a waiting list for nearly eight months to get a Tee hangar here.”

“It’s that bad?”

“It’s bad,” Brad nodded. “Most of the airports around here are really small and constrained by the towns they’re in, so they can’t expand. That puts hangar space at a premium. My Skyhawk spent eight months at a tie down before I got a Tee. You got an FBO yet?”

“I’m going to just go freelance until I find hangar space. No use hiring an FBO until I know where I’m going to park my plane,” Kit answered, to which Brad nodded in understanding. An FBO was a *fixed base operator*, which was basically a flight services company...kind of like a gas station, garage, and concierge all rolled into one. Most of them offered fuel and maintenance for private and business planes, but larger ones also offered services like cleaning inside and out, de-icing, oxygen tank refills, and lavatory maintenance. Most FBOs also had pilot perks in their hangar terminals like sleeping bunks, showers, lounges, courtesy cars, concierge services, and so on, for they were major selling points for an FBO. Some of the large multi-airport “franchise” FBOs even offered services like aircraft sales, or offered hangar space to clients to house their planes. Most private pilots hired an FBO to maintain their planes, but Kit would hold off on that until he knew exactly where he was going to permanently hangar his plane. Virtually all airports and FBOs offered their services to anyone who paid for them, be it someone who hired them to do the work all the time or a transient pilot who needed one-time service or a fuel tank fill up while flying cross country. Contracted planes got services cheaper than one-timers, but that option was always there.

FBOs, oddly enough, often competed with the very airports that housed them. Georgetown was a good example of that. There were six FBOs at the airport of various sizes, and two of them offered to sell aircraft fuel. But the airport *also* offered aircraft fuel at a public fueling station, and that was where a vast majority of planes would fuel up if they weren't already contracted to an FBO at the airport—it was where Kit would be gassing up his plane himself. Many airports offered their own fueling stations, because it helped the airport earn more money on top of the rent they collected from businesses on the airport, aircraft tie down and hangar space rents from pilots, and landing fees they charged to planes that landed at their airports, if they charged them. Georgetown did not charge landing fees to land there, because it was a small, general aviation airport, and not charging landing fees was often a factor determining if a pilot landed at an airport. So, instead of charging landing fees, Georgetown offered air fuel, called AVGas, at a public fueling station at competitive prices, which probably earned them more money than the landing fees would.

That was probably another reason why Vil had his plane delivered here...he had no doubt that Bergstrom charged landing fees.

“Well, let me sit down and check out airfields in El Paso,” he chuckled. “Have a good trip!”

“You too,” Kit returned, and the canine wandered over to a free computer and sat down.

“Were you serious?” Jessie asked. “About teaching me to fly?”

“Would you like to?” he asked.

“I, I don't know. Maybe. We'll see, after we fly to Cincinnati,” she said, her eyes speculative. “But I have so much else to do, and the baby—”

“Love, it’ll always be here, if you want to learn. There’s no time limit. We have all the time in the world.”

“We’ll see. Okay, so, what’s next?”

Under Jessie’s eye, Kit completed the flight plan, then even filed it. “There. Now it’s all set, we can go to see your folks next weekend.”

“You think we can?” she asked excitedly.

“I think I’ll be ready by next Saturday,” he told her. “The systems on the plane are much easier than I thought. I’ll feel confident flying it cross country next week, as long as I break it in,” he said with a sudden smile. “Let’s take it up!”

“Go flying? Don’t we have to—”

“Nah, we’ll keep it under eighteen thousand, so we can have a little joy ride,” he told her. “Wanna go for a flight, Misses Vulpan?”

She laughed. “I’m a little nervous, but I’d love to, Mister Vulpan,” she replied.

“The first time is always scary,” he assured her as they stood up. “My first time in a plane, I nearly threw up. And my first solo, I almost wet my pants.”

“I can’t believe that,” Jessie laughed. “You’d never be *that* nervous about anything!”

“Well, you start getting *really* friendly with God when you’re sitting in the plane by yourself for the first time and heading down the runway.”

Jessie giggled. “I don’t think I believe you,” she teased.

“Well, let’s see how fearless you are, Misses Vulpan,” he challenged. “Trust me enough to take you flying?”

“Such a silly question,” she retorted.

Her playfulness turned to nerves when they got in the plane and he started it up, after he performed a thorough preflight check, and had to fight a little with the headset she needed to wear; piston engine planes weren’t nearly as loud as jets or turboprops, but there *was* some noise, and the headsets helped block it out. He helped her adjust her microphone, then put on his own headset and plugged them both in, setting it so only his headset would transmit through the radio, and both sets were set for the intercom. She was quiet as he went down the checklist for preflight, very still when he started the engines, and was a little fidgety when they taxied out.

Kit was impressed. The plane was *quiet*. They didn’t really even need the headsets, it wasn’t much louder than a car inside, quiet enough for them to speak in normal voices and be heard, with just a background droning about as loud as it would be driving down interstate with the windows down. It wasn’t entirely quiet in the cockpit, but it was much quieter than any other cockpit he’d been in. Amazing acoustic dampening! “Why do we need this for the noise, there isn’t much noise,” Jessie noted, pointing at her microphone.

“Yah, this is the quietest plane I’ve ever been in,” Kit agreed. “You can take yours off, love, if you don’t mind what you hear. I just had you put it on cause the planes I’ve flown were loud enough for the headsets to help. Your ears would start to ring after a while, and you’ll probably want to wear them when we’re airborne, since the engine’s going faster, and will be a little louder.”

“Okay, I’ll leave it on, then.”

She got a little nervous, clutching to her armrest when they took off, but then she gasped when she looked out the window, as they did a slow banking turn while climbing, heading north and away from the restricted airspace around Austin. “Wow!” she exclaimed, looking down at the ground through her side window.

“Yeah, it’s pretty, isn’t it?” he said, looking over at her as he leveled out around four thousand feet and puttered off to the northwest, keeping an eye on his MFD window to make sure no other planes were around; using visual flight rules, *he* was responsible for avoiding a midair collision, so knowing where other planes were was critical. Most planes had transponders, and those transponders showed up on his window because the transponder fed that data to the Garmin through telemetry beacons with which the transponder maintained contact. “We’ll go out about fifty miles and head back in, shouldn’t take more than an hour given I’m gonna be going slow.”

“No, go fast!” she said excitedly. “How fast can we go?”

“Well, you won’t really feel it, but at this altitude, I think about two hundred knots is the best we could manage. It’ll suck all our gas to do it, though, and that gas is five dollars a gallon, love.”

“Oh,” she said, a little disappointed. “What’s a knot?”

“It’s a little over a mile an hour,” he answered. “Ten knots is about eleven and a half miles an hour or so. Our normal cruising speed is hundred seventy-four knots, which is just about two hundred miles an hour. We can’t really do that down here, we need the thinner air at around twenty five thousand to go at that speed without burning up all our gas.”

“Oh, so, the lower we are, the more gas it takes?”

“More or less,” he said. “It’s a little more complicated than that, but you can sum it up that way. The air’s much thinner higher up, which lets us go faster and without as much air resistance. That’s why airliners always cruise above thirty thousand. Much more fuel efficient, not to mention much less turbulence.”

“I get it. It’s not that hard.”

“It can be for us. This plane isn’t pressurized, pretty kitty, so if we go over fourteen thousand feet, we have to wear these oxygen breathers,” he said, picking up the white tube that would affix over his nose. “We only have five hours of oxygen for four people, but that’s not a big deal, since we only have about five hours of flight time above fourteen thousand anyway, and with only two of using it it’ll last ten hours. We can only carry so much gas.”

“I never thought of that,” she said with a surprised look. “Are they uncomfortable?”

“Try it on, cause you’ll be wearing it when we do go see your parents,” he told her. “I’m not flying that far at low altitude, it’ll murder our fuel efficiency. If we want to do it in one leg, without stopping, we *have* to fly high.”

The good thing about a decked out plane was that it had all the cool toys. The plane had XM Satellite radio and was enabled for internet access via satellite thanks to the Blue Sky equipment and account Vil had set up, which was a different system from the Garmin and the weather system, but the Garmin knew the Blue Sky was there and could use it as well. Since the plane was literally connected to the internet, the Garmin could access

internet information, like how the weather system downloaded real-time weather information from the Weather Service. Kit had Jessie get out her laptop and have it search for networks, and she was a bit astounded when her laptop connected to the internet through the airplane. They listened to XM radio and chatted while they flew out about a hundred miles, then turned around and headed back for the airport, but the whole time Kit was seeing the unique plane systems in use, after he studied them for hours on the tarmac. Jessie kept her nose glued to the side window, looking down on the sun-dappled ground below, with the crosshatched farm fields, ranch pastures, roads, buildings, and houses. They passed over a large stream, nearly a river, and then over the rugged hills that dominated the area north and west of Austin, filled with houses. She pointed things out to him, like a golf course, or a large cluster of houses winding along a hillside, or a baseball diamond. They turned on the air conditioner when the cockpit began heating up, and Kit was highly pleased...climate control in small planes wasn't the best in the world. But this plane used HVAC for climate control, the same system used in jets, and it kept the cockpit nice and comfortable. As far as the unusual cockpit configuration went, Kit had no complaints. It took him a little getting used to the side-mounted angled control stick, but it rested at the natural angle of his arm, and he found he had a very comfortable control of it, able to rest his elbow on the armrest and still keep hold of the stick. The controls were electrical, fly by wire, and were responsive and sensitive, which made it a joy to fly. No wrestling with a stick or rudder pedals in crosswinds. The cockpit layout was nice and practical, and everything was at his fingertips as every flight instrument was right where he expected it, since most of them were displayed on the primary window of the Garmin. The Garmin's control pad was on the center console, with additional controls on the dash, surrounding the twin display

monitors, but everything was laid out *exactly* as it had been in his training plane; Garmins were all the same. After just an hour in the air, Kit felt confident he could fly the plane cross country, since the plane's systems and displays were either fed into the Garmin or were well organized and easy to read—indeed, the Cessna 400's cockpit was *designed around* a Garmin. He had only one beef with the plane, and that was a silly little thing; no sun visor. Kit did see that getting some sunglasses was going to be mandatory, though, since the large curved cockpit windscreen had nowhere to put a sun visor...flying northwest hadn't been entirely fun. Outside of that one thing, the plane was freakin' *perfect*. "Alright, we're going to descend," he warned her as they approached Georgetown, showing clearly on the map on his right window, the Multi-Feed Display or MFD, and saw that there was one plane about four miles west of them. "Let me radio the tower and get landing clearance."

Jessie was quiet as they landed, and Kit taxied them back to their parking spot using the rudder pedals; the plane had a fixed nose wheel, so it steered with differential braking on the rear wheels. "So, did you like it, pretty kitty?" he asked as he powered down the engine and started to perform the post flight checklist.

"That was *awesome!*" she gushed, giving him a happy look. "So, can we go to Cincinnati next weekend? Please?"

"We already have the flight plan filed," he winked.

"Thank you!" she squealed, lunging over the center console and giving him a fierce hug. "I have to call Vil and thank her myself for them giving you this plane, my handsome fox. It's going to be so *wonderful* to have it!"

“Love, that makes me glad I took it all by itself,” he told her seriously. “If you like it, then we keep it.”

“Yes we’re keeping this!” she told him excitedly. “I *love* this thing!” she cried, pattering her paws on the dashboard in rapid staccato, then flinching her paws away as if afraid she might break something.

Kit laughed. “I’ll have to find you a flight instructor,” he winked.

“I would not mind at all,” she said with utter sincerity. “If we have it, I’d love to learn how to fly it all by myself!”

“Well, I *do* hope you’ll let me come along,” he said flippantly, which made her burst out laughing and smack him fondly on the arm. “Let me finish the post flight, then we can lock it up and head home.”

“Okay. I gotta go pee,” she said, reaching for the door latch.

Kit chuckled as she climbed out, dropped down off the wing, then rushed for the terminal. She’d been bitten by the flying bug. Now would come the process of converting her to the Dark Side.

The plane was exciting, but there were, honestly, much more important things for him to worry about. The plane had been a wonderful distraction, but today, Sunday, he had real work to do, so much work that he begged off Sunday poker so he could focus on the task at paw.

The bonds.

Kit was quite a savvy businessman, and a savvy businessman never does anything without a plan. He was savvy enough to know that he didn’t

know enough to form that plan himself, so he sought out the advice of someone that *did* have that kind of knowledge... Vil.

As Jessie spent the day cooking, doing homework, going over to visit the poker crew and take them some food, and excitedly telling her parents all about their flight and plans to come up over the phone, Kit was on video conference with Vil. Kit had tried to get Jessie to take part in the discussion, but she just told him that she trusted him to take care of it, that she'd really have no idea what they were talking about anyway, and left it to them to handle it. After counting up the 15 bonds and calculating their combined worth with interest, Kit found that he had \$117,743.28 worth of them, and that much money demanded wise and prudent investment. One didn't just stick it in a savings account somewhere. And that was where Vil came in. She wasn't a financial planner, but she was more than well versed enough to know where the good investments were. Together, over the course of the day, they hammered out a highly detailed and thorough investment portfolio for the money, divesting the capital through multiple investments; stocks, bonds, annuities, certificates of deposit, and commodities, mainly precious metals. They decided that it was only wise to leave \$10,000 of it out as available cash in case of emergencies, which Kit would deposit in a special money market account, giving him access to that money while it earned more interest than it would in another account. "God, I'm going to have to either hire an accountant or bone up on my tax codes," Kit grunted as he typed up the plan, which he'd send to Vil to let her check over to ensure he had it all copied correctly. "I'll have to file a ten forty next year, no way will we get away with an A or EZ form, not with all this interest and capital gains."

“Well, it’s a good kind of pain,” Vil chuckled. “Much better than you living out of your boots. Dear God, bro, you have no idea how worried I’ve been thinking about you down there with nothing but your salary, and nothing in the bank and no investments. I’ll sleep much better now knowing you’re set up.”

“You shouldn’t worry about stuff like that, sis,” he told her. “I know how to manage our money. The only reason we’ve been so broke was because of the wedding and Christmas and the honeymoon. We kinda went overly crazy in the keys and burned up our savings. Taking that day trip to Key West broke us.”

Vil laughed. “Well, you’re entitled to the occasional moment of insanity,” she grinned. “But now you have some reserves if that ever happens again, and that’s what makes me so relieved. Now, if you have some kind of emergency and can’t get hold of me for some reason, I know you have enough held back to get you through until you can get hold of me.”

“Well, thanks for that concern, sis,” Kit said mildly. “Oh, and expect a call from Jessie sometime today.”

“Oh? What does she need?”

“Nothing, she’s going to thank you and the family for the plane,” he said. “She’s *hooked*.”

Vil laughed. “So, you’ve taken it up already?”

He nodded. “Yesterday. I wasn’t planning to, but the control systems in it are so user friendly, I felt safe taking it for a short flight to get the hang of

it. Next time I'm taking some Windex and paper towels so I can clean Jessie's nose prints off the glass."

Vil laughed harder. "She liked it?"

"Now she wants a pilot's license," he told her. "She said that since we own it, she wants to learn how to fly it."

"Well, that shouldn't be too hard," Vil said, waving her hand negligently. "I'll—"

"You'll let me handle that. I *am* her husband."

She gave him a quick grin. "Alright, I'll leave that one alone."

"You'd better. Okay, sis, here it comes," he said, saving the file, then uploading it to her. "Check it over."

"No sweat, bro," she said, her paws working under her, where he couldn't see. "You gonna let me handle this, or are you going to do it?"

"You can help with the stocks, but I'll get the rest," he answered. "You can buy the stocks much cheaper and faster than I can, and I can handle the others over the phone or at a few offices here in town. I know where to go. With you doing the stocks, I can do it all in one day."

"It's the Vulpan in you," she winked. "Call Jessie over here."

"Sure. Jess!" he shouted. "My evil bitch of a sister wants to talk to you!"

Jessie laughed from the kitchen and scurried in. "hold on, Dad, I'll give you to Kit for a minute," she said into the phone, and pushed it at him. "Stop being mean to your sister," she chided him, swatting him on the end of his nose with two fingers as she leaned down into the range of the

webcam. Kit traded places with her, standing up and giving his attention to the phone.

“Did she chew your ear off about yesterday?” he asked John.

“A little,” he chuckled. “She seems quite happy and excited about your plane. She was only mentioning your coming baby and her pregnancy about once a minute rather than every other sentence.”

Kit laughed. “Well, I’m glad she’s keeping her priorities straight,” he noted.

“I have to admit, I rather like the idea of it myself. It’s very nice knowing you can be here six hours after we call you.”

“We could do that no matter what flying commercially, but this way we can do it basically for free. Vil and my family gave me that plane, and you know how Vil sees a gift.”

“It costs you nothing,” he noted.

“Exactly. She gave me a credit card you use at airports to buy gas and pay for maintenance, and she’s paying the insurance and the taxes and everything. So, we basically have a free plane at our disposal.”

“I’m going to have to thank Vil next time I call her,” John chuckled. “How many furs does it hold?”

“Four.”

“You couldn’t squeeze someone in between the two in the back seat? We couldn’t squeeze Ben in there and fly to Columbus, for example?”

“It’s not a bench seat back there, John. A fifth fur would have to sit on the floor, and that’s illegal. I wouldn’t allow it. I’d like to keep my license,

cause the FAA is really anal about following the rules.”

“Oh. Do planes have trunks? Where do you put your suitcases?”

“It has a cargo hold, which is a plane’s trunk,” he affirmed.

“So, you could bring stuff up with you?”

“Up to a point,” he said. “Personal planes aren’t good shipping planes, John. Everything’s about weight in a private plane, and there’s not much extra weight to play with. The plane only has an extra four hundred pounds of load rating if I fill up the gas tanks, and that four hundred pounds doesn’t go as far as you might think. That weight doesn’t include anything, not even the pilot. So stick two furs in there, and you’ve just eaten that four hundred pounds. Then add in their luggage, carry-ons, food, necessities, and the weight gets used up quick.”

“Yes, I see. But, with just two of you, you could put some extra luggage in the plane.”

“With just two of us packing light, yeah, we could. We’ll have about a hundred pounds of weight open to us. The old pilot’s assumption is two hundred pounds per fur with average baggage.”

“Kit, Jessie doesn’t weigh two hundred pounds,” John said with a chuckle. “If she’s an ounce over one twenty, I’d be amazed.”

“When you take her and add everything she’s carrying to it, like her suitcase, her purse, and our camera bag, and her laptop, and so on and so on, yeah, it gets pretty close to that,” he answered seriously.

“Ah, I didn’t think of that.”

“That’s where the weight goes,” Kit chuckled. “That and we’ll put some stuff in the cockpit that we might need, like an emergency kit, atlas, a blanket, that kind of thing. All of that adds to the weight too. Everything you put in the plane adds weight, and that’s the one thing a pilot never ignores.”

“Well, think you can take me and Hannah up for a flight? I’ve never been in a small plane before.”

“I’d love to,” Kit answered. “We can do a lap around Cincinnati.”

“It sounds like it’ll be fun.”

“Jessie wants a pilot’s license now,” Kit laughed, which earned him a light, playful smack on the knee. “What?”

“It’s not a joke!” she protested.

“I never said it was, pretty kitty! I just think it’s funny how quickly you decided you want one.”

“I take it she’s being mean to you?” John asked lightly.

“Eternally,” Kit answered in a suffering voice, which made John laugh.

“So, when will you get here?”

“It’ll depend on when we leave, which depends on when I get out of work on Saturday,” he answered. “Saturdays are kinda free-wheeling for me. I’m done when I get my work done, so it’ll come down to how much I have on my plate. We’ll fly back on Sunday night, since Jessie needs to be in school Monday morning. But she can sleep on the plane, so we can leave really late.”

“He never lets me miss even a single class,” Jessie complained to Vil, which made her laugh. John chuckled when he repeated her words to him.

“Good, I’m glad you’re keeping her on the path, Kit,” he said approvingly.

“That’s going to be much trickier when she starts coming to term,” Kit said, “and the baby’s gonna mess with her final semester, but we’ll manage. I won’t let Jessie get this close to her degree and quit now. She *will* graduate.”

“She’d better, or she’s gonna owe me and her mother *sooo* much money,” John said, which made Kit burst out laughing.

“Okay, trade me again,” Jessie said, and she took the phone while Kit sat back down at the computer.

“So, is it all good?” Kit asked, looking at his monitor.

“Everything’s right,” she affirmed. “You gonna get to work on that?”

“I have tomorrow off. It should all be done by close of business tomorrow,” he promised her.

“Sounds good, bro.”

“Kit! Dad wants to know if you can ask Rick to trade days off,” Jessie called. “Take Saturday off instead of Monday, and give us an extra day.”

“Yeah, I can do that, as long as they don’t mind picking us up really late,” he called back. “I still have a late day on Friday, you know.”

“Sounds like you should have fun up there,” Vil noted. “Jessie will get two whole days to listen to her mother carp about getting pregnant.”

“Hannah’s not nearly as opposed to it as I thought she would be,” Kit said musingly. “I’m sure she’s going to sit us down and have a very long talk about responsibility and taking care of the baby, but she seems honestly enthusiastic about the idea of being a grandmother.”

“You know she will,” Vil chuckled. “I’d take a copy of your portfolio statement with you to wave in her face when she starts complaining that you can’t afford the baby.”

Kit laughed. “That may not be a bad idea. She’ll know that even if I leave Jessie, she can always get half of our assets for the baby,” he winked.

“Like you’d *ever* leave Jessie,” Vil snorted. “You’re a Catholic. Doesn’t she understand what that means?”

“Well, we weren’t married under Catholic sacraments,” Kit noted. “No Catholic wedding, no need for an annulment.”

“Bro, you’re about ten seconds from getting slapped,” Vil warned in a very unfriendly tone.

“Sis, get real. I’ll never leave Jessie, and you know it.”

“Still, you don’t even *joke* about something like that,” she told him flatly. “Sometimes with you, it’s hard to tell what’s a joke and what’s not. Hannah doesn’t know you as well as I do, bro, and she’d flip out if she ever heard it.”

“I’m not stupid enough to ever say something like that in front of her.”

“At least you have that much sense,” she said with a nod. “Oh, by the way, Sheila and Muffy left here about five hours ago. They should be getting there any time now.”

“Today? Weren’t they supposed to leave yesterday? I thought they were just too busy clubbing or something to stop by and see us.”

“Yeah, but Sheila’s parents made her stay over for some reason, and Muffy decided to wait for her. Probably to grill her about her decision... they’re not too happy about it. They want her to stay in Harvard. But, they can’t deny that she’s determined, and I think in a way that makes them happy. They think she’s *finally* growing up.”

“Alright. Odds are, they’ll spend the evening over here. I’d better warn Jessie.”

“She already knows, I talked to her this morning.”

“Ah, that would explain why she’s done all that cooking. I thought she was just too excited to sit still.”

“Well, I’ll let you get to it, bro, I have some work to do here. A few reports to read, and a termination to write up.”

“Uh oh, who?” Kit asked.

“Kelly Parmon, senior vice president of safety,” she said, her face grim. “He let our ISO certification logs and paperwork get out of date, and I was some kind of pissed off when I found out.”

“How bad was the fine?”

“Fifty thousand dollars,” she fumed. “That’s a pink slip with no warning in this company.”

“Yeah, I’d say it is,” Kit agreed. “How on earth did he let that go?”

“Total absolute incompetence,” she growled, then she used several rather colorful adjectives to more fully describe her feelings. “It’s not like

it's even that *hard* to keep that current!"

"Who are you promoting to take his place?"

"I'm going inside the family. Cousin Terry." Terry, or Kitstrom Terrence Vulpan, was the second child of uncle Tom. From what Kit remembered, he was twenty-one years old, just six months younger than Kit, and had graduated from Yale at the age of nineteen...and not because he slacked. Terry had skipped two grades in elementary school, and graduated from Yale in three years with a bachelor's in business. Last Kit heard, he was just starting his Master's courses at Yale, and was also looking into trying for Oxford the way Vil had done.

"Terry? How long has he been working at the shipyard?"

"About a year, but he's been pretty impressive," she said. "Right now he's a vice president over in accounting, and he runs a tight ship. Nothing but good performance reviews out of his department. I'm sure as hell not giving him the job because he's a Vulpan. That's not a rock job, cause the government will fine our asses to oblivion if he doesn't do it right. He earned his chance to prove himself, so I'm giving him some real responsibility and we'll see how he does."

"I think he'll do alright," Kit said. "Terry is one smart cookie."

"No doubt," Vil nodded. "He got through school faster than any of us did. He was only nineteen when he graduated from Yale with his Bachelor's, and he just finished his Master's degree in December."

"I'm surprised he decided to go into the company. I always thought he'd go off on his own."

“I think he will, but I’ll teach him as much as I can until he does,” she chuckled. “I won’t mind losing him as long as he goes out there and does something with himself, and also doesn’t go into business competing against *me*. Then I’d have to destroy him.”

Kit chuckled. “No mercy even for the family?”

“I’d come after him even harder, cause he should know better than to try to compete against me,” she snorted, which made him burst out into helpless laughter.

“Dear God, I married a barbarian and my sister is a heartless bitch. Where did I go so wrong?” he lamented.

“That’s *Miss Heartless Bitch* to you, buster,” she teased in reply. “Now, I really need to go, so I’ll talk to you later, bro.”

“Alright. Night sis. Love ya.”

“I love you too, you little pain in the ass,” she grinned, and then she disconnected the conference session.

Jessie was indeed cooking knowing that Sheila and Muffy were coming, for they arrived about a half an hour after he finished talking to Vil. They’d shed their winter clothes the instant they hit Austin, it seemed, for Muffy was wearing a halter and a miniskirt in the brisk forty-five degree evening, showing off a great deal of fur, and Sheila was wearing a Boston Bruins tee shirt and a pair of khaki shorts. “Muffy,” Kit greeted, giving her a warm hug, “how’s Boston treated you?”

“Coldly,” she giggled. “It’s been *freezing* up there! I’m glad to be down here for a couple of days.”

“What happened, though? I thought you were supposed to be here yesterday.”

“We *were* supposed to leave yesterday,” she growled, giving Sheila a strong look.

Sheila coughed uncomfortably. “Well, blame my mom and dad for that,” she said. “I got the freakin’ third degree from them. We were packed and like *two seconds* from catching a ride to the airport when my mom and dad waylaid me and made me explain everything to them *again*,” she sighed. “They tried to talk me out of it. Er, you do know, don’t you?”

“Of course we do, silly femme,” Kit chuckled. “Vil explained it to us. I have to say, I’m impressed, cousin. Your idea to go to both schools at the same time, that was impressive.”

“Thanks,” she said with a modest smile, coming over and hugging him as Muffy greeted Jessie, and got a friendly, warm hug, which startled his cousin a little.

“So, the infamous Party Pack loses a member,” Kit teased.

Sheila laughed. “Only temporarily,” she winked. “Besides, I can always start a new Party Pack down here. I’m an *Austin* Vulpan now, just like you.”

“Ooh, can I be a part-time member of your Party Pack, Sheila?” Muffy asked with a little bounce, entirely overacted.

Jessie laughed. “Stop being so silly!” she chided. “Are you two hungry? Dinner’s almost ready.”

“Oh, am I!” Muffy said, getting a bright smile. “What did you make?”

“Jambalaya,” she answered. “With garnished asparagus, stewed beets, beef tips and chunked potatoes, and home baked black bread. Oh, and I made us some cherry cobbler for dessert.”

“I haven’t had jambalaya in forever!” Muffy said with a big grin. “How did you know I like spicy food?”

“I didn’t,” she admitted with a giggle. “But Kit does, so I have to indulge him from time to time.”

“She made me a *thank you* dinner,” Kit laughed. “Because I was extra-nice to her.”

“You should be the one in there cooking for her,” Muffy teased, and she hugged Jessie again. “Congratulations, cousin-in-law!”

“Aww, thanks, hon,” Jessie said with a demure smile.

“Yeah, congrats you two!” Sheila added, hugging Kit, then hugging Jessie in turn. She put her paw on Jessie’s stomach and patted it gently. “You proved our cousin’s a real Vulpan, Jess, he knocked you up not three months after you were married!”

Jessie gave Sheila a prim look, but Muffy continued to dig. “If he was a *real* Vulpan, he’d have got her pregnant before they were engaged,” she announced.

“That would have been a real trick, since we were engaged so quickly after we entered that phase of our relationship,” Jessie said, her cheeks trying to ruffle.

“Well, Kit’s full of surprises, as well as a few other things,” Sheila said with a sly grin at her cousin, which earned her a punch on the arm from

him.

They sat down to dinner not long afterward, and spent a very pleasant evening catching up with the goings-on up in Boston. Muffy had arranged to take two days off from school to come down to see him, and Sheila talked about all the work she had ahead of her enrolling in the University of Texas. “They have a great culinary arts program,” she said. “I looked around, and it’s the best one in Texas. It’s just nice that it’s where I want to live, too.”

“I’m still surprised that you want to move,” Muffy said.

“I *love* it here, Muff,” Sheila said sincerely. “Kit and Jessie are awesome family to have around, and I have a lot of great friends who don’t care that I’m a Vulpan. Between Jessie and Martha, I’ve already learned so much about cooking!” she said with a bright smile, turning to Jessie. “I cooked for *Higgins* last week, and he said I did really good!”

“That’s nice to hear, Sheila,” Jessie said supportively.

“Higgins has been helping me since I went back up, teaching me more about cooking. I wish he’d come down here,” she frowned. “But he doesn’t want to leave Boston.”

“He quit?”

“No, he was one of mom’s servants, so he’s going back to work in her house,” she answered. “I tried to get him to come down here, but I couldn’t convince him. I’ll just keep up with the maid service, and cooking for myself will give me plenty of practice, so I think I can manage. I still wish he would have come, though. I like Higgins. He’s a lot of fun for a butler.”

“How did you pull off that deal with Harvard?” Kit asked curiously.

“It took a lot of ass kissing, that’s for sure,” she laughed. “When that wasn’t enough, I had to start threatening to sic my mom on them if they didn’t give me what I wanted. *That* got them. They agreed to shadow me through the filler courses, and I do my business courses in what they call *private tutoring*,” she said, making ditto motions with her fingers. “It’s really me just emailing my homework and course assignments to a professor in the business college. I have to go up to Boston twice a semester to take a midterm and a final, and I also have to attend a full semester when I do my capstone project, they wouldn’t budge on that. But that’s okay, I should be able to manage it.”

“What do you mean by shadow?” Jessie asked.

“It’s a term that means cheating, basically,” Muffy answered. “Sheila will show up on the rolls of those classes, and won’t do any work in them, but will graduate with a C average in them on the books. She has to pay double the usual tuition for each course she wants to shadow, though.”

“Oh. Some of that under the table stuff Kit says Harvard does for the Vulpans.”

“Us and a few other very prominent and rich families,” Sheila nodded.

“Yale does it too,” Muffy added. “I’m shadowing a couple of courses this semester that I absolutely can’t stand.”

“The perks of being rich,” Sheila grinned. “Anyway, I’ll be taking *only* culinary arts courses at U.T. Well, those and the courses they require for a degree that Harvard credits won’t cover,” she added. “I’ll have to actually *take* those courses. Eww,” she said, making a face.

“You can’t cheat at my school,” Jessie grinned at her. “You’ll do the same work we do!”

“Another low point for the Vulpan family,” Sheila sighed. “Being just like *normal* people.”

Jessie gave her a startled look, then both Sheila and Muffy began to laugh. “Be nice,” Kit murmured. “Remember, she’s feeding you right now. That’s not a paw you want to bite.”

“Yes, I think I’ll have to make you something *special* next time,” Jessie warned.

Muffy grinned. “We’ll just bring antacid.”

“Cousin, there’s nothing you can bring to help when she makes *that* meal,” Kit said mildly, which made Jessie and Sheila giggle.

“Oh, do we speak from experience?” Muffy teased.

“I speak from the experience of never being dumb enough to send her to that spice rack,” he retorted.

“What are you planning to do while you’re here?” Jessie asked.

Sheila looked at Muffy, and they both grinned at Jessie. “Oh, we have *plans*,” she all but purred in reply.

“Oh dear,” Kit sighed. “Love, do we have any honey in the fridge?”

Jessie laughed. “It must be time to teach me the recipe for the famous Vulpan hangover tonic,” she giggled.

“Oh, those plans involve *you*, Jessie,” Sheila grinned. “In fact, they start in about a half an hour,” she added, looking at her delicate gold watch.

“What’s in a half hour?”

“The Top Hat opens,” Muffy said with a wicked smile.

Every single strand of fur on Jessie’s entire body frizzed out. “No way!” she gasped.

“Oh, yes we are,” Sheila told her with an evil grin. “You can’t get knocked up by someone else now, you’re a total free spirit! And we’re going to liberate you from this evil monogamy!”

“You *wouldn’t dare!*” she said in absolute mortification, standing up and glaring at the two of them. “I’d never *ever* do something like that no matter how drunk you get me, and *I’m pregnant!*” she shouted. “If either of you even *try* to give me a drink, I’ll beat you up!”

“Relax, love, they’re just teasing you,” Kit said calmly. “Or at least they’d *better* be,” he added threateningly.

The two Vulpan females laughed almost uncontrollably, Sheila nearly falling out of her chair. “Alright, we’re teasing about that, but you *are* going with us tonight!” she said. “It’s femme’s night! All the male strippers are going to be there, and you can’t miss it!”

“And you’ll be our designated driver,” Muffy added.

“I have class in the morning!”

“It’s only six thirty, you prude!” Sheila accused. “We can have a good three hours of harmless fun ogling naked males and still get you home in time to get to bed.”

“I will not!”

“Why not?” Kit asked her. “I think you’ll have fun.”

“You’re sending me to a strip club?” Jessie demanded, a little hotly.

“No, I’m sending you out with your *friends*,” he answered calmly. “If you happen to wander into the Top Hat, so what? I trust you, love. I know you’d never do anything foolish, and I’ve told you before, I have total faith in you. Did you have fun during your bachelorette party?”

“Well, yeah, but—“

“Then go *have fun*, my pretty kitty,” he told her, leaning over and kissing her on the cheek. “Besides, you’ll get home so hot and bothered that I’m guaranteed some action tonight.”

“Kit!” Jessie gasped, but then she laughed helplessly.

“See, you have official permission to be naughty!” Sheila said commandingly. “So let’s finish this wonderful dinner and get busy!”

“Oh, you can do me one favor,” Kit said.

“What is that?”

“Ask them if Allison still works there. I want to talk to her. If she does, either get her phone number or give them my Blackberry work number so she can call me. If she’s not, see if they’ll give me her contact number.”

“Woo, now he’s a Vulpan!” Sheila laughed. “Arranging his mistress in front of his wife!”

Kit gave her a nasty look, which made Muffy nearly spray jambalaya all over the table.

“What do you want to talk to Allison for?” Jessie asked.

“I want to interview her for a story,” he answered. “I can make her anonymous so nobody knows who I’m talking about and still publish her story. She’s a very, very interesting young femme, and I think she’d be the subject of an outstanding piece.”

“Sure, I can do that, cousin,” Sheila told him. “I’ll ask Benny, the bartender. He’ll know, and he can pass it on for you.” She narrowed her eyes. “Isn’t that the one that’s the chemistry Master’s student who pays for school by stripping and whoring?”

Kit nodded. “And *that* is why she’ll be such a good story.”

“Yeah, I’d have to agree,” Muffy said seriously.

Jessie gave him a curious look, but said nothing. Kit, seeing it there, headed it off by reaching over and putting his paw on her arm. “Trust me, love, as I trust you.”

Jessie’s cheeks ruffled, and she nodded.

Kit picked up the dishes for them after they left, and busied himself by checking to see if Rick had assigned him anything over the weekend. When his in box came up empty, he sat on the couch and practiced guitar, at least until his Blackberry rang. He didn’t know the number, so he answered it with his ritual greeting. “Lone Star magazine, Kit Vulpan.”

“Hello,” a femme’s voice called. “I was asked to call you.”

“Allison?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. I’m not sure you remember me, but—“

“Kit Vulpan. Two different colored eyes, missing part of your ear. I danced for you at a party a few months ago.”

“So you do remember,” Kit chuckled. “Listen, I know this is going to sound unusual—“

“Yes.”

“Excuse me?”

“I agree. Your cousin explained what you wanted of me. As long as you guarantee my anonymity, I’ll do the interview.”

“Nice, nice. Thank you very much.”

“Be glad your cousin came tonight. This week is my last here.”

“Really? Moving on, moving up, or moving away?”

“Moving up. This is my last semester, and I told them I wouldn’t work here beyond that. They’ve known for two years. They pressed me on the issue, demanding I stay on, so I quit. I could have just walked out, but I agreed to work until Friday just so my regulars know and understand I’m leaving, and that I am *not* interested in any private arrangements.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Oh, it’s about time anyway. I have more than enough money saved now, I decided I’d work after I get my degree, and I don’t need this job anymore. It’s certainly not because I was doing it for fun.”

“Well, that’s something we’ll talk about during the interview,” he said, grabbing a note pad and jotting down some quick notes. “When would you like to meet?”

“Any time tomorrow after three, and any time between one and five from Tuesday to Friday is fine. After Friday, I won’t be here anymore, and I’ll have the whole weekend available.”

“Hmm. We’ll be out of town this weekend. Can you hold on a minute? I’ll call my wife and ask her if she wouldn’t mind inviting you to dinner tomorrow. If you don’t mind doing the interview with company, that is.”

“She’s right here, listening to me,” Allison said calmly. “Misses Vulpan, he wants to know if you mind if he interviews me tomorrow at your house during dinner.” Kit waited, a bit anxiously. “She agrees.”

“Good,” Kit sighed. “Don’t tell her this, but she’s just a little jealous of you. I’m going to interview you with her listening, so she doesn’t get the wrong idea.”

“I understand,” Allison said with a slight hint of amusement. “So, what time tomorrow?”

“How about six or so? I have some things to do that morning, but I should be done by then. We can interview while Jessie cooks, then have a good meal.”

“That’s fine. What’s your address?” Kit gave her his address, Blackberry number, and detailed directions on how to get to the apartment from the university. “I have it. Hold on.”

“Kit?” Jessie’s voice came over the phone.

“Pretty kitty,” he said. “I do hope you don’t mind.”

“I understand, love,” she said sincerely. “And *thank you*. You’re so sweet, thinking of me.”

“I always think of you, my love,” he said impulsively. “Do you mind terribly cooking for Allison?”

“I’d be happy to. And I’ll get to hear her story, too.”

“You can get a head start, you know. She seems to be right there in front of you.”

Jessie laughed. “Sheila would kill me if I spend all my time in this private room talking to Allison and not out there watching naked guys gyrating around the room.”

“What’s she doing there, anyway? I thought it was femme’s night.”

Jessie repeated that to Allison, then there was a long silence. “She, umm, said that they entertain the males who came with the femmes upstairs. So she’s working tonight.”

“Ah. Alright, I won’t hold you away from the fun, pretty kitty. Go out there and ogle to your heart’s content.”

“There’s only one male I like to ogle,” she said with shy daring, being a little bold but a bit self-conscious because Allison could hear her.

“Well, get all charged up so I can enjoy it when you come home and do that.”

“Kit!” she gasped, then she laughed. “Hold on, this is *her* phone.”

“Mister Vulpan?” Allison’s voice called.

“Allison. Be nice to my wife, she’s a touch shy.”

“I noticed,” she said knowingly, which made Kit chuckle. “Tomorrow at six, then?”

“We’ll be ready for you. And my wife is an *awesome* cook,” he added.

“I’m looking forward to testing your claim,” she said. “Goodbye.”

She hung up before he could respond.

Kit chuckled. Now *that* was an interesting young femme.

Jessie got home around eleven, and much as he predicted, she was *very* amorous. As much as she said she only had eyes for him, he knew that she was as red-blooded as any other femme, and no femme could look at the fine hunks of male a place like the Top Hat would employ and not get bandy...unless she was some kind of religious zealot or frigid. And Jessie was neither of those. Jessie did indeed give him a wild time, but she wasn’t quite so fun when she woke up that morning and had to go to school. She was almost like a little kid, groaning and pulling the pillow over her head, hiding from reality. “Nnnnnnoooooo,” she whined when the alarm went off. “Ten more minutes!”

“Up and at ‘em, tiger!” Kit called from the hallway. “You have school!”

“Nnnoooo!!!!” she moaned groggily, rolling over on her stomach and pulling the pillow tighter over her head.

Kit rolled in and yanked the covers off of her, baring her gorgeous long-haired tail and exquisite backside. She kicked her feet jerkily, then slid halfway up onto her knees with her head still under the pillow, which revealed all kinds of *very* interesting things to him when her tail flicked up. “Pretty kitty. Love. Either you get up right now, or you’re going to miss class for an *entirely different* reason.”

She froze, realized what kind of position she was in, then laughed helplessly under the pillow. “Alright, I’m getting up,” she said, putting her tail down and rising up onto her knees, then she looked back at him over her shoulder and winked.

“You little tease,” he accused as he went back down the hall. “Breakfast in five minutes!”

As usual, he had breakfast ready for her by the time she was out of the bedroom and at least partially awake. A strong cup of tea and a ham and onion omelet awaited her, and she flopped down in the chair wearing nothing but a robe barely belted in the front, leaving half her considerable cleavage hanging out. “How long will it take you to get all those finances done?” she asked.

“I should be done around three or so,” he answered. “What do you want me to pick up for dinner?”

“Let’s give her something nice,” she said with a yawn. “Grilled salmon with lemon and rosemary, au gratin potatoes, steamed broccoli with cheese sauce, and you can bake an angel food cake for dessert with cinnamon chocolate icing. Oh, and shrimp scampi for an appetizer.”

“Oooh, going for the throat, eh?” he chuckled.

She just gave him a grin. “You need to be reminded who *feeds* you when you’re looking at her boobs.”

He laughed, leaned over the table, and pulled her robe open. “*These* are the only boobs I care to look at,” he winked.

“Suuure,” she teased, slapping his paws away. “And who sent me to go ogle naked males last night?”

“So, you’ll let me ogle Allison?”

“Only if you do to me afterwards what I did to you last night when I got home,” she said roguishly.

He laughed. “You have a deal, pretty kitty,” he told her. “I’ll drag you into the bedroom and ravish you the instant we push her out the door.”

“I can live with that,” she smiled. “And I’m glad you invited her to dinner. Both to keep me from getting jealous, and so I can meet her outside of that *place*. She was *naked* when you were talking to her!” she said, slightly scandalized. “Just sitting there on the couch like that was entirely normal!”

“It was for her, love,” he told her simply.

“She had her naked butt on a velvet couch!” she said. “I was afraid to sit on it! Who knows who sits on that couch and doesn’t wipe properly!”

Kit almost fell out of his chair laughing.

He sent her to school on time, and then got to work. He had a lot to do, and since he had a dinner appointment, he had to finish in time to get the shopping done. He got the first parts of it done, and that was where Vil would help him. She placed orders for all the stocks they planned to buy, and as soon as he had the cash, he would wire it to her to cover it. Vil could buy the stocks at a *vastly* reduced fee, given she could buy them using the company and its buying power. It was a service the company offered to its executives as well, so it wasn’t like they were doing anything illegal. Vil was just using her own policy to buy stocks herself, which she would then sell to her brother at cost. After that was done, Kit called the same accounting firm that handled the taxes for the magazine, whom Rick

trusted, and he contracted the services of an accountant who would help them do their taxes next year. Kit wanted to hire them *now*, so he had his spot as a client and his accountant would be waiting for him come January; it was always best to be a client well before the tax season rush.

He was standing outside the bank waiting when it opened, however. The teller was a bit mystified when he presented the bonds, and it took a manager to assure her that the bank *did* in fact cash them; they were fairly rare. The manager helped him personally after she realized he had *fifteen* of them. She cashed the bonds, and he scratched two tasks off his list when he bought four certificate of deposits of maturation times between 30 days and six months for a total of \$15,000, and opened a money market account with an initial deposit of \$10,000. The CDs were basically “wait and see” investments, short-term no-risk investments with low returns that basically gave him money something to do while he waited to see if any better investment opportunities came along, like perhaps some real estate investments when the real estate market bubble burst and real estate values crashed, which would put investors in a prime position to snap up deflated property and hold onto it for when the markets rebounded. He also bought a safe deposit box—they *miraculously* found an open box for him despite a nearly year-long waiting list—and he put the CD certificates directly into the box. He walked out of the bank with checks and two debit cards for the new account on order, and the balance minus \$25,000 in his old account, with plans to keep his original account open to handle day to day expenses and pay bills.

Sometimes it was funny what money could accomplish. Jessie would *normally* need to be there with him when he opened a new account, but they accommodated him by simply pulling the signature card and Jessie’s vital

information for their original checking account and using it for the new account, which let him open the joint account without her being with him. And they only did it for him because he intended to keep around \$25,000 in their bank, ten in the account and fifteen in the CDs he'd just purchased.

After finishing at the bank, he visited a brokerage and bought two commodities. The first commodity he bought was precious metals; he bought \$9,000 worth of gold and platinum. Those were the most stable metals with solid track records of increasing value over time, and were stable investments. The second commodity he bought was treasury bonds, guaranteed government bonds that had a good rate of return if one bought 30-year bonds; though not the best way to invest to make money, their rock-solid guaranteed maturation made them a very solid foundation for any portfolio. Kit bought \$20,000 worth of 30-year treasury bonds, which he could also sell before maturity if necessary. Combined with the precious metals, Kit had built a solid foundation for his portfolio, guaranteed money that grow steadily and dependably over time.

The CDs and Treasury bills were the “stability” portion of his investment plan, which would appreciate slowly but steadily over time. He had already started on the “risky” portion with the gold and platinum, though precious metals weren't really as risky...but weren't absolutely guaranteed to appreciate in value. So, Kit classified them as “risk.” Since he now had the commodities bought, he returned to the bank and placed the bills and metals vouchers showing his ownership of the metals—those would come later, he demanded it delivered to the bank rather than allow some company hold the metals for him—told the manager the metals would be delivered directly to the bank in two days, and then moved on to the next phase. That was to return home, and wait for Vil to get confirmation to

know how much he owed her; often her agents on the floors of the exchanges would delay making a buy if they thought they could get a better price. And her brokers actually came through. They saved Kit nearly four hundred dollars by going on their own instincts and catching several of his stocks at inter-day lows, buying them at their cheapest that day. Sure, waiting to buy a stock after it fell by six cents wasn't much, but when one bought a thousand shares of that stock, those pennies added up *fast*. When they bought all the stocks Vil had ordered bought, she added it up, and Kit called the bank and arranged the wire transfer of that sum to her, which was \$64,427.24.

After adding everything up, and including brokerage fees, safe deposit box rental, and other expenses, he invested a grand total of \$117,484.01 of the \$117,793.28, which led to a tidy \$309.27 net deposit into his regular checking account. He had cut it almost razor-fine, but their planned investment expenditures had come in under the initial capital.

All because of careful planning.

“Is that it, bro?”

“Yeah, that's it,” he said, looking at the clock and seeing that he had twenty minutes left before 3:00pm, which was when he had to go buy the food for tonight's dinner. “And I even finished on time.”

“You got everything?”

“Yup. Money market account open, safe deposit box bought, CDs bought, T-bonds bought, gold and platinum bought, all our stocks are bought, and I contracted an accountant to help do our taxes next year. It's a nearly sixty percent high risk, forty percent low risk balanced portfolio, at least for now since nearly fifteen percent of the capital is available for

reinvestment. You gonna courier those stock certificates to me when you get them?"

"They should be in your hands by Wednesday," she promised. "What's the grand total?"

"I have a little over three hundred dollars left," he said, a bit proudly.

"We nailed it, then," she giggled.

"We did indeed. Well done, sis. I expected nothing less when you're the one helping with the planning."

"Well, you're solvent now, bro. It's about time. Now, what is this dinner you're making? Making something special for Jessie?"

"Kit chuckled. "The truth? I'm inviting over a stripper and prostitute to interview her for a story I'm writing."

Vil gasped, then laughed richly. "You have to be joking!"

"Not a little bit," he answered.

"And Jessie *knows* about this?"

"She's cooking."

"Dear God, bro, what did you put in her orange juice?"

"Jessie's a little curious about this one," Kit told her. "She works at that sex club Sheila used for my bachelor party. She was a stripper who'd whore out to the clients in the club, their highest-priced femme, and she used the money to get a Master's degree at U.T."

"Okay, now that's unusual."

“And thus why I want to get her story,” he finished. “She’s a drop dead gorgeous vixen, sis, and I mean *gorgeous*. Jessie’s just a little jealous of her because I’m showing interest in another femme, but my interest is only for the story, not for *her*. That’s why she agreed to invite her over. If I interview her with Jessie here, she’ll see she has nothing to be jealous about.”

“So she can keep an eye on you,” Vil chuckled.

“Which is why I offered the interview over dinner, so Jessie could be here to make sure I behave.”

“Clever.”

“You didn’t raise a fool,” he chuckled.

“No, I did not. I’ll let you go get your shopping done. I’ll have the courier arrive at the magazine around lunchtime Wednesday, so you can take the stocks straight to the safe deposit box.”

“I’ll be waiting. Vil.”

“Yeah?”

“*Thank you*. You just ensured our children get their degrees. I owe you so much for all the help you’ve given me over the years, I don’t know how to ever repay you.”

“For you, bro, anything. Anytime. Anywhere. If you would let me, I’d put you in a mansion and give you every penny I got out of Dad’s will, but I know you’d never let me. Despite that, you are my family, and I love you, no matter what.”

“I love you too, sis.”

“Call me after you finish the interview. Tell me how it went.”

“You got it. Talk to you tonight.”

“Tonight then. Bye bro.”

“Bye.”

Kit blew out his breath, turning the phone over in his paw. It was done. In one day, he had executed the investment strategy he and Vil had drawn up. With her help and a lot of legwork, he had gotten it all done in only one day. Truth be told, it wasn't that hard. The commodities were easy to buy, as the same brokerage offered to sell both of them to him. The work at the bank wasn't hard because it was all in one place. The most difficult part of it all would have been buying the stocks, but thanks to Vil and her contacts, the brokers she sent out onto the floor of the exchanges to buy those stocks directly, she had saved him a lot of time and a considerable amount of money.

God, he loved his sister.

Allison was a very interesting young femme. In some ways, she reminded Kit of Sheila, Vil, Jessie, and Sam, all rolled into one. She was highly intelligent—to call her a genius wouldn't be far from the mark—but she had a remarkably practical and grounded outlook on life. Her practicality was her most pervasive trait, an almost brutal pragmatism that had led her into the life of a stripper and prostitute; she had seen that stripping and selling her body for sex was the most lucrative profession available to her, more than able to cover her tuition and keep her in a comfortable lifestyle. She could be coquettish and playful, but it was just an act. In ways, her almost detached outlook, a nearly emotionlessness, reminded him of Vil, when she was fully wrapped up in the persona of the

Ice Queen. She had a very sensible and clinical approach to things, from eating to conversation, which was much like Sam's well ordered personality. But, she did have a delightfully wicked and understated sense of humor, which reminded him of Sandy. She was as fearless as Sheila, but outside of the club, she was as well-mannered and urbane as Jessie, with exquisite manners and a sense of nearly wholesome propriety. Foxy Firetail the stripper, her stage name, was just an act, a mask she wore, for Allison Gallagher was a very, very different young femme when she was at school.

Jessie was quite surprised to see her stepping in the front door wearing not a miniskirt, not a bustier, but a sensible blouse and a calf-length pleated brown wool skirt. Granted, her blouse and skirt did flatter her formidable figure, but the clothes themselves were very modest.

Kit greeted her, bade her to sit on the couch, and while Jessie cooked for them—he had baked the cake and put the tips and potatoes on before Jessie got home—they talked. He didn't need notes or research to know what he wanted to ask her, so he went through every question that had rolled around in his head since the night he met her. Allison was blunt, direct, and very honest, telling him things that elicited gasps from Jessie in the kitchen, and no doubt caused his pretty kitty's cheek fur to perpetually stand on end. She described her past, coming from a broken home of a father that abandoned them when she was thirteen and an abusive mother, who she left the instant she turned eighteen to let her mother sink herself into her addiction to drugs, and how the pitiful sight of her mother, a strung-out junkie, turned her away from a similar fate. She described graduating from high school and seeing how she would have to be smart, smart and practical, in order to earn the college degree she knew was her ticket to a better life. She talked about how she got into the business, how it worked,

and what it was like to be a stripper and a prostitute. She talked about the Top Hat and how she earned almost *obscene* amounts of money stripping and having sex with the members, money that paid for her schooling, kept her in a small, modest yet well built little house in north Austin she owned outright, allowed her to drive a Lexus when not at school and a cheap used Toyota Camry while at school (so as to hide her money), and had put nearly \$65,000 in cold hard cash in the bank at the age of 23, all of it spread through wise and well-reasoned investments that earned her a decent return. She told him about her fears, about her almost monthly medical screenings for AIDS and other diseases, and her many fights with patrons over them using condoms, which was her inviolate rule. “No rubber, no fun,” was her motto. She told them with calm reserve about the four times she’d been raped within the Top Hat by irate patrons who refused her condom rule, and how justice was never pursued against the rapists. The worst that happened was that they were barred from the club from then on. After all, how could she cry rape without exposing the club and losing her income? She told them about the lonely life she led, since she couldn’t really socialize with anyone at school. How could she risk getting too close to a fellow student and having them find out the truth? The only real friends she had were fellow workers at the Top Hat, who shared her occupation and shared her unique outlook. Only a fellow stripper could understand the dangers and hazards the stripper’s life held. But, Allison was much, much smarter than most anyone in the Top Hat, so she felt a little lonely sometimes. The other femmes couldn’t really relate to her as they could to each other. They were a little intimidated by her. While they wasted their money on useless toys, clothes, drugs, and other frivolities, Allison had invested the money she didn’t use on school and living expenses, and she was *sharp*. She had built a

portfolio as diversified and insightful as the portfolio Kit had assembled that very day.

Kit wrote her summary of her life word for word out of her mouth. “My body earns the money, but my mind does something useful with it.”

She described an average day in the life of a high-priced prostitute in great detail to him. As he dictated her words into his laptop, she described going to school and doing her homework like any other student, teaching two entry-level chemistry classes both for a little cover for her true income and to help her in her own field of study, and then putting aside Allison Gallagher, graduate student and student teacher, and becoming Foxy Firetail, stripper and prostitute, performing an internal transformation, going from demure, quiet, femme-next-door femme to a seductive, sophisticated, and extremely sexy vixen who earns upwards of five hundred dollars a night stripping, and a thousand dollars an hour selling her body. She admitted quite calmly that one night, she took home nearly seven thousand dollars, and that was *after* the Top Hat took its twenty percent of her tips and the one quarter of her prostitution proceeds; that was the success of the Top Hat, she explained, that they took only a small percentage of their male and female workers, which attracted highly attractive workers. By attracting the most attractive workers, they catered to those with lots of money, who *spent* large amounts of money in their club. Allison told them about one night where there was a party, and the Top Hat took in nearly *forty thousand dollars*, and that was *net*. The actual amount of money that changed paws that night was close to *two hundred thousand dollars*. It was a huge party for a visiting millionaire, thrown by an Austin millionaire, and attended by quite a few other millionaires. Absolutely vast amounts of money were flowing through that club, making it truly a club

for the rich to play with beautiful or handsome playthings and satisfy their carnal fantasies.

They took a break for dinner. Allison wasn't entirely impressed with the "fancy" dinner Jessie planned for them, for she was much like Kit, accustomed to eating exotic, rich meals. But her disinterest in the menu changed quickly when she tasted the salmon. "Oh my," she breathed. "Kit, you were not lying. Jessie, you are a *fabulous* cook!"

"Thank you," Jessie said with a demure smile. "I wanted to make you something really nice, and, well, I'm a cat, so to me nice is seafood."

They enjoyed a sumptuous meal, talking about nothing in particular, and Allison actually laughed when they produced the cake for her. "You'll ruin my figure, and my figure is my living!"

"Not anymore it's not," Kit reminded her.

She actually *giggled*. "You're right. One *big* slice, please."

She was startled when she found out that Kit was the one that made the cake. "I'm a lucky femme, Allison. I found a male that can actually cook," Jessie said with a fond smile at Kit. "I had to train him a little bit, but he's turned out rather well."

"I think he did," she agreed.

After dinner, they resumed the interview. Allison continued to describe the daily life of a student by day, hooker by night in frank, explicit detail, and even touched on how her life affected her personality. "I guess you can call me jaded," she said simply. "I don't believe in the innocence of fur any longer. I don't look at males and wonder *what if* any longer. I sometimes enjoy the sex, but it's just a feeling, a sensation. There's no love anymore, at

least not for me,” she said soberly, reflectively, swirling wine bought just for her in her glass as they sat on the couch. “Furs lost being *fur* in a way to me.”

“Believe me, that’s something I can understand,” Kit said, almost grimly, glancing at Jessie. That was almost exactly how he felt about his family.

“Why is that?” she asked.

Jessie looked at him, and just nodded. “I don’t know if you know of my family, Allison, but my relationship to my family is just as jaded.” He told her about his history with his family, and the towering hatred he had for all of them except his sister and a handful of cousins he either liked or against which harbored no ill will. “So, all that money, and what do I have to show for my family? This,” he said, pointing at his damaged ear. “My family isn’t a family, Allison. It’s a collection of greedy, hedonistic, egotistical foxes who are bound together by their arrogance and their common name.”

“And you live like we do?”

“I used to,” he admitted. “But my father’s will was voided, and that allowed my sister to give me the bonds my mother bought for me when I was born, which I cashed out for a little over a hundred grand. It’s the only money I would *ever* accept from my family, because it came from my mother, and I’d insult her memory not to take it and use it for *my* family. It’s all invested now for the future, so I can provide everything our children will ever need. That money isn’t for us, it’s for our children. I’ll still work and we’ll still live off my salary—”

“And mine, when I graduate,” Jessie added.

“And Jessie’s,” Kit nodded. “But the money I inherited from my mother will never be *mine*. It belongs to our children.”

“That’s a very beautiful act. You’re a very strange couple,” she said honestly. “You, born from the rich, who hate the very money most others dream of having themselves. And you, a demure and shy femme who moves with seductive grace because you’re jealous of me, afraid I might steal away your husband.”

Jessie’s cheek fur bloomed in a furious blush.

“And you’re a femme who grew up like the rest of us, but also see money through your husband’s viewpoint rather than your own.”

“I used to, but when I saw Kit’s family, I finally understood what he meant. From that moment on, I haven’t had a single thought about his family’s money. We’re better off without it.”

“But now you *do* have money,” she noted.

“It’s not our money. It’s our baby’s money,” she said, putting her paw on her stomach unconsciously. “We’re going to have a baby, Allison. And that money is for our babies, not for us. That’s why Kit locked it all away in investments, so there’s enough to send all of our children through college when they’re old enough. This one won’t be the *only* one,” she said, giving Kit a loving smile.

“Congratulations on your blessing,” Allison said with a smile and a nod to them.

“Thank you,” they said in unison, and they both laughed. “So, we’ll live as we always lived, on our salaries, while the money given to us by

Kit's mother will let our children go to Harvard if they want to," Jessie finished.

"A very responsible plan."

"We're responsible furs," Kit chuckled. "And we're just like any parents anywhere. We care more about our children than we do ourselves. Besides, it's not like we'll be living out of soup cans. We make a decent living, and I love my job."

"I can only hope I like my next job more than my last one."

"If it's what you want to do, how can you not like it?" Jessie asked simply.

"Hopefully. I was looking at either two to three more years in the Top Hat before I had enough invested to retire, or taking my degree and looking for a real job. I think that a job gotten from a Master's degree would take me maybe eight to ten years before I have enough saved to retire."

"Then what?"

"Honestly? I don't know," she shrugged. "Maybe I'll open a little bar somewhere, or a bed and breakfast. Or maybe I'll let my practical side take over and get involved in the sex trade from the provider side rather than the worker side. I think I'd make a fairly effective madam," she said with a slight smile. "To me, retirement means *freedom*. Freedom to do whatever I want. Even if I have no idea what to do, to me, it means that I've made it. I can do nothing if I want, sit around, get fat, and watch TV until I keel over from a heart attack. But I'll have *earned* that right."

They were quiet a long moment, and then Kit sighed and leaned back. "I'd say you have," Kit said. "I'll try to run this in the Friday edition,

Allison. I should have the article finished by tomorrow. Tomorrow, I want you to come by here, or stop by my office, and review the article to make sure you agree to it, that I've made it sufficiently vague enough to protect your identity. You'll have total control over it, Allison. If you want anything changed, its gets changed. If you want me to kill the article completely, it dies."

"I can live with that," she said with a nod.

"Just call me when you're ready to come see the article. You still have my number?" She nodded. "Then call when you're ready. If I'm done, I'll let you read it. If I'm not, I'll let you see what I have and give me feedback on if you like what you see."

"Alright. I teach a class at one, so I'll call you around three. Is that alright?"

"That's just fine," he assured her. "I'll be in my office then, but if you don't want anyone there to see you, we can meet wherever you want."

"That works for me. How about John's Pizza? Do you know where that is?"

Kit and Jessie traded a look, then laughed. "We had our second date there," Jessie told her.

"I know where it is. I'll meet you there at three thirty. That sound good?"

"I can make it."

"Do you mind if I come too? I'd like to see the article."

“You’re welcome to,” Allison told her with a nod. “But I rather expect your husband will show it to you long before I see it.”

Jessie laughed. “I guarantee you, he’ll retreat into the den the second you leave, and I won’t see him again until tomorrow morning,” she grinned. “Then he’ll hustle me off to school and run to work, and he’ll shut himself up in his office and won’t come out until he either finishes or it’s time to meet you.”

“She knows me well,” Kit chuckled.

“You really think it’s that good of a story?”

“Allison, I’ve heard more stories than you can imagine, and *none* of them are as compelling as yours. I just hope I can do it proper justice.”

“Well, we’ll see if you can,” she said, sipping on her wine.

“Just answer me one thing, Allison,” Jessie said, quite seriously. “Why did you tell us your story?”

“Because life is a transient thing, Jessie. If I were to die tomorrow, then no one would ever know. And I think I’d like at least one fur to know. Or two, in this case,” she smiled. “If I say no to the article, at least you know. And for some reason, that makes me feel...better.”

Jessie got up, walked over to the chair in which Allison was sitting, then leaned down and kissed her wordlessly on the cheek. “And I feel better knowing your story,” she said seriously.

“Well...thank you, Jessie,” she said, with sudden, surprising demureness. “I should get going. I have a lab in the morning, and a class to teach. Tomorrow, three thirty, John’s Pizza.”

“We’ll be there,” Kit said with a nod, then he stood up and offered his paw to her. She took it and allowed him to help her to her feet, then he walked her to the door. “Thank you for a wonderful evening, Allison, and the privilege of hearing your story.”

She laughed suddenly. “Strange, the way things work. When I first met you, it was your trying to *talk* to me, with no expectations, no reservations, that made me give you my real name, told you what I did then. You made me feel...*important*. And that made me want to tell you something I’ve never told another living soul.”

“We’re all important, Allison,” he told her. “And don’t think that just because I’ve heard your story, I never want to talk to you again. You have my number. You know where we live. When you want to talk, if you want to just come over and hang out, you know where we are.”

“And you’ll always be welcome here,” Jessie said with total sincerity. “Our door is always open for you.”

“That’s very kind of you,” she said with a smile. “But I’m not sure I’ll ever accept that offer.”

“It’s there anyway,” she replied calmly.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said. She shook Kit’s paw, then Jessie’s paw, and then she opened the door. “Good night, and thank you.”

“We’ll see you tomorrow,” Kit told her.

She nodded and walked out. They watched her go, and Kit put his arm around Jessie, watching from the door as she got into her Lexus, and then drove away. “What do you think?” he asked her.

“That’s the most fascinating, and messed up, femme I’ve ever met,” she said with sincere pity. “If anyone ever desperately needed a friend, it’s her. She’s totally alone, and she’s shut herself off from everyone. But it’s like she just shut that part of herself away, and when she retires, she’s going to go looking for it again. Like it’s her second chance to find herself, without any responsibilities or distractions.”

“That’s *exactly* what she’s like. She gave up a part of herself when she sacrificed her morality to pursue her goal of getting a degree. And now, she wants to find herself again now that she doesn’t need to hide behind her mask anymore. That’s why she opened up to us. She’s starting down the road that will lead her back to herself, and she had to admit what she was to herself instead of hiding from it behind a false front.”

“Why do we seem to keep coming across femmes like her?” Jessie asked curiously. “First Sheila, now her.”

Kit gave her a look, then shook his head soberly. “They’re nothing alike. Only on the surface. Underneath, Allison is *nothing* like Sheila.”

“True,” she agreed after a moment’s thought.

Jessie was absolutely right about Kit. Five minutes after Allison was gone, Kit was in the study, poring over the copious notes he wrote in his laptop. He spent nearly an hour organizing them, arranging them, and then he started on the outline of the article.

He decided immediately that to maintain the impact of the article, certain truths had to remain, but he could protect Allison by being intentionally misleading about *where and when* he met Allison. He would

claim that Allison was merely one of the many furs he met on his six months of working his way across America, meeting her “somewhere between Atlanta and Austin.” He would tell her story from the past tense, as if it was already over, and that Allison had been retired from prostitution for some time. He also decided to intentionally change her breed. Allison would transform into a ferret for the article, though still quite attractive; he knew how to describe a femme ferret to make her sexy. He could do all of this because of the disclaimer that appeared with all his *Through My Eyes* articles; that the stories told may not be real, though the furs that told them most certainly were. That disclaimer gave Kit license to change many relevant facts about Allison to protect her anonymity.

He decided on a title for it: *Second Chances*.

After he had his planned changes noted in his outline and notes, he began. He worked almost without interruption, stopping only to go to the bathroom and make himself tea. Jessie knew better than to bother him or wait up for him, so she went to bed and left him to his work. He wrote, and wrote, and wrote, telling the story of Allison’s life in simple, almost simplistic terms, focusing on the events, but never forgetting about the femme who experienced those events. He highlighted Allison’s resolve, her drive, and in a way, the hard choices she made when she abandoned sentimentality for hard practicality, giving particular focus to that fateful moment when she realized that working as a stripper and prostitute was the most economical means of achieving her goal, embracing pragmatism over morality, giving up the dream of love and, while not becoming hard or cold, instead becoming aloof, separating herself from a job she despised, and forced to maintain that illusion to hide that job from the rest of society until it became second nature to her, until she became so wrapped up in

protecting herself behind a persona, she lost the real femme inside her for a time...but she also had no regrets. She had survived, even thrived, and her success made her happy in her own way, filled the void caused by the sacrificing of a child's dream. Hers was not a happy story, but it had something of a happy ending in that she had survived her time buried in the dark underside of American society, and had come out of it both emotionally unscarred and financially well off. She had given up the child's dream and the hope of love to pursue her goal, but she had gained independence and freedom in return. To her, that was a fair trade, since now that she was independent and wealthy, she had time to rediscover the child's dream, and find within her the ability to love. Hers was an innocence sacrificed, but a hope maintained, for everything she had done was done with the goal of retiring and having the chance to discover the true femme buried for so long within her, to find out who she was, who she *really* was.

Gaining a second chance for happiness.

He realized he finished the article, but it was nine pages long, so he went back and tried to edit it. He chopped it up and rewrote it, keeping select passages and paragraphs intact, and again he found it running nearly ten pages, which was *way* too big to be an article.

All through the night, he worked on it. He redrafted, and redrafted, and redrafted, edited it down, and still could not get it under seven pages without completely destroying the essence of the article. Allison's story was so hard to tell in just a few words. Few words did it a grave injustice.

He drafted it again, and making a few painful choices, he cut it down to five pages. After he got it to five pages, he scrubbed his face and realized that he had to make breakfast for Jessie. It was almost 7:00am. He'd been up all night writing, and aside from an achy back, he was not tired in the

slightest. He was too excited, too absorbed in his work to even feel tired. He rushed into the kitchen and put on some eggs, sausage, and toast for Jessie, made her a pot of tea, and then found her already up, droopy-tailed, heading for the bathroom. “Breakfast’s on the stove, don’t let it burn,” he said, hurrying back to the den. He transferred all his work into his laptop, and was on his way to work with just a quick kiss on Jessie’s cheek as she dragged herself into the kitchen. He was the first one in, so he left the door unlocked and hurried to his office, then transferred all his work into his workstation and went back to work. He kept rewriting passages and trying to edit, but could not get it under five pages no matter what he did.

The door opened, and Rick looked inside. “Son, it’s nearly eleven, and you haven’t even come out to get your tea. What’s wrong?”

“I...have a problem,” he said. “Come in. Close the door.”

Rick gave him a curious look, but did what Kit asked. Kit brought up his original article, the unedited one, which was nine pages long, then brought up the edited five page article. “Read these. Then tell me what the hell to do.”

Rick took Kit’s chair when he vacated it, then he read the article. His expression never changed for over twenty minutes. He then read the edited article, and again, his expression never changed. After nearly forty minutes, he leaned back in the chair, his expression neutral, but his eyes reflective. He then picked up the phone and dialed a number. “Dan. Rick. My next issue is going to run long, just to warn you. It looks like it’ll run about forty pages. I just wanted to give you a head’s up. Okay. Later, friend.” He hung up the phone, and looked at Kit. “We run the long one,” he said. “There’s no way you can edit that piece, Kit. No way. It’s...*wow*.”

“Don’t make plans for it yet,” Kit said. “I have to get final approval.”

“From who?”

He gave Rick a steady look.

“I see. When will you know?”

“This afternoon. I’m meeting Jessie for a late lunch at three thirty. I’ll know after it’s over.”

“Call me the instant you know.”

“I will.”

Kit was at John’s Pizza at two, with his laptop. He sat in a booth and nursed the same glass of tea, exhausted but pleased, just sitting and reading the article over and over, looking for ways to edit it, tweak it, try to do it more justice. He was so absorbed that he was honestly startled when Allison knocked on the table, making him snap his head up. She was wearing a baggy tee shirt and a pair of faded jeans, and to his surprise, a pair of silver rim glasses. “You’re early,” she noted.

“I am? I am. What time is it?”

“Three fifteen,” she answered. “Are we eating?”

“Yeah. Yeah,” he said, motioning for her to sit opposite him in the booth. “Here. Read this,” he said, turning the laptop towards her. “I’ll order us a pizza. What kind do you like?”

“Anything,” she said with a negligent wave of her paw.

Kit ordered them a large pepperoni pizza, and waited at the counter for it, almost afraid to go back to the booth. Fortunately, though, he didn’t have

to wait long, for John's kept pizzas all but ready to bake. Ten minutes later, the pizza was ready, and he carried it back to the booth. Jessie was there now, quiet, waiting patiently as Allison read from his laptop, her expression sober. He received a kiss from Jessie on the muzzle as he set the pizza down, and she reached for a slice. "Have you eaten at all today, my handsome fox?" she asked in a subdued tone.

"I...I don't know," he said, a little wearily.

"Here. Eat!" she commanded, pushing the slice at him.

"I'm not hungry," he said. "Not yet, anyway. I'm too nervous."

She gave him a compassionate look, then tore a piece of cheese off the tip and pushed it slowly and gently against his lips. He nibbled at it, and as if that one taste unleashed a monster inside him, he was suddenly ravenously hungry. She gave him the piece of pizza, and he attacked it like a man dying of hunger. She took a piece herself and ate it with her usual speed, but she kept her eyes on Allison.

After what seemed like an eternity to Kit, Allison finally raised her eyes from the screen of his laptop. She said nothing, for a long, long time. Kit felt his heart was about to leap out of his throat, that he was about to throw up the piece of pizza he'd just eaten, and then she gave a single, eloquent nod.

Then she said something that totally baffled him. "Why a ferret?" she asked.

He was dumbstruck. He tried to find words, which came out as several incoherent rasps, then he laughed helplessly. "Why not?" he asked.

“Can he use it?” Jessie asked, wanting to hear her say it for some reason.

She nodded. “I’m...touched, Kit.” She reached down for a piece of pizza, then took a bite out of it.

“Do you want me to make any changes?” he asked.

She shook her head while chewing, swallowed, then said “no. It’s fine just as it is.”

“Did I do it justice?”

“I think you did. But what is my opinion?” she shrugged. “Here, Jessie. Your turn,” she said.

“Good, cause I haven’t seen it yet,” she said, turning the laptop around and scrolling the article back to the top. Kit and Allison ate in silence, the calm silence of two people content to share a meal and not discuss what was certainly an emotional issue in public. Jessie sniffled once, and then her eyes misted over as she reached the end, closing the screen of the laptop. “Kit, that was beautiful,” she whispered. “Stark, but beautiful.”

“The story was told,” Allison said simply. “And now someone will know.”

“They will indeed, Allison,” Kit assured her.

Jessie was misty-eyed the rest of the time, as they ate pizza and talked of nothing important at all, as if they were pointedly avoiding the subject of the article. Allison complained about her stupid students, who were taking introductory chemistry either as degree requirements or because they had this strange idea of what chemistry was, and Jessie told her about her

English classes. Kit told her about his work, and then Allison abruptly cut them off. “I have to go,” she said. “I promised them I’d stay until Friday. I have to go get ready.”

“This is my cell phone number,” Jessie told her, her eyes grave as she wrote on a napkin. “I want you to call me *every day* until you leave there. I want to make sure you’re okay.”

Allison looked at her with her eyes a mystery, then took the napkin and nodded silently. “I don’t get off work until late.”

“Then wake me up,” Jessie said immediately. “Knowing you’re okay is going to let me go back to sleep that much happier.”

“I will. I promise.”

“Don’t be a stranger, Allison,” Kit told her. “You have friends if you want them.”

She gave both of them a long, emotionless look, then nodded to them, got up, and left without a word. Kit blew out his breath, and Jessie put her paw on his shoulder. “Are you alright, my handsome fox?”

“I’m very, very tired,” he said, digging his phone out and calling Rick. “But I have more to do. Rick, it’s Kit.”

“What’s the word?” he asked.

“The word is yes. As is.”

“Thank God,” he said. “I don’t think it needs anything, son. You did a fantastic job. I’ll just spellcheck it and work it in at nine pages.”

“I hope it’s worth the extra cost.”

“Son, between this and Barry’s interview of the Austin election commissioner, yes, it’s worth it,” he said bluntly. “Go home, son. When you left here, you couldn’t walk straight. Go home and get some sleep. You deserve it.”

“I can’t yet,” he said. “I have to come back to the office. I made a promise, Rick. I have to wipe all my notes off my workstation. The article will be all there is.”

“Alright, but don’t push it. Come in, clean up, and then go home.”

“Alright, Rick. I’m on the way in.” He disconnected the call, and looked to Jessie. “Go on home, love. I’ll be along as soon as I’m done.”

“Do you want me to do that at home, too?”

“No, I’ll get it. I’m going to keep *one* copy of my notes. I’ll burn it on a DVD, encrypt it, and hide it somewhere.”

“Okay. I’ll be waiting for you at home, my handsome fox. Please come home soon.”

“Believe me, I will,” he said with a yawn. “I am beyond tired.”

Chapter 22

It had been a great day to fly.

Jessie had given over gawking out the window to settle in with a book, one of her reading assignments, a cockpit light turned on that was basically a map-reading light for the copilot's side and her oxygen tube affixed over her nose. It was 8:42pm by the clock on the dashboard, and the GPS window in the Garmin display showed them at 47 nautical miles south-southwest of Heather Municipal Airport, which was six miles northeast of Cincinnati. They'd be landing in about twenty minutes, and Kit was about to begin his descent and swing around to the east side of the city to avoid restricted airspace around the city and its main airport.

They'd left on Friday rather than Saturday, leaving after only three hours at work, which he spent securing a day and time to interview Lamar Smith and do some easy research jobs for both Lilly and Marty. Kit had arranged to work on Monday to cover his Saturday, and Rick had also given him some flex time off, given he'd worked for nearly 17 straight hours on Allison's article. Then again, Rick was in love with that article, and right now Kit could burn down his ranchhouse and rape Martha, and Rick would just tell him he was a naughty boy and don't do it again. Everyone else in the office thought it was a great article, too. Barry had been speechless, it made Lilly and Marty cry, and Savid spent nearly an hour sitting at his desk, tapping his template pen on his temple, lost in contemplation. Kit still felt that it could be better, but Rick had locked the article in literally as is, and printed it on page four, taking up ten pages once it was reformatted into the

template format and the font was dropped down to the magazine's standard, but not editing out a single word. Rick had left the entire article just as it was written, printing it contiguously, and just pushing back the other usual features of the magazine to pages further back. Kit wasn't the feature article, though; Barry's outstanding interview with the head of the Texas Election Commission was the lead article, taking up the entirety of page three and one column of page four.

Kit had a copy of the magazine with him, since it was printed and distributed today, packed in his overnight. They'd left the apartment at three, telling Lupe to keep an eye on things—Lupe had a key to their apartment and the code to the alarm—and were in the air by 4:45. Kit had to file a new flight plan because he intended to try the plane out at its maximum service ceiling, but that was not meant to be; there was some kind of snafu going on with the flight plan servers. It usually only took thirty seconds to get confirmation, but for some reason the system wasn't working. Kit abandoned trying after twenty minutes, deciding to fly under VFR, and then it took twenty minutes to get into the air since he'd already done the packing and preflight inspection of the plane before coming to get his flight plan in. Jessie had spent most of the flight looking down at the ground, or staring at the clouds around them as they flew over most of them, having to ascend through a partial cloud deck when they took off... which was why they got off the ground so quickly. The cloud cover grounded all the VFR pilots, giving Kit a quick line to the runway. She got to watch a gorgeous sunset out of the left side of the plane, having to look across Kit, a sunset at 17,500 feet, the sun sliding behind a rippled horizon of gentle hills. Once the sun went down and she couldn't see the ground, she started reading.

The plane was a dream to fly. The Garmin made navigating ridiculously easy, and the autopilot was both *very* easy to use and very versatile, allowing the pilot to control virtually all aspects of the flight while the autopilot was engaged. Kit let the autopilot fly for about an hour, but had kept manual control of the plane for most of the rest of the five hour flight, just so he could get completely used to the unusual stick placement. On the trip home, the autopilot would be doing a great deal more work. Kit had flown most of the flight at 17,500 feet, just on the upper edge of VFR airspace, where they had a steady tailwind and clear, cloudless skies both above and below. They averaged 170 knots relative airspeed to ambient air, what was called TAS airspeed—which translated to about 185 knots true speed relative to the ground, or around 250 miles an hour—with a very efficient fuel mixture thanks to the favorable weather conditions. They'd land with enough gas in the tanks to go another hour, where he expected to land with only enough gas for another thirty minutes, not counting reserves. They wouldn't get that kind of efficiency at lower altitudes, which was why they had gone high enough to require oxygen. The oxygen breathers themselves weren't uncomfortable to wear, slim nose tubes much like the portable oxygen tubes worn by people with lung problems, much better than wearing a full mask and *much* more efficient, and the plane's superior climate control kept them nice and warm in the frigid air nearly 18,000 feet over northern Kentucky on a late February night.

“Alright, my pretty kitty, we're gonna start descending,” he warned. “When we get under fourteen thousand feet, you can take off your breather. After that, you need to pack up your books and stow them. And after that, it'll be time to pull out the winter coats and boots from the back seat.”

“Sure thing, love,” she said. “Should I put my seat belt back on?”

“Not yet,” he answered. “But I do want you to have it on when we land.”

“It doesn’t bother me, love, I just couldn’t slouch down in the seat to read with the belt on,” she said, giving him a smile. “I’ll be glad to get on the ground, though.”

“Yeah, I have to pee, too,” Kit laughed. “I’ve been holding it for the last half hour. I *knew* I should have bought a portable urinal, but it’s been a crazy week, and we got a late start because of that damn flight plan server. I don’t want your folks to be up all night waiting for us. They certainly sell them out of the little store there at the Georgetown airfield, and the shop at Heather should have them too. I’ve never seen a terminal shop that doesn’t. I’ll have to get one before we fly home.”

“Well, you’re a *boy*,” she said, almost accusingly. “You could do something like that. Girls don’t have that option,” she said primly.

“Well, you do, actually,” he said. “They sell female urinals too.”

“They do? How would a girl, umm, you know.”

“You’d hold it in place, I imagine,” he shrugged. “They’re specifically designed so you can use them sitting in a seat. They come with this flared and shaped opening, so I guess you could just hold it tight up against yourself and prevent any leaking. They also sell bedpan-style ones that you can actually sit on, which seal so nothing leaks out. You could put it on the back seat and sit down if you don’t like the idea of holding a urinal to yourself.”

“That’s a creepy thought,” Jessie mused. “And kinda embarrassing.”

“Well, it’s an option. And think, love, there’s nobody up here to see anything except me,” he chuckled as he turned the plane and started descending, following the Garmin’s suggested course correction. “You can just drop your jeans and have a seat, or hold the urinal in place. It’s not like you’ve never done it with me in the bathroom before.” He clicked his teeth absently. “I’ll have to find one for our return trip. Trying to hold your knees together isn’t good when you have to put your feet on the rudder pedals. I should have thought to get one before we started up, but we were in such a hurry, I forgot it.”

“That or a soda bottle,” she winked.

He chuckled. “That would work for *me*. It would be a bit of a challenge for you.”

They were on the ground about fifteen minutes later, and the ground controller directed him to an open space he could rent for the weekend. Jessie was out of the plane as soon as the propeller stopped, not even putting on her winter boots and running with her coat in her paw, running for the terminal. He followed her and saw the terminal clerk to pay for three days of parking and a recharge of the oxygen tanks on the plane, whose desk was right inside the lobby of the small terminal, so visiting pilots could not possibly miss it. “Your shop still open?” he asked the badger.

“Yeah, closes in twenty minutes.”

“Good. I didn’t have time to buy a urinal for the plane,” he grunted. “We had a late start, and we just got our plane a few days ago. This was our first long distance trip in it.”

“Well, congratulations,” the badger said with a smile. “Ah, so, that would explain why that cat ran through here,” he laughed. “She with you?”

“My wife,” he nodded. “I’ll be following her as soon as I pay for parking,” Kit confided, which garnered another chuckle out of the badger.

While Jessie called her parents, Kit used the bathroom, and got to their shop before it closed. It was filled with everything a pilot might want in or for a plane, from sunglasses to clip-on map holders to little hand-held electronic maps to portable DVD players to decals to Game Boy and Playstation Portable games to magazines to puzzle books to clip-on battery powered book lights to 12 volt outlet adapters to run small devices and such. They did have portable urinals, as he knew they would. Jessie came in with him, and blushed a little when he pointed out the urinals, since the clerk in the store was a male.

Kit spent nearly two hundred dollars in that shop, but it was money well spent. They bought two hybrid male/female portable urinals that Jessie didn’t think would be *too* embarrassing to use, two power adapters for their laptops; airplanes were just like cars, they had 12 volt DC power outlets in the cockpit to run external devices. He was a bit surprised that they had power adapters for a Sabletech at first, but then he thought about it and realized that most people who could afford to fly their own planes could afford a laptop like a Sabletech. He bought a nice pocket pilot’s atlas so he’d always have a map and it wouldn’t add much weight to the plane, and even bought a copy of the FAA flight plan program to install on his laptops so he could file flight plans from his laptop.

Jessie gave him a curious look when they came out of the gift shop carrying two huge bags. “I realized we don’t have power adapters for our laptops that’ll work in the plane,” he explained.

“I never said a word, love,” she chuckled. “I’m the one that went out and bought that camera when we were poor. And they are kinda necessary.

The battery in my laptop won't last five hours." Her phone rang, and she dug her Blackberry out and answered it. "Mom, what's wrong?" she asked, and listened for a moment. "Do you want us to take a cab instead?" She giggled. "Oh, okay. Just go to the terminal building when you get here and call, we're going back to the plane. Kit has to tie the plane down, and hee bought some toys for it and we have to put them in the plane, so we may still be there when you get here. You know how boys are with their toys," she giggled. She put her Blackberry back in her purse. "They're going to be a few minutes late, there was an accident down on Wilkerson and they're waiting for the cops to let them through."

"I hope everyone's okay," he said as they walked back to the plane under the bright lights of the tarmac.

They returned to the plane to stow their purchases and get the luggage. He gave Jessie a sly smile and set the urinal down by the center console, which made her cheeks ruffle and made her laugh. "You are *so* not watching me use that!" she teased.

"Let's just say that I'm glad the plane has autopilot," Kit told her, which made her laugh helplessly.

To their surprise, Jessie's family didn't wait at the terminal when they arrived. They instead drove right up to the plane from the back side, along the car path, and got out. Jessie ran over and gave her parents a big hug, and Kit climbed down and embraced Hannah warmly. "Hello, Hannah. We're here," he chuckled.

"It's good to see you, dear," she returned. "And I'm glad you got here safely."

"Thanks for coming to pick us up. We really appreciate it."

“Well, I have to make good use of the van your sister gave us for Christmas,” she said with a light laugh.

Kit shook John and Ben’s paw in quick succession as Hannah started animatedly talking to Jessie about her pregnancy. “So, this is the plane,” John chuckled. “Care to show us the inside?”

“You’re going to fly in it tomorrow,” Kit said with a smile. “But sure. Step right there, and get up on the wing, but stay within the line you see right there. That’s the safe zone where the wing can support you,” he cautioned. John and Ben were going to just look inside, but Kit had them climb into the front seats, and Kit pointed things out from the outside, showing them the control surfaces, and letting Ben push the rudder pedals. “You won’t do anything, the plane’s turned off,” he said with a chuckle. “The plane is fly by wire, the controls don’t work with it shut down like this.”

“Ah, good, I was afraid I would accidentally deploy flaps or make the plane lurch or something,” Ben chuckled. “But it’s really cool.”

“Very, very nice. Almost like the inside of a car,” John noted.

“Just about. Now get out and help me with the luggage,” Kit said with a grin.

“Isn’t it neat?” Jessie called from the ground. “Kit’s going to teach me how to fly it!”

“She wants a pilot’s license,” Kit elaborated to her father and brother. “She’s already addicted,” he winked.

“Ya know, it’s not a bad idea,” Ben said speculatively. “If I make it in the NFL, I could afford to buy a plane, and it would be kinda nice to be able

to fly down and see the folks whenever I want.”

“How long did it take to fly here?”

“About seven hours total, if you count it from the minute we left the apartment, since the airfield where I keep the plane is thirty miles from my house. The actual time in the air was a smidgen over five hours.”

“That’s not bad at all,” John said with a nod. “When you compare it to about sixteen hours by car, and the five or so hours it would take by airliner given you can never get a nonstop flight, that’s really nice. How much is gas for planes?”

“About five a gallon right now,” Kit said as he helped John back to the ground. “Ben, can you close that side? Just pull it down, I’ll come around and lock it before we go.”

“Sure thing, Kit.”

“Anyway, I don’t really have to pay for the gas, Vil does. So all it cost us was time.”

“And two hundred dollars in the terminal shop,” Jessie added.

“Yeah, but we *need* everything I bought,” he challenged. “Or would you like to spend another hour flying back waiting to go to the bathroom?”

Jessie’s cheeks ruffled, then she laughed helplessly.

“What does that mean, Kit?” Hannah asked.

Kit climbed back up onto the wing, and as Jessie protested, he reached in and pulled out the urinal and showed it to them in the floodlights of the tarmac. John and Ben laughed, and Hannah’s fur seemed to want to stand up for a second. “We were in too much of a hurry for me to buy one when

we started out, but this little eight dollar piece of plastic is one of the most important things you can ever have in a plane when flying cross country. It prevents all kinds of unscheduled stops.”

“Not much privacy in there,” Ben noted with a chuckle.

“Well, then it’s a good thing we’re married,” Kit replied urbanely.

The Williams males helped him finish tying the plane down, then they transferred the suitcase and two carryons to the van in the brisk February night, and then they were all in the van as Hannah drove them out of the airport. “Any trouble finding this place, Hannah?”

“No, dear, I’ve been past here many times,” she said.

“Don’t let him drive your van, eh?” Kit noted.

She glanced back at him through the rearview mirror. “He has his SUV, I have my van,” she said calmly, which made both Kit and John chuckle.

“How’s the Mustang, Ben?”

“Heavenly,” Ben said from the back row. “Of course, I don’t think I’ve ever driven it faster than sixty miles an hour. All my friends accuse me of being an old femme,” he said, which made everyone laugh. “Miss Vil asked me to be careful with it, and I’ll do just that.”

“I’m glad I have at least *one* responsible child,” Hannah noted.

Jessie bristled. “Hey!”

“Jenny isn’t nearly so careful,” John said sourly. “She’s had it all of three months or so, and she already has two speeding tickets.”

“Why does that not surprise me,” Kit chuckled lightly.

“I’ve visited the apartments your sister arranged for them, Kit,” Hannah told him. “They’re *very* nice.”

“Heck, are they,” Ben said in agreement. “I went with her to check out mine. It’s *huge*! It’s got really nice furniture in it, and it has everything but a TV and a stereo as far as appliances go. It even has its own little washer and dryer, no laundramats for us,” he said happily. “It’s in a fenced compound, I have an assigned parking space inside the fence so my car is safe, and there’s a pool and a gym in the complex. It’s only a mile from campus, and it’s a straight shot. You turn right coming out of the complex and the street goes straight to the east side of campus. I can easily walk it, cause I’ve heard trying to park around campus is absolute murder.”

“Jenny bought a bicycle,” Hannah told them. “It must be cold to ride in the winter, but she uses it to get to campus when it’s not raining. “She also bought this ridiculously large TV and stereo system for her apartment,” she said disapprovingly. “It cost her nearly three thousand dollars!”

“Sounds like she’s trying to burn up all the money Vil gave her at Christmas,” Kit said with a grunt.

“At the rate she’s going, she will,” Hannah said with a little heat in her voice. “I mean, Vil bought her that DVD combo player and that very nice portable stereo and that Playstation with all those games and that portable TV, but that does not mean she has to go out and buy a three thousand dollar home theater system to use them on,” she complained. “She could have bought an entirely decent thirty two inch widescreen television for five hundred dollars, and a very nice component audio system for three hundred. That little girl needs to have me pull sharply on her reins. She’s being entirely wasteful and disrespectful of the wonderful gifts that Vil gave her.”

“Let her learn from it, Hannah,” Kit said calmly. “When she uses up all that money Vil gave her, when she calls home begging for money, snub her. Let her learn that if she can’t manage her money, then there will be times when she’s going to starve.”

Hannah nodded sharply. “I can agree with that advice, dear,” she told him.

“Well, you won’t see me doing that,” Ben said. “I haven’t used a penny of the money Vil gave me yet.”

“Well, you’ll need to buy a TV and stereo and a few other things, son,” John told him. “And you will need to eat and buy gas when you’re at school, and there are also expenses like books and such. And for that, Vil’s money will be very useful. But you don’t have to follow Jenny’s example. If you manage that money wisely, you’ll easily get all the way through the year.”

“I hear ya, Dad,” Ben nodded. “Since I’m not paying rent or utilities or car payments or insurance, if I can’t live off ten thousand dollars a year, I should be shot.”

“Well said, Ben,” Kit said with a sober nod.

The Williams house was a warm place which Kit rather liked. It hadn’t changed a bit outside of a little table that had been in the basement now standing in the place where the Christmas tree had stood when Kit was there last. Kit and Ben carried the suitcase and carryon bags up to Jessie’s old room while Hannah made some coffee and put water on for tea, and put some leftover roast beef in the microwave. “I know you must be hungry,” she told Kit when he came back down.

“A little, thank you,” he said. “Are we going to have our long talk tonight or tomorrow?”

She gave him a look, then laughed. “Well, I think we can save that for tomorrow,” she told him. “There are a great many things for us to talk about, and they aren’t joking matters.”

“I know they’re not, Hannah, and I’ll welcome your advice. This is unexplored territory for both of us. I don’t know how Jessie will take it, but I’ll take any advice you and John can give me.”

“I’m very glad you feel that way.”

“This is my wife and child we’re talking about. You better believe I’m serious about this.”

She gave him an approving pat on the arm as she took some green beans in a glass bowl out of the refrigerator. “Would you like some potato salad too?”

“Please,” he said as John wandered into the kitchen at the smell of coffee emanating from the coffee maker.

“Mmm, thanks dear,” he said as he pulled his mug out of the strainer in the sink and standing near the coffee maker, waiting. “So, you’re taking us flying tomorrow?”

Kit nodded. “I can only take three of you at a time, though. So we can do two trips.”

“I think Jessica can wait for us in the terminal, or here at home,” Hannah said sharply. “After all, she gets to ride in the plane whenever she wants.”

Kit chuckled. “Good luck convincing her,” Kit told her. “She really likes that plane.”

“You’re right I do,” Jessie giggled as she came into the kitchen. “It’s a little scary right at first, then it’s just *awesome!*” The water started to boil for tea, so Kit took down two cups while Jessie fetched the tea from the pantry.

“Well, I think you can sit out a ride, dear, so Kit doesn’t have to take two trips.”

“I don’t mind, Hannah,” Kit assured her. “Heck, I could fly to Columbus and pick up Jenny. I could take two with me on the way to get her, and two with me on the way back.”

Hannah’s eyes lit up. “Can you really do that?” she asked quickly.

“It’s about an hour to Columbus from here,” he shrugged. “I could leave tomorrow morning and get her, and take her back the next day. I could take Ben and John tomorrow to pick her up, and you and Jessie when I take her back.”

“John,” she prompted.

“I’ll call her right now,” John chuckled, pouring himself a cup of coffee and scurrying towards the living room.

“Heck, from now on, we can fly from Austin to Columbus first to pick her up, then drop her off on the way home,” Kit added.

“That’s very thoughtful of you, dear,” Hannah said with a nod. “I’m starting to understand you when you said that Kit’s plane could be very useful, Jessica,” she added to her daughter.

“Yeah, it’s really awesome. It just opens up so many possibilities,” Jessie agreed.

“I’ll need to get back to the airport early tomorrow,” he said. “The earlier I go get Jenny, the more time we have together.”

John came back into the kitchen, holding the phone to his face. “Kit, which airport does Jenny go to?”

“I won’t know until tomorrow, when I get to the airport and look up Columbus,” he answered. “We can call Jenny after we know so she can meet us there.”

John relayed that, then asked another question. “She wants to know if she can park her car at the airport overnight.”

“Sure. She might have to pay for it, but I’ve never heard of an airport or airfield that didn’t have extended parking.”

John relayed that, then hung up after a minute, and after telling Jenny to go buy a road atlas of Columbus, so she could find the airport. “She sounded excited at the idea of it,” John said. “And Kit, thank you very much for this. You certainly don’t have to go so far out of your way for our benefit.”

“John, you’re *family*,” he said simply. “I’ll be happy to do this for you. Heck, I like Jenny, I won’t mind at all,” he chuckled.

Hannah’s cooking was as good as he remembered. The whole family sat at the table with Kit and Jessie as they ate the offered leftovers, chatting over little things. Jessie did tell Hannah about Kit’s article and Allison, so Kit pulled out the magazine so they could read the article. To Kit’s delight, Jessie made sure to refer to her as *Foxy* to maintain Allison’s anonymity.

“She doesn’t work in that place anymore,” Jessie said. “Well, not after tonight, that is. She’s supposed to call me when she’s done, so I know she’s alright.”

“You associate with this *femme*, Jessica?” Hannah said, a bit coldly.

“God knows she needs *someone* to be her friend, mom,” Jessie replied. “She may not be an angel, but she’s a nice girl, and I’m worried about her.”

“I don’t see how a tramp can be nice,” Hannah said frostily.

“She’s not a tramp, Hannah, she’s a realist,” Kit said simply. “She saw that the only real way she could get her degree was to do work she found repugnant. She made a very logical decision and swallowed her repulsion to do it. That’s the story of quite a few prostitutes, you know. I’ve never known a prostitute that *liked* doing it. They did it because they had to. Foxy may have had other choices, but none of them would have let her do what she wanted. So she made a *practical* decision.”

“And just how many prostitutes do you know, Kit?” Hannah challenged.

“Quite a few,” he said honestly. “I met a bunch of them in homeless shelters as I was working my way towards Austin. I have a bunch of stories they told me in my journals about what it’s like, people they’ve met, so on and so on. But none of them had a story anywhere near as interesting and unique as Foxy’s.”

“Well, I don’t approve,” Hannah announced.

“I’m sure she doesn’t entirely approve of her old life either, Hannah, else she’d have kept doing it after she graduated from college, or just dropped out of college to focus only on that. But she did it. She did it

because she couldn't see any other way to achieve her goal. You can hate what she did, but you can also respect her determination to achieve her goal."

"Not at that price, I won't," Hannah said bluntly, crossing her arms beneath her breasts and putting on an affronted expression.

"Just read the article, Mom, then you'll understand what Kit's saying," Jessie urged.

"Well, I'll read it," she said. "But I doubt that it will change my mind."

"I think I'd like to meet her," Ben mused.

"You will *not*!" Hannah snapped. "It's bad enough that Kit's cousin is chasing after you! I won't have another tramp trying to grab your tail, Ben!"

"Still?"

"She calls me at least twice a week," Ben said dismissively. "She wants to fly me down to Mexico during spring break, but Mom won't let me go."

"She's not the only one," John said mildly.

"Well, at least she's not giving up," Kit chuckled. "The new Sheila is quite a bit more tenacious than the old one."

"We didn't tell you, she's staying in Austin for good," Jessie added. "She's going to get a degree in cooking at U.T. and open a restaurant after she graduates. So she's down with us to stay."

"She left Harvard for U.T.?" John asked in surprise.

“Not entirely,” Kit said, a bit delicately. “She’s going to do her business degree requirements at Harvard by correspondence and internet classes while she takes culinary arts classes at U.T. Her plan is to get two Bachelor’s, one at each school. Her plan is actually pretty good,” he said approvingly. “She really put a lot of thought into it.”

“I don’t mind, I really like Sheila,” Jessie said. “She’s wild, but she’s also very sweet and thoughtful. She’s been a good friend.”

“Hmph,” Hannah sniffed.

Jessie’s old bed still didn’t agree with him, so he was quite stiff when he woke up at six to go to the bathroom, and decided to just stay up since he’d need to get up in about a half an hour anyway. Hannah was still asleep--the first time he’d ever woke up before her--so he invaded her kitchen and started cooking breakfast, using Hannah’s well stocked refrigerator and pantry to start quiche. He had all the vegetables cut and the bacon and sausage cooked by the time Hannah appeared, wearing a full length terrycloth bathrobe, hurrying down to find out what was going on in her kitchen. “Morning,” he said pleasantly as he swept a cutting board of onions into a bowl. “Want to help?”

“I’ve told you about this kitchen, young male,” she told him, her face stern.

“You’ve cooked for me so many times, Hannah, let me do something for you, at least once,” he smiled.

“What are you making?”

“Quiche,” he answered. “I have everything cut up and the meats cooked, now I just need to mix up the egg filler, sautee the veggies, and pop it into the oven.”

“Well, let’s see how you’re doing this,” she said professionally.

Hannah quickly took over his attempt to cook, relegating him to a purely helping position, but she *did* follow his recipe instead of trying to finish it using her own. Between the two of them they had the quiche in the oven and merrily baking in short order. Hannah went on to make coffee while Kit reheated the teapot, for he knew Jessie wouldn’t be asleep much longer. Kit cut grapefruits into halves to go with the quiche as Ben and Jessie appeared at the same time, Ben in a pair of shorts and a tank top and Jessie in a long nightshirt and pajama bottoms, which she only put on to come downstairs. Jessie slept nude, even here at her parents’ house. “That smells great, what is it?” Ben asked.

“Quiche,” Kit answered as he poured water into a cup for Jessie’s tea.

“It’s Kit and Jessica’s recipe,” Hannah said, almost disapprovingly.

“Well, it smells good,” Ben said. “When are we leaving, Kit?”

“After we eat, so go wake up John if you don’t mind.”

“He’s already up. He should be down in a second.”

They all dressed while the quiche was baking, and then Hannah got a little offended when John and Ben complemented her on such a good breakfast. But, after they were done, Kit herded Ben and John into Hannah’s van, and John took them back to the airport. “This is gonna be *soooo* cool,” Ben said expectantly as they pulled into the airport.

“Where do I park, Kit?”

“You can park behind my plane, same as last night. That parking space comes with the airplane spot, so you don’t have to pay anything.”

“Okay.”

It was rather chilly as they piled out of the van and walked over to the terminal. John chatted excitedly with the terminal clerk while Kit used their computer to look into the flight. Columbus wasn’t far, only about 120 miles, or about 100 nautical miles, so there was no earthly reason to go over 18,000 feet and require a flight plan. He’d fly on VFR. They could be there in 35 minutes...and that was with him piddling along. He could be there in 20 minutes if he opened the throttle to max and hauled ass over there in an arc that let him gun it through thinner air.

“So, how does this work, anyway?” Ben asked.

Kit chuckled, and gave Ben a brief explanation of the computer. “I’d use it to file a flight plan if I was going to fly over eighteen thousand feet, but I’m not going to do that. Columbus is only 95 nautical miles out, that’s like a hop, skip, and a jump from here. There’s no reason to go over eighteen thousand for such a short trip. Besides, you’ll get to see more if I fly low. John!” he called.

John scurried over. “Yes?”

“Call Jenny, I know where I’m landing,” he said, clicking up a map of Columbus on the computer and pointing. “Here. Bolton Field Airport. It’s not that far from Ohio State’s campus, and I won’t have to go through all the procedural crap I would if I landed at the international airport. Hold on, they link to Mapquest, we can get driving directions for her.”

John called his daughter, and then read off the instructions to her when Kit brought them up on the monitor. “How long til we get there?” he asked.

“Tell her it’ll be about an hour,” he answered. “I have to gas up the plane before we leave. Oh, and tell her that the terminal employee can tell her when we land, so she can wait in the terminal and we’ll come get her there.”

They went back to the plane, and after Kit unlocked it, Ben and John had a bit of a row over who got to sit up front as they removed the tie downs. Kit listened to them jostle for position, then chuckled and broke it up. “You can switch in Columbus. Jenny can ride up front when I take her home, and Hannah can ride up front on the way back. Jessie can stay in the back seat, she gets to fly home,” he told them.

They both laughed. “I’ll flip you for it,” Ben offered. “I sure as heck don’t want to be back there when Jenny’s in the plane.”

They did indeed flip for it, and Ben won the toss. That put John up front on the flight over. They loaded themselves into the plane, and Kit turned on the electric heater for them so the plane could warm up as he stayed out in the cold and did the preflight walk around inspection. After that was complete, he climbed into the plane and performed the preflight checklist, which included starting the engine. “So, we’re on the way?” Ben asked as Kit released the parking brake.

“Not quite yet. I told you, I need gas first, and that means we head to the pump,” he answered. “This isn’t an airliner, Ben, us private pilots pump our own gas in airports where they don’t offer a truck fueller or I get it at a service hangar, and I’m not. I’d rather just get it myself. I don’t want to wait

around for the fueler or attendant, not since they have a self-serve station right over there.”

“I didn’t know that,” he mused.

Kit followed the signs to the fueling station, and had to wait as a little Piper gassed up. After it was done, the pilot waved to him before he climbed into his little two-seater, then Kit replaced him at the fueling pump. “So, how do you pay for it?” John asked curiously. “I don’t see an attendant.”

“It’s a credit card pump, John, just like at a regular gas station,” Kit said, pulling out his wallet and removing his Transport card. “But it’s a lot more expensive.”

“How much will it cost?”

“Well, I’m about to put about sixty gallons in this thing, and it’s, um, four sixty a gallon,” he said, looking at the pump before he opened his gullwing door.

“Ouch!” Ben said. “That’s like three hundred bucks!”

“About that,” Kit agreed. “Flying isn’t a cheap hobby, Ben,” Kit chuckled as he climbed out.

“Actually, if you compare it to driving, it’s really not that much more expensive,” John said after a second’s contemplation.

He gassed up the plane in the cold morning, as the sun peeked through some wispy clouds near the horizon. It takes a little bit of time to pump seventy gallons of fuel, so Ben and John had to wait inside for a bit. Kit finished up and took his receipt, closed the fuel tank cap and door, then

climbed back into the plane. “Now we’re ready to go,” he told them as he restarted the engine, then disengaged the parking brake. “We’ll be in the air about half an hour or so, guys, so if you need anything, say so now.”

“I think we’ll be alright,” John said, reaching down and picking up the urinal. “After all, we have this,” he chuckled.

Kit had them in the air about ten minutes after fueling up. Both of his passengers were reverently silent as they took off, Ben gazing down at the ground as John looked out the front windscreen, wincing against the sun. “I should have brought sunglasses,” he complained.

“Jessie left hers in her nook,” Kit said. “They may make you look a bit silly, but it’s better than your eyes watering for the rest of the flight.”

“Where is that?”

“Reach down the side of the center console, there’s a little nook down there,” he prompted.

He reached down and produced Jessie’s sunglasses, then put them on and sighed in relief. “Much better,” he noted. “Okay, explain this dashboard while we’re flying.”

Kit chuckled, and spent much of the flight explaining the flight instruments and how he navigated using the Garmin and GPS. He explained the MFD, which showed them where they were, showed them the locations of other planes on the map which were his responsibility to avoid, and pointed to Bolton Field in the top right corner of the MFD map. “We’ll be there in about five minutes. I guess you could call Jenny and tell her we’re almost there.”

“You can use cell phones in planes?”

“Sure, it won’t mess with my avionics, and we’re low enough for you to get a signal,” Kit assured him.

“How high up are we?” Ben asked.

“Four thousand and thirty seven feet,” he said, pointing at his altimeter. “Let me radio Bolton Field and get landing instructions, they have a tower there.”

“You make it sound like not all of them do.”

“Nope,” he said. “Most airfields don’t have towers. That’s one of the main differences between an air *field* and an air *port*. Some airfields have control towers, most don’t, it depends on how much traffic the airfield has. But all airports have a tower, no matter how large or small they are.”

“Wow, there’s a lot more to this than I thought,” Ben said musingly.

“You should see the written test you have to take to get your license,” Kit chuckled. “And that’s just the beginning. If you want to get rated for flying only by instruments, you have to know a heck of a lot more. And you have to know a heck of a lot more than that if you want a commercial pilot’s license. And it only gets worse as you go up. The test for an air transport license, the airline pilot’s license, is an absolute *beast*.”

“What kind of license do you have, Kit?” John asked curiously.

“A commercial license,” he answered. “I got it because if you apply to military flight school and you already have a commercial license or better, they give your application much more weight. So, I went to a flight school that did commercial pilot training, called a one forty-one school. If you ever want a license, Ben, I *highly* recommend you do a one forty-one. The requirements to get a commercial license are much less stringent if you do it

in a one forty-one program, since you're being specifically trained for it. If you get a standard license first and then try to upgrade, it's a headache."

"I'll remember that," Ben said, "cause I guess I'm like Jessie. Seeing this plane and how you just flew up here for the weekend, it seems awfully convenient."

"It is at that," Kit chuckled. "Now excuse me while I do the pilot thing and radio in."

He set the radio so they heard it on their headsets as well so they could hear the tower, and they listened in interest as Kit got landing instructions. Kit landed behind a Citation jet, which was taxiing back towards them on the ramp as they landed, heading for a small hangar near the terminal. Kit was directed to a short-term parking area near the terminal, for he told the ground controller he was just staying long enough to pick up a passenger, and John called Jenny and told them that they were on the ground. "She's in the terminal waiting, and she says she's already got a parking place."

"I told you they'd have them. It probably cost her about ten bucks."

John told Jenny that, then he laughed. "She said you're way off, it cost her twenty."

"Then this airport's a ripoff," Kit noted. "God help me if I wanted to park my plane overnight, if they charge that much just for a car."

Kit parked, and they didn't have to go in after her. She must have been waiting at the doors, watching planes, for she ran out carrying a small carryon as soon as Kit and John appeared behind the opened doors. John climbed down and hugged her when she reached them, and she came around and gave Kit a crushing hug. "Hey, you! This is gonna *rock*!" she

said happily. “I’ve never been picked up in a private plane before! Oh, and congratulations!”

“Thanks. I hope you like it,” he said as Ben climbed over the center console and got into the copilot’s seat. “Now let’s get you in, you’re in the back.”

“Aww! I wanna sit up front!”

“We already drew up a schedule,” John told her with a chuckle as he went around the plane.

“You get to sit up front on the way back to Columbus tomorrow,” he promised her.

“Oh, okay! I can live with that,” she said. “Where do I put my bag?”

“There’s a compartment behind the back seat, or I can put it in the trunk. Your call.”

“I’ll keep it, I wanna take some pictures!”

“I should have thought of that!” John said, slapping his forehead as he climbed up onto the wing, preparing to get back in the plane.

“No sweat, Dad, I’ll sell you a few of mine,” Jenny winked as Kit helped her up.

Jenny was almost annoying excited as everyone got in, Jenny took off her coat in the warm cockpit, and everyone buckled up. Kit got in line to take off as he tried to cope with about a thousand questions spewing out of Jenny’s mouth, thrown out at blazing speed as she snapped pictures of everything; the cockpit, her father beside her, the tarmac, the taxiway, everything. She gave an excited yell as Kit, who was idling at the end of the

runway waiting for clearance, throttled up. She screamed and laughed when the plane lifted off, then took pictures out her window at the ground below as Kit did a slow banking turn to point them back to Cincinnati, which dipped the wing on his and Jenny's side of the plane. "Are we going up really high? Can I still see everything? How long will it take to get there? What happens if the engine quits?" she rattled at high speed.

"I'm getting a muzzle for you when we fly back," Kit told her, which made her laugh.

"Can we fly over the campus? I'd love a picture of it from above."

"Afraid I can't, the campus is back there," he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder, towards her. "And I'm not turning around. Besides, it's restricted airspace, I'd have to be so high over it that your picture wouldn't really show anything."

"Oh, I didn't know that."

"There's a ceiling over most big cities we can't go under except when we're in set flight lanes," Kit told her. "Not since nine-eleven. If their radar caught me flying too low over a city, they might think I was going to try to crash into a building or something, and I'd get in big trouble. They have me on radar and the transponder in the plane tells them exactly who I am, so they'd bust me when I landed."

"How high is it?"

"Depends on the city, but most of them are two thousand feet, which is too high to get the kind of picture you want," he answered. "Some really big cities don't allow private planes over them at all, like Washington D.C., but

other big cities will let private planes fly over, as long as we stay high enough.”

“Cool,” Jenny said energetically, accidentally kicking the back of his seat. “Can you do a loop the loop?” she asked with a giggle.

“I’m not sure everything’s stowed for a move like that, I don’t feel like getting whacked in the head by your carryon. But, if you just want a ride, well,” he said, looking to make sure everyone still had their seat belt on, then he jacked the stick hard to the left. The plane rolled, rolled hard, well past vertical, turning the plane upside down. Ben grabbed the dash and John cried out in alarm, but Jenny was laughing. He ran inverted for nearly ten seconds, then turned the plane back over, which caused John to give a startled cry, but made Jenny give an excited whoop.

“Yes, this plane can do a loop, by the way,” he said lightly. “It’s rated for 4 Gs, that lets it do a few stunts. But I’m also not going to give myself a concussion or plow my plane into the deck just to amuse you, Jenny.”

“Warn an old male next time!” John complained, which made everyone else explode into laughter.

They got back to Columbus at a fairly decent clip, and landed and taxied back to the same parking space. Jenny was too excited to sit still as they drove back, and then ran into the house. “Such a spazz,” Ben sighed as they got out behind her, which made Kit laugh.

With Jenny there, it was like a little family reunion. Jenny gushed over Jessie’s pregnancy for several minutes, then settled down some. Kit and Jessie showed them pictures of their honeymoon, and Jenny showed them pictures of her apartment, proudly pointing out her “awesome TV and theater.” John and Hannah took her to task for wasting so much money, and

Hannah threatened her quite effectively by making it clear that between the debit card Vil got her and the campus card she got from her parents for Christmas, she *would not* receive any more money from them. She had to survive on her own on the money she had. That made Jenny quite flabbergasted at first, then she turned sulky, despite the fact that she said she still had nearly six thousand dollars to last her until next September. “Vil said we could enjoy her gift!” she protested.

“Enjoying it is fine, but you are *wasting* it. You could have bought a much cheaper TV and stereo and still had quite good ones, but instead you go out and buy something entirely too expensive,” Hannah told her frostily. “Are you determined to show your sister-in-law how much like *her* family you can be?”

That brought Jenny up short. She turned to Kit for support, but was snubbed just as flatly as Hannah had. “Don’t look at me, I think you’re being a touch ridiculous,” Kit told her. “Your mother is totally right. Enjoying money doesn’t mean going nuts with it.”

“So says the guy with his own plane,” she pouted, then she stalked off.

“She’ll get over it,” Jessie giggled. “She always does.”

Ben went to work out, and Jenny went to see some old high school friends to give them a little space, and Kit and Jessie sat down with John and Hannah and had that serious talk, that lasted over three hours. They were very frank, explaining that they were very worried about the pregnancy because the two of them were young, Jessie was still in school, and Hannah was still not convinced that their marriage would last. Kit and Jessie had to talk quite a while, assuring them over and over that they were okay, their marriage was still strong, and they were taking the pregnancy very

seriously. Jessie told them about her visit to the obstetrician, and how Kit was both making her do everything the obstetrician said, and also making her go to school. Both of them stressed heavily that Jessie's education was still a priority, and while she would lose a semester when she delivered and their baby was newborn, she *would* finish her degree. After she got her Bachelor's, then Jessie's future was much more ambiguous. John spoke of seeing her go on to get her Master's to teach, or even get her Doctorate and be a professor like him, while Hannah favored her settling down to be a housewife, devoting herself to her baby as Hannah had done with her own children...but still absolutely adamant that Jessie get her Bachelor's, so she would always have it and the doors that it would open for her if she ever had to work. "The baby's just a delay, not a derail," she said for the tenth time. "Not that I'm not overjoyed to be pregnant," she said with a giggle, "but I do still want to teach. I can do both, I know I can. Femmes do it all the time!"

"I'm torn about that idea," Hannah said honestly. "I would like to see you devote yourself to the baby, but I know that's just impossible nowadays. But, I've seen you work so hard and come so far, to see you abandon it now, so close to earning your degree," she said, then trailed off and sighed.

"Don't ever think I'd never think my child doesn't come first, Mom," Jessie said, with a little heat. "But I can be a good mommy *and* still go to school, and then to work. We've already discussed how we're going to handle it. Kit can take care of the baby when I'm at class, because I'm going to arrange to take afternoon and night classes after I deliver. We may not see much of each other for a semester, but I'll graduate by then. I'm

going to take some time off after I graduate to care for the baby, then start my Master's program."

"I'm already supporting both of us, so I'm not too worried about money," Kit continued. "Jessie can still work on *School Daze* for money, that's not very hard, and that's at-home work. But, it's her decision about all of that," he told them. "If she wants to work, I'll support her. But if she wants to be an at-home mother, then I'll support her. My only position in this is to make sure Jessie gets to do what she wants. That's what being her husband is all about," he said, putting his paw on Jessie's arm. "Making her happy."

"Aww, you're so sweet, my handsome fox," she smiled in reply.

"Well, you did think about it," John noted approvingly. "Thoroughly."

"But there's a lot more we haven't considered, mainly because we haven't thought about it," Kit said. "And that's where we need you. I expect to be burning up the phone lines between here and Austin over the next seven months."

Hannah sat up a little straighter, unconsciously assuming the matronly role. "As well you should," she told them. "We've been through three pregnancies, dear, we've experienced most of it. And you should also talk to Rick and Martha. They're also quite experienced, and they can help you with the little problems that takes being there to best address them."

"Oh, we will, that's a promise," Jessie said with a nod. "Martha thinks I'm her long lost daughter, she won't let me get away with not letting her be involved with my pregnancy," she laughed.

“She hosted you and helped you put on your wedding dress, Jessica, and you two have been very close to her and Rick for as long as Kit has worked at the magazine. Of course she sees you as all but her own daughter. Martha will make sure I know what’s going on, even those things you’ll either forget to tell me or refuse to,” she said flintily.

“I knew there was a downside to having in-laws,” Kit said morosely, and he laughed as she ducked out of range of Hannah’s paw.

“The big question is, Kit, can you afford to support *three*?” John asked. “A baby is a very expensive addition, if a welcome one. Jessica might have to work. And then there’s the expense of raising the child, and then there’s college. You really need to think this through, and come up with some kind of plan, because I haven’t heard either of you mention that yet.”

Kit and Jessie looked at each other, then Kit shook his head. “We have nothing to worry about, John,” he said.

“Not anymore,” Jessie agreed. “Our baby’s future is set.”

Kit told them about the bonds. “I’d never take a damn penny from my family, but the bonds are different. My *mother* bought them for me, and Vil was smart to tell me that when she sent them. I’d never turn down something from my mother, because she *loved* me,” he said simply. “I’d insult her memory if I threw them back in Vil’s face. So, I took the bonds, cashed them, and invested them. We have ten thousand dollars in the bank for emergencies, and the rest of it is invested so our children can go to any school they want when they graduate.”

“That money belongs to our children, not to us,” Jessie added.

John and Hannah looked quite surprised, and were silent for a long time. Finally, John leaned forward on the table. “A hundred thousand, you say?” he asked.

“More or less. The invested portion is closer to eighty-five thousand, but that’ll mature nicely in the investment portfolio that me and Vil hammered out. Our children will want for nothing, and the interest off the investments will more than support us as a second salary in case Jessie wants to be a stay-at-home mom. She doesn’t *have* to work. We have the investments for the future, the ten thousand put back in case of a disaster, and now we just sit back and let the money do the work for us.”

Hannah looked...strange. He wasn’t sure if she was happy or angry or what. “And how is this money arranged, Kit? In your name?”

Jessie almost knocked the chair over as she jumped to her feet. “*Mother!*” she gasped, utterly outraged.

“It has to be asked, Jessica,” Hannah said, a bit sternly. “If your marriage fails, then what happens to this money?”

Kit gave her a hard look. “If you want me to sign a contract right here and now that sends every *dime* of that money to Jessie if we divorce, then go type it up,” he told her with an intense stare. “But don’t *ever* assume that I’d leave my child hungry and abandoned.”

John put his paw on Hannah’s forearm. “I think that’s about enough discussion, before you say something that causes your daughter to punch you in the mouth,” he said mildly.

“I can’t believe you, Mom! Hasn’t he proved himself to you by now? Has he ever lied to you? Doesn’t he bend over backwards for you? Has he

ever given you any reason to doubt him?”

“No, he hasn’t. But I had to ask, Jessica, for the sake of your child if nothing else. I had to be sure.” She looked at Kit and nodded. “And now I’m sure that he will be a responsible male should your marriage fail and take care of Jessica and your baby. I believe you, Kit, that you’d sign all the money over to Jessica.”

“Thank you for that much, Hannah,” he said, not very cordially.

“Alright, let’s all go calm down before we have a war here,” John said in a commanding tone. “Jessica, Kit, don’t be too angry.”

“I’ll get over it,” Kit said. “I’m sure Hannah didn’t mean it the way it sounded.”

“No, no, I didn’t mean to offend, Kit,” she said, just a little placatingly. “But I did have to ask, and we did deserve an answer.”

“I’ll admit that you did,” he nodded.

Kit took Jessie down to the basement while Hannah cooked and calmed her down. Hannah had been quite tactless, but Kit wouldn’t begrudge her her right to know the answer to that question. She just should have been a little more diplomatic about bringing it up. Kit soothed Jessie for over an hour, after Jenny and Ben both came back and wisely stayed upstairs, until he had to resort to her own tactic; laying her down on the couch with her head in his lap. One paw tousled and played with her hair, while the other kneaded through her silky longhaired tail, and he kept her contained until she calmed down. She surrendered to him, let him pay special attention to her, and nearly dozed off by the time John came down

the stairs. "Dinner will be ready in a minute," he said. "Are you coming up?"

"We'll be up in a minute, Dad," Jessie said, sitting up.

"I'm sorry that happened, sweetie," John told her sincerely. "Your mother just said it wrong, that's all."

"It's...it's alright, dad," she said with a sigh. "I can believe that she didn't mean to sound that shrewish. Maybe four months ago I'd have believed it, but not now."

"Alright, we'll set places for you," he said, then went back upstairs.

"I'm sorry, Kit," Jessie said, snuggling up to him and putting her muzzle under his chin. "I'm sorry she said that to you."

"It's alright, love," he told her. "She took a question she *was* entitled to ask, and just had it come out wrong. I don't blame her."

"I thought you were going to come over the table at her," Jessie said.

"Only to get between you and her," Kit told her, which made her giggle. He caressed her shoulders and back, which made her start to purr. "Now, ready to go up and be nice to your mother?"

"I guess so," she told him.

"Come on, I'm hungry. And I'd much be up there eating than down here with *you*."

"Why you little jerk!" she barked sharply, and he laughed when she bulled him down to the couch and started tickling him. "More concerned about your stomach than your wife? Just wait til I get you home!" she shouted as he laughed helplessly, squirming under her. "I'm making you a

meal from *that* spice rack! Then you won't have to worry about being hungry anymore!"

"P—P—Pizza," he wheezed, which made Jessie laugh and collapse on top of him.

"I love you, Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan," she told him, then gave him a lingering kiss.

"And I love you, Jessica Desdemona Vulpan," he returned with a loving smile, patting her on her waist. "Now let's go get some dinner. You have to keep our baby healthy and developing."

"I just hope the morning sickness bug passes me by," she laughed as she got off of him.

"Keep dreaming," Kit noted as they went upstairs.

Since there was no football, there was little for John to do on Sunday. Since Ben was training for Ohio State, though, he had started going out with his son on Sundays to help him practice, since he knew how to throw a football, and despite his small and wiry frame, he could put some surprising air under a pigskin.

While John and Ben were out in the cold, Jessie and Hannah, who were speaking again after a rather contrite dinner, had a long and indepth talk about what Jessie could expect as the weeks went by and her pregnancy progressed. Kit didn't listen too much to that, since he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to know what kind of physical changes Jessie could expect, so he and Jenny spent the early morning and afternoon down the basement playing X-Box, in what Jenny cheekily called the "no pregnancy talk zone."

She'd calmed down a lot since the flight, and was back to the normal Jenny he remembered, all smiles and energy and a wicked paw at Halo 3. Jenny would make some guy out there either the happiest male in the world or unbelievably jealous, since Jenny was a total sports nut and was a hardcore gamer femme, the mythical "femme who likes video games and sports." She wasn't the only one, though; Vil had been known to pick up a game controller from time to time, and she was no slouch herself.

Not many Fortune 500 CEOs had an X-Box 360 in their offices and Civilization IV installed on their work computers. Vil loved simulator games like that, where her amazing analytical mind and attention to detail could shine.

About two, though, after an indulgent early dinner of beef shishkebabs, it was time to take Jenny back to Columbus, since she had some homework to do. It was Jessie and Hannah's turn to go, so, Kit found himself in a van with three femmes, who all talked about "femme things" all the way to the airplane. But Hannah and Jessie got quiet, sharing the back seat, while Jenny asked a zillion questions and had to resist the urge to press buttons up front as Kit taxied out of the parking space after his preflight inspection and checklist. "Don't we need gas?" Jenny asked as they pulled out onto the main taxiway leading to the runway, getting in behind a Citation and with a Cirrus pulling up behind them.

"I filled up when we came to get you," he said, pointing to the monitor. "I still have plenty of fuel, enough to fly to Columbus and back twice with plenty to spare."

"Oh. I guess you'd pay attention to that," she giggled.

“Checking your fuel status appears three times on the preflight checklist,” he said calmly as he pulled up to take the place of the Citation that pulled out onto the runway, preparing to take off. “So you can’t possibly miss it unless you’re stupid. Now excuse me as I get us airborne,” he said as the control tower called him, and he bent his attention to the task at paw.

They were airborne and heading northeast, and Jenny went right on asking him a thousand questions. He answered them as best he could, then when she asked how hard it was to fly, he chuckled and looked at her. “Want to try?”

“Would I!” she said with a squeal, almost reflexively reaching for the control stick. “Um, can I grab it?”

“Kit, this is not a good idea!” Hannah said with sudden concern from the back seat, leaning forward.

“Trust me, Hannah, I won’t let her crash us. My sister would kill me,” he said, which made Jessie laugh. “Alright, now, grab hold of the stick. Don’t bother putting your feet on the pedals, you won’t need them.”

“Okay,” she said, taking hold of the stick in her right paw, since it was on the right on her side of the cockpit. “Now what?”

“Now hold it steady and in the center, centering a stick makes the plane go in the same direction,” he instructed. “It’s spring loaded, so just let it go back to its rest position.”

“Okay, it’s there,” she told him, relaxing her grip on the control.

Kit toggled a switch on the center console to enable the controls on both sides of the cockpit and let go of the stick. “There, you’re flying,” he

told her with a smile.

“I am? I am! I’m flying the plane!” she said with a laugh. Her laugh caused her paw to shift on the stick, and that shift caused the plane to shift a little, rolling just slightly to the right. Hannah gave a sudden cry of alarm, but Kit didn’t shout at her. “No problem, see this white line right here on the dash? Make it level by pushing the stick just a little to the left, then center it when you get there. Just nice and slow,” he told her.

She did as he ordered, slowly leveling the plane, and she did a fairly good job of it to boot.

He let her fly for nearly five minutes, pointing out the other planes on the MFD. “Each blip is a plane,” he explained, “and these letters pointing to it tells me who it is. It tells me if it’s a private plane like mine, or an commercial airliner, or military.”

“This plane has radar?” Jenny asked.

“No, that’s too expensive and heavy. It gets all this information from transponders and a radio,” he told her. “Transponders are little radios that broadcast a unique ID signal that identifies us. Each plane’s transponder radios to a beacon, which includes who we are and where we are. Our GPS location, altitude, speed, and direction are all part of the information the transponder sends, which the transponder takes off the flight instruments in the plane. The beacons all combine the information with a common computer, and then the computer sends data back to the beacon. Then the beacon sends out what you see to all the planes so we can see each other without needing radar for each plane. It’s not radar, but it’s just as good.”

“Ah, that’s pretty smart,” she said approvingly.

“The skies got much safer when the FAA mandated the upgrade to Mode S Transponders, which are what allows what you see on that monitor,” he told her. “Now let me take back over, we’re getting close to Columbus.”

Kit did get Jenny one thing, and that was a flyover of Ohio State. He had to stay above two thousand feet and stay inside a narrow corridor arranged by a controller since he was close to an approach path to the international airport, but Jenny had a good zoom on her camera. She got a few good pictures of the campus and the stadium, and then they turned around and landed at Bolton Field. He again parked in a temporary parking zone near the terminal, then killed the engine. They all got out of the plane, and then they hugged Jenny by turns. “You be good, sis-in-law, or at least good in comparison to how you usually act,” Kit teased when it was his turn.

She laughed. “I’ll *try*,” she grinned. “Thanks for letting me—uh, for doing that for me,” she said, looking around.

Kit laughed. “It’s our little secret,” he whispered in her ear, then kissed her on the cheek.

“Woo, baby,” she said with a grin, throwing her arms around his shoulders and slashing her tail behind her aggressively. “Soon I’ll be having an affair with you! You *do* have the sisters fantasy, right?”

“Jennifer Ophilia Williams!” Hannah barked, which made both Jenny and Jessie laugh.

“Be good, sissy,” Jessie told her, giving her a hug.

“I’ll never be that boring, sissy,” she winked. She waved to them and shouldered her bag, then hurried towards her Mustang, which was visible in a parking lot beside the terminal.

“Someday that girl will grow up,” Hannah complained.

“I don’t know, Hannah, sometimes when you act young, you feel young,” he chuckled. “Now let’s get out of this cold and back into that warm cockpit.”

“I still can’t believe you let her handle the controls,” Hannah said, a bit accusingly.

“Well, I’m going to let *you* fly too,” he grinned as they turned back to the plane. “If I can trust Jenny not to crash us, I’m positive you won’t.”

Hannah’s cheeks seemed to ruffle slightly. “Well, I might give it a try,” she said speculatively.

Hannah wasn’t that bad at it, actually. He let her fly in a straight line for a while, but when it came time to make a course correction, he let her do it, walking her through the process of stick, rudder, and throttle involved in making a turn. She really didn’t have to use anything but the stick and rudder pedals—the stick itself actually—but she did well. Kit let her control the plane for about ten minutes, but took over when it was time to get serious about it, when he started descending and circling Cincinnati to get in the proper landing lane for Heather, which was using its southwest approach for landing today.

“Well, that was quite interesting,” Hannah said in her manner as they slowed to a stop in the parking place, and Kit turned the plane around to

face the tarmac. “It was much different looking out the *front* window rather than a side window.”

“Yeah, gives you an entirely different perspective,” Kit agreed as he killed the engine. “Alright, we’re done, let’s go back to the house.”

It was a very enjoyable afternoon. Hannah was still just a little contrite about her faux pas the night before, so it made her very accommodating. She made them a big dinner, and then they all sat around the Bengal Den and watched movies while they talked. Jessie talked about the baby, Ben talked about his excitement at the idea of going to play for his favorite college team, and John talked about the cruise that he and Hannah were taking next month through the Bahamas. Vil had very thoughtfully set the cruise date so one of the two weeks fell on Cincinnati’s spring break, so John had to arrange replacement teachers to cover his classes for the other week he’d be gone. The university wasn’t entirely happy about his extended vacation, but he had been there for nearly twelve years without missing a single day of work and he had tenure. The fact that he was the head of the English Department made him just a *little* hard to replace, so they wisely gave him his week off.

Kit did talk a little bit about his work, telling them about their election coverage, which surprised Hannah. “Why would a student magazine cover something like that?”

“Because Rick wants to bring *substantial* information too, Hannah, not just where the cool bars are. He believes in providing everything a student might want to know, and some students are interested in politics. Besides, perhaps the election series will make us youngsters get interested in politics,” Kit added. “I’ve been registered to vote since I was eighteen, but

this will be the first year I actually *do it*. Covering politics made me interested enough in the process to want to take part in it.”

“Well, then I’d say it’s a good thing,” John said with a nod. “Young furs need to be involved. If they don’t use their voice, they let all the old fogeys make their decisions for them,” he chuckled. “So, who are you voting for?”

“I’m something of an independent who’d like to see some real change in Washington, so I’m supporting Ron Paul,” Kit grinned. “My sister and most of my family are hardcore Republicans, but that should be no surprise, since she’s rich. She’s all for Mitt Romney.”

“I’ve never thought to ask her about politics,” John chuckled.

“Don’t tell me you’re one of those nutzoid liberal college crackpot professors,” Kit teased.

“Nutzoid crackpot, no, liberal professor, yes,” he smiled.

“And he’s entirely wrong, of course,” Hannah said simply. “This is a true mixed marriage, Kit. He’s a liberal Democrat, I’m a moderate Republican.”

“That must make for some fireworks come election time,” Kit noted.

“On the contrary, our debates are quite calm. I tell him how much he’s wrong, and he keeps refusing to listen,” Hannah said loftily, which made Kit laugh. Hannah had a very subtle sense of humor.

“Well, I’m going to register to vote when I get home,” Jessie said. “I’m going to register as an independent, since I’m not really swayed by either party.”

“Thought about the election, Jessica?”

She made a noncommittal sound. “I’m still listening to all the candidates. I haven’t really made up my mind yet.”

“Always good to keep an open mind,” John nodded.

“Did you read the article about Foxy, Mom?” Jessie asked.

“I did,” she answered. “And I have to admit, Kit, you did make her sound like something *more* than a tramp. I still say she’s a tramp, but she has much more of a story than I believed at first.” The phone rang, and John reached over to pick it up. “But I still can’t agree with her decision. She seemed a smart femme, she could have found *some* other way to get her education. Student loans, work, something.”

“Well, we’ll have to disagree on that point, Mom,” Jessie said. “You haven’t met her, or talked to her. She’s nothing like what I expected.”

“I’m afraid this isn’t a good time to talk,” John was saying into the phone. “Yes, I can understand that, but we have company right now. No, Monday evening is fine. Talk to you then. Goodbye,” he said, then he hung up the phone and gave Kit a serious look. “Kit, that was your uncle.”

“Uncle? Who?” he demanded.

“He said his name was Brian,” he answered.

“What did he want?” Kit asked, a little suspiciously.

“To talk,” John said honestly. “He said he wanted to get to know us. He said right up front that he wanted to try to reconcile with you, so learning about us was one step towards it.”

Kit frowned. Brian was...well, he was a wild card in the family. He was an uncle and as such he was fully cognizant of what the family did to him, but he was also the only elder in the family that showed any kind of remorse or reluctance. Kit had no idea what he was up to, calling Jessie's family, but he was also damn well going to find out. "Let me call Vil," he said, standing up. "They know better than that. They are supposed to *leave me alone*, that's part of the deal. I didn't make this agreement and give them back their money just have to have them start interfering with my life."

Kit retreated upstairs to make the call. Vil answered on the third ring, and from the sound of it, she was on board her jet. "Hey bro, what's up?"

"Vil, Uncle Brian just called here," he said.

"I know. He asked for their number," she said calmly.

"What? You *let* him?" Kit asked, almost astounded.

"Of course I let him," she answered simply. "Brian seems quite sincere, Kit. Of all the elders, he was the only one that ever showed any real concern for you. That's why I tried so hard to get him to help you," she explained. "You know, it's really weird. Sarah was so close to Dad, I always thought that she was the one that would have been easiest to convince. But, I guess she was in Dad's pocket too much," she sighed. "Of course, Uncle Brian never went against Dad either, but he did show some concern for you."

"Sis, we had a deal," he protested. "They leave me alone, I leave them alone. I don't *want* Brian nosing around my life. I will *never* forgive him. You tell him that."

“I think you’re being a little too harsh, bro,” she said honestly. “The will is voided. Let him at least try to prove himself to you.”

“I think I’m not being harsh enough,” Kit returned. “Where was his concern when I needed him? Where was he when I had a broken back? Protecting his money, that’s where,” he snapped. “He only decides to try to get back into my life after it’s *safe* for him to do it. He never risked *anything* the way you did, sis. He made his decision, and now he has to live with it. He chose his money over me, and I’ll never forgive him for it. So tell him to *back off*. I don’t want him contacting Jessie’s family, I don’t want him contacting anyone in Austin, I don’t want him anywhere near me.”

Vil sighed. “Are you sure you won’t even hear him out?”

“I won’t even give him the time of day,” he declared bluntly.

“Alright, I’ll talk to him,” she said, in a disappointed voice. “But I think you’re being too stubborn about this, Kit. I worked very hard to get you back into the family, and despite his disapproval of your marriage, Brian is at least *trying*. You should at least try in return.”

“He’s trying about two years too late,” Kit said bluntly.

“Alright. I need to hang up real soon, bro, we’re about to take off in a minute or so, and I’ve found that my phone doesn’t get good reception in the air.”

“Where are you going?”

“Washington. I have to testify in front of the Armed Services Committee tomorrow, and I didn’t want to fly down on the same day. I have a friend down there I want to see, anyway.”

“A friend? Who?”

“A friend from Oxford,” she said, suddenly demure. “He’s over visiting some friends who work in the English embassy.”

“Oho, is this the answer that that ticking clock you were hearing around Christmas?” he asked lightly.

She laughed. “Maybe,” she admitted. “His name is Kendall Brighton.”

“The Brightons? As in Brighton Industries?”

“That’s them,” she affirmed. “So it would be a marriage of equals, and a good business arrangement. They’re Britain’s version of Vulpan Shipyards, so at least he’s someone I have a lot in common with.” She laughed. “His father introduced us at a mixer at Oxford, which I didn’t completely appreciate at the time, since I had the feeling he was throwing his son at me. That opinion changed after I talked to him, though. Kendall just graduated in December. He’s tall and handsome, with this little black dot under his chin that’s *cute*,” she said with a surprising giggle. “Outside of that, he’s exactly what you’d expect from a British fox from a family like the Brightons. Sophisticated, well mannered, educated, and intelligent.”

“I’ve never heard you talk like this about a male,” he teased.

She laughed. “I’ve been too busy being the Ice Queen to act like a femme,” she said. “I certainly don’t love Kendall, at least not yet, but at least he’s interesting enough for me to see what’s there.”

“Well, good luck, sis.”

“You should come meet him,” she said. “Can you fly over?”

“No, we’ll have to do that some other time,” he told her. “I have to fly back to Austin tonight, and I’d rather spend this time with Jessie’s family.”

“Okay then. But you do need to meet him, bro.”

“He’s the rich guy, he can fly down to Austin.”

Vil laughed. “Say the word, and you can be rich too,” she told him.

“No thanks,” he said dryly. “I’ll earn my own millions, thank you.”

She laughed. “Then get to work, bro!” she teased. They said their goodbyes, and Kit went back to the living room.

“What did she say?” John asked.

“Brian won’t call you again,” Kit said, a bit sternly. “I want him nowhere near me, and nowhere near you.”

John and Hannah traded a brief look, then Hannah changed the subject. “Have you decided where you’re going to live? Jessie mentioned that the apartments will be under construction.”

“We’re still talking to Lupe about that,” Kit said. “We can stay in our old apartment until the new ones are done, that’s not a problem, but I’m not too keen on doing the move into a new apartment close to a construction zone with a newborn. We’ll either stay in our apartment until they’re totally done on the far side of the block, or we’ll move into another apartment somewhere else temporarily if we can’t do that.”

“How long is it supposed to take them to do the construction over on the other side?”

“Lupe says they’ll be done in about five months for the duplexes, and six months for the other buildings,” Kit answered. “He has *three* contracting

companies over there working under the architects. One company will be building the community center, one will be building the duplexes, and the third will be building the apartment buildings to give the current tenants somewhere to live when they tear the old ones down. They're putting so many workers on the project because the bank demanded that the construction schedule had the *entire* project completed within a year in order for him to get the loan."

"That's a strange condition," Hannah noted.

"Not really," Kit answered. "Apartment complexes don't earn any money if they can't hold tenants. The bank wants to see some returns on their investment, so they were willing to loan Lupe enough to hire enough workers to get the work done in a year. That assumes that there are no delays, which are common in construction. But that's not Lupe's problem. The bank can't penalize him if the actual construction takes longer than a year if it's an issue with the contractors. But that'd be the contractor's loss. They get a bonus if they finish on time, and an even bigger one if they finish early, and they'll lose it if they run over."

"Won't that encourage them to cut corners?"

"You've never built anything in Texas, John," Kit chuckled. "The regulators there are pretty strict. They'll inspect all of the contractors' work before they sign off on it and let Lupe start moving furs in. If the contractors cut corners, they have to fix everything, and that runs them over time and they lose their bonus. They're best off just doing the work and doing it right. They'll earn much more money than if they try to cheat."

"I hope you move before the baby comes," Hannah said. "A baby needs a stable environment."

“I hope so too,” Kit agreed. “The three companies are supposed to combine into a single force to build the rest of the complex after they finish that part of it,” he continued, reciting what Lupe had told him a few days ago. “Lupe said there should be a small army there doing the work. It’s going to *take* an army to build a complex that takes up an entire city block from the ground up in a year.”

“Lupe’s sure they can do it,” Jessie added. “He said his project manager is positive they can finish, that they’ve set up a schedule that finishes in eleven months.”

“Well, we’ll see,” Kit noted.

It was a great visit.

Kit and Jessie enjoyed a wonderful early dinner prepared by Hannah, and then, at six o’clock, Jessie’s family drove them back to the airport. There were the usual goodbyes and promises to call, but there was also reality, the reality that Kit had work in the morning, and Jessie had school.

For the flight back, Kit *did* manage to get a flight plan filed, and that let them fly home with him trying out the plane at its service ceiling of 25,000 feet, where he would get some serious fuel efficiency. Flying that high again required oxygen, and also introduced Jessie to one of the little annoying parts of altitude flight...pressure differences. She spent nearly ten minutes trying to get her ears to pop, but once she finally did and the cockpit warmed up, she was comfortable flying at such high altitude. Kit felt a little restricted flying on a flight plan, but it was worth it with that gallons per hour number on his display. He didn’t have the tailwind this

time, but he was still going to get home without stopping for gas, and do it without landing while running on fumes.

She did her homework in the plane, balancing her laptop on her lap and typing on it as Kit took advantage of the autopilot and used his own laptop to surf the net...just because he could.

Jessie didn't let him get away with it, though. He'd let Jenny and Hannah fly the plane, so after she finished her homework, she demanded her own turn. Kit laughed and complied to her request, teaching her the rough basics of the idea of flight, about the three axes and the controls that moved the plane along them, then enabled the copilot controls and let her have at it. She flew the plane for nearly twenty minutes, and he let her make a couple of very slow and gentle turns in a zigzag that put them back on their original course, then let her descend to 23,500 feet before going back up to the cruise altitude of 24,500 feet...then getting bitched out by the traffic controller for deviating from his flight path's assigned altitude. He passed it off as an autopilot snafu, which made Jessie giggle as he lied baldly over the radio. After that, they put it back on autopilot, and Jessie finally broached a subject she'd been avoiding.

"Alright, my handsome fox," she said in the tone of a femme about to do war, reaching down and picking up the portable urinal. "Look out the window."

Kit almost knocked the plane off course laughing. It was a good thing it was on autopilot.

He certainly didn't make it easy on her, giving a grinding vocal rendition of stripper music, which earned him a smack, but she did eventually manage to get her business completed satisfactorily. "I'm putting

a towel or a bag in here to hide these when we take them out of the plane,” she declared, which made him laugh again.

They got home a little after midnight, landing in the chilly night as Jessie took video of them landing to send back to her parents. They were in the door about 1:00am, and since Jessie had napped on the plane, she wasn’t as tired as Kit was when they carried their luggage into the apartment. “I’ll make you a cup of tea, my handsome fox,” she offered.

“No, I’m just going to bed,” he told her. He then found her all over, him, giving him a crushing hug, and receiving a passionate kiss.

“Thank you, my handsome fox,” she smiled. “Thank you for taking me to see my folks. And thank you for being so wonderful.”

He laughed. “You can show your gratitude by coming to bed,” he told her, dropping their suitcase by the couch. “I can’t sleep without someone to snuggle, and I’d rather not go wake up Sheila.”

Jessie laughed and took his paw, then shooed him towards the bedroom. “I’ll lock up and set the alarm,” she told him.

Kit showed pictures of their trip at work the next day, and even showed them the video Jessie made of them landing at Georgetown. They were all impressed, and he had to field quite a few questions and inquiries as to if he could fly them out to South Padre Island or Houston. But the serious part of the day happened after that, when the office was visited by two male furs wearing dark suits.

Kit was working on the questions he was going to ask Congressman Smith tomorrow at their interview when they came into his office. One of them was a cat with gray tabbled fur and the other was a badger, and they

came in and closed the door. “Kit Vulpan, I’m Sergeant Brown of the Austin Police,” the cat said, showing him his badge as he approached his desk. “My partner, Sergeant Wilson.”

“APD? What can I do for you?” Kit asked, in a bit of confusion.

“It’s about the article you wrote,” the badger told him. “The one in your Friday issue.”

“What about it?”

“We’d like for you to answer some questions about this femme you called Jane Doe and where she works,” the cat told him. “The commissioner of the Austin Police read your article, and he wants to find and shut down the illegal brothel if it’s operating in this city.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t help you,” Kit said immediately, quickly forming his thought so he gave away nothing about Allison, not even her gender. “That fur was an anonymous source for a journalism article. I won’t reveal anything about him or her, nor will I answer any questions about the article.”

“Aren’t you interested in helping the femmes that might still be forced to work there?”

“What I want or don’t want makes no difference,” Kit told them. “I made a promise to keep my source’s identity a secret, and I will not break my word. I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you anything. It’s nothing personal, I assure you.”

“Your article said you met her somewhere between here and Atlanta. Is she even in Texas?” the badger asked. “If you tell us that much, we can leave you be and refer the matter to another state.”

“I’m sorry, but if I answer one question, you’ll expect me to answer other questions. So I’m afraid I will answer *no* questions about my source or about the article. It’s a journalist’s right to protect his sources.”

“I’m not entirely sure we’re willing to take that answer, Mister Vulpan,” the cat said. “The DA is already starting an investigation. He may subpoena you.”

“Let him, I’ll just sit on the stand and repeat what I just told you. Like I said, it’s nothing personal, but I cannot help you. Now, in the interests of keeping things cordial and polite, I’ll ask that you kindly take your leave and let me get back to work. Because I’m afraid I can’t say anything more.”

The two officers looked at each other, and the cat nodded. “Thank you for being polite, at least,” he said, offering his paw. Kit stood and shook it. “I’m obligated to leave you my card in case you change your mind.”

“I understand,” he said, taking the officer’s card when he offered it. “And thank you for being polite as well. It raises my respect for the Austin police. Have a good day, now.”

“We will, thank you. By the way, off the record, I thought it was a *damn* good article,” he smiled.

Kit chuckled. “Thanks,” he said.

That was the first indication that the article had caused a reaction. He found out around lunch just how much it did, for Marty was *inundated* with emails about it. Furs commenting on it, asking questions about it, asking where this femme really was, both emails asking to help Allison and a few crude ones asking to hire her, there were *hundreds* of emails about it, many of them requests for the magazine to put the article up on their website.

Mike had done so, as well as opening a forum on the site so furs could discuss the article on a message board...and boy, did that stress the servers. All those different viewpoints flying around, from religious zealots who denounced Allison to the snarky cheeseballs who were asking for her number to the femme-rights militants who used the article as a springboard to spout rhetoric about how unfair the world was to femmes. Quite a few furs supported Allison, quite a few denounced her, much as Hannah did, unable to look past what she did no matter how *logical* a decision it was for her. Mike had to go in and moderate it when the messages started becoming flames.

But, the one thing that mattered to Kit was that a great many furs thought it was a very thought-provoking article. It made furs think, it made them take an issue and see it in an entirely new light, from a startling new direction, letting them look inside something dark and unpleasant and see that things were not what they always appeared to be.

And that was one of things journalism was all about.

Rick told him that there wasn't an issue to be found anywhere on campus, and for the first time ever, it had sold out in College Station and San Antonio in the limited news stands where it was sold. But, Rick told him, it wasn't just Kit's article that did it, for Barry's election piece had also generated quite a bit of email traffic.

But what was most flattering to Kit, ten separate magazines and websites had contacted the magazine, looking to lease the right to reprint it. Rick would earn some money by selling those rights, and the magazine and Kit himself would get more visibility because the article would retain his byline and give credit to *Lone Star* as the original publisher. But, what

mattered more to Kit was that Allison's intriguing story would reach more readers.

"It's not just this one," Rick told Kit, who was working on Monday in place of the Friday he took off, as Kit sat in Rick's office and Rick both talked to him and typed on his workstation. "The statewide magazine *The Texan* asked to lease reprint rights on all the election articles we've done so far and for ones we're gonna do, and I also got an offer from the *American Statesman* to reprint the articles for a section they're going to do starting next Monday, since we're coming up on the primary. They said we did a lot of their work for them," he grinned.

"Are you going to do it?"

"Sure, they're paying for it," Rick chuckled. "And we keep the byline, so it's also free advertising."

"Well, both of those are good. Does that mean we're getting raises?" Kit asked with a playful grin.

"You wish," Rick growled in reply. "I'm going to reinvest that money."

"Hey cousin," Sheila called from the door. "Wanna do lunch?"

"Sheila, it isn't even ten yet."

"Yeah I know, just lockin' you down," she told him.

"Well, sure then. Where do you wanna go?"

"I got plans," she winked.

"Alright, I'll let you surprise me," he said, then Sheila padded off when Savid called for her. "Okay, now back to this raise," Kit prompted.

Rick laughed. "I'm going to invest that money in the magazine," he repeated. "I'm going to expand our pages per issue, increase our circulation, and I'm thinking of hiring someone with professional photography experience. Lilly and Rick are good, I'll never take that from them, but I'd like someone with some formal training on staff, so they're not always running around taking pictures when they could be doing their normal jobs."

"Sounds good. Where's the extra money coming from?"

"I'm gettin' a hell of a lot more advertising offers," he said. "That's one reason why I'm plannin' on expanding our pages per issue, that's more net revenue. Always before, fillin' those extra pages with viable content was the trick, but that's not hard anymore. Things have really grown here, son. Lilly's started doing some *real* writing, I have your journals, *School Daze*, you're a damn good writer on top of researching, Barry's work has become *fantastic* since you came on and took the researching pressure off of him, and that lets both of you put out a lot more content than before. There's that, and I also want to start both a photo spread and a submitted reader photo page, just random nice shots, as well as a couple of new weekly features I'll be introducing at our next major staff meetin'."

"Which is why you want a staff photographer."

"Yeah. Things are really moving here, son, and I want the magazine to keep pushing the envelope. I want us to be a magazine for school kids that's read by *more* than just school kids. I want to see expanded circulation, more sale units distributed, and thirty-eight pages per issue as our new target length."

“I’ve noticed. You’re putting Barry on more and more *real* news, and there’s the election special, and Lilly’s been pulling some actual writing assignments on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, when she’d usually just spend all day dicking around with the *Scene* page or going out and taking the pictures you need.”

Rick nodded. “It’s not going to be entirely cheap to expand, but I think we can make it. It’s gonna be tight for a few weeks, when our expenses outrun our revenue until it all evens out.”

He said it impulsively. “Well, Rick, if you’re interested on taking on a partner, I’d be willing to invest,” he said. “I *work* here, after all, if I can’t believe we’d turn a profit, I should get another job.”

Rick gave him a serious look. “You mean that, son? I thought you were broke.”

“Not as broke as I was two weeks ago,” he said, then he explained about the bonds. “I have fifteen thousand bucks sitting around waiting for an investment opportunity, at least I will after three months when the CDs mature, and what better opportunity than right here?”

“Son, you and Jessie need to come over for dinner tonight,” he said quickly. “Let’s sit down and talk about it.”

“I’d be happy to. I’ll bring over a business plan I wrote up a while ago, and we’ll see if my ideas for the magazine come close to yours.”

“Bring it. I’d love to see your ideas.”

“I keep it in the bottom drawer of my desk,” Kit laughed.

“Go get it. I’ll look it over and we’ll discuss it at dinner tonight.”

“Sure.”

Sheila’s lunch plans were not for an intimate family affair. They went to the Burger King by campus, and as they sat down at a booth, Allison came in. She waved to them, then came over and sat down. “Hey,” she said.

“Heya,” Sheila smiled. “I brought him.”

“Thanks. It’s good to see you,” she said, shaking his paw.

“How you been? Enjoying the lightened workload?” he asked carefully.

“Yes, school is much easier now that I’m not working,” she told him with a light smile. “I saw your article. I liked it very much.”

“Thanks,” he told her. “I didn’t know you knew my cousin.”

“Well, she’s very interesting,” Allison said mildly. “I find her easy to talk to and fun to be with, so we’ve been palling around since we, ah, met each other last week.”

Kit gave Sheila a surprised look, and she nodded with a grin. “We get along well together. Ally rocks,” she winked. “*Way* more fun than you two,” she teased.

“I’m, I’m really glad to hear that, Allison, and Jessie will be too. She’s really worried about you.”

“That’s very kind of her. Your wife is very sweet. A little naïve, but very sweet.”

“Well, I like her that way,” Kit said with a chuckle.

Allison ordered some food, and they had a very nice lunch. Again, they made smalltalk, leaving Allison's article and her history alone since they were in public, but Kit was just glad to see her, and what was more important, overjoyed that she'd found someone to be her friend. Sheila wouldn't care a whit that she was a former stripper and prostitute; in Sheila's eyes, that just made her more fun. Sheila would be a good friend that would push Allison and try to make her have fun, keep her engaged, and help her try to find herself by being someone she could talk to about anything, someone with whom she could be honest without being judged.

After looking at it for a moment, he realized that Sheila was the perfect choice for a friend for Allison. Someone fearless and fun-loving, and someone that knew the truth of her and didn't care a bit. Sheila would reintroduce Allison to the world, slowly integrate her into her circle of friends, which were also Jessie and his friends, and slowly wear down the protective shell she kept around herself until she could break out of it and be her own femme. He realized that Allison would slowly become part of the circle of furs that were their friends...and he didn't mind at all.

Chapter 23

The honeymoon between Jessie and their baby was over.

She scrambled out of bed five minutes before the alarm went off, rushed down the hall, and Kit heard her noisily retching into the commode. It might have concerned Kit to hear his wife throwing up if he didn't know she was pregnant, for that was the first time she'd done it. Much to Jessie's discontent, morning sickness was not going to pass her by.

At least she was ready for it. Doctor MacNair had explained the phenomenon to them thoroughly at her last exam, how it was inconsistent in when it struck and how long it would make her nauseous, and that it did not, as the name might suggest, occur only in the morning. The doctor had given Jessie a series of useful tips if she was struck with the condition, and from the sound of it, Jessie would start following those helpful hints today; eat small meals, avoid hot rooms, eat soda crackers or salty potato chips to settle her stomach enough for a meal if she felt queasy, take short naps, and avoid laying down after a meal.

But, Doctor Mac had been almost dead on with her prediction, Kit noted. She said that morning sickness tended to begin showing up during the sixth week of pregnancy, and the March 5 day showing on the calendar near the bed showed that Jessie was about halfway through her sixth week. Doctor Macnair said that Jessie conceived somewhere between January 26 and January 28, an actual estimate of January 27 with a little margin for error, and that put March 5 three days into her sixth week of pregnancy.

That calendar, the Countdown Calendar as Jessie called it, was segmented by weeks of pregnancy and indications and other features that Doc Mac told them to expect. He knew that Jessie had already, rather morosely, scribbled *start getting fat* on the May page. That was the month that Doctor Mac said that Jessie would start showing visible signs of her pregnancy obvious to the casual observer, her “baby bump.”

Though she was modest, Jessie was still proud of her sexy physique, and the thought of getting fat was not the greatest thought in the world to her. But, it was what she called her “happy sacrifice,” and she could always get her figure back after the delivery.

Outside of this morning sickness, things were going swimmingly with Jessie’s pregnancy. She was almost disgustingly healthy, as Doctor Mac put it, and their baby was perfectly healthy inside her. Her pregnancy was progressing in an almost textbook manner, and Doctor Mac joked that their baby shared its parents’ love of routine and preparation, habits ingrained in his job as a researcher and her preparation to become an English teacher. “You’re giving birth to a banker,” she teased them.

In the two weeks since they’d gone to see Jessie’s family, there had been quite a bit going on in their lives. Kit and Jessie had sat down and talked with Rick and Martha about investing in the magazine, and Kit had found that nearly 90% of what he put in the business plan he’d drawn up for the magazine was also in Rick’s plan. Over dinner, Rick and Kit drew up a contract which would let Kit buy into the magazine as a part owner, and receive a percentage of the profits in return for a \$15,000 investment which he’d pay in installments, as the CDs he’d bought matured and he could cash them out. He did begin with a \$5,000 initial payment, taken out their crisis reserves, which would be replaced as the CDs holding that money locked

up matured. That \$5,000 would help the magazine afford expanding their pages per issue for those critical three weeks between the increase and securing enough advertising to pay for it, as that meant it cost more per unit to have the magazine published. For those three weeks, Kit's money would literally be paying everyone's salaries...including his own.

A touch ironic, that.

That salary would include the photographer. Rick had already put the ads out in the paper, Monster, and other online sites, as well as telling the Job Placement Services office at U.T. what he was looking for in case any recent graduates were looking for a job. Rick already had a lot of experience dealing with U.T., for he'd finally arranged the intern deal with them to replace Sheila. Starting with the summer semester, the office would have two unpaid interns, changing every semester, who would be learning about journalism from inside a magazine. Rick had only wanted one at first, but the school convinced him to take on two, since the university was having trouble finding enough intern positions for its journalism school. The journalism school took *Lone Star* a *hell* of a lot more seriously now than they did just six months ago, for the magazine had evolved from a quaint little Friday student rag to a magazine that put out real news and had some unique and innovative features. It said a lot for the magazine's credibility that the school of journalism actually lobbied Rick to take on two interns rather than one.

And that was just one of the busy aspects of friends involved with their daily lives. Lupe had been running around like a maniac for over a month, because a virtual *army* of construction workers had descended on the far side of the new pool. Kit was *astounded* at how fast they moved. When they first arrived, the combined companies knocked down every building left on

the block and ripped up their foundations, working 24 hours a day despite Lupe's assurances they'd only be working 10 hours a day, while the pool builders finished pouring the concrete and let it cure. They couldn't run heavy machinery around the pool area as the concrete cured. Despite working around the clock, though, the denizens of Westwood really didn't mind all that much. They didn't do any loud work after sunset, mainly just cleaning up and laying out their planned construction, and the worst complaints Lupe had to deal with were the lights they used after dark to illuminate the job site. After about a week, after an inspector had signed off that the pool cement had cured properly and the pool builders could start on the deck, diving boards, and slides, the three companies broke up to begin their individual tasks. In the week since they started their individual assignments, there was already significant visual signs of progress. The foundation of the first duplex row and the the first apartment building had been laid out, and work had already begun on them. The third company, building the large community center that would anchor the pool, had started excavating so it could lay the pipes that would go into the foundation. Inspectors and workers from the water service, city sewer authority, power company, cable company, phone company, and gas company were already on site, coordinating with the contractors to set up the utilities the buildings would use. The old Westwood was all electric, but the new Westwood would offer natural gas hookups for kitchen stoves and kitchen stoves only. Dryers and air conditioning units would still only be electric. Gas would also be hooked up to the community center, though, running its heat during the winter and supplying gas for the large kitchen that would be in the building.

The utilities were taking advantage of the construction, too. Lupe had already contracted with the phone company to allow them to build a major

repeater station in the basement of the community center, acting as a hub for their DSL service, which would give any DSL users in the complex very high speed; the further from a repeater one was, the worse DSL was. Being literally in the same complex as the repeater would give all the complex fast and reliable DSL. The cable company decided to use the complex as a hub as well, already planning to run a new heavy bandwidth trunk line to the complex to radiate out to the surrounding neighborhood as part of their broadband upgrade project in Austin. The fringe benefit for allowing them to do that for Westwood was a dedicated low-population trunk feeding off that major line, which would give cable modem users in the complex blazing speed with virtually no slowdown during peak use hours. Be it DSL or cable, the complex would have some screaming fast internet. The power company was already starting work on the surrounding power lines to prepare for the increased demand on the block, and the water company was also looking at installing a larger main to service the new apartments.

Kit gave Lupe his fifteen minutes of fame. He did a story on the new complex and interviewed Lupe professionally, then Rick ran it in last week's issue, along with Kit's interview of Lamar Smith. They put in some architect's sketches of what the new Westwood would look like, and the article talked about the number of units there would be, what services the new complex would offer, and highlighted its proximity to U.T. and the fact that the AMTA had agreed to start a shuttle from the complex to the school once the complex was finished, which would give students a special reduced fare bus ride to campus and back with arrivals and departures every 20 minutes from 7am to 9pm Monday through Friday, 7am to 5pm every half hour on Saturday, and special service directly to and from the stadium on home game days.

Kit had promised Lupe space in the magazine, and the complex *was* of interest to students of U.T. since it was being built aimed at housing them, so the article more than deserved to run in the magazine. And maybe it would help Lupe fill up with signed leases to show the bank when they started doubting the sanity of giving him so much money to get the complex built so fast.

Allison had faded into the background of their lives over the weeks, but still reared her head indirectly. Sheila and Allison were almost inseparable, and as a result they didn't see Sheila quite as often. She came over only about once a week and still came to poker, but going out with Allison now took up most of her time. The two of them were the anchor of a brand new Party Pack made up of Sheila, Allison, and members of the sorority, mainly Danielle, the other Jessie, Sandy, and Lisa. Much as he expected, Allison had been integrated into Sheila's circle of friends, and Sheila had told him that she got along very well with the sorority girls. They had no idea just who she was—well, Sandy did because she'd seen the picture of Allison giving Kit a lap dance, but she kept it secret from the others—and treated her well, if being just a bit jealous of her. Allison *was* drop dead gorgeous, and femmes sometimes couldn't help but feel a little threatened by another femme who was so much prettier than they were. But, Allison gelled well with Sheila, and Kit was sure she'd be just fine. Sheila would teach her how to have fun again, something that she'd forgotten in the years she'd been a stripper and prostitute.

But her impact on his life was still front and center. The article had attracted *huge* attention, and Rick had received four requests to reprint it from other magazines, as well as continued emails coming in about it. Sheila kept Allison informed, joked with her that she was a rock star now.

Kit had also received another visit from the Austin Police, trying to get him to reveal *anything* about the article. Their last visit was them nearly begging just to have him answer if he met the femme in Austin or some other city, just so they'd know if they could retire the matter, but Kit would not budge. He would not answer any question, for if he answered just one question, they would try to make him answer another, then another, and so on and so on. He kept Allison's identity an absolute secret, and there were only four furs who know that secret outside of him and Allison. Jessie, Sheila, Sandy, and Mike were the only ones who knew, for Sandy had heard him talk about Allison and seen the picture of her, and Mike had been there when he asked her all those questions and wasn't drunk enough to forget it. He pieced it together after he happened across Allison's picture while going through old photos, but he agreed along with his family and Sandy that it had to be kept an absolute secret. He even deleted all his copies of Allison's pictures he had from the bachelor party.

Kit sat up in bed, arched his back until it popped, then swung his legs out. Today was a big day for him, for his medical certification had expired without him realizing it, nearly two weeks ago. He'd literally flown to Cincinnati with four days left on his eligibility, and since he'd not left the FAA a forwarding address, they'd had no way to send him a reminder to renew his medical certification until Vil registered his plane in his name. The expiration warning had arrived last week, a week after his medical certification expired, and he'd had scheduled this exam to get it back. He wouldn't have any penalty for it, he just had to either visit the FAA office at Bergstrom or fax in a copy of the certification to them, and they'd send him his new license. The license part of his license didn't expire for eight more years, only his medical clearance had to be renewed. Today, he had an exam

scheduled to get his medical certificate for his pilot's license, which would grant him another year of flight status.

And it would be a war. Kit's injuries had caused him a huge hassle last year, for the doctor examining had deferred him, put his flight status on suspension so the FAA could examine his physical health and determine if he was flight worthy. His doctor had given him *six hours* worth of tests and exercises to prove his back wouldn't prevent him from flying safely, then he sent it all to the FAA for their determination...and that took *two months*. He'd gone for his physical in late December, got deferred and went back for the follow-up tests in early January, and it was late February when the FAA finally approved him and sent him his license. He knew that this doctor as well would question the condition of his back, but this time he was armed with all the tests and results of his last physical to show the doctor that he'd already been thoroughly examined, and passed by the FAA. He knew he'd still be facing an exhaustive examination, but he was positive he wouldn't get deferred this time. It would just take all day.

A fun way to spend his day off.

Jessie came back into the bedroom and sat on the bed by him, smacking her chops with an unpleasant expression. "I need to brush my teeth," she complained. "I'd kiss you, my handsome fox, but you do *not* want to do that right now."

He laughed. "I'll dare the Godzilla breath," he said, leaning over and giving her a quick peck on the lips. "Better now?"

"Mmm," she nodded, putting her paw on her lower stomach gingerly. "I don't think our baby liked that lasagna we had last night. And I was *hoping* I wouldn't get morning sickness," she complained, flopping back on

the bed. "I hope it doesn't last long. Doctor Mac said it could last a few days, or a whole month."

"Well, let's wait and see. Just keep her tips in mind."

"Yeah, I'll go buy some Lays after class, some of those little lunch size bags, and carry them around with me. She said they were the best thing to squash my nausea while I'm at school."

"If you leave a few minutes early, you can swing by Circle K and pick up a couple of those little grab bags," he told her.

"That's a good idea. Let me get into the shower, then," she said, standing up. She started forward, but Kit grabbed her by her longhaired tail and stopped her. "Turn around," he ordered, making a circling motion with his finger. She laughed and complied, turning to face him, and he gave her a thorough visual inspection. "Nothing yet," he reported.

She laughed, striking a little pose for him, which was really sexy since she was nude. "So, I'm still your supermodel?" she teased.

"You always will be, even when you're about to deliver," he answered. "Now go hop in the shower, I'll start breakfast."

"No thanks," she said, making a face. "I'll leave a little early and grab something at school, I'm not in the mood to eat right now."

"Okay. But take your vitamins, and I'll start the tea."

"Make me some Earl Gray," she said, turning and heading for the bathroom. Kit put on a pair of shorts and wandered into the kitchen and got the water for the tea going. He turned off the alarm and went out for the paper, and found the door opening behind him. Sheila came in wearing her

workout shorts and a tank top despite the thirty degree morning. The weather the last week or so had been really wild. It would be in the 30s in the morning but rise up to the 70s during the day. That was usual, the crew told him, the precursor to the hot Austin summer. Spring came early in Texas.

“Kit,” she called. “You ready?”

“Do I look ready?” he countered. “Let me get the tea going, you want some?” he asked.

“Sure!” she said, closing the door. “She in the shower?”

“Yeah.”

“She coming?”

“She has school today, and she says you cheat.”

Sheila laughed. “She just doesn’t have the guts to play racquetball with me,” Sheila teased. “She spends half her time running away from the ball. Where’s your bag?”

“In the den,” he said. “But we can’t play a full set, I have that physical at eight thirty.”

“No problem, Rick always bitches when I come in late anyway,” she laughed. “Oh, I do have something to show you, though. I got the new Iphone!”

“Such a lemming,” he teased.

“It’s *awesome*,” she countered. “It can do so much!”

“I’ll keep my Blackberry, thanks,” he said, pouring water into teacups. “Come get it.”

She bounded into the kitchen and took the cup of steaming water, then went to the cupboard where he kept tea. He’d finally broke down and started having Connecticut Tea Company tea shipped to him, buying direct from their website, so they finally had decent tea. The only problem was that he had to order large boxes, so it was rather pricy. He had bought regular tea, a box of Earl Gray since both he and Jessie liked to drink it from time to time, and a gift box filled with a variety of flavored and herbal teas to satisfy Jessie’s curiosity and occasional taste for something new, but Sheila went for the regular tea. “Get me a regular too, please,” he said as he finished pouring the water. One of the things he liked about it was he bought loose leaf tea, which came in little packets, rather than tea bags. He’d always favored loose leaf tea over bags, it just tasted better. Jessie had to get used to the idea of that, but she rather liked it after she learned how not to drink too much of the loose leaf.

“What’s Jessie drinking?”

“Earl Gray,” he answered.

“She been trying out the flavor box?”

He nodded as she handed him a packet. “Tries a different flavor every night.”

“I need to order another box,” she noted to herself. “I’m down to my last week’s worth.”

Jessie came into the kitchen wearing a robe, and took the tea Kit had prepared for her with a grateful nod. “Hey Sheila, come to take him for racquetball?”

“Yeah. You gonna come play soon?”

“When you stop hitting the ball at me on purpose,” she accused.

Sheila laughed. “Then never,” she winked.

“I’ll make you a deal. I’ll play racquetball with you tomorrow if you play tennis with me on Saturday.”

“You drive a hard bargain,” she accused.

“Well, Kit’s too good, I can never beat him,” Jessie complained. “He makes me run all over the court!”

“Well, we *do* play for the exercise,” Kit noted calmly, which made Sheila laugh.

“You make it Thursday afternoon, you have a deal.”

“That’s fine, just remember I don’t get out til after five.”

“Just wait for golf season,” Sheila grinned. “I already joined a country club, and they open for the season on Saturday,” she said eagerly.

“I didn’t know you play golf,” Jessie said with surprise.

“I love it. Kit, not so much.”

“I don’t mind golf, but swinging the club makes my back ache after a while,” he said mildly. “So I don’t play very much.”

“See? But I’ll need a partner, and hey, you said you’d try almost any sport once. So, wanna play golf with me?”

“Sure, I’ll try it,” Jessie said with a nod. “Is there some place I can rent or borrow some clubs?”

“We’re about the same size, we’ll see how you do with mine,” Sheila told her.

“You’re gonna let a whiffer use your driver? You’re brave,” Kit noted, which made Sheila laugh and Jessie give him a flinty look.

“Oh, since I have both of you here, I wanted to ask something,” she said. “Kit, would you do me a *huge* favor?”

“What?”

“Can you fly me, Allision, and Danielle out to South Padre Island on Friday morning, then come get us Sunday evening? I’ll pay for the gas,” she offered.

“I guess I can. Did you ask Rick for Friday off?”

She nodded. “I’m gonna work next Saturday to make up for it. So that’s all set.”

“Well, I can manage it, as long as I pass my physical today,” he chuckled.

“How long will that take to get your license back?” Jessie asked.

“Back? You lost it?” Sheila asked.

“My medical certificate expired,” he explained to her. “And it’ll take all of one day to get my license back. I get my physical certificate, make a phone call and fax it to the FAA, or take it to the satellite office they have at Bergstrom, and I’m legal again. If I go to Bergstrom, I’ll walk out with a temporary license til my new license gets here by mail. If I fax it in, they’ll mail it to me, and fax me a temporary license like I’d get if I go to Bergstrom.”

“Oh, cool beans,” Sheila said. “So, it’s a go?”

“I’d be happy to take you,” he said with a nod.

Sheila gave him a huge grin. “You’re the best, cousin!” she said excitedly.

After racquetball, he was there on time at the office of Doctor Enrique Valguerro, an FAA-approved flight surgeon who had his practice about two miles from Bergstrom. Doctor Valguerro was a pilot himself, and had been in the Air Force, stationed at Bergstrom back when it was an Air Force base. He moved back to Austin after he left the military, and he came highly recommended on the airfields around Austin as a doctor who *knew*.

Valguerro was a plump brown-furred chinchilla, looking like he could be Sandy’s uncle, and he did indeed *know*. He’d administered this examination many times, so he knew exactly what he was doing, and gave Kit the only complication he was expecting. When he reviewed Kit’s medical records, he made note of the screws in his back, and also his passing medical examination and official FAA documentation showing that the FAA was aware of his past accident, but had cleared him to fly after his last exam, after a thorough check of his back. “I see they deferred you last time, but you passed the subsequent physical, and you have all your waiver documentation right here. Have the screws caused any problems since your last certification physical?”

“None,” he said. “I still have full range of motion and it doesn’t hurt at all when I fly, even when I’m doing G maneuvers to scare my passengers.”

Valguerro laughed. “You’re lucky you brought these records, or I’d have to file for deferral for you again. But, I’m afraid I’ll have to make you do some pretty extensive exercises and tests so I’m sure you’re still in flight

condition, my friend. That's something I have to check thoroughly before I sign off on you. I hope you understand."

"Completely, and I don't mind at all," he said with a nod. "I've been through this before, as you saw when you checked over my records. My last doctor did a six hour exam and a bunch of tests on my back to send in with the rest of my records when I filed for my waiver. I had to wait two months for the FAA to look over my case and approve me," he grunted.

"Well, your last doctor was doing his job," Valguerro said with an approving nod. "And I doubt it'll take that long this time. You got passed last time, and I won't have to defer you again since you have all your waiver paperwork. So, after I make sure your back is still in flying shape, you'll be good to go."

Then came the tests he knew were coming. He went through X-rays of his back, a very thorough physical inspection and examination of his entire spine and musculature and tissues surrounding his spine, and then he did nearly an hour's worth of range of motion exercises and pressure tests simulating G forces Valguerro demanded without any trouble. The doctor put him through every possible test he could think of to make absolutely sure Kit's back was capable of the stresses of flight. After all that, he was back on the exam table, and Valguerro continued the examination, moving on to the normal parts of the exam. "So, what are you flying these days?" he asked.

"I lucked out and got my paws on a Cessna four hundred," he said.

Valguerro whistled. "I had a fractional on one when it was a Columbia, before Cessna bought them out, and it was a *sweet* plane," he said. "I'm flying a Centurion now. I wanted something pressurized."

“Nice,” Kit told him. “Fractional?”

“Nah, I own the whole thing,” he grinned. “You rated on twin engines?”

Kit nodded. “I don’t have seaplane, rotor, or any jet ratings, but I have about everything else...Cat two and three, IFR, high altitude. I’ll have to get those some day,” he chuckled. “I was trying to get my first jet rating before the accident.”

“I never bothered trying for one. Why did you want it?”

“Before these screws were in my back, I wanted to fly fighters for the military,” he said. “So I was trying to get rated on a jet while I was in ROTC, so they’d see I had jet experience.”

“Ah, I understand, *amigo*,” he said, patting Kit on the shoulder compassionately. “Which one were you doing?”

“Citation CJ-2,” he answered.

“All those ratings at such a young age? That had to be pricy.”

“Eleven thousand dollars was the final price tag. I was on scholarship, and I finished flight school before the accident. It paid for most of my commercial license. The expensive part for me was renting planes after I got my license to keep logging hours to pad my application to Air Force flight school, and I was also starting on that Citation jet rating right before the accident. I’d done about half of the ground training and flown my first jet the day before it happened. That was *very expensive*,” he grunted.

“Renting a jet to log hours is almost ridiculously expensive. It was like four hundred bucks a day.”

“Well, that’s quite an accomplishment for such a young pilot.”

“No, it just took money,” he said calmly, which made Valguerro laugh. “I got my commercial and my extras in a year in a one forty-one program through the University of Massachussets. It was one of those comprehensive programs that rated us for both single and multi props as a commercial license, Cat two and three, IFR, high altitude, the whole shebang, so when I graduated, I had to take both single and multi tests, then do two check flights for the first test. Then we had to do it all over again for our IFR ratings on both types, then do it *again* for the commercial test. God, that took a lot of studying, because I was taking fifteen credit hours a semester on top of that. It was like working two jobs,” he chuckled.

“Well, you got through it. So you didn’t rock much in flight school?” he asked, using an old Air Force term that they also used in ROTC. To *rock* meant to fail.

“I was paying *very close* attention,” Kit chuckled. “The scholarship would be withdrawn if I went under a three point zero GPA, and my flight school was through my scholarship, so I couldn’t fail any major section or it would be withdrawn.”

“That’s motivation,” Doctor Valguerro said with a nod. “I rocked way too much when I got my license,” he laughed. “It took me a year to get my standard pilot’s license. But, I was doing it on base, so it was way cheaper than it would’ve cost me elsewhere. But, after I had it, I moved to flight medicine, and I’ve never regretted it.”

After another three hours of exhaustive tests of his vision, hearing, reflexes, general physical health, even a psychological evaluation,

Valguerro had Kit dress as he went over some lab results. “You’re good to go, my friend. I’ll sign off on you, so you’re back on flight status.”

“Thanks, Doctor,” Kit said with a smile. “I’m glad of that, I’m taking my cousin to South Padre on Friday, so I kinda need my license.”

Valguerro laughed. “Finish dressing, I’ll fill out the forms for you.”

After six hours of being examined, Kit got his completed form, and then went to the FAA office on the grounds of Bergstrom International Airport, in a building not far from the smaller south terminal. He sat around waiting for an hour, finally got a clerk, then sat and waited as the short, thin male marten clerk reviewed his license history, inspected the certificate issued by Doctor Valguerro, then called Valguerro to personally confirm Kit had passed his physical because of Kit’s previous deferral on his physical from last year, due to his prior injuries. “I have to ask,” the marten said with a slightly shy look, “you’re *that* Kit Vulpan, right?”

Kit smiled. “Afraid so. You won’t hold that against me, will you?”

The marten laughed. “Why should I? A co-worker pointed me to an article you wrote, and I thought it was pretty good. Let me print out your temporary license. You know the drill with the real one?”

“Yeah, I’ll get it in the mail about a week before it expires.”

He laughed again. “That’s about right,” he admitted, turning to his keyboard.

At four o’clock, he walked out of the FAA office on Bergstrom holding his temporary pilot’s license, which would expire on March 6, 2009. He had a full year before he went through another six hour physical, but he would

to back to Doctor Valguerro when that time came, since he already knew about Kit's back and wouldn't be so hard on him next time.

He also noticed that there was a flight school there at the airport.

He called Jessie as he walked back to his truck. "Hey baby," he said. "I'm done. Need anything before I come home?"

"Now? What took so long?" she demanded as the sounds of dishes clinking chimed in the background.

"My back," he said simply. "The doctor had to make absolutely sure my back doesn't disqualify me. I told you this would take all day," he noted.

"Yeah, you did," she agreed. "Well, you can swing by IGB or Wal-Mart and pick up some nutmeg, I'm almost out. And you can buy me some of those little bags of potato chips, I haven't done that yet."

"Will do," he promised. "Any nausea today?"

"A little, right after lunch, but thank God I didn't throw up," she said with relief. "Nothing is more humiliating than kneeling in a public bathroom and having everyone listen to you barf."

Kit laughed. "Anything else?"

"Grape juice?"

"Don't ask, silly femme, demand. I don't respond to wishy-washy little girls."

"Then get grape juice, you little jerk," she retorted playfully. "And keep an eye over your shoulder when you get home!"

Kit laughed lightly. "Always do, pretty kitty, always do."

Kit bought what Jessie wanted, and gave her a loving kiss when he got home. He put his paw on her belly, almost reflexively, and she laughed and responded with her pattern “not yet, my handsome fox.”

“Someday I’m gonna feel him kick.”

“Someday you might feel *her* kick,” she said with a giggle. “After she starts making me fat.”

“You won’t be fat, you’ll be pregnant,” he told her, wrapping his arms around her from behind and rocking her gently from side to side. “And you’ll be beautiful.”

“So you say now, when I’m still skinny,” she giggled, reaching behind his head and patting him on his damaged ear.

“To be fat, you have to have fat in here, not a baby,” he teased, kissing her on the side of her neck as he patted her flat belly with his dark-mittened paw. “Now stop being silly, my pretty kitty.”

“I’m not being silly! I’m making sure my male will still love me when I’m fat and ugly.”

He laughed lightly. “You will *never* be either of those,” he told her. “You’re a gorgeous cat, love, but it wasn’t your face or body I fell in love with. What’s in here is what I love the most,” he said, tapping her just under her ear. “The body and face are just window dressing. Gorgeous window dressing, but still window dressing.”

She giggled, and leaned against him. “I need to record that so I can play it back at you when I’m fat.”

“Be my guest.”

After dinner, Kit relaxed with Jessie on the couch, practicing guitar while she wrote part of her paper about flying. She asked him all kinds of questions, how long it took him, what kinds of licenses there were, and so on. Kit explained pilot's licenses to her, and the various ratings for different kinds of planes, and the levels of licenses. "So, if I wanted a license, what would I have to do?" she asked, looking at him and ready to type on her laptop. He explained the way that worked too, how one could go to flight school or take private instruction, and explained the difference between a program for a standard license and a program for a commercial license, a part-141, like the one he'd taken.

"That's the best way to do it," Kit told her. "When I graduated from flight school, I had my commercial license and I was rated for two classes of aircraft, single engine prop and multi-enging prop. It took about a year, but it also cost over twelve thousand dollars. If I'd have done a standard license, I could have graduated in four months or so and did it for about six thousand dollars, but I wouldn't have even a quarter of the privileges I have with a commercial license. My commercial license lets me land at almost any airport, because I know air commercial traffic control procedures and I can fly by instruments alone. Those are skills that standard pilots aren't required to have."

"Okay, so, how does having a license make life different for you compared to other furs?"

She was serious about this, he realized. She was approaching it like a reporter, and she'd seen how he did his prep work enough to know what to ask to get the information she wanted. "Well, I guess it's a matter of freedom," he said. "I can fly a plane, which lets me go much further than someone in a car. In the same time it takes someone to drive to San

Antonio, I could fly to Dallas or Brownsville. It's not a cheap thing to do, but it's an option. But most pilots don't fly so they can go places faster, they fly because they enjoy flying." He chuckled, strumming his guitar. "And you got a taste of how it makes things different, love. How many of your classmates can fly home to visit their parents on the weekend?"

She giggled. "Yeah, I guess so," she said. "Thanks love."

"When's that paper due?"

"Next month, but why wait?" She glanced at him. "Do you have any plans for my spring break?"

He laughed. "Love, I'm still so far in the hole on time off I'll be making it up to the magazine for ten years," he told her. "But, I did have a couple of ideas. We haven't gone out on a date for a couple of weeks, you know."

She gave him a shy yet loving smile. "Where do you want to go?"

"I was thinking of dinner in New Orleans," he said with a smile. "And a night in a French Quarter hotel, then a ride in a riverboat after we explore the Quarter."

She gave him a bright smile. "I'd love to," she said. "Can we afford it?"

"A dinner, a night in a hotel, and a riverboat ride? Of course we can," he told her. "I can land at Lakefront Aiport there in New Orleans, so we can take a cab into the city easily or rent a car."

"I'd love to go," she said with a smile.

“I’d love to take you. I have to start looking at other airports, though. Driving up to Georgetown kinda sucks, but I guess I have to go where I can find hangar space for the plane. Leaving it outside tied down to the flight line isn’t the best thing in the world for it. I want to get hangar space so we can store it out of the weather, and hangar space is always in demand.” He gave her a sly little look. “They have a flight school at Bergstrom, you know.”

“Really?” She said with a smile. “Have you been looking at flight schools for me, love?”

“A *little*,” he winked. “I noticed the signs for it when I was at the FAA office getting my license renewed. I’ll look into it for you.”

“I’d love to, but didn’t you say that flight training was expensive?”

“If you want to learn, pretty kitty, I’ll find a way to pay for it. It’s just that simple.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said. “But the baby comes first. Maybe after I deliver I’ll think about it, but I’d rather not have something like that on top of school with me being pregnant.”

“Love, there’s no time limit,” he chuckled. “We have plenty of time for you to decide.”

Jessie wasn’t too keen on the idea of starting flight school while pregnant, but Kit could understand her position. She was in school, and she was pregnant. She had a *lot* more important things on her mind right now, and flight school did take some concentration and devotion.

He *did*, however, thoroughly research every flight school in the Austin area. There were six of them, and he finally settled on the Austin Aerial Instruction Academy, which was based in the general aviation section of Bergstrom. They were almost exactly like his own old flight school in that they offered all levels of flight instruction, from standard to flight instructor, and they also offered ratings on multi-engine and instrument flight rules. They had a 141 program which would graduate someone with a commercial license in 10 months, and what was most important, *all* of their flight school trainer planes were late models with impeccable maintenance records. Their oldest plane was a 2002 Cessna 172. Three of their trainers had Garmins, and they also had a Beech for people who wanted to earn a twin engine rating. The only difference between their flight school and Kit's was that Kit's school included a twin engine rating with their commercial program, where it was an optional choice for AAIA's commercial program, and cost extra money to get if one took it.

What he looked around for himself was a flight school that offered training for rating on jet aircraft. Despite what he told Avery back at his wedding, he really wouldn't mind getting a jet rating now that he was in a position to be able to use it. Renting a jet would be cheaper for the magazine than flying 8 furs to the same place, but only so long as Kit could fly it, and for that he'd need a rating on the specific kind of jet he rented. Having a commercial license and his multi engine rating opened the door to getting a jet rating, which was specific to the type of jet he intended to fly. His multi-engine rating and his authorizations in most aspects of jet flight would let him rate to a jet, which required training in that particular class of jet, like Citations. Getting rated in a Citation would let him fly Citation class jets, which was what he'd been doing right before the accident, trying to earn a rating on a Citation CJ-2. Some pilots also pursued the

authorizations entailed in jet flight at the same time while rating to a jet, like complex aircraft and high-altitude operations, since one could cover those things during training for the jet. It could take as little as a couple of weeks or as long as a few months, it depended entirely on how much money he had to afford renting a jet to complete the rating.

He knew it would be hard, and expensive. To get a rating that mattered, he needed to find someone willing to rent him a jet to fly, then rate on that jet. He'd also need a second pilot, since most jets required two pilots on board...but, if he could find all of those things, then it would be viable. If they got a small enough jet that only required one pilot, like a 6-seat Citation, and he was rated on it, they could rent a jet and fly it and save money over flying 6 furs commercial. It would cost about \$2,000 in rent and jet fuel for a two day trip in a CJ-1, where it would be about the same cost to fly 6 furs on airlines, with the added bonus of having total control of when they left and when they arrived.

Sure, it wasn't exactly cost-efficient or really that useful to go to all that trouble to maybe fly a jet for the magazine once, but it was more about *finally* getting that holy grail of pilot ratings, a rating on a jet. Finding an excuse to do it was justifying itself in his mind.

He did dream about it while flying Sheila, Allison, and Danielle down to Brownsville on Friday. Kit was reading the newest issue of the magazine, seeing it in print rather than on computers, while the autopilot kept them on course, trying to tune out the excited babbling of Sheila and Danielle, where Allison comported herself with her usual quiet reserve. They were only twenty minutes from Brownsville's airport, the closest airfield to South Padre Island, but Sheila already had hotel reservations and a rental car that was supposed to be waiting for them at the terminal at 9:00am sharp. Kit

had agreed to take them, but only in the morning, so he didn't miss work. He had enough time to get back home and even relax a little while. He still wasn't sure why they were going now, since Danielle and Allison were missing a day of class; U.T.'s spring break started a week from today...but then again, maybe that was why they were going now. Next weekend it would be crowded, where this weekend they had the beach to themselves.

Wow. *Wow*. Barry had interviewed State Senator Chris Rivers as part of the election special, and—*wow*. What a fantastic interview! Barry took it to Rivers, but not in a confrontational manner. Much as Kit did, he asked hard, difficult questions, but also gave Rivers a chance to display his strengths, state his platform, and try to woo people to vote for him. He'd ask a very tough question challenging his views, then turn around and ask a supportive question that aligned with Rivers' platform. It ran five pages, and was the lead article. Next week, they would release their first expanded issue, going for a target of 38 pages.

But the TCAS woke him up. It gave an audio warning of a nearby plane, and Kit knocked it off autopilot and checked the MFD; there was another private plane coming at him from an angle, but a good mile under him. Kit was cruising at 11,000 feet, but that plane was at 6,000 feet. Kit bumped his auxiliary radio over to the accepted pilot chatter frequency for Texas pilots and called the plane. A femme answered, and he chatted with her for a few minutes before saying goodbye when Brownsville air traffic control called him on the primary radio, still tuned to traffic control frequency. "Belt up, femmes," Kit called over the intercom as he answered the controller, descending to enter a holding pattern around the airport. "We have to sit in a holding pattern for a little bit," he said.

“Are we gonna run late? That car’s supposed to be waiting for us,” Sheila warned.

“Call them, we’re close enough to the ground for you to get a signal,” Kit answered. “But I don’t think we’ll be waiting long. I don’t see much traffic around us,” he noted, looking at the planes on the MFD.

They were in holding for only ten minutes, and he landed only five minutes later than expected, and rather happily; Brownsville wasn’t going to charge him a landing fee. He taxied up to a temporary parking area by their terminal, giving the girls access to their terminal through a concourse door, then powered down. “Alright, girls, you can get out,” he said as he set the parking brakes and disabled all flight controls and control surfaces. “Remember to stay next to the plane and walk straight to the door when you’re ready.” There was no reason to go through postflight since he was going to start the engine back up as soon as they unloaded. Kit got out and opened the cargo door, and then started pulling out the three small suitcases they brought. “Remember, right here, Monday, six o’clock,” he told them. “I’ll call you before I start out, Sheila.”

“Thanks a million, cousin!” Sheila said, hugging him.

“Yeah, thanks, Kit, you saved us a ton of money and time!” Danielle added, giving him a hug of her own.

“Don’t let Jessie see you do that, or she’ll shave the fur off your tail,” Kit told her, which made her laugh. “Have fun, Allison,” he said, taking her paw, rather formally.

“I’ll make sure she does,” Sheila grinned. “Let’s go find our car, femmes! It’s still a half hour to the island, and we have beer to drink and guys to lay!”

Danielle's cheeks ruffled up as she gave Kit an apologetic look, which only made Kit laugh and shoo her along, then he started out for the terminal so he could pay the landing fee for the airport.

What he thought would be a nice quiet solo flight back turned into anything but. Vil called him while he was sitting on the taxiway, waiting for a commuter plane to cross through the intersection so he could get to the runway. He ignored her until he was in the air, when he could put it on autopilot and get the phone out. He hooked up the hands-free headset for it and pulled his aircraft headset off one ear to put the Bluetooth in his ear. When she answered, he heard her gasp. "Where the hell are you, and what's all that noise?" she asked.

"I'm flying back from Brownsville, I just dropped Sheila and some friends off there for the weekend. What did you need?"

"I don't need anything so badly I'll listen to that droning," she told him. "Call me when you're back on the ground."

He did so when he got back to Georgetown, talking to her as he tied down the plane in a rapidly warming morning. "Alright, I'm on the ground, now what did you need?"

"I got news for you, bro," she told him. "I made a deal with a commuter airline at Bergstrom for your plane. They'll give you some hangar space in their hangar down there until we can get a permanent hangar. I'm going to give you a number for their hangar manager down there, and she'll tell you about it. Remember, though, this is just temporary, bro. They have some empty space in one of their maintenance hangars because the plane that usually takes it is assigned somewhere else, but she'll

be happy to rent you that spot until the plane comes back in four months. The plane's in Europe somewhere right now."

"That sounds good, sis, thank you," he said as he tugged on the guide line securing the tail of the plane. "Cause it sucks having to tie this thing down every time I'm done."

"Hey, that's one of the things I'm here for," she chuckled. "That and trying to spoil you rotten, that is."

"Keep trying," Kit chuckled, "though you've certainly started tempting me because of this plane."

"Oh? I'm starting to taint that purity, eh?" she giggled. "And just how did I manage this miracle?" "I'm not sure I should tell you. It just gives you a new angle of attack to use against me, after all. Why should I give you ammunition?"

"Humor me."

"Well, alright, I guess. I've been pondering getting a jet rating," he told her. "If there's ever a time Rick wants to take most of the office somewhere, we'd all have to take commercial flights. It would be cheaper if I could fly us, but flying eight people would take either a multi-engine prop or a jet, and, well, jets are faster and more comfortable. If I could fly us, we'd save money renting a jet over flying six or seven furs commercial. The only drawback to that is that most jets that can hold eight or more require two pilots to be on board, by law, and there's the fact that I'd have to rate on a specific model of jet, so there would have to be that particular jet available for charter when we went to go rent it. Getting an eight seater would require an extra pilot, but there are some six seat jets that can be flown with just one pilot. It really wouldn't be cost effective to rent a jet big enough to fly

the whole magazine, but a six-seat jet flown by just me would actually be cheaper to rent, since we wouldn't have to hire a second pilot. It's not *really* all that important, but I was working on a jet rating before I was hit by the car, and, well, you know. It's something I never got to finish, and something I'd always wanted to do."

"Hmm. What does it take to get this rating thing?"

"That depends entirely on the jet," he answered. "There's no generic rating for jets, Vil, it's specific to the jet I want to fly. So, I'd have to know what jet I could charter and train to fly that particular jet."

"Let me make some calls, bro," she offered.

"No, I'll do it myself," he said, a bit warningly.

"Bro, I can help with this, and I *promise* I won't throw money around. I'll just ask around and see if there's anyone around Austin willing to let you tag along on flights they're already taking so you can log hours at the controls. Doesn't that help you get your rating? It's what you did when you got your license."

"It's not quite that easy, sis. I'd have to do ground training on the jet, be officially working for the rating to fly the jet. And the pilot that was with me would have to be a flight instructor certified to train me for that jet rating. Those aren't exactly easy to find outside of the professional flight schools or the aircraft builders."

"I'll keep that in mind. But, if I can find you something like that, will you take it?"

"Well," he said hesitantly, considering it. "If you promise not to just rent the jet, I guess I will. It *would* be really nice to be able to sit in the co-

pilot's chair of a jet on a flight."

"I'm glad you will. You've denied yourself what you rightly deserve for a long time, bro. If I can help you get something you want, even if it's something you don't need, well, you know I'm gonna meddle. And after all, your birthday is coming up at the end of the month, and I have to get you a good present," she said with a little chuckle. "I know how hard you worked to get your pilot's license. I'd love to help you keep going with your flight training."

"I appreciate your concern, sis, but I can do without the manipulation."

She laughed. "I'm glad you're using your gift."

"I love it, sis. Thank you again."

"How does it handle? What's it like to fly in it?"

"Why don't you come down and take a joy ride with me?"

She laughed. "Give up my private jet with my personal bedroom to come down and fly in a little single engine propeller plane? Sure!" she said brightly. "I'll have to clear some space on my calendar, though."

"We'd love to see you, sis," he said. "It's been months since you've been here."

"Since the wedding," she affirmed. "Okay, so, while I'm doing this, you look into that ground training you said you need, see where you can get it. With luck, I'll find someone able to do me a favor by the time you're done."

"Remember, no cheating."

“I’ll do my best to hold to that, or at least cover it up so you can’t tell I was cheating,” she giggled. “I’ll look over my schedule and find a good few days to come see you. Hmm, Jessie’s spring break is next week, right?”

“A week from today is when it starts, then she doesn’t have to be back until the following Monday.”

“Let’s see if I can wrangle a day or two somewhere in there, so me and her can spend some quality time together.”

“She’d love to see you.”

“I’d hope so,” she chuckled. “Alright, let me go juggle my schedule some, baby bro. I’ll call you back when I have something solid.”

“Alright.”

“I’ll text you the name and number of that fur about the hangar. She can give you all the details.”

“I was just about to make note that you haven’t given me his number,” he chuckled.

Kit wasn’t sure how to feel about Vil meddling. On one hand, he wasn’t asking her for money, he was asking her to use her influence and power to secure a favor for him. That, though, went paw in paw with that money, for her money gave her that power. Vil had *incredible* power as the CEO of the Vulpan businesses; he had no doubt that she could effectively bully the President of the United States. But, he’d also have to admit, that power was useless unless it was used, and at least he wasn’t asking for anything outrageous. He didn’t want her to arrange any special favors, he just wanted her to look around and see if she could find him a jet that would let him tag along when they went on a flight.

Kit called the hangar after he got home. The fur he had to talk to was named Alice Darrow, and he found her to be a pretty laid-back and friendly young femme. She was the hangar manager for Avia Commuter and Charter Airlines, which had seven offices; Austin, Houston, Seattle, Los Angeles, Baltimore, St. Louis, and they'd just opened a new office in London flying commuter and charter flights between London and European cities. The office here had originally been based in Houston, but they'd moved the home office to Austin when Bergstrom was built because they got their paws on a brand new hangar that had a hell of a lot more office space than their Houston hangar. There was enough traffic for them to keep a flight operation here in Austin, enough for two planes, but they had their main maintenance facility here as well, having moved that from Houston because they had much more room. "The space was originally for a Lear four fifty, so I'm sure your plane will fit in it," she told him. "What have you got?"

"A Cessna four hundred," he answered.

"Oh, nice, and that'll more than fit," she chuckled. "The spot's in the back of the hangar, but you'll have no trouble at all moving in and out, it's a big hangar. I'll give you a clicker that'll open the hangar door if you fly in after hours."

"Sounds good."

"We have an AVGas pump right inside, and we only have one turboprop that uses it," she said temptingly.

He laughed. "Yes, I'll buy my gas from you, if you take Transport."

"Of course we do," she said with a giggle. "Now, were you told that this isn't permanent?"

“Yeah, my sister said I can have the spot for four months.”

“Yeah. Our plane’s coming back after the London office takes delivery of a new eight fifty that’s scheduled for delivery four months from now.”

Kit whistled. “Expensive.”

“Worth it, our London expansion is *really* busy,” she said. “The new tunnel dropped off charter travel to Paris, but there’s lots of other European cities, and London’s a big arrival point for business. The eight fifty’s gonna do commuter routes from London to other cities. Our number crunchers say the plane will pay itself off in five years.”

“Sounds like it was a good investment, then.”

“I certainly hope so,” she laughed. “I’d prefer you come to park the plane when I’m here. Can you bring it here today?”

“Well, if my friend is home, I think we could get it done before I have to go to work,” he said, looking at the clock.

“Well, you have my number, call me if you can.”

“Sure.”

Lupe was indeed home, and he was willing to give Kit a hand. Lupe drove with him as he went up to Georgetown, telling Alice he was on his way on the phone on the way up, and he parked his truck behind his plane at the airport. “Now, you know where to go?”

“Yeah, brah, the backside of the airport. You have to go down one seventy-one to get there. Avia, right?”

“Yup,” he said, getting out of his truck and giving Lupe the key. “Do not burn out my clutch,” he warned.

Lupe laughed. "I know how to drive a stick, brah," he assured him.

"I should be there waiting for you," Kit told him, which made Lupe laugh.

"You better be. If you got beat somewhere by a car, you'd have to hand in your license in shame."

"Oh, it can definitely happen, Lupe," he said. "If they stick me in a holding pattern, you might get there before I can land."

"Well, let's hope it don't happen."

Kit took off for the second time that day for a five minute flight from Georgetown to Austin. He barely managed to get over a thousand feet before he was descending again, being guided down by a controller at Bergstrom. Bergstrom had two full-length runways for jets and two smaller runways to the southeast of them for small planes, and that was where Kit was sent to land. He relied on an airport layout graphic he brought up on his laptop computer, sitting in the copilot's seat, to guide himself to the Avia hangar, and he called Alice from inside the plane as he was taxiing down a long line of hangars. "I'm on the ground and coming to the hangar," he told her.

"Okay, park outside and I'll show you around before you taxi in."

Alice was a small collie, short and thin, but she was bouncy. She explained the procedures they used in the hangar while they walked down the clearly marked center line, showing him how the hangar was divided into four quadrants for the four planes that would be parked there. The two planes in the front of the hangar were both Citation business jets, the little CJ1 models, the six seater versions, obviously in for maintenance. The front

two bays were their maintenance bays, while the back of the hangar looked to house two planes. The plane in the back on the left was a Cessna 421, an eight passenger turboprop, which was the one permanently assigned to Austin, while the back right area, cordoned off with yellow paint on the floor, was empty. There was an open garage door on the left side of the hangar, between the Citation and the 421, probably for maintenance trucks or clients, and there were doors that looked like they went to offices behind the empty area that would be his parking spot, which was in the back of the hangar on the right side. “Okay, this is yours for four months,” she told him, pointing to the empty marked area in the back right of the hangar.

“Everything inside the paint. The AV pump is right there, and the hoses should easily reach your plane. Just log how many gallons you pump and we’ll bill you for it,” she assured him. “You’re free to taxi in and out without getting a tow since your plane is so small, just warn everyone before you do it. I’ll give you a remote for the hangar and garage door so you don’t have to get in and out to open it, it’s an auto-open one. We own the six tie down spots outside the hangar too, so if you can’t get the doors open for some reason, tie down out there, so you won’t have to pay to park.”

“Can I drive into the hangar?”

“Sure, we let clients do it all the time. That’s what that garage door over there is for,” she said, pointing to the open double-sized garage door. “The clicker I’ll give you opens that door too. Just drive down the middle between the red lines, stay out of the plane areas. I’ll even let you park your car in your plane spot, since your plane’s so small.”

“Wow, thanks a lot, that’s nice of you.”

“No sweat,” she shrugged. “You’re paying rent, after all, so may as well let you get your money’s worth,” she winked. “Let’s go up to the office so you can sign the contract.”

Lupe was waiting in the lobby when he came in from the back. He waved to Kit, and gave Alice a curious, assessing look he saved for femmes that caught his interest. Kit had to chuckle; Lupe would lay the moves on her when they were done. After Kit read and signed the four month lease agreement, he went back out and taxied his plane into the hangar. He had no trouble at all getting it to his area, which was entirely too big for his plane, so much room he could easily turn the plane around with his Pathfinder parked inside the yellow lines within the spot. Alice and Lupe were talking near the door leading to the offices as Kit got out of his plane and locked it up, then he greeted one of the Avia workers who wandered over to admire his plane. They chatted a minute, until a stern look from Alice sent him scurrying back to the 421 and what he was doing. But her entire demeanor changed when she turned to talk to Lupe again, becoming all demure and coy. Kit saw that she was interested in Lupe, and was already playing the game with him.

Kit had to stand there and listen to them exchange goofy lines, then exchanged phone numbers, then Lupe finally asked her out. “So, how does dinner and a movie sound?” he asked her.

“Well, I think I could go for that,” she said with an appealing little smile, looking up at him. Lupe wasn’t very tall, but at least he was taller than her. “How about tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow’s fine with me,” Lupe grinned.

“Lupe, I have to go to work,” he reminded him.

“Oh. Oh, yeah. Sure. Gotta go, babe. I’ll call ya.”

“You’d better,” she said with a smile, which made Lupe chuckle.

“Damn, she’s cute,” Lupe said as they walked to his truck, the garage door opener-like control in Kit’s paw. Lupe had parked in the lot outside the side of the hangar facing the public, which was covered in white stone and had the Avia logo painted in blue over the glass doors.

“She’s a smart one, Lupe, be careful.”

“We’ll see,” Lupe grinned.

“And remember she’s in control of the space I’m renting for my plane,” Kit added. “You piss her off and get me evicted, we’re gonna have words.”

Lupe gave him a look, then laughed delightedly. “Then somebody’d better take a dive during poker on Sunday,” he grinned.

“Ohh, it sounds like someone doesn’t want rummage rights through our leftovers.”

Lupe winced. “That’s dirty pool, brah.”

“Vulpans go for the throat,” Kit noted in a calm voice.

Work turned out to be nearly as exciting as that morning, for when he showed up at one, nearly late, a small ocelot in a dark suit was standing in the main office waiting for him, with several uniformed members of the Austin Police behind her. Two furs he didn’t know were in his office, sitting at his desk, going through his computer. She stepped up to him and handed him a two folded sheafs of papers wrapped in blue, and Kit knew what they were.

A search warrant.

“What now?” he sighed.

“We have a search warrant, ordering you to surrender all notes, transcripts, drafts, edits, and or recordings pertaining to an article written about an illegal brothel,” the ocelot told him.

“Well, I don’t have any of it,” he told them. “They were all destroyed as part of my agreement with my source.”

The ocelot gave him a dark look. “If you’re lying and covering for your source, sir, you can be charged with obstruction of justice if we find anything.”

“You’re already snooping, go right ahead. You’re not going to find what I don’t have. I’ll guarantee you you won’t find anything.”

And they didn’t. Mike was no fool; because they worked in a magazine, every workstation in the office had a program that eradicated data off of the hard drive by *zeroing* the disk, causing the hard drive to write blank data over what one wanted deleted from the hard drives, which destroyed it. Kit had that same program on his laptop and home computers, and he had run it there as well. They couldn’t use a disk snooper to reconstruct that data, because the hard drive had completely written over all of it, permanently destroying it.

The computer techs in his office were quick to realize that. “He has Data Wiper on his workstation, counsel,” the short cat told the ocelot. “If he ran it, we won’t recover anything off this computer.”

“Like I told you, I *destroyed* all my notes,” Kit said simply. “And I’m not naïve enough to think that just hitting *delete* on my computer erases it

forever.” He offered up his laptop as well. “And you’ll see I have that program on my laptop too.”

The techs took his laptop, started it up, then frowned when it was up and running. “We can check, counsel, but I doubt we’re going to find anything.”

“Check it.”

The DVD he burned did, however, come up. “I see here that you burned word documents to a DVD,” the tech said after he worked with his laptop. “Where is this DVD?”

“I’ve burned quite a few DVDs,” he said simply. “What file names?”

When the tech repeated them, Kit knew that those were the research notes because of the dates they were burned to the DVD. They weren’t given names that anyone but him would really understand; they didn’t say *Allison’s notes* or anything like that, they were listed by the evolution of the article, with names such as *base notes* or *outline* or *second draft*. Since Kit never worked on more than one article at a time, he never felt any need to differentiate; that came when he *archived* the information. When he archived it, it was bundled under the title of the article then all the individual files were renamed to reflect the archive, since he often changed the titles of articles halfway through writing them.

Besides, using the same names for all his research files always put the same names in his *documents* list on his shortcut window. After archiving, he just cleared everything out of the files and started over.

“If you can see I’ve burned DVDs, why don’t you keep looking? I burn DVDs of those same files over and over, it’s part of my archiving system

that keeps things standardized. Since I do the archiving for all the writers, I change the names of their research files to a standard format then burn it. We keep three copies of all our notes and background information. One copy is in our server, another is the backups of the server, and the last is kept on DVDs in hard storage in case of some kind of cataclysm that wipes out all of Mike's backups of our network data." He pointed at the wall. "Two doors down, you'll find our storage room with a few boxes of DVDs, all organized by week. That's our hard storage archive."

"So, you burned a DVD of the information we want?"

"Do I look dumb to you?" Kit asked simply. "I promised my source I would destroy all notes. Why on earth would I burn a DVD of notes I intended to destroy?"

And that was the easy way to avoid answering the question—and maybe get busted for perjury—while giving an *indirect* answer they'd buy.

Vil didn't raise a fool.

"Then what did you burn on this DVD?"

"That week, I'd say it was Barry's interview with the head of the Austin Election Commission. Either that or background notes on instances of gay hate crimes committed around the U.T. campus. Maybe both. I don't recall exactly."

Kit waited patiently for them to go get the DVD, silently praying that they took him on his word and didn't actually check the DVD to see if its volume number matched the number of the DVD he burned. That would require them to load the DVD, where the DVD they'd go get would have the same week written on it as the DVD he burned. He almost held his

breath when they came back, and was silently gleeful when he saw they did not have the DVD with them.

“It’s there,” the tech told the ocelot. “Right where he said it was. Two DVDs burned that week.”

“Did you see what was on them?” the ocelot asked.

“Do you really think he’d leave it out like that?” the tech asked.

“Check.”

Kit was again inwardly nervous as the tech went and got the two DVDs he’d burned that week, then checked them one by one. One of them had the same list of files he’d burned to the DVD, matching up exactly. “This is it,” the tech said, holding up the DVD. “It’s the one about the election commission.”

Thank *God* he was such a creature of habit! And thank God they were just looking at file names! And thank God he didn’t just merge everything to one DVD and burn it all together like he usually did! But that week was so wild, so messed up, he’d not done it all together. It was the only week in the box that had more than one DVD for it. That little mistake was saving his ass right now!

“We’re done here, counsel,” the tech said. “There’s nothing here.”

“Alright then. If you’d come with us, Mister Vulpan, we’ll go check your house and home computers.”

Kit didn’t entirely like them coming into his house, but when they arrived at his apartment, he showed them to his den and let the techs go after his computers while uniforms searched his house. One of them did

come up with a DVD, taken out of the closet, and Kit's cheek fur ruffled a little when he realized just what that DVD was. "Uh, if you're going to look at that one, I'd ask you clear the room of the males," he said quietly to the ocelot. "That one has some pictures on it of my wife that I don't think I'd like seen by anyone but a femme."

She was at least accommodating in that regard. He let her use his laptop to investigate the DVD. After bringing up a text list of files, then seeing they were all picture files, she quietly removed it and gave it back to him. "It clearly has no documents on it," she said.

"Thank you, ma'am," Kit said sincerely, putting it back in the case.

It was a very nervous hour. Kit did in fact have that DVD in the house, but it was hidden in a rather ingenious way; in plain sight. It was in the entertainment center, inside a *Pretty Femme* DVD movie case. The movie DVD itself was over at Sheila's apartment, and he wanted that DVD where he could get at it quickly and easily but also keep it hidden, so he Lightscribed a copy of the DVD art of *Pretty Femme* on the DVD, and then put it in the case. The police did go through his entertainment center, but thankfully, they didn't check every single disc in all his DVD and game disc cases. The *Pretty Femme* box was just shuffled aside after the uniform officer opened it and just glanced inside, saw *Pretty Femme* printed on the DVD, and then moved on.

They had missed it.

After an hour in his apartment, the techs and police came up empty. The ocelot then handed him another piece of blue-wrapped papers. "This is a subpoena, Mister Vulpan," she told him. "Since there's no notes, you'll

have to testify about it in person. Wednesday, March fifteenth, ten o'clock at the courthouse."

"Oh joy," he said blandly.

"We'll take you back to your office, then," she said.

Once he got back, Rick, Savid, Barry and he all congregated in Rick's office, and they talked about it. Kit made it plain that he was not going to give them any answers at all, which was what Rick wanted to hear from him. Rick and Savid basically gave Kit their full support, since they were listed as the editors of the magazine and they'd probably get subpoenaed next, but they were relieved when Kit said he'd talk to Kevin about it. Kevin was his lawyer, so this was his domain. "We should have called him as soon as they started searching, son," Rick told him. "Because I'm not entirely sure that search warrant was entirely legal. Did they cause any trouble?"

"No, they didn't trash our house or anything like that."

"Did they find anything?" Savid asked.

"I destroyed all of it," he said, giving Rick a look that told him he was lying, mainly for Barry and Savid. Rick already knew that he intended to keep one copy of his notes, and that DVD...and it would get moved tomorrow.

It was time to abuse his family's connections just a tiny bit more.

He called Vil as soon as the meeting broke up. He needed her help, but he was also fearful that they were tapping his phone, so he was very careful. "Sis," he said, "can you do me a favor?"

“Well, sure. What is it?”

He was quiet a second, then spoke in a voice that told her that he was deadly, deadly serious. “I just had the Austin police search my office and my house,” he told her, “and I got subpoenaed.”

What? Oh, like *hell* they did!” she said with sudden heat. “I’ll—“

“You’ll leave it alone,” Kit told her. “Let me call Kevin and see what kind of legal options I have before you start going Rambo all over everyone.”

She actually laughed. “I have every right to protect my little brother from being harassed,” she declared.

“Yeah, well, let me talk to Kevin first. I have the right to protect my sources, so I don’t think they can really make me testify. But I want to talk to Kevin first.”

“I’ll—“

“Vil, don’t talk, listen. Let me handle it. But, there is something you can do for me. Is that lawyer you went to school with still here in Austin, the one that used to work as a *courier*? I’d like to talk to him about it, and I know he’s good. I want to talk to him *face to face*. If they subpoenaed me, well, they may be doing something I’ve seen done before, so I’d rather not use the phone.”

She was silent just a second. “Yes, my lawyer friend is still in Austin,” she answered in a tone he knew meant she understood what he was really asking. “I’ll call him and have him drop by your office tomorrow morning to talk to you about it.”

“Thanks, sis.”

“Any time, bro.”

Take *that*, the District Attorney of Travis County. If he trapped Kit into admitting that hard copies of his article notes existed, and he wanted that information, he was going to have to wrestle Vil for it...and Kit rather doubted he had the balls to try.

“Now, let me make a few calls,” she said in a grim voice. “They’re not gonna push around my little brother,” she actually seethed.

“I can take care of myself, and like I said, let me call Kevin before anyone does anything. Let’s see where the law is before we start going Vulpan all over people.”

She laughed helplessly over the phone. “Going Vulpan! God, is that ever the truth!”

After talking to Vil, he called Kevin. Rick was probably right that they should have called Kevin when the cops were searching, but on the other paw, they left without finding anything. Had they backed him into a corner, odds were he’d have called Kevin to come help. Kevin was startled to hear about it, and was in the office not ten minutes later, reading the copy of the search warrant he was given as well as the subpoena. “Well, this search warrant is legit,” he said, turning it over. “I’d have had to argue against anything they found in a hearing after the fact. It’s signed by a judge, that’s all they really need, and I know that judge’s signature. I clerked for him. Since they came up empty, they’ll have a hell of a time trying to get another one for the office and your house, but they could try to get one to search your cars, your plane, or your safe deposit box. If they try, call me *immediately* and don’t let them start searching until I get there. But this

subpeona, this doesn't sit right with me. I need to go look up some cases, but there's something about it that's not ironclad," he said, looking at it. "I'm almost positive we can get you out of it. Let me go back to the firm and talk to Delores. I may be your attorney, but she's also my boss and always makes me tell her about any work I do for you, to make sure I do it right. She's also very well versed in criminal law. If there's any hole at all in this subpeona, she'll find it, and then we'll quash it. Can I take this back to the firm?"

"It's all yours," Kit told him earnestly. "I take it you're now on retainer?"

He laughed. "Nah, I'll do the research and file the motion for you pro bono, especially since you helped me set up that entertainment center last week. This is no big thing. But, if I have to go argue in a courtroom, that's another matter," he said delicately.

"I don't mind paying, Kev. You *are* my lawyer. I don't expect you to do this for free."

"I'll do the easy stuff free, at least what I can hide from the other partners but Delores," he grinned. "Delores won't say anything. I can't really hide doing real work if I'm going to the courthouse to argue a motion."

"I told you, no problem, Kev. As far as I'm concerned, you're on retainer right now."

"That'll make Delores happy," he chuckled. "You know, I'm amazed they're doing this."

"What do you mean?"

“Kit, you may be down here, but you’re a *Vulpan*. The DA has to know that if he pisses off your family, they’ll destroy him. Someone like Vil could ruin him with a flick of her wrist all the way from Boston.”

“Well, I’m outcast from the family and it’s basically common knowledge, so I guess he’s willing to take the risk.”

“If I were the DA, I’d never have the balls to try it,” he admitted. “I value my life. But, from what I’ve heard of the DA in office now, he’s one of those crusader types. You know, war against drugs, war against crime, war against indecency. But if he thinks he’s big enough to play in the Vulpan’s sandbox, he’s either really brave or really stupid. It’ll be a rude awakening for him the first time he deals with your sister. Anyway, let me take this back and talk to Delores. I’ll call you when we have something, either tonight or early tomorrow.”

Kit called Vil back and told her what Kevin said. “See, there’s no reason for you to come down here and buy out the city in a snit,” he told her. “Kevin’s pretty sure that the subpoena is flawed, and he’s talking to Delores Kittimer about it. They’ll let me know more either tonight or tomorrow, but Kevin said the outlook is very good. So just leave this one alone for now, sis. Let’s hear what Delores has to say first. Until then, leave it alone.”

“Well...alright. I don’t like it, but alright.”

“You have to let me grow up eventually, big sister,” he teased.

She laughed. “I guess I am being a nosy mom,” she admitted. “If I start acting like Hannah, you have official permission to smack me on the nose.”

The search and subpoena were a surprise, but it also didn't grind the office to a halt. They all had work to do, and a lot of it, since next issue was expanding by 14 pages, from the old target length of 24 pages to the new target length of 38. That was 14 pages of additional information, 14 pages they had to fill with interesting, viable stuff, and not just ads. Rick was absolutely adamant about his ratio of material to ads, and that meant that 79% of those pages had to be filled with articles, pictures, or other features. It was a noticeable increase in work for the four staff writers, for now Lilly and Marty were doing real writing, Barry was doing an extra article, and Kit was doing an extra article on top of his researching duties. Barry's article was about the lack of swimming pools for recreation for students in Austin, and Kit's extra article was about spring break destinations for students either with low money or no car of their own to get around. Kit had to research the data for both of those articles, as well as research for the closing of The Pit for Lilly's article, and the statistics Marty needed for his article about gay hate crimes on the U.T. campus, for there had been just such an incident four days ago that involved the spray painting of an anti-gay slogan on a car parked near campus. It was work for everyone else too, for Savid and Jeffrey had a lot more graphics to design, Sheila wasn't there, so Mike and Denise were running everyone's errands, and Rick had to manage it all. The only ones that didn't have a huge workload increase from the expansion were Denise and Mike, but they did anything and everything they could for everyone else. Mike also spent that time going out to take the photographs they needed for the issue, he did proofreading and formatting for the writers, he volunteered to do some footwork tonight to cover some nightclubs to help Lilly with her *The Scene* duties, and he also expanded the website by adding a new page where people could submit photos for the new feature they were introducing next week, named *Student Snapshots*.

Denise had taken over for Sheila doing the little things as best she could, often rushing back to her desk to answer the phone, trying to help everyone as much as she could. Rick rewarded her by giving her a piece of Marty's usual duties, letting her pick some of the letters for the mailbag which she had to proofread and edit to fit in the allotted size without changing the meaning of the writer's intent. It was her first real journalism project since working for them, and she was happy to take her shot at it.

It was really busy in the office, with a focus that they didn't often show. They'd all lost time because of the search that disrupted the office, and in a magazine working on a deadline, losing an afternoon was a bad thing. Everyone felt like they were already close to deadline, so there wasn't as much bantering and visiting, but there was a hell of a lot of work. Mike went out for pizza for everyone since nobody wanted to leave for lunch, and Jessie showed up with Sandy, Charlotte, and Sam around four. "Wow, it's so quiet," Jessie noted as Sandy went to Jeffrey's office, and Charlotte stood out in the main office talking with Lilly, who had come out of Rick's office.

"We're kinda busy," Kit told her as Sam and Charlotte wandered in behind his wife, sending Marty's research off to him, then looking at Sam and Charlotte. "Guys, can we have a minute?"

"No hanky-panky at work," Charlotte teased, but the serious look on Kit's face deflated her humor a little. "Uh, sure. We'll wait out in the office."

"What's going on, handsome fox?" Jessie asked.

"They served a search warrant on me this morning and searched the office and our house. And I got subpoenaed."

“What? Why?” she asked, her face aghast.

He explained it to her quickly, then leaned back in his chair. “They didn’t find anything, of course. I’ve been around the block enough times to get past it.”

“Did you tell Vil?”

He nodded. “She’s going to help, in her own way, but I did talk to Kevin. He said there’s nothing we can really do about the search warrant, and not to really worry about it, especially since they came up empty. They can’t really ask for another one since they didn’t find anything this time, unless they get a warrant for our safe deposit box. But they won’t find anything in there either. But, he also thinks the subpoena is illegal, so he’s filing a motion to quash it. He said Misses Kittimer is going to let him handle my case, but she’ll be watching over him *personally* to make sure he does it right.”

“Well, that does make me feel a little better,” Jessie said. “I mean, I love Kev, but he *is* just starting. Misses Kittimer is a partner, she’s got lots of experience.”

“I’m sure they’ll handle it. Kev said it’d just take a quick brief and a few hours of research, then the hearing to quash the motion. He’s not charging us for anything but having to go to court, though, which is really nice of him. Kev knows we’re not exactly rich, and I appreciate them not making us dig into our crisis fund.”

“They searched our house, didn’t they?”

He nodded. “They didn’t tear it up, I was watching them. They found our *honeymoon* DVD, but they didn’t see anything on it.”

“Oh, thank God!” Jessie said, her cheeks blooming.

“So, that’s the big news. They didn’t find anything, and they never will. The firm is on the case to defend me against the subpoena, so we’re just waiting to hear back from Kevin.”

“I’m going to feel weird in our house now, knowing a bunch of strangers went through our stuff,” she said, a bit indignantly. “It’ll take time for it to feel like it’s *ours* again.”

“I know the feeling. Anyway, as far as non-earthshaking news goes,” he said, which made her giggle, “I also moved the plane this morning. Vil found me a temporary place to park the plane on Bergstrom that’s inside a hangar, renting a spot from a commuter airline that had an extra space in their hangar. But I can only use it for four months, then the plane that occupies that space is going to be back.”

“Well, that’s better than nothing,” she noted.

“Yeah. Lupe took me up to Georgetown and picked me up at Bergstrom, and he already has a date with the hangar manager for the airline,” he grunted.

Jessie giggled, obviously starting to feel a little better. “He’s such a dog,” she said.

“No doubt there, but at least he has enough sense not to go after Sheila.”

“You think there’s going to be a lot of trouble over the article?”

He shook his head. “I have rock solid constitutional rights,” he said. “This is about protecting a source, and they can’t do anything about it.

They'd never even *try* this if I worked for the newspaper or a big magazine. They think us little rinky-dink city magazines don't know our rights, so they're trying to intimidate me into giving up my source."

"I hope so."

"I know so," he said confidently.

"Well, let me get my work done, love," she said. "I have some writing to do for Jeffrey."

"So, when's the wedding?" he asked with a grin, referring to her *Missy and Cutler* strips.

"As if I'd ever tell you," she said primly. She kept the plot evolution of her strips a secret, even from him. "There may not even be a wedding!"

"Suuuure," he teased.

"Just for that, I'll make sure there's not," she teased, turning her back and flicking her tail at him insultingly as she strode from the office.

Jessie went home after about an hour, which Charlotte and Sandy spent in her office with her and Sam spent out in the big office on the phone with Kevin. The four of them were going to a movie tonight, since it was Kit's late night and Kevin wasn't able to go out because he had in the middle of his second trial before Kit dropped this on him, and he didn't like to go out while actively trying his case. Sam certainly understood, and gave him the space he needed so he could give his clients all the attention he deserved. Lilly and Mike left to do their footwork for *The Scene*, and Rick, Savid, and Jeffrey called it a night around nine. Kit stayed in the office to finish up Lilly's research, then got home around eleven. By doing it tonight, he could leave a little early on Saturday.

He got home to find the lights out everywhere but in the bedroom. He set the alarm and dropped off his attache by the couch on his way back, and found Jessie laying in bed on her side, wearing a seductive lace teddy that he noticed *immediately*. “Welcome home, love,” she said to him, swishing her tail behind herself sensually. “After all the stress today, I thought you could use a little relaxation therapy.”

“What a welcome,” he said with an eager smile, which turned into a hurried act of obedience when she crooked her finger at him.

Saturday was just as busy, and a big relief for him. Not a minute after he arrived and unlocked the office a few minutes before nine, a fur in a business suit came into the office and called out. When Kit came out of his office, he introduced himself as an old friend of Vil’s and showed him his Vulpan Shipyards ID card and Massachusetts driver’s license, which was what Kit wanted to know; this fur was Vil’s courier. They talked for about five minutes, then Kit gave him his encrypted DVD. He was gone before anyone else made it into the office.

Mike had come in on his day off to help Lilly compile her club information for *The Scene*, Marty was in, Barry was in, and Kit, as usual, was in before everyone else. But Kit had finished all the research for everyone else’s articles, so he only had to worry about his own article today. He did, though, have some advance research for planned articles in a few weeks dealing with the elections. There was going to be a Democratic debate in Austin in late March at big auditorium in U.T., and they were planning to cover it. Rick had already secured press passes for himself, Kit, Barry, Lilly, Marty, and Mike, and he was currently busting his ass trying to secure at least one interview with at least one candidate. He doubted that he was going to pull off that miracle, for why would a Presidential candidate

bother to interview with a magazine that circulated in two mid-sized cities and a small town near them, but he was trying. Rick had spent almost all day yesterday calling campaigns trying to arrange an interview, with no luck.

The day started off rather well. After getting his DVD into Vil's safe paws, Kevin called him back in a conference call with his boss, Delores Kittimer, who was a partner at his firm. "Kit, we can quash your subpoena," Kevin told him right off.

"The subpoena violates precedents Texas law follows called *bad faith subpoenas*," Delores explained. "If a subpoena serves no purpose other than to try to force a journalist to reveal his source, without any other evidence, then Texas law has followed a precedent that says that's not allowed. I talked to the DA's office, and they have *nothing*. All they have is the article, no evidence, not even any certainty there was even a crime and if it happened in their jurisdiction if there was, and that's not enough. I'm completely confident we can quash the subpoena."

"Thank God," Kit said with a sigh. "When will it happen?"

"We talked to the judge yesterday afternoon. Since the court date is so close, he'll listen to our motion to quash it when you have to show up to testify, to give the prosecution a chance to present any other evidence first. He'll listen to the motion and then rule then."

"Okay, so I still show up at the courthouse on Wednesday?"

"Yes. We'll be there with you," Delores told him. "Kevin will be chairing the argument."

“And Misses Kittimer will be right there to make sure I do it right,” Kevin chuckled.

“That’s my job as your boss, Kevin,” she chuckled in reply.

“Thank God,” Kit sighed. “Thank you, guys, thank you so much.”

“We’re your attorneys, Kit,” Delores said gently. “It’s our job and our privilege to be there for you when you need legal representation.”

“Well, that doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate it, especially since you didn’t charge me at all.”

“Well, what we did before, checking out the subpoena, that was pro bono. But, I’m afraid we’ll have to bill you for the court date. Not me, just Kevin,” she said quickly. “I’m just going to be there as an observer, on my own time. Kevin will be the only one billing hours.”

“I don’t mind at all, Misses Kittimer,” Kit told her honestly. “Kev said he’d check out the subpoena as a favor, since I did him a favor last week. I never expected you to do it for free if you had to do real work for me, so bill me for whatever real work you had to do. It’s only fair.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. We’ll only bill you for whatever time it takes at the hearing, though. It only took me about two minutes to find the holes in the subpoena and call a friend in the DA’s office, and I won’t charge for two minutes.”

Kit laughed. “Well, I do truly appreciate that, Misses Kittimer,” he told her. “I’m not sure I could afford two of your minutes.”

She giggled girlishly. “They would be very eventful minutes,” she said with feigned seriousness.

Kit called Vil almost immediately after he was off the phone. “Delores said—“

“I know what she said, she told me before she called you,” she told him, rather smugly. “I’ll give over on this one, bro. I’ll let your lawyers handle it, because Delores absolutely *promised* me she’d kill this subpoena and get them off your back. If she fails, I’m gonna take a huge bite out of her ass. You don’t double-cross a Vulpan,” she said, a bit vindictively.

“I’m happy to hear that, sis.”

“I’ll still be watching, though,” she warned. “And if Delores fails, I’ll take care of it.”

“I won’t say a word if it does,” he promised, “because I promised my source I’d keep her secret, and I’ll go to jail before I break that promise. But I’m not too keen on the idea of being thrown in jail,” he admitted with a chuckle.

“You leave that to me,” she told him. “If they try to send you to jail, call me. I’ll step on that DA so fast he won’t have time to squeal.”

“It’s a deal.”

Saturday was his flex day, and he often had the luxury to leave early when he got all his work done. But Kit hung around to do some accounting work for Rick, as Rick had taught him his books and often let Kit enter payments and charges to their accounts so long as Kit left a detailed ledger of what he’d done. That put Kit in a position to know the financial health of the magazine better than anyone else. They were going to be in the red for the first expanded issue, but Rick’s notes and advertiser database showed him that they’d break even for their second, and show a profit for their third

and beyond. Rick had secured more advertisers than he expected for the expansion, and some of them already had print ads designed and ready to go rather than having to get them created. That would get the magazine back into profitability much faster than Rick had planned...though Kit's investment was still a huge benefit. It was literally paying their salaries this week, and would help pay them next week. As he invested more money, it would be capital the magazine could keep in reserve in case of an emergency, and also give them the ability to buy some new equipment if they needed it. Rick, for example, was considering buying a car titled to the magazine, which he could then drive and claim against taxes for both the car and for the gas and other expenditures he paid out for it. In effect, Rick was going to drive a company car, which let him claim every penny of expenses he shelled out for that car against taxes, which he couldn't do with his truck. Kit thought that that was rather clever, and Rick did deserve to get something back for all the hard work he'd put into the magazine. Replacing his 12 year old truck would be suitable reward.

He keyed in a series of expense reports Barry had submitted for little things like batteries and gas for his car when his Blackberry rang. Rick did compensate them for gas but not the other little things, and they were tax deductible as business expenses, for either the magazine and for them. Rick claimed the compensation for gas against the magazine's taxes and kept track of other expenses for the reporters, which would help them when it was time for them to claim the expenses against their taxes. Kit kept every receipt of everything he spent for the magazine, for he fully intended to claim it on his taxes next year. He picked up his phone and saw it was Martha, so he put it to his ear as he finished putting in an expense on the Excel spreadsheet. "Hey Martha, what's up?"

“Kit,” Martha said quickly. “You need to come to Austin General.”

“What’s wrong? What happened?”

“Rick broke his leg,” she said quickly. “He was fixing the roof on the barn and fell off.”

“Oh my God! Is he okay?”

“He’s in surgery right now, dear. His leg was pretty badly broken. The bone was sticking out,” she said, then he gave her a second to recover herself. “Can you get down here?”

“I’ll be right down. Let me call Jessie and go pick her up, then I’m on the way. Do you need anything?”

“No, dear, no, thank you. Just come down.”

“I’m on my way.”

“Thank you, Kit.”

“Any time, Martha. See you in a few minutes. Bye now.”

When Martha hung up, he snatched up his Blackberry and speed dialed Jessie. “Hey, my handsome fox,” she said sweetly.

“Love, be ready for me to pick you up, we have to go to the hospital,” he told her quickly as he rushed for the door. “Rick broke his leg.”

“Oh no! Is he okay?”

“Martha said he had to have surgery, it was a compound fracture. Can you call Mike and have him spread the word?”

“Sure, sure I can. I’ll call Vil and tell her too, she’ll want to know.”

“Okay. I’m setting the alarm right now, so I should be home in about ten minutes or so.”

“Alright, I’ll be waiting.”

Kit drove perhaps a little too fast, and found Jessie standing by their assigned parking space with her phone to her face. She climbed into the Pathfinder quickly when he pulled up without pulling into the space, holding up traffic while she got in, then they hurried off. “No, I don’t know, Lilly,” Jessie was saying into the phone. “Kit said Martha said Rick was in surgery. I don’t know which room. Just get to Austin General, that’s where we’re all headed, we can meet in the lobby and figure it all out. Okay, let me call Jeffrey, you make the calls and I’ll see you at the hospital. Bye-bye.” She lowered the phone and scrolled through the numbers on her display. “I’ve told Mike and Lilly so far,” she told him. “Mike said he’d call Barry and Savid, and Lilly said she’d call Denise and Marty.”

“Good,” Kit said as he turned. “Did you tell Vil yet?”

“No, I’m starting local and working my way out,” she said. “Mike was asking me a million questions I couldn’t answer.”

“We should call Sheila and let her know too,” Kit said. “She can’t get back up here til I go get her, but she does deserve to know. She works there too, after all.”

“Okay, I’ll call her next. Jeffrey? It’s Jessie.”

Kit got them to the hospital in seven minutes, by nearly running a few red lights. He parked in the visitor lot, and Jessie was calling Sheila as they hurried towards the main entrance. Kit called Martha’s cell phone to find out where in the hospital she was, and he and Jessie finished at almost the

same time. “Sheila asked you to come pick them up tomorrow morning,” she said. “They’re going to cut their trip short.”

“I can do that. Martha’s on her way to the third floor from outside, in the waiting room just off the elevator,” he told her. “She doesn’t know how much longer he’s going to be in surgery.”

“Okay. I’ll call Vil, so I’ll see you up there.” Austin General was one of the few hospitals that allowed the use of cell phones inside, but only in hospital rooms. They didn’t allow anyone to use them in waiting rooms or hallways to keep cell phone users from disturbing other furs, so Jessie already knew that she had to wait outside by the front doors to call Vil from her cell phone.

He met Martha in the third floor waiting room. The tall, slightly plump great dane gave him a crushing hug, twinging his back a little bit, and he patted her on the back as she held onto him for a long moment. “It’s going to be alright, Martha, it’s just a broken leg,” he told her assuringly.

“I know, dear, but surgery is surgery,” she answered. He pushed out enough to look into her eyes, holding her paws in his own.

“What happened exactly?”

“Well, Rick was working on the barn, fixing a leak up on the roof, when he just slipped. He slid down the roof and right off the edge.”

“He should have asked for help,” Kit grunted.

“Our next-door neighbor was helping him, dear,” she said. “It was just an accident.”

“How long has he been in surgery?” he asked.

“He just went in when I called you,” she said. “It was the first chance I had to tell anyone.”

“I understand, Martha,” he said, patting her forearm. “Are you alright?”

“I—it’s just frightening, dear,” she told him. “I know it’s not life threatening, but you didn’t see it. It was *horrible*,” she shuddered.

“Well, the docs will get him all patched up, don’t you worry.”

Jessie came out of the elevator and rushed into Martha’s arms, giving her a long, compassionate hug. “It’s going to be okay, Martha,” she said.

“Thank you, dear,” she said.

More and more furs arrived, both ones he knew and ones he didn’t. A portly doberman shook his paw and introduced himself as Bill Wilson, who was the fur helping Rick with the roof when he fell. “I tried to catch him, but he just,” he said, whistling and sliding his paw over his other quickly. “Was over before I could even reach out.” He met a few other of Rick’s neighbors, all farmers and ranchers, where Rick lived on a tiny ranch that didn’t have any animals or stock. Rick had bought it for a song from an elderly couple who couldn’t work it anymore when he moved back to Austin ten years ago, after leaving a job with Newsweek to strike out on his own in the journalism world. Rick was a native son, who had left to work with Newsweek, then had returned because his high-school sweetheart wanted to go back home. Rick had worked at the newspaper a few years, “trading down” as some had accused him, but that was only extra income for him to help raise enough capital to start his own magazine. The waiting room filled up as not just the crew came in, but with other friends. Sam and Kevin hurried in, no doubt told by Jeffrey through Sandy, and the sorority

wolf, Charlotte, showed up out of the blue. “We met at the wedding,” she said in explanation to Kit. “Rick was really nice. I hope he’s okay. Any word?”

“No word yet,” Kit told her. “He’s been in for about an hour.”

After nearly everyone was there, Kit got a text from Vil to have him call her. He went outside and speed dialed her, and she picked up before it even went half a ring. “Bro,” she said. “I’m over Ohio right now. I should be there in about three and a half hours. How is he?”

“No word yet,” he answered. “He’s still in surgery.”

“Kit! Kit, he’s okay!” Jessie shouted, running out of the front doors towards him. “He’s going to a room!”

“Oh thank God,” Kit said explosively. “He *just* got out of surgery,” he told Vil. “Pretty kitty said they’re moving him to a room. Let me go up and see him, I can call from the hospital room.”

“Okay, call me when you get up there.”

Holding Jessie’s paw, Kit rushed up the stairs with her to the second floor, and down a corridor. They entered a private room filled with furs, and Rick was the center of attention. His lower left leg was wrapped up thick bandages and braces, and his tail also splinted in a brace. “Rick,” Kit said thickly, supplanting Savid and taking Kit’s paw at his bedside. “How you feeling, friend?”

“Very groggy,” he said. “But, they said I’ll be fine. Outside of a broken leg and fractured tail, no major damage.”

“Thank God,” he breathed. “Vil’s on her way down. The instant she heard you were injured, she rushed straight to the airport.”

“She’s such a sweet femme,” Martha said with a snuffle.

Kit called Vil to tell her, and Rick spent a moment talking to her on Kit’s phone as Martha pulled him aside. “The doctors said there was no major damage, but the way his bones were broken is going to make it hard for him to get around,” she told him. “He’ll have to be in a wheelchair for a few weeks, they said. He can’t put any weight at all on his leg, not even for crutches.”

“Well, your house has a big door,” he said. “And we can build a ramp to go up the porch steps.”

“Kit,” Rick called. He and Martha went back to his bedside, and he gave him back his phone, but not to talk to Vil. The call was ended. “Vil said she’ll call you when she gets in,” he said, then he put his paws out to both him and Savid, who was on his other side. “Kit. Savid. They said I’ll be laid up for at least a week, and won’t let me go to work. They won’t cast my leg until they’re sure it won’t get infected, so I’m stuck in here for a few days. Then I’ll have a couple of weeks in a wheelchair,” he grunted. “You two are going to have to hold down the fort for me.”

“We can do easily, Rick,” Savid told him.

“Savid, you handle the editing for the issue. Marty can help you, and I want you there with him, Kit, so you can learn more about it. Kit, I need you to do the rest of my job. I know you know how. I trained you for it myself,” he said with a smile.

“We’ll keep the place from exploding for you, Rick,” Kit told him.

“I know you can, son. I have all my appointments in my computer, you’ll have to go in my place. I know it’s gonna make it hard on you, son, doing my job on top of your own, and I’m sorry.”

“Rick, we’re a team,” Lilly said with a tut. “We’ll all help pull up the slack. We’ll show you we don’t need you around,” she winked.

“Someone always has to watch you, you naughty femme,” Rick teased in reply, which made her laugh.

“I can do a little of my own research for a week,” Barry chuckled. “I’d rather do research than go try to wheedle money out of advertisers,” he grinned at Kit.

“I don’t wheedle,” Kit said primly. “I tell them my sister will crush them like a bug if they don’t buy space in our magazine. Vulpans prefer coercion and blackmail to weak-position tactics like wheedling,” he said, which made everyone laugh.

“It’s the tactical use of available assets to gain an advantage against business rivals,” Jessie added. “Vil says so.”

“She’s corrupted my wife,” Kit grunted.

“She doesn’t look all that corrupted,” Charlotte giggled.

“Wait a few months for the corruption to show,” Sandy laughed. “She has pure evil growing in her belly!”

“Then you don’t need to be at the baby shower, do you Sandy?” Jessie asked, which made Sandy laugh raucously.

The doctors let them visit for nearly an hour, as Rick mainly talked to Kit and Savid about what he wanted them to do while he was laid up, then

they were hurried out so the doctors could do a check on him. Rick's neighbors agreed to meet at Rick and Martha's tomorrow to build a temporary ramp that would go up the porch. Jessie and the crew also agreed to come, to turn it into a "ramp raising party," but Kit had to bow out. He was going after Sheila and the others tomorrow. While many of the others went home, promising to come visit tomorrow after the ramp was built, several stayed at the hospital with Martha. Kit and Jessie stayed with her, as did Savid and his wife, an Indian mongoose named Nawa, and Sam and Kevin. Jessie sat with Martha, holding her paw as they waited for the doctors to let them back into his room, as Kit paced the room, going over in his mind how he was going to juggle his schedule to get those appointments done as well as get his normal work done. He had another major project coming up in an interview with Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, but Barry was conducting that interview where Kit would be handling the research for him; Kit got the Smith interview, it was Barry's turn to get a major interview under his belt. There was also the Democratic debate that was coming up in a couple of weeks, and there was a hell of a lot of research to do for that, on the candidates, on the school, on the auditorium itself. On top of those major projects, there was an upcoming piece on the college of science's winning of several grants and their story on the debate over building a new sports facility that would house the basketball and volleyball teams, and the opposition by some students and officials because it would take one of the larger student parking lots as well as reduce the amount of sports facilities offered to the students by tearing down the student sports pavilion and replacing it with a much smaller one.

They let them back in his room after about ninety minutes, but Rick wasn't his usual self. They'd given him pain medication, so he was a little groggy and unfocused. He had this huge amalgamation of stitched canvas

and chrome buckles around his left leg, a soft cast holding his broken bones in place, which was also elevated in traction, cradled in a sling of canvas held up by sturdy white cords. Sam noted that they were elevating it to reduce swelling when they went back into the room. Martha sat by his bed, patting his paw as he drifted through coherence in a manner Kit knew all too much, having experienced it from the inside more than once. The first couple of doses of a strong pain medication always put a fur out of it. Kit knew he'd be more coherent after the surge of the initial dose faded, which would put him in that "zone" of both coherence and lack of pain. Then the pain would creep back in, slowly, like some kind of insidious invader, until they gave one another dose.

Martha fed Rick some of the mediocre fare offered by hospitals when Vil arrived. She hurried into the room, hugged Jessie, hugged Kit, then sat by Rick's bedside. "Hey, old male," she said with a smile, patting his cheek and muzzle. "This is some way to get me to come down and see you."

He chuckled. "I don't recommend it," he said.

"I talked to the doctors, they said you'll be right back to kicking tail in about six weeks," she smiled. "How did you break it?"

He laughed ruefully. "I fell off my barn's roof," he admitted.

"You have a whole stable of young males working for you you could have made come out and fix your barn," she grinned.

"And most of them have no idea which end of the hammer to hold," he retorted.

"Well, that might be true. *I* certainly don't know how to swing a hammer," she admitted. "What are you going to do about the magazine?"

“I’ll have Savid and Kit mind the shop until I’m back,” he said.

“Well, that’ll work,” she said with a nod. “Now, what were you doing up there?”

Rick again recounted the tale of breaking his leg to Vil, and how Bill and Martha trussed it up waiting for the ambulance to arrive. “I’m just glad my wife and neighbor don’t panic,” he said. “I told them what to do, and they did it just fine.”

“You were supervising your own first aid?” Vil asked.

Rick chuckled. “I *was* in the army, young femme,” he said. “We’re trained for basic first aid. I knew what we had to do when I realized how bad my leg was broken, just like how I knew what to do when Kit was shot.”

“Well, that training has certainly paid off for you,” she smiled. “It saved my brother and helped you in your own hour of need.”

“It never hurts to know what to do in an emergency,” he said.

“Well, don’t you worry yourself one little bit, Rick. I’ll make sure this doesn’t put you in the poorhouse.”

“Well, I do have insurance, Vil,” he chuckled.

“Yes, I know, and we need to talk about when you’re going to offer health insurance to the magazine,” she said, a touch flintily.

“Dear, if I could afford it, I’d gladly do it,” he answered honestly.

“Vil, you didn’t fly all the way down here to pick a fight,” Martha said, a touch sternly. “Or talk business.”

“I know I didn’t. Guess you just can’t take the businessfemme out of me,” she chuckled ruefully.

They visited for nearly an hour, until the medication and the weariness of surgery caught up with Rick, and he started dozing off. They broke up then, and Vil took Martha home with Jessie and Kit driving behind them, and Stav driving Martha’s car. Rick and Martha owned a small ranch east of Austin, out in the hilly scrub of mesquite trees and browning pastureland. Their small three acre ranch was surrounded by larger ranches and farms, and it was Martha’s dreamhouse. Martha had always wanted to live on a small ranch, and Rick had bought it for her, since he’d grown up on a ranch not two miles from where he lived now. Their ranch was small because the former owner was a small horse caretaker, who had a ten stall barn and corral with about two acres of pastureland behind the ranch house for the horses. Rick and Martha used to have three horses, one for each of their sons, but when Rick got so busy with the magazine and the boys moved out, they sold them. Their property was a mirror of its owners. It may have been a small ranch, but it was clean and neat and impeccably maintained. Though the barn behind their two story ranch house now just held their tractor, it was freshly painted, and their ranch house was surrounded by well manicured shrubs and flowers and small trees. Martha was a gardener by hobby, as much as Jessie was a knitter, and her yard was her pride and joy. Five cars pulled up into their driveway, with Vil’s rented limo pulling up the rear, and Martha led Kit, Jessie, Bill, Sam, Kevin, and Vil into their house. It was filled with furniture from the 70s, with an earthy, old-fashioned feel, but everything was clean and neat and orderly.

“I’m afraid this ate up my visit,” Vil told Kit and Jessie when Martha offered to make coffee for everyone. “I won’t be able to make it down next

week.”

“That’s alright, sis,” Kit told her. “I’d much rather you be here for Rick than come down just to piddle with us.”

“How long can you stay?” Jessie asked.

“I have to leave tomorrow morning,” she answered. “I just had to come down and see him.”

“We all appreciate it, Vil,” Martha told her, coming out of the kitchen and giving her a warm little hug. “I just hope he’ll be okay.”

“I’m sure he will, hon,” Vil told her, patting her on the arm. “We’ll make sure of it. Kit and Savid can keep the magazine going, and I’ll be watching from Boston to make sure he’s healing just fine. And there’s plenty of furs here ready to run when you send out a call for help.”

“Amen,” Bill said.

“That’s right, Martha. You call me, and I’m on my way,” Sam told her with quiet resolve.

“I’ll leave my numbers with you, hon,” Kevin told her. “I’m here if you need me.”

“Such good kids,” Martha said thickly, giving Sam and Kevin a hug.

“Only to good people,” Kevin told her with a smile, which made her chuckle and pat him on the arm. “I’m mean to jerks.”

“That’s something I’d expect Kit to say.”

“Well, that’s why we’re friends. We think alike,” Kevin winked.

“Well, I hope you know how to swing a hammer, youngun,” Bill told him. “Be here at nine tomorrow and we’ll get that ramp up.”

“I’ll be here, Bill,” Kevin told him.

“I’ll bring a couple of the girls from the sorority,” Sam said. “We’ll have enough paws here to get anything done that needs to be done.”

“Well, between me, Tom, and Jake, I’m sure we’ll have enough. Building a ramp we’re just laying over the stairs shouldn’t take more than a couple of hours.”

“Well, still, Jessie and Charlotte will want to come.”

“The other Jessie,” Jessie said with a giggle when Bill looked at her. “There’s another Jessie at the sorority.”

“That’s why we call her JD,” Sam said, pointing at Jessie. “You guys will need to be fed, and we won’t make Martha do all that cooking.”

Martha chuckled. “I’m used to cooking for a pack of hungry males. I had three sons and Rick to feed,” she told them.

“Yes, but you’ll be at the hospital,” Sam told her. “If you trust us to build your ramp, we’ll take care of it while you take care of Rick. And we’ll bring you a nice home cooked meal when we’re done.”

“Of course I do, dear,” Martha told her, patting the skunk on the shoulder fondly. “And I’m sure both of us will appreciate you cooking for us.”

They started filtering out after Martha had time to calm down and relax. Kit, Jessie, and Vil were the last ones behind, as Jessie assured Martha she’d have plenty of help and Kit and Vil assured her that Rick and

the magazine would be cared for quite lovingly. “We’re partners now, after all,” Kit smiled.

“You just focus on Rick, hon, let *us* handle everything else.”

“I’ll even do the shopping for you,” Jessie assured her.

“At least Rick had good timing, he broke his leg right before spring break, which gives Jessie plenty of spare time,” Kit winked, which made Martha gasp, then laugh in spite of herself.

“I’m sure he had it all planned out,” Martha chuckled.

They kept Martha in good spirits until she was tired, and then Jessie and Vil tucked her into bed. “I’m going to stay here tonight,” Jessie told them when they came downstairs. “I want to be here if she needs me.

“I’ll have Stav bring your car here,” Vil said. “I’ll be here tonight, but I’m going to have to go back to Boston in the morning.”

“Which hotel are you going to stay at?” Jessie asked.

“I’ll stay here tonight, if there’s room,” she said.

“They only have two spare bedrooms,” Jessie said. “There’s not enough room for everyone.”

“Ah. Well, damn,” Vil sighed. “I’ll just go down to the Regency, then.”

“Stav, Marcus, you can borrow my truck to go pick up Jessie’s car,” Kit told them. “That should make it easier for you.”

“Yes, it will, thank you,” Stav said with a nod. “We can stop by the grocery store on the way back to pick up enough food for everyone tomorrow as well.”

“And thank you, it’s sweet of you to do this for us,” Jessie added.

“It’s more than our job, it’s our privilege,” Marcus said with a rare smile. “Often we serve to prevent something bad from happening. It’s always a joy to serve to help with something good.”

“Now you see why I pay their outrageous salaries,” Vil said with a smile.

Chapter 24

Rick was certainly in good spirits the next morning.

Kit stopped in to see him early that morning, talking the nurse into letting him in before visiting hours just to say hello, and he spent about five minutes with him. Rick was in that window of comfortable lucidity between pain and high from the pain medication, but both Rick and the nurse who came in with him gave him a very good prognosis. “They said I should make a full recovery with nothing but surgery scars to prove it ever happened,” Rick chuckled. “I just hope mine don’t do what yours did.”

“In that riot of patchwork you call fur, how could anyone tell?” Kit teased in reply.

“They said I’ll be about two to three weeks in a wheelchair before they’ll let me go to crutches,” Rick grunted.

“That’s better than six weeks in a wheelchair,” Kit told him.

“True.”

After stopping by to see Rick, Kit got back to business, and business was going to get Sheila. He arrived at Avia at eight on a Sunday morning, and found the hangar open and workers there. They had never seen him, but they also didn’t challenge him when he pulled his Pathfinder into the hangar through the car entrance...mainly since Alice had given him a little placard to put in his windshield. He parked near the hangar wall behind his plane, then went from car to plane in almost record time, performing a thorough

yet fast preflight. He pumped off thirty gallons of AVGas from them, logged it on the use sheet, then he warned everyone he was about to taxi out with a shout across the hangar. He got in the plane and performed startup, then slowly taxied the plane out along the wide center line through the hangar, the designated aircraft taxi route to the open double doors.

Since he was at a major airport, he had to wait a little bit to get air traffic on the horn. But, once he had it, he was quickly given clearance to taxi, got his weather information for takeoff, and was in the air and on the way south-southeast. He spent the hour in the air going over the checklist he had on his laptop dealing with his workload, for he'd sat down and organized everything in a spreadsheet. There was a lot for him to do, so much that he'd have to go into the office today so he didn't fall behind. He had to finish entering those reports into the books, and he also wanted to look over everything and make absolutely sure everything looked right, since he'd be the one responsible for all of it for the next week or so. He called Sheila while in the air, about a halfway there, and she complained about it. "Kit, really, call before you leave next time!" she told him. "All I hear is mmmmmrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr."

“Can it. Are you at the airport?”

“We’re almost there now,” she said. “We’re pulling into the rental car lot. The rental furs will take us out to you.”

“Sheila, thanks. I appreciate you leaving early.”

“It’s not for you, cousin, I want to see Rick and make sure he’s okay.”

“And that’s what I appreciate,” he told her.

“How is he?”

“Aside from his broken leg, he’s fine,” Kit answered. “The surgery they did to fix his bones went off without a hitch, they didn’t even put any screws or plates in his leg. They reset the bones and sewed his leg back up, and they were done. He’ll have to stay in a wheelchair until his bones can support him walking on crutches, though.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound too bad,” Sheila said. “I’ll still be happier after I see him.”

“He’s looking forward to it. I’ll be landing in about fifteen minutes or so, I’m about to take it off autopilot, so let me get off here and get my mind back on what I’m supposed to be doing.”

“We’ll be waiting.”

Kit landed for a second time at Brownsville and taxied out to the general aviation terminal, and saw that Sheila and the others were definitely waiting in an overcast, mild morning. Kit pulled in and went through engine cutoff, then opened the door. “Hurry up, femmes, there’s weather coming,” he called. They hurried up to his plane, and he helped them stow their luggage. Danielle fought a little with Sheila over who was going to sit up front, however.

“You were up front last time, and he’s your cousin!” Danielle protested. “You have a way better chance of riding in the plane again than me!”

“Well, he is my cousin, and I got us this weekend!” Sheila replied.

“I’ll make both of you walk if you don’t get in the plane,” he said bluntly to them, helping Allison up onto the wing on his side; she intended to sit behind him this time. “Just flip a damn coin, we gotta go!”

Danielle rather smugly won a coin toss, and he had them all strap in as he restarted the engine. “Alright, get your headsets on, femmes,” he called as he radioed the tower, then used the MFD to check the radar for the region. As he feared, the front that he’d seen edging in on the west side of the display was moving at a fair clip. “Damn,” he growled. “Well, I hope you don’t get airsick,” he told them.

The ride home was a bit more challenging than the usual flight, for he hit the front about ten minutes from Austin, and the whole time, he was too busy watching the Doppler radar to pay much attention to what the femmes were talking about. He had more important things on his mind. When they hit the leading edge of the front, which created sudden crosswinds and turbulence, Danielle looked a little frightened, but Sheila just laughed as the plane rocked in turbulence as he descended in preparation for landing. “There’s some crosswinds at the airport,” he told the girls, “so be ready for the plane to rock a little as I make our approach. Don’t be scared. I’ve landed in worse than this.”

As Kit predicted, the landing was a little bumpy, but it was also by the book. The small runways weren’t in much use during weather, so Kit didn’t have to wait at all to land. As the rain intensified, Kit taxied off the runway and along the ramp. “Isn’t this a different airport?” Allison asked curiously.

“Yes, this is Bergstrom,” he answered. “Vil managed to find me at least a temporary place to park the plane inside a hangar, which is *much* preferable to parking out on the tarmac, especially in weather like this. So we won’t have to unload the plane in the rain, and I won’t get soaked tying it down.”

“Well, that’s good at least,” Danielle said.

“I’m sorry again, girls, about cutting this short,” Sheila said as they turned along the ramp that led to Avia’s hangar.

“No problem, we understand,” Danielle answered.

“Did you at least have fun while you were there?” Kit asked.

“It wasn’t as busy as I thought it would be,” Sheila said. “I was hoping for at least *some* eye candy for us to look at, but it was all families and crap.”

“It was the wrong weekend for it, spring break starts next weekend,” Danielle giggled.

“I know, but I thought it’d be nice to go scope out the place before spring break, so we’d know where all the good places were,” she grinned. “And I think we might see if we can get Kit to take us down next weekend too,” she winked.

“Nope, I have plans,” he said. “If I take you, getting back is your problem.”

“Well, we could always drive,” Allison said. “It’s only a few hours to Brownsville from Austin.”

“Well, yeah, but it’s so much more stylish to be flown down by our own personal pilot,” Sheila said grandly.

“This personal pilot’s gonna start charging you,” he said as they pulled up to the hangar. “Gas for this thing isn’t free, you know.”

“It is for you, Vil pays for it,” Sheila teased.

“And is that a reason to let you abuse her hospitality, or mine?” he challenged as he carefully guided the plane down the center aisle, and then

pulled into his spot and turned the plane around, putting it almost exactly where it had been when he pulled out that morning. A few button presses shut down the engine. “Alright, go ahead and get out while I do post flight. Shouldn’t take but a minute.”

By the time he was finished with his post flight, all three femmes had gotten out from Danielle’s side. Kit opened the cargo door and helped them unload their luggage, then he waved to the others in the hangar and herded his charges into his Pathfinder. “Alright, back to the sorority,” he said, for that was where he’d picked them all up.

Sheila followed him to the hospital, and they went up to see Rick. He looked much healthier and more alert than he had just that morning, mainly because Martha and Jessie were there. Sheila gave him a big hug, and Rick teased her about her outfit. “I’m supposed to be recuperating, and you saunter in here wearing shorts and a half shirt,” he told her. “That does little for my blood pressure, you know.”

“Oh, do I get the old heart going there, Rick?” Sheila said with an outrageous smile, turning in place to let him get a good look at her. “You should have seen me on the beach. I was *rocking* in my bikini. Some serious square footage of my white fur was on display,” she said with a wink, patting her white-furred belly.

“I hope you got pictures.”

“I hope you like hospital food,” Martha told him, which made Rick laugh.

“You missed it all, Rick,” Sheila pressed. “Me and Ally were having a contest to see how much fur we were willing to show off, while Danielle tried to pretend she didn’t know us,” Sheila grinned.

“Ally?” he asked.

“Allison, a friend of mine,” Sheila told him. “She’s a red vixen too,” she winked. “And she’s almost as fearless as me. There was all this white fur all over the beach, a whole bunch of boys following us, and Danielle looking about ready to die of embarrassment.”

“Sheila, I’m going to box your ears if you keep this up,” Martha warned, which made Sheila laugh delightedly and pat the matronly femme on the shoulder.

“I’m just playing, Martha,” she said. “I tease him all the time at work.”

“You tease everyone at work,” Kit said mildly.

“It keeps work fun,” she said shamelessly.

“She’s like this at work?” Martha asked.

“She once mooned Barry for a over a five dollar bet,” Kit told her, which made everyone but Martha laugh.

“Sheila, that’s very improper.”

“I’m no lady,” Sheila grinned. “And I’m five bucks richer. All it cost me was showing Barry my bare butt...which I might have done for free if he’d asked nicely.”

“But you compromised your modesty!”

“Give me five bucks, and I’ll compromise it right here and now. For ten I’ll show you *all* my white fur.”

“You’re incorrigible!” Martha laughed helplessly.

“Yeah. Fun, ain’t it?” Sheila agreed, then she burst into laughter when Rick started padding his hospital gown, looking for his wallet, which earned him a smack from his wife.

Despite being much more toned down, Sheila was still Sheila.

Kit stayed with them for about two hours, but then he had to go. He went into the office, and spent most of the early afternoon going over everything so he was sure it was all in order, and going over Rick’s schedule next week so he’d know what was going on. Just like Kit, Rick kept a very detailed appointment calendar, which told Kit absolutely everything that he needed to know about what Rick was going to be up to next week. There were seven advertisers to visit, calls to make about the upcoming debate they intended to cover, and more calls to try to secure interviews with other political figures. Rick was still trying to wrangle at least one interview with at least one Democratic candidate, but even the longshots like Joe Biden and Dennis Kucinich had declined an interview with the magazine.

Kit brought up his own calendar, then compared the two. It was going to really, really load down his schedule, but he could do it all. He’d be working late every day, and he’d have to come into work tomorrow as well...but that was the breaks. He owned a stake in the magazine now, and its profitability was necessary for him to get his investment back. That meant that he’d have to take over for Rick for a week, until the hospital cleared him to come back to work. Kit would still be doing the outside appointments until Rick was ambulatory again, but at least when Rick was cleared to return, he could do all the deskwork and phone calls.

No pain, no paycheck.

He decided to get a head start on it all by tackling some of the research he intended to do tomorrow, for Barry's Hutchinson interview. He did, though, call Lupe and tell him he wouldn't be there for poker.

"Brah, this is two weeks in a row. We miss ya!"

"It's gonna be three, next week I'm taking Jessie out, and we won't be back until Sunday night."

"Aww, hell. Well, if you can't show up for poker, the least we can do is swing by and bring ya something' to eat."

"Nah, you don't have to go that far out of your way, bud," he declined. "I've got food here already, and besides, Jessie would think you're making a pass at me if you start usurping what she sees as her domain."

Lupe laughed. "God forbid she thinks I'm muscling in on her turf. She's a sweetie, but she can be jealous."

"It just means she loves me," Kit chuckled.

"Dude, has she ever clawed you?" he asked.

Kit laughed. "Never on purpose," he said. "She prefers to whack me with pillows when I'm being bad. And of course, I'm bad as much as possible. There's not a pillow in our apartment that doesn't have an imprint of my face on it somewhere," he said, which made Lupe howl with laughter.

Jessie joined him a little after noon, fulfilling her self-appointed role of nurturer and caretaker by bringing him some stuffed peppers. "How much longer are you going to be, handsome fox?" she asked.

"I'm not sure, pretty kitty," he answered, motioning at the computer. "I've got a lot of work to do, and it got tripled when Rick went down. I'm

here now doing work I'm supposed to do tomorrow so I can hopefully get home before dark tomorrow night."

"I can understand that, but can't someone help you with it?"

"Not with this," he said. "I'm halfway through the research I'm doing for Barry's interview with Senator Hutchison, and he wouldn't have any idea where to pick up where I left off if I left it for him to finish."

"Well, you don't have to do it all alone," she said, giving him a firm look. "Let me go get my laptop, and you can tell me what to go find."

"You, little missy, have homework," he said firmly.

"I've finished my homework," she said imperiously.

"I don't want you stressing yourself over it, pretty kitty."

"I'll be more stressed waiting for you to come home," she told him. "Now stop playing the noble sufferer and let me help you."

He chuckled. "Alright, alright. My laptop's in my attaché, you can use that one." She pulled it out and pulled up the chair that sat in front of his desk, then sat it down and opened it. "Okay, first thing you can do is go to the National Library of Congress and run a search for words *Kay Bailey Hutchison Senate Bill sponsor*. It will return every piece of legislation she's introduced or co-sponsored. When you have them, compile them into a list of titles, note what kind of bills they are, like environmental, spending, transportation, defense, and so on, and send it to my workstation. After that, run the words *Kay Bailey Hutchison vote*, then put the words *Legislative Session* in quotation marks. That will bring up a list of every vote she's made, sorted by legislative session. You'll get a listing of PDF files. Download each one, then save it and send it to my workstation. I'll go

through them later to compile a list of every major or controversial vote she's cast, and how she cast it."

"Don't they keep a list like that somewhere?"

"Sure, but most often it's kept by the Senator's office or some other organization, and they like to conveniently leave out certain votes they'd rather not let furs know she made. The only way to get a full and unbiased list is to pull it right out of the Library of Congress. That can't be altered, they pull it right out of the Senate records."

"Oh. Alright, handsome fox, the computer's up, so let me get started."

Jessie actually helped tremendously. With her to do a lot of the tedious searching, Kit was able to compile and extrapolate the data into an easy to read format that Barry could skim quickly in order to compose his questions, then have that data on hand in his PDA to use as ammunition if the Senator lied about something in the record. What would have taken him five or six hours of searching and compiling only took three hours. Jessie was an English major, so she knew how to research to some degree, and that helped when it came to her using Google. Jessie could google like nobody's business.

The pair became a trio when Barry came in, poking his head into the office around four. "Did you see Rick today?"

"Of course we did," Kit told him. "Why do you think I'm here?"

Barry chuckled. "I came to do that research on Hutchison. I think you're going to be too busy to do it."

"We're almost done with it," Jessie told him, with a bit of a smug little smile.

“Yeah, I came in today to get that done for you.”

“Aww, damn, Kit, you didn’t have to do that. You’re going to be too busy with Rick’s work this week.”

“Barry, I’m the *researcher*,” Kit told him. “And I’ve seen your research. It’s the researching equivalent of a kindergartner with crayons. Think I’d let you go into that interview with what you prepared yourself?”

Barry gave him a hot look, but when he saw the lightness in Kit’s eyes, he laughed helplessly. “I did just fine doing my own research before you got here,” he said with mock imperiousness.

“Thank God I got here then,” Kit grinned at him. “I have a certain standard I expect out of research done for this magazine, and you, sir, simply just don’t cut the mustard.”

Barry laughed. “That’s it, it’s *so* on now, buster,” the bear grinned. “Just wait til the next time you do an interview, and I have a chance to rag on your invasion of *my* territory.”

“Bring it, little cub,” Kit grinned in reply. “Now let me finish this up. You can help by sending me that work you did on the board of governors meeting, so I can archive it for the database.”

“Sure thing.”

“There’s an extra stuffed pepper in the fridge if you want it,” Jessie added.

“Woo, thanks Jessie!” he said excitedly, then hurried towards the break room.

Kit was too tired to do much of anything that night, but he did manage to go see Rick and fill him in on things. He went over the schedule he'd drawn up with his boss to make sure Rick didn't have anything planned that wasn't on his schedule, and found that Rick didn't have anything to add, and probably wouldn't have said anything even if he did, since Kit was going to be so busy. "Son, I can't thank you enough for this," he said. "You're going to be so busy til I'm back on my feet, and on top of all that, Jessie's gonna have a baby, which has to be on your mind all the time."

"Well, let's just call it a clean slate when it comes to the vacation time I owe," Kit said, which made Rick laugh. "Oh, and there's one more thing. Saturday and Sunday, I *am* going to take some time off. I promised Jessie I'd take her to New Orleans, and I'm not going to break my promise. I'll just have to make sure that I get everything done this week, so we have that time."

"Abandoning me in my time of need, are ya?" Rick asked with a sly grin.

Kit laughed. "As if. You should be home by then, and I'll still be a call away if you need me."

"Did they build that ramp like Bill was saying they would?"

"I'd guess so," Kit answered. "I haven't been over to your house today. Jessie's over there now, you can call her and ask her how lopsided it is."

"With Bill doing it, that's entirely possible," Rick said seriously. "He's a great friend, but he can't eye up a straight line with a yardstick."

Kit had been right about how busy he'd be, but he was also right about a couple of other things.

On Monday afternoon, Barry *almost* had an interview with Senator Hillary Clinton, Presidential candidate. Kit called the national headquarters of her campaign, identified himself and the magazine, and asked for an interview for the magazine, ten minutes miraculously cleared itself in Senator Clinton's heretofore full schedule. However, the campaign worker told him that the interviewer would have ten minutes to ask the Senator questions, but only questions pre-submitted to the campaign at least three days in advance, to which Kit replied "that's not an interview, that's a sound bite," and threatened to publish the fact that the campaign had tried to do something like that, to turn the interview into a milktoast softball photo op about how Senator Clinton was the furs' candidate who even did interviews with little city magazines. The staffer seemed quite miffed, and made a fatal mistake. "I was being nice enough to offer your magazine time with Senator Clinton out of respect for the Vulpan family. I didn't have to offer you anything, since if I recall, you're the earless outcast Vulpan who has nothing but a family name to throw around, and lives exiled from the family in Texas. What does it matter to me that some little backwater campus paper prints something about us I'll just dismiss as the lies of a little fur who gets by after being disowned by exploiting his family's name while writing for some quaint little school newspaper? Who are people going to believe, a little mom-and-pop ten page mimeographed school paper and a disgraced rich kid that regular furs will hate because he's a rich brat, or a national campaign spokesfur? You have no teeth, Mister Vulpan, and I believe the Senator's schedule just filled up again. So, you can go to hell." Then he hung up the phone.

“Oh, you sorry little son of a bitch!” Kit shouted into a phone that was now dead. “Toothless, am I? I’m about to bite you in the ass, you political hack!” He went on to swear sulfurously, which got about everyone in the office looking into his office door. “We’re about to declare war on the Clinton campaign,” he told them, which made them all laugh.

“Ooo, I need some color-coordinated war paint!” Marty said eagerly.

That nameless staffer did the one thing one should never, ever, ever do. He made a Vulpan angry.

Like his family, Kit didn’t anger in the same way as most furs. The reaction of most furs to anger was to get, well, angry. Yell, shout, throw things, maybe do something rash, that was the common reaction to anger. But Vulpans approached anger from a different angle. Kit had gotten his initial ire out of the way, and now all that was left was the cold, seething side of anger that made him focused on his task, and that task was to take that unnamed staffer over his proverbial knee and spank him.

Still fuming, Kit sat down and typed out a blistering, savage, vituperous editorial comment that would run in the opinion section of the magazine, which was part of the mailbag. It was a rare thing for the magazine to run an op-ed, but Kit was furious, and not just furious that he’d been personally insulted. The staffer had dared to pull his pants down and piss on the journalism society in general, and seemed to forget that even little “mom and pop ten page school papers” had the power to reach readers. He blistered the campaign for the behavior of its spokesman, then added a final comment. “I may be the exiled outcast of one of the richest families of America, as you so succinctly put it, but that doesn’t mean that I still don’t have a voice, and the right to use it in the political process. Never once have I ever tried to use my name to gain unfair advantage, for if anyone knows

anything about me or my family history, they know that I have no love for the family whose name I bear, and would wish to be divorced from association with the vast majority of them. To threaten to attack me for printing the truth of your own words by exploiting my family and my background is the most base and cowardly of attacks, equal to attacking the wife of a candidate for something her brother did twenty years ago. It is typical political flim-flammy of the sort that the American voters are growing tired, making an outrageous attack with absolutely no connection to the matter at hand in hopes that the outrage will obfuscate the truth. When you threatened to attack my credibility based on my family name and the unfavorable image created by the idea of spoiled rich brat whining because he was denied a shiny bauble, which has absolutely nothing to do with the issue, you proved that you and the campaign you represent are nothing but more of the same. And America grows tired of *same old same old*. And you may accuse me of whining in this article, crying to the readers of our “quaint little mom and pop mimeographed school paper,” but to do so would be merely proving my own point. The onus is upon you, sir, to prove that I am what you say I am using logic, reason, and debate, which is something which seems to be utterly lacking in the discourse of this campaign, from every campaign, not just the one you represent.”

Kit did edit his initial lambasting of the Clinton campaign to carefully remove all references to the Senator herself, who probably had no idea what her staffer had done. Then, realizing that that too was not maintaining journalistic integrity, he broadened it again, omitting all references to the Clinton campaign and just naming it “one of the campaigns.” But he left that same sense of outrage that a campaign could be that arrogant, accusing it of “forgetting its connections with the common furs,” and “scornfully dismissing the little fur in favor of the well oiled political machine, which

proved that no matter how much campaigns said they were campaigns of the furs and with furs in their hearts and minds, that they would listen to the needs of the common fur, they were still nothing but cold calculating number crunchers that would bleed a newborn if it would milk one more vote out of the machine.” He went on to wonder if the campaign approached every phase of its campaign the same way, if it was the needs of the furs that the campaign would address when elected, or the needs of the special interest groups who had the influence to hold the candidate’s ear. “To deny a common citizen the same access you grant a rich corporate executive because they cannot pay you in the form of campaign donations is akin to bribery, and it makes one wonder just what you must repay to that rich executive should you be elected to office,” he finished with his final paragraph.

Kit showed the various versions of the editorial to Rick in his hospital room that evening as he sat down with his boss to discuss what he’d managed to get done that day. Rick gave him a steady look after he read it. “Did you drop your name on him on purpose? Did you come out and say that the Vulpans would like it if the Senator gave the magazine an interview?”

“No!” Kit said. “I just identified myself as Kit Vulpan, which is only polite, and then asked for an interview for the magazine. I admit, I figured them hearing my name might open the door, but I didn’t do anything overt. I’m smarter than that, Rick. If I threw around my family name like that, Vil might wring my neck. It might affect *her*, and she won’t stand for that if her renegade little brother is out there claiming to speak for the Vulpan family. My sister may love me, but she *is* a Vulpan. She’ll come after me even

harder than she would someone else if I cross her, because I'm supposed to know better."

That made Rick laugh richly. "Alright then. Run it. It's brilliant. Just make one change."

"What?"

"Let's go with the original idea. Identify the Clinton campaign, but keep the paragraphs about all the campaigns acting like that too."

"But that's being biased."

"This is an *op-ed*, son, you're allowed to be biased. If Clinton can't keep her campaign staff civil, there's no reason we need to be civil in return. She's responsible for the actions of the furs she employs to speak for her. So, let's go after them. Leave them with me, I'll edit them so they merge. It's pretty clear you have two separate articles here, they'll look strange if you try to just paste one to the end of the other. Besides, it'll give me something to do. It's borin' in here," he complained.

"God do I know that feeling," Kit said seriously.

"We'll knock the starch out of a few collars," he said with a bright smile.

That was the memorable first day of his week, but he was too busy to dwell on that. He spent his days doing the work of two furs. He was going in at six in the morning and leaving at six or seven at night, doing his research and other duties in the morning, then attending to Rick's business that afternoon.

Kit ended up taking the accounting home with him, sitting at the table with his laptop as Jessie cooked dinner for him. “How was racquetball?” he asked her.

She snorted. “Your cousin *cheats!*” she accused. “She tries to hit *me* with the ball!”

“She’s a Vulpan, love,” Kit said absently, sipping his tea. “You’ve shown weakness. Now she’ll exploit it for everything she’s worth.”

“Well, it’s no fun to play if I’m spending all my time dodging the ball!”

“Learn to hit it back,” he shrugged.

“Just wait til I get her on that tennis court Saturday morning,” Jessie fumed.

“Pretty kitty, you *know* what she’s going to do, and you’re a damn good racquetball player. You taught *me*, after all. Use it against her.”

“I’d rather play you.”

“I’d rather play tennis.”

“You’d rather run me all over the court,” she accused.

“Yes, I love watching you jiggle in that sexy little tennis outfit,” he said immediately. “I need to buy you one of those little personal trampolines,” he mused, which made her gasp from the kitchen, the burst out in helpless laughter.

“I should smack you, but how can I be angry that you like looking at me?” she admitted.

“All day, every day,” he said, saving his spreadsheet. “I’m done, pretty kitty. Need help?”

“No, I got it, handsome fox. Go rest a little. You deserve it!”

“You’re the one who deserves a little rest.”

“Don’t go all psycho protective on me now,” she giggled. “Doctor Mac said I need to stay just as active. After all, you let your cousin beat me with racquetballs today!”

“No, *you* let her beat you up with racquetballs. Learn to play your game your way, or keep dodging little blue blurs.”

“Abused by my cousin-in-law and ridiculed by my husband. Whatever is a poor little kitty to do?” she said in a melodramatic tone.

“Grow some fangs, you weenie,” Kit called.

He knew immediately that he would face dire consequences for that one, but Jessie decided to extend the anticipation...for all of five seconds. He felt her grab the back of the collar of his tee shirt, then an icy shockwave roared through his back when Jessie poured ice down the back of his shirt. He yelped and jumped out of the chair, holding the back of his shirt out, but he was also laughing lightly as she strutted back into the kitchen holding an empty ice tray.

The week both seemed to crawl and rush by.

Kit was working more than twelve hours a day, doing his work in the morning and Rick’s work in the afternoon, but he was no replacement for Rick. They all felt his absence most keenly, for he was the calm rock that

kept everyone confident and the gentle joker who lightly teased and was teased by in return. Kit did Rick's work in his own office, not even pretending to take Rick's place now that Rick wasn't here to claim his own desk. It was just fine to sit at Rick's desk when Rick was here and all the materials were in his office, but now, with Rick another week days to go in the hospital before his planned release date of Tuesday, when they planned to replace his stitches with ones that would dissolve on their own and then put his leg in a cast, which was the green light for him to go home.

Rick tried to stay as engaged as possible, mainly through his laptop. Kit and Savid would send him things, and he would look them over and send back his opinion. But Kit and Savid were the ones that did the real work. Savid was responsible for the layout of the magazine that week, and what was more, a magazine with 14 more pages than before. Kit's responsibility was filling those extra pages with ads to pay for it. Rick had secured about half of the new advertisers, but it fell to Kit to land the rest of them. He spent his Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons hurriedly bargaining with advertisers over ad space, offering the design skills of Savid and Jeffrey if they didn't have a print ad of their own, and then negotiating over how much space they wanted and how long they wanted it. He managed to secure all the advertisers they needed, fulfilling the 21% threshold of advertiser space Rick maintained to keep the magazine from looking like a NASCAR race car—barring certain exceptions, like half or full page ads, which were exempted from the advertiser ratio—that made the magazine look like a real magazine, and not another campus ad sheet with a little news in it. Some of those ads wouldn't show up for a couple of weeks, but they were contracted, and the magazine was paid for it.

Thursday was...weird. They had their first ever issue wrap meeting without Rick, and nobody liked the feel of it at all. They went through the motions, though. Savid chaired the meeting, going over the issue page by page, feature by feature, article by article, looking for feedback, opinions, or comment. Everyone felt a little subdued, and even more so because Rick refused to make the final call on wrapping it. "This was *your* issue, so it's ready for print when *you* say it is," he'd told them in a conference call between himself, Savid, and Kit just before the meeting. The cover had a picture of Rick on it, much as Kit had covered the issue when he was shot, Rick in the hospital with his leg in traction with the headline *Oh No, Not Again!* over him in big white letters, and below that was the caption *Lone Star head dingo injured in home accident*. Barry had done an article about the accident, and they also ran a tongue-in-cheek list of do's and don't's for furs working on the roofs of their barns, cautioning against such activities as ballroom dancing, jump rope skipping, and pole vaulting while working on top of a barn roof.

Rick's biggest contribution to the issue was Kit's edited evisceration of the campaigns. Rick had seamlessly turned Kit's rant into a devastating butt-whoopin' of all the Presidential campaigns in general, but taking the Clinton campaign to task in particular for its unprofessional and downright childish response to the magazine's attempts to get an interview, making sure to leave in the campaign staffer's cruel mocking of Kit's family situation, and Kit's personal response to it. Rick had rearranged Kit's material and added some lines of his own to fill the gaps, joining it all together. He changed it so much that Kit added Rick to the byline for the article, giving credit where credit was due.

It went to the printer right on time, and they called it a day...at least everyone but Kit did. He stayed behind to get some work done, clearing space for his weekend, for he still fully intended to take Jessie to New Orleans that weekend. He had promised her, and he *never* broke his word to his wife. He accepted two applications for the photographer's position from the mail, and printed three more filed through internet postings. He did more accounting work, closing out the week in the books, which coincided with the last day of the magazine's activity cycle. He called back two advertisers who had shown interest in the magazine, did some research on possible photographic equipment their new hire might want, sent off a copy of the end of week reports to Vil, who still watched the magazine's finances to ensure her investment was maturing satisfactorily, then dropped by the hospital to deliver the resumes and the end of week reports to Rick. "I think we got everything," Kit told him. "The wrap meeting went alright, but it was my first time closing out the week."

"I'm sure you did fine, son," Rick told him. "Did you send a copy off to Vil?"

He nodded. "If I messed it up, I'm sure she'll call me to point it out," he chuckled. "I also sent her a thank-you note with it for her coming down."

"Yeah, I need to do that too. By the way, the docs did some tests on my leg."

"And?"

"They're going to do another minor surgery," he answered. "They said it'd be just a local anesthetic and a twenty minute procedure. Something in there isn't healing exactly the way they want, so they're going to go in and fix it."

“Well, that doesn’t sound so bad.”

“It’s not, but they’re doing the surgery Monday morning, then they’re gonna hold me for three days afterward to make sure I don’t have an infection before casting me. They’re really anal about that. I tried to get them to send me home earlier, but they kept saying that since the surgery area will be inside the cast, they’re taking no chances. So I’m looking at not getting out of here until sometime next week.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah, ouch. Think you guys can hold on, son?”

“I’m sure we can, Rick.”

“Good. When’s your court date?”

“Wednesday.”

“You still taking the weekend off?”

Kit nodded. “I should have my slate clear by tomorrow afternoon so I’m not burdening anyone, then I’ll be in New Orleans with Jessie on Saturday night and Sunday. I’ve already got our reservations at the Hyatt Regency and Antoine’s.”

“A restaurant?”

“Yeah. I worked there for a week when I was in New Orleans, until I got fired because the maitre’d didn’t like the looks of me. He said that someone that looked like a street ruffian had no business working in a respectable restaurant like his. It’ll be fun going in as a customer,” he chuckled. “I can be an ass to the manager, and he can’t say a word to me.”

Rick laughed. “Give him hell, son,” he grinned.

“Where’s Martha?”

“She went home about twenty minutes ago,” he answered. “She’s bringing me some pot roast,” he said with a hungry lick of his lips.

“I wouldn’t mind staying to steal it from you, but Jessie’s waiting for me.”

“Get yourself home, son, and thank you so much for stepping up to the plate when the magazine needs you.”

“Hey, I’m a part owner. I have to secure my own paycheck. Yours, well, who cares,” Kit said flippantly, which made Rick laugh so hard his leg shifted, and caused him to wince.

The true beauty of an airplane was doing things just like this.

It was a brilliant, cloudless late afternoon as they soared at 12,000 feet, with the Gulf of Mexico visible on Jessie’s side of the plane and them over the wetlands of Louisiana, and the sun low and behind the plane, painting the marshlands and little towns below in gorgeous golden light. Jessie had her earphones tuned to XM while Kit had his laptop balanced on his knees, surfing some websites to get a basic overview of his next major research project, the Democratic debate. They were an hour and a half into a two hour flight, en route to New Orleans. Instead of them wearing comfortable fare of jeans or shorts and tee shirts, Kit was wearing a suit and Jessie a breathtaking blue dress with sequined straps fastening behind her neck, splitting into four lines to form the border of the bodice, two going outside her breasts and the other two crossing between her breasts to form a border filled with blue satin, then looping around to form the border of the low

back of her dress. It was calf-length, and her high heels were laying on the floor by her feet, ready to be slipped back on when they landed. They would be going from the plane to the hotel with just enough time to check in and drop off their single overnight bag and laptops, then would go directly to the restaurant. The clock on his PFD showed that they were right on time. They could call a taxi from the airport to take them to the hotel, and it would wait there while they checked in before taking them on to the restaurant.

“Wow!” Jessie gasped as the plane crossed over marshy wetland, the border of the sea and Louisiana looming to the south. “That’s so pretty! I gotta get a picture!”

“That’s Vermillion Bay over there on the horizon,” he told her, pointing to Jessie’s side of the plane. “We’ll fly directly over Thibadoux soon on our way to New Orleans. That’s all wetlands and swamp down there, what they call bayou country, or cajun country. When we approach the airport, you’ll see Lake Pontchartrain, the airport’s built right on the shore,” he told her. “Depending on how they make me land, we may swing out over it.” A controller called his plane’s number on his headphones. “Excuse me, love, I’m being called,” he said, then he pushed the key on his joystick and answered. The controller was basically just identifying him and learning where he was going, which wasn’t unusual when a private plane on visual flight rules wandered into airspace controlled by a new airport, for he was close to Lafayette.

It took them another twenty minutes to reach New Orleans, after they stowed everything and Kit took the plane off autopilot. They did indeed get to fly over Lake Pontchartrain, landing at Lakefront airport from the north, almost feeling like he was landing on an aircraft carrier when he

approached the runway from over the lake. Lakefront was a big airport for a general aviation facility, and because of that it didn't run temporary parking for planes precisely the same way. Kit didn't talk to the airport about it, he had to talk with one of the three aircraft FBOs, Fixed Base Operators, who owned the hangars and tarmac space in the airport. Kit just picked the one closest to the runway, Aero Premier, called them on their radio frequency, and secured himself overnight parking in their brand new north complex hangar, which was literally right off the taxiway...after he taxied all the way back up from the south end of the runway. But, it was worth the taxi to park his plane in a hangar that was open 24 hours and offered to call a taxi for them while they were still taxiing to the hangar.

After landing and reaching the tarmac area controlled by Aero Premier, Kit was met by a signal truck who guided him into the huge hangar and parked him in the middle of a large collection of other private planes. Then the driver helped unload their suitcase and drove them to the front desk in the signal truck, where Kit paid for a night of parking, refilling his plane's fuel tanks, and a \$10 landing fee charged by Lakefront airport.

At Georgetown, and the airport in Brownsville, visiting pilots weren't charged landing fees, the airports getting their income from pilots by selling their own AVGas and jet fuel. Here at Lakefront, though, the airport offered no services they themselves oversaw and they charged a small \$10 landing fee for all landing aircraft not based at the airport...which Kit didn't find to be overly outrageous. It was entirely acceptable to him to pay \$10 so the airport was there and in working order in case he ever wanted to land here again. The FBOs that offered parking, fuel, and services to visiting planes collected those fees, and probably split them with the airport.

The two FBOs at Bergstrom were Atlantic Aviation and Signature Services, both of which were “franchise” FBOs that had businesses at quite a few airports, didn’t have to do that; Signature was the FBO Vil used when she landed in Austin, it was to their hangar and tarmac that Kit went when they went to meet her.

That there were only two FBOs at Bergstrom that Kit could contract to take care of his plane, if that was eventually where he parked his plane after getting permanent hangar space, might seem odd. But in reality, it made sense from a business standpoint. Little Georgetown Airport charged no landing fees and was focused entirely on private aviation, was more friendly to businesses that focused on the private pilot with his personal plane, and as a result there were 7 FBOs there that offered a variety of services, on top of the services the airport itself offered in fuel and their pilot terminal. Bergstrom, a big international airport that had airlines landing there and also charged a landing fee to planes that weren’t based there—and thank God Kit’s plane *was* considered based there because of his hangar deal with Avia, so he didn’t have to pay landing fees as a private aircraft since the airport got rent from his parking space—didn’t really focus on its small general aviation section as a source of profit, so they weren’t as friendly to small FBOs that might want to set up shop there. There were only two nationally based FBOs that had settled in to serve private and general aviation at Bergstrom...because they were big, national FBOs who had the clout to bargain reasonable deals with the airport over rent, and one large flight school that probably had had to pay through the nose to set up their operations at the airport; but given the kinds of planes the school used, they were certainly successful. The biggest sticking point for Kit was that there was no hangar space, and until he found permanent hangar space, he’d not hire an FBO to maintain his plane. Some big FBOs offered hangar space as

part of their services, but there wasn't an empty hangar spot anywhere in Austin. Where he'd eventually get hangar space was the major determining factor of which FBO he chose.

The taxi was sitting out front of the Aero Premier hangar waiting for them. Kit helped Jessie in and then got in himself, and told the cab driver, a scruffy-looking jackal who was very jovial and polite, where they were going. "I will have you there in no time," he said in accented English. "Safely and surely!"

Jessie looked out at the city as they drove down through it, at its mixture of new and old architecture, then they entered the glass and steel canyons between the thirty story skyscrapers in the central business district. "I will wait for you here," the taxi driver told them when he pulled up into the Hyatt's traffic circle by the front door.

"I'd appreciate it," Kit said. "We'll be going to Antoine's after we check in. I know you know where that is."

"And I know to drop you off at Decatur and Saint Louis," he said with a smile and nod.

"Then you're just the cab driver I need," Kit grinned.

It took then all of ten minutes to check in and drop off their suitcase and attaché, then they were again in the cab on their way to the French Quarter. Antoine's was in a rather awkward place on the back side of the Quarter, on Royal Street near Esplanade, and so it was always best to go in through the back way, via Esplanade, and walk to the restaurant from there. Some cabbies tried to drive down Royal, which was a very slow process at night in the Quarter, because of all the foot traffic heading for Bourbon

street. Kit gave the cabby a healthy tip when he dropped them off, which made him smile brightly. “Thank you, my generous friend!” he said.

“It’s best to repay a kindness with a kindness,” Kit said sagely. “What’s your name?”

“Avrad, good sir. I hope to carry you again. Good evening to you.”

“Good fur there,” Kit said as they watched his cab drive off, and Kit took special note of his cab company.

“He seemed nice,” Jessie said.

“He knows his way around this city,” Kit told her. “That’s an important trait in a cab driver in New Orleans, because the streets here are really weird. If we ever come back, I’ll call his company and ask specifically for him.”

“Does he know his way around? Where’s the restaurant?”

“He knows his way around because he *didn’t* drop us off in front of the restaurant,” he told her. “Come on, I’ll show you why.”

It was *so, so* satisfying to enter Antoine’s. The hare maitre’d that got him fired was standing at the podium near the door. The hare certainly remembered him, but his gray-furred face was confused by Kit’s suit and Jessie’s elegant dress. “What are you doing here?” he finally asked.

“Vulpan, party of two, eight thirty,” Kit said, giving him a malicious smile.

The hare’s eyes darted to his appointment chart, then widened when he saw the appointment there. The look of shock, chagrin, and fear blooming

on his face just made Kit feel all warm and fuzzy inside. “Uh, F—Follow me,” he said, motioning with a gloved paw.

They were seated in the main dining room, with its elegant carpet and crystal chandeliers, at a table clothed with a sheer coverlet. The walls were covered with memorabilia of famous past guests, along with tasteful paintings and one small tapestry with the fleur de-lis. When they were brought menus, Jessie’s eyes widened, both at the prices and at the seafood. “Kit, can we afford this?” she asked in a whisper.

“I told you we can, and this is one of the best places in the city for Creole seafood, so drool away, love,” he smiled.

It was a heavenly meal. Kit had crawfish bisque for his first course, oysters Rockefeller for his appetizer, no salad, and lamb chops with mint sauce for his main course. Jessie went with the shrimp remoulade for her appetizer, she tried escargot at Kit’s dare for her second course, which she didn’t think were that bad at all, and grilled trout with crawfish tails and shrimp for her main course. Both of them opted for the steamed broccoli to go with their entrees, and for dessert, Kit had peach melba while Jessie opted to try the chocolate mousse. As usual, Jessie finished her meal much faster than Kit, and was forced to sit and wait for him. She was much better at that now, though; months of eating dinner with him had slowed her down a little.

“Now, wasn’t that worth the flight?” Kit asked with a bright smile.

“I thought this was about getting revenge on that fur that got you fired,” she giggled.

“Oh, I already got that. I’ll remember that look on his face for *years*.”

Jessie laughed.

Their hotel room was by no means as luxurious as their \$150 meal, but it was nice in its own right. For one, the bed actually felt nice to his back, and for another, their tenth floor room had a nice view of the river. Jessie avoided laying down to combat her morning sickness, following Doctor Mac's tips, so they decided to go down and check out the casino.

"Remember, don't bring any money into the casino you can't afford to lose," Kit winked at her.

"Then give me twenty dollars," Jessie told him, looking around in curiosity.

It turned out that twenty bucks went a long way, because, to his shock, Jessie was *good* at blackjack. They were there for over three hours, and though they left without the \$20, it gave them three hours of fun. Kit watched Jessie play blackjack for nearly an hour before going off to play nickel slots, his own little mindless diversion of fun. At one point, Jessie had been up to \$75 while Kit was playing slots. When they were finally done, Jessie was angry with herself for not quitting when she was ahead. "Seventy-five dollars, my handsome fox. Seventy-five! Why didn't I quit!"

"We were there to have fun, pretty kitty," he told her mildly, as he flagged a cab outside of the casino. "Did you have fun playing blackjack?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"Did you lose a fortune?"

"No! I only played the twenty."

"Then wasn't the three hours of fun worth the twenty dollars it cost you?"

She gave him a curious look, then she laughed. “I guess it was,” she agreed. “But it would have been *more* fun if I won.”

“So says every gambler on the face of the earth,” he winked.

That Sunday, they traded dinner attire for tourist attire. It was as warm in New Orleans as it had been in Austin, so they left the hotel with their suitcases that morning wearing summer clothes, Jessie in a pair of khaki shorts and a tank top, and Kit in a pair of jeans and a faded Longhorns tee shirt, with the Texas flag on the back. He had a cab take them back to the airport so they could pack their luggage in the plane, then it took them back to the French Quarter so they could sightsee. They explored the quarter thoroughly, from one corner to the other, browsing tee shirt shops with naughty tee shirts, to the strip clubs on Bourbon street that Jessie made sure Kit got nowhere near, to the antique shops along Royal street. Kit took her into Saint Louis Cathedral just as mass was letting out, sneaking in, and they walked up to the French market. They ate lunch at Café du Monde there by the market, watched street performers across the street from Jackson Square, then went to the Riverwalk. Kit bought them tickets on a noon cruise on a riverboat, and then they spent four hours standing at the rail of the boat as it cruised the river, taking lots of pictures and video.

But, no matter how fun the day was, it had to end. Almost regretfully, they hailed a cab at the Riverwalk mall’s entrance around 6:30, and went back to the airport. “That was *so much* fun!” Jessie said exuberantly as the cab pulled up to the hangar at the airport, and Kit paid the cabby. “I can’t wait to show the gang the pictures!”

“Yeah, I had a ball,” Kit agreed as they got out of the cab.

Jessie was totally used to the plane by now. She got in confidently and strapped in as Kit did the preflight walk-around, then she pulled out the video camera from their carryon stowed in the back seat as he climbed in himself. “For the gang,” she grinned, pointing it at Kit. “And here we are in the hangar, getting ready to start the engines and go home,” she announced as the camera recorded. “Say hi, my handsome fox!”

“Hey guys,” Kit waved to the camera, then he reached overhead and began the startup sequence. “If they find this in the smoking wreckage, we love you.”

“*Kit!*” Jessie gasped, then she laughed. “Now do you see what I put up with, guys?”

“I have never tried to scare you on purpose. I did that to your father,” he added absently, which made Jessie nearly drop the camera as she laughed.

Jessie narrated the startup checklist, knowing it so well, then she talked loudly over the engine as she panned out to show them taxiing out of the hangar. “Which way are we taking off, love?” she asked him as they came out onto the tarmac.

“Not sure, lemme ask,” he said, then asked traffic control for instructions to take off. When they answered he relayed it to Jessie. “We’re taking off going south, over the city,” he told her.

She panned the camera all around the plane, then focused it on the Garmin screens, then she pointed it out her side window at a forward angle when Kit taxied out to the end of the runway. “Okay, heeeeere we go!” she called as Kit throttled up to take off. Kit made sure to dip his starboard wing slightly so Jessie got a good view of the city as they took off over it. “Oooh,

there's the Superdome!" Jessie said, pointing her camera a bit more towards the wing. "And those big bridges they talked about when they showed the Hurricane Katrina coverage! And now we're moving out over the swamps southwest of the city as we slowly turn more west to fly home," she continued, pointing the camera out over the wing. "How long til we're home, love?"

"About two hours," he answered, adjusting to course he'd programmed for their return flight before they left Austin, following the most efficient pilot's arc south from New Orleans to Austin. "We could make it in about seventy-five minutes if I felt like burning all our fuel to get there, though."

"We'll be landing at night?"

He nodded. "That should be interesting to tape for the gang too," he said with a smile.

"Oh, they're going to see almost all this flight," she smiled at him, turning the camera back on him.

"It's going to be awfully boring for them," he chuckled.

"We can edit out the boring parts," she winked.

"Like when I'm yelling at my laptop, accusing Chess Masters of cheating?"

She laughed.

Jessie did tape a good part of the flight, getting them a beautiful shot of the sunset at 12,500 feet as they neared Port Arthur. She got great shots of the city of Houston's lights as they flew over it, and then put the camera away until they got ready to land. She taped the whole landing, panning

between the MFD window showing their map location and the lights outside, as Kit put the air traffic on speaker so the camera's microphone could pick it up. "Aaaaaand...touchdown!" Jessie called when they landed, and Kit throttled back. "There you go guys, our flight from New Orleans to Austin in our Cessna four hundred! I hope you enjoyed it!"

"I know I did," Kit smiled, reaching over and taking her paw. "Enjoy our date, pretty kitty?"

She leaned over and kissed him on the muzzle tenderly. "Thank you," she told him.

"Enjoy it while you can. When the baby comes, we'll be chained to Austin. Not that that's a bad thing," he added with a dreamy little smile.

"Do they sell baby seats for planes?" she asked absently.

Kit found himself back up to his ears in work on Monday, but that wasn't the only issues of the day.

Rick's surgery took place at 8:00am, and went off without a hitch. They went in and fixed a slight herniated segment of muscle, which must have torn free after the first surgery, and Rick was being told he'd be casted and on his way home bright and early on Thursday morning, which was a very, very good thing. The doctors had cleared him to return to work, and they had an elevator here in the building, so Rick would have little trouble wheeling in to do desk duty. Kit would still be doing all the legwork for Rick's job, but Rick being back in the office would take a lot of work off Kit's shoulders.

The blistering op-ed they ran also caught just a *little* attention. Just a little, like, say...from CNN.

He fielded the call at eight o'clock Monday morning, just as Rick was going into surgery, as he was researching the nine Democratic candidates for President in preparation for the upcoming debate, which was now next week. Denise wasn't in the office yet, so the switchboard call came straight to Kit's phone; usually it went straight to Rick's, but Denise had reprogrammed it while Rick was recovering from his injury. "Lone Star Magazine, Kit Vulpan speaking," he said absently, copying a bunch of text off a campaign website into a Word file.

"Mister Vulpan? This is Dan Larkin, associate producer from CNN."

"CNN?"

"Cable News Network," he said. "We'd like to interview you over an op-ed you wrote, which has become something of a viral piece roaming around the web."

"Huh, really? I hope I get royalties for it," he noted, which made the producer laugh.

"So, are you interested in four minutes of on-air interview around four twenty?"

"No."

"I—what?"

"No thank you. I may be a journalist, Mister Larkin, but I also don't appear in public. I do my public speaking from behind a keyboard. It's an agreement I have with my family."

“I—well, I guess I could understand that. Are you sure you won’t change your mind?”

“Not any time this century, no. Thank you for the offer, I do appreciate it, but no thanks.”

“Well, I’d like to leave you my number, in case you change your mind,” he said in an obviously disappointed voice.

“That won’t happen,” Kit said with gentle adamance.

“Alright then. Thank you for your time.”

“Thank you. Goodbye.”

Then he hung up.

He didn’t pay it much more mind until Mike got there. He came straight to Kit’s office and pointed a finger at him. “You crashed my server!” he accused, though he was grinning.

“Excuse me?”

“The server crashed yesterday!” he said, then he laughed. “Too many hits on the website!”

“Would this have something to do with the op-ed?”

“Hell yeah,” he grinned. “I put it up on the site, and the server crashed from overload.”

“I was just called by CNN asking for an interview.”

“Holy—wow! Did you take it?”

“Nope,” he answered. “I don’t appear in public, Mike. I’ve lost my taste for it.”

Mike’s eyes flickered to his half-missing ear, then could only nod in understanding. “But yet you work for a magazine,” he grinned.

“That’s all done behind a computer,” Kit said with a little smile.

“Point.”

Kit tried to get his work done, but the op-ed made that hard. There wasn’t an issue of the magazine to be found *anywhere*, for those that had one weren’t leaving them laying around as they usually tended to do on campus, and the server was still logging huge traffic, way, way more than normal. Mike showed him a graph of the server’s load after he got it off the server. Somehow, word of the op-ed had gotten out, and it was attracting attention from the internet. From what Mike was saying, the issues were all snapped up *because* of the internet. The traffic started early on Sunday morning, according to the graph, while Kit and Jessie were in New Orleans, and then it grew steadily through the morning. The server crashed at 2:28pm yesterday, which caused the backup server to kick in and also text an emergency code to Mike, who had to come in to get everything all straightened out. “I have the server and both backups trying to keep up with the demand,” Mike said with a happy grin. “You need to write a comment about it I can put up, like saying you don’t do TV interviews.”

“I can do that,” Kit chuckled.

Rick was absolutely *thrilled* about it, calling at five minutes to nine to report in with the good news about his surgery. When he called, Kit didn’t have to tell him about anything, because he already knew about the server crash. Rick told him the good news about his leg first, then went straight on

to the op-ed. “Son, this will drive interest in the magazine through the *roof!*” he said excitedly. “This is three weeks in a row we’ve totally sold out our sale units and the magazine has vanished off the campus. I want you to call the publisher and tell him we’re increasing circulation by twenty percent on the next issue as a test to see if it holds up, and send a blanket warning to all our advertisers that they’ll see a rate increase if our increased circulation holds. I don’t think they’ll mind too much,” Rick chuckled. “Oh, and accept *every* reprint request that comes in about the op-ed. And bargain for five percent over the going reprint royalty.”

“Alright, I can do that,” he answered. “CNN called for an interview.”

“Did you take it?”

“I don’t appear in public, Rick, you know that.”

“Damn. Well, I can respect that, son,” he said. “But *I* will,” he chuckled.

“You are on the by-line,” Kit noted. “Call CNN and tell them you’ll do the interview.”

“Did the CNN guy leave his number?”

“No, but I can get you the number for CNN’s Houston bureau in about ten seconds,” he said, already bringing it up. “Just tell them you’re trying to get the number for Dan Larkin about an interview he offered to us.”

“I’ll have to do it over the phone,” Rick mused.

“We’ll send them a nice picture of you they can put up on the screen,” Kit chuckled. “You seem awfully giddy about this.”

“God, son, you have no idea how hard it was to resist calling you when the server crashed,” he laughed. “But I didn’t want to intrude on your time with Jessie.”

“Aww, thanks, boss,” Kit said sincerely. “That was very thoughtful. I really appreciate that.”

“You get to work on that, let me call everyone and tell them I’ll be home Thursday morning.”

And that basically wrecked his day. Kit was doing two jobs, but since one of his jobs entailed dealing with magazine business, he found himself spending half the day wearing a phone earset lent to him by Denise so he could free up his paws while he fielded calls for half the day. They were offered 19 reprints, and Kit bargained for five percent over standard royalty for each one. A couple of editors grumbled a bit at that, but they also accepted it.

Lone Star made some money that day.

Jessie was on her spring break now, so she came in around noon, bringing Kit some beef stroganoff and broccoli with cheese sauce for lunch. She hung around to do some writing for her strip, then decided to just sit quietly in his office knitting, just being near him, which Kit did not mind at all. “I’m going to go have my first golf lesson with Sheila tomorrow afternoon,” she said. “We’re going to a driving range.”

“That’s no surprise,” Kit told her. “It’s a lot harder than most furs think to hit a golf ball. It takes some practice.”

“How long will you be at the courthouse on Wednesday?”

“Dunno, love,” he answered. “The hearing is at ten, and I doubt it’ll go much past six, so any time in between. It’ll depend on how many times the DA likes to hear me say no.”

Jessie giggled. “I’ll make sure to keep the checkbook handy if I have to bail you out of jail,” she winked.

“I may need it,” he said with a sober nod.

Rick did the interview with CNN instead of Kit, by phone from his office, and the whole office watched it on TV. It ran at 3:21pm Central time, where Rick told the CNN anchor, Don Lemon, about how the Clinton campaign staffer, who was unknown to them, had been almost vicious in his rejection of an interview request, and how that act had caused the magazine to release an op-ed about all the campaigns and how they were treating the “little furs,” how the campaigns were showing how they were so unlike the images they were trying to project. Rick told them about his own experiences with arrogant campaign officials who not only brushed off his interview requests, but did so with snide and snarky comments...though none matched the sheer hate spewed on Kit by the Clinton staffer. “How can a campaign say he or she is a champion of the common fur when the common fur gets treated like a criminal when trying to communicate with the campaigns? How can John Q. Taxpayer compete with Corporate Bigwig when trying to communicate his concerns to the candidates, when anyone without a name or a campaign contribution check is shown the door?”

“But you’re not a common citizen, Mister Sanders, you’re a journalist,” Don Lemon pointed out respectfully.

“Listen, we know we’re a small magazine, barely more than a campus mag for the University of Texas, but we’re also professionals. And when

you don't treat a journalist with professional courtesy, you can expect that journalist to use a journalist's outlets to voice his or her indignation."

That made Don Lemon chuckle. "Indeed they can," he agreed. "The Clinton campaign released a statement saying that the co-author of the op-ed who tried to arrange the interview, Kitstrom Vulpan the third, tried to use his family influence to get an interview, and was rebuffed by the campaign because of it. Any truth to this statement?"

"Sir, if you knew anything about the Vulpan family, you'd laugh at that statement," Rick said seriously. "He *has* no family influence, and the staffer knew it. That was why the staffer was so nasty to Kit, calling him 'the earless outcast Vulpan.' If the staffer is saying Kit was trying to use his name to get an interview, then why did he bring that up? The staffer got very personal, and we couldn't let such an uncalled-for action go unchallenged, so we wrote the op-ed."

"But wouldn't an explanation be that the staffer made note of it because Mister Vulpan was doing just that?"

"You don't know the Vulpan family, Mister Lemon. If he ever spoke for his family, his family would definitely have something to say about it, and that's something Kit would never do. He just made peace with his family and reconciled to them in order for him to be able to communicate with his sister and his cousin, both of whom he dearly loves, but that peace doesn't include him speaking for the family. I doubt he'd do anything to jeopardize that peace, because it would strip him of his contact with his sister and cousin. He'd never do such a thing, because his family would be rightfully angry if he tried to use his name in a way that they didn't approve. After all, the name doesn't belong to *only* him."

“So you challenge the press release by the Clinton campaign?”

“I certainly do. And I stand behind every word in our op-ed.”

“Well, we’ll have to leave it there. Thank you, Rick.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“That was Rick Sanders, head editor of *Lone Star* magazine,” Don Lemon said, which made the office explode into applause.

Kit just blew out his breath. Rick had saved himself, and Kit, a lot of grief, for he followed the cardinal rule: *never speak ill of the family*. Rick had danced on the razor’s edge communicating the outrage the family would feel if Kit was exploiting his name openly—*openly* being the key word there—while also defending their right to feel angry if he did, for that was a violation of the unspoken rules of conduct of family members...even disowned ones. Kit was impressed anew with both how intelligent Rick was, and how subtle he could be.

“Did you hear that, cousin? You *love* me,” Sheila said, throwing herself into his arms. “Let’s elope!”

“And the banjo starts playing,” Mike said ominously, which made Kit laugh.

“He’s already married, Sheila,” Jessie said primly. “You had your chance when you were kids. He’s mine now.”

Sheila laughed raucously.

His phone rang, and it was Vil. “I didn’t do it,” he said immediately upon answering it, pushing Sheila out of his arms.

She laughed. “I’m calling just to say *you’re fine*,” she told him. “I don’t disapprove of what Rick said. He defended the family honor while also defending yours. He did well.”

“You were watching it?”

“Of course I was. CNN tried to get me to comment, so I fished and found out Rick was going to be interviewed today,” she answered. “I read the op-ed, too,” she laughed. “I can certainly tell which parts you wrote and which parts Rick did.”

“Yeah, it was a collaborative effort,” Kit chuckled as he went back into his office, while the crew high-fived each other. “He took my disjointed rant and put some structure in it.”

“I do have to protest one thing, though. As one of those rich special interest groups, I protest you trying to restrict my access to buying politicians,” she teased, which made Kit laugh helplessly.

Kit had to work late to get all his work done, since he spent most of the day doing Rick’s work, but Jessie stayed with him, so that made it much easier. She went out and got them Chinese for dinner, then helped him again with some of the easier research, digging up the easier facts for him and arranging it. She’d seen his research work often enough to be able to duplicate his basic format, which made it *much* easier for him when he incorporated her work into his own. “I should have Rick pay you for this,” Kit said as he merged her work with his.

She giggled. “I think Rick has more important things on his mind. Are we gonna go see him?”

He nodded. "I have to give him the daily briefing. I hope the docs stay with letting him go home on Thursday. He'll be in a wheelchair, but at least he'll be home."

"I wonder how long he'll last til he comes to work," Jessie mused.

"I give him one day," Kit said honestly. "I'll bet ten bucks he'll be in his office Monday morning."

"He probably will," Jessie agreed with a nod. "Not sure how he's gonna manage the bathroom in that wheelchair, though."

"He'll find a way," Kit chuckled.

Courtrooms sucked.

Kit arrived on Wednesday after having been dropped off by Jessie, who had liked trying her paw at driving golf balls that she was going to go back to the driving range this morning and practice some more. She'd wanted to go with him, but he didn't want her to worry. Besides, he was coming armed for bear.

Kevin and Delores met him in the lobby, just on the other side of the metal detector, which had a fit when Kit went through it and forced them to use a wand to determine that he did indeed have metal in his body. The skunk looked quite dapper in his dark gray suit and red tie, and the tabby cat wore a very modest gray business skirt and blazer. He shook their paw when he got to them. "Thanks for coming," Kit said.

"I am your lawyer," Kevin grinned. "We're ready to argue the case, so don't you worry a bit."

“I made sure he’s ready for this,” Delores assured him. “This will be very good practice for him.”

“We have the subpoena all but quashed, the only real thing they can do is try to search again using search warrants.”

“Well, it won’t help them all that much if they do, because I destroyed my notes,” Kit said carefully. “I don’t have them anymore.” And that was technically true, for he no longer *had* the notes. Vil did.

“Well, they can still try,” Kevin told him. “But we’ll be ready for them if they do.”

At ten, Kit, Delores, and Kevin entered the courtroom on the subpoena. The DA was already there, a raccoon wearing a dark suit, a gray-furred rabbit judge, a burly bear bailiff, and there were eighteen furs in a jury box to the side of the judge’s bench and witness stand. Luckily, at least to Kit, there was no one else in the room. As soon as Kit and his lawyers sat down in the audience seats, the judge banged his gavel, and the burly bear bailiff called the court to order.

“Alright, proceed, counsel,” the judge told the raccoon.

“The state calls Kitstrom Vulpan to the stand,” the raccoon said.

“Are you still moving to quash the subpoena, Mister Vulpan?” the judge asked.

“Your honor, I’m counsel for Mister Vulpan,” Kevin said in a strong voice after he stood up. “I’m here to represent Mister Vulpan on the matter.”

The raccoon looked a little irked, but said nothing. The judge, on the other hand, looked slightly amused. “Bailiff, see the jury back to the deliberation room,” the judge said, “while I hear the arguments.”

Once the jury was removed, Kevin and Kit were allowed to move into the well, sitting at the opposite table, while Delores remained behind them, silently observing but allowing Kevin space to do his work. Kevin stood up and began. “Your honor, as you know, Texas law based on reporter’s privilege is weak and unclear, relying mainly on the First Amendment, various appeal cases, and *Branzburg versus Hayes*. Reporter first amendment rights have always been weak in grand jury cases, but in each case the district attorney was asking specific questions about specific cases with a specific objective, and with supporting evidence. None of those conditions appear in this case. The district attorney is, to coin a term, fishing. He has no idea if there even *was* a crime involved in this case, and if there was, he can’t even claim that it occurred within his jurisdiction.”

“That’s why Mister Vulpan was subpoenaed, to find out,” the DA cut in.

“But, since there’s no definitive case here, no specific questions, not even a certainty of jurisdiction, the subpoena fails the balancing test put forth to subpoenas against reporters in most criminal cases,” Kevin said.

“This isn’t a criminal case, it’s a grand jury,” the DA said, a bit testily.

“But where *is* the case, your honor?” Kevin asked. “All we have here is a series of vague questions and uncertainties. Can the district attorney even prove a crime was committed and present enough evidence to bring charges? Charges against whom? All we have here is a paper-thin set of accusations brought against no one, in a place that may or may not be in the

district attorney's jurisdiction, where the only possible lead they have to go on is an article that appeared in a campus magazine, that may not even be truthful, as the article's disclaimer clearly states. All this subpoena is trying to do is intimidate the author of the article into violating his relationship with his source, it serves no other reason, because the district attorney has nothing else. That, your honor, is a bad faith subpoena. And because of that, the subpoena should be quashed as by the precedent set by *Branzburg*, which the state of Texas follows."

The judge was silent a moment. "Counsel?"

"The subpoena clearly states our position, your honor," the raccoon said. "The purpose of the subpoena, and this grand jury, is to determine the very questions counsel brought up. Was there a breaking of the law? If so, where? The subpoena is clear in that it isn't demanding every single scrap of information from Mister Vulpan. We only want two questions answered, your honor. Where is the brothel in which the subject of the article worked, and when did the source work there? If those questions are answered, Mister Vulpan is free to go about his business. He doesn't have to name his source. We don't want details, we just want to know if this is a matter that falls within our jurisdiction, and if it falls within our jurisdiction, we'll pursue the matter from there without Mister Vulpan's help, since that's a battle over privilege I know I'll lose."

"Sir, to do that would cause me to break my word to my source," Kit said, standing up quickly. "I gave my source my solemn word I would protect their anonymity, and revealing *anything* about what I was told would violate that promise. Because of that, I can't answer any questions at all about the article."

“You’re speaking out of order, Mister Vulpan,” the judge told him. “Please sit down and remain quiet for the remainder of the hearing.”

Kit listened to Kevin and the other fur argue back and forth, rephrasing their core arguments as both sides quoted other cases to the judge, for nearly half an hour. Then the judge seemed satisfied. “Let’s break for an early lunch. I’ll return with my decision. We’re adjourned until twelve o’clock.”

“All rise,” the bailiff called mechanically.

“How do you think we did?” Kit asked as the two of them left the courtroom.

“I think we’re fine,” Kevin answered.

“You did very well, Kevin,” Delores told him with a nod. “Assertive, confident, knowledgeable, respectful, and always in control. You’re going to be an excellent trial attorney.”

“Thanks, Misses Kittimer,” Kevin said with a happy look.

Kit was a little nervous as they ate lunch at the cafeteria. The thought of going to jail was actually looming on his horizon, because he wasn’t about to reveal anything about Allison. If the DA won, he’d have to answer questions that he would not answer, and he’d be found in contempt of court. He wondered if they’d let him bail out, or hold him in jail to force him to testify. Kevin kept trying to distract him from those kinds of thoughts, keeping a cheery, positive attitude, so much so that he was joking with Kit when they went back into the courtroom at noon. Kit was *very* nervous when they sat back down, after the judge entered and called the court to order. “Despite the general, non-confidential information being sought by

the district attorney, precedent falls squarely on the side of Mister Vulpan,” the judge announced. “No matter how general you’re trying to be, counsel, you have no case other than attempting to force a reporter to reveal a confidential source in order to support your case. That is the textbook definition of a bad faith subpoena. As such, I rule that the subpoena is quashed,” he announced. “Since there seems to be no other evidence the district attorney can present at the present time, I’m inclined to end this grand jury proceeding. However,” he warned, looking at Kit, “if the district attorney can re-present this matter to a grand jury with an external source of evidence to support the hearing, then I won’t rule to quash a subpoena again,” he warned. “Because in that situation, the grand jury proceeding will be examining actual evidence, and the district attorney isn’t calling you to testify for the sole purpose of forcing you to violate your relationship with your source. Understand, Mister Vulpan?”

“Yes, sir,” Kit said, a little nervous and also at the same time quite relieved.

“Alright then. Bailiff, dismiss the grand jury if you please. This case is hereby dismissed, with the district attorney’s leave to re-present the case at a later time once he meets the conditions I set forth.”

And with a bang of the gavel, Kit felt very much like the fish that slipped off the hook.

He left the courtroom with Kevin and Delores, who patted him on the shoulder. “I told you you’d get out of it,” he said.

“Yeah, but the judge said I would have to testify if the DA brings it back.”

“Yes, but without your testimony, I *seriously* doubt that they’ll ever manage it,” Delores told him honestly. “I talked to a friend of mine in the DA’s office. They have absolutely no leads. Nothing at all. All they had was your testimony, and we just stopped them from getting it, so they’re beyond helpless.”

“They don’t even know if the brothel where your source worked is in Austin,” Kevin continued. “I mean, they don’t even know if there was a crime, and if so, where it was. They have nothing, Kit. I wouldn’t worry about it. Trying to bully you into answering their questions was their last resort, their Hail Mary. It failed, so I’d just sweep this one under the rug and forget about it.”

“Well put,” Delores agreed. “Oh, excuse me a minute, boys, I see an old friend from the DA’s office,” she said, then she hurried towards a dark-furred male cat in a black suit near the stairs.

“That’s easy for you to say, Kev,” Kit said with a sour grunt. “I will worry about it, for quite a while.”

“Well, don’t let it make your fur fall out,” Kevin chuckled, playfully punching him in the arm. “You gonna make poker this weekend?”

“I’m going to try,” he answered. “But with Rick out, it’s not a guarantee. I’m still doing both our jobs right now.”

“And with Jessie pregnant, too,” Kevin grunted. “That must be a lot of stress.”

“Vulpans live on stress,” Kit said lightly. “How’s it been going with Sam?”

“Wonderful,” he answered. “I’m going to go meet her folks next month, as soon as I get this criminal trial out of the way. My first,” he said with pride.

“Oh? What happened with the infringement case?”

“Won it,” he grinned. “Got my client nearly four hundred thousand dollars in damages.”

“What kind of criminal trial are you doing?”

“I’m defending someone from petty larceny charges. A mid-level manager at Motorola accused of shoplifting. It’s just a misdemeanor case over a five dollar box of candy, but he pled not guilty, and the firm put me on his case. Sorry if I can’t really go into specifics.”

“No problem. I should do an article about you,” Kit chuckled. “I’ll call it *Life After College*, showing furs using their degrees, showing you cutting your teeth after graduation from law school. You’d be a perfect first subject.”

“I guess I could let you do that. It’s free advertising for the firm.”

“We’ll have to talk about it, and talk to Rick about it.”

“You know, *you* fall into that as well,” Kevin grinned.

“Nah, I cut my teeth as a homeless vagabond,” Kit winked.

“Such a waste of a history degree, since you’re solidly in journalism now,” Kevin grinned.

“I should go take classes on journalism,” Kit shrugged. “I really have no idea how to do it. All I really know is what I learned at the magazine and what Rick and Barry taught me.”

Kevin laughed. "I think you're doing just fine as it is," he said. "And not just you. Rick has something special going on over there. *Lone Star* is like no other magazine I've ever read. It's news for young furs, things that *matter* to us. It's the only magazine I know of that has news on the election on one page, then a review of the latest video game release on the next. It has *The Scene*, *School Daze*, *Ask Away* and all those other features that makes the mag much more fun to read. It's way more than a campus mag now."

"Yeah, Rick's got vision," Kit agreed. "And a damn fine group of furs working for him. Hmm," he mused.

"What?"

"I should ask Rick what he'd think if we had Mike actually start writing," he said. "Mike's our resident tech-head, maybe we should have him do articles about tech reviews, advice, so on and so on. It's the only thing we really don't do ourselves, Rick always buys articles from other sources for stuff like that. Why should we when we have a perfectly good computer god right in the office? After we hire a photographer, a lot of his workload is going to dry up, since he and Lilly are our primary photographers right now. We'll have to keep him busy."

"Computer god?" Kevin asked with a laugh.

"Just about. Mike knows *everything* about computers and gadgets. He knows how to network, he knows programming, he knows hardware and software, I've never seen anything he couldn't do when we asked him. I think he can even program a VCR."

"That is truly the ultimate test of any tech guru," Kevin said with a solemn voice, then both of them exploded into laughter.

Delores returned. “My friend tells me that with the subpoena quashed, they’ll let this fade away, at least if the assistants have their way. He said that off the record, of course,” she said with a light smile. “He said the DA himself was the one that pushed it, over the advice of the assistants, because there’s so little there. But then again, the DA has always been a moralistic crusader. He’s gone after things like this before,” she said absently. “I’d say Kevin was right, Kit. You can put this behind you. With the search coming up empty and the subpoena quashed, he can’t do anything but harass you, and he’d be doing it after he’s already been beaten in court. If he does, we’ll be coming after him for prosecutorial misconduct, and the DA’s office knows it. I made that clear when I talked to my friend, and I still carry enough clout in the office that they won’t dismiss that as an idle threat. So this case is over.”

“Thank God,” he said with an explosive sigh. “Let me make the reassuring calls that I’m not going to jail now,” Kit said, taking out his Blackberry as they all left the courthouse. He called Jessie first and told her to come get him, that she wouldn’t have to bail him out, which made her giggle, then called Rick and told him he’d squirmed out of it...if only just. He then called Vil to assure her all was well because she was poised to crush the DA if Kevin and Delores failed to quash the subpoena, then, after Kevin and Delores said their goodbyes and they parted, he called Allison. She too wanted to know what was going on. “Ally,” he said. “It’s over. I’m not going to jail, and my lawyer told me the DA’s office is going to let the matter drop.”

“Thank God,” she said explosively. “You are a true male of honor, willing to go to jail rather than break a promise,” she said carefully. Even now, they never directly talked of it except when they were in his house.

They both knew that cell phones were *not* secure; anyone with a scanner could hear every word they said.

“When I make a promise, I make a *promise*,” he told her calmly. “Jessie wants to know if you and Sheila would like to come over for dinner tonight. She’s making lasagna and german chocolate cake.”

“I’d love to,” she answered. “She’s still trying to make me fat,” she added with a laugh.

“She thinks if she fattens you up, you won’t be so attractive when *she* gets fat,” Kit said sagely. “She loves you as a friend, Ally, but she *is* a little jealous of you, even now. She has this weird idea that because we’re both foxes, I might find you to be more attractive than her, which is utterly ridiculous. It’s part of her sinister plot to keep my eyes from wandering when she’s waddling around.”

Allison laughed. “Well, at least now I know what to expect,” she said.

“She just can’t get it into her head that I’m totally hers,” Kit chuckled.

“Such a pity,” Allison teased. “You are so whipped.”

“I enjoy my slavery,” Kit told her, which made her laugh.

Rick, it turned out, was again operating on a similar wavelength to Kit. After he went to visit Rick in the hospital, his last night there, he told him about his idea, to which Rick replied by showing him a file in his laptop called *Cyber Corner*. It was a detailed description of a weekly article Mike would pen dealing with technology, games, and the internet culture.

“As soon as I hire a photographer, he starts the article,” Rick said.

“Have you looked over the resumes?”

He nodded. “I’ve set up interviews for next week,” he answered. “I’ve already looked over the portfolios of four of them online, the others offered to bring them to the interview.”

“So, you’re coming back?”

“Monday,” he affirmed. “They have elevators there, I can get to work just fine cause Martha’s gonna drop me off and pick me up. The docs have cleared me for desk duty. So, you can throttle back on doing my work after Friday, son. Leave it alone on Saturday, take your Sunday and Monday off.”

“Jessie will like that,” Kit chuckled. “We can spend time at home instead of the office. She’s spent almost all her spring break sitting in my office knitting and doing her homework.”

“Take her to the beach,” Rick told him. “Sunday is supposed to be a fine day, according to the weather. Take her to South Padre and let her have a little spring break fun.”

Kit was about to say something, then he laughed. “That’s a pretty good idea,” he said.

“Anyway, as far as the magazine goes, I’m also gonna introduce two new features,” he said, moving his document to a new page. It was called *The Little Corner*. “This is going to be Denise’s territory,” he explained. “It’ll be a femme’s-eye view of campus life.”

“She’s going to beat you when she sees that headline.”

“Rick laughed. “I’m actually going to let her name it, this one’s just to get a charge out of her.”

“It’ll do that alright.”

“Marty will handle the other new feature,” he said, scrolling down to a heading named *15 Minutes of Fame*. “It’ll be guest articles from students, mainly from the journalism majors, giving them their shot at doing news, editorials, reviews, whatever, published. Marty will pick two articles submitted by students each week and run them, and he’ll pick ones that have a bearing on whatever articles we’re running that week. I think it has potential,” he said. “Not only do we give journalism students a chance to cut their teeth, we can introduce fresh views, angles we never thought of.”

“I think it’ll work, as long as we get enough submissions.”

“When it’s thin, Marty’s going to use this instead,” he said, switching to a heading called *Shout Out!* “This’ll be a log of a discussion on Twitter Marty and Mike will host on Tuesday nights, where students talk about some subject in real time, and we post logs of it or write articles based on it. I’m not sure how well this will go over, though. This one is purely an experiment.”

“Experimentation is good as long as it doesn’t consume all our resources,” Kit chuckled.

“I think Marty and Mike can sacrifice an hour every Tuesday night,” Rick said. “Jeffrey’s also talking about splitting *Missy and Cutler* off from *School Daze* and doing it as an independent strip, running one strip a week. He wants to name it *Culture Wars*, and put Missy and Cutler in battle gear on the intro panel, about to start fighting.”

Kit laughed. “That about sums up how those two get along,” Kit said. “It’s a love-hate relationship if there ever was one. But *Culture Wars* is a kinda silly title. He should just call it *Missy and Cutler*. Furs know those

two by now, so the title makes perfect sense. What more needs be said once you get to know them? I mean, it's *Missy* and *Cutler*."

Rick laughed. "True. I'll have to talk to him about it. We haven't asked Jessie about it yet. Think she'd go for doing it as a weekly instead of the way she does it now?"

"She'd do it. You'll have to give her a raise, though."

"I'm going to put her on as a full-time staff member," Rick told him. "I was going to ask her if she would like to do a feature herself. Jessie has a gentle kind of personality, I think she'd do well in an advice column or something like that, something that let her sweet nature show through the words on the page. I'll let her think about what kind of feature she'd like to try though, and we'll go from there."

"She'd probably go for it, at least after she got over her bout of nerves," Kit chuckled.

"Talk to her about it when you get home. I thought about asking her about it when she was here earlier, but Martha distracted me with barbecue," he laughed. "Both of them are making sure I leave here twenty pounds heavier than when I came in, and that doesn't count the cast they'll put on me."

"Where is Martha now?"

"Home, getting things ready for the wheelchair," he answered. "She wanted to move some furniture around. She has Sheila and Bill over there helping her."

"Looking forward to it?"

“I’m not looking forward to the wheelchair, but I’m glad I’ll be going home,” he smiled. “I just hope I’m not in it long.”

“Well, here’s hoping you heal fast. Soon as your bones are stable enough, you’ll be on crutches.”

“I still don’t see how that matters,” Rick grunted.

“Just in case you accidentally put weight on your broken leg,” Kit told him. “They wouldn’t even take my cast off until my bones were fully healed, for fear that I’d stress it moving around.”

“Well, that’s your back, son, this is just a leg.”

“If you put the wrong stress on your leg, you’ll wish you stayed in the wheelchair,” Kit told him. “It means you’ll be back in surgery and you start over healing from scratch.”

“Yeah, I know, but I don’t have to like it,” Rick chuckled. “You talk to Jessie tonight, and take that girl to the beach on Sunday!”

“I think we will,” Kit said with a smile.

Sheila and Allison joined them for dinner that night, a dinner of lasagna, artichoke hearts, salad, and german chocolate cake. Allison looked at all the food with an amused look, giving Kit a slight smile as Jessie kept trying to double Allison’s portions, but she said nothing. She was too busy eating to say anything.

“God, Jess, I gotta learn to cook as good as you,” Sheila said after taking a bite of the lasagna.

“You’d better if you want to be a chef,” Kit teased lightly.

“How did it go today, cousin?” Sheila asked. “I mean, the stuff you won’t tell anyone else.”

“There wasn’t anything more to it,” he answered honestly. “Kevin went in there and just *steamrolled* the prosecutor,” he chuckled. “Perry Mason would have been impressed.”

Allison reached over and patted him on the wrist. “Thanks again, Kit,” she said. “You were willing to go to jail for me. I’m so honored.”

“I made you a promise, Ally,” he told her. “And a Vulpan *never* breaks his promises.”

“Yup,” Sheila agreed. “None of us will, not when it counts. It’s about the family honor.”

“You have no honor, Sheila,” Jessie teased with a cute smile. “You’re a Party Pack girl.”

“I have a *little*. I’ll sell it to you,” she offered, which made both Jessie and Allison laugh.

“I meant to ask, Ally. Do you talk to—to *them*?” Jessie asked. “How did *they* react to the article?”

“The Top Hat? It made them rather nervous at first,” Allison said. “They knew it was them Kit was talking about, and they knew it was me that did the article. They didn’t appreciate the part about covering up the rapes, but they did appreciate how Kit made note that they were very good employers in other respects, how they let us keep the majority of the money we earned. But when Kit refused to speak to the police after they came around, they calmed down a great deal. They relaxed when the search turned up nothing, and I’m sure they’re dancing in their offices now that the

subpoena has been beaten, since their business has actually *increased* since the article. It got some old members who haven't been coming to start coming again. They have extensive contacts inside the police and DA's office, so they knew what was going on. As I recall, two of the assistant DAs are members," she mused with a slight smile. "I can say that the owners have a great deal of respect for Kit for refusing to say a word, and they didn't kick him out, he's still considered a member of the club. And Benny said that the owners actually liked the article, too. He said they said it was very good. Benny said he thought he knew me until he read the article, then realized he'd never really known me at all," she said with a mysterious little smile.

"Benny?" Jessie asked.

"Benny the bartender there at the Top Hat, he's still is a friend of mine, so he keeps me in the loop with what goes on there. Between attempts to lure me back, that is," she chuckled lightly. "But I'm never going back. I got out with my investments and, thank God, no diseases. I'm not tempting fate. I'm done with it."

"The hell you are, we'll go back as customers," Sheila grinned at her. "You forget, me and Kit are members, and we can take guests! You'll get to be the girl doing the pawing, not the girl being pawed!"

"I might do that," she smiled. "A couple of the male strippers are *very* handsome."

"Boy, are they," Jessie said reflexively, then she blushed and laughed. "But I still love you, my handsome fox, even though you did throw me at those male strippers."

"I'm so glad," he said blandly, which made all three femmes giggle.

“We should go celebrate,” Sheila said. “Kit, Jessie, wanna go do something with the Austin Party Pack this weekend?” Sheila asked with a grin. “Me, Ally, Sandy, Sam, Danny, Jessie, Charlotte, Lisa, we can all have a party at the sorority or go to Dallas or something! It’s the last weekend of spring break!”

“Actually, I’m taking Jessie to the beach on Sunday,” Kit said, looking at her.

“I’m so glad you decided to tell *me* that!” Jessie laughed.

“I just did. Wanna go to South Padre on Sunday?”

“Of course I do!” Jessie said immediately.

“Ooo, can we tag along?” Sheila asked. “We’ve been there, we know where all the sexy guys hang out!”

“I’m not all that interested in sexy guys, Sheila,” Kit told her with a dry smile. “But that’s up to Jessie. She missed out on spring break, so I gotta make it up to her. This is *her* trip.”

“I’d love to have you guys along,” Jessie said immediately, reaching over and patting Allison on the forearm. “If you’d like to come.”

“I think I would,” Allison smiled in return. “As long as you don’t get jealous of seeing me in a bikini.”

Jessie’s cheeks frizzed out, and she laughed. “I’ll do my best,” she said with a helpless smile. “It’s not going to be fair when I’m fat and you’re not.”

Allison glanced at Kit, then she laughed earnestly. “And I think you’ve been trying to fatten me up!” she accused.

“I am not!” she protested.

“God, the boys will just *die*,” Sheila said with a predatory smile. “Me *and* Jessie *and* Ally, three of the hottest femmes in Austin all together and in bikinis. They’re gonna howl!”

“I’m not going there so boys can ogle me,” Jessie said primly. “I’m a married femme, and I’m pregnant, for goodness sake!”

“So? You’re not showing yet, you’re still a sexy beast, Jess. Wear dental floss and your wedding ring, let them see what they can never have!” Sheila said with a malicious little smile, which made almost every strand of Jessie’s fur stick straight out.

“I will *not*!” she gasped. “I have a nice two-piece from our honeymoon I can wear, because I *do* like to swim.”

“You don’t go to the beach to *swim* on spring break, you silly girl!” Sheila said with a laugh. “You go to look utterly hot in a bikini and make every boy have wet dreams about you for two weeks afterward!”

“No thanks. I already have a male to do that for me, any time I want,” Jessie smiled.

“She does,” Kit agreed mildly. “I dream about her every night. Of course, she’s right there, but that doesn’t change the fact.”

“I don’t mind when my husband has naughty dreams about me,” Jessie said with a darling smile at him. “But I think I could do without some horny boy having them.”

“Jessie, Kit’s only like a year older than the average college student,” Sheila protested.

“What a difference a year makes,” she returned.

“You’re twenty-three?” Allison asked.

“Not for eleven days,” Kit answered. “Twenty-two.”

“His birthday’s on the thirtieth,” Sheila smiled. “And I already got *plans*.”

“I’ll be busy.”

“Big plans.”

“So sorry.”

“*Huge* plans,” Sheila said with a bright-eyed grin.

“I’m not that stuuuuupiiiiid,” he said in a sing-song voice.

“Cousin, your life will never be the same,” she said with steady eyes.

“Hmm. End up in jail for a year because of your plans, or spend my birthday with my wife and a nice quiet little party with our friends. Decisions decisions,” he said quietly.

Allison laughed. “Well, may I come to your party?”

“I’d be happy to have you,” Kit said with a nod. “But you’ll be there with the whole gang.”

“A bunch of criminals and reprobates,” Sheila grinned.

“And how are they different from you and me, Sheila?” Allison asked calmly.

“That’s why you’ll fit in perfectly,” she laughed. “So, what time do we get here on Sunday for the beach?”

“Six or so,” Kit answered. “If we leave out from here at six, we’ll get there around eight or so. If we get there early, we have plenty of time.”

“Six? Damn, cousin, that’s harsh,” Sheila protested.

“Take it or leave it.”

“Sheila, can I stay over at your place Saturday? That way we’re all right here.”

“Fine with me, Ally, long as you don’t mind the couch.”

“Make sure to remind me to bring my day bag,” Allison said, finishing the last of her lasagna.

“Just remember, once we leave the plane, all the space we have is the rental car, and you’ll be carrying most of what you need anyway. So pack light,” Kit warned.

“I didn’t think of that,” Allison mused. “Where can I put a credit card in my bikini?” she asked, giving Sheila a sly little look, which also made Jessie’s eyes harden just a little bit even as her cheeks threatened to ruffle out.

“Punch holes in two and wear them as your bikini top,” Sheila winked at her. “It’ll give the term *swiping your card* a whole new meaning. Jessie can wear a couple of those new golden dollars, and I’ll wear beer bottle caps!”

“Are we going to play ‘who can show the most white fur’ again?”

“You bet we are! Of course, Jessie wins, *all* her fur is white. Well, kinda nearly-white. Guess we coulda said it was white up until Kit

deflowered her,” she said clinically, looking at Jessie in a manner that made her cheeks ruffle.

“Stop teasing my wife, you two,” Kit told them.

“But it’s so *easy*,” Sheila protested.

“Sheila, when she finally bites you back, I don’t wanna hear you come crying to me,” Kit warned.

“Duly noted, cousin,” Sheila said, glancing at Jessie with a smile.

“Let’s see if we can get some cash this time, Ally. We’ll dance for dollars!”

“We need G-strings for that.”

“And how is that different from the bikini bottoms we already have?”

“Point,” Allison acceded, which made Kit laugh.

Chapter 25

The entire crew was on hand on the joyful morning when Rick was released from the hospital.

It was nearly an honor guard that wheeled Rick out to Martha's old van, and Rick paused to get hugs and shake paws of those around him. "Now you better get all those party streamers down by tomorrow, since I'll be back on Monday," he teased. "You'll have to go back to doing real work!"

"Why Rick, aren't you coming to the wrap meeting today?" Marty grinned.

"I'm afraid not, I'm on strict orders from someone more important than the doctors," he said, pointing at Martha.

"I want him to settle in before he starts going back to work," she said bluntly.

"So Savid and Kit are still your whipmasters til I'm back," Rick grinned.

"At least they let us play X-Box in the main room on the big TV," Jeffrey intoned.

"You weren't supposed to tell him that!" Lilly protested.

"So, Jessie, did Kit tell you what I had in mind?" Rick asked.

“Mmm-hmm,” Jessie said. “I’ll take the job. I’m not sure what kind of writer I can be, but I’ll be glad to take the strip to a weekly. As long as you give me a raise,” she winked.

“A raise and a promotion to full time. As far as what kind of writing you’ll do, well, we’ll talk about it later. Given the good work you do on the strip, I’m positive we can find something you’ll be very good at. I’ve come to learn that English majors are good at writing.”

“She can do the work, she just can’t do it fast,” Kit teased.

“I get all my homework done on time!” she protested, then she grinned lightly at him.

“Well, now she’ll earn that big office we gave her,” Barry teased. “She does one little strip a week and gets an office, and poor Sheila gets a desk out where Rick and Savid can stare at her butt.”

“I stare at her profile, not her butt. She sit facing side to me, not back,” Savid chuckled.

“Ten bucks, Savid, and you can see all my butt you want,” Sheila teased.

“You get only five for showing Barry!”

“It’s a seller’s market, my dear mongoose,” she winked. “Demand goes up, price goes up.”

A couple of offended looking furs passing by glared at Sheila, which just made the whole gang laugh. “Alright, you bunch of freeloaders, get back to work!” Rick commanded. “We have an issue to put to bed today!”

“We have it all under control, you old dingo,” Lilly smiled.

The day was just starting, but it was already good. Kit and Jessie both went back to the office, and after a little kissing and nuzzling in his office, she went to go talk to Jeffrey about expanding her strip to become a strip of its own while Kit went back to the mundane tasks. He'd cleared his own inbox of everything major, so he was just doing Rick's work today. They were all ready for the debate, Lilly, Marty, and Barry's work for next week had already been researched and readied for them, and Kit was running two pieces out of his journals for *Through My Eyes* next week to clear a little time for himself; Rick had told him to hold off on doing any writing for next week so he could get his house back in order after Rick came back on Monday. So, in actuality, Kit was looking at a pretty light couple of days work wise. He had only two meetings with potential advertisers on Friday, nothing at all really on the schedule for Saturday outside of accounting work that Rick told him not to do but would do anyway, and Sunday they'd be going to the beach. Today he'd have to close out the week after the wrap meeting, but outside of that, he was on cruise control today.

He did still have work, though, in what was unplanned. Kit fielded two calls for requests for reprints of their work, which Rick had already told him to accept. One of them was for Barry's interview of Senator Hutchison, but another was for Allison's article.

Kit got a little curious, then pulled up the records, then he blanched slightly. In the last month, the magazine had sold reprint leases to 37 different magazines, newspapers, or websites. 37. Dear God, that was a *lot*. Most of them were local, either in-state magazines or the Austin paper, the *American-Statesman*, but four pieces had been sold to national organizations. Reprint rights to Kit's article about Allison had been sold to *Newsweek*, and no doubt because of Rick's contacts with his old job. The

Associated Press bought rights to Barry's interview with Senator Hutchison and Kit's interview with Representative Lamar Smith, and the *Washington Post* had bought reprint rights for the op-ed.

37 reprints. Holy cow. That was a hell of a lot. That was just a sign that Rick's plan to increase circulation was a very sound one, since this was the *perfect* time to expand. The magazine was on a hot streak, and they had to build a larger reader base. They needed more free units on campus, and they needed—

They needed *sale units inside Austin*.

This was the perfect time. Rick had never done sale units inside the city because they were free on campus, but Austin was a pretty big city. Sale units around the campus were a waste of time, but if they put sale units around Bergstrom, in north Austin, out near Pflugerville, over in the hill country to the west, out in the ranchlands to the east, now those would sell.

Kit was a researcher, and this was a good topic to research with his spare time.

He spent all morning on his project. He called around to inquire about interest among vendors. He studied population distribution of students who lived off campus, to avoid putting sale units near concentrations of student housing, as well as age distribution to target the magazine at the 18-34 crowd on which the magazine focused. He projected printing costs against possible profits to run a risk analysis, then called all of their active advertisers to gauge their reaction to an increase in circulation of sale units within the city, which would increase their fees...but also increase exposure of their advertising.

Every single one was enthusiastically for the idea, despite the increase in their own costs, since they advertised with Austin in mind.

By the wrap meeting, he had his entire idea thoroughly researched and analyzed, and he found that a *large* increase in circulation, while risky, was also the best approach and had the greatest chance of increasing their profits. They needed to get the magazine out while furs were interested, and that meant putting it in every bookstore, library, convenience store, even every bar they could find. Kit worked through the math and decided that a 150% increase in sale units distributed in a ring around campus, concentrated to the north, south, and west where there was a larger segment of younger furs than there was to the east, along the edges of the city, was the safest and most effective means to go about it...at least to him. Kit was no business major, but it was just common sense to avoid selling the magazine in areas where furs could either get it free or where those furs lived, since they could just give away their free copy after they were done with it.

Kit called their printer and inquired about whether they could handle such a huge increase in ordered units. "It'd push us, but I think we could do it," Dan said. "We'd have to print them in waves and ship them out, we couldn't have the entire order ready to go by seven a.m. like we usually do. Uh, are we talking over and above the current increase, or based on the old numbers?"

"I did the math based on the old numbers," Kit answered. "So, you can do it?"

"If you can find stands to put them on, we can print 'em," he said confidently.

After the wrap meeting, Kit called Rick. “I’m sending a file to your Blackberry,” he said. “Download it to your laptop when you get it and take a look at it.”

“What is it?”

“A business proposal,” he said. “It’s still tentative, but take a look at it and tell me what you think.”

“Sure, I can do that, son. It’ll give me something to do while Martha coddles me,” he chuckled. “Send it off.”

“It’s on its way.”

“How was the wrap meeting?”

“Everything went just fine. We didn’t change it from what you saw yesterday. Jessie’s been closeted up with Jeffrey all day, talking about taking the strip to a weekly. She’s kinda hogging him, we still have some work to do on *School Daze*.”

Rick laughed. “I’m still not sure what kind of feature she’ll do.”

“How did Denise take your offer?”

“She said yes so fast I think she sprained her tongue,” Rick answered. “And if we’re lucky, we’ll have a staff photographer by next Friday.”

“That’ll be useful,” Kit agreed. “Mike?”

“He’s probably in his office right now planning his first article,” Rick chuckled. “Holy—how long did you work on this, son?” Rick asked in surprise.

“Almost all morning. It’s just a rough draft,” he said quickly. “I called around, did some math, and looked into a few things.”

“Dear God, son, I knew you were a good researcher, but *damn*,” Rick said quietly. “I’ll crunch your numbers and see if mine match yours. If they do, this might be worth a shot. It’ll cost some serious cash for the expansion, though, and we’ll have to do some major legwork to get the magazine on racks out there.”

“I’ll have another seven thousand available by Tuesday,” Kit said. “That should keep us out of the red ink until things stabilize and we find out if it’s profitable. If not, we can scale back and eat the loss.”

“If we can sustain circulation, it won’t be a loss for long,” Rick said. “If we can push even half this circulation on the sale units, we’ll earn the investment back inside three weeks.”

“It’s a gamble,” Kit said honestly. “But this is the perfect time to try, Rick. Almost past time. If we don’t try something bold while interest is peaked, while so many other mags and papers are buying our work to reprint, we’ll miss our opportunity.”

“We’ll see how the twenty percent increase goes this week,” Rick said. “If that does well, then we’ll take a long hard look at your idea. You’ve seen the books, son. If we overreach, the magazine is out of business.”

“I know. That’s why I said it was a gamble,” he said calmly.

“It might be a gamble worth taking. We’ll see,” he said.

Kit felt relaxed by the time it was beach time.

It was a good morning to fly, clear and warm for March, though there were a few sleepy girls in the plane with him. At seven they were in the air and on the way to Brownsville, and to be fair about things, Allison rode up front, since she'd been in the back both times last time they flew. She was her usual quiet self, though she was still not entirely awake. Jessie was in the back with her laptop, working on her strip, while Sheila slept in the seat behind Allison.

Sheila had rented a car for them, so they brought actual stuff with them. They had a cooler for drinks and light snacks they'd buy in Brownsville, and everyone brought one change of clothes, just in case they wanted to go somewhere that frowned upon bathing suits. Everyone was literally in their suits already with shorts and tees worn over them, Jessie's floppy straw hat in the open cargo area behind the back seat, though Sheila was wearing nothing but a little shoulder wrap that showed off her rather skimpy black bikini top.

Sheila was *highly* displeased with Jessie's choice of bathing suits. She was wearing the same sensible two piece she'd worn during their scuba excursion in the keys. It was a sleek little suit, showing off her sexy torso, but the sports-bra style halter top and sensible bottom did not sit well with Sheila at all. She wanted Jessie in a G-string and pasties, or just about the same thing, and rallied for nearly ten minutes to have Jessie buy a "better bikini" while they were at the beach...something Sheila would pick out for her that would no doubt mortify Jessie for a month after even *thinking* of putting it on.

Everyone was awake and alert by the time they landed, though. Kit paid to park the plane at a tie down spot and they climbed out, locking Jessie's laptop up in the cargo hold as Sheila went to go get the rental car.

Kit had the plane tied down by the time Sheila got back to them, parking at a lot across from the plane—cars weren't allowed on the tarmac in the visiting tie downs at the airport—and they carried their cooler and wicker bag full of their stuff. Inside it were their sunglasses, changes of clothes, a little cash, and Sheila's wallet. Sheila agreed to pay for everything but parking the plane, since Kit flew them down. Paying for the rental car, parking, and everything else was Sheila's responsibility.

“Let's go!” she said, honking her horn. “I know the beaches will be empty, but let's at least get there before the drunk naked coeds wake up and stagger back to their rooms!”

Sheila was close to right. They got the car parked and got out to the beach around 8:30, and they had the place more or less to themselves. There were very few furs out and about, since it was very early for the college crowd...though it wouldn't be totally empty. Not every college did spring break the same week, so while U.T.'s spring break was ending, other schools' breaks were just beginning. Today would be a huge turnaround day for the island, as some college kids left and new ones came to take their places. Kit and Sheila both figured that they'd have about four hours of peace and quiet before the beach started filling up, which would be more than enough time for Kit and Jessie to actually *swim*.

They got to do that. The water wasn't all that warm, and there weren't any waves, but it was still nice to float lazily in the clear water. He and Jessie swam a while as Sheila and Allison guarded their spot on the beach, laying out in the warm sun in their spaghetti strap bikinis and garnering about every male eye on the beach, until they'd had about enough. They came out and scrubbed the water out of their fur, which made Sheila giggle a little.

“You two look terrible,” she teased. “And your fur’s gonna be all chalky when the salt dries in it.”

“Well, I brought a comb for a reason,” Jessie winked, fishing a big comb out of the bag.

“Sheila, if you pull your bottoms down any further, you won’t really have any reason to wear them,” Kit noted clinically.

Sheila laughed and looked up at him. “Hush and let me enjoy myself.”

“Such an exhibitionist,” Kit accused with a chuckle.

They didn’t stay in one spot on the beach all day. After a while, after some beach volleyball, lunch, and a lazy hour or two dozing in the warm sun, they packed their things and put them in the car then went out to enjoy what the beach had to offer. They went shopping on a boardwalk, and Allison got talked into going on a parasailing ride by Sheila. Jessie took quite a few pictures of her flying along behind the boat. The two vixens had their “who can show the most white fur” competition early that afternoon, as well. Kit and Jessie just got a good distance from the two of them as they very nearly got arrested for indecent exposure by a bike patrol. Their bikinis were very skimpy to begin with, both of them wearing thong bottoms, and with less total material on their bra tops than a dinner napkin, and both of them were very brazen about pushing what little they were wearing as far as they could get it to go without exposing themselves. Sheila was no chicken, but she was dealing with someone who used to strip for a living, so Sheila lost that little contest. Sheila could show as much as Allison given the rules, but she couldn’t *strut* the way Allison could, move with that total sensuality, that utter ripe promise to rock a male’s world, the slightest tilt of her hips promising the darkest delights. It was the challenging strut of a stripper who

knew she had the hottest body on the beach. Allison's strut just *owned* every male eye on the beach, admittedly, even Kit's...much to Jessie's dismay. Kit wheezed a little when Jessie elbowed him in the ribs.

"Give her the crown, cousin. You got your tail whipped," Kit teased when they came back to them.

"Yeah yeah, maybe I'll go to the Top Hat on member's challenge night and work on my walk," she grunted, giving Allison a slightly annoyed look.

"You may call me *your Majesty*," Allison said in her quiet manner, which made Kit explode into laughter.

"I'll call you a bitch, Ally," Sheila grinned.

"I've been called worse by meaner furs than you," she returned with a slight smile and a shrug of her shoulders.

Sheila treated them to a nice meal at a beachside restaurant, then they went to a beach party hosted by one of the clubs on the island. While Sheila and Allison tormented males and made females very jealous by playing volleyball, Kit and Jessie sat at a table. "Alright, you can put your eyes back in your head, handsome fox," she told him tartly.

He laughed. "I can't deny she's beautiful, love, but she's not *you*," he told her, kissing her on the muzzle. "You could totally kick her ass in a game of 'who can show the most white fur,' cause you're *way* sexier than she is."

"No, I could never do, *that*," she said, her cheeks ruffling.

"You've put her to shame when we're in the bedroom," Kit winked. "And who said you had to play the game in public?"

She gave him a speculative look. "I think you're just being nice."

He snorted. "I had my chance with her, if you recall, and I said no. So what does that tell you?"

"That you were too afraid of what Vil would do to you if you ruined our wedding?"

Kit laughed. "I love to see you jealous," he told her. "It tells me I'm still your number one."

"You always will be," she told him. "And I have to keep myself on the top of your list when you have *her* tempting you," she said, motioning at Allison.

"How can I be tempted by what I see as second best to what I already have? Yes, she's beautiful, pretty kitty. I admit it. She's probably the second most beautiful femme I've ever known...but guess what? You're on the *top* of that list. You don't have to do a thing to stay there, love, just be yourself. There's nothing sexier on earth than that."

"I just wish *you* were jealous," she said, a bit accusingly.

"Oh, I'm jealous, love, but I keep it in here," he said, tapping his chest. "I'm not like you. You're a knockout, pretty kitty, one of the most beautiful femmes there is. You don't have to have me tell you that either, you *know* it. You're *beautiful*. Just look around. The males stare at you, the femmes give you dirty looks, just like they do Allison and Sheila. But you put Sheila to shame, and Allison can't quite reach your level. I'm, well, *plain*. I'm not really all that handsome, I have funny eyes, I have a bad back, I'm missing part of my ear, and I have these," he said, holding up his scarred left arm, where white fur marred the red fur on his forearm, jagged lines of white

streaking down into the dark-furred mitten on his left wrist and paw. “I know I can’t hold a candle to the males you went to see at the Top Hat, but I just have to trust you, trust that you’ll come back to me when you go out the door. I know you could have any male you wanted, any time. No male could ever resist you. I can’t help but feel jealous knowing that, but I know that the only thing I can do is show you how much faith I have in you, how much I trust you, how much I love you, and hope that it keeps you with me. I just have faith that you love me as much as I love you, and I try to show you that even though I have a friend like Allison, someone *almost* as pretty as you, I’d never break my wedding vows, because you are my entire life. I’ll always be by your side, for as long as you’ll have me.”

She gave him a long, tender look, then leaned over the table and kissed him lovingly on the nose. “You are the most handsome male I have ever known, my love,” she told him with honest eyes. “These aren’t scars, to me, they’re beauty marks,” she said, touching his arm. “And you’ll never get rid of me. When we find our male, we Williams femmes dig in our claws and never let go. Just look at my mom and dad,” she said with a light yet loving smile.

“I’m easy prey to keep, pretty kitty. I won’t struggle.”

“That’s a good thing,” she said with a light whisper, then she kissed him. It was one of her special kisses, a kiss he was surprised she’d give him in public, and God, was he glad he was already sitting down. All sound seemed to turn off, and all he could sense was her, her lips on his, her paw touching his arm. When she broke the kiss, he was all but leaning into it, and he was a little disappointed that she ended it as his brain restarted. “So, I’m your number one?” she asked with a slight smile.

“The one and only,” he said breathlessly.

The intimate mood was broken when Sheila and Allison came back to the table, Sheila a little out of breath. “Well, that was more fun than I expected,” she laughed. “Allison popped out of her top jumping up to spike the ball,” she winked.

“And I was too busy kissing my wife to see it. Darn,” Kit said in a deadpan voice. “Oh, wait, I have a picture showing *so* much more.”

Allison and Sheila laughed, and to his surprise, so did Jessie. “I forgot you have that,” Allison said.

“One of the few left. There were only a few of them to start with, and the rest were deleted because of the potential scandal involved. You know, a Vulpan caught on camera like *that*. I’ve got the only copy I know of left, and I keep it in a very safe place,” he said carefully.

“Well, I’m glad to hear that. That would be a little...embarrassing, if it came out at the wrong time.”

“Well, I still have my copy, but I don’t keep it where just anyone can find it,” Sheila admitted. “And I’ll keep it as long as Kit keeps *my* picture.”

“Forever, then,” he grinned at her. “I can’t lose my blackmail material.”

“You learned *way* too much from Vil,” Sheila accused, then she grinned. “Seven days,” she said with a little trill in her voice.

“I already told you, it’ll be a party at home during poker,” Kit told her. “Lupe’s already planning it, and I told him I don’t want anything outrageous.”

“Oh, my plans start *after* the kiddie party,” she grinned. “I’m just glad you have Monday off. You’ll be in no condition to work the next day.”

“When is your birthday, Jessie?” Allison asked curiously.

“Not til July,” she laughed. “I’m a patriotic femme, I was born on July fifth, ten minutes after midnight. Ten minutes from the big day,” she laughed.

“Well, that’s always easy for furs to remember,” Allison chuckled. “What about you, Sheila?”

“September twenty-seventh,” she answered. “You?”

“August thirtieth,” she answered. “About one month and six years before you,” she said with a little smile.

“You don’t act twenty-four, but Sheila certainly doesn’t act eighteen,” Kit chuckled.

“I’m twenty-one,” Sheila said primly. “I have six IDs that say so.”

“You act like you’re twelve,” Kit teased. “You need a few IDs that say that, too.”

“I got way too much up here and have laid way too many guys to be twelve,” Sheila said with a naughty smile, pointing at her breasts and thrusting them in Kit’s general direction.

“Well, if we’re going by those standards, you’re, what, ninety?”

“Bite my ass, cousin!” Sheila snapped, which made Allison and Jessie erupt into laughter.

They got back to the plane after a few walks up and down the beach, right around sunset. Kit was a little tired from all the walking they did, but it had been a good day. It was nice to walk on the sand, paw in paw with Jessie, while Sheila acted like a little kid and lured Allison into shedding much of her reserved demeanor and having a little fun. It was nice to spend time with his wife, it was nice to spend time with his cousin, and it was nice to see Allison warming up to him and Jessie, on her way to being a friend. There was still a way to go, but there was hope.

They climbed back in the plane at 7:00, and were airborne and on the way home by 7:20. Sheila was up front for the ride home, and both she and Allison had their cameras out, taking pictures as they took off. Kit got them up and to a nice cruising altitude of 12,000 feet. "I wonder how hard it is to get a pilot's license," Allison mused, which made Kit laugh.

"You have no idea how many furs have said that who've ridden in this plane," he teased. "Just keep one thing in mind, Ally."

"What?"

"This plane costs about seven hundred thousand dollars."

"That much? Wow," she breathed.

"I certainly wouldn't have it if I wasn't a Vulpan," Kit admitted. "My family gave it to me as a thank you gift for me not stripping them of every penny and throwing them all out into the street."

Sheila laughed. "Yeah, they did," she admitted. "And I had to pony up twenty thousand out of my trust for it. They rated it to how much we got from the deal, as to how much we had to give. So, next time you bitch about

me asking for rides, remember that, cousin. I helped buy this plane for you!”

“I’ll give you the stuffing out of the back seat. That’s worth about twenty thousand,” Kit mused, which made the three femmes laugh.

“I never heard that before,” Allison said. “What happened that made them buy you the plane in return for it?”

Telling Allison that story helped pass the time for the hour or so flight back to Austin. “Wow,” she mused in her quiet manner. “You had it all, but you gave it up. I can see, Kit, you’re truly a male of your word. You really did have the chance to be rich.”

“I could have been a *billionaire*,” he said immediately and without batting an eye as he started descending towards Bergstrom. “That’s what the Vulpanes are worth, Ally. About six point six billion, if you add up everything. Stocks, property, the worth of the businesses, everything. Most of that worth is tied up with the shipyard and steel company, though. When my father died, he had about seven hundred million in *cash* in banks and securities, and he controlled the business.”

“Which is the biggest piece of the pie,” Sheila added. “Our family owns the biggest private company on Earth.”

“Not quite,” Kit corrected her. “The shipyard and steel companies and the parent company over them all have stock, but the stock isn’t sold to the public. It’s all internal within the family and the board, to keep the company privately controlled, even though it’s technically listed as a public company. Vil owns two thirds of all the stock of all three companies, Vulpan Shipyards, Vulpan Steel, and the Vulpan Corporation, which is the parent company of the other two and the catch-all for all the little tertiary

companies the Vulpans control. Since Vil has that super-majority of all three companies, that's where all her money comes from, and it gives her total control of all of it. Vil earns no salary for being the CEO. She relies utterly on the profitability of the companies to earn her salary. Her pay is her dividends from the stock...but, since it's Vil, I think she netted like twelve million last year after taxes. Vil's an absolute genius when it comes to business."

"That's where the family got all its money," Sheila continued. "All of us own shares of the family business, and we earn money from it. I own five hundred shares of each company," she said proudly. "I think Kit's the only family member who doesn't own family stock."

"Actually, I do," Kit told her. "One thousand shares of each. Vil sold them to me, she leveraged a proportioned buyout of the board. The stocks are all zero sum, Allison," he explained when she looked at him with a blank stare from the back seat. "There are only sixty thousand shares of each company's stock, that was all that was ever issued. To buy stock in the business, I had to get them from someone else in the business. Vulpan stocks are never available for sale. They're not even listed on stock exchanges. What Vil did was force the members of the board to all give up one hundred shares, buying them back from them, then she sold them to me. The Vulpan stocks are the backbone of my stock portfolio," he said calmly. "That is no-risk dividends for life, since the shipyards have Navy contracts coming out of their ears for the next sixty years."

"So, you own a little less than two percent of your family business," Allison reasoned.

"Yup, and Sheila owns a little less than one percent," Kit nodded. "Vil owns two thirds of each one, which means she owns forty thousand shares

of each company. It's the way they've done it ever since my grandfather incorporated the businesses back in nineteen thirty-six. When a board member is fired, quits, or retires, he has to surrender his stock to his replacement, it's an ironclad part of their contracts. The only ones who can't lose their stock are family members."

"So, over the years, the family earns money from the stocks," Allison reasoned.

Kit nodded. "Like I said, my father had like seven hundred million dollars in cold cash in the banks when he died, which was split up among the family as part of the deal that gave Vil control of the company."

"I'm one of the army of cousins, and I got a sixteen million dollar trust out of it, which is just chump change compared to what my mother got," Sheila told her. "My mom got ninety million out of the will, as well as some property and some other stuff. And that was on top of the money they *already had*. Mom and Dad were worth about a hundred thirty million in total assets before Kit's dad died, then they get ninety million in cash dropped on top of that."

"I don't get it. How could Kit have stripped your family and left them broke if they already have money of their own?"

"Because of the stocks," Sheila explained. "Up until the death of Kit's dad, see, the way it worked was that the oldest controlled all the stocks, as well as *all money earned by the stocks* within the family and any profits or interest made off money that was earned off the stocks. Yeah, my mom has a hundred twenty million of her own money from stock dividends, but since Luke's will was voided, it put control of that money all back in Kit's hands, even the money earned from stocks already given out. It was how Uncle

Luke kept a stranglehold on the family, and his father before him. Not even our own money was really our own. Uncle Luke could have taken it *all* from us at any time.”

“That sounds illegal.”

“It dates back to a contract that all the Vulpans who were there in nineteen thirty-six signed, when the stock was first created,” Kit explained. “It gives the heir absolute control of all money earned and stock created from the family businesses. In return for that control, the family gets shares of the family stock. It was made that way because originally, my great-grandfather was only going to give the oldest son *anything*, he was going to leave the other three Vulpan siblings with nothing but million dollar trusts, which was far too small to suit them, far beyond their usual standard of living. Imagine, the thirties, and a million dollars wasn’t *enough* to live on,” he snorted. “Anyway, my great-grandfather still had that British concept of passing everything to the eldest son. That original agreement was still in force, right up until my father died, because of how the agreement was worded. It gave the descendants of the heir the same power over the descendants of the other family members, giving my father the power to strip all money and stock earned from the businesses away from anyone in the family at any time...which was just about everything. Everyone relied on the shipyard, and any other businesses they started were started using money earned from the shipyard, which folded them into the agreement too. The only way to get around the agreement would be for someone to leave the family, get a job, earn money, and use that money to start a business. And me and Vil are the only Vulpans who has ever done that,” he chuckled. “Vil has a little boutique in Boston that is all hers, outside of the family’s control, built with a two thousand dollar loan from a bank as part of her

Master's in business degree project requirement. But that chain was broken with my bastard father's death. The money and stocks were all split up among the family, and the deal that would have given Vil absolute control was dissolved, outside of her ability as the majority shareholder to leverage a forced sale of stocks held by someone else. She can't take the stocks, but she could force the family to *sell* their stocks to her at a set price based on the last quarter's dividend. But the money is all theirs, free and clear. That's why the family was so happy about it. They're finally free of the threat of the family head disowning them and casting them out without a penny to their names. Vil can't take that money from the aunts and uncles, and the parents can't take the money from the cousins."

"How many cousins do you have?"

"Like thirty," Sheila answered. "It's hard to keep track anymore, the older cousins are having kids now."

"And each one got that much money?"

"It was based on how much stock we have," Sheila said. "The ones with stock got less, because we'll earn money off the stocks. I got sixteen, but I think one of the one-year olds got like thirty, because they stopped giving stock to cousins about ten years ago. Said the stocks were being spread out too thin by handing them out to every cousin. I think cousin Debbie was the last one to get stocks. All together, all us cousins got around two hundred million dollars from when Kit's dad died."

"And your parents got a hundred million each?"

"Only my mom. Each of the aunts and uncles, you know, Uncle Luke's brothers and sisters, each one got ninety million," Sheila told her. "But the property was distributed without being fair about it. Uncle Zach's the eldest

now, so he demanded the lion's share of the property and assets, and the others knuckled under to him. So, Uncle Zach's the richest of all the Vulpans now. The only ones that didn't really get much out of the will were Kit and Vil, which kinda sucks, since all the money was *theirs* to start with," she said. "But Kit was disowned, and Vil gave most of it up in order to keep control of the shipyard, since she was given the stocks before Uncle Luke died. Uncle Luke named her the heir, and with the title of heir come the stocks and the CEO's chair. Vil got the company stock, her house in Chelmsford, her dad's collection of cars, and five million dollars in cash. That's it. Compare that to Uncle Zach, who got ninety million, houses and properties all over the world, a private jet, a yacht, securities, stocks, and a bunch of other shit."

"I knew you were from a rich family, Kit, but to hear the numbers thrown around like that," she said, sounding a little surprised as Bergstrom came into view in the distance, its lights on. "And you could have had it all," she breathed.

"I won't touch that money," Kit said with utter sincerity. "It's a curse I'll never bring down on myself."

"But you *did* touch that money when you bought the stocks," Allison reasoned.

Kit glanced over his shoulder at her. Allison was very smart. "I didn't buy into my family fortune, Ally, I bought confidence in Vil's ability to run the business," he told her. "So, I'm showing my faith in my sister to earn enough money for our kids to be able to go to Harvard," he chuckled. "But, I have more than just Vulpan stock in my portfolio. The Vulpan stocks are the backbone, but I also invested in industrials and energy, but stayed way away from real estate and financials for now. Both of those are bubbles

either collapsing or on the verge of collapse, and I'd rather do more than throw my money down a hole. No matter how much faith I have in Vil, I won't put all my eggs in her basket. It's not sound financial planning. One untold disaster, and it's all gone."

"Truly," Allison nodded. "I keep my money spread out so I'm not exposed to too much risk in any one area."

"I just have a trust," Sheila laughed. "They send me a check every week, and I won't get to touch the principle til I'm twenty-five."

"You should pay more attention to it," Allison told her. "If you don't know how to manage that money, you'll find out how fast it can disappear."

"That's what the trust is about," she said as Kit radioed in and prepared to land. "I actually do a good job with my money, Ally. I have money in the bank. I think I have about fifteen thousand in there last I checked. My brothers and sisters burn through their trust checks like it's endless, and they go days, even weeks, broke. They have millions in the bank, and they're going to Mom for money cause they wasted it all. I budget my money. I found out a long time ago that if I watch how I spend my money, I have plenty to do whatever I want. I just don't do anything stupid with it, that's all."

"Well, that's a start," Allison nodded.

"Sheila may not look it, but she's probably one of the shrewdest of the cousins," Kit said as the plane lined up with the runway, then radioed the tower again to begin his landing approach. "And all this time we thought she was a flake," he winked at her. "Just another member of the Party Pack."

“Thanks a lot, cousin,” Sheila said caustically. “And I *am* a member of the Party Pack. The Austin Party Pack!” She grinned. “And in seven days, you will be inducted as its newest member!”

“Oh, no,” Kit said mildly. “Now excuse me while I focus my attention on not plowing us into the runway.”

After they were safely down and in the hangar, they drove back to the apartments. Allison’s Lexus was parked in the visitor’s lot, but she didn’t go straight home. She got to meet the founding members of the poker crew before heading home, since they were all sitting on Lupe’s porch. Kit took her over and introduced her to Lupe, Dan, and Mickey, and all three of them gave her a curious look. “Have we met somewhere before?” Mickey asked her.

“Maybe you’ve seen me when I’ve come over to see Sheila, or to have dinner with Kit and Jessie,” she said mildly as she shook his paw.

“Ah, maybe that’s it!” he said. “It’s nice to meet ya. Wanna come play poker with us next week? We’re always looking for suckers to separate from their pocket change,” he grinned.

“Brah, don’t scare off the easy targets,” Lupe said with a laugh.

“Kit invited me to his party next week, so I’ll be here,” Allison said with a slight smile. “And I’d be happy to try my paw in poker against you.”

“Uh oh, she might be a card shark,” Dan laughed, “just like innocent-looking little Sammy!”

“She’s certainly *somethin’*,” Lupe said with a grin, looking her up and down openly.

“Yes, I’m going home,” Allison said with a slight smile. “Let me go say goodbye to Jessie and Sheila, Kit. And thanks for taking us, I had a wonderful time,” she said, leaning over and kissing him on the cheek, then sauntering away in a manner that all three of the males noticed most keenly.

“Brahhhh,” Lupe sighed. “Sheila won’t let her anywhere near me,” he complained.

“Sheila knows you too well,” Kit told him with a chuckle. “You’d make a move on a mannequin if they put it in a bikini, Lupe,” Kit accused, which made Dan and Mickey laugh.

“Brah, what was she wearing at the beach?” Lupe asked intently. “I *hope* she was wearin’ some seriously skimpy bikini. Like, fishing line and drink umbrellas skimpy.”

“It was moderately skimpy, yes,” Kit said in a mellow tone.

“Brah, why you gotta be so mean,” Lupe said, his tail shivering.

“Because you’re sitting there drooling over one of my cousin’s best friends,” he answered evenly. “And if you annoy her, Sheila will probably get mad at you. You really wanna play with *her*? And if Alice finds out you’re trying to two-time her and takes it out on me, then *I’ll* get pissed. You want both of us riding your tail, Lupe?”

“Well, I hope you got pictures,” Lupe grinned. “I want to see as much of that fine femme as possible.”

“Dude, you’re so hopeless,” Mickey laughed.

Allison was already on her way home when Kit got back to the apartment, passing Sheila in the courtyard as she walked back to her

apartment across the complex, and got to work making some tea as Jessie got the shower going, to wash the rest of the sea salt out of her fur. She hugged him from behind as he put the kettle on, and he patted her on the arm fondly. “Did you enjoy yourself, pretty kitty?”

“I had a lot of fun, thank you, my handsome fox,” she replied, kissing his neck. “Thank you so much.”

“Any time, my love. Did you get all your homework done?”

She laughed. “It’s been done since Tuesday,” she said, poking him in the side lightly. “You big worrier!”

“I gotta keep your grades up, or your parents will kill me,” he chuckled, turning around and putting his arms around her waist. Her paws immediately sought out the scars on his back, and traced them lightly under his shirt. “So, are we still a little jealous?”

She giggled. “I guess I always will be, but I feel a little more confident that you won’t stray on me,” she winked. “I just hope I can keep you faithful when I’m fat.”

He laughed. “That’s when I’ll be *most* faithful to you, my pretty kitty, because it means our baby will be closer and closer to coming into the world,” he said, putting his palm on her flat belly. “I can’t wait.”

“Me either,” she said, putting her paw over his on her stomach. “I’m just glad I had no nausea at all today,” she giggled. “I guess the baby showed mercy on me on our beach trip.”

“I think that means the baby liked the beach too,” Kit grinned, which made her laugh. “Six months and two weeks to go, Misses Vulpan,” he cooed, embracing her.

“Seven days until your birthday, Mister Vulpan,” she giggled in his ear.

“After spending all day staring at you in a bikini, I *hope* you’ll give me an early birthday present,” he said, sliding his finger up her back in a sensual manner.

Her tail shivered. “I think we could work something out,” she whispered in his ear, then she pulled back. “*After* we both take a shower,” she said, waving her paw in the air between their muzzles. “You smell like the beach!”

“I kinda like it,” Kit smiled.

“I won’t like tasting salt every time I kiss you,” she answered. “Now put the kettle aside and let’s get this salt out of our fur.”

“Together?” he asked with a growing smile.

“You’re better than a backbrush,” she winked, turning off the stove and taking his paw, then pulled him back towards the bathroom.

The kettle sat on the stove for the rest of the night, forgotten.

By Monday, they knew how the twenty percent increase in circulation went.

It was a complete success.

The features in this week’s issue weren’t earth-shattering like they’d been in the last two weeks, but they still cleaned out all the free copies, and had sold 85% of all sale units by Monday. A 15% leftover rate was higher than Rick’s estimation, so that was even more profit for the magazine. The success of the last two weeks had sustained over the third, and furs were

still buying the magazine. Sensational stories had sparked interest, but they had come back again this week to read the magazine again.

After they got that information, Rick called in Kit to the office, then he, Rick, Savid, and Mike sat down in his office and had a long talk. The four of them were the core of the magazine, for Savid and Mike were the first employees whose input Rick trusted, and Kit was now a part owner. They talked about Kit's bold gamble to increase circulation for nearly two hours.

In the end, though, conservatism won out the day, but Kit also felt a little vindicated. They agreed to increase circulation another 10% and barter to offer it within Austin, mainly in youth concentrated areas in north and south Austin, away from the campus. Rick would arrange the rack space with bookstores and shops, and they would test the Austin market to buy what one could get for free on campus with 500 units.

"It's gonna mean another red week," Rick frowned, looking at his monitor. "I'm not increasing our advertising fees until the increase in circulation is permanent and sustainable, or we'll lose our clients. So, everyone tighten up your belts, cause it's gonna be crunch time."

"It's good risk," Savid said. "If Austin sales work out, we offer sale issues in city. That's good."

"Yah, I'd have to agree," Mike nodded. "We've always avoided Austin because it seemed useless to put sale units out where furs could pick it up for free. But we have a lot more interest now, and I think this is the time to see if *selling* the magazine in Austin will work."

"Well, one thing we could do is put out two separate issues," Kit said impulsively. "We add four pages to the sale units with extra features, like

archived strips or *best of* articles or something. Give the students an incentive to buy the retail version.”

“I’m not sure I like that idea,” Rick grunted. “I don’t like the idea of teasing the students like that. They’re our backbone. If we piss them off and they think we’re holding back our best stuff to make them pay for something we’ve always put out for free, our campus circulation might bomb.”

“I was thinking of making different versions, though,” Mike said, looking at them. “We sell in College Station and San Antonio, but our articles are focused on Austin.”

“Mainly cause of U.T. alums living outside the city,” Rick told him.

“Well, why don’t we put out different versions for the expatriates? We could send someone down to do a story or two about San An and put those in the San An units, or buy articles from other sources.”

“Well, that might work,” Rick said. “But it’d be a lot of work, and reprinting can get expensive and a bit boring if they read those articles in the original material.”

“Well, we’ll have two new interns next month,” Mike said, smiling. “We have them help with it. Every week, they have to come up with one idea for a story about San An or College Station and research enough to present the idea to the office, then they help with the whole process, from Kit’s research to Rick’s editing. It’ll be good practice for them, and it also frees us up from having to do so much work trying to find stories. We’ll have Kit to do the research, one of the writers to write and proof the article, and you two to edit their work. Each of us puts in a little time, but they handle the lion’s share of the work on it.”

“That has potential,” Savid nodded. “But why restrict it? Let’s add it to *all* issues, not focus them. We make the magazine more, what is word, far reaching.”

“You mean start extending our focus out from Austin? That changes the core mission of the magazine, Savid,” Rick noted. “We’re about bringing news, information, and entertainment to the students, and all our advertisers are focused on that too. If we start reaching out, we’ll charge advertisers more, and what if they’re not getting returns for their money? They start pulling out. We can’t forget that.”

“Well, those would be sale units, so the price of the unit would help offset the advertiser problem,” Kit mused. “We could charge them the same, or even less, and make it up with sale profits.”

“But if the students still like it, why not try?” Savid asked. “We should ask them. Send Kit to do survey, see if students would like stories about Texas outside Austin in campus issue, see if they want more broad approach or if they want us to stay focused on Austin. If they like it, we add it. If they don’t, we do Mike’s idea and restrict external work to external sale issues. Either way, we increase circulation because we appeal to more and more furs.”

“That’s a good idea,” Mike said. “After all, we *are* about the students. We’ve asked them what they want before, let’s do it again. We’ll ask *them* what they want, and we’ll give it to them.”

“I agree. Kit, you have a job to do tomorrow,” Rick chuckled.

“Another afternoon in the student center. Yay,” Kit chuckled. “I should take Sheila and make her attract attention again.”

The other three chuckled. “Take her. If there’s one thing she can do, it’s draw every eye in the room when she wants to.”

“I’ll put a poll up and add a forum question to the website, get feedback over the net,” Mike added. “Me and Marty can also bring it up during our first twitter session tomorrow afternoon.”

“Alright, let’s do that,” Rick said. “I’ll call Vil and get her input before lunch. After lunch we start interviewing photographers.”

“When are the interviews?” Kit asked.

“Three today,” Savid told Kit. “Four tomorrow. None Wednesday because of debate.”

“We’re gonna have a meeting tomorrow morning about the debate,” Rick said. “I want to get articles on it out in this week’s issue, so it’s gonna be some long hours for everyone. I’m gonna warn everyone that Wednesday will be an all-nighter. We’ll all be here and work our tails off to get the debate articles worked into the issue by Thursday.”

“We’re young, we can handle it,” Mike chuckled. “And Kit’s already done like every possible angle of research, so we’ll be ready.”

“So we take Friday off?” Savid asked.

Rick nodded. “If anyone wants Friday off, they can take it, except Lilly. She’ll still have to do her canvassing that night for *The Scene*. But, if they want to come in, they’re welcome to do so,” he smiled.

“You keep saying it, it keeps not happening,” Mike grinned.

“Just remember to keep Sunday open,” Rick said. “It’s Kit’s birthday, and we’re having a cookout over at his apartment complex to celebrate.”

The survey was easy enough to do for Kit and Sheila the next morning, after the meeting. Kit had done student surveys often enough to have a routine, and enough students knew about the magazine to stop and talk to him and Sheila. Kit wore his usual tee and jeans, but Sheila was already in “summer” dress mode, and was wearing a half-shirt tank, a glorified bra, and a pair of cut-offs that showed off a great deal of Sheila’s legs. They arrived bright and early at 10:00 in the student center’s main room, pulled out the banner, and the two Vulpans did a lot of surveys...and even took a few pictures. For some reason, students wanted pictures of and with Kit and Sheila, and they obliged. Quite a few students got pictures sitting between the Vulpan cousins at the table, and more than one male got his picture with Sheila on his lap, kissing his cheek.

Sheila would never be anything but naughty, no matter how old she got.

They amassed about four hundred surveys in the six hours they were there, and the general feeling of the students was that they’d rather like to see articles about the general region in addition to articles about and for Austin. One student summed up the feeling rather well. “Well, Texas is more than Austin, and since I’m from New Braunfels, I’d kinda like to see some stories about other parts of Texas.”

That was what most students wanted. They wanted to learn a little about the Texas beyond Austin, but still have the magazine focus on their stomping ground.

Savid was a little victorious when Kit brought back the results that afternoon, as he and Sheila reported on their findings. “Most of them liked the idea, as long as we don’t go overboard,” Sheila summed it up for them.

“They liked the idea of us doing an article here and there, but not for us to suddenly go statewide. So, there ya go.”

“Is just as I say,” Savid grinned.

“Don’t get cocky,” Mike laughed.

“Well, I’d say that our readers have spoken,” Rick said. “I’ll get together with Barry and we’ll hammer out something we can show the school of journalism, so they know what kind of assignments we’re giving the interns.”

Kit had never attended a debate before, but to do it as a member of the press was *very* interesting.

Rick had decided not to attend because he was in a wheelchair, so it was Kit, Barry, Lilly, Marty, Mike, and Denise roaming through the auditorium on campus in the press section, where a multitude of desks were set out with little stands that said to whom they were assigned. It was what the organizers called the *war room*, where all the reporters would do their work, while the on-air journalists used the room as a relay between their studios and themselves. They were all wearing “nice” clothes for this excursion, suits for the males, a pantsuit for Lilly, and a long pleated skirt and white blouse for Denise.

“Wow! That’s Candy Crowley! And that’s *Keith Olberman*!” Denise gushed as they moved through the large room, on the way to the auditorium. “Look, that’s Bill Richardson!” she said, pointing.

“Down, girl,” Marty teased.

“Let’s at least try to act professional,” Barry chuckled. “It looks silly for press members to be going around asking for autographs. They might doubt our neutrality.”

“Oh, hush, you mean males,” Denise giggled.

They didn’t rank high enough to have a seat in the vaunted war room, but at least their press passes let them get into it. They’d arrived about an hour before the debate to get a feel for the place, and also so Kit and Barry could interview the other journalists. They wouldn’t do anything that took more than a minute, they just wanted some background information to get a feel for the debate. Armed with digital voice recorders, the two of them fanned out while the others milled around and talked to nearly anyone who would give them a minute. A few of the reporters seemed a little surprised that these young furs wanted to talk to *them*, but it actually got them quite a bit of good information. Kit even got to talk to a couple of real names, for he’d managed to get a couple of words in with Wolf Blitzer and Neil Cavuto. They were nice enough, and Wolf Blitzer actually knew who he was, which surprised Kit a little bit.

The news part of it for Kit and Barry was a brief and entirely chance meeting between Kit and Senator Hillary Clinton in a back hallway. Kit and Barry had been on their way to their seats in the auditorium as the Senator was coming out from the candidate’s preparation area to do a quick interview with someone and they happened to cross paths in the hallway, and were surprisingly alone, just Kit, Barry, the Senator, and a Secret Service agent. The Senator gave him a double-take as they approached, then reached out a paw to stop him in the hallway. The thin, middle-aged raccoon femme was taller than Kit expected in person. “You sure tore my campaign apart in that editorial,” she said with a surprisingly gamey smile.

“They got what was coming to them, Senator,” he answered simply. “It wasn’t personally against you, though.”

“I know. I just hope you’ll be fair to me when you write about the debate.”

“I guess I could,” he said, scratching his chin. “That’ll depend, though.”

She gave him a surprised look, then laughed. “Depend on what?”

“Answer three questions,” he said.

She laughed a sincere and heartfelt laugh. “Deal. Shoot.”

And that was how *Lone Star* managed to get a brief interview with a Democratic candidate. Kit asked three questions, about the instability in the housing market, about the war in Iraq, and how independent she would be from her husband if she won the election. She seemed surprised about the first and last questions, and answered impulsively and honestly. “I think the housing market will bounce back after a while, it’s just going through a natural correction,” she answered about that. “I’m more worried about how this increase in foreclosures might affect the markets, though.” As to the third question, she looked him right in the eye and said “when I was first lady, I did what he asked of me, gave him my opinion, but also knew that he was the one in charge. When he’s the first husband, I expect him to act the same way I did.”

“That’s my three questions. Thank you, Senator, I appreciate it.”

“Well, I guess I owed it to you after what happened,” she smiled, touching his forearm fondly.

“Dude, that was *so* score!” Barry said with a huge grin as they went into the auditorium. “What luck!”

“Yeah, but I’m just glad nobody saw it, or my picture would be everywhere in the morning,” Kit said. “I’m glad nobody’s really noticed me, for that matter.”

“I’ve seen a couple of cameras point your way,” Barry told him. “I’m not sure if they took any pictures of you, though.”

They all took very detailed notes during the debate, listening to the nine candidates, then rushed back to the office with a lot of coffee, donuts, and pizza set up by Rick, who was waiting for them. Then, they got to work. They had the rest of the issue ready, with holes left in it for tonight’s debate. They all took off their nice clothes, went back to jeans and tees, and worked. There would be four articles about the debate, written by Kit, Barry, Lilly, and Marty, with Mike and Denise writing an editorial on their impression as opposing views; Mike was a moderate Republican, Denise a centrist Democrat. They actually weren’t far off from their ideology, but they had some differing viewpoints, and those viewpoints would be the basis of the two sides editorial. They weren’t alone in the office, either, for Martha showed up a little past midnight bringing dinner for them, and Jessie brought them all fresh coffee and tea for Kit around four, then stayed until it was time for her to go to school.

They all worked right into Thursday. Kit finished his article first, a four page piece about the issues, then helped Marty with his writing and his viewpoint as a gay male and how the debate impacted his platform. Marty was still getting into the swing of being a “real” staff writer, but he did a pretty good job. Barry got his piece done, then he helped Lilly finish hers about the femme’s perspective. Rick and Savid sent them back a couple of

times with edits, then they all took a break for lunch when Martha brought them all tuna casserole and a refill of their rapidly dwindling coffee can. The only ones not writing or editing were Sheila and Jeffrey, and those two found themselves in unusual positions. Sheila ended up manning the phones that day, while Jeffrey found himself doing a little research and some phone bargaining, getting pictures of the candidates to use in the issue from their campaigns.

By 4:00pm, they were all done. They had their wrap meeting, and Rick showed them how he'd jigsawed all their work together into the issue. It ran 47 pages this week since they'd done all their usual features and had done other articles on top of the debate articles. Rick had spent his time sitting in his wheelchair all week securing rack space in their test areas around Austin, so they'd be printing more copies of the issue tomorrow than ever before. The magazine would print at a loss that week, dependent on how many copies they sold; if the Austin test sites really tanked, the magazine would take a bath. Rick was being more conservative than Kit would have been, but it was still a real gamble to do what he was doing. But, expanding with an issue like the debate issue was a wise move.

At the end of the wrap meeting, Rick made a couple of announcements. "Damn fine work, gang," he told them. "But tomorrow, the gang grows. I've decided on a photographer."

"Which one?" Sheila asked.

"The femme sable, Janet Zychowski. She was very impressive in the interview, she has some solid experience with computers since she was a double major with computer science, she was more amenable to the idea of doing work other than photography, and she seemed capable of dealing with our rather unique chemistry."

“That and she’s cute,” Mike grinned.

“Well, with us losing Sheila next month, replacing the hot femme in the office was a priority,” Rick said, which caused Lilly to get up, go over to him, and smack him on the arm. That made everyone erupt into laughter. “I like versatile furs working in the office, and she was definitely the most versatile of the seven I interviewed. I’ll offer her the job tomorrow morning.”

“You’re not *losing* me, Rick, but if I stay on after April, I demand to be paid,” Sheila countered.

“Like I said, we’ll be losing Sheila next month,” Rick grinned at her.

“You old bastard,” Sheila grinned back.

“If I wasn’t a bastard, I’d fail the boss test,” Rick told her. “Everyone has Friday off except Lilly cause she has to do her club canvas, but if you want to come in, I’ll be here. The writers will be coming in on Saturday as usual, but I’ll have Janet come in on Saturday as well to start getting her settled in. If she takes the job, that is. Mike, pick an office for her and set her up.”

“She should get the one between the printer room and Marty,” he said. “We’ll move the break room to the other side of Marty. She’ll need close access to the big toys on that side.”

“Take care of it. Do we have the computer equipment she’ll need?”

“We have one workstation left from what Vil sent us,” he answered. “Thank God she had the foresight to send us a couple of extras to use as backups. I will need to buy a couple of boxes, though, Rick. We’re out of

backups, and I don't like not having backups in case someone's box takes a nosedive on me."

"I'm not sure we can afford to go out and get Sabletechs."

"We won't have to, I'll custom build a couple of good ones. But I'll need to buy the components."

"Talk to me about it after the meeting and we'll take care of it," Rick nodded. "Now, as everyone knows, Sunday is Kit's birthday," Rick grinned, which got him some applause. "And there's going to be a party at his apartment. It'll be a cookout. Kit's friend Lupe is setting it up, and he asked me to ask each of you coming to bring something to eat, that way we have plenty. And he asked that you guys *please* not all bring the same thing. He has the beer, hot dogs, burgers, and paper plates all set up, and Jessie's baking the cake, so we need other dishes and some non-alcoholic drinks for those of you who have to drive home. And I don't want to see ten bowls of potato salad out on the table," Rick told them. "Before we call it today, let's make a list," he said, pulling out a piece of paper and a pen. "Who's bringing what?"

"Sounds good, boss," Denise nodded. "I'll bring some homemade salsa and some spicy corn."

"Salsa and spicy corn. Bring some chips too," Rick said, writing it down.

"I'm no cook, but I can grab something from a deli on the way down," Mike said. "How about some macaroni and cheese?"

"Sounds good, you're in for mac and cheese, Mike," Rick nodded.

"I'll bring a case of Coke, I'm no cook either," Marty said.

“We’ll need it,” Rick assured him.

“I have Nawa make some hot chicken curry for those brave enough to eat *real* food,” Savid grinned.

“I’d love to try it, Savid,” Kit told him. “I love spicy food, and it’ll rock to taste it from the paws of someone who knows what she’s doing.”

“Alright, that’s Savid. Lilly?”

“I’ll bring some pork barbecue,” she said.

“Ooh, nice,” he said, writing that down. “Jeffrey?”

“You’re asking me to cook?” he laughed. “How about if I bring a couple of gallons of ice cream to go with the cake?”

“I’ll put you down for three,” Rick answered. “Make sure they’re different flavors, but don’t get exotic. Chocolate, vanilla, and something else will work. Barry?”

“I’ll bring some shish kebabs. They sell these good ones premade at Sam’s, we can just throw them on the grill. I’ll get chicken ones for those who don’t want to eat burgers or dogs.”

“Bring enough for like ten,” Rick warned. “There’s probably gonna be more furs there than that, like twenty, but at least that way they’re not fighting over them.”

“Twenty?”

“Well, there’s the nine of us, Martha and Nawa, the sorority femmes, Kevin, my neighbor Bill’s coming with his wife Lucy, and Kit’s friends there at the complex,” Rick said. “That’ll be about twenty. What are you bringing, Sheila?”

“Me? I bought the beer,” Sheila laughed.

“That’s the beer. What food are you bringing?”

She gave Rick a look. “I’m buying the hotdogs and hamburgers too, Rick,” she told him.

“Oh. Okay, that’s different, then,” he said with a nod. “Martha’s bringing a bunch of food, so that’s my contribution. Kit’s the guest of honor, we can’t really expect him to bring anything, and Jessie’s baking the cake, so it sounds like we’re set. Kit, son, you get the honors of taking the list to Lupe.”

“I can manage that,” Kit chuckled, taking it from the dingo.

“Now, on to the last announcements,” Rick said, leaning over the table a little to look at them seriously. “As most of you know, Kit’s bought into the magazine as a partner,” he said. “In fact, it’s been his money that’s been paying our salaries the last couple of weeks, since we’ve been running in the red due to the expansion. And while I was out, him and Savid were handling my job. That got me to thinking, mainly about what might happen if I weren’t here, if something happens to me. Because of that, I’m giving Savid and Kit the title of vice presidents. The title gives you official clout to get these jokers to do as you say when I leave you in charge,” he grinned.

“God forbid,” Lilly grinned.

“Savid will be the vice president in charge of the production of the magazine, responsible for content and layout. Kit will be the vice president in charge of, well, everything else. But don’t get too jealous, guys,” Rick chuckled. “Over the next few months, if these expansions hold and we start earning the money we’re projecting, I’m going to expand our staff again.

I'll be hiring two new writers, another photographer, and two research assistants, and more promotions will be coming around the loop. And I'll be giving everyone a raise," he finished, which made everyone applaud loudly. "So keep kicking ass, guys. If we can keep the issues flying off the shelves the way we have been the last month, we'll get bigger, we'll get better, and we'll earn more money. But for tonight, go home, get some rest, and feel proud. We put a hell of a good issue to bed today."

"Congratulations, cousin," Sheila grinned at him when the meeting broke up, and pawshakes and hugs were distributed around the table. "Twenty two and a vice president, you're moving up in the world."

"Yeah, all it cost me was fifteen thousand dollars," Kit grinned, which made Sheila laugh.

"Just goes to show, even a hopeless bum can be important if he has enough money."

Kit laughed. "Well, I won't let it go to my head. I'll only wear my Darth Vader helmet on Fridays."

Janet Zychowski was exactly what Mike said...cute.

She wasn't beautiful the way Jessie and Allison were, but she was definitely worth a look. She had bone white fur except for a little brown band over her eyes on her forehead, extending into her blond hair, extending from temple to temple. This was an extremely odd fur coloration pattern, since the majority of sables had brown or tan fur. She kept her hair short, which let her ears pop through it, and she was very slim and surprisingly tall. She was wearing a dark blouse and a pair of black slacks,

not normal fare in the office, but she was carrying four camera bags with her when she came in. She came into the seemingly deserted office and called out, then came to Kit's office when he answered her. He got up and shook her paw and introduced himself. "Rick told me to settle you in," Kit told her. "Did you finish all the paperwork yesterday?"

She nodded. "Yup. I'm all done with that. He said I'd be here half a day to get used to my office, and that, uh, Mike would be getting me up to speed on your network."

"This is usually his day off, so he'll probably be a little late," Kit chuckled. "I hope you don't mind my asking, but how did you get such unusual fur?"

She laughed. "You're not the first to ask. "My dad's a Polish marten and my mom's a Russian sable, and I guess martens and sables shouldn't mix," she grinned. "I'm the first Zychowski born in America," she added, with a bit of pride.

"Do you speak Russian?" he asked curiously.

"And Polish," she added with a nod. "My parents wanted their kids to know their heritage. Not that I think those will ever help around here," she grinned.

"Well, I never really think me having a pilot's license will ever matter working here either, but you never know," Kit shrugged. "And if we ever interview a Russian diplomat, your language skills will come in *very* handy. Let me show you to your office, and I hope you don't mind the sterile smell. It used to be our break room," he winked as they entered the big room."

"Oh really? Well, I'm glad I at least have one," she laughed.

“Well, we have a few open offices, but we wanted you near the printer room, where we keep all our industrial printers and scanners and such,” he explained as they crossed over to her new office, which held her desk, a small couch, two chairs, a shelf, a light table behind her desk, and her own printer and scanner. “We set you up with the same equipment our graphics furs use, but if you have any special requests, Mike is the raccoon to see.”

“What add-ons do you guys use with Photoshop?”

“I really don’t know, I’m the researcher,” Kit winked. “Mike will have your laptop and Blackberry ready when he gets here, I don’t see them on the desk,” Kit noted.

“You supply them?”

“I *guess* we do,” Kit chuckled. “We have them for everyone else, but now that I think of it, I should call and find out. We have a rather special arrangement with our Blackberries, I have to see if we can extend it, or if we need to change our plan. Let me call and find out.”

When Kit called Vil, he found out that Rick had already talked to her about it. “Yeah, Rick told me you’ve got a new hire. I agreed to add her on to the plan for the Blackberries, but I also told him I can’t be adding on everyone he hires. He gets this new girl for free, as a gift because he broke his leg. If he wants to put anyone else in, he’ll have to take it over himself. The Blackberries were a gift to the furs who helped you when you were hurt, not a running perk for the magazine.”

“Well, that’s only fair,” Kit said calmly. “She got our last Sabletech workstation, but I guess we’ll have to buy her her own laptop.”

“Now there I can help you,” Vil told him. “Tell Rick I’ll buy the laptop for him by proxy, because I signed a deal with Sabletech for them to supply the shipyard with laptops. The brand has impressed me. Their workbook brand laptops are *very* rugged, and they’re perfect for my foremen and engineers out on the platens. Tell him I can get the magazine Sabletech computers and peripherals at a discount, but the magazine *does* have to pay for them.”

“I’m sure he’ll go for it,” Kit said. “Dear God, everyone in this office is in love with the laptops you gave us. Do me a favor and put in an order for a laptop that a professional photographer would find good.”

“Just one?”

“Yeah, we have only one new hire,” Kit chuckled.

“It’ll be there Monday,” she promised.

“Thanks, sis, you’re a lifesaver.”

“Any time, bro. And premature happy birthday,” she said with a giggle.

He laughed. “Thanks.”

Kit went back to see Janet settling into her office, her fingers flying over the keyboard of her computer. “Tell Mike that his security is weak,” she told Kit in a calm voice. “I’ve managed to snoop the entire network.”

“Mike doesn’t put security on the inside, but try breaking in from the outside and see how far you go,” Kit chuckled. “Mike’s *very* good. Anyway, your laptop will be here on Monday, and your Blackberry is on order. I’m not sure when it’ll get here.”

“What kind of laptop?”

“We use Sabletech here,” he answered her, which made her eyes widen slightly.

“Sabletech? Those are *expensive*.”

“They’re worth every penny,” Kit said fervently.

“I’m glad I took this job now,” she laughed.

“That may change after a week,” Kit told her. Barry peeked in, and Kit waved him inside. “Janet, this is Barry, he’s our lead writer,” he introduced.

“We met when she came in for the interview,” Barry smiled, shaking her paw.

“Did Rick explain how things work around here?”

Janet nodded. “He said there would be times I’d be more than a photographer,” she said. “He told me I was hired specifically because I can do more than take pictures.”

“Yeah, we do what needs done around here,” Barry said. “Whether it’s in our job description or not. I think Lilly’s done every job there is to do in this place at one time or another. Rick said you were a computer science double major, so odds are you and Mike are going to be doing a lot of work together.”

“We’ll see how good he is,” Janet chuckled. “Rick said I’d also be doing some graphic design, I’ve taken a lot of classes on graphics and art. I think it’s a solid background for a photographer. I’m all about the picture, and sometimes a picture isn’t just what you take with a camera. A piece of art is just as much a picture as the pictures I take with my camera.”

“Well, Savid and Jeffrey will be very good teachers if you want to keep learning,” Kit told her.

Janet grinned. “I’ll enjoy working in the same office that writes *School Daze*,” she told them. “I started reading your magazine just to read the strips! I love Oxnard best, he rocks!”

“Well, we keep all our future strips a secret,” Kit winked at her. “But, I will let you in on one thing. We’re splitting *Missy and Cutler* off into its own strip.”

“Really? That should be really interesting,” she said. “Those strips have a very different feel from the others.”

“They should, my wife does the writing for it,” Kit chuckled. “I do the writing for the other strips.”

“I never noticed!” Janet laughed. “I guess I should look and see whose names are on the strips!”

“All three of our names appear on all the strips,” Kit told her. “But when *Missy and Cutler* splits off, it’ll just be Jessie and Jeffrey on that one. I don’t have anything to do with those.”

“Jeffrey’s gonna be stressed doing both strips and his other work,” Barry noted.

“I think we might be hiring another artist soon,” Kit chuckled.

Mike scurried into the office, and Janet shook his paw. “You must be Mike,” she said.

“That’s me,” he smiled. “I see you’ve met the unimportant furs.”

“Someone wants his check shorted next week,” Kit teased.

“Yeah, I dare ya,” Mike grinned. “Now give me and Miss Zychowski some room while we talk shop and get her box set up to her liking.”

“We’ve been dismissed,” Barry said to Kit absently.

“I think kicked out is a better term,” Kit noted in reply.

“Shoo!” Mike told them, waving his paws at the pair imperiously.

Kit could have left early, but he hung around to help Janet settle in. He showed her how their archives worked, which she picked up very quickly, after she and Mike spent three hours in her office setting up her computer to her exacting specifications. Lilly had both come and gone in that time, coming in and updating *The Scene*, then leaving early for some well-deserved rest. Mike went home as well after the computer work, leaving Kit and Janet in the office after Barry left for the day as well. “So, was he good?” Kit asked as she navigated through to the archives.

“He seems to know what he’s doing,” she answered. “He certainly knows Photoshop.”

“It used to be part of his job,” Kit chuckled. “Mike and Lilly did almost all the photography before we hired you. They’re both very good at it.”

“Well, we’ll see if I can’t free them up to do their own work,” Janet said with a smile.

“Oh yeah, I’m not sure if anyone told you, but I’m having a little party over at my apartment tomorrow. You’re welcome to come.”

“Well, sure, I can come. When and where?”

“Around one. I’ll bring up mapquest and print you out some directions. It’s not far from here.”

She was quiet a moment. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

He chuckled. “Yes, I’m *that* Kit Vulpan,” he said.

She laughed. “Well, I knew that. I just wanted to know what brought you here. Out of everything you could have done, why work in a little magazine?”

“Because this is my family, and this is my home,” he said earnestly. “Rick’s been like a father to me, and the gang here are the family I never had. I love it here so much, I took what little money I do have and bought into the magazine. I’ll be here until either I die or the magazine closes.”

“But what brought you here in the first place?”

“The same as you. I needed a job, I saw Rick’s ad, and I applied. Fate was being kind to me that day. That whole week, actually. That’s also the week I met my wife. Meeting Jessie is what sent me looking for a job, and brought me here. So, I guess you can say that my wife is the reason I’m here.” He turned to go back to his office. “Just tell me when you’re ready to go, so I don’t accidentally lock you in here when I leave. I’m not sure there’s enough food in the break room to last you until Monday. They cleaned it out when they moved the break room yesterday.”

She laughed. “Actually, I’m about done. I did everything Rick asked me to do today. I’ll be back Monday morning to get my portfolios and my own photo archives loaded up for the magazine, and Rick said I’ll have my first assignment. I can leave my cameras here?”

“If you want, as long as you don’t need them until Monday. Rick’ll be here around eight Monday morning.”

“I have cameras at home. I have too many cameras,” she laughed. “Only thing that’ll suck is taking my film home to develop, but I don’t think any magazine or newspaper has darkrooms anymore.”

“You use film?”

“For certain artistic shots, yes, I still use film. Film can produce effects you can’t quite match without six hours with Photoshop, and I get a better result spending twenty minutes developing film. I have a special camera that is both digital *and* film,” she told him. “It takes a digital picture but also takes the same picture on film.”

“I’ve never heard of one of those.”

“I’d be surprised if you had, because I made it,” she said, standing up and picking up a camera case on her desk, and pulling out a surprisingly bulky camera that looked like an old fashioned 35mm portrait camera. “This is the film lens, and right here is the digital camera lens,” she said, pointing to the dual lenses, the digital lens showing through a hole drilled into the case. “The controls for both lenses are up here on the top, but both take the picture when I press just one button. The offset between the two apertures is only half an inch, so I get virtually the same picture, but I can change modes on the cameras to get one scene with different effects between the two pictures.”

“You *made* that? Damn, I’m impressed!” Kit said honestly. “You should patent it!”

“I did,” she smiled. “Of course, since the film camera is a Minolta and the digital camera is a Fuji, I couldn’t really build and market them myself,” she added with a smile.

“I’m really impressed, Janet,” Kit told her. “I’ve never known anyone that could invent things before.”

“I’ve never known anyone who comes from one of the richest families in America before, so we’re even,” she winked. “Now let’s get out of here.”

Kit didn’t really set much stock to birthdays.

Much as Christmas and other holidays, Kit hadn’t had much leave to really feel like celebrating since he was about twelve. That was the last birthday he really enjoyed, his twelfth birthday, because he’d gotten to go to a Celtics game that evening and meet Larry Bird, and it was also the first time he’d met Suzy. She had been one of the masses invited to the party, a child of the Boston rich invited to the party of the Vulpan heir as a matter of courtesy because Suzy was one of Vil’s friends. Those two had met in Weston Academy, the ultra-elite private school for Boston bluebloods which Kit himself had attended, and the two of them had formed a very quick friendship that had endured over the years. Vil and Suzy were best friends, and probably always would be. Kit had liked Suzy despite her being so much older than him, and that was probably where Suzy’s crush on Kit had begun.

Of course, that was a very different Kit. Back then, he was called Little Luke about half the time by his aunts and uncles, and only Vil, Clancy, and the house staff called him Kit, because that was the pet name his mother had given him, a play on his first name that was both contraction and her

own special way of calling him “baby.” Vil had taken to using it after their mother died, for it soothed Kit during his storms of grief and also seemed to evolve Vil’s regard for him as less and less his sister and more and more his mother, and it spread from her to Clancy and the house staff. Back then, he was only just beginning to stoke the fires of what would become an inferno of hatred against his father, the year when the hurt and confused young kit began to hate his father for not being there. That year, that birthday, was the second straight birthday party that his father had not attended, and in a sign of what was to come, it was the first that Kit enjoyed if only for the very fact that his father had not been there.

Since his twelfth birthday, Kit had had no reason to celebrate the occasion. Oh, there had been parties, but they weren’t the same. That year, his twelfth year, was the year that Kit started to drift away from his family, to start to question everything he’d been taught, all of it started by his hurt at why his father had walked away. By his thirteenth birthday, Kit was already on the path that would lead to the confrontation on his sixteenth birthday, the day he walked out on his family, forsook them, choosing to live on the streets rather than be a Vulpan any longer. And after that momentous sixteenth birthday, he’d been too busy trying to survive in the face of his father’s attempts to destroy his life to feel like doing much celebrating. Birthdays became like other holidays, just days, where the magic they had held for him in his youth had faded away over time.

But, this was his first birthday with Jessie, and in that respect, it felt like a special day for him. Jessie was going to bake him a cake and his friends were coming to a cookout in the courtyard, which would no doubt be done over the sounds of construction across the block as Lupe’s army of workers raced to get everything built on time. For that reason, Kit was

looking forward to today. Not because it was his birthday, but because it would be a nice little gathering, where the three separate circles of his friends, the magazine, the sorority, and his neighbors, would combine and interact with each other more than they usually did.

Jessie was sure to give him an extra-special waking up birthday present, blowing lightly in his ear at 8:00, making his swat sleepily at what felt like a fly, the she kissed him exuberantly on the side of his muzzle, leaning over his back. “Wake up, my handsome fox,” she cooed in his damaged ear. “It’s your birthday.”

“Then let me go back to sleep,” he mumbled groggily.

Her paws sliding down his back sensually made his tail stand straight out under the covers. “But then I can’t give you your first birthday present,” she said huskily in his ear.

She found herself wrapped up in his arms before she could even take a breath.

After what Kit felt was the best birthday present ever given in the history of the universe, she made him a nice breakfast, keeping him firmly out of the kitchen. “Oh no, this is *your* day, silly fox!” she laughed. “No cooking! Now go play X-Box or something and let me take care of you!”

“You already did this morning,” he said with a loving growl, wrapping her up from behind, putting his paws on her belly. “Six months and one week,” he said in her ear.

“I know very well how much more time I have to go,” she said primly. “Now don’t make me call Mom and have her get you out of my kitchen!”

“The heavy artillery, eh?” Kit laughed, then he was serious for a moment. “You know,” he realized, “Vil didn’t send me a card. She always sent me one when I was in Boston. I’m a little surprised.”

“Oh, I seriously doubt she forgot your birthday, love,” Jessie told him, patting his paws with her own. “You know her, odds are some courier in a suit’s gonna knock on the door at noon and give it to you personally.”

“Yeah, that’s something she’d definitely do,” he chuckled, nuzzling Jessie’s neck. “I love you, Jessica Desdemona Vulpan,” he told her, hugging her a little tighter.

“And I love you, Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan. But that’s no defense to lurk in my kitchen when I have very important work to do for your first birthday since we were married,” she said tartly. “Now get out of my kitchen so I can make your breakfast and bake your birthday cake!”

He laughed, and just hugged her even tighter. “But I want to spend the rest of the day just like this,” he protested, “with the femme I love and our baby wrapped up in my arms, close to me. That would make the day much more special than me just getting one year older.”

“Such a sweet talker when he’s trying to get his own way,” Jessie accused with a giggle. “But you’re about to get punished, my handsome fox. I have to have your cake ready by the party!”

“Well, there are no pillows in the kitchen, and I have a pretty firm grip on you to keep you from going to get one,” he noted dryly.

“Mmm-hmm,” she hummed lightly, reaching to her left. She grabbed the extendable spray nozzle from by the faucet of the sink, pulled it up, then

aimed it over her shoulder, right at his face. “You were saying something, love? I didn’t quite make that out.”

Kit laughed, then just rocked her back and forth in his arms. “Point taken, my pretty kitty,” he surrendered. “But you do realize, this means war.”

“We can have our epic battle of good versus evil *after* I bake your cake,” she noted clinically.

“It’s a date,” he chuckled, kissing her neck, then he obediently let her go.

He went to the living room and decided to read while he listened to the news on the radio. He took the cup of tea Jessie brought out for him with a smile and a nod of thanks, and basically did as Jessie wanted, which was relax. Jessie called him to the table when she finished breakfast, a simple affair of eggs, bacon, a grapefruit half, and wheat toast. After breakfast, she got to work on the cake, which made Kit feel a little...unsettled. He was so used to helping Jessie whenever she was engaged in domestic chores that he felt, well, like he was freeloading. Here he was, sitting around reading a book and listening to the radio while Jessie was in the kitchen working, and it just wasn’t like him. He would usually be in there with her, sharing in the labor both to be near his wife and also to get it done; after all, if both of them were working on it, it got done faster and gave them more time to themselves. But here he was, banished from the kitchen on pain of getting attacked with the sink sprayer, forced to sit there and do nothing while Jessie worked in the kitchen...worked for him. He knew it made her happy to do this for him, but it also annoyed him just a little bit that she wouldn’t let him share in the labor. He’d be much happier in there with her than he was sitting in the living room, banished from her presence. It just felt...

unnatural to be in a different room than her. Even when they were doing different things, they were almost always together. The only time they really separated was when Jessie had serious homework to do, which she preferred to do in the quiet sanctuary of the den.

When she came out to give him a new cup of tea, he pulled her down onto the couch and held her for a long moment. She always seemed to be able to sense his feelings, so she didn't struggle or think he was playing, she just let him hold her, kissing him lightly on his cheek and muzzle. "What's the matter, my handsome fox?" she asked. "I wasn't *that* mean to you, was I?"

"Just feeling a little unsettled," he answered. "I'm not used to being in the house with you and not with you. And I'm sitting here reading a book while you're in there doing work. That makes me feel like I'm a heel."

She laughed. "I'm in there working because I *love* you, silly," she told him. "I want to give you something special on your birthday, and *I'd* feel like a heel if I let you do any of the work. The birthday boy just simple does *not* help bake his own cake! It would be a scandal!" she told him, kissing him on the nose. "But it's all but done now, love, I got it in the oven. So, I have about a half an hour that's all yours," she cooed, wrapping her arms around him.

Despite being married, and knowing every inch of her body, and doing many much more intimate and sexy things with her, there was definitely something to be said about making out on the couch like a couple of teenagers. Kit made sure to keep full possession of his wife until the timer went off, spending a blissful 35 minutes in the arms of the femme he loved, running the entire range from playful pecks and smooches to deep, toe-curling kisses that nearly made them both pass out from lack of oxygen.

But, reality intruded on their intimate fun...but not without a fight. Jessie laughed quite a bit as she struggled free of Kit's grasping paws, constantly complaining that the cake was going to burn, and he'd be in *all kinds* of trouble if that happened. But she got free of him, and rescued the cake in more than enough time to prevent a calamity. Kit wanted to watch her decorate it, but she hustled him out of the kitchen imperiously, pushing him from behind all the way through the living room and to the hallway. "In the den, you!" she commanded. "You'll see the cake when I bring it out at the party, and not a minute before!"

"But--"

"But nothing! Stay!" she barked, pushing him through the door, then closing it loudly behind him.

"This is false imprisonment!" he shouted playfully through the door.

"You get one phone call, call your lawyer!" she shouted back, which made him erupt into laughter.

He'd give her what she wanted--he always did--but that didn't mean that he had to make it easy for her.

After the cake was decorated and safely spirited out of the apartment, Jessie let Kit out of the den. She did cave and let him help prepare some of the other food Jessie was bringing to the cookout, baked beans, her famous spicy beef tip and potato chunk dish, and she was making homemade chili for the hotdogs. Kit helped her carry some of it out, and saw that the courtyard had been converted to a little party area. Lupe had erected a large sideless tent, basically a shade, under which they'd set several long tables and folding chairs. The tent, tables, and chairs were brand new. Sheila and Allison were already there, helping Lupe, Dan, and Mickey spread cheap

tablecloths over the tables and weight them down at the corners with little beanbags. Sam and Kevin were also here, carrying a large platter of chopped vegetables with a big bowl of ranch dip in the middle. “Hey brah, you’re early!” Lupe teased.

“It’s my party, I’ll show up whenever I damn well please,” Kit teased in reply.

“Well, if you’re gonna show up for the setup, you’re gonna help,” Lupe told him. “You can help Mickey bring over the grills.”

“I don’t mind, I’m not a drama queen like certain chihuahuas around here,” Kit grinned at him.

Kit helped them get everything ready. Tables were covered and sturdy plastic plates and silverware were stacked, food was brought out in containers in preparation for the guests, Dan and Mickey’s grills were brought over, and Dan had to make a quick run down to Circle K for a new propane cylinder when he realized the one he had didn’t have enough left to hold out for the whole party. Allison left as well, and brought back a couple of very large coolers and four large bags of ice. “I’ll pay you back for those, babe,” Lupe told her. “All this stuff is gonna go in storage and be in the new community center, that way it’s available for patio parties.”

“And you can write them off on your taxes,” Kit chuckled.

“I ain’t no fool, brah,” Lupe grinned. “So I hope you saved the receipt, babe. I’ll need it for my taxes.”

Dan and Mickey iced down the beer and soda they’d bought, Jessie started pressing hamburger into patties, and they all just sat down and talked while waiting for the others to start arriving.

And they didn't wait long. Sam and Kevin got there about twenty minutes after they got everything set up, carrying food for the party and a small wrapped present for Kit, and Martha and Rick arrived not two minutes later, so quick that Kevin helped Martha get Rick transferred to the wheelchair and wheeled him down the sidewalk. Janet was the next to arrive, and she spent much of her time shaking paws and being introduced around, which kept everyone busy until Lilly, Jeffrey, Sandy, Savid, and Nawa all arrived at the same time. More and more kept arriving faster and faster as they approached 1:00, which was the start time for the party, but nobody got there that late. The last ones to arrive were a couple of the sorority girls, Danielle and Charlotte, who got there as Jessie and Sheila had started grilling the hamburgers, hot dogs, and other grillable foods the guests had brought. Lisa had brought some chicken breasts to grill, since she didn't eat red meat, they had Barry's shish kebabs, and Charlotte brought corn on the cob wrapped in foil, which were parked on an upper rack and left to slowly cook.

It was a nice time for Kit. He wasn't allowed to help cook or serve, so he sat at the table and talked with friends, and friends around him either met friends or renewed friendships forged at the wedding. Some of the more bashful sorority girls like the other Jessie and Lisa got to see some furs they hadn't seen since the wedding, and Janet got the opportunity to meet just about everyone in Kit's life at once.

But, it wouldn't be a party without at least one surprise. Kit was chatting with Janet, getting to know her better, when he didn't notice things get a little quiet around him, and heard Sandy giggle. A paw tapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, can I sit here?"

Kit gasped and almost jumped up, since that voice belonged to no one other than Suzy. He whirled around and saw Suzy, Vil, Muffy, Hannah, John, Jenny, Ben, and to Kit's surprise, his cousin Terry all standing there with a fox male Kit didn't know. He laughed and gave Suzy a rough hug. "I never thought I'd see you guys!"

"Now you know why you didn't get any cards," Jessie told him with a giggle.

"I should have known!" he laughed as he hugged Vil. "You're such a sneak!"

"What can I say, I'm a Vulpan," she laughed in reply. "I left this morning and picked up Jessie's family in Cincinnati on the way down."

"I'm so happy you guys are here," Kit told Hannah as he gave her a fond hug.

"We were happy to come, dear. We got to ride in your sister's jet," she laughed.

"It was fun!" Jenny gushed as she hugged Kit.

"Kit, this is my boyfriend, Corey," Suzy introduced him to the slender fox male that was with them. He was a little taller than Kit and a little wiry, but he had a handsome muzzle and dark hair the same color as his mittens combed back and between his ears. "Corey, this is Kit, one of my oldest friends."

"I've heard a lot about you, Kit," Corey told him.

"I heard you make movies. How was Mexico?"

“Hot and dry,” Corey laughed. “But I’m done down there for now, we’re back in the studio for post production work.”

“Corey, this is Jessie, my wife,” he introduced.

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet the girl that made Suzy available,” Corey grinned at Jessie as he shook her paw.

Jessie laughed ruefully. “Well, you’d better put a ring on her finger or you might not have her long,” Jessie teased.

“We’ve been talking about it,” Suzy told Kit in a low voice.

Kit was a little less pleasant when Terry approached. “It’s good to see you again, cousin,” he said with an earnest smile. “When Vil said she was coming to see you, I begged her to let me come. The rest of us aren’t exactly sure if it’s safe to try to call you or anything,” he admitted. “The only ones that seem to be allowed are Vil and Muffy.”

“Well, I guess I told them to leave it like that,” Kit chuckled.

“Well, you’d have quite a few cousins calling if we knew you’d let us.”

“Well, I kinda like not being embroiled in the family business,” Kit told him. “The last thing I need is for someone like Victor to be calling me at three in the morning just to be an ass, or Bridgette calling me every hour to try to make me get a divorce, or God forbid, Bess calling down here whining because Liz stole her boyfriend. I kinda like them to be too afraid to call.”

Terry laughed. “Tell me about it,” he drawled.

Kit accepted Terry into the party with a certain wariness, but after sitting down and talking with him a while, he felt much better about it.

Terry was a very earnest Vulpan, and not cut from the usual mold. He was intelligent, insightful, hard-working, and dedicated. He was also rather handsome, much more handsome than Kit, probably the most handsome among all the male Vulpans. But instead of having an arrogant snotty personality like Victor, he was instead modest and self-effacing, much like Ben. All of Uncle Tom's children were a little different from the other cousins, but not necessarily in a good way. Bess, the most wanton and notorious of any of the Vulpan kids, was Tom's oldest. Then came his cousin Dahlia, who was actually a little mentally unhinged and was kept close to the family's vest, then Terry, then their youngest, the twelve year old male Hunter, just starting at Weston next fall. Terry's mother and Tom's wife, Justine Leeks Vulpan, had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer not long after Hunter was born, and had had her ovaries removed, which made Hunter the last of the children of Tom and Justine.

Uncle Tom and his family had almost always been the "black sheep" of the family, at least until Kit took that title in spades. Tom was a little...odd. Eccentric was a good word for it, but he wasn't eccentric in a bad or dangerous way. He was just odd. He had a very unusual personality, he was a little moody and a bit erratic, but he was also absolutely brilliant. Kit had since learned that his enigmatic uncle had a bit of obsessive-compulsive disorder, which gave him those wild mood swings and periods of genius mixed in with periods of sullen depression. It wasn't blatant, but it was just enough to give him his rather unusual personality. All of his kids were also a little off the beaten path, in their own ways. Bess was an absolute slut and the most notorious of all the Vulpans, the founding femme of the Party Pack. Dahlia had battled clinical depression and mild schizophrenia most of her life, so she was rather delicate. Terry was very much unlike most of the

other Vulpans, since he was so smart, and Hunter was just a bundle of unceasing energy that ran his parents ragged.

Terry, at least, was sincere when they got around to talking about his leaving the family, and he was brave enough to do it around the family, since Vil, Muffy, and Sheila were sitting with them as they talked. “I was petrified,” Terry told him. “I was a senior and almost ready to graduate, and then you get disowned, and I was terrified that Uncle Luke was going to come after the whole family, so much so that I convinced Dad to pay for my whole four years of school at Yale *in advance*,” he said. “He did it for me, too, set up a special trust I used to pay for my school, which would let me finish Yale. I wanted to try to call you a couple of times, but I’ll admit that I was too afraid to do it,” he sighed. “I couldn’t see how I’d survive if I got disowned, how I’d ever get a good job if I was thrown out of school, since I saw what Uncle Luke did to you. We were afraid he’d do the same to us, not just disown us, but torture us. We knew he was capable of it.”

“The old bastard certainly was,” Kit grunted, then he realized that just about all of Jessie’s family and Allison were listening with rapt attention.

“Well, I was wrong about it, and for that much, I apologize, Kit,” he said, offering his paw. “If you don’t mind a late apology, that is.”

“Yay! Another convert for the Austin Vulpans!” Sheila called.

“Hey, I’m still a Boston Vulpan, Sheila! We’ll have to go to war to get Terry back!” Muffy challenged.

“Bring it on, *Eugenia*!” Sheila called insultingly, then the two started mock-slapfighting across the table like a couple of six year olds, which made the whole party erupt into laughter.

“It’s not too late,” Kit told him, shaking his paw. “At least not for you. For some others in the family, their chance passed a long time ago. Basically anyone in the family older than me, who was old enough to understand what was going on, yet did nothing. Them, I will *never* forgive.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that. And just so you know, it doesn’t really bother me all that much that you married a cat. *I’d* never do it, but that’s because I just don’t find femmes who aren’t vixens attractive. I guess growing up in Boston flavored my idea of attractive.”

Kit had heard much the same attitude from Vil, so he could nod in understanding. “I appreciate that, Terry. So, you’re saying my wife isn’t pretty?” he asked teasingly.

Terry laughed. “She’s pretty, but she just doesn’t *do it* for me, cousin.”

“Well, I know who to call when I want a chaperone for her, then. So, what’s it like being a vice president who matters?” Kit asked, which made Terry laugh.

Kit and Terry talked a while about the shipyard as the party got into full swing, hearing about Terry’s surprising resistance when he took over the safety department. The older furs in the department really resented what they saw as Vil’s move of cronyism, putting a Vulpan in charge of an *important* department, which had forced Terry to go in and clean house. He demoted a bunch of middle managers in his department, transferred some furs in from his accounting department to replace them, and reorganized the entire division to ensure that such a mistake that happened there could never happen again. He instituted tighter controls, more dual oversight so no one fur in a critical position could make a mistake that would result in a fine from the government, and ordered an audit of general shipyard safety to see

if there was any way they could increase safety for the workers or streamline safety procedures. He went so far as to include a survey with paycheck to poll the workers on their confidence of the safety policies at the shipyard. From the sound of it, Terry was going to be just fine in his new job, for he took it seriously, and he had to guts to do what had to be done. While they were talking, Kit got to sample a whole lot of different foods, and he almost choked when he tried Nawa's curry; it was the *spiciest* food he'd ever eaten! His eyes watered as he swallowed the first mouthful, then he laughed and took another bite. Despite being so spicy, it was still quite delicious.

"At least he's brave!" Nawa laughed as he worked his way through the curry. Then, after he finished it, she put another plate in front of him. "Here, this is curry I did not make *just* for you," she said with a teasing smile.

"Nawa! You cheating little so and so!" Kit objected, which made the whole party laugh.

"I give you honor for eating the whole thing," she grinned at him. "Most run at the first bite." Then she pointed at Savid. "And blame *him* for first dish, he told me to make my spiciest curry for you!"

"Oh, I'll take care of you next week, Savid," Kit threatened, pointing an accusing finger at the mongoose.

They spent a very lovely afternoon in the courtyard, eating, talking, and laughing as Terry and Jessie's family circulated, and Suzy introduced Corey around. Outside of a slightly frosty meeting between Allison and Hannah, things went quite swimmingly. Kit rather liked getting to talk to Suzy face to face for a change. They talked about once a week on the phone on the average, usually every Saturday, maintaining a friendship that had

endured for over ten years. Kit got a chance to get to know Corey, who was a very mellow young fox who loved to make movies. He'd be going back to his studio in New York on Monday to finish his movie, and then he'd be shooting another film in Maine over the winter, which would keep him close to home for Suzy. Suzy did seem to honestly love him, from their weekly talks, and getting a chance to see Suzy and Corey together showed him that Corey loved Suzy in return.

He was glad of that.

There were other little wars of conquest going on at the party. Sheila had trapped Ben over by the grills and was talking to him, and Hannah was keeping a very close eye on them. Sandy was teasing Jeffrey, playing with his ears from behind and making them flinch, while Sam and Kevin stayed close together, standing side by side as they chatted with Jenny and John. Lupe introduced Alice around when she arrived, and about all the males were watching Allison as she moved through the party, going back to her seat. Kit didn't spend all his time watching Allison though, if only to keep Jessie from beating him, so he stayed in his seat of honor and let his friends drift back and forth to him. He spent a long time talking privately with Suzy, out of Corey's earshot, getting caught up in the kinds of things she'd never tell him over the phone or in front of her boyfriend. He then took part in a pretty indepth conversation between himself, Vil, and Rick as they discussed the expansion of the magazine.

But they didn't let him spend the whole day talking. After everyone had eaten their fill, Jessie and Martha vanished, then returned with the cake. Kit had to sit there and get serenaded by a round of *Happy Birthday* by everyone as Jessie brought out a german chocolate cake baked in the shape of the magazine, with *Lone Star* written across the top in icing and all the

birthday candles down where the picture would be, and the words *HAPPY BIRTHDAY KIT!* scrolled across the bottom. Everyone applauded when he managed to blow out all the candles in one try, and then he did the honors of cutting up the cake and doling out the pieces. Jessie had baked two cakes but had only decorated one to make sure that there was enough cake for everyone, and also explained why she was so adamant about keeping him out of the kitchen, to keep the secret that Vil and her family were coming. They enjoyed the delicious cake, and then everyone produced small gifts for him. Thankfully, nobody went crazy, not even his rich relatives, and he got a bunch of little knickknacks and useful little things for the office, though Sheila couldn't resist the opportunity to buy him a G-string to wear for Jessie and a stack of porno DVDs all taped together. He was afraid that Vil was going to spring something on him, but thankfully, her gift to him was a new acoustic guitar, to replace the rather old one that Rick had given him.

It was Rick's gift that puzzled him. He unwrapped it and found a mobile broadband card, one of those ones that worked just about anywhere by accessing cell phone networks rather than Wi-Fi. "Well thanks Rick, but I'm not sure how much use this is going to be," he said, turning over the card's box to look at the back.

"Oh, it's going to be very useful to you, son," Rick grinned.

A cold feeling built in the pit of his stomach, because Rick was looking at Vil.

"You're going to be telecommuting for about six weeks, bro," she said with a predatory smile, like the cat that caught the canary, taking a small brochure from Stav and handing it to him. "Happy birthday."

“What is this?” he asked, looking at it. It read *Cessna Flight Training Academy*, and upon its front was a picture of a raccoon and a badger sitting in the cockpit of an aircraft, the badger looking where the raccoon was pointing.

“May fifth, you’re going to Independence, Kansas for about six weeks, bro,” she smiled. “And you’re going to go through Cessna’s Citation training program, the one Cessna uses to train its own pilots. You said you’d always wanted to get that jet rating you’d never gotten, so I’m going to make sure it happens.”

“But, but I have work! I can’t leave for a month! I’m already too deep in the hole on time off as it is!”

“Work will be sent to you, son, and I seem to recall a certain young fox bargaining a cleaning of the slate as part of the deal when he invested in the magazine,” Rick chuckled. “I know you don’t believe this, but you can actually do most of your research work from home. Well, you’re going to be doing your assignments from Kansas, and you’re also going to be writing a few articles about your experience for the magazine,” he added. “I think those would be really, really interesting. So don’t think this is a vacation, cause it’s not. You’ll be working your tail off up there for the magazine when you’re not in flight training.”

“See, I already have everything all set up,” Vil grinned.

“I’m going with you,” Jessie smiled, taking hold of his paw. “My last final is the Thursday before we leave. I’ll be out of school, so I’ll have plenty of time. Vil said that I could take classes on flying while I’m there and she’s going to make sure I can get back to Austin for my appointments with Doctor Mac,” she assured him.

“I’m, I’m speechless,” he said in shock.

That made quite a few of them laugh. “It’s four different programs, bro, and they said a couple of different types of jet fall into some classes because all their systems are the same. You’ll do each one, one after the other after the other. They said it would take you about one or two weeks to do the first section, that’s for a little jet called a Mustang, because it has the same avionics you have in your plane now, that Garmin system. They said it takes about two to three weeks for the second section for, um, the CJ series, one week for the third section for an encore, then two to three weeks for the last section, which you get to pick for any jet they produce. When you walk out of there, you’ll be qualified to fly, hold on,” she said, taking the brochure from him and looking at the back, “the Mustang, all four models of the CJ series, and the Encore, and you’ll get a chance to learn how to fly a Sovereign, XLS, Citation ten, or a Columbus.”

“And I’ll be there with you,” Jessie said, kissing him on the cheek. “So you won’t be alone.”

“I’m...wow. Just wow. Vil, sis, I’m, I’m...thank you. Thank you so much!” he said, giving her a fierce hug.

“Can I give a gift, or can’t I?” she laughed as she patted him on the back.

“You spoil me too much!”

“You won’t let me spoil you anywhere near as much as you deserve,” she answered. “So I’ll just give you what you *want*. I know you’ll never take anything you can’t justify in your own mind, so I’ll just be happy with helping you fulfill a lifelong dream. You’ll finally get the chance to fly jets,

little brother. They won't be quite the jets you wanted to fly when you were younger, but at least you'll get to fly jets."

"Thank you sis," he said, picking her up off her feet and rocking her back and forth in his arms. "I love you."

"And I love you, Kit," she told him, kissing him on the cheek. "Now put me down, it's entirely improper for the most powerful femme in America to be held in her brother's arms like a kid."

Everyone laughed and applauded as he put her back down. She looked up at him, her eyes a mystery, then she smiled. "So, you're not going to rage over my gift?"

He laughed. "It's a totally useless gesture since I don't have a jet, but you're giving me something I've wanted half my life. Why should I?" he smiled, then he hugged her again.

"That just saved you getting spanked in public," she grinned at him.

He was honestly overwhelmed. Vil was letting him finish a boyhood dream. It probably wasn't cheap at all, but on the other paw, it was something he'd always wanted, and it may even be useful some day. Some of the really small Citations could be flown with a single pilot...maybe some day, when he had money, he could rent one just to fly it. It would be worth the thousand dollars to do it...just once.

Jessie looped her arms around him and kissed him on the cheek. "I'm glad you're happy, my handsome fox," she giggled. "We've been working on it for a month, all of us."

They all gave him a huge grin, and it made Kit laugh. "Well, thanks, everyone. I'm *very* happy." He reached down and grabbed Vil's paw. "And I

believe I owe *you* something,” he told her.

“Oh? What is that?”

“A ride in my little single engine propeller plane,” he smiled down at her.

She laughed. “I accept!” she said. “But we’ll have to go now, since we have to get back to Cincinnati and Boston tonight.”

“As long as nobody minds that the birthday boy’s bailing on his own party,” Kit laughed.

“Go ahead, handsome fox, you have a promise to keep,” Jessie giggled. “And we’ll just keep going without you.”

“Yah, brah, we won’t even know you’re gone!” Lupe teased.

And so, Kit and Vil took a short ride down to the airport in her limo. Stav and Marcus waited for them in the hangar as Kit helped Vil up onto the wing, and she settled into the copilot’s seat as he did the walk-around. She watched silently as he got in and did the preflight, just paying attention to his actions, and remained quiet as they taxied out towards the runway. “Kit,” she said, adjusting her headset, “I have a question.”

“Well, I’ll do my best to answer,” he said as he turned on the ramp leading to the runway, then held up his paw to Vil as he answered air traffic. “Well, hold that thought until we’re up, sis,” he said.

She was quiet, looking out the window as they took off, and he turned to the southeast and ascended, getting well away from the traffic patterns of the bigger planes. “Alright, now, what was your question?”

She was quiet a moment. “I want you to come to Boston next weekend. Will you do it?”

“That’s going to depend,” he told her honestly. “How long, and why?”

“Kendall is going to come over from London,” she told him. “I want you to meet him.”

“Well, why am I going to Boston? You *know* how I feel about Boston, Vil. Bring him here.”

“Kit,” she said, then she looked out the window. “When’s the last time you talked to Clancy?”

“Monday,” he answered. “Wait a second. Why didn’t he come with you?”

“Kit, Clancy—“ she said, then she blew out her breath. “Kit, Clancy is getting old.”

Kit gave her a long look.

“He wanted to come with us, but he was just too tired,” she told him. “And he’s really worn down over the last couple of months. I want you to come to Boston to meet Kendall, but I also want you to go see Clancy. He’d really like to see you, and I really think you should.”

He didn’t miss the inference in her voice, *before it’s too late*. “I’d love to see him, sis, but I *will not* stay in Stonebrook. Not as long as Zach is in that place. Maybe not even if he wasn’t. It was *his* house, sis. There’s nothing but bad memories there for me.”

“You can stay in a hotel, bro, that’s not a problem, but I’d really like you to come up. Both you and Jessie. I’ll even send my jet for you.”

Kit was silent a long moment. “I’ll have to ask her, sis. You know what might happen if I bring my wife to Boston, within rifle range of Uncle Zach or Uncle Jake or Aunt Maxine. My *pregnant* wife, Vil.”

“I’ll keep a leash on the uncles, Kit, I promise. So you’ll come?”

“I’ll ask Jessie. How she answers is how I answer, sis. If she says no, you’ll just have to bring Kendall and Clancy here.”

“Alright, I can live with that,” she said, looking at the cockpit displays. “You know, all those flights I’ve taken in my jets, and I’ve never once sat up front,” she said. “It almost looks like a video game.”

Kit laughed suddenly and earnestly, which made the plane lurch a little since he had his paw on the control stick. “Well, we can’t let you go without playing this one,” he told her. “Grab the stick, Vil. It’s time for your first flying lesson.”

Kit gave Vil the same basic flight lesson as Jessie and let her fly the plane for about ten minutes, even let her do a slow turn to turn them back towards Bergstrom, then let her spend the rest of the flight enjoying seeing flying from the perspective of the pilot. “I wonder what it would be like to fly a plane myself,” she mused, which made Kit laugh again.

“What is it about this plane that makes everyone want a license to fly it?” he asked her with a grin.

“It *is* nice, bro,” she said. “It’s like riding in a flying Bentley.”

“It probably cost about as much as a Bentley,” he noted. “How much is insurance on this thing anyway?”

“Insurance? Why should I insure it?” she winked. “You own it outright, bro. If you crash it, you don’t need any insurance to pay it off.”

“So, it was too outrageous to be worth it,” he noted.

She laughed. “Just about. You graduated from a very good flight school and have a lot of logged hours, but it was a combination of your age and your lack of logged hours for a long period that the insurance companies didn’t like. They said they’d give me a better rate after you logged some hours again. And unfortunately, about the only furs a Vulpan can’t bully are insurance underwriters.”

“I hope the flight school lets me rate as a solo pilot,” he said. “To be rated to fly a jet solo takes a little more than being rated to fly as part of a crew.”

“I showed them your flight record, and they said you *would*,” she said. “But just barely. You’ve had your commercial license for years and you have enough logged hours in complex planes, which was what they said was the benchmark. They said you’d earn a rating to fly solo.”

“Thank God,” Kit sighed. “I know I’ll never use it, but if I have the solo rating, the option is always there someday when I save up enough money to rent a jet, just to fly it *once*.”

“I can take care of that, bro,” she smiled.

He laughed. “And ruin my sense of accomplishment? No. If you do everything for me, when will I ever feel like I managed to do for myself?”

“Don’t sell yourself short, brother mine,” she told him seriously. “I *read* your magazine, and in the last month, I’ve seen better writing out of your little campus rag than I’ve seen out of *Time*. You’re doing exactly what

you should be doing by trying to expand right now. If you keep your quality as high as it's been, I see *Lone Star* going statewide within two years. Have you seen your sale numbers for your Austin test market yet?"

He shook his head. "Rick will find out tomorrow morning. I think they'll be very good. This week's issue had the debate coverage in it."

"I think so too," she agreed. "I think Rick's being too conservative, though."

"Well, I can see it from his side, sis. If our test crashed, then the magazine would literally be out of business."

"I wouldn't let that happen, bro. This is an *investment*. I'd have loaned the magazine the money to recover. And note I said *loan*, bro, not *give*. My generosity has limits."

"I'm not sure I like the idea of you coming down here to bail us out," he said seriously. "If there's no fear of failure, there's no dedication to excellence."

"That's a healthy attitude," she said with a nod.

Kit put a finger to his headset as air traffic control called him. "Alright, time to watch and listen, sis, I have to land us."

Marcus and Stav were waiting for them at the hangar as he parked the plane, and one of them helped Vil down as Kit did postflight and locked up. "I really need to update my logbook," Kit laughed. "I still haven't logged the trip to the beach yet, and those logs are how the FAA knows I'm logging hours and how I know when it's time to take my plane in for inspections and maintenance."

“You can do it tomorrow,” Vil said. “We have a party to get back to!”

“True.”

When they got back, the party was still in full swing. Everyone was still out in the courtyard, talking, laughing, listening to music, and mingling...or mingling too much. Sheila was trying to pry Ben away from Hannah, who was watching him like a hawk as he chatted with Muffy, but the real shock was Terry and Allison sitting by themselves over at the furthest table, talking while sitting opposite each other, and with Terry holding Allison’s paws. Terry looked smitten, and Allison was smiling with surprising warmth and earnestness. Kit...wasn’t sure about that. Allison could be honestly interested in his cousin, or she could be fishing for him, using years of practice to lure him into a relationship.

Kit worried about it for a while, until Terry came over to him, his expression a little surprised and bewildered. “Kit, can I talk to you a second?” he asked.

“Sure, pull up a bench,” he said, waving to the empty seat beside him.

“I was talking to Allison.”

“I noticed.”

“I tried to get her to give me her number, and she wouldn’t give it to me.”

Kit’s respect for Allison went up a few notches, as well as his trust in her. She wasn’t fishing for Terry after all. She just liked him.

“What did I do wrong?” he asked earnestly. “She was such a wonderful femme to talk to. She’s smart, she’s funny, she’s interesting. We were

having a great talk, and then she just seemed to shut down and walk away.”

“Did you take her paws, or did she offer them to you?”

“I, I don’t know. Maybe both? She didn’t seem to mind. She was squeezing my paws while we were talking. It was really nice to hold them. Her paws were soft.”

Kit wasn’t sure exactly how to approach it, but he did see that Allison hadn’t told Terry, and that meant that he had to protect her secret. It was not his secret to give. “She has her reasons, Terry. Besides, why did you ask for her number? You’ll probably never be back here.”

“I’ll *come* back if I can get her number,” he said earnestly.

“That’s not really your decision, Terry. If I were you, I’d leave it alone.”

“What? Why?”

“Because you seem to forget, *she* can get in touch with *you*. Sheila is her best friend, and I’m here too. You think she can’t get your number if she wants it?”

He was silent a moment, then he chuckled.

“You want my advice? Here it is. Just leave her be. If she’s interested, she’ll call you. If she’s not, she won’t.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. Allison is not your average femme, Terry. I think you noticed that.”

“God, did I,” he said fervently.

“Well, take it from me. Someday, when you’re older, you’ll understand.”

“Older? You’re only six months older than me!”

“Yes, and I’ve spent those six months here in Austin, where you live in Boston. You don’t *know* Allison, cousin. I do. Just trust me.”

“I—well, I guess I will. I’ll leave you my personal cell number, Kit, both for you and for her. But tell her that I *really* want her to call me. I don’t think I’ve ever met such an interesting femme in my whole life.”

“Oh, she’s definitely that, Terry. You have no idea how interesting she really is.”

And when Terry found out the truth of Allison, he’d be in for a shock. Kit pondered how Terry might react to that, to find out that the brilliant, beautiful Master’s graduate chemist he was dating used to be a stripper and a prostitute. Terry was a hard male to know, and always had been within the family, because he was so intelligent. That intelligence made Terry hard to talk to, hard to understand, because he was very, very complicated, and he was also very...standoffish. Kit guessed that being from Uncle Tom’s family, the black sheep of the Vulpans, and having sisters like Bess and Dahlia, made Terry less willing to circulate in the family. Kit had barely known Terry before he was disowned. The only thing that wasn’t a surprise to the family about Terry was that he had gone through school so fast. Everyone knew he was one of the smartest of all the Vulpans.

He could only guess at how Terry would react, and hope that it didn’t turn into major drama. Allison was just starting to come out of her shell, and if Terry was vicious to her, it might really, really hurt her. But, it was a

risk she'd have to take. Allison would have to be honest with him, honest right up front, and let him decide if she was worth the risk.

God help Terry if he did get vicious with Allison. Sheila would take that *very* personally, and would probably come after Terry like ten kinds of pissed off bitch, seeking vengeance for her friend's injured feelings. Sheila was generally harmless, but she could also be very, very nasty when she was mad.

But, that concern faded after being immersed back into the party. He, Hannah, John, and Jessie sat for a while and talked about the pregnancy, how Jessie was doing, how often her morning sickness struck, then Ben and Jenny joined them. "Ugh, stop talking about pregnancy," Jenny said with a frown.

"You should pay attention, Jennifer, because some day you'll go through the same thing," Hannah told her.

"I hope not," she said quickly.

"Yes, a child having a child would not be a good thing," Kit said mildly. "It would be hard to tell them apart."

Jenny whacked Kit on the shoulder.

Vil came over and put her paw on Kit's shoulder. "Bro, I hate to say it, but I'll have to gather up the air crew and head back. I need to be back in Boston."

"Already?"

"Kit, it's nearly seven," she said with a smile. "Time flies when you're with friends and family, doesn't it?"

“I didn’t realize it was so late,” he said, and looking around proved it. Half of them were already gone. Most of the sorority had gone back, as had Kevin and Sam, and Janet, Barry, Mike, and Lilly had also said their goodbyes.

“Come on, you and Jessie can ride with us to the airport and have the limo bring you back before I release it,” she smiled.

“Sure, that would be nice,” Jessie said. “Lupe! Just leave everything, we’ll come help clean up when we get back!”

“Sure thing, babe!” Lupe called back from the grill, where he was grilling another hot dog while Dan and Mickey were sitting nearby, drinking beer. “We always like help when it comes time to clean up!”

Vil had hired one huge stretch limo for the day, and it was big enough to hold all twelve of them. It was divided into two seating areas, and while Ben, Jenny, Suzy, Muffy, and Corey sat in the middle seats, Kit, Jessie, Vil, and Terry sat in the back with John and Hannah. Stav and Marcus sat up front with the driver. Kit listened as Vil and Terry talked with John and Hannah, just enjoying what little was left of a good day. It had been so nice to have friends and family around, not to have any drama, and see Jessie’s family getting along with what few members of Kit’s family he would allow around them. Muffy was very friendly with Ben and Jenny, and Kit knew that they emailed and called each other. But he was even more glad that Terry had seemed to take well to Jessie’s family as well. He had been kind and respectful to Jessie’s parents, and had been friendly and social to Ben and Jenny...though for Terry, that was a double-edged sword. He was a hard male to get to know, and it wasn’t because he wasn’t friendly. It was because he was so smart, it was hard for furs to relate to him sometimes. He *tried* to be social, but he just seemed to come across as too introspective and

aloof for most furs. But it was still good that he tried. Jenny seemed baffled by him, but he seemed to strike up a friendship with Ben.

They pulled into the airport, and up to the hangar housing Vil's private jet. The modified Bombardier Global 5000 was about five times bigger than any normal private jet, taking up a good piece of the hangar. They all filed out of the limo and hurried up to the jet, and Kit had to go up with them and see what changes she made to accommodate so many passengers. Vil's plane was so big it had enough room in it for a private sleeping area and galley in addition to a luxurious living room-like open area with seats, tables, and even a sectional couch that literally bisected the cabin, with the centerpiece plasma TV mounted into the ceiling so it could be retracted up out of the way when not in use. Vil had had the interior redone, he noticed. The galley was now behind the couch and was an open area, with a bar, little fridge, and cupboard, and the table that had flanked the couch was now in the galley. The couch had been lengthened to nearly bisect the cabin, providing a sense of separation between the galley and living area, with two doors at the opposite sides of the back wall, which was probably the private bedroom and the lavatory. There were four chairs across from the entry hatch now, with little tables between them, and there was a couch along the fuselage near the original couch and coffee table, forming a U of couch seating with a hole in it to reach the galley. The jet was big, big enough to be a commuter airliner, but it was built, designed, and operated almost exclusively for one fur and her passengers. The plane probably cost around fifty million dollars, but that was a drop in the bucket for Vulpan Shipyards, and Vil wasn't the one that ordered it anyway. Their father had been the one that had ordered the jet, but he had died before the shipyard had taken delivery. When Vil became the CEO, she inherited the jet right along with everything else. "Nice," Kit noted as Jessie looked in.

“You had it redesigned,” Kit noted.

“Dad’s design was...just weird,” she said. “He wanted to make it feel like a house, so he split the cabin and put in those seats and that table, then created that narrow companionway between here and the galley with the really small office and stateroom, like closets. I never really liked it, so I had it redone. I left the sectional, had the little office and bedroom ripped out, and put the galley behind this area, then expanded the back of the plane to a stateroom where I put a real bed and a desk.”

“Well, I think it looks nice. Kinda cramped this way, though.”

“I didn’t have enough seating for everyone,” Vil laughed as she came up behind them. “Too much *me*, not enough *we*. I’ll have the second couch pulled out when we get back and reduce the seats by the hatch to two to get my roomy feel back. I *liked* having lots of space up here, not feeling like I was in a plane.”

“Well, you’ll definitely get it,” Kit noted as Avery came out from the cockpit. “Not much room for others, though.”

“This is *my* plane,” Vil said adamantly. “They can fly in the other one, or they can fly coach.”

Kit laughed.

“It’s good to see you again, Mister Vulpan,” Avery told him, shaking his paw. “Just coming to look, or are you going back to Boston?”

“Just came up to look,” he answered.

“You’re looking radiant, Misses Vulpan. Congratulations on your coming blessing.”

“Aww, thanks, Captain Avery,” Jessie smiled, startling him by giving him a brief hug.

Kit and Jessie moved through them all, saying their goodbyes. “Now you be good to my daughter, Kit,” Hannah ordered as he gave her a hug.

“I will, and I’m sorry we didn’t get more of a chance to talk today.”

“Well, there were plenty here competing for your attention,” she smiled. “And we can talk almost any time, where some of those here don’t have that luxury.”

“I knew there was a reason I liked you, Hannah.”

“Good sense if nothing else.”

He laughed. “That and your towering sense of modesty,” he smiled.

“Oh, go on, you,” she said, lightly swatting him on the rump.

He hugged Vil one more time. “Thanks for a wonderful birthday, sis,” he told her, holding her around her slender waist. “And thanks for the wonderful gift.”

“Well, since you’re being so magnanimous, how would you like a nice house? Two of them, actually,” she said with a light smile. “There’s this nice four bedroom colonial about two blocks from your apartment, but there’s also this very nice six acre lot in a gated luxury community about a half hour from Austin that would be a lovely place to build a house of your own.”

Kit chuckled ruefully. “No, Vil.”

“You can keep saying it, but it’s not going to sway me, bro,” she grinned. “You aren’t a vagabond anymore, and you and Jessie aren’t a

young couple anymore. You're going to have a baby. You're going to be a family. And families shouldn't live in apartments. They should live in *houses*."

"Lots of families live in apartments," Jessie protested. "There's nothing wrong with an apartment!"

"Oh yes there is, young lady," Hannah said authoritatively. "The difference is *control*. When you own your own house, you *own* that house. You are not at the mercy of someone else."

"I couldn't have said it better myself, Hannah," Vil said with an approving nod. "You're just one nasty fight with Lupe away from being in a very bad predicament, and you *are pregnant*, Jessie. I want you two in a *house*, a nice house where you are secure, a place that is all yours and where nobody can tell you what you can and cannot do."

"Except for you?" Kit asked with a dark look.

"Well naturally except for me," she said with a surprisingly playful smile.

"Let's not ruin this day with a fight now," Kit said quickly. "Let's just agree that we'll fight this battle another day."

Vil laughed. "I'll agree to that, bro," she said, hugging him again. "Happy birthday. I love you."

"I love you too, you little pain in the neck," he answered.

"Hey, no fighting," she teased, then she stood up on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. "We have to go now, bro. I'll call you tomorrow morning."

Kit and Jessie hugged and kissed their way through the plane, and then they hurried out. Vil waved to them from the hatchway, and then Avery closed it. Kit kept his arm around Jessie's waist as they waved to those looking through the windows, who waved back, then they had to retreat so the jet could start its engines and taxi out.

"You think she was serious about the house?" Jessie asked.

"Deadly," he answered. "You don't know her the way I do, pretty kitty. She's starting to dig her claws into us, and she's going to get more and demanding. It will be for our own good, of course, that's how she'll justify all of it. She has it in her head that we should live in a house, and she won't stop until she gets what she wants...or I step on her."

"Well, I like it at the apartment. I mean, it would be nice to own our own house, but I love Lupe and Dan and Mickey, and living close to Sheila, and being close to the sorority."

"And I love not having to mow grass, pay property taxes, live bowed at the throne of a mortgage company, or try to figure out how to fix a leaky sink," Kit said, which made Jessie giggle.

"My poor inept fox," she teased, kissing him on the cheek. "We'll have to enroll you in those do it yourself courses they offer at Home Depot."

"I fight my battles with a keyboard, not a hammer," he said, which made her laugh.

The jet's engines started, and they watched the plane taxi out of the yawing doors. "Well, happy birthday, my handsome fox," Jessie told him, putting her head on his shoulder as they watched Vil's plane taxi out. "I hope you liked your gift."

“Now that I won’t complain about,” he chuckled. “It’s the completion of a boyhood dream. You know what’s going to make it so wonderful?”

“What?”

“You’ll be there with me,” he told her.

“Aww, you’re so sweet.”

“Let’s go home, love. You have school in the morning.”

“And you still have Sheila.”

“Sheila? What about Sheila?”

Jessie gave him a long, serious look.

“Oh, crap,” Kit breathed.

Sheila was indeed waiting for him at home. She gave him a *huge* grin and moved to grab his arm as he came into the courtyard, but he just pulled away from her. “*After* we help clean up.”

“Stall all you want, I’ve got *plans*,” she said eagerly.

Kit, Jessie, and Sheila helped Dan, Mickey, and Lupe clean up. The femmes cleaned up the litter and folded up the tablecloths—Sheila grumbling about doing manual labor the whole time—while the males folded the tables and carried them to the show unit to store back in a bedroom, mainly because Lupe was taking no more tenants while the construction was going on...which made the show unit obsolete and had turned it into a storage space. Dan and Mickey moved the grills back as Kit, Jessie, and Sheila swept up, and then Lupe stored the leftover food in his fridge and the storage unit fridge after splitting it with Dan and Mickey, the other two bachelors. “Well, we won’t be begging for your leftovers for a

week, Jessie,” Dan grinned as he carried a large tupperware container of hot dogs towards his apartment.

“My fridge hasn’t recovered from your last visit,” Dan!” Jessie teased in reply.

After everything was cleaned up and restored to normal, Sheila grabbed possessive hold of Kit’s arm. “Don’t wait up for us, Jessie,” Sheila said with a dangerous smile. “In fact, don’t expect to see us until some time next week. It’s time for Kit’s initiation into the Party Pack!” She flipped her phone open and hit a button. “It’s time,” she said into the phone.

Not twenty seconds later, a limo pulled out and stopped in the street. The door opened, and about half of the sorority boiled out; Sandy, the other Jessie, Charlotte, Danielle, Lisa, and three of their new pledges, Shannon, Annette, and Vicky. They were giggling as they rushed up, all of them wearing dance club outfits, and they surrounded Kit. Paws grabbed him and started dragging him to the limo, which made him laugh. “We’ll bring him back to you, Jessie,” Sheila said over her shoulder as she sauntered behind the pack of femmes. “I can’t guarantee he’ll be able to walk straight, though.”

“Don’t you do anything illegal!” Jessie shouted. “And have a good time!”

“I don’t think they’re going to give me a choice in the matter, pretty kitty!” Kit called in reply.

“Damn right you won’t!” Sheila agreed with an evil, ominous laugh as he was physically dragged into the limousine.

Chapter 26

He was going to *kill* Sheila.

Kit woke up around noon to a dark and empty apartment. Jessie was in school, and Kit was so hung over that his head felt like it was going to explode. Sheila had gotten him so drunk that his memories were fuzzy for about half of last night...but the half that was fuzzy was something he was glad Jessie hadn't seen. She would have absolutely *died* of mortification...if she didn't haul off and slap Sheila in the face first.

Sheila had outdone herself.

She had taken him to several different clubs, and it was there that she had gotten him drunk, even got him to dance with Danielle and the other Jessie. Once she got him drunk, she took him to an illegal rave, then to illegal street racing, then to an illegal casino out in Bastrop, and then to cap the night, she just had to take him to the Top Hat for the crown of the evening. Sundays were typically femme's night down on the first floor, but while the sorority girls partook of the festivities on the first floor, Sheila had taken him up to the second floor, where he got the only shock big enough to penetrate the haze of alcohol.

Somehow, some way, Sheila had found a cat stripper whose fur was almost the same color as Jessie's, and had the same basic body type. She didn't have a longhaired tail, but she did have the same basic dimensions as Jessie through the bust and hips, and had long blond hair. She looked nothing like Jessie in the face, with much sharper features, but that didn't

matter all that much. Sheila had the stripper do a private performance just for him, Sheila giving him a wicked smile when she abandoned him in a small room and the cat came in and gave him a lap dance, and the cat had made it abundantly clear that she had been rented for *more* than a lap dance, if he was so inclined.

And that was why Sheila was going to die.

Kit was too drunk to pass on the lap dance, but he was nowhere near drunk enough to break his vows to Jessie. The cat had tried *very* hard to entice him into a one night stand, but he stayed faithful to his wife. And, thankfully, he passed out not long after the cat left the room, which defeated any further attempts Sheila might make to make him stray.

And so, he'd woke up alone around noon, feeling like his head was about to explode. He'd had hangovers before, but never one that severe. He dragged himself to the kitchen and put on water for tea, his paws shaking and his tail quivering, but at least Jessie hadn't had him pour out or give away all of his wine. He used the last bottle to make the Vulpan hangover tonic, which was far more wine than it was honey or tea, but he'd extend the hangover just to take the edge off his splitting headache. He decided he'd rather have a little pain for a while than *this* kind of pain for a couple of hours.

After his paws stopped shaking like he had palsy, he took very direct action to recover from his hangover. He took an ice cold shower, about four Excedrins, and then rested on the couch until the worst of his headache dulled to a manageable level. He knew that the key to nursing a hangover was alcohol, but alcohol delivered in very small amounts over a long time, allowing his body to slowly descend from the plateau rather than crash hard

like it did during a hangover. Besides, the wine also helped buzz off some of the pain, making it more bearable.

He was left alone most of the day, except for one visitor. It was a FedEx driver, who delivered a very large and heavy box. Kit was too tender to care much about what it was, so he put it on the coffee table and left it alone until he felt ready to investigate the matter. Odds were, it was some kind of belated birthday present from someone.

By the time Jessie got home, Kit was recovered enough. She kissed him on the cheek and passed by to put her backpack away, then she came back and sat in his lap, wrapped her arms around him, and gave him a healthy kiss. “Feel better, my handsome fox?” she asked.

“Some. I’m gonna *murder* Sheila.”

“What did she do?”

“She got me too drunk to care about *almost* everything else she did,” he said.

She giggled. “Well, let’s hear it. If the cops are gonna break down the door and arrest you, I want to know now,” she grinned. He told her about the night, at least what he could solidly remember, and she gasped when he told her where they went last. “She took the girls *there*?”

“She surely did. Remember, Sunday is Femme’s night down on the first floor, so no doubt they got to watch a whole bunch of male strippers. I have no doubt they’re hopelessly depraved now,” he noted dryly.

“I’m gonna kill her!” Jessie growled. “She shouldn’t be taking eighteen year old girls *there*!”

“Jessie, *Sheila* is eighteen,” Kit noted. “And you have to stand in line to kill Sheila. I get her first.”

“What did she do?”

“She hired one of the Top Hat dancers as a *hooker*,” he said, a little indignantly. “And had her try to get me to break my vows.”

Jessie gasped, her eyes wide. “She *did not*!” she gasped, flabbergasted.

“Oh yes she did,” Kit intoned. “And I’m gonna spank her narrow little ass as soon as she saunters over here.”

“I’m not waiting that long!” Jessie snapped, clearly outraged. She jumped to her feet and pushed the sleeves of her sweater up over her elbows, and marched right out the door without another word.

Kit chuckled. Sheila was about to get her come-uppance.

Kit turned his attention to the box on the table and started to open it when the door banged open. A wild-eyed Sheila was slamming the door behind her and pushing against it with her paws. “Kit!” she said in a strangled voice. “Call her off!”

“What?”

“She tried to *spank* me!” Sheila said as the door started shuddering as Jessie pounded on it. “Call her off!”

“You deserve to be spanked, girl,” Kit accused. “You tried to get me to have an affair!”

“It was just a joke!” she protested. “I know you’d never do it!”

“But you paid a hooker to try!”

“I wanted you to come home and jump Jessie’s bones, goof!” she said, pushing her back against the door as an irate Jessie started banging harder. “Hear that, Jessie? I was trying to get his motor started for *you*!”

“I’ll show you a started motor, you skinny little bitch!” Jessie shouted, which shocked Kit. He had *never* heard her curse in public before, only when she was alone with him.

“Jessie!” Kit called. “Calm down, love.”

“*Thank you!*” Sheila said, but then she yelped when Kit grabbed her arm and yanked her off the door. Jessie barged through it and saw Kit settling back on the couch with Sheila turned over his knee. “Kit! Kit, this isn’t funny!” she protested, and she gasped when he jerked on the back of her shorts, yanking them down and baring her furry butt, then he pulled her tail aside and tucked it under his leg.

“Pretty kitty, shut the door. I don’t think the courtyard needs to see this,” he said mildly.

Jessie grinned and shut the door.

What came next was something Sheila had deserved probably since she was twelve. Kit spanked her, and he did not hold back. Sheila howled and kicked her feet, yowling, crying, even begging, but Kit was implacable. He blistered Sheila’s shapely little backside for a good three minutes, spanking her so hard his paw was stinging.

But finally, he relented. He gave her one more hard whack, just for good measure, then pushed on her side. She scrambled off his lap and yanked her shorts up, then put both her paws on her butt and rubbed vigorously, her tail slashing behind her. “That was *not funny!*” she shouted.

“Neither was trying to get me in bed with a hooker,” he retorted. “You acted like a brat, so you got what a brat deserves.”

She gave him a hot look, then laughed ruefully. “If you wanted to paw my butt, you should have asked,” she grinned. “You may be a cousin, but what’s a little friendly pawing between cousins?”

“Still being a brat?” Jessie asked threateningly.

Sheila laughed again. “Will you spank me if I say yes?”

“No, Kit hits much harder than me. I’ll let him do it.”

Sheila grinned and rubbed her butt again. “Okay, okay, I’m sorry about the hooker. I thought you’d think it was funny, then get so horny you’d run home and give Jessie a hot nightcap. But you passed out before you could seal the deal,” she complained. “*Really*, Kit, you used to be able to drink way better than that! You could drink more than that at fifteen!”

“You drank at *eleven*?” Jessie gasped.

“I’m a Vulpan, and mom never locked the liquor cabinet,” Sheila grinned. “And I was drinking at nine,” she corrected. “So, truce?”

“Only if you *never* do that again,” Kit said.

“Deal,” she said. “But, did you like the girl I found for you?” she said with a sly smile.

“What?”

“She sent a *cat*,” Kit said. “And one that had the same color fur as you and was your height and size. I think she thought I might mistake her for you in my drunken haze.”

“Well,” Sheila hummed with a smile, but that smile faded when Jessie *growled* at her. “I said I won’t do it again!” she said quickly, putting up her paws.

“Kit. Love. I think you didn’t spank her enough,” Jessie said in a low, flinty tone.

“My pretty kitty has spoken,” Kit said, advancing on Sheila inexorably.

Sheila wasn’t a fool. She turned and bolted, and managed to get out the door and run for her life.

“Really!” Jessie fumed, putting her paws on her hips and glaring at the door. “I would never believe she’d do that!”

“I would,” Kit said simply. “You can’t ever forget, love, Sheila is Sheila, and she doesn’t think like a normal fur. There wasn’t a single Vulpan except for my mom and dad that was faithful in the marriage. Her own mom cheats on her dad, and vice versa, and they don’t really hide it from each other. She doesn’t see me having a tryst with a hooker as anything out of the ordinary compared to the rest of the family or as a threat to my marriage, since all the Vulpans cheat on their spouses. It’s almost expected. She doesn’t see it the way we do.”

“She’d better, or I’ll blister her butt!” Jessie declared, her tail slashing in anger. “You’re not going to cheat on me, buster!”

“I know I won’t,” he chuckled, wrapping his arms around her and giving her a light kiss.

“Shew! Godzilla breath,” Jessie giggled, waving her paw between their noses.

“Sorry. I’ll go brush my teeth.”

“I’ll make you some more tea,” she offered. “What’s in the box?”

“No idea, look it over while I’m fixing my Godzilla breath,” he answered.

When he finished brushing his teeth, he came out and saw that she’d opened the box. Inside were *stacks* of manuals, small software boxes, CD cases, and books. “They’re here already!” Jessie said in surprise, looking at one. Kit saw that each one had a Post-it on it that had either his or Jessie’s names on it, and each one, he realized, was from Cessna. He picked one up and saw that it was the manual for a Citation CJ-2’s avionics system.

“Well, I see Vil’s thorough,” Kit said, picking up another one, and saw that it was Cessna’s proprietary software, named *Virtual Cockpit: Citation Mustang*, and another that read *Virtual Cockpit: Citation Encore*. “She had them send the manuals.”

“They sent mine too. See?” she asked with a smile, picking up one of the books labeled for her, which read *Cessna Flight Academy: Flight Regulations for Private Pilots*.

“Jessie, exactly what did you agree to do with Vil?” he asked.

“I’m getting my pilot’s license,” she grinned. “Vil had them call me, and they told me that if I study these books they send, that I can get my license in as quick as four weeks as long as I can pass the written test. They said if I go really quick, they’ll help me get my twin engine complex plane rating too. The fur I talked to said that the more I study, the less classroom time I have to take, and that gives me more time to get the hours I need to do my practical test. He said if I can get my pilot’s license in three weeks,

I'll have enough time to log the hours I need for a multi-engine complex plane rating."

"That *is* true about getting a license quickly," he said with a nod. "There's no real schedule about it. As long as you pass the written test and have the necessary logged hours, you can take the oral test and check ride any time. And multi and complex ratings, you can get those at the same time on the right plane, you just have to log the hours and take the test."

"So, while you learn how to fly jets, I'm going to get my pilot's license," she told him. "Vil said it was my early birthday present."

"Well, that's what it is," Kit chuckled. "I guess Vil got her way in the end and paid for it anyway. Eh, I won't complain, I guess, if that's what you want."

"I've wanted to fly our plane since the first time you took me up in it!" she said excitedly, putting another book aside on the coffee table. "I told Vil I didn't want to start until after the baby because it would take so long. I mean, you were in flight school for over a year. But then she found out I could get one in a month as long as I don't go for all the same ratings you got, so I went for it. She said I could get the same ratings you have later, after I get my pilot's license. I hope it didn't cost her that much."

"Private training at Cessna itself? I'd say it ran her about fifteen thousand dollars."

"That much?" Jessie said in surprise.

"It's *expensive* to fly, pretty kitty. I have no doubt that the jet ratings she'd giving me probably cost about fifty thousand total. The last time I saw

a hard number for training, it was nine thousand dollars for a two week course for a commercial pilot to rate on a Boeing seven thirty-seven B.”

“Wow,” Jessie said in surprise. “Another one for me. There’s so many,” she said, in a little bit of dismay, looking at the books on the table, all of them with her name on them.

“It won’t be easy, pretty kitty. But if you really want to do it, I’ll help you.”

“I really do,” she said honestly.

“Then I’ll do everything I can to help you. You’ll have to study a lot, but at least I can take you up in our plane and let you see that textbook knowledge in action. That should help you learn it better than if you just memorize stuff.”

“Good, because I want to fly our plane home,” she said with a smile.

“Well, I guess I’ll let you,” he winked.

“You better, silly fox,” she smiled, reaching up and pulling his head down. It made his head throb a bit, but the kiss he got made all the pain melt away.

When they went through the box, Kit was impressed. They had sent Jessie all the books, manuals, and information she needed to study to learn about the fundamentals of flight, airplanes, and flight procedures, they even sent her testing software so she could quiz herself on her knowledge. Kit had been sent the manuals for every jet they were going to teach him to fly, as well as an email address and a letter telling him that he had to choose which of the big jets Kit wanted to learn to fly and email his choice to them tomorrow, so they could send out those materials to him as well. They not

only sent books and manuals, they also sent software. They sent software that showed the planes and cockpits in great detail, and there was also test software that would quiz him on the locations of controls and procedures, literally the test software that would test him on the information he would need to know to pass the oral test segment of his check ride evaluation. They even sent a copy of the game *Microsoft Flight Simulator 2008* that had add-ons for every Citation jet they produced. The flight simulator software was very faithful to real flight situations, and the add-ons would allow him to simulate flying the jets he was going to learn to fly. It also showed the internal cockpits of the plane in perfect detail, since they'd taken pictures of the real cockpits of the planes to reproduce for the simulator.

They also sent him brochures and website addresses to look over the big jets. There was the Citation XLS, the Citation X, the Citation Sovereign, and even the Citation Columbus, a plane that wasn't even in production yet, but they could rate him to fly on it because they had already had a test plane and were testing it for FAA certification. Once they started certifying the plane, it was standard procedure to train pilots to fly it for when it *was* in production, that way there were pilots out there that could fly the plane. Kit looked over each plane, but it took him all of three minutes to choose, once he looked at the Citation X. Now that the Concorde was retired, the X was the fastest civilian aircraft in the sky, capable of crusing at Mach .92, over five hundred miles an hour, and had transcontinental range. He could fly from Boston to London, New York to Los Angeles, or Los Angeles to Hawaii in a Citation X, without having to land to refuel. The X was a dual-pilot jet, not single pilot rated, but none of the big jets were. If he was going to learn how to fly a jet, he was going to learn how to fly the fastest one he could legally fly.

He sent off the email informing them he chose the Citation X, then went back to the material, preparing to sort it so he could draw up a study plan, both for himself and for Jessie.

The office was quiet when he came in on Tuesday, and when he went to go see Rick, he found out why. Rick showed him the spreadsheet showing sale figures over the weekend, and they weren't as good as the first test had been. In fact, they weren't very good at all. The magazine would be pretty solidly in the red for the week.

It had dismayed some in the office and made Rick nervous, but Kit studied the figures carefully. What he saw wasn't the bottom line showing that the magazine had lost six thousand dollars that week, he instead saw that every single new sale site had sold *some* magazines. Only two sites only sold one or two, the rest had sold at least five. What he saw was that furs had bought the magazines, but had not bought enough to put the magazine in the black. To Kit, that was more important than the scary figure at the bottom of the page.

Rick shared his cautiously optimistic appraisal after Kit read the figures. "I see that we sold throughout the metro area, but not in high numbers."

"We can just cut back on units to the Austin market next week," Kit said. "We'll put more out where we did well, less out where we didn't."

"Well, we didn't sell out at any location, and our sales always drop off past Monday at College Station and San Antonio. So I don't see us selling many more magazines."

“Well, we just adjust, Rick. You know how this works.”

“I know, but I can’t feel really nervous about it,” he said with a nod. “We’re gambling with everyone’s future here. Yours, mine, everyone who works for us.”

“Well, we’ll make it,” Kit said. “We should advertise.”

“Advertise? Where?”

“On the campus radio station, for one,” Kit answered. “Maybe a few radio stations around town too. Advertising works, Rick that’s why our advertisers pay us money to run their ads. We need to do the same.”

“That’s not cheap, son. I don’t see how we can pay for it.”

“I know it’s not cheap, Rick. And I’m willing to invest in the advertising, because I know it’s going to work.”

“Son, I can’t keep letting you sink all your money in the magazine. You might lose everything!”

“It’s my money to spend, Rick, and I won’t lose everything,” he said mildly. “In fact, I’ll have more cash to invest very soon.”

“Another CD is maturing?”

He shook his head. “No, the second quarter ends today,” he answered. “Tomorrow’s the first of April. That means that tomorrow the dividend checks get sent out for my stock investments. So, find out how much it’ll cost to have a radio spot produced, and we’ll talk about it.”

“Kit, it might cost fifteen thousand dollars for the spot and for radio airtime.”

“If it increases circulation, it’s worth it,” Kit shrugged. “I’m willing to pay the money, Rick, because I believe in the magazine. Besides, I kinda owe it to you, since I’ll be gone for six weeks.”

Rick chuckled. “You’re not taking a vacation,” he smiled, then turned a little in his wheelchair. “But I’ll look into it.”

“Works for me. Well, let me get to work,” he said, standing up.

That night, Jessie got her first taste of what she’d have to do to get her pilot’s license. Study. Lots and lots and *lots* of study. Kit made her do her homework and her study for her classes first, then she spent nearly two hours with the first book in the series she had to study. Kit also started studying, at least after he installed all the software they sent on the laptops. It made for a quiet evening in the Vulpan household, quiet and serious.

“You make this look so easy,” she accused as she turned the page.

“I’ve had lots of practice,” he answered lightly. “I have over a thousand hours logged, love. Back when I was in college, before the accident, I was logging fifteen to twenty hours a week flying either solo or as the pilot in command, which is what really matters. I was getting an hour in every day after class and about five hours a day on the weekends, most of it in that old Beech the flight school had,” he chuckled. “It was the only time Vil ever complained about how much money I was costing her,” he laughed. “Renting a plane to log hours isn’t cheap. Guess I shouldn’t complain about flying that old beast, it let me log the hours that will let me get my solo jet rating. A beech is a twin engine complex plane,” he explained, “meaning that it has systems like retractable landing gear and anti-icing systems and such, things you don’t find on single engine private planes. You have to be rated for those to fly a jet. Anyway, I put in eight

hundred hours in that thing in a year. God, did I piss off the other students,” he laughed. “I always had it. They always had to fight me for it.”

“So, after I get my license, I need to get a twin engine and complex to fly a jet?”

“A lot more than that. You need instrument rating and authorizations for high altitude flight training. You’ll get both if you go for your commercial license, so that’s the way you should go. A commercial opens many more doors than other ratings, and it trains you to be a *real* pilot. Any pilot serious about flying should get a commercial.”

“Then I guess that’s what I’ll do,” she smiled at him.

After she studied, he quizzed her on what she learned as they cooked dinner, then they went down to the airport so they could talk about what she’d learned in the hangar with their plane, so he could show her, since her first lesson was about basic flight controls and surfaces. A couple of the mechanics wandered over while they talked, as he pointed out the rudder and grilled her on what she’d learned about yaw, as did one of Avia’s pilots. “Teaching her to fly?” the bobcat asked curiously.

“I just started today,” she answered.

“Congratulations! You’ll love it,” he smiled.

“Hey, if you need to show her more complicated cockpits, feel free to take a peek in the other planes in the hangar,” one of the mechanics added. “Just warn us, and don’t touch nothin’ inside,” he winked.

“That’s very nice, thanks,” Jessie smiled in return.

And that was Jessie's first lesson in flying. She learned all about flight controls, the three axes of movement, and how they affected a plane. It was her first step down a long path.

Without a debate or anything earth-shaking, their issue that week was what they'd call normal, maybe even boring, but they were introducing new features, Mike and Denise's, this week was the first week that *Missy and Cutler* would be its own, stand-alone strip, and it was also the first week where Janet's photography was going to be in the issue. And Janet was a *damn good* photographer. Mike and Lilly were good, but Janet had a *touch*, an eye, that made her photographs exceptional. They had also included the reader-supplied photo gallery and *15 Minutes of Fame* features, and Janet had included a few of her artistic shots in the issue as part of the photo gallery to give the first photo feature some special style.

Kit, Rick, Savid, and Mike had had a meeting about circulation, and they decided—reluctantly—to print the same number of issues this week as last week and adjust distribution, sending more to good locations and less to poor ones. Rick had been hesitant to do it, but Kit insisted, and it was Kit's investment money that was paying their paychecks that week. Kit knew that they were going to lose money for a while, but the constant exposure and potential radio advertising was going to increase circulation in the long run, so it was money worth spending.

Kit and Rick were discussing radio spots with Savid and Mike when Jessie rushed into the office, breathing hard. "Kit!" she said urgently. "Kit, look at this! There has to be a mistake somewhere!"

"What's wrong, pretty kitty?" he asked as she held out a bank slip.

“You should take it to your office, son, I don’t think we want to listen to you two fight over money,” Rick smiled.

“Furs in wheelchairs can’t run very fast, Rick,” Kit teased, but he did follow Jessie back to his office.

In his office, she gave him the bank statement. “I went to go withdraw some money for groceries, and they gave me a statement that has balances for both accounts on it. Kit, look at the money market account!”

He did so, and saw that it had \$38,382.25 in it, which was about \$32,000 more than it should have. Kit thought about it a moment as Jessie looked nervous and frantic, then he realized that it was April 3, and the Vulpan stocks would have disbursed their dividends by now. “I think I know what it is, hold on, love,” he said, picking up his phone off the desk and speed-dialing Vil.

“Hey bro, what’s up?”

“Vil, have dividends been sent out?”

“Yeah, this morning,” she answered. “Did you not get yours? I had it set to direct deposit to your market account.”

“We did, but we haven’t got the statement yet, so it just showed up in the bank without warning.”

“Oh. Well, we were down a little this quarter because of some charges we had to write off over a Navy contract, but we should be back up to normal next quarter.”

“Well, that explains it. Thanks, sis.”

“Remember, Friday, as soon as you get out of work,” she told him. “The jet will be there waiting. You can sleep on the way up.”

“We’ll be there,” he promised.

“Gotta go. Love ya, bro.”

“I love you too. Bye.”

“Bye-bye.”

“It’s legit, love,” he said, putting the phone down. “That’s our dividend from our Vulpan stocks.”

“Thirty *thousand* dollars?” she gasped.

“Closer two thirty-two,” he said calmly. “That’s about what I expected, more or less.”

“I didn’t realize it would be so much money!” she said in surprise, her eyes wide.

“Well, that money is going to help,” Kit said. “I’m thinking of using it to invest in the magazine, if you don’t mind.”

“Well, I guess not, I think. What if you spend it all?”

“Love, we’ll get another check about that big every three months,” he told her. “The dividends are paid out every quarter. Mind that we have to save some of it to pay our taxes next April, but outside of that, this is the ‘guaranteed income for life’ I was talking about, pretty kitty. I thought I told you it’d be about eleven dollars a share or so, that’s about where the dividend pays out from quarter to quarter.”

“I think you did, but I wasn’t expecting thirty thousand! I thought it would be like three!”

“I think you were thinking of just the stock from one company,” he said. “We own a thousand shares of *three* companies, love. The dividends are different for each company, but they average out to about eleven dollars a share between all three.”

“Oh. Ohhh, okay!” she said, then she laughed. “Well, our babies are definitely going to Harvard!”

“We won’t start investing the dividends off the Vulpan stocks just yet, if you don’t mind, love,” he said. “I want to invest in the magazine. If we put some money into the magazine, it’s going to really take off. But to warn you, it’ll take time and money.”

“Well, if we’re getting this much every three months, I guess that wouldn’t hurt. After all, if the magazine does well, we earn more money in the long run, and so does everyone else.”

“Exactly,” he smiled, giving her a quick hug. “Thank you, pretty kitty.”

“Just don’t go crazy, handsome fox,” she winked. “I don’t want to try to buy lunch at school and find out my debit card is rejected.”

“I won’t bankrupt us. I’ll make sure we can at least buy enough ramen noodles to last us until July,” he grinned, which made her laugh and kiss him on the muzzle.

“You make me eat Ramen noodles for three months, and I might give birth to a panda,” she warned, which made him almost fall over laughing.

It took some wrangling, but Rick finally caved in on the radio spot. Kit wrote a check for \$2750 for a professional radio commercial, actually three of them, in 60, 45, and 30 second intervals. After they had the professional commercial, Rick shopped around for airtime. It was frightfully expensive, but Rick advertised the magazine on a rock station and the pop station Jessie liked to listen to for 3 weeks, buying 6 commercial slots, 2 of them in the 18-34 prime time listening block, which was the most expensive. Kit wrote a check for nearly \$6000 for the air time, but Kit saw it as a wise investment. The radio spots were in the spirit of the magazine, being both sophisticated and irreverent at the same time, and Kit had laughed out loud when he heard them. All three spots made sure to make note that *School Daze* could be found within.

The strip. Kit could see friction coming on the horizon over *School Daze*. It was *highly* successful, so successful that the magazine has been receiving requests for them to syndicate it from the *Austin American-Statesman*. Rick planned to do that starting in June, after they'd printed 100 strips in the magazine, but what he didn't see was that Jeffrey was really earning a name for himself as a talented artist, and that Jeffrey might be the first member of the crew to leave the magazine and strike out on his own. Kit was fairly sure that a big reason he was still here was because *School Daze* was not his alone. Kit was the co-creator of the strip, and they owned it jointly...and they *owned* it. It did not belong to the magazine, it belonged to Jeffrey and Kit. The magazine had rights to print the strip, but the strip was not the magazine's. It was a dilemma for Jeffrey, for he could not do the strip alone, yet Kit was entrenching himself more and more into the magazine every week by investing his own money into it.

It wasn't that Jeffrey was unhappy at the magazine. He loved it there, he loved the gang, and leaving would hurt him. But he was young, and he saw a potential to really make a name for himself in the world of artists, and that wasn't easy at the magazine. Of all the workers at the magazine, he had the greatest potential to earn more money elsewhere, and that potential went up every week as his work was noticed more and more. He didn't have enough space to be creative here, not with the duties he had to the magazine, and the lure to leave, earn more money, and have more freedom, was strong. He needed room to create, to work on his own projects. That was why Kit felt that the next hire they made was another artist, to help Jeffrey and give him more room to work on his own projects. If they didn't, they might lose him.

Kit had a long talk about it with Rick after the wrap meeting on Thursday. He made sure to stress that Jeffrey hadn't said he *wanted* to leave, but he also put the situation out for Rick in terms that made it hard to ignore. "We need to give him space and time to do his own work," Kit said. "He's young and talented, and if we don't give him what he needs, we'll lose him. Besides, if you think about it, if we give him that space, we'll get first shot at anything new he does," he added.

"True," Rick said. "I was going to hire another artist, we talked about that when you bought into the magazine, but I wasn't ready to do it because we're in the red as it is from expansion."

"We don't have to hire *now*, but we should tell Jeffrey that we *are*, so he knows we're thinking of him."

"Yeah. We should." He reached over to his phone and punched up Jeffrey's intercom. "Jeffrey, come see me before you head out, okay?"

“Sure thing,” he answered.

The mouse came in and sat down with them, and Rick explained what they were planning to do. “We know that you’re more limited here with us than you could be trying to freelance, Jeffrey, so what we were looking to do was bring in an assistant to help you with the simpler work around here and give you more time to pursue some of your freelance work,” he said. “You’ll still be full time, you’ll get a promotion and title of lead artist, and you’ll still get your full paycheck,” Rick smiled, “but you’d have more time to work for yourself. We don’t want to lose you, so we’re willing to give you what you need to make you stay.”

Jeffrey gave Rick a startled stare, then laughed. “Wow, Rick, I’m, I’m speechless,” he said. “It’s really cool that you’re thinking of me and my career, and I have to admit, I’ve been wondering if I could make it freelancing.”

“Well, when we hire you an assistant, you can freelance on top of getting your steady paycheck from here,” Rick smiled. “And just to tell you, I’m going to let you start syndicating the strip when you’ve printed your hundreth strip in the magazine. Once you get to a hundred, I’ll relinquish reprint rights to you two, and you can contract to whoever you want to syndicate the strip so long as you always run your newest strips in the magazine first.”

“The strips would have never taken off without the magazine, Rick. As far as I’m concerned, the magazine will *always* be the home of *School Daze*.”

“I’m glad you feel that way,” Kit laughed. “I *do* own half the strip.”

“It wouldn’t have ever made it without you and Jessie, Kit.”

“Now, mind that we can’t hire an assistant right now, but as soon as we shake out the bugs of this attempt to expand, I’m going to hire your assistant, a research assistant for Kit, and a writing assistant for Barry and the others, and also give all you guys a raise. But hiring you an assistant will get priority, son, because you’re very important to us and we don’t want to lose you.”

“You’re offering me a raise to cut my hours and do my own work, Rick...I’d be an *idiot* to quit this job!” Jeffrey said honestly.

“I’m glad you see it that way,” Rick grinned.

Kit was not looking forward to this.

He and Jessie were being led to Vil’s private jet on a dark, rainy night. Kit was going to do his Saturday work on the plane and at Boston, so he had Saturday and Sunday to go to Boston.

Boston. Vil kept trying to drag him there, but she just wouldn’t, or couldn’t, get it through her head that it wasn’t *just* a city to him. It was a black pit of nightmarish memories and terrifying sensations. He was sure he’d either nearly faint or go into some kind of maniacal rage when they went past the grove of trees along the private drive and saw Stonebrook in its stark tan granite glory, sitting on the top of its gentle hill and with all the smaller buildings and garage behind it. She didn’t understand that there wasn’t just heartache tied up in Boston for him, but fear, almost overwhelming fear. She hadn’t tried to live on those unfriendly streets in those first two weeks after he walked out, she couldn’t fathom what kind of abject terror he experienced that first night, when he had nowhere to go, absolutely no idea where he could go, what he could do, walking the nine

miles from Stonebrook to the outskirts of Boston in the freezing cold with no coat and no shoes. She didn't know that he'd nearly *died* that day, that a policeman had seen him stumbling along in the snow by a road and had taken him to a clinic to have him checked out, a clinic that kept him over because he had hypothermia. Boston wasn't a place to him, it was hell. It was the hell he endured after he walked out, and the hell his father put him through after he had managed to survive those first two months and tried to set himself up some kind of passable life. Vil thought that all he had to do was go back to Boston and stay a while, maybe have a little fun, build good memories to cover over the bad, and his aversion to the city would fade away, but she was wrong. It never would. Boston would forever feel like a hostile, ominous place to him, a place where he had shed blood and descended from the life of propriety and culture he had known to being beaten by street thugs and stealing from convenience stores because he was so hungry he was willing to risk going to jail just to get something to eat. Boston would never feel like any place other than a place from which he had to escape.

The only reason he had agreed to this was because Jessie would be with him. He held her paw, almost painfully tight, as they sat down in the plane, which Vil had had converted back to her spacious private area after his birthday. The chairs up front were gone except for two, the two Marcus and Stav probably used, with her couch and galley remaining. Jessie patted him on the shoulder, then cuddled up with him after the pilots went into the cockpit and closed the door. Kit was too nervous to talk to them, and Jessie could sense it, so she cuddled with him a moment, then pushed him down so he could lay with his head in her lap. He tried to relax as she played with his hair and ears, clutching hold of her glorious longhaired tail and holding it close to his chest. She knew how nervous he was about this, and bless her,

she was doing whatever she could to comfort him, bolster him so he could get through it.

He laid there as the plane taxied and took off, until the plane had leveled out for the four hour flight to Boston, laid in silence, until he sighed and patted Jessie on the knee. "I love you, pretty kitty," he told her.

"I'm so glad, because I love you too, my handsome fox," she said gently, running her paw across his shoulders, then slid it down towards the one part of his body that always attracted her paws, the scars on his back.

"Six months to go, pretty kitty, six months."

"Actually, I think we can call it five months and three weeks to go now," she said with a little giggle, leaning down on one paw. She squeaked slightly when the plane hit a little minor turbulence.

"We're about to pass through some upper-level turbulence caused by that storm front," Avery called over the intercom. "So please either keep seated or walk carefully for the next five minutes or so."

They passed through some minor turbulence for about five minutes, and Jessie distracted him by asking him to explain turbulence and how it affected flying. He lay with his head in her lap, looking up at her as she smiled down at him, and did so, and branching off into general knowledge about weather she would be expected to know as a pilot. After nearly twenty minutes of just gabbing away, he stopped, gave her a rueful look, then laughed. "Such a wonderful femme," he smiled, reaching over his head and patting her on the leg he was using as a pillow.

"I know how to keep your mind occupied," she winked. "Now explain what warns me I'm about to stall."

“Ah, so we’re going over last night’s subject?”

“Well, why not?” she smiled.

“Well, I guess we should get today’s study done. I’m still trying to learn the characteristics of the Mustang.”

Instead of sleeping, they spent the entire flight in quiet study. Jessie was moving along in her studies, still studying the basics of the mechanics of flight. As soon as she finished that subject, she’d start memorizing flight regulations, and then she’d go on the mathematical part of it; navigation, fuel consumption rates, and converting a gallons per hour number and fuel remaining indicator to a distance a plane could fly before it violated its reserves. Kit spent that time poring over the flight manual and checklists for a Citation Mustang, the first plane he was slated to learn to fly when they got to Kansas. The Mustang also used the Garmin 1000 navigation system, so at least that much he did not have to study. He’d been using Garmins most of his piloting career. He’d be studying a new avionics system when he started studying for the other models; only the Mustang used the Garmin G1000 avionics suite. The CJ series, Encore, and X all used different avionics suites, though Cessna worked very hard to make each Citation cockpit *feel* similar. A CJ may use different avionics than an Encore, but Cessna worked hard to keep all the buttons, switches, and indicators in the same place as much as possible. So, if he wanted to check the status of his landing gear in a Mustang, he’d look in the same place when he was behind the controls of an Encore.

“You know, I should just get my flight instructor rating,” Kit chuckled when she asked him a question. “I’ll have to look into it. You can get your private at Cessna, and I can teach you to get your instrument rating and whatever else you want. It would be a hell of a lot cheaper for me to get my

instructor rating than it would be for you to go to school for the ratings you want.”

“You said it takes a while.”

“About two months,” he said, waving a paw back and forth. “Give or take. I can pass all the flying parts, but I’d have to take the classes in learning how to teach.”

“Well, I can help you there, I *am* in school to be an English teacher,” she winked at him.

He laughed. “I guess you could at that. Well, I’m going to be your first student.”

“I should make a dunce cap,” she said lightly.

“I get to indulge in the hot English professor fantasy,” he grinned in reply.

She laughed. “Well, I’ll know how to punish you for poor performance,” she teased. “I’ll sleep on the couch!”

“Mean kitty,” he accused, then he felt the plane start to descend.

Kit’s anxiety returned when they were on the ground. It was a cold night in Boston despite it being April, since spring came late that far north, and they were bundled quickly from the jet to a waiting limo. Stav was waiting at the door of the limo, holding it open for them, and after they were inside, he supervised as the ground crew moved their single suitcase into the trunk. Kit’s paws were literally shaking as Stav got into the driver’s seat of the small limo and put on his seat belt. “How have you been, Mister Stav?” Jessie asked.

“I’ve been well, and you may just call me Stav, if you please,” he answered as he pulled away from the plane, towards a road that led off the flight line. “Miss Vil has put you up in the Liberty tonight and tomorrow, in the Presidential suite.”

“Naturally,” Kit sighed. “Why couldn’t she just put us in a Holiday Inn somewhere?”

“I believe she’d see that as a scandal, Mister Vulpan. This is *Boston*. Can you imagine what the gossip pages would say if a Vulpan stayed in the Holiday Inn, no matter which Vulpan it was? Remember, we are back where appearances matter.”

Kit sighed and nodded.

“I take it this Liberty is a fancy hotel?”

“It was just remodelled last year, Miss Jessica, and it’s one of the most luxurious hotels in the city. I believe it’s Miss Vil’s favorite because of its appearance.”

“Ooh, so it’s going to be like Vil’s vacation home in the keys?”

“Not quite, but expect the same luxury,” Kit said with a snort. “I’m glad it’s two in the morning, at least we’ll avoid any papparazi. I know they’ll be frothing at the mouth to get pictures of us if they find out I’m here. Kit Vulpan and his interspecies wife sneaking into Boston,” he grunted, holding his paws up as if to frame a headline.

“Kit,” Jessie protested.

“I’m just saying it how they will, love,” he told her, putting his paw on her arm fondly. “I happen to *like* the fact that you’re a cat. It would be kinda

strange for me to call you *pretty kitty* if you were a raccoon.”

She gave him a look, then laughed helplessly.

The Liberty was built out of an old jail built back in the mid-1800’s, but had been converted into a luxury hotel. The hotel had been built around the jail but maintained the original jail as its core, so the towering hotel was built of the granite famous in New England, granite just slightly darker than the granite from which Stonebrook was built. It was beside a large hospital and beside a long strip of grass and forest park called the Esplanade, on Beacon Hill, which was a promontory between the Charles River and the back bay. A bellboy took their suitcase and overnight that held their laptops, and then a smartly dressed clerk gave them their key as Jessie gawked at the nearly 100 foot high ceiling of the hotel lobby, which had originally been the atrium of the prison. “Miss Vulpan has already paid for your room and any and all meals or room service you may require, and will cover all gratuities. So, please don’t feel that you need to tip any staff member, Mister Vulpan, unless you are particularly impressed by their service,” the clerk told him. “She also reminds you that she will be here to pick you up at eleven o’clock in the morning. Shall I arrange a wake-up call for you?”

“Please, around ten,” he nodded as he took the two keys that were on a small, ornate ring. “What’s the smaller key for?”

“Each room has its own private safe. The key is for that safe, Mister Vulpan,” the clerk replied.

“Ah. Thank you.”

“You can reach our concierge counter by dialing zero from any hotel phone. Would you like a light meal sent up before you retire?”

“We ate on the plane, but thank you,” Jessie answered him.

“The steward will see you to your room, Mister Vulpan, Misses Vulpan. I hope you enjoy your stay with us.”

“Thanks. Have a good night.”

“You too, Mister Vulpan,” the male fox said with a nod.

The Presidential suite was suitably stupendous for a luxury hotel, and was so exclusive that Kit had to use a specific elevator to reach it, the only elevator that went to the penthouse. It took up the entire top floor of the building, and was like a luxury apartment. Every room was richly appointed in 1800s style furniture in dark, richly varnished colors, and the huge windows offered views of all four directions of Boston. The bedroom’s windows overlooked the Charles River...and seven or so miles upriver, on a hill overlooking the river, was Stonebrook Manor.

“Wow!” Jessie said in wonder as she looked out the window, then she went into the kitchen. “The fridge is full of food!” she called. “And there’s a bar, and a bowl of fruit!”

“You keep gawking, I’m going to bed. I hope this mattress doesn’t kill me,” he said, sitting tentatively on the bed and testing it. It felt soft, but there was a firmness under it that made him hopeful.

She hurried back into the bedroom and started undressing. “I’m not letting you sleep alone, silly fox,” she smiled. “You’d be a nervous wreck in the morning.”

“Amen to that,” he said.

After they were both undressed, Jessie slid into bed beside him and wormed her way into his arms, putting him on his back as she kissed him tenderly. “Well, hello there, Mister Vulpan, fancy meeting you here,” she said with a gentle whisper.

“You just keep following me around, Misses Vulpan,” he smiled in reply, sliding his paws up her back.

“For the rest of eternity,” she giggled, rubbing her nose against his. “Now let’s get some sleep. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

It may be a long day, but it started earlier than it was supposed to start.

Kit had gotten up to use the bathroom around nine, and sat on the edge of the bed, his paws on the small of his back. The bed wasn’t bad, leaving him only with a slight twinge in his back, much better than borrowed beds usually treated him. Jessie put her paw on his lower back, then grabbed the base of his tail and squeezed it lightly. “Morning, my handsome fox,” she called, and she used that grip on him to pull him away from the edge. He laughed and scooted back on the bed, until she sat up and wrapped her arms around him and kissed him on the side of his neck. “How’s your back?”

“Not bad,” he answered. “But I might be open to you trying to sprain it,” he said huskily.

She laughed. “Well, let’s get started on some of those good memories Vil wants you to take from Boston,” she purred in his ear, then pulled him backwards back down onto the bed.

After a very enjoyable two hours, the phone by the bed rang, as Jessie sat on the edge of the bed with her towel in her lap, and her just-dried fur

being brushed out. Kit had just stepped out of the dryer they had installed in the luxuriant bathroom, with its huge shower, jacuzzi tub, and an alcove holding a full body dryer that even had a seat in it for someone too lazy to stand in the airstream. Jessie reached over and picked up the phone, then hung it up after saying good morning to whoever was on the other side. “I guess this is the real deal, it wasn’t a recording, it was a real fur,” she giggled as she pulled a comb through her tail, which she had in her lap. Kit sat down beside her, then leaned over and kissed her on the side of her short muzzle. “Kit, we’re supposed to be up and getting ready,” she said, but she started purring when Kit put his paw on her bare breast.

“I’m gonna be *so* jealous of our baby when he takes possession of these,” he said thickly in her ear.

“I’m sure *she* will give them back to you when she’s done,” Jessie said with a sly little smile and a sideways wink at him.

“Well, I see we’re going to have our first major fight,” Kit laughed. “I say it’s a he.”

“And I *know* it’s a she,” she answered.

“We won’t know until the ultrasound,” he protested.

“I’ll bet ya,” she grinned.

“Oho, you wanna bet, do you? Fine, I’ll bet you two weeks of doing dishes it’s a boy.”

“Such wussy little terms,” she giggled. “Oh no, it’s gonna cost ya, handsome fox. I’ll bet you a month of daily foot massages and weekly pedicures it’s a girl.”

“Such high stakes,” he said with mock seriousness. “And if I win?”

“You’re not,” she winked. “But if some miracle does occur and you win, I do the dishes for a month.”

“You’re on,” he said. They shook paws professionally, then she laughed when he put his arm around her and nibbled playfully on her cheek and ear. “I’d give you foot massages no matter what, you silly kitty,” he teased as she squirmed in his arms.

“And I’d have done the dishes. But I think you’re gonna look so *cute* painting my toe claws, and blowing on them for me,” she teased.

“You’re gonna look funny with waterlogged pads, cause I’ll make sure I dirty every single dish we have every time I cook.”

“Cheater,” she accused with a grin, then she started purring when ran his fingers through her hair between her ears. “I wonder how long it’ll be after I deliver before I’m ready to make love again,” she mused in a throaty purr. “I’m sure I’m going to be sore down there for a while.”

“I can wait as long as you need me to, love,” he told her, putting his paw on her flat belly. “Five months and three weeks, my pretty kitty.”

“I’ll be getting fat soon,” she complained. “Doctor Mac says I’ll start to show at the end of this month. I’ll start showing a baby bump, and then I balloon up like a whale,” she frowned.

“Such a vain little kitty,” Kit laughed.

“How am I going to keep my husband’s eyes on me when I’m fat and Allison is running around with her supermodel body?” she asked sourly.

He laughed. “Jealous, jealous, jealous,” he accused. “But that just makes me love you more. It shows me you love me.”

“Of course I love you, you silly male,” she told him with a bright smile.

“Well, at least the morning sickness hasn’t bothered you for a few days. Maybe you’re over it.”

“God I hope so,” she said explosively. “It’s really annoying wondering if you’re gonna throw up every time you eat something, or lay down.”

“Let me do that for you,” he said, taking the comb from her.

“You’re just looking for an excuse to paw my butt,” she giggled as he pulled her tail into his lap.

“Do I need an excuse?” he challenged, reaching behind her and goosing her, which made her squeak and flinch. “If I want to paw your butt, Misses Vulpan, I’ll just grab it! I *own* that cute little butt!”

“Hey, don’t bruise me!” she protested with a grin when he goosed her again, then again, and she jumped off the bed with a squeal and a laugh when his pinching fingers chased her posterior. Kit laughed, at least until she reached down and picked up one of the large down-filled pillows and cocked it back threateningly, then he put his paws up defensively.

“Now behave, you, or you’re gonna find out what Boston goose feathers taste like!”

“I give, I give!” Kit laughed.

“Good. Now, you have a job to do,” she said, turning around and presenting her longhaired tail to him, pointing at it imperiously.

“Yes, I believe I do,” he said lightly, reaching over and pinching her backside one last, fatal time.

The beating lasted about five minutes. Kit laughed the whole time, until he was in the usual position, on his stomach on the bed with his arms protecting his head, and Jessie straddling his legs to hold them down as she smacked him with the pillow. “Now *behave*, you little rat, or I’m gonna start putting horeshoes in the pillows,” she said in his ear after she put the pillow aside when he surrendered.

“But it’s more fun to be naughty,” he protested with a chuckle.

The phone rang again, and Jessie reached over and picked it up, flopping down to lay on top of him. “Hello? Hi Vil!” she said happily. “Oh, just beating up your brother, he was being a little jerk again,” she said casually, which made Kit laugh. “Umm, can you give us a few minutes? We’re kinda not decent,” she said shyly. “Okay, that’s fine. I’ll go unlock the door for you. Okay, bye-bye.” She hung up the phone. “Vil’s down in the lobby. She’s gonna wait in the living room while we get dressed.”

She moved to get up, but Kit grabbed her by the paw. “Aaat, where’s my kiss?” he demanded. She laughed and attended to the matter, kissing him playfully on the muzzle, then she slid off of him and picked up a robe, pulling it over her shoulders as she scurried out into the next room.

Typical for her, Kit mused with a loving smile. She wasn’t home, so she wouldn’t leave the bedroom without something on.

Kit pulled on his underwear as she went out to unlock the door, and was pulling on his jeans when she got back. “You need to comb your tail, love, it looks like a haystack,” she noted as she took off the robe and went for the bra and panties she’d laid out on the dresser.

“I know,” he nodded as she stepped into her panties and pulled them up, snugging the back up against the base of her tail. Jessie didn’t like closed-tailhole panties, because her tail was longhaired and it really messed up her fur trying to thread her tail through the hole, the same problem Kit had with his bushy tail and closed-hole underwear. Nor did she like strap-backed panties, which usually either had a button, snaps, eyes and hooks like a bra, or velcro on a strap going over the tail. She preferred low-backed panties that relied on a femme’s hips to keep from slipping. Then again, the recent popularity of the low-back was one of the reasons hip-hugger jeans came back into fashion, since low-back panties were naturally low on the hips to begin with. Before low-backs, femmes either had strap panties or those old beasts that buttoned in the back, which tended to pinch the tail. Males didn’t have it much easier, since low-backs weren’t very popular. Most males wore holed undies, no buttons or openings, just a hole in the back through which he would thread his tail. Kit’s bushy tail made those impractical, so he’d worn snap-strap briefs most of his life, at least up until last year, when he wore whatever he could afford. The cheapest style of male underwear out there were hook-strap briefs, using the same eye and hook as a femme’s bra, and he’d kind of gotten used to them, despite them being uncomfortable. He’s only just started buying something different, he’d bought some Hanes super-thin velcro strap-back briefs, where the cloth-backed soft velcro had an overlaying flap of soft cotton to keep the velcro from snagging fur.

“Where are you repealing indecent exposure laws,” Kit sighed as she pulled her bra on.

She laughed as she hooked it; she usually wore a front-hooking bra except when she was wearing a dress, because her claws made it very hard

for her to hook a bra behind her back. “Even if it was legal, you’ll never catch me going without clothes in public,” she teased.

“You know, there’s a nude beach down in Florida.”

“I’m so glad for Florida,” she said mildly, stepping into her jeans. “Now comb your tail.”

“Kit!” Vil called from the other room. “I’m here!”

“We’re in the bedroom, and we’re decent!” Kit shouted in reply.

Vil came in as Kit and Jessie both were pulling their tee shirts over their heads. She was wearing something that made her look like a college student, a U-Mass tee shirt and a pair of faded jeans, which was very unusual for her. Vil almost always wore business clothes, even when she wasn’t working. But, she’d told them to dress casual for today, and she had obviously taken that to heart herself. Kit hugged his shorter sister fondly, and Jessie hugged her and kissed her on the cheek after she got her shirt on. “Kit, comb your tail, it looks awful,” Vil ordered, looking at it critically.

Jessie grinned at him. “Chop chop, you miscreant,” she told him imperiously.

“I love it when she throws those fancy words at me,” he said, picking the comb up off the bed, sitting down, and doing as he was told. “What’s first?”

“We go see Clancy first,” she answered. “Then, afterwards, if you don’t need a little time to calm down after going to Stonebrook, we’re going to meet Kendall and have a nice meal, then I’m going to indulge Kendall in one of his joys.”

“Which is?”

“Basketball,” she said with a little sigh, rolling her eyes. “The Celtics play tonight, so I borrowed the box and courtside tickets from Uncle Brian.”

“Which explains why we’re in jeans and tee shirts,” Kit chuckled.

“Well, it should be good, they’re playing the Charlotte Bobcats, and both are gonna make the playoffs,” Vil noted. “Well, bro, you ready to face Boston?”

“No, but let’s get this overwith,” he sighed, combing the last burr out of his tail.

After Kit and Jessie loaded their pockets, they went downstairs. Jessie shivered when they stepped out into the nippy Boston air, for it was early April in Massachusetts, and spring wouldn’t come to the Northeast until early May. “Why didn’t I bring a coat?” she complained as she hugged herself as they hurried to the waiting limo, Marcus and Stav flanking the open door, waiting for them.

“We’ll buy you one on the way to Stonebrook,” Vil promised as she herded Jessie into the limo.

And Vil did. Kit was getting a little nervous, but it was nice to stop at a mall and run into Macy’s to buy Jessie a coat. They found her a nice black hooded jacket , light but warm, and Kit broke down and bought a zip-up hoodie just to take the bite off the air. Vil had them buy some simple canvas and rubber-soled slip-on shoes which were popular in Boston in late winter and early spring, basically just to keep the feet dry and offer a little extra insulation against a Boston night, since it was going to be rather cold after the game.

Kit felt his heart start to speed up when they pulled on Stonebrook Road, which was technically a public road but was literally nothing but a private, county-paved driveway for Stonebrook manor, since the Vulpan owned *all* land on both sides of the road and would not sell it. There used to be other houses out here, but Kit's father had bought them all out and forced them to move, then had their houses demolished and allowed the lots to return to nature. A mile down Stonebrook Road, they reached the massive gates of Stonebrook Manor, the ancestral home of the Vulpan family. The Vulpan family crest of a fox and a lion separated by a sword was on the gates, the fox on the left and the lion on the right, with the sword split in half to straddle the two gates.

Kit had a riot of conflicting emotions and fears roll through his mind at the sight of those gates. He had honestly never believed he'd ever see them again, and behind them, up that quarter-mile cobblestone driveway, would be the huge mansion that was the residence of the head of the Vulpan family. It was divided into three sections, the center and the east and west wings, and Kit knew that Zach was living in that house. There were many cottages, bungalows, and guest houses scattered through the estate along with other buildings, like the large garage where his father had kept his collection of cars. Some of the buildings were near the house, mostly associated with the house, while the guest cottages tended to be further away, giving guests a feeling of a little privacy from the bustle of the main house. One large guest house was down by the river near the dock, and another large one was by the large indoor pool down the hill behind the main house, with three others hidden among the woods beside and behind the main manor. Clancy lived inside the manor house itself, in an apartment in the center of the house on the first floor, not far from the kitchen. Kit

could probably walk from the main entry hall to Clancy's door blindfolded, even after seven years since the last time he'd set foot in Stonebrook.

So many memories, and so few of them good. Most of good memories in that house were from when his mother had been alive, and afterward, there were fewer and fewer, and all of them involving Vil or Clancy. There had been so many fights with his father, screaming matches, furious exchanges. There was so much vitriol in that house, and it seemed that it was still there, for Kit's greatest enemy in the family lived in that house now, seamlessly taking over for Kit's bastard father. Uncle Zach was in there now, the most rabid purist that ever walked the face of the earth, someone who would probably *kill* Jessie if he thought there was any way he could get away with it without Vil retaliating. Kit had no doubt about that. Zach would see Jessie's entrance into Stonebrook as some kind of desecration, the out-of-control Kit bringing his non-vixen wife into the core of Vulpan history and culture, into the *heart* of the Vulpan family. That was what Stonebrook was to many Vulpan, the center of the family, the seat of the power of the family. That was why Zach wanted to live here, to be in that seat, to use it as a symbol against the rest of the family as he tried to slowly wrest the power in the family away from Vil. Kit also had no doubt that Zach would have a conniption if he saw Jessie, and there might be a fistfight right in the main hall. Vil was taking a real risk in allowing Jessie into Stonebrook, because Zach could poison the family against her even more than she was already poisoned given she supported Kit, and Kit had broken the most sacred of Vulpan family traditions, and had married outside the species.

The unforgivable crime.

Jessie put her paw on his wrist, giving him a compassionate look. He smiled wanly and patted her paw, then blew out his breath as the car took the driveway that would take them around the house and to the rear entrance, which was most commonly used since there was a pull-in heated garage back there that opened into a parlor where servants would prepare the Vulpans for going out. Clancy's apartment wasn't far from that parlor, down a hall branching out from the main hallway and near the east wing. The limo pulled into the large garage, which had a door on two walls so limos could simply pull forward and back out, and then slowed to a stop. A thin vixen and tall male, both in a gray uniforms, hurried out. The male opened the door while the vixen stepped up to take their coats. The male gaped when Kit stepped out, giving him an astounded look, and the vixen was so shocked she didn't give him the customary little bow, greet him, and offer to take his coat.

"Master Luke!" the male said in an astounded voice. "Bless my soul, I thought I'd never see you in the fur again! Have you been well? Are you home to stay?"

"Benson?" Kit asked, giving him a searching look.

"Yes! Welcome home, Master Luke!" he said with a bright smile.

"Kit," he corrected immediately. "Do *not* call me by *his* name."

"Master Kit it is, sir," he said with a nod. "Are you home to stay? Are you here to get rid of *him*?" he asked in a sudden whisper.

Kit shook his head. "I'm just here to visit Clancy," he said honestly. "This place could never be my home anymore, Benson. Too much bad blood, too many bad memories."

The vixen gave him a compassionate look, then finally held out her paws. Kit dutifully took off his hoodie and offered it to her. “You’re getting thin, Sally.”

“I’m surprised you remember me, Master L—Kit,” she smiled. “I’d only been here two months before you and your father had your falling out.”

Jessie climbed out, and the two gave her a startled look. “Benson, Sally, I’d like you to meet my *wife*,” he said in a calm yet strong voice, stressing her relationship to him. “Jessie, this is Benson and Sally. They worked here when I still lived here.”

Benson looked stunned, and Sally looked a trifle disapproving as she looked at Jessie.

“Then the gossip was true!” Benson gasped, then he blinked. “It’s an honor to meet you, Miss Jessie,” he said, giving her a little bow.

“May I take your coat, miss?” Sally offered, with the tiniest edge in her voice. Clearly, Sally was in the same boat as most of his family.

“Oh, it’s nice to meet you, and thank you very much!” Jessie said, smiling at Benson and taking off her coat and offering it to Sally.

But the edge in Sally’s eyes evaporated when Marcus helped Vil out of the car. Both servants bowed deeply to her. “Miss Vilenne!” Benson said happily. “It’s good to see you, madam. Have you been well?”

“Well enough, Benson. Can you send tea to Clancy’s apartment? We’re going to visit him.”

“I’ll see to it, madam,” he nodded.

“I don’t think your Sally likes me very much,” Jessie whispered as they followed Benson out of the garage.

“Bigotry isn’t restricted to the rich, love,” Kit whispered back. “Is my uncle here today, Benson?”

He nodded. “He and his family just finished taking lunch in the sun room about an hour ago.”

“Well, here’s hoping he decides not to bother us,” Kit grunted.

He felt...vulnerable. Almost like his father was lurking around every corner, or maybe uncle Zach. Zach was no better than his father, cut from the same mold, and the fact he was in the house made it still feel like the ghost of his father was hovering over his head. Kit led Jessie by the paw in front of everyone, moving quickly and surely along a path he hadn’t walked for over seven years, but knew by heart. Left into the main hall, down to the next right just in front of the main door to the kitchen, then right. Jessie kept looking around at the rich paneling and the portraits, at the Italian tapestry hanging near the kitchen, a piece that would be the centerpiece of any artist’s collection in almost any other house, but in the Vulpan house it was relegated to hanging in a hallway used almost exclusively by the staff, because his father had thought it looked ugly. Jessie gaped again at a huge two-handed sword, a Scottish claymore encased in glass and hanging on the wall. Vil walked behind him with Benson trying to hurry to keep up, until they reached a nondescript door devoid of decoration or filigree, the door to the private apartment of Clancy.

He knocked quickly, then opened the door before there was any response. He poked his head in and called out for Clancy, looking into a room he hadn’t seen for seven years. It was an elegantly decorated living

room, with a simple chair and tea table near a fireplace, a couch facing the fireplace, and a television in the corner that had the look of almost never being used. A stereo was in a rack beside the TV, complete with a turntable so Clancy could play his collection of Big Band era music, his favorite music genre. “Clancy?” Kit called.

“Kit my boy!” came a reedy response. “Please, come inside!”

Kit led Jessie and Vil into the apartment, and held tightly to her paw as she looked around. Vil stood just behind, then moved out of the way when Benson had a young maid Kit didn’t know bring in a tray with tea and scones and set it on the tea table. Clancy hobbled into view in the hallway leading back to his den, separate bathroom, and bedroom, leaning heavily on his cane. Kit stared a moment, for Vil was right, Clancy looked *old*. His fur was dull and thinning, and the white fur of age had invaded the red fur all over his muzzle, cheeks, and head. He was wearing a smart gray suit without a coat, his white shirt and vest showing as he limped into the living room. He was moving very slowly, and Kit saw that the paw not on his cane was visibly shaking. When did this happen? When Kit talked to him on the phone, his voice was always the same, strong and eloquent, the diction of a fox with an impeccable education. His voice had never betrayed this shocking decline in Clancy’s physical health, and he’d never said a word about it outside of just saying he was tired from time to time.

“Clancy,” Kit said with a concerned look, helping the old fox to his chair by the fireplace. “How have you been, you old rascal?”

He smiled wearily. “I’ve felt better, my boy,” he said honestly. “I’ve just gotten over a bout of the flu, and I’m still feeling a trifle under the weather. Ah, Jessica, I’m glad he brought you,” he said, smiling at her. “And Miss Vilenne as well! Both of Master Lucas’ children together in

Stonebrook. Ah, a happy day for me,” he told them with an honest smile. “I do so wish you’d come home, my boy. You are a Vulpan, and this is where you belong.”

“Clancy, you know I’ll never come back here,” Kit told him. “I have a life now, a life in Austin. I have friends, I’ve bought into the magazine where I work and now I’m a part owner, I have plans. And I’d never live up here so near the family with Jessie,” he added pointedly.

“Ah, true, your family lacks your progressive mindset,” Clancy said as he settled into his chair and reached for the teapot. “Now let me pour you some tea.”

“I’ll do it, Mister Clancy,” Jessie said, picking up the teapot before he could reach it. “We didn’t come here so you could wait on us.”

He chuckled. “An old habit that I fear will never fade,” he admitted as Jessie poured the tea.

Kit was really worried. Clancy looked so, so weak. So *old*. He was 73 years old, but that had barely slowed him down when Kit remembered him from his late sixties. Just three months ago, he’d looked much healthier than he looked now. But he didn’t let that show, he instead talked with him warmly, and let him tell Jessie quite a few stories about when Vil and Kit were kids. Several of them made both siblings’ cheeks ruffle a bit, and made Jessie laugh.

“Vil, I never knew you were a car thief!” she teased when Clancy related the first time Vil had stolen one of her father’s cars and drove it around the manor. There were quite a few more roads than just the main driveway on the manor. There were roads to the cottages, service roads used by the groundkeepers, a road to the boat dock, and a road leading to a

never-used alternate entrance through the back gate, down by the river, which was much wider than the front gate and lacked an overhead frame. It was an industrial entrance left over from when they built the indoor pool, which would let them tow a boat or other large or heavy equipment in or out of the manor.

“Well, it’s dad’s fault for keeping the keys to all his cars in a rack by the garage door,” Vil said with a smile. “Boy, was he mad, because I ran into a post down by the boat cottage and scratched the paint of his thirty-six Ford. He took getting it repainted out of my allowance,” she laughed.

“That is nothing, though, compared to what Kit did,” Clancy smiled.

“Here it comes, his favorite story,” Kit sighed, which made Jessie giggle. Clancy did tell that story, the infamous day that Kit set fire to his father’s brand new Bentley, which had just been delivered two days before the incident. He went into great detail about how the fire department had to come and put it out, then all the questions and investigations that followed. Kit had managed to keep his involvement a secret for about five days, but the arson investigator had managed to isolate Kit as the only remaining suspect, and Kit cracked under the pressure they brought to bear.

“It’s silly to be jealous of a car, but I was,” Kit mused as he remembered that. “Dad seemed more interested in the car than in me, so I torched it. They never knew I did it on purpose until I was sixteen, when I admitted it just before I walked out.”

“Oh, if these old walls could talk, they would have quite a tale to tell,” Clancy said with a watery smile. “Sixty-eight years, my dear, that’s how long the Vulpans have lived in Stonebrook. Kitstrom Arthur Vulpan, Kit’s great-grandfather, bought the land in nineteen and thirty-eight, and Kit’s

grandfather, Kitstrom Daniel, started construction on the main manor house in nineteen and thirty-nine, when he was seventeen. It had always been Samuel's dream to build Stonebrook, but he died before they began construction, leaving young Daniel to shoulder both the burden of running the company and building the manor. It was finished in nineteen and forty, and I remember the first day I stepped through the gates, back when they were brand new," he said wistfully, his eyes distant. "I have lived and served in this manor since the day it was opened, my dear. My father was one of the first butlers of the manor, and I joined the staff after college, returning to take my father's place and allowing him to retire. The Vulpans have lived in this house since it was built, but a Warrington has served on the staff. My son is the chief butler now," he smiled. "Following in the family tradition. He detests your uncle, my boy," he said with a slight smile. "I really do wish you would return home and drive him out. You have so much more right to this estate than your uncle ever did. You and Vilenne, it is *yours*, and he has no right to try to claim it."

"Well, I agreed to let him live here as part of the agreement to split up the family fortune," Vil reminded him. "But he didn't read *all* the fine print," she said with a purring voice. "He never does. That's his one weakness."

"What fine print?" Kit asked.

"If you ever return to the manor and take residence, he has to leave," she answered. "Not me, *you*. And once he's gone, he can't return if you maintain residence for a time considered it a permanent change of address. So, if you move back up here, change your license to Massachusetts, and settle into the manor, Uncle Zach will have to move out. And once he's out, he *stays* out."

“I don’t remember reading that.”

“You didn’t read the agreement, Kit. Zach did, but he didn’t read it *carefully*. You and me are on the deed of the manor as the owners, jointly. But the legal agreement that everyone signed includes that clause. And Zach *knows* about it,” she added with a wicked smile. “His lawyer finally noticed it, and we had quite a little spat about it about a month ago. But there’s nothing he can do. If he challenges the clause, he has to challenge the *entire* contract, it’s specifically written that way. You can’t challenge any one part of it without challenging *all* of it. And if he does that, well, he could lose everything if he wins, because his victory would void the contract, returning *everything* back to Kit. And I doubt Kit would be feeling very magnanimous if Zach dragged him back into family business *again*, especially when he’d be doing it for no reason but pride and greed.”

“But he agreed not to get anything,” Jessie protested.

“That agreement is *in the same contract*, Jessie. If that contract is voided, then Kit can lay legal claim to everything. And I mean *everything*. He’d leave the family completely broke.”

Jessie giggled. “That’s mean, Vil.”

“I’m a mean girl,” she said without batting an eye. “Zach thought he was nicking the bait off the hook when I drew up the contract, but he didn’t read it closely enough to see the *little* hooks that are spread through the whole thing, almost like little mines. Those clauses are there to absolutely ensure the good behavior of the elders towards Kit. If they violate any one clause, then Kit can strip them of their money.”

“Yes, Vilenne outdid herself when her lawyers prepared that agreement. The conditions of the split of the money are very specific, and

they were worded in such a way that it seemed that restrictions against Kit were also restrictions against the family.”

“This is news to me,” Kit said seriously.

“I put it together to keep them off your back, bro,” she answered. “For example, no member of the family can *ever* sue you in court. If any of them ever does, it voids the deal. Any challenge to the contract, by the structure of the contract, voids the *entire* contract if any one section of it is thrown out. So, if anyone gets the bright idea to try to get the deal altered, they lose everything. If they win, then the deal that gives them all their money is gone and Kit takes it back. It’s also in the contract that anyone who helped you after you were disowned by Dad, back when his will was in effect, have retroactive immunity, an *ex post facto* clause. My past deeds can’t be used as a basis to try to challenge the existing contract. I mainly put that in there to stop Zach from trying to steal the CEO chair and stocks away from me, to hamstring any ideas he had of pulling a Cybil. Oh, and it’s also in the contract that if any Vulpan is convicted of a crime against Kit, Kit can call to have the contract voided for that family member, and that money comes to *me*,” she said with a sly little smile. “So, anyone who does anything against Kit ends up surrendering his or her entire fortune to me, and the same conditions Dad had against Kit in his original will are put in effect against the guilty party. So, Uncle Zach can’t have cousin Victor beat Kit with a crowbar or try to make Jessie have a miscarriage with the promise that he’d give Victor money to cover what he’d lose when he was convicted. Even if he wasn’t convicted of conspiracy, if he ever gave Victor a dime of his own money, he’d lose everything to me. And I’ll just turn around and give it to Kit’s children,” she smiled evilly.

“That is the true masterpiece of the contract,” Clancy chuckled weakly. “If you were so much as slapped in the face by your uncle, and he was convicted of it in a court of law, then he loses everything to the one member of the family who will never give it back. And it puts any member of the family who does this in the same situation from which you climbed out, Kit, completely disowned from the family with the threat that any aid to the disowned party costs the offender his or her own portion of the family fortune. The clause is brilliant in that it threatens a family member with absolute ruin if they attempt anything against you, my boy.”

“How did you slip that past them?” Kit asked in surprise.

“They either didn’t read the contract carefully enough, their lawyers didn’t bring it to their attention, or they signed it knowing it’s there, I can’t really tell you. But, see bro, I made sure you were well protected,” Vil smiled. “I have the family nailed to the mast. They can’t take any action against you without risking their own fortunes.”

“And you wondered why they were so quiet up here,” Jessie laughed. “Now we know!”

“I have everything under control,” Vil purred, sipping her tea.

“Damn, sis, that’s...just *brilliant*,” he said in admiration.

“Thank you,” she said with a knowing smile. “Oh, by the way, next week, you should pick up the *Sun* from an international newsstand and read it.”

“The English one? Are you going after Cybil now?”

She smiled and nodded. “She’s had a few months to think that I’ve forgotten all about her and that she’s safe, so now I start skinning her out of

her mangy hide one little strip at a time,” she said vindictively. “The first shot will be fired Monday morning, after the *Sun* prints a very revealing little investigative article about Lady Cybil Whitmore.” She looked at Jessie. “As promised, Jess, I’m gonna make her *hurt*.”

“Good,” Jessie said, taking a rather savage bite out of her scone.

They stayed with Clancy for another three hours, letting him spin tales of the Vulpan children’s youth, while Kit pondered what he’d learned about the contract. Actually, it made perfect sense. It was why Zach had not tried to stop him from seeing Clancy, why he was staying far away. He faced utter ruin if he got into a confrontation with Kit, lost his head, and did something stupid. And if he didn’t do that, he risked getting evicted from Stonebrook if he angered Kit enough to cause him to move back to Boston and take residence in the house, which would force Zach and his family to move out of the manor. Oh, Zach had about 12 other houses to which he could move, it wasn’t like he’d be out on the street, but it would be a stinging blow to his ego to be forced out of Stonebrook, out of the ancestral seat of the power of the Vulpan family. That had to be why Zach was avoiding Kit, to both not do something stupid, and not give Kit any reason to get angry enough to come after Zach in the one way he could that Zach could do nothing to prevent.

“Well, I’m finding myself a bit in need of a nap,” Clancy finally said. Kit helped him to his feet, and the old fox gave him a gentle hug. “I’m honored you came all the way up here to see me, my boy.”

“When you couldn’t make it to the party, I had to make sure to bring the party to you, Clancy,” Kit answered, patting him on the back. “It was so good to see you!”

“And you too, my boy. Now, you can make an old fox happy and come home.”

“My home’s in Austin now, Clancy.”

“No, your home will always be *here*, young Kitstrom,” he said firmly. “This is your home. The bad memories that linger in this place can be cleaned away like so much dust, and replaced with what is good and proper. And it is only proper that the son of Lucas and Beth Vulpan live in the home that is his by birthright.”

“I’d be lost in here anymore,” Kit laughed. “And I couldn’t afford the electric bill, let alone paying everyone’s salaries.”

“Tosh,” he sniffed, then he was surprised when Jessie hugged him.

“It was good to see you again, Mister Clancy,” she told him. “I really enjoyed talking with you.”

“I’m glad you did, my dear, I’m glad you did,” he said, patting her on the back. “I’ll admit to you, my dear, I was honestly hesitant when I heard Kit was marrying a cat, but you have won me over. Kit could not have found a better femme and a mother for his children.”

“Aww, thanks, Clancy,” she said, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

“Don’t be a stranger, dear,” Clancy said, kissing Vil and taking her paw.

“Of course not!” she laughed. “I’ll be over to see you on Thursday. So just keep your chin up, old male, and know we still love you.”

“That comforts me in ways you’ll never know, my young ones,” he smiled. “Now, forgive a host for bad manners, but I really do need to have a

lie down.”

Kit was very quiet when they left Clancy’s apartment. Vil was right, he did look...*tired*. Age was catching up with him. He’d been sick, he’d said, so Kit fervently hoped that some of what he was seeing was Clancy recovering from the flu. But he looked both old and weary, and that was never a good combination.

Kit made a very special point in his mind to call Clancy much more often...at least once a day from then on. He had to make sure his old friend, the fox that had all but raised Kit since he was nine, was doing alright.

It was a very concerned Kit that walked the halls back to the garage, so preoccupied by Clancy’s condition that he felt none of the anxiety and fear he’d felt when he arrived. Jessie kept hold of his paw, squeezing it reassuringly, and she sidled up to him and put her arm around him when they waited in the heated garage for Vil’s limo; Stav had taken it to the private gas pump on the grounds and filled up the tank, and the car was on the way back.

“Vil, how long has he been that bad?” he finally asked.

“He’s improved somewhat,” she answered. “He really was sick. He had the flu. But that was nearly a month ago, and it’s taken him all this time to get his legs back under him. I’m sure he’ll recover more, but Kit....”

“I know,” he said quietly.

“Does he like cookies, Vil? I think I’d like to send him some when I get home.”

“I can buy—“

“No, I want to *make* them for him. A homemade cookie always makes a fur feel like someone’s thinking just about him. I want him to open a box of cookies and know they were made just for him.”

“You are such a treasure, Jessie,” Vil smiled as the garage door opened, and the limo rolled in. “Clancy loves peanut butter cookies, but his favorite treats are cherry scones. If you next-day aired those, they should reach him fresh.”

“Hmm, I’ll have to look up how to make those.”

“I’ll have the recipe the kitchen uses emailed to your Blackberry before we leave Boston,” she promised.

Once they were back in the limo, Kit looked back at the tan granite of Stonebrook and could only sigh in relief that he was leaving. He was even more relieved in that Zach wouldn’t be bothering him...probably ever. Vil had never explained that little trick in the contract they all signed, but it certainly explained why it had been so quiet in Boston since the court case. The one thing the Vulpans wouldn’t dare would be to get stripped of their money and end up destitute.

For some strange reason, as he looked back on Stonebrook, he felt...a benediction. Even more than the end of the court case, as they drove away from that tan manor, he again felt...*free*. Always before there was a chance that the family might find some way to annoy him, but Vil had outdone herself in fixing it so they would never dare try to disrupt his life, by putting their fortunes on the line if they did so. He looked back on that manor, that source of so much pain, and he felt, well, not quite so nervous as he had when he arrived. The pain of Boston would always be there, but now he knew, completely, *utterly*, that there would be no more.

He was beyond the reach of the family.

The sun began to shine as clouds over the manor moved away, and in a way, that was how he felt inside himself. The dark shadows of his family were being chased away, and it was a fresh start, a new day, a chance to move on and feel that he was in total control of his life—well, as much control as Vil would let him have. He had no illusions about still being tied to her apron strings, because she was still on her mission to force him to take what she believed was owed to him. But those were battles for another day...and God, he knew there were going to be some doozies. He had no doubt that she had either already bought a house in Austin, or was looking for one, and was going to try to force him into it. But he'd have those fights with her when the time came.

Kendall Brighton was a tall, athletic, young, very attractive red fox. His eyes were green instead of the pattern amber common among foxes, and he was devilishly attractive, with strong cheeks and a boxy muzzle. His hair, like Corey's, was not the same color as the fur on the top of his head, which was rare for male foxes, though not quite so rare for vixens. His hair was a dark chestnut, cut short and away from his ears, but a little long in the back. Much to Kit's surprise, Kendall Brighton had an earring in his left ear, which branded him as an absolute maverick when it came to British upper-crust society. Such things were almost unheard of among the British blue-bloods.

Kit's first impression of him that this couldn't be a member of the Brighton family, that he had to be an impostor. He did fly in on a private Lear jet, but when he came down the steps, he was dressed in a Boston Celtics sweatshirt, blue jeans, and sturdy hiking boots, with his windbreaker

jacket thrown over his shoulder negligently. With that earring and his casual demeanor, Kendall could walk into any bar in Boston and not make a single eye take notice of him. But when he spoke, it was *abundantly* clear that this was not an American fox. “Kendall Brighton,” he said in a Machester accent, shaking Kit’s paw as he reached them. “You must be Kit and Jessie. Villy’s gone on and on about you two.”

“Villy?”

“I cannot make him stop calling me that,” Vil growled, slapping him on the shoulder, which made him smile rogueishly behind her back.

Needless to say, Kit took an immediate liking to the male.

“Hi, I’m Jessie Vulpan,” Jessie introduced, and he took her paw and kissed the back of it, which made her cheeks ruffle slightly.

“Charmed, Jessie, charmed. I must say, you’re just as pretty as the pictures Villy’s showed me. So, you’re going to be an English teacher?” he asked with sincere interest.

Kit’s impression of Kendall only improved while they were in the limo, on the way to Boston Garden. “Villy wanted us to go out to a swanky restaurant, but I get enough of that at home,” he said with a chuckle. “I told her she could really make my weekend by taking me to a Celtics game and feeding me hot dogs and beer at the Garden.”

“I think taking him to a five star restaurant might be cheaper than eating dogs and burgers at the Garden,” Vil grunted, which made them all laugh.

“I have to wear a suit five days a week, the last thing I wanted to do was come down here on my day off and put on a suit just to eat dinner,” he

grinned. "I'd rather be wearing a Manchester United tee and some trousers than a suit."

"What do you do, Kendall?" Jessie asked.

"Work for Brighton Industries, of course," he answered easily. "I'm in the public relations department, putting a good face on the family business. We build ships, Jessie, same as your family. 'Course, right now my official job, straight from the old male, is woo Vil and marry into the Vulpan family," he admitted with a light smile at Vil. "I heard the old male started working on a pre-nup the minute after he introduced us at a mixer at Oxford."

"He was certainly listening to wedding bells when he did that," Vil grunted darkly.

"Well, you two *are* going out," Kit noted.

"True, but that's just because it's hard to find a gal who *understands*, Kit. Villy understands, so it's easy to go out with her. No pressure, no having to worry if she's a gold-digger. By Jove, she's three times richer than I am, she's the one probably worrying if I'm the gold-digger," he laughed. "Besides that, she's a damn smart lady who I love to talk to. She's the perfect girl. Brains, beauty, *and* someone who's not after me for my family's money."

"Well, you're certainly doing the job your father gave you," Jessie giggled.

"I guess it shows how desperate I am to find a girlfriend when I'm flying across the pond just to go on a date," he admitted with a self-deprecating smile.

“You flew across the pond because you know my family has a skybox and courtside seats in the Garden,” she teased in reply.

“Well, that’s certainly a perk,” he winked. “So, you work in a magazine, Kit? What do you do there?”

Kit and Jessie got to know Kendall on the trip to the Garden, and they continued to talk as they pulled into the VIP garage and walked towards the arena. Stav and Marcus walked quietly behind them as they padded along, moving among other furs who were there to see the game. They went up an elevator to a carpeted, much quieter section of the arena, until they reached a door that had the Vulpan name stenciled under the skybox number. Kit had never been in this skybox before, since the last time he was at a Celtics game it was in the original Boston Garden, and the new box was *much* nicer. It was the size of a large living room, with huge glass windows that would let them look down on the game. Three huge LCD monitors were arrayed through the room so no matter where one was, a TV was visible so not a second of the game would be missed. There were two large couches, a table with raised chairs, chairs in front of the glass windows, and even a private bathroom just for the skybox. Vil picked up the phone hanging on the wall by the door. “Yes, this is the Vulpan skybox,” she said. “I’d like you to send up a platter of hot dogs, hamburgers, french fries, and condiments, enough for five furs. I’d also like a platter of mixed raw vegetables with ranch dip. Hold on,” she said, then she looked to Stav and Marcus. “What do you want to drink?” she asked them.

“Tea, madam,” Stav answered.

“Tea for me as well, madam,” Marcus added.

“Alright, send up a pot of Farthing tea, a glass of berry Aquafina, and a pitcher of Guinness draft.”

“Ah, bless you for rememering, Villy,” Kendall laughed. “A game’s not a game without a pint of Guinny, be it football or basketball.”

“Send it up as soon as it’s ready,” Vil finished, then she hung up the phone.

After they settled in on the couch, Jessie sitting on her feet and nestled up against Kit, Kendall looked to them. “So, Jessie, I have to ask you something, and it might be a tad personal.”

“That’s alright, I just won’t answer if it’s too personal,” she smiled.

He grinned at her. “Did it bother you much, knowing what kind of family you were marrying into?”

“Watch it, buster,” Vil teased, slapping him on the shoulder.

Jessie laughed. “It was scary,” she admitted. “Kit was terrified of his family when we first met, and I had to really work to make him look past them and look at *me*. They were the faceless, distant furs that didn’t seem to matter, at least until the day Kit was shot. It was then that I realized that he hadn’t been joking about his family. But I wasn’t about to let them win,” she declared, lacing her fingers between Kit’s and patting the back of his paw with her other paw. “If I’d have let them scare me away from him, they’d have won, and I wasn’t going to let them win. He was worth it, he was worth fighting for him.”

“My fearless kitty,” Kit said lovingly, kissing the back of her paw much as Kendall had done. “She owns me now,” Kit laughed. “She chased

my family away, and now I'm all hers. It's her prize for being so determined."

"And what's most admirable is she did it knowing he was broke, that he was disowned," Vil added. "She knew the *full* truth about him. Jessie is no gold-digger. She wanted my brother for who he is, not who his family is."

"Yeah. I always thought it would be neat to be rich, but then I met Kit's family face to face, and I realized that Kit was absolutely right about them, and about the Vulpan fortune. It's a curse," she declared. "It turned his family against itself. They don't love each other. They *hate* each other, all they care about is their money. Every other Vulpan outside of Kit I've met so far except for two have been really messed up," she said.

"And who are those two?" Kendall asked.

"Vil and their cousin Terry. Sheila, Muffy, the rest of them, they're all, well, *tainted* by the Vulpan fortune. I love Sheila a lot, but even though I love her, I have to say that she's just as affected by her family's curse as the rest of them. She's hedonistic and self-centered. Kit showed that he's just a very smart male to stay away from that money. He's a brilliant and exceptional fox, he can *earn* us our own fortune," she said with a loving smile, patting his scarred forearm. "Then we can feel good about being rich, because we *earned* it, we weren't *given* it."

"Only with you there helping me, pretty kitty," he chuckled.

"You heard it here first, Ken," Vil said with a smile. "Kit will be a self-made millionaire by the time he's thirty-five. Maybe even sooner. He's settled down and found his business, he bought into the magazine where he works as a part owner. And between him and that clever dingo he's partners

with, they're already well on their way to building their magazine into a profit powerhouse. He may be estranged from the family, but when it comes to the traits that built the Vulpan empire, he has them all in spades. Foresight, determination, wisdom, and a feel for the market."

"I'm blushing here," Kit laughed, a little embarrassed by all the praise.

"He has to use them, since he doesn't have the world handed to him on a silver platter," Kendall nodded. "That's why the old male makes every Brighton *work*. If you want to be a Brighton, you contribute. You'll have time to sit on your arse and eat caviar when you retire."

"I wish I could make my family do that," Vil chuckled.

"So, are you sure you want to marry into the Vulpan family, Kendall?"

"Call me Ken, and I won't be marrying into the family so much as marrying the best part of it," he said, smiling at Vil unashamedly.

"Such a schmoozer," Vil laughed.

"I'm just doing what the old male said to do," he grinned. "He said if a fox as handsome and educated as me couldn't woo a femme like Villy, he'd disown me. You don't want me to have to go work in a pub, do you?" he asked, looking at her with outrageously fake puppy-dog eyes, which made Jessie erupt into laughter.

"If you keep calling me Villy, I'll buy out Brighton Industries if only to *fire you*," she retorted with a smile.

The food arrived, and conversation ebbed so two of the most powerful families in the western world could eat hamburgers and hot dogs at a stand-up table, laugh, and talk about nothing important whatsoever. They enjoyed

the amenities of the skybox, until there was a knock at the door. It opened before anyone could say anything, and Suzy poked her head in. “Vil? Kit!” she said with a happy squeal, rushing in. Kit moved out from around the table and gave her a huge hug. “Surprise!”

“I’m so happy to see you!” he said with an honest smile. “What are you doing here?”

“Vil invited me and Corey to see the game!” she said with a smile, looking to the doorway. Corey was hurrying in. “You know you can’t come to Boston without seeing us!” she grinned at him.

“I’m glad Vil found a way to get you in,” he laughed. “She’s been running us around most of the day.”

“I wanted it to be a surprise,” Vil laughed as she gave Corey a chaste hug, then kissed Suzy on the cheek. “Suzy, Corey, this is Kendall,” she introduced. “Ken, this is my best friend Suzy, and her boyfriend Corey.”

“Ah, the film maker!” Kendall said with an earnest smile, shaking Corey’s paw. “We really have to talk!”

“We’ve heard a lot about you too, Kendall,” Suzy smiled as she accepted a kiss on the paw from him. “Things like that,” she winked.

“I’m a British gentlefur, I have manners,” he said stuffily. But then he belched loudly, which paralyzed the entire skybox with laughter, even Stav and Marcus.

Suzy and Corey joined them at the table to help them finish off the meal—and Vil’s order of vegetables came into focus when Suzy and Corey arrived, since Suzy loved raw vegetables—and a new round of introductory

chatter and stories passed across the table, as Suzy, Corey, and Kendall got to know each other.

But there was a game to see, so they left Stav and Marcus in the box to go down to courtside about fifteen minutes before the game was slated to begin. The Vulpans owned six seats directly behind the Celtics bench, and they took them all up they settled in. Kit and Jessie found themselves in the middle, almost protectively, as Vil and Kendall sat to their left, and Suzy and Corey sat to their right. “Do you watch much basketball in England, Kendall?” Corey asked.

“Call me Ken, and yes, I *love* basketball!” he said enthusiastically, pointing to his *Celtics* sweatshirt. “Almost as much as I love football. I didn’t just buy this for the trip over, the Celtics are my favorite American team.”

“Well, that shirt does look a little worn,” Jessie giggled.

“I’ll buy a couple of new ones before I go back to London,” he said. “I’m sure they sell some here in the arena. They’ll feel more special in having come straight from the Garden.”

“They’re very expensive, though,” Corey warned.

“There are some things that are more important than mere money,” he said in a deadly serious voice that made Kit and Corey laugh, and Vil roll her eyes.

Kit noticed that there were already a few camera flashes, before the players were even introduced, and he realized that some furs on the far side of the court were taking pictures of *them*. But there was really nothing they could do about it. He lost interest in that when the announcer’s voice called over the PA, the lights dimmed, and the pregame activities got started. The

Celtics were playing the Charlotte Bobcats tonight, which most were expecting to be a steamroll game since the Celtics had already clinched a playoff spot and the Bobcats weren't doing too well this year, but were in the running for the last playoff spot.

It was indeed a steamroll, but it was still a lot of fun. Kit hadn't been to a sporting event in years, and he really had fun cheering the Celtics, and watching as Kendall kept trying to steal towels from the Celtic players' chairs. The arena cameras even caught him doing it, showing him sliding his paw out with a naughty grin on his face, then snapping back and looking all innocent every time a player looked at him. The players seemed to realize he was just playing, and security was reluctant to stop him because he was obviously with Vil. The players even got into it a little bit themselves once the Celtics were twenty points ahead, dangling towels in front of him the wagging a finger at him. At one point, he even got down on his knees and begged with those outrageously fake puppy-dog eyes, which made Kevin Garnett laugh, grab someone else's towel from an empty chair, and throw it to him. He jumped up and down and swung it in the air, then threw it over his shoulders and sat back down.

Kendall seemed fun-loving and maybe little like Sheila, until he heard him and Vil talk business, discussing both shipyard business and the general state of the global economy. That was when Kit realized that the silly male that was trying to steal towels from players was indeed an Oxford graduate. He had a *vast* understanding of economics and business, and was able to give Vil brisk and intellectually challenging conversation in her own areas of expertise.

She wasn't the only one listening, Kit noticed. Two Celtics players were leaning back as Vil and Kendall were discussing the housing bubble,

and Kendall explained to her why he was positive it was nowhere near the end of bursting, and how it might trigger a global economic recession if it continued on unchecked. “Too many banks have tied up too many assets into mortgage security bundles,” he told her. “With those mortgages defaulting in huge numbers, those securities are going to crash, and the market mark policy the American system imposes is going to destroy the value of those securities as American real estate values decline. Without those assets, it’s going to wipe out liquidity and put a major crunch on everything. The global stock markets will drop sharply, and the economic slowdown will cause the price of oil to go way down. The entire financial system is built on a foundation of sand that’s seeping through holes drilled through the bedrock by the mortgage issue. It’s already happening, Vil, look at Bear Sterns. That won’t be the first major investment bank to go under before it’s all over.”

“So you’re predicting gloom and doom?”

“I’ve already pulled my money out of stocks,” he declared immediately. “I don’t predict anything, dear Vil, I act on my instincts. And my instincts tell me to get out of the stock markets, because some time in the next six months, they’re going to crash. It could be tomorrow, it could be late October, but I can feel it coming. I’ll let them bottom out, clean out the dodders, then pick up some bargains. Either I’m right or I’m wrong, but either way I’m ready because I won’t be losing my money.”

Kit noticed those players pulling out some PDAs and making some entries.

The Celtics won handily, and Kendall got quite a bit more than he bargained for when Kevin Garnett pulled off his jersey and tossed it to him. “I figure you earned it if I don’t take a bath in the market,” he grinned, then

the lanky hyena jogged off with the rest of his team back to the locker room.

“I couldn’t *buy* this!” Kendall beamed, clutching the jersey to his breast. “I’ll never wash it!”

“Then I’m not coming to see your house,” Vil murmured.

They parted with Suzy and Corey up at the skybox, since Suzy had to catch a plane to Cleveland in the morning to look over possible sites for a Yankee Bytes store. Suzy was still the vice president in charge of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Massachusetts, but her father was having all the kids go with him and get engaged in the expansion. It was Suzy’s turn to go with her father to look at expansion possibilities. They left the skybox after having a short nightcap of tea, mainly to let the crowds thin out, and started out themselves. Kendall made sure to still buy a couple of Celtics tee shirts at a stand on the way out, spending over a hundred dollars on two tees, a hat, and a new sweatshirt.

“Now that was fun!” Kendall said brightly when they got back into the limo. “Where to next?”

“I’m taking Kit and Jessie back to their hotel,” she answered. “They’re going back home tomorrow morning.”

“Why not later? I’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Because Jessie’s still in school, and she’s pregnant, so they need to get back so she can rest and get her studying done.”

“Really? Congratulations!” Kendall said brightly, kissing her paw.

“I’m not made of glass, Vil, I don’t need to rest,” Jessie protested.

“But you *do* have to do your homework,” Kit said firmly. “And you have finals coming up. Don’t you have a paper due on Monday?”

She gave him a cold stare.

“I promised your mother our marriage wouldn’t hurt your grades. I’d rather not have her trying to drag us to the courthouse to file for divorce.”

“She would do it,” Vil laughed.

Vil and Kendall dropped them off at the hotel, and got out of the limo to take them inside. Vil hugged each of them in turn, and Kendall shook their paws. “I’m not sure if I’ll see you tomorrow, because Kendall’s taking me to New York tomorrow morning,” she said. “If we don’t, then have a good flight home. I’ll have a limo here at six, and it’ll wait for you until you get up and decide to go, so don’t worry about getting to the airport. Remember, the jet will be ready to go whenever you wake up and get there, so don’t feel rushed.”

“We will. Thanks, sis, thanks for a good day.”

“Gotta build those good memories of Boston, bro,” she smiled, then she kissed him on the cheek.

“Well, let’s say you laid a foundation today,” he told her, kissing her back. “But I still want out of Boston as fast as possible.”

They waved to each other, and then Vil and Kendall went back out to the limo. Jessie took his paw and watched them go with him, then she put her arm around him and kissed him on the cheek. “What do you think of him?”

“I think Vil found her husband,” Kit said immediately. “She’ll probably date him for about six more months to feel him out and make sure he’s what he appears to be, then she’ll hint that she’d be amenable to him proposing.”

“I like him,” she smiled. “He’s funny and charming and really, really smart.”

“Vil won’t be winning every argument against him, that’s for sure,” he chuckled. “Come on, you, let’s get you upstairs and into bed.”

“It’s not even eleven,” she protested.

“Who said we were going to sleep?” he asked with a husky whisper in her ear.

She shivered slightly, her tail sticking straight out, then she gave him a daring little smile. “Why are we standing here, then?” she challenged.

It was nice to get back to nice, *warm* Texas.

They landed at Bergstrom at about two in the afternoon, going from the thirty degrees in Boston to seventy degrees in Austin. Jessie did most of her homework on the plane heading home, but Kit was also glad to be home, and be out of Boston. Even though he’d had a good day, it was still *Boston*, and Jessie understood. That was why she’d not objected too much when they left so early. Kit had had a good day, and he wanted out of Boston before something happened that ruined the trip for them.

His visit did not go unnoticed. In the Sunday paper, there was a picture of them at the game, with the short blurb beside it reading *Vilenne Vulpan*

shows off new beau, Kendall Brighton, at Celtics game along with her recently reconciled brother Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan III, his wife Jessica Vulpan, Susan Jenkins, whose family owns the Yankee Bytes chain of electronics stores, and Corey Reeves, whose family owns Cape Cod Shipping. In the picture, Kendall, Kit, and Corey were all standing with their fists in the air, cheering a Celtics basket, Vil and Jessie were looking at each other, clearly talking, while Suzy was taking a beer from a vendor with a smile of acceptance.

Kit and Jessie pulled into the apartment complex just in time for poker. They put their things away, then they showed up over at Lupe's and spent an hour chatting, telling them all about their trip. Poker was a bit thin that week, with just Lupe, Dan, Kevin, Sam, and Mickey; Jeffrey and Sandy were out on a date, and Sheila hadn't shown up either.

Kit called Rick as Jessie settled in with her other homework, getting her flight training books out. "Hey, Rick," Kit called. "Did you get the numbers yet?"

"I have partials, and while they're better than last week, I don't think we'll hit the black this week," he said, fretting a bit over the phone.

"But they're better?"

"I'll know for sure on Monday, but I think they'll be higher."

"That's all we need. We just keep putting them out. I know we have enough to print the same amount next week and still pay everyone."

"I'm not sure how long we can keep this up, son," Rick said seriously.

"Until we turn a profit," Kit answered calmly. "I'm not worried, Rick. I know we're going to turn a profit. We just have to be persistent and keep

trying.”

“It’s risky.”

“Risk is part of the game,” he said simply. “We were just lucky to get so far without hitting a rough patch.”

“True,” Rick grunted.

“Just trust me, Rick,” Kit told him. “I’m willing to put up the money for it, so don’t worry about it. I think you know I’d never waste my money. I only back what I think can win, and I *know* we can do this.”

“Well, you’re putting your money where your mouth is, that’s for sure,” Rick said. “So much so that I’m considering taking a mortgage out on the ranch to raise some more capital. I can’t let you take all the risk yourself.”

“*No*,” Kit said quickly, remembering what Kendall said. “Don’t take out a mortgage. If you want to raise money, take out a business loan, but don’t do a mortgage right now, the market for it is *very* bad.”

“You sure?”

“I talked to someone yesterday who knows economics, and he said the mortgage market is about to explode, which will drag down real estate values. You’ll stand a better chance with a business loan, but I don’t think it’s necessary, Rick, at least not yet. I can pay for three more weeks at the current print volume and still pay our paychecks, so let’s go those three weeks and see what happens. I’ll be getting ready to go to Kansas about then, so we can make our decisions before I leave.”

“Alright, but I’m not entire sure I like this, son. You’ve already dropped so much money into the magazine.”

“And I’ll get back every penny and more,” Kit said confidently. “As long as we keep putting out the same high quality, we *will* sell at a profit.” He scratched his cheek. “We’ll talk about it in the morning, I’m gonna come in to make up taking Saturday off.”

“Sure thing, son. You just get back?”

“Yeah.”

“How did it go?”

“Good and bad,” he answered. “Good in that it was nice to see Vil and meet her boyfriend, bad that Clancy didn’t look very good at all. I’m really worried about him. Jessie’s going to bake him some scones and send them to him tomorrow,” Kit said with a loving smile at her as she went into the kitchen.

“I need cherries, go get some!” she told him from the kitchen.

“And I just got nailed to be an errand boy,” Kit chuckled, “so I’ll see you in the morning.”

“See you then, son. Bye.”

“Bye,” he mirrored and closed his phone. “Do I need to get you anything else?” he called.

“Just cherries,” she answered. “How does salmon steaks sound for dinner?”

“Sounds fine with me,” he said, digging his keys out of his pocket.

Monday's figures were encouraging. They weren't great, but they were encouraging. There was a solid increase in sales at all sites, up nearly 25%, which put the magazine only moderately in the red for the week. They had a really good issue coming up, though, for Barry had an interview with Governor Rick Perry...which was quite a surprise to almost everyone.

Governor Perry *called the magazine last night*. They didn't go after that interview, the Governor had come to them. He called Rick on his business phone last night and said that he had forty-five minutes of available time on Tuesday and wanted to give an interview to the magazine because he felt they'd done a good job, and he wanted to interview with someone that spoke to the young voter...and in Austin, he said, that was the readers of *Lone Star*.

That more than anything showed Kit that the magazine was spreading, and there was a real potential to make it take off here.

Needless to say, as soon as Kit and Rick had their meeting that morning, the entire magazine went into a blitz of activity. Barry and Janet would be going to do the interview, and Kit was going to make sure that he was well armed for it. Lilly ended up doing some easy research for Marty and Denise as Kit devoted himself to the project, fully intending to research Perry so thoroughly that Barry went into that interview knowing what size underwear the governor wore when he was 14. Jessie came in after school, did her homework in her office, then spent a little time with Jeffrey setting up their next week of *Missy and Cutler*, then she went and got pizza for Barry, Kit, and Rick, since they were working late that night to get ready for the interview. They had a long meeting around seven when Kit gave Barry all his research, and Rick discussed what Barry would ask. Barry was by far

their best interviewer, much better than Kit; it was Kit that emulated Barry's style when he did interviews, so Kit had no doubt that the Governor would watch Barry leave his office tomorrow morning feeling like he'd been skinned, but skinned *fairly*. Barry was utterly non-partisan. His role model was Tim Russert, who played devil's advocate with all interviews, asking tough but fair questions that forced the guest to reveal his true feelings and views. Barry could pick apart talking points and doublespeak with ridiculous ease and relentlessly pursue a straight answer, and woe to any politician that wasn't ready when they sat down with him...as the Austin Commissioner of Elections discovered a while ago. But no matter how tough he was on the other fur, he was always exquisitely polite and gave the fur the chance to explain his views, thoughts, and platforms in as much detail as he wished.

Kit got home late that night, but he was happy. He knew that Barry would give a great interview.

He stayed up late studying the avionics systems in the CJ series of jets. The CJs used the Rockwell Collins Pro Line 21 avionics suite, one of the most vaunted and lauded avionics suites available, and it was the first electronic avionics suite Kit had used that wasn't Garmin. It had many of the same functions as the Garmin—actually many more—but the method to getting to those functions were different, and that was what he had to learn. Kit had gotten the hang of the extra attention he had to pay to things when studying the Mustang, so at least in that regard he was already adapting to the difference between a jet and a multi-engine prop.

They were all a bit nervous when Barry and Janet headed out at nine the next morning. This was, by far, the biggest interview the magazine had managed to score, even bigger than Representative Smith and Senator

Hutchison. Barry had only one day to prepare, and that pushed Kit's ability to research to the limit. In about two hours, they'd find out just how well they did.

Everyone was doing other work while Barry was gone, but their minds were on the interview. Kit was keeping himself busy by researching out Lily's upcoming assignment to write an article on the new club that was being built on Congress which was going to be called the Inferno. Rick was rolling around his office aimlessly in his wheelchair, muttering, and Sheila was sitting on the corner of her desk, being interviewed by Marty for some reason, probably for *Ask Away*.

The whole office stopped when Barry and Janet returned, and when Janet grinned, an explosive sigh of relief rolled through the entire office.

"Barry rocked!" she proclaimed.

"I think it was a good interview," Barry said modestly. "Here, we recorded the whole thing. You guys listen to it while I get an outline ready to write the article."

They did so, listening as Barry grilled the Governor on a variety of issues. The Governor's voice seemed quite surprised that Barry was ready with so many indepth questions when he answered them, but it didn't sound like annoyance, it sounded more like delight. He answered the questions that were against his platform with honesty, spelling out why he disagreed, and answered the questions that supported his platform with quiet logic rather than passion, explaining his views. Barry asked questions from all over the field, from national issues like the war and economy to local issues like the rise in crime around the U.T. campus over the last few months. In all, Kit felt that Barry had done an outstanding job with the interview.

“You know, I think we should put a transcript of the entire interview up on the website on Monday, after the magazine has had a chance to sell,” Mike mused. “Who can type really fast?”

“I can do it, it gives me something to do while waiting for phone calls,” Denise volunteered.

“Why transcript it when we can podcast it?” Janet challenged.

“Oh, I was planning to do that too,” Mike grinned. “This way we have it available for anyone, including the stone-age furs that don’t have Ipods.”

Barry presented his first draft of the article that afternoon, and when Kit read it, he saw that it needed almost no editing. Rick did have him correct a couple of very small point, but the big smile on the dingo’s face said everything. “Damn fine job, Barry.”

“I just wonder when we became a political magazine,” Barry chuckled. “We’ve done more interviews with politicians than anyone else.”

“Well, it’s election season,” Rick chuckled. “That’s the big news right now. We’ll go back to more normal work after November.”

Jessie had an early dinner waiting for him when he got home. “What’s going on, pretty kitty?” he asked curiously.

“I want to go up in the plane tonight,” she answered, “so I thought we could get dinner done early.”

Kit laughed. “I have you *so* seduced by the Dark Side,” he teased.

“I wasn’t kidding, handsome fox. When we come back from Kansas, *I* want to be the one who flies the plane home.”

“Well, then let’s eat so we can give you some practical time to apply what you’ve been learning,” he smiled.

And they did. After a dinner of beef stew, her mother’s excellent recipe, they drove out to the airport. They again had a little impromptu lesson there at the plane, as Kit quizzed Jessie on what she had learned so far, then they got into the plane and Kit walked her through the preflight checklists. She knew them from hearing them so many times, but this time Kit took it slowly and explained *why* he performed each step, what he was checking, what he was doing and why it was important. When he finished the checklists, he had her get out of the plane, and then he climbed over the center console and got into the copilot’s chair.

“What are you doing, love?” she asked curiously.

“It’s an entirely different perspective sitting in the real chair, pretty kitty. If you learn from the right seat, you’ll be a little awkward when you sit in the left one. So we’re going to do this right, with you in the left seat. I can fly the plane from the right side, I did it enough sharing flight time with buddies in the Beech back in flight school.”

“Oh. Okay,” she said, hopping down and hurrying around the plane.

Instead of doing everything, he had Jessie do it. She was the one that started the plane, she was the one that did a radio check with the tower—in a slightly quavering voice, at that—and she was the one that did everything short of actually guiding the plane out of the hangar. As they taxied, Kit continued to teach her about their plane, and he stressed that what she was learning may be focused on the 400, but it could apply to virtually any plane. “It’s the *method* you need to focus on, pretty kitty,” he told her. “This could be our plane, it could be a Skyhawk, it could be a Piper, it could be a

Beech or a Grumman, it could be a single prop or a four engine jet, it doesn't matter. If you understand the method, you can apply that method to any plane you fly."

"But wouldn't flying a bigger plane make it different?"

"It'll make it handle differently, and you'll have a lot more to do, but the fundamental method is the same," he told her.

It was a little different taking off from the right seat, but Kit adjusted to it. When they were up, Kit grilled Jessie about what she'd learned so far, about the mechanics of flight, and then he let her have the controls. They stayed relatively low, flying out over the ranch country southeast of Austin, as he let Jessie practice making turns, descending, ascending, and banking. She giggled as they did a fairly sharp bank. "I should turn us over like you did to Dad," she grinned at him.

"Let's save the aerobatics for when you have more time behind the stick," he said mildly. "It's not as simple as just pushing the stick, love. The flight characteristics of the plane will change when you invert it. Actually," he mused, then he looked at the altimeter. "Take us up to ten thousand. Let's introduce you to a stall."

Jessie was introduced to *real* flying then. She gasped when Kit intentionally stalled the plane, lowering the throttle and hitting the speed brakes, and she looked very frightened as the plane dropped out of the sky, entering a spin due to the way Kit jacked the rudder when the wings stalled. But Kit regained control of the plane with practiced ease, only losing about a thousand feet. "That's something you should *never* experience in this plane unless you do it on purpose, love," he told her. "This plane is almost impossible to stall by accident. Now, how did I get control back?" he asked.

She dredged her memory. “You work into the spin,” she answered. “To get air over your flight surfaces and work to put your nose down more steeply so you can regain control of the plane.”

“Very good. How do you get out of a spin?”

“One axis at a time,” she answered. “You focus on regaining yaw axis first, because regaining yaw control will make the plane nose down and let you get control back faster. After that, you get back longitudinal control, stopping the corkscrew, then latitudinal by pulling out of the dive.”

“Right. And the mechanics of it? How do you do it?”

“By working the controls in the opposite direction. If you’re sliding in yaw to the left, push the rudder right. The plane will want to naturally nose down once you slow the yaw spin, and once it noses down it’s much easier to regain control.”

“Right. What’s it called when you enter a spin?”

“Incipient.”

“Correct. And after you’re fully into the spin?”

“Developed.”

“Correct. How do you get out of a spin? What’s the key word, love.”

“Angle of attack,” she answered. “When the angle of attack decreases and you can overcome autorotation.”

“Exactly right, almost verbatim right out of the handbook,” he smiled. “Those are the three biggest words in flight school, love, angle of attack. Always remember exactly what they mean.”

“The angle between the wings and airflow,” she said immediately. “Which determines the lift the wings generate.”

“How do we alter our angle of attack without changing our direction or airspeed?”

She thought a second. “Flaps?”

“Very good!” he said with a big smile. “You’ve been studying hard, I see,” he said happily.

“Of course I have,” she winked in reply.

He let her invert the plane at ten thousand feet, and she found out that it *wasn't* as easy as just turning the plane back over. She found out that it took both stick and rudder to keep the plane stable and flying smoothly upside down, and turning the plane back over took more attention. “Now keep that a secret,” Kit winked at her. “It’s technically against flight regulations to perform aerobatic maneuvers in a utility class plane. We just broke the law.”

“Oh no, let’s run for Mexico!” she giggled, turning the plane south and opening up the throttle.

He stalled the plane three more times, and on the third time, he let Jessie try to recover after she asked for a chance to try. It was a flat stall with little yaw spin, a very easy stall from which to recover, and to his utter delight, she was able to recover control of the plane after about five seconds. When she pulled the nose up smoothly, he gave her a big kiss. “Outstanding, pretty kitty!” he beamed.

He let her fly around for over an hour, then he took control once they got close enough to the airport to have to start interacting with air traffic

control. She watched carefully and listened as he interacted with traffic control, and she helped perform their landing checklist. He landed smoothly, and then let Jessie take over the taxi once he was off the runway, let her taxi them back to the Avia hangar. “Remember, this plane steers using differential braking,” he told her. “It will turn very sharply, but it’s always going to want to go in a straight line if you increase power while turning, and that’ll increase your turn radius. So never increase power during a turn.”

“Got it,” she nodded as she turned along a bend in the taxiway.

Kit was quite impressed with Jessie when he took over to put the plane back in their parking place. He was amazed that she got them out of that stall so smoothly, given she had so little time behind the controls. And he knew that she was intelligent, and that she had a quick mind, but she was amazing him with how much she was retaining from her self-study of the flight school books.

Kit was absolutely positive that she would get her pilot’s license in about three weeks in Kansas. With their own plane, she could practice what she was learning in the books, which just reinforced it. They’d give her a pretest when she arrived, and find out they’d have to teach her very little in a classroom, freeing up plenty of time to do the flying. She’d walk into that flight school literally already knowing how to fly. She’d just have to study for her written test and the oral exam given during the check ride, do her required flying hours, then do her check ride. She’d walk into that place already knowing how to *fly* a plane. All she’d need would be the formalities.

“Tomorrow, we’re going to a little airfield called Lakeview that’s northwest of Austin,” he told her. “And there, you’re going to learn how to

take off, land, and do touch and go's."

"Why there?"

"Because it's a small private airfield with no tower, a nice long paved runway, and there will be very little traffic," he answered. "Think of it as going to a mall's parking lot early on Sunday morning to learn how to drive. You'll have plenty of space and few distractions."

"Okay," she nodded. "I'll make sure to go back to those sections and study them tonight. And I think that software they sent me has interactive programs that teach it."

She did just that, too. Kit talked to Clancy on the phone after they got home, and he put Jessie on the phone so he could thank her for the scones, while she was reading her books and also using her interactive software to learn all about the mechanics of taking off and landing. Kit was steeling himself for it; it was always a bumpy time for any new pilot, and the shocks on his plane's landing gear were going to be sorely tested.

Sheila opened the door without knocking. "Hey cousin," she called.

"Yeah?" he asked, pausing from the interactive quiz he was taking on his laptop about the avionics system in the CJ series jets.

"You got a minute? I need some help with something."

He paused the quiz and went out with her, going to her car. The trunk of her Mustang was tied down, with a box hanging out of it. "What did you buy?" he asked.

"My TV died on my last night, I have no idea why," she answered. "Can you help me carry it to my place?"

“Sure,” he said. She’d bought a large flat-screen TV, looked like 40 inches at least, and the two of them carried it from her car.

“Has Terry been calling you?” she asked.

“Not really, why?”

“He’s been calling me every freakin’ day,” she complained. “He’s *really* trying to get Ally’s number.”

“I told him to leave that alone, that she’d call him when she’s ready,” he grunted.

“Well, he’s not listening very well. So, what did you think of Kendall Brighton?”

Kit chuckled. “I like him,” he said honestly.

“Yeah, he seems nice,” she answered. “I met him last month when I went up for the weekend to see Mom, and bring back more of my stuff. I can’t wait for them to finish the apartments,” she said. “As soon as we move in, I’ll be able to have my stuff shipped down.”

“Any word from U.T.?”

She nodded as they turned down the sidewalk leading to her building. “They said I’ll have to pay out of state tuition for the fall semester, but I’ll qualify for in-state tuition in the spring.”

“So they accepted you?”

“I’m transferring from *Harvard*, cousin,” she winked. “They sure as hell didn’t say no.”

“Well, that’s one less thing for you to worry about. How’s Allison been? I haven’t seen her since the party.”

“She’s doing fine. She’s got finals coming up, and she has to take her oral Master’s test, so she’s been shut up in her house studying.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right,” Kit mused. “We’ll have to throw her a party when she graduates. Well, you will. Me and Jessie will be in Kansas.”

“Pft, we’ll come up to Kansas the weekend after she graduates and party there.”

“We’ll be busy, cousin. These schools aren’t five days a week. We’ll be going every day, even Saturdays and Sundays. On the weekends, I can buy time in their flight simulators that counts as logged hours, and I intend to do just that. I have six weeks, and I’m going to make good use of every single day. I’m also gonna start work on my flight instructor’s certificate, so I can teach Jessie and not have to pay someone else to do it.”

“Wooo, could you teach me?”

“Only if you’re *serious* about it,” he said adamantly as they reached her door, which was already open. They carried it into her living room, which had cherrywood-colored furniture. “Flying isn’t a game you can play whenever you want, Sheila. If you don’t take it seriously, you’ll kill yourself and whoever is in the plane with you when you finally crash. Go ask Jessie how much she has to learn, she’s already started studying for her license. It takes real dedication, because there is absolutely no way you can fake the final test. It’s an *oral* test combined with a check flight where you do everything and the test-giver watches while he asks you questions.”

“Yeah, well, I still think I’d like it.”

“If you really want to learn to fly, I suggest you enroll in a flight school, because they know what they’re doing. There’s a very good one at Bergstrom, AIAA. They’re professionals, and you won’t have to worry about buying flight time since you can afford to rent planes. Just be ready to pay. Getting a license will cost you about ten thousand or so, but every new rating you want will cost you more.”

“That’s why you’re getting that instructor thing,” she noted. “So you don’t have to pay to get Jessie those extra licenses.”

“Yes, that’s what I said not a minute ago,” he teased.

He helped her take the TV out of the box and put it up on her TV stand. “There ya go,” he told her. “I’m gonna head back home.”

“Thanks cousin,” Sheila said, bending down to hook up the TV to her cable box and DVD player. “I got it from here.”

The Perry issue went out on Friday at 44 pages, which made it larger than usual, but Kit was more interested in Monday. He was sure that the magazine was going to turn the corner this week, because there was a big picture of Governor Perry on the cover, him sitting behind his desk with the caption *Gov. Rick Perry Speaks His Mind*, with Barry’s interview and article as the main story. Kit kept a close eye on the Circle K down by Bergstrom, since they were selling the magazine, checking it both morning and evening as he and Jessie went to the airport and back.

The days were spent in training Jessie. She had learned all the aspects of moving the plane around on the ground, and he had taken her up and let her fly, so moving on to the more complex flight operations was the next

logical step. Their first lesson in taking off and landing was predictably rocky, and his poor plane got some hard bangs that Wednesday. But that was part of the learning process, and they had practiced it again Thursday afternoon, which helped Jessie turn the corner. She could take off very well, that was actually easy, it was landing that she needed to practice. Saturday was spent teaching her the various aspects of in-flight maneuvers she had to know, ascents and descents, turning in climbs and descents, slow flying, throttled flying, high altitude and low altitude, ground-reference maneuvers like turning while holding a set altitude and distance from a landmark, and that afternoon a crosswind at Lakeview gave them the chance to practice takeoffs and landings in crosswind situations. Most of what they did were things she hadn't studied yet, since she was busy learning the flight regulations right now, but he wanted to give her an early idea of what kind of maneuvers she would have to know how to perform to get her license.

Monday, all of Rick's fears were allayed—at least this week—and Kit's faith was justified. They just got to the black side of breaking even. It was certainly no staggering profit, but they managed to pay everyone's salary that week.

That entered a pattern for Kit that lasted the entire month. He would have a meeting every morning with Rick, then call Clancy every morning at ten to keep up with him. He kept busy with a constant influx of more and more research, since he was researching for himself, Barry, Lilly, Marty, and even Denise, which kept him on the fine edge of overexertion almost every day. Afternoons were devoted to their coming trip to Kansas, which he looked forward to more and more every day, counting the days to May 5 as much as he was counting the days to September 30, which was when Jessie was supposed to deliver. Kit systematically went through all the work

that Cessna sent him, memorizing all their manuals and using their software to master the avionics and cockpit configurations they used in their jets, used the testing software they sent him to quiz himself every day. Jessie kept pace, splitting her time between preparing for her finals—she only had to take two actual tests, her other classes were an end of semester paper or project—and studying for her pilot's license. Every afternoon they went up in the plane for at least an hour, giving Jessie time to get comfortable behind the controls and get proficient in the actual maneuvers she had to know how to perform.

Every Friday, they sent out more magazines, to more locations, continuing what Rick considered to be a frighteningly aggressive expansion policy, but Kit was insistent...and he was paying for it. Kit used up the entire Vulpan stock dividend, and had even dipped into their crisis fund money, but he wanted a certain threshold of units before he left for Kansas, where they'd level off and allow sales to increase nice and consistently for the six weeks he'd be in Kansas. He was sure Rick would continue expanding while Kit was in Kansas, but not as aggressively as Kit would.

Every Monday, he saw figures that kept him optimistic. They were either slightly in the red or just barely breaking even each week, but they weren't far in the red, and their sales numbers continued to steadily increase. That was what Kit wanted to see, and that was what kept him consistently optimistic. There *was* a market out there for the magazine, it was just going to take a little time for the readers to find the magazine. Until then, until it really took off, they just had to keep pushing it, keep cranking out quality issues.

The expectation of what was coming, both for them and for Jessie's pregnancy, just made the time fly by. Kit noticed her baby bump for the

very first time late in April, one nice sunny Monday morning as he held her after waking up, putting his paw on her belly and feeling a very slight yet significant thickening of her usually slim, taut belly. He gasped and felt her stomach with both paws, then laughed. “It’s about time!” he proclaimed, kissing her on the ear.

“What?” she asked sleepily.

“My *son* is starting to make himself noticed!” he proclaimed.

“My *daughter* should know better than to make me fat before it’s time,” she countered. “But we’ll know for sure in about four hours, and you’ll be in for me for a month’s worth of foot massages and pedicures!”

Kit looked at the countdown calendar, and kissed her again. “Twenty weeks and six days to go, pretty kitty.”

It was just one change in her body. Over the last few weeks, her breasts had grown in size, which Doctor Mac had said was entirely normal, gaining a cup size, which forced her to buy new bras, and she went ahead and bought maternity clothes while she was at it. She’d outgrown her morning sickness, and was now eating more consistently and had suffered a few episodes of craving. Her stomach had not started to thicken fast enough for Doctor Mac, and had dragged her in for a full medical checkup last week, a checkup that showed that their baby was quite healthy, the problem was that Jessie’s uterus had not filled with the normal amount of amniotic fluid yet, which was one of the contributing factors to the baby bump. Doctor Mac changed her vitamin intake levels a bit, and it seemed to have done the trick. Kit had noticed a definite thickening around her waist over the last couple of weeks, but it hadn’t been a thickening out from her belly, more of a settling in around her sides, as is her waist was preparing to carry the extra

weight. But now there was definitely a little bump there, only noticable by touch, and even then only because he knew her body so well.

“From here out, I get fat,” she sighed. “But it’ll be worth it.”

“You’ll never be fat, you silly kitty,” he told her, kissing her on her neck. “I keep telling you, you’ll be *pregnant*. And I’ll love you more and more every day, because I’ll see you carrying our baby inside you, and I’ll love you for it.”

“We’ll see how much you love me when I’m waddling around.”

He laughed. “I will break you of this delusion, you silly femme,” he told her.

“What delusion?”

“That I’m only with you because of your body,” he teased. “Your body is a perk, not the fundamental basis of our relationship.”

“A perk? I’m a *perk*?” she asked, rolling on her side and looking up at him.

“Yes, it’s one of the unwritten bonuses I got out of this deal,” he grinned. “The chance to make love to the sexiest beast in Austin every day, who will *continue* to be the sexiest beast in Austin, even after she’s well into her third trimester.” He brazenly fondled her breast. “And since these have grown, it’s been interesting,” he grinned naughtily at her. “That’s a part of you where I’m finding there’s more to love.”

She smiled slightly. “What, they weren’t big enough for you before?”

“They were perfect before, but now I get to experience the whole ‘too much to grab in one paw’ deal. It’s been an interesting challenge,” he

winked.

She laughed, then wrapped her arms around him and pulled him down into a kiss. “What do you want for breakfast?” she asked.

“Aat, the doctor said no food until the ultrasound, and liquids only up to three hours before,” he reminded her. “So how about a nice glass of orange juice?”

“I want eggs,” she sighed. “I’m hungry.”

“Four more hours, and I’ll take you out for pizza,” he promised.

“Pizza,” she snorted.

“Pizza in Galveston,” he grinned.

“Ohh, that’s okay then!” she said brightly.

Jessie had a doctor’s appointment at noon, which meant that she would miss school today. She had already arranged for the absence, getting all her assignments done and getting the notes she would need. Her finals started next week, and both the classes in which she would take a final held class on Monday. He supervised her glass of orange juice, making sure she drank it, then they settled in for the three hour wait where she couldn’t eat, drink or urinate by getting involved in studying. Jessie was studying for a final while Kit was studying the flight manual for a Citation X, which Cessna had sent to him about two weeks ago along with software for it. Twice, Kit had to stop her from going to the bathroom, but when she couldn’t hold it any longer, he warned her not to completely empty her bladder.

They were at the doctor’s office right on time, and Doctor Mac was literally waiting for them. Kit, as usual, was present when they went to the

ultrasound, and Jessie laughed and shivered when they smeared what looked like Vaseline into the fur all over her lower belly. “I’m going to need a shower after this,” she laughed.

“Most femmes eat fast food on the way home to wash the jelly out of their fur,” Doctor Mac smiled in return as her assistant, a short, slightly plump dog with tan fur, finished applying the jelly to Jessie’s stomach. Doctor Mac took the ultrasound probe, which looked like a paddle, then applied it to Jessie’s belly. Jessie and Kit watched in fascination as Doctor Mac explained what they were seeing on a display on the device. “There’s the head, right there, and nicely developed,” she said, pointing out a head-like feature. “Well, that’s one for Kit’s column,” she laughed. “Your baby has a fox’s muzzle. See how it’s long, like his? Since both of you have triangular ears, that won’t really be a fight. A well developed body, your baby’s development is right on track, almost textbook. Ah, and now we know,” she said as the baby seemed to move on the grainy monitor. “So, what was the bet?”

They both laughed. “A month of foot massages and weekly pedicures against a month of doing dishes,” Jessie answered.

“Well, Kit, I’m sorry to tell you this, but you’d better learn how to apply nail polish,” she grinned. “Congratulations, it’s a girl.”

“Ha!” Jessie said triumphantly, pointing at Kit. “I *told* you it was a girl!”

“I demand a do-over!” Kit called strongly.

“You can have your do-over after our daughter is born,” Jessie told him.

“But, maybe he’s just not well endowed,” Kit protested. “Look again!”

“Are you that hot for a boy?” Doctor MacNair asked.

“I just want to get out of painting her toe claws,” he grinned.

“No chance now!” she laughed. “You made a bet, you lost a bet, you own up to that bet!” She held up her foot and wiggled her toes. “You’re going to really get to know these for the next month, baby!” she proclaimed.

But still, now they knew. A daughter. He was going to have a little girl, and at least they knew so far that she was going to have Kit’s muzzle. He gave Jessie an impulsive kiss, and held her paw. “We’d better look into pink bedding,” he smiled. “And I’d better talk to your dad about learning how to shoot a gun so I can keep the boys away from her.”

Jessie laughed. “Don’t be like my mom!”

“It’s a simple matter of statistics,” he said. “Her grandmother is beautiful, her mother is beautiful, so she’s going to be beautiful. I need to take precautions now, before the boys start following her around panting.”

Jessie’s cheeks ruffled, and she laughed shyly. “Well, I’ve done enough skeet shooting with Dad, handsome fox, I’ll show you how it’s done,” she smiled.

After Jessie was cleaned up with alcohol pads, and she got the chance to finally empty her bladder, they went on to the rest of the exam. The doctor took blood and did a couple of tests that she said were checking the baby for some common conditions that were detectable early. Afterward, she sent Kit and Jessie out to get something to eat, and had them return about two hours later. They sat in Doctor MacNair’s office while she wrote

on a prescription pad. "I'm writing out the name of a prenatal supplement I want you to start taking, Jessie," she explained as she wrote it out. "You can find it in the vitamin aisle of any drugstore. You'll take one a day. Just add it to your current vitamin regimen."

"What kind of vitamin is it?"

"It's an iron supplement," she answered. "The bloodwork is showing you're a bit low in iron, hon, so we need to get that back in balance."

"I thought I was already taking one."

"You are as part of a multivitamin, but you're like many young femmes who need even more iron than usual," she answered. "Young femmes have a high demand for iron from their own bodies, and when you add on the baby's needs, it can create an iron deficiency. So, you need to increase your iron intake."

"Oh, okay. How about the baby? Did the tests show anything?"

"They showed your baby is absolutely and perfectly healthy," she smiled. "No defects, no abnormalities, no indicators that the baby might have a condition. So, you can cross birth defects and Down Syndrome off the list of possible problems."

"That's a relief," Jessie said with a smile.

"That's a Vulpan in there, she'd *better* not have any problems. She's part of a clearly superior bloodline," Kit said loftily, but his smile betrayed his true position.

"I'll show you a superior bloodline when I get you home," Jessie teased. "After I cut a few furrows into your arm!"

Kit laughed and patted her on the shoulder. “See the abuse I endure? She’s such a meanie,” he teased.

“Yes, and I’m sure you do everything you can in order to be abused,” she remarked in a deadpan voice.

“Oh, does he,” Jessie sighed. “He’s an immature brat, but despite that, I love him anyway.”

“God I hope so, since that’s my daughter in your belly,” he said lightly.

After the exam, Jessie called Vil to give her the good news as they drove to the airport, then, after they filled up the plane’s gas tank, they taxied out. Jessie was again in the pilot’s seat, and she was the one who taxied the plane out of the hangar. Kit was technically breaking the law letting her control the plane, but they’d never really catch them since she did such a good job of it. All that practice at Lakeview let her taxi the plane like a pro. She taxied them out to the runway, but Kit was the one that actually handled the takeoff. Once they were up, he let her take over, making her plan her course using the Garmin’s flight management system, search for any dangerous weather along their path, and calculate how long it would take to get there and how much gas they’d use during the trip at the cruising speed and altitude she chose to use for the flight. Once she had all that done, he started bombarding her with questions about flight regulations, weather conditions, and questions about the plane itself. She had to know the plane, be able to answer questions about the plane, for it was their plane in which she would fly to get her license. Kit had already arranged that through Cessna. She would do her required hours in her own plane, and do her check ride in her own plane, and only after she got her private license would she fly another plane, when she started flying a twin engine Cessna supplied by the school to get her complex and multi-engine ratings. Jessie

answered every question he threw at her almost immediately, and she missed very, very few of them. He ran the gambit, from icing conditions to the rules of traffic collision avoidance to stalls to low speed turns to air traffic control procedures to the difference between VFR and IFR. He kept pelting questions at her as she lined them up for their approach to Scholes International Airport, but let Kit take over when they got close because the airport had a control tower, and Jessie was still learning the exact procedures about landing at airports where there was traffic control. He had her bring up the profile of the airport on her laptop from the FAA airport database program they had on their laptops, which had a diagram layout of every airport in North America, which told him where to go once he was on the runway. She guided him off the runway and along taxi ramps to a parking area near the terminal for short term parking. “Now you get to partake in the age old tradition, pretty kitty. Tying down the plane,” he chuckled.

“But we’re only gonna be here like four hours! We don’t have to tie it down!”

“We don’t *have* to tie it down,” he agreed, “but I’d rather not come back and find our plane on its back because a wind gust caught the wings and flipped her over. It takes ten minutes to tie her down, and that’s much better than taking a bus home,” he winked at her.

They indeed went out for pizza. Kit rented a car there at the airport and they drove around until they found a pizza parlor, one right on the beach, and they watched the sun set behind them as they ate Chicago deep dish pizza at an outdoor round glass and iron table with a striped umbrella. “So, are you ready for finals?” he asked.

“I will be,” she answered confidently, taking Kit’s broadband connect card Rick gave him for his birthday and connecting it to her laptop.

“What are you doing?”

“Making sure Professor Coffee got my assignment, he said he’d email me,” she answered. “I love this broadband thing, handsome fox. It’s awesome!”

“I’m sure we’ll get some use out of it,” he chuckled. “In one week.”

“I know. Excited?”

“God, you know it,” he laughed. “I just hope I’m ready.”

“Love, you can name every control in a Citation and point to where it’s supposed to be,” she laughed. “I just hope *I’m* ready. I want to get as much done there as I can.”

“We have six weeks.”

“Well, that’s just a floating number, love, based on how much time it’s supposed to take you to finish,” she told him. “If you finish early, then I don’t have as much time.”

Kit snorted. “We have six weeks,” he said. “That’s what Rick’s giving us, that’s how much we’re taking. If I finish in two weeks, then I’ll just beg Vil to pay for me to rate in another jet. The main thing we’ll need time for is you, pretty kitty. You have to log hours in the plane to qualify for your license. Log official hours, anyway,” he chuckled. “They don’t know that you could literally get in the plane right now and fly it home by yourself. You know enough to do it, and you certainly know how to take off and land,” he smiled.

“You made me practice enough!” she accused.

“So, the time is for you. If you can finish your private in three weeks, you’ll have enough time for them to rate you on multi and complex and get your high altitude authorization. Then you can log hours back here at home while I get my flight instructor certificates, then I can officially train you on IFR and your commercial rating.”

“And jets.”

“Well, I could get rated to train on a jet type, but I kinda don’t have a jet here to train you on,” he laughed. “We’ll have to go to a flight school for that.”

“Well, when we earn our millions, we can buy our own jet, and then you can teach me to fly it,” she smiled.

“I guess I could at that,” he chuckled, nodding in agreement. “I just hope I can find the time, it’s gonna be really busy at the magazine when we get back. Rick plans to expand again after I get home. He’s going to slow expansion while I’m in Kansas and let our circulation solidify, and also build up a little reserve capital, then we’re gonna hire four new workers. We’re hiring an artist to assist Jeffrey, two research assistants to help me, and another writer.”

“You’re hiring two?”

He nodded. “Rick wants me to branch out even more from research, so his plan is to let me run the research department and let the assistants handle the smaller jobs, and leave the really important research projects to me. That will free up some of my time for other duties, like writing or just goofing off.”

“Well, you *are* part owner,” she winked.

“He wants to train me completely in editing,” he nodded. “Rick said he wants me capable of running every aspect of the magazine so he can go on a vacation,” he chuckled. “He certainly deserves one. It took him breaking his leg to get a few days off. He’s worked without a vacation since he started the magazine.”

“I think as soon as we get back from Kansas, we need to send Rick and Martha on a trip. Can we afford sending them to Hawaii?” she asked.

“Yes, we can,” he said, smiling broadly. “I think that’s a wonderful idea, pretty kitty. I’ll have to dip into our crisis fund, but I’d say that’s a fully justifiable expense. I’ll call Vil and see if she can wrangle us a deal on a flight and a hotel room, and we’ll pay for it. Let’s make it a surprise.” He snapped his fingers. “Let’s make it a double surprise!” he said, grabbing his phone and speed-dialing Vil.

“Hey bro,” she greeted. “What’s up?”

“Vil, can you do me a favor?” he asked.

“Sure, what is it?”

“I’d like you to find out how much it would cost to send Rick and Martha and Jessie’s parents to Hawaii for a week, the week after we get back from Kansas,” he told her. “Rick deserves a special gift for being so kind to me, so me and Jessie have decided to buy him a trip to Hawaii to show our gratitude. And since Rick and Martha like Jessie’s folks so much, let’s just send them too. That way they can enjoy a holiday together.”

“Bro, I think that’s a *marvelous* idea!” Vil said brightly as Jessie absolutely beamed at him. “I’ll pay for it, because I know you’ve been

sinking all your money into the magazine. You can pay me back later,” she said quickly, to cut him off.

“I think I can agree to that,” he answered, then looked to Jessie. “Vil said yes,” he told her.

“Good!” Jessie said with a clap, “and thank you for thinking of my folks, handsome fox!”

“Now this is going to be a surprise, Vil,” Kit warned. “I want to spring this on them when we get back from Kansas. But Savid will need to know, so he can quietly make preparations to take over editing the week Rick’s gone.”

“I’ll make sure he never sees it coming,” she laughed. “It’s a good thing that John isn’t teaching summer school this year, or this would never work.”

“Good. Thanks a ton, sis, you’re wonderful.”

“Oh, by the way, me and Kendall are going to fly over to Kansas to see you while you’re there,” she told him. “I’m not sure what weekend it will be, but there will be a visit.”

“We’ll be happy to see you. Is everything all arranged for Kansas?”

“Yup. I have your hotel suite reserved, I have two cars rented for you while you’re there, and I’ve basically swept everyone out of your way. You’ll have complete run of the place, bro, the instructors are at your beck and call, and the flight simulator is literally there whenever you want to use it. Cessna agreed to give you complete priority, even to the point of kicking other students out of it if you want to use it.”

“Well, you didn’t have to go that far,” Kit laughed. “How about Jessie?”

“The same thing. She’ll have two full-time instructors training her in as much as they can teach her in six weeks. They’re confident that if she’s studied the material they sent her, she’ll get her license and her multi-engine ratings at a bare minimum.”

“Good, that’s what I want her to get,” he said. “I might be calling you while I’m there to beg,” he laughed.

“Oh? Beg for what?” she asked impishly.

“If I finish my training before the six weeks is up, I might beg you to buy me another rating,” he laughed. “I want to stay the entire six weeks, so my pretty kitty can log as many hours as she can. That’ll give her a head start when she goes for her instrument rating and commercial license. If I finish early, I’ll have nothing to do.”

“Bro, you basically own that place for six weeks,” she told him simply. “If you finish early and want to train on a different jet, you just let me know, and I’ll make it happen. I’m glad I finally found something I can spoil you with,” she teased.

He laughed ruefully. “I can’t argue there. My towering morals seem to evaporate when it comes to learning to fly jets. I guess I can’t deny my boyhood dream.”

“Well, we’ll bring the little boy out in you yet,” she teased. “I gotta go, bro, I’m up to my ears in tax reports here.”

“Still?”

“We already filed, I’m examining the reports now,” she told him.

“Ah. Well, have fun with that.”

“Hush, you,” she chuckled. “Let me say bye to Jessie.”

“Sure thing. Hold on, and I love ya, sis.”

“I love you too, bro.”

Kit gave Jessie the phone, and finished his pizza as he felt excitement well up in him. In one week, they’d be on the way to Kansas. Kit would be learning to fly jets, and Jessie would be getting her pilot’s license on a fast track. Then, after six weeks of training on jets during the day and doing his research assignments at night, he’d return to Austin and send Rick on a well-deserved trip to Hawaii. He was scheduled to be out of the cast by then, so he’d have a wonderful time, and finally get to take a nice rest.

And what was most important of all, he was going to have a baby girl. A daughter. All at once, the wonder and responsibility of being a dad washed over him, and he felt more devoted than ever to Jessie and their marriage. Finding out their child was a girl made it seem much more real, much more imminent. It was a concrete fact, and that made it all feel much closer. Now they could prepare for the baby knowing what they’d want for her, and that feeling would make it feel that much more real to him.

He just hoped he would be a good father, a much better father than his own father had been...but then again, just about any male could be a better father than his had been.

He would prove to himself that he was a better male than his father. He would be the best dad he could be, supportive, loving, and nurturing. He would teach her, try to give her what wisdom he could, be there to hold her

paw when she needed it, but let her go when it was time for her to try things on her own. He wanted his daughter to grow up healthy, happy, and want for nothing. He wanted her to grow up responsible and intelligent, not be like his cousins, to understand her position and be conscientious and dependable.

He knew she would be a beautiful little girl. He just hoped that he could help her be just as beautiful inside as she would be outside...just like her wonderful mother.

Chapter 27

He was so excited he could barely sit still.

Their Cessna 400 landed on a brisk, cloudy, windy Sunday at Municipal Airport in Independence, Kansas after a four hour flight that seemed to take them a million years. Kit was so excited to finally be there, so anxious to get started, he flew the plane at almost full throttle, cruising at 220 knots at 17,500 feet and landing in a stiff headwind about ten minutes from violating the plane's emergency reserve, draining his tanks to get there quickly, so much so Kit had to land and refuel in Oklahoma, where they also had lunch. They landed at about two in the afternoon, and there on the north side, with its large buildings, was the Cessna Flight Training Center. It was there where Kit would tie down his plane, and it was there where he and Jessie would be spending the next six weeks of their lives. He taxied the plane towards their compound, and a guide truck came out to meet them. Jessie took video of their arrival from the right seat as the guide truck brought them to a large hangar, and then guided them inside to occupy a spot right near the hangar doors. Kit turned the plane around and shut it down as a femme raccoon, a cat, and a tall ocelot approached. The raccoon was wearing a pant suit, while the cat and ocelot were wearing dress shirts with the Cessna logo embroidered on their pockets and jeans. "Mister and Misses Vulpan, you're early!" the raccoon called as Kit opened the gullwing door. "We didn't expect you until later this afternoon!"

"I couldn't wait to get here," Kit laughed. "Are you Amanda Wilkes?"

“Yes, I am,” she nodded. “Welcome to Independence. Are you ready to go to your hotel?”

“Well, can we take a quick tour first?” he asked as Jessie opened her door and climbed out.

“I think we can manage that,” the ocelot smiled, stepping up and offering his paw to Jessie. “I’m David Summers, ma’am, and I’ll be your flight instructor.”

“Hi, I’m Jessie Vulpan,” she smiled.

“Have you been studying the materials I sent you?”

“Oh, yes sir!” she said with a laugh. “Kit makes me study every night!”

“I think you’ll find she’s all but ready to take her check ride,” Kit told him with a smile. “She can recite the FAR to you verbatim.”

“Well, there’s more to it than the regs,” he smiled. “And I’m happy to see you bought one of our planes! It keeps my paychecks coming,” he chuckled.

“This plane is *why* I’m getting my license!” Jessie laughed. “I love it so much, I’m learning to fly it!”

The male cat offered his paw to Kit. “It’s good to meet you, Mister Vulpan. I’m Luke Jones, and I’ll be your primary flight instructor for the Citation program.”

“I’m *very* happy to meet you,” Kit laughed.

“Have *you* been studying your materials?” he asked.

Kit grinned. “Do you want me to blindfold myself and point out the location of every control in a Citation cockpit?”

“I think you can do that when we start,” he smiled. “Did you find the software helpful?”

“Immensely,” he answered as he opened the cargo door and started pulling out their suitcases. “It’s one thing to see a picture, but quite another to have that interactive simulation that quizzes you on what a control is and what it does.”

“How was your flight up, Mister Vulpan?” Amanda asked.

“Smooth,” he answered. “We stopped in Oklahoma to refuel and grab a bite to eat, but outside of that, I’ve been flying her at about max speed to get up here. I’ve been just a *little* anxious to do this,” he said.

“It’s all I’ve been hearing about for two weeks,” Jessie sighed, but she was smiling at him.

“This is all the luggage you brought?” Amanda asked curiously as he pulled out the second small suitcase, and Jessie shouldered their carryall holding their laptops.

“The rest of it is on its way up via UPS,” he told them. “As you know, this plane doesn’t have the biggest load rating in the world, and we had too much to bring given how long we’ll be here. So, we just shipped up our other stuff and carried what will hold us over til it gets here.”

“Clever,” Amanda said with a nod. “Your rental car is just outside, and a second rental car is already parked at your hotel. So, you can put your luggage away and we’ll give you a tour of our training center.”

They were showed around, from the classrooms to the two large flight simulators, all of it brand new and cutting edge. “This is a much different flight school from what you might have attended Mister Vulpan,” Amanda told him. “This isn’t a for-profit school, it’s where we bring our customers, their private pilots, and our employee pilots for their initial type rating when they buy planes from us or they come to work for us. We have two facilities where you will train, Mister Vulpan. Here, and at our Wichita facility. This facility is currently dedicated to our Mustang, CJ four, and Columbus programs, since the Mustangs are built here in Independence and the CJ four and Columbus aren’t in production yet, and we’ve yet to incorporate them into our Wichita facility. The Wichita facility is where you’ll be training on the CJ series, the Encore, and the Citation Ten. Our facility here is understandably small but highly advanced, because it serves a very exclusive clientele of Mustang pilots and our test pilots preparing to test fly the CJ four and Columbus, and there’s a connected, even smaller facility where we train our pilots on our more complicated propeller aircraft like the four hundred, that holds flight simulators Jessie will be using when she can’t fly on VFR. Our Wichita facility is much larger, but just as advanced. Because of that, we’re completely focused on the timely and thorough education of our customer or their pilots. Our operation is usually centered mainly on our Citation jets, furs who already have their licenses, but we’ve made a special accommodation to give your wife her initial flight training,” she said with a smile. “David has graciously agreed to be her flight instructor, when he’s usually one of our Citation Mustang instructor pilots.”

“I’ve been told to train you as much as I can in six weeks, Misses Vulpan,” he told her. “If you get through your initial private certificate quickly, we can get you type rated on multi-engine craft and also get you your instrument rating.”

“I’ll do my best, Mister Summers.”

“Please, call me Dave,” he smiled.

“I find it odd that you have just one jet program down here,” Kit noted, “since you build the jets in Wichita.”

“The Mustang? It’s built here in Independence, Mister Vulpan, so it’s best to have the training facility for them here, at least for now. We had plenty of empty space down here after we built this building, so we put the Mustang training program here, and added the experimental flight programs while we prepare to expand our Citation flight training facility in Wichita to incorporate them there. The CJ four and Columbus are still in flight testing stage, so we decided to make use of the extra room and also keep them separate from the other jets, to keep the pilots we’re training on them focused.”

“Ah. So, when I finish here, I’ll be moving up to Wichita?”

“Then coming *back* here, while your wife does all of her training here,” she pointed out. “So instead of moving you, we’ll just allow you to commute to Wichita when you begin those phases of your training. We’ll be furnishing you a Mustang for your personal use after you complete your rating training, Mister Vulpan,” she smiled. “In fact, you’ll be helping with the test flights and shakedown of that jet, it’s just come off the assembly line. You’ll be the first pilot in the seat after it’s had its initial inspection flight and safety shakedown. You’ll be *flying* up every day, and also getting some real time behind a jet yoke in the bargain.”

“Now that sounds fun!” Kit said excitedly. “But why not put us at Wichita rather than here?”

“We had Misses Vulpan to consider as well, Mister Vulpan, and so we decided that it would be the most convenient for everyone if we let you settle in here, since this airport is where Misses Vulpan will be doing all of her training.”

“Ah, yes, that is best,” Kit nodded as Jessie looked at a flight simulator.

“Since you already have your license, it will be very easy for you to fly to Wichita and back every day. It’s only about fifteen minutes from here in a Mustang.”

“Not enough time to have any fun,” Kit laughed.

“Now, let me show you the planes we have for Misses Vulpan to fly,” she said, guiding them down a long corridor.

They entered a smaller hangar, where a Cessna 400 painted white with blue stripes rested, and beside it was a twin engine Cessna 303. “We’re not actually having her fly in *your* plane, but we have a four hundred here for her to use,” she motioned. “That keeps us from putting hours on your personal plane. This is our four hundred trainer. And we have a Crusader for her to use to get her multi-engine rating.”

“It’ll feel weird not being in *our* plane,” Jessie said, looking at the planes.

“You’ll find our trainer flies and feels just the same as yours,” David assured her. “We keep her in tip-top shape.”

“It’s all the same inside?” she asked.

“Yup,” he nodded. “We looked up the plane you bought using her serial number, and our trainer here has the same systems as your plane, so you’ll feel right at home inside.”

“Who did your training on the four hundred, Mister Vulpan?” Luke asked.

“I did,” Kit answered. “I already knew the Garmin, so I just studied the manuals on the plane itself. I have my commercial, so I can get away with doing that in a utility class airplane.”

Luke laughed. “Yes, you can,” he nodded. “As long as you don’t mind paying outrageous insurance.”

“Well, while I’m here, we can take a check ride in my four hundred and you can sign me off to make the insurance company happy,” Kit said with a smile.

“We can definitely do that,” Amanda said confidently. “That should bring down your insurance quite a bit.”

In all, Kit was impressed with the facility. They had three small classrooms, and one was in use, where three furs were being instructed by a fourth, who was using a laser pointer to indicate parts of a Mustang cockpit that was projected on a screen by an overhead projector. They had two flight simulators for the Mustang and one flight simulator each for the CJ4 and Columbus. One of the Mustang simulators was in use when they came into the room, and Kit saw on a monitor an image of the cockpit, where a thin femme bear was behind the controls, adjusting something on her Garmin display. Luke was explaining their training schedule to him as they walked, and from him Kit learned that he would spend his first few days in a classroom, going over the fundamentals of jet flight from an aviation

standpoint, then they'd go into the Mustang's flight systems, learning how to manage a jet's systems, which were much different and more complex than any plane he'd ever flown before. After he finished his classroom training, he'd be spending most of his time in a simulator. Kit would literally be type rated on a Mustang without ever actually *flying* it. The simulator was approved by the FAA to type rate pilots, since it could duplicate all aspects of actual flight...and they could even program it to mimic in-flight emergencies. And it was a hell of a lot safer to deal with real emergency conditions in a simulator then train for the eventuality in a real plane, but never face the actual conditions until it actually happened. The simulators even moved, being on a platform moved by hydraulic pistons.

After they finished their tour, the three of them walked Kit and Jessie out to their car. "Now, remember, we start at eight o'clock," David told Jessie. "We'll meet in the hangar where you saw the trainer plane, alright?"

"I'll be there, Dave," she nodded.

"You'll start at eight as well, Mister Vulpan," Luke told him.

"Please, call me Kit," he said with a smile. "You're probably older than me, I'm the one who should be calling you *Mister*."

Luke laughed. "Then the boss would give me a funny look," he smiled, pointing towards Amanda.

"Darn right I would," she smiled, giving Kit a card. "This is my work, phone, cell, and fax numbers, Mister Vulpan. If you have any questions or need to talk to me, you can reach me any time. I'll be at your immediate disposal. Consider me your liaison to the Cessna company," she smiled. "So, if these two jokers do anything out of bounds, I'm the one you call."

“We’re not jokers! We’re troubadors,” David smiled.

“Well, these troubadors had better do a good job,” she smiled at them.

“I’m sure they will,” Jessie said with a smile.

“If you studied as much as you say, we’ll look good without ever lifting a finger,” David laughed. “If you’ve learned most of the bookwork already, then that’ll really streamline you getting your license. Heck, we might even be able to wrangle your IFR rating if you can log enough hours and do the bookwork quickly enough, since both plane models you’ll be flying are IFR rated planes. We can just double up and kill both birds with one training regimen. I’d be happy to give you the training.”

“I’ll do my best,” she smiled. “I already told Kit, when we leave, *I’m* flying the plane home.”

“Then we’ll do everything we can to make sure it happens,” David said with a reassuring smile.

The trio left them at their rental car, a Saturn, which had the keys in it as well as a map showing them where their hotel was. Vil had put them up in an Embassy Suites hotel, which was more like a small apartment than a hotel room; the chain was famous for their two-room hotel suites, a living room/kitchenette and a bedroom. The hotel was only six miles from the airport, on the outskirts of the town of Independence, according to the map.

“Well, what do you think, love?” Kit asked after they got into the car.

“I think we’re both going to have a lot of fun here!” she said with an eager smile.

“We’ll both be busy as sin,” Kit chuckled.

“It’s better than me just puttering around the house doing nothing,” she told him. “And besides, I’ll be learning something while I’m here, something really cool!”

“That makes me happier than you probably believe,” he told her. “I’d hate for you to come up here and be bored.”

“Oh, this *will not* be boring,” she laughed.

The Embassy Suites hotel was just off state route 27, and across the street from a strip mall anchored by a Wal-Mart and Sam’s Club. They carried their luggage in and to the desk, where a short, plump bobcat greeted them with a smile that revealed he’d broken a fang and had yet to have it fixed. “May I help you, sir?”

“Yes, we have reservations for Vulpan, Kit and Jessie Vulpan,” Kit told him.

The bobcat punched keys on his computer. “Yes, yes sir, right here. Ah, it looks like this was a special arrangement. There’s a couple of messages here. First, we replaced the bed in your room with a Sleep Number bed, by special arrangement. I’m not sure why it told me to tell you that,” he said curiously.

“I understand why,” Kit chuckled. “I have what you might call special needs when it comes to mattresses.”

“Ah, well, we’re happy to accommodate you, sir, it says here that the bed is yours, and you’ll take it home with you when you leave. We’re also holding a key for you, sir, for a rental car parked in our lot, it’s a black Saturn. And we’re holding several boxes delivered to the hotel by UPS this

morning. Now that you've checked in, I'll have them delivered to your suite."

"Wow, they got them up here fast," Jessie said. "We just shipped them yesterday afternoon!"

"I guess when they say next day air, they *mean* it," Kit chuckled as the clerk started printing out forms.

It took them about five minutes to sign everything and get the little plastic strip-keys for their room, as well to get the key to their rental car. The clerk had an attendant show Jessie where the rental car was parked, since that was her car, while Kit carried their luggage to the hotel room that would be their home for the next six weeks. It was surprisingly roomy, he had to admit, with a nice big living room and full service kitchen along the side wall, with a nice little table for meals, and a small pair of small folding double doors at the end of the counter, which were open to reveal a little economy washer and dryer in a nook. The living room side had a clean, new-looking couch and two chairs, arranged around a large widescreen TV that did not look like the kind of TV one would find in a hotel. There was a small desk near the door to the bedroom that looked like a computer work area, since it had a network cable coiled on top of it. The clerk that had checked them in had also come with him, and he pointed things out to him as he looked around. "As you can see, sir, this is one of our long-term suites, for furs who will be here a while," he said. "We get quite a few, to tell the truth, because of the Cessna factory," he added. "We have a fully furnished kitchen, your own private washer and dryer, and you'll find your TV has Direct TV. You'll have about two hundred channels to choose from. We have a hotel-wide wireless network for your laptops, but we also provide two network jacks if you prefer to go wired, or have any trouble

with your wireless card.” The bobcat led them into the bedroom, which was dominated by a king-size bed, two dressers, a nightstand on each side of the bed, a vanity, and a sliding door closet. “Note that there are two doors to the bathroom, sir, one here and one in the living room. The bathroom has a full size tub. Your Sleep Number mattress is already on the bed, and the controls for it are on the nightstands. The other wired network cord is behind the desk,” he said as he went over to the curtains on the far side of the room and opened them, revealing a little ground-floor patio surrounded by a waist-high iron fence, that looked into a pool. There was a gate in the fence and a little stepping-stone path between well-maintained shrubs that led to the pool area. “This room has a patio for your enjoyment, and as you can see, we also have a pool here, but it’s not open yet. It will be opened in two weeks, sir, and you’ll find that your patio has a gate that lets you go right out to it.”

“Nice,” Kit noted.

“Like I said, sir, this is a long-term room, so it has some extra perks compared to most of the other suites,” the bobcat said with a broken-toothed smile. “As you saw, there’s a Wal-Mart right across the street that has a grocery store in it, where you can shop for groceries and whatever you might want or need. Independence Mall is on the other side of town, right down route twenty-seven, if you’d like to do any shopping that doesn’t involve Wal-Mart, as well as a number of small stores in the downtown area. Virtually every pizza place in town will deliver here, and we also have a sub shop, Vietnamese restaurant, and a Chinese restaurant that will deliver here as well. We have the numbers to them on a little placard in the top drawer of each nightstand. We don’t offer room service here, but if you call the front desk, they can usually help you with anything you might need.”

“Sounds good, thank you,” Kit said with a nod.

Jessie was brought to the room as they went back out to the living room. She smiled and tipped the young collie that had helped her find the car, then looked around the living room with a professional eye. “Very nice,” she said. “I can do some real cooking here.”

“Would you like me to show you around, ma’am, or will you trust your husband to do it for you?”

Jessie laughed. “I think I can trust him to do that,” she said, winking at Kit.

“Alright, I’ll have the boxes UPS sent delivered to your room immediately,” he said.

“What’s it like?” Jessie asked as the bobcat left, and she opened the door to the refrigerator. It was smaller than theirs at home, but it looked big enough to serve their purposes while they were here.

“Not bad. Vil had a Sleep Number bed sent for us.”

“What’s that?”

“One of those adjustable air mattresses, because of my back,” he answered.

“Really? That sounds interesting,” she said, leaving the kitchen to go back to the bedroom.

Kit helped the hotel staff carry in the five boxes holding their clothes and some other necessities, then he tipped each of them for their trouble. He carried the box holding their clothes into the bedroom and saw Jessie splayed out on the bed, arms and legs out wide, her tail straight out under

her and between her legs, and with the control for the bed in her paw, with a happy look in her face. “I *love* this thing!” she gushed. “You can make it as firm or soft as you want!”

“Well, the manager said it’s *our* bed, that we’d be taking it with us when we go. I’ll have to ask Vil what that means.”

“I hope that means we ship it home with us,” she said. “It’s *way* more comfortable than our bed!”

Kit had to try it with that declaration, climbing in on the side in which he usually slept at home, then he picked up the little control and hit a button. Under him, he felt the mattress firm up, push back at him, until he found a setting that felt nice to his back. “Wow, this thing is nice,” he agreed, making it soft again. “Now you don’t have to worry about finding a mattress that suits *me*,” he chuckled. “I can set my side to be nice and hard, and you can have whatever you want.”

“Then I can firm up my side for when I’m feeling frisky,” she giggled, rolling up on her side and testing the border between the two sides of the bed. “Well, nothing hard in here, nothing that feels like a divider, I guess as long as we make both sides the same firmness, it won’t feel like two mattresses pushed up beside each other.”

“That’s good, since we always somehow end up in the middle of the bed tied up in each other’s arms anyway,” he said with a sensual smile that made her grin at him. He gave her quick kiss, but she giggled and grabbed hold of him, pulling him into a more serious kiss that made his tail shiver.

“Mmm, fancy meeting you here, Mister Vulpan,” she smiled.

“Whatever are you doing in a hotel room, Misses Vulpan? Did I catch you when you were arranging a liaison with some mystery lover?”

“I cannot tell a lie, you did,” she giggled. “He’s a handsome young fox that has this little problem with one of his ears.”

“I’ll have to challenge him to a duel,” Kit declared. “I’ll brook no competitors for your affection.”

She laughed and gave him a hug and kiss on the cheek. “Such a silly boy!” she accused. “Now let’s quit acting silly and get unpacked and settled in. We *are* going to be here for a while.”

“You do realize that Lupe’s gonna be abusing our apartment while we’re gone,” he laughed. “We have a nicer TV than he does.”

“As long as everything’s still there and nothing’s broken, why should we mind?” Jessie smiled. “As long as he *stays out of our bedroom*,” she declared in a serious voice.

“You left him a whole fridge and freezer full of food, I doubt he’ll make it back there for two weeks,” Kit laughed.

It took them about an hour to unpack everything. Kit had brought more than just clothes, he had also sent his printer and desktop, and their DVD player and a selection of movies. Jessie brought some of the pots and pans from the kitchen, since she liked them and didn’t relish the idea of either using the ones in the hotel or buying new ones. She’d brought most of her spice rack contents as well. As Kit put the computer back together, Jessie arranged the kitchen to her liking, then got on the phone and started calling everyone to tell them that they’d arrived in Kansas safely. Kit did the same,

calling the office first, calling Rick directly. “Hey boss, we’re here,” he said after he answered the phone.

“That was fast,” Rick chuckled. “Did Jessie record you guys arriving?”

“She did,” he answered. “She’ll upload the video later, right now she’s calling her folks to tell them we got here.”

“What kind of hotel room did Vil give you?”

“Nothing outrageous, but it’s nice,” Kit said appreciatively. “We’re in an Embassy Suites, in one of their long-term suites. It doesn’t look like a hotel room, it’s actually kinda homey. It even has a full kitchen in it.”

“Take some shots of it, we have to document everything for your series.”

Kit was making a series of articles out of their trip to Kansas, but Rick was also having them video as much of it as they could, to have videos the readers could watch on the website that would coincide with the articles they’d read in the magazine. The series was being called *The Life of a Pilot*, and would document Kit’s experience training to fly jets in Cessna’s training program. Kit had to write the first article by Tuesday, since Rick needed it completely finished by Wednesday so he could work it into the issue.

“Jessie’s getting pretty good with the video camera,” Kit chuckled. “Did Mike install that video conference program on your laptop?”

“Janet did,” Rick answered. “Let’s test it.”

“Sure, lemme get my laptop up and running.” They kept up with each other on the phone as they got the video conference up, and then he was

graced with Rick and Sheila's faces in his monitor as he hung up the phone and turned up the volume. From the look of it, they were at Rick's house, and Sheila had to be over there to see Martha, and get more lessons on cooking from her. "Hey guys," he grinned. "We're here."

"I see Janet didn't blow anything up installing this," Rick grinned to someone behind the camera.

"Just for that, your computer is going to suffer a mysterious and fatal crash, Rick," Sheila's voice called, barely audible, over the microphone Rick was using.

"I keep payroll synced with my desktop on this thing, so if she doesn't want to get paid, she can go right ahead," Rick countered.

"What's Kansas like, cousin?" Sheila asked, grabbing Rick's microphone and putting it close to her mouth, bending down to where she was literally cheek to cheek with Rick.

"Very flat," Kit answered. "Cessna has a huge facility here, and it's really nice. They already gave us a tour of where we'll be training. Hopefully they'll let us take some video of it so we can show you guys."

"I'll see it myself next month," Sheila winked. "Vil's gonna come see you, and when she does, I'm coming up too. Both me and Ally." She laughed. "Did I tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"You're a damned virus, cousin," she grinned. "Me and Ally both enrolled in *flight school*!"

Kit laughed. "You did? Well, good for you!"

“We enrolled together,” she said with a big grin. “AAIA, we start next week! We’re gonna do it together! We’ll both have the summer free, and we’re both interested, so we’re gonna go for it! They said as long as we don’t dick around, we’ll have our private licences before school starts, they have a special summer program.”

“Well, congratulations, cousin! I’m sure you’ll love it. I know I do.”

“I loved it when I flew in your plane,” she grinned. “And think, after I get my license, I can borrow your plane,” she said with a huge, teasing smile.

“After you have about ten years of practice, maybe,” Kit retorted immediately. “Just remember, cousin, this isn’t something you do half-assed. You have to be dedicated, or you’re wasting your time and your money, and you just might get someone killed.”

“I think I’ve proved I can dedicate myself when I want to, cousin,” she smiled.

“You have at that,” he chuckled in agreement.

“Son, your first assignment is on its way to your Blackberry,” Rick said, pulling the microphone back close to his mouth. “You’re going to research voter fraud in Texas for a piece Barry’s doing for the election special, and you’re going to research the Rainbow Push Coalition, because someone from them is going to give a speech on campus.”

“And Michael Phelps!” Sheila called.

“And Michael Phelps, there’s a little fan club on campus that Denise is doing as her weekly piece,” Rick chuckled.

“God, he’s cute, even if he’s not a fox!” Sheila gushed, smiling in a predatory manner.

“It’s no surprise he’s a good swimmer, he *is* an otter, after all,” Rick grinned. “So, there you have it. I hope you’re ready, son, because we’re gonna keep you *really* busy while you’re in Kansas.”

“I’ll manage,” Kit smiled.

“Well, we’ll let you go, I’m sure you have a lot to do to settle in,” Rick told him. “If you have a kitchen, I have no doubt that Jessie’s gonna want to head to a grocery store as soon as you’re unpacked.”

“I wouldn’t bet against you on that one,” Kit smiled in agreement.

“Alright then, have that research done and sent in by Tuesday morning,” Rick told him.

“It will,” Kit promised. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“We’ll be here. Have a good one, son.”

“You too, guys. Bye now.”

“Bye cousin!” Sheila called, waving as Rick said his own goodbye and terminated the conference.

“Huh, guess what, pretty kitty?”

“What love?”

“Sheila and Allison enrolled in flight school for a summer program,” he told her. “They’re going to get their licenses too.”

Jessie laughed. “I think we’ll have to hide the keys to the plane!” she declared.

“We just might at that,” Kit chuckled in agreement as he speed-dialed Vil.

“Hey bro!” Vil called when she answered, without even saying hello. “You there?”

“We are, and thanks for the bed, sis!” he said. “I never thought of the bed situation.”

“That bed’s yours to keep. Just have a mover come pack it up and ship it home when you leave,” she told him. “Can’t have you showing up for your training bent over like an old geezer, can I?” she asked lightly. “What’s the hotel room like?”

“Kinda roomy,” he answered. “It’s pretty nice. We can definitely feel comfortable here.”

“They said they have a pool, what’s it like?”

“Pretty big, but it won’t be open for two more weeks, they said,” he answered.

“Did you find the cars alright?”

“Right where you put them,” he answered. “One was at the airport, the other was here and the desk clerk had the key. Our stuff from Austin was even here waiting for us,” he said appreciatively. “I have no idea how they got it here so fast.”

“You had it shipped next day air, bro, and UPS *will* deliver on Sunday if you pay for it.”

“I didn’t realize that, I thought it would be here tomorrow,” Kit chuckled. “I just told them I wanted it here as fast as possible, and they

gave me a price.”

“Well, there ya go,” she told him. “Hate to cut it short, bro, but I’m about to pull up to the jet and get on board.”

“Where are you?”

“Getting ready to head back to Washington,” she answered. “I have to testify in front of the Armed Services Committee *again*, this time for the House. Why can’t they just do this at the same time?” she complained. “But, at least I’ll get to see Kendall!” she said brightly. “He’s coming over to Washington tomorrow and we’re going to have dinner.”

“Another long-distance date?” Kit chuckled. Kendall had been coming over at least once a week to go out with Vil.

“Yeah. Next week *I’m* going to England,” she told him. “We’re going to watch polo in Scotland or something, I’m not sure.”

“So interested,” Kit laughed.

“What I’m interested in is *Kendall*,” she told him. “I *really* like him, bro. And I mean I’m getting into *daydream* territory,” she told him.

Kit laughed. “Why Vil, are you telling me he’s challenging your virginal resolve?”

“You of all furs should know that I’m no virgin, bro,” she told him, a bit tartly. That much was true; there was no Vulpan younger than fourteen that was a virgin, be it male or femme. Vil had lost her virginity at fifteen, and she’d told Kit all about it when he was older, after Suzy took his. “But I can say that I hear that ticking coming from below my ribcage much louder whenever I’m around him,” she said, almost girlishly.

“So, Vil’s finally heeding her Catholic teachings to be fruitful and multiply,” Kit teased.

“I’m following in your footsteps,” she teased in reply. “So far, I think we’re on schedule for a nice May wedding,” she said dreamily.

“So late? Don’t give him that much time to see all your flaws, sis, trick a proposal out of him now and get your claws into him by September.”

She laughed. “So, I should approach this like business, eh?”

“You bet. He’s not listening to your offers, it’s time for a hostile takeover. Leverage him. After all, that’s what you’d do if he was a business rival.”

“I think I’d like a *marriage*, bro, not a business relationship. Just leave me alone, I’ll drag him to the altar in my own time and at my own pace.”

“Alright, but I could tell you all about what kind of fun you’re missing,” he told her, a bit naughtily.

“Stop right there, I don’t think I’m old enough to hear what’s about to come next,” Vil told him with a laugh.

“Alright, I’ll let you figure that out on your own,” he said lightly. “Call me when you get to Washington and we’ll talk.”

“Sure thing. Later, bro.”

“Bye sis.”

Rick was right in that the first thing they did after they finished calling everyone and got everything unpacked and set up to their liking was head to the store. They spent nearly \$300 buying a plethora of food, and their own plates and silverware because the ones at the hotel weren’t all that good. Kit

had to buy another bottle of body soap, and Jessie had to buy a new bottle of vitamins, since she only had enough to last her another two weeks. They bought laundry detergent for the washer and Bounce sheets for the dryer, and Jessie bought a beach towel to use when the pool opened, since Jessie loved to swim. She hadn't packed her swim suit, but odds were they could find one for her at the mall that was supposed to be across town.

When they got back to the hotel it took them about an hour to get everything packed away, and Jessie broke in the kitchen by cooking their first meal of shrimp jambalaya as Kit retrieved his assignments, sent them from his Blackberry to his laptop, and surveyed them to see what kind of work he had ahead of him. He saw that they were actually going easy on him, since they weren't asking for anything really indepth.

It took him about four hours to get it all done. He didn't go by what they asked for, he went by what they needed, so his research was much more detailed. While he worked, Jessie had her nose deep in her flight books, reviewing everything she'd learned so far, for she knew that starting tomorrow, what she knew was going to *matter*. He'd already told her that the first thing she should expect would be to be tested on what she knew, and not casually. David would grill her, really test her knowledge, because he had to know exactly what she knew so he'd know what he had to teach her. It was nearly eight when Kit was finished with magazine work, and he uploaded their video of landing in Kansas to the website for Mike, so he could do whatever it was he wanted to do with it. Kit took video of the hotel room as well, narrating as he went. "And there's my wife, studying for her first day of flight school. Wave to the readers, pretty kitty," he called. She laughed and waved, holding up her textbook so they could see the cover that read *Flight Procedures and Air Traffic Control for Pilots*. "She's

already hard at work, because tomorrow she's going to start working for her private pilot's license."

"You've had me working on it for over a month!" she protested.

"You're going to *officially* start," he corrected, which made her giggle and nod. "We've got a very nice suite at Embassy Suites here in Independence, and we've already settled in. Almost looks like a home, doesn't it?" he asked, zooming in on the dirty dishes in the sink. "I'd show you the bedroom, but then we'd have to hide the slaves we keep tied up in there for our perverted desires."

"Kit!" Jessie called threateningly. "Behave!"

"Since when do I behave?" he asked flippantly as he panned back to the living room. "Tomorrow, I'll ask the Cessna furs if they mind if we take some video of the training facility, to show you guys. I hope they do, their facility is *very* interesting. I'd love to show everyone what they'll be reading about. Anyway, that's about it here from Independence, Kansas. Kit and Jessie Vulpan, signing off."

He sent that off to Mike as well, before Jessie could demand he make a video without the color commentary.

The first day.

Kit was almost giddy as he and Jessie drove to the airport, arriving at the facility a good half hour before 8:00, but the facility was already open, and their two personal trainers were already there and waiting. They separated with a kiss good luck, and were taken to separate areas. Kit was taken to a small classroom by Luke, and the small, thin cat then proceeded

to do what Kit knew was coming...test him. Kit was quizzed on what he'd learned studying the manuals and books, and quizzed *thoroughly*. Luke told him to answer when he knew, but if he was guessing, to tell him he was guessing and try to answer anyway. Kit understood why; a guess was often based on what a fur knew, and that would give Luke insight into how much Kit really did know. Luke tested him for nearly three hours, and then, after it was done, he settled in and started teaching Kit the classroom aspects of jet aviation.

For the rest of the day, Kit was back in school. He learned all about flying a jet, how it was different from flying a prop plane in how it handled and what responsibilities Kit would have as a pilot of a jet aircraft. Luke was a very good teacher, teaching in a simple, earthy kind of language that seemed to just sink into Kit's brain and lock in. He learned all about jet engines that day, the science of jet propulsion, and how the higher speeds altered the handling characteristics of a jet aircraft. The main thing that was drilled into his head that day was that jet aircraft were much more responsive than prop planes, and also required more attention.

To Kit's surprise, at the end of the day, Luke gave him a written test on what he'd learned that day to see how much he had retained, and Kit had acquitted himself nicely.

"We'll have another day of classroom instruction tomorrow, and then we'll start working in the simulator," Luke told him. "You showed you know your stuff about the basics, so tomorrow we do the classroom portion of the Mustang control systems and handling characteristics."

"Sounds good. Oh, I have a favor to ask, but I think I'll need to ask Amanda."

“What is it?”

“I’m writing a series of articles for my magazine about my experience here,” he said, “and my editor wants me to take video of the facility to post on our website. Can you find out who I need to talk to to arrange that?”

“Sure, I can find out for you, no problem,” he answered with a nod. “I hope the articles are good,” Luke laughed.

“So far the experience has been wonderful,” Kit grinned. “You mind being interviewed about what it’s like being a flight instructor?”

“Not at all,” he answered.

“You’re definitely going to get some good press from me,” Kit chuckled as they left the classroom. “Now I need to find out where my wife is.”

His wife was, in fact, airborne. He found out from Amanda after she came over to talk to him about taking video inside the facility, and he went out to the tarmac to see her perform a touch and go on the runway. She lifted back up into the air and performed a low speed turn to the left, and it looked like David, who was in the right seat, was going to have her go around and do it again. He smiled when he watched her go around and do another touch and go, putting the plane down with practiced, gentle ease, right on the stripes; he’d taught her to aim to put the wheels down within the area of a band of marker stripes on the runway, because it taught her how to manage the runway. If she could touch her wheels on the stripes, then she could aim at any part of the runway when she was executing a short strip landing. And when she took her commercial check ride, she *had* to be able to bring the plane to a smooth stop within one hundred feet of a

point her examiner selected on the runway, so he was just teaching her what she'd need to know later.

“She learns fast,” Luke told him. “She has a very light touch I wouldn't expect out of a student pilot.”

“I've been having her practice in our plane,” Kit chuckled. “You don't have to repeat that, though.”

“Repeat what?” he asked with a smile. “That's how I taught my wife, too,” he added with a chuckle.

“I did mean to ask one thing,” he noted. “How is Dave going to try to get her IFR done in six weeks?”

“Because the planes she's learning to fly in are all IFR rated,” he answered. “The hours she logs for her private are *also* hours she can claim for her IFR *and* her commercial, don't forget that. She'll really only need her cross country requirements for IFR after she gets her rating, and we can do some of that in the simulator. We *do* have simulators for a four hundred, which she'll use if she can't fly VFR.”

“Oh. Ohhhhh,” he said. “One forty-one rules!”

“We *are* a one forty-one facility,” Luke told him.

“But she's not learning through a one forty-one approved curriculum,” he realized.

“We won't say anything if you won't,” he smiled.

Kit laughed and shook his head.

Jessie did two more touch and go maneuvers, then she landed and taxied back to the small hangar attached to the facility. Kit, Luke, and

Amanda met them there, and she waved brightly to him as she opened the gullwing door of the trainer. She and David did the post flight, and after she was done, she ran over and gave him a huge hug. “I take it you had a good day?” he asked with a laugh.

“I get to *solo* tomorrow!” she said with an excited squeal.

“You taught her well, Kit,” David chuckled as they came over. “She knows everything she needs to know to do her first solo flight.”

“So, I take it she passed her tests this morning?”

“Remember when you said that she could recite the FAR verbatim?”

Kit nodded.

“You weren’t lying,” Dave smiled. “There are some things she needs to take in the classroom, but I’m going to mix that in with actual flight time. She’ll spend some time in the classroom in the morning, then we go out to the plane and she logs her hours the rest of the day.”

“He said I could have my private in ten days if I really work hard,” Jessie said brightly.

“I think she could pass the written test right now, but she needs a little reinforcement to pass the oral, and she needs more training with the four hundred to answer the questions the examiner will ask her about it during the check ride. But if she works very hard, she’ll have the logged hours she’ll need for her check ride in about ten days. Then she just needs to bone up for the test.”

“I’m proud of you, pretty kitty,” he said, kissing her. “We saw you doing touch and gos, and you flew *beautifully*!”

“She’s definitely either a natural or been stealing time in your plane,” Dave winked.

“She’s a natural, naturally,” Kit said, then they all laughed. “How’d you do on the Garmin?”

“I remembered everything you taught me,” she grinned.

“She handled it like a pro,” David nodded in agreement. “I’ve already signed her off on the Garmin. I don’t think you missed a beat when you taught it to her. You’d be one hell of a flight instructor, Kit.”

“I’m going to get my rating,” he said with a nod.

“Really? I’ve seen your pilot record, Kit. All you have to do is pass your FOI, take the ground training, and get your proficiencies logged and you could do your check rides for your type one, type two, and your MEI, cause I doubt any pilot with as many logged hours as you couldn’t perform the required maneuvers,” Amanda said. “Hell, Kit, you’ll have enough hours logged to rate as a flight instructor for a couple of jet models. We can do that for you, we’re authorized to give the exams here.”

“You can?”

She nodded. “The FOI classroom training is a three week course, and Luke can do your ground training and endorse you for your requirements, fitting it in between your training sessions. It’ll be a lot of work, but we can do it inside the time you’ll be here. Interested?”

“Yes!”

“The FOI prep class is two hours a night, Monday through Friday, five to seven,” she told him. “Our next class doesn’t start until next Monday,

though, but I think you'll need that time for your rating training."

"Just give me the books so I can get a jump on it," Kit said.

"I'll have them for you before you leave tonight," she promised. "We have a doctor you can go to for your physical for your rating."

"He doesn't need a physical, Amanda, he already has a commercial. They're the same physical."

"Oh? Well, I guess that's not a problem then," she winked. "That means you can focus on getting everything done in time. Luke, you'll need to work up a schedule to get all the ground training in along with the type training."

"I think he'll have plenty of time to study and get the ground training in, since he already knows most of what I have to teach him about the jets," Luke told Amanda. "He's going to the simulator tomorrow."

"How long until he tries his check ride?"

"Honestly? Four days," Luke said. "We'll finish classroom instruction on the Mustang tomorrow, and after that, all he needs is practice behind the controls. I'm positive he can pass a check ride then."

"Well, you're shaving a whole week off our usual time," Amanda smiled at him.

"A week of that is usually glass cockpit training," Luke noted. "He already knows the Garmin, so he has a leg up. It's when we go to CJ training that he'll have to devote some time to avionics training. The Collins is much different from the Garmin."

"But the switch locations will be similar to a Mustang," Kit noted.

“Yes, and that will help you a *lot*.”

Jessie was very excited when they went home, Kit with a new book to study that taught the process of teaching; an amusing repetition in his mind. “I was really nervous at first, but Dave is very nice, and he made me comfortable,” she said in the car. “After about ten minutes, I relaxed when we went over what I knew instead of what I didn’t, *then* we talked about what I don’t know. Classic teaching tactic, building confidence in the student,” she laughed. “He had me plot a trip to Wichita on the Garmin, then he had me carry it out. We flew to Wichita and landed at the airport there, then we came back. He had me do *everything*, and he only talked about flying when I was about to do something wrong. After he had me practice touch and gos, he said that tomorrow I get to solo,” she said. “I’ll be really nervous, but I can do it. I know I can.”

“I almost threw up on my first solo,” Kit told her with a wry chuckle. “Of course, now, I have no idea why I was so nervous.”

“He said he was really impressed at how consistently I could land,” she told him. “All those times you made me practice at Lakeview paid off.”

“I’m glad they did,” he smiled. “How did you do with air traffic control?”

“I messed up a few times, but I’m getting better. I got a little confused one time and almost turned the wrong way, but Dave caught me before I did it.”

“That’s what he’s there for,” Kit chuckled.

Kit wrote his first article that night, after Jessie made hamburgers for dinner and curled up with the laptop to practice on a simulator program

David told her to work with that night. He wrote about arriving at the program, and his first day. He stressed all the preparation work he did before he arrived, the month and more of intense study of everything they sent him, and double stressed the dedication required to be a pilot while at the same time capturing the essence of freedom and fun that came with taking off from a runway and having the whole world laid out before you. He summed it up with the line “it’s easy to fly, but it’s only easy if you’re very serious about being responsible and safe, and that means being a well prepared, well educated, and well trained.” He went on to describe his first day, which started in a classroom, not in a plane or a simulator. “Surprised? Don’t be,” he wrote. “Three quarters of what makes a good pilot isn’t how well he can fly, but how well he is trained. Skills come with training, and training comes with taking it seriously. Nothing can compare to a professional, quality flight instructor using a tried and true technique for training a pilot, and here at Cessna, they have a program that is second to none in quality.” He then went on to describe Jessie’s first day, and explained that flying on the first day actually wasn’t unusual. “It’s actually very easy to fly. It’s just as easy as driving a car, and probably even more so...if only because the only thing you can really run into is the ground, and you don’t have maniacs all around you who look at driving as a full contact sport. As long as you understand the rules, flying is safe, easy, and fun. In the sky, you’re in the wide open spaces, and the only furs who share it with you are just as determined to keep everything safe and courteous as you are. That’s the true mark of the skies compared to the roads, the defensive mindset of those you find there. Hot rods and hot dogs in aviation circles find themselves grounded very quickly, where hot dogs on the streets continue on with impunity until they either kill themselves, or someone else.” He told wrote about Jessie’s upcoming solo flight, and reminisced

about his own first solo, how it was pure joy mixed with abject terror, and how he very nearly threw up when he opened the throttle and started down the runway to begin his first flight without the comforting presence of a flight instructor to make sure he didn't do something stupid. "It's the ultimate test of character, that moment where you have to look yourself in the face and ask yourself *am I ready to really do this?* The only answer can come from yourself, and that's in that moment you pull back on that stick and lift your plane off the runway. That is the moment that you become a pilot, not when you take your check ride and get a license, oh no. That's just a confirmation of the truth you experience in that plane, by yourself, on that runway as you accelerate and watch your speed, both terrified and anxious to hit that magic number that tells you that it's time to pull back on the stick and change forever. That is the moment a fur becomes a pilot. And while it's scary when it's happening, I don't know a pilot that doesn't look back at that moment with fondness and nostalgia." He then went on to talk about Jessie's rather unusual progression. "Is it unusual for a student to solo on her second day? Oh yes, but Jessie has a distinct advantage over other students, and that's a husband who's already a pilot. She spent *months* preparing for this, and her advantage was being the wife of a male who has gone through it himself, who could tell her what to study, what to read, what she needed to know, could tutor her and demonstrate for her. The fact that we own our own private plane and she had the ability to see what it takes to be a pilot from the cockpit also helped quite a bit, for she learned a great deal about being a pilot before she ever decided to pursue her own license, just by watching me. Jessie walked into the front door of Cessna already knowing most of what they teach in the classroom, because I knew exactly what she had to study to be ready to take the exams...everything! All she really needs now is to practice behind the controls of a plane,

something she couldn't do with me, since I'm not a licensed flight instructor, which is what she's receiving. Tomorrow, my wife will change. She will become a *pilot*, for she will know that exhilarating and scary feeling when she opens the throttle on her plane, all by herself, and ask herself that question that has been asked so many times before as she accelerates down the runway. Am I really ready for this? I know my wife, and I know what her answer will be. And I'll be there to watch her plane lift off from the runway and soar into the sky. I will watch her become a pilot." He smiled. "And so will you."

He sent it off without showing it to Jessie, for he didn't want her to see it until after her first solo. He joined her in silent study after finishing his work, engrossing himself in learning the avionics system in a Citation X, since he'd already gone through everything else.

The Citation Mustang flight simulator was, in a word, *awesome*.

It was an absolutely perfect and faithful replication of a real Mustang cockpit, and everything Kit had read and studied all came together like a jigsaw puzzle, falling into place as Luke sat with him and grilled him on all the flight controls, then tested him on the procedures for warming up the plane, the procedures for a cold start and a warm start of the engines, and then they walked through the preflight checklists. He was absorbed in what he was doing, but but he and Luke were keeping an ear out for Kit's phone, and Kit had the video camera right at paw and ready. He had already taken extensive video of the facility with Amanda's blessing, and now he was waiting to video Jessie on her first solo. David was going to call him as she taxied out, and he was waiting for it. Luke knew of his plan, and wouldn't mind at all to go out with him and watch with him. "It's a very important

moment in any pilot's life," Luke chuckled. "I remember my first solo. I almost wet myself."

"Me too," Kit laughed.

The two of them sat in the cockpit as Kit went through the checklists, occasionally having to think a second before finding the right control, mainly because the control locations were different in a Mustang from his 400, even if they did use the same avionics system. In the simulator, Kit performed his first simulated engine start, taxi, and then the video monitors that appeared to be windows in the simulators showed the end of a runway. Kit blew out his breath, checked his indicators to ensure he was good to take off, then pushed the thrust levers forward to takeoff position. The simulator leaned back slightly to simulate the G force of acceleration, and Kit pulled gently back on the yoke when he reached takeoff speed. In a smooth motion, he achieved the nominal ascent angle for their projected flight plan and retracted the landing gear, then started a very gentle ascending turn, a gentle pitch and roll to the right as he lined up for an imaginary flight from Independence, the simulated airport from which he took off, to Tulsa, Oklahoma. The flight plan Kit had been given was for a flight at 300 knots at 17,000 feet, but that was only because it was a very short flight from Independence to Tulsa, a flight of 17 minutes. He brought the simulator up to 17,000 feet and leveled out, then Luke quizzed him on all the indicators as they "cruised" along. Kit answered all of his questions quickly and correctly, then Luke watched as he began the descent and performed the landing checklist. He even remembered to bring up a diagram of the Tulsa airport on the Garmin's database and queue it so it was ready to go when he was on the ground. He made a slow turn to line up with the runway, and then landed the simulator with light grace, so much

so that the simulator barely shimmied and made him wonder if the simulator thought he was on the ground. The weight on wheels switch indicated that they were indeed on the runway, so he hit the brakes and started their deceleration.

“A little slow to react to landing,” Luke noted.

“I thought the simulator was broken, I didn’t feel anything,” Kit laughed as the simulator slowed, and he turned to taxi on the indicated ramp, using the diagram that even showed the location of the plane on the diagram to guide him to where he was supposed to park.

“That’s because that was one of the smoothest first run landings I’ve seen,” Luke said with an approving nod.

“I put way too many hours on a twin engine Beech not to be able to put a multi down softly,” Kit chuckled.

“A Beech?”

“At my flight school. It was very old, it still had steam gauge indicators,” he winked.

Luke laughed. “Once you fly glass, you wonder how the hell you ever managed without it.”

“Amen.”

They sat in the simulator and discussed the flight, which was basically Luke telling him that he did nothing seriously wrong, and only made a few very minor mistakes which they corrected right then and there. But then his phone rang. They both jumped up as Kit answered it, and he heard David’s voice over a propeller engine. “She’s taxiing out now,” he called.

Kit and Luke hurried out to the flight line, and David joined them on a little platform often used to observe take offs and landings, and Kit aimed the camera at the 400 as David used a pawheld radio to tune in to air traffic control on a special training frequency which Jessie, the controller, and David would all use. They listened as Jessie negotiated with the controller to get clearance to take off, and Kit could hear the nervousness in her voice. But he expected her to be nervous. There was no pilot that wasn't nervous on their first solo that wasn't lying. She pulled out to the end of the runway, and he heard David call on the radio. "Go, Jessie, go!"

"C two six seven requesting clearance to take off," she called in a slightly quavering voice.

"C two six seven, cleared to take off, VFR."

"VFR," she acknowledged the controller telling her she was under visual flight rules, then, after a pause, the plane surged forward. Kit followed her with the camera as she raced from right to left in front of them, then right when Kit knew she was up to speed, the plane lifted off the runway smoothly and at a perfect angle. Her wings bobbed just a little, probably due to nerves, but she executed a slow speed ascending turn, by the book, as she flew off.

"Damn, that was almost perfect!" Luke said happily. "What's her course?"

"I'm having her fly up to Blackbow lake and back. I've always loved that flight, it's really relaxing."

"Wow, you're sending her pretty far out for her first time," Luke noted. "That's almost cross country distance."

“She can handle it,” he said with utter confidence.

“How long will that take?” Kit asked.

“About thirty minutes, it’s about forty miles out, and I told her to stay under a hundred and sixty knots. I want her to enjoy her first flight.” He changed channels on his radio and keyed it. “Tower, location of C two six seven?”

“Ten nautical miles heading three two two, one five zero knots.”

“Right on course and under her speed limit,” he said with a nod.

They didn’t have to do it, but all three of them waited right there on the platform, waiting for her to return. The wind started picking up, and that concerned David a little. When he called in to the tower, he frowned.

“There’s a pocket of clear air turbulence coming in ahead of a storm front that wasn’t supposed to get here so fast,” he said sourly, switching channels and calling the tower to call Jessie to warn her of approaching weather conditions and have her speed up to beat the front to the airport. She was already on her way back, so all they could do was wait and watch, and hope she could outrun the approaching bad weather.

Things got a touch more serious when Jessie appeared on the horizon, a bank of clouds appeared at an angle to her right, and the wind started getting erratic on the tarmac. She got clearance to land, and as she was making her approach, the wind suddenly shifted on the flight line as a gust of wind roared over them from an unexpected direction. “C two six seven, crosswind, wave off, wave off!” the tower called just as Jessie was about to land. A gusting crosswind hit her plane, pushing her sideways and dipping her leading wing towards the ground, but she opened her throttle and picked up her nose quickly, just as she was supposed to, using stick and rudder to

counter the force the crosswind was putting on the plane. Kit almost had a heart attack after the fact, when he realized that what just happened was one of the *worst* things a student pilot could face on her first solo flight, a sudden clear-air crosswind gust while landing. That crosswind would have crashed a lesser experienced pilot, and of that there was absolutely no doubt. She called the tower as she flew out and away from the airport, and they directed her to the other runway, where she'd be flying into a headwind, and Kit could only feel very relieved and very proud. Jessie had just passed her biggest test, and that was reacting to a sudden and unforeseen event. She drifted out and made her turn, then approached again.

Kit narrated to the camera as he tracked her. "Jessie had to wave off because of a gusting crosswind on the runway, a rare event, almost like a microburst in a thunderstorm," he explained as Jessie approached, "and now she's landing on a different runway so she has more favorable wind because it's changing direction constantly. Landing in a crosswind is very dangerous, and pilots avoid it unless they have absolutely no other choice. What you just saw was my wife recovering from something that might have crashed another pilot."

"Did she ever," Luke agreed. "That femme can *fly*."

She navigated shifting wind very well for a novice, banging the wheels just a touch harder than she would have otherwise, and then hit her brakes and speed brakes. "Well done!" David called over radio, "and way to not panic, Jessie! I'm proud of ya, girl!"

"I almost wet my pants!" she admitted over the radio, probably unaware that the tower heard her as well.

“Damn fine flying, lady! You just proved you can keep your head in an emergency! Taxi back to the hangar, and be ready to get your first solo endorsement in your logbook, as well as a couple of hugs and kisses from your husband!”

“I think she just got her endorsement for her emergency situation,” Luke noted.

David laughed. “Hell yes. I’ll sign off on that right here and now. She did not panic. All she needs now is her glide training and she’s golden on her emergency procedures. And if the examiner doesn’t like it, well, we got *tape* of it.”

They met her at the plane, and Kit gave her a huge hug and a kiss. “Well done, pretty kitty,” he told her before she could even do her post flight.

“You’re a pilot now, Jessie,” David grinned at her. “Not many pilots can say they got their emergency response endorsement on their first solo.”

“Really? Why?” she asked.

“Because waving off in that crosswind qualifies as an emergency, mainly because it sure as hell wasn’t planned,” Luke told her. “You did exactly what you were supposed to do, and you did some great flying correcting when that crosswind hit you.”

“I just did what Kit told me to do in a crosswind,” she answered. “I didn’t get scared until *after* I was about twenty seconds out from the airport,” she admitted with a shy, nervous smile. “When I tried my second landing, my paws were shaking on the controls.”

“Well, you did great!” David beamed. “I want a copy of that video, Kit, we can use it as a perfect example of what to do when you’re hit by a crosswind. We can use it to teach other pilots.”

“You got it,” Kit nodded.

“So, I did well?” Jessie asked.

“That’s a silly question!” David laughed. “Here, show her the video, Kit.”

Jessie was surprised when she saw the video herself, as the four of them watched from the small LCD screen on the back of the camera. She saw how the plane slid sideways and one wing dipped, but then the plane corrected quickly and nosed up, aborting the landing. “Wow, I did that?” she asked.

“Like I said, you did great, Jessie,” David repeated. “Now, you feel up to going up again?”

“Uh, am I soloing?”

“No, I’m going up with you this time,” he smiled. “We’re going to go over some things and just let you log hours.”

“Good, I think I’ll feel a little better being with someone else this time,” she laughed nervously. “I’m a little nervous now.”

“Perfectly understandable, but you know what? I’ll feel totally comfortable letting you fly, because now I *know* you won’t panic in an emergency. I’ll feel totally safe flying with you.”

Jessie absolutely beamed.

And so, Jessie's first solo flight was a bit more exciting than Kit would have liked, but like David, he was now confident that she wouldn't ever crash a plane because she panicked. She had proved her mettle.

She proved she was a *pilot*.

When it came to getting a rating, Kit was the first one to draw blood. Four days after they began, on a blustery, windy, stormy Thursday that grounded Jessie because she couldn't fly with a cloud deck and put her in a flight simulator for the day, Kit took his first check ride. Kit was excited, anxious, nervous, and terrified all at the same time. He was looking at the day that a boyhood dream would come true, and he'd been so excited the night before that he only slept about two hours. He'd spent the rest of that time studying everything, doing the software quizzes, and reciting checklist operations over and over. He was at the Cessna facility at six, leaving Jessie to drive in on her own, and paced around for the three hours while waiting for his check ride time going over everything in his head. Then, finally, the appointed hour had arrived, and the check ride for his coveted, dreamed-of jet rating had begun.

To his surprise, it wasn't an FAA examiner that administered the check ride, it was one of the Cessna instructors, who was authorized by the FAA to perform the exam. His name was Justin, and he was a tall, slender leopard who was friendly and nice.

But being nice didn't mean that he was going to go easy on Kit. His oral exam was demanding, almost exhausting, but Kit answered every question quickly and concisely, whether he was right or wrong. Kit wasn't perfect on his oral exam, making a few mistakes, but he made no mistake

worth a pink slip, which was the *fail* paperwork that would be given to him if he answered a critical question wrong, or made a potentially dangerous mistake during the check flight. After the oral exam, Kit and Justin got into the simulator, and Kit was given his simulated flight orders. Justin didn't remain quiet as Kit bent to the task at paw, still asking the occasional question about what he was doing, and more importantly, why he was doing it. He asked quite a few questions about the engines, and then he fell silent as Kit finished the preflights and started the engines...at least in simulation.

The simulated check ride was an hour long, with Jessie watching from the simulator control panel the same way he'd watched her solo from the platform, and Kit had been warned that there *would* be a simulated emergency during the check ride by Luke. The check ride for jets always included an emergency situation to which the pilot had to respond, to ensure that the pilot knew what to do. And Kit, perhaps a little indignantly, felt that they were being a tad unfair.

Kit's emergency situation ended up becoming landing the jet on one engine, on backup power, in a thunderstorm, on a short runway.

It started with the engine. He got a fire warning in engine #1, and did exactly what he was trained to do. He pulled the fire level, declared an inflight emergency, redeployed his power management and flight controls to a single engine configuration, and executed an emergency descent as he waited for control to give him instructions. As he descended, feeling the plane trying to yaw to the left because the lost engine was no longer putting thrust on that side of the plane, the plane's electrical breakers popped, and the plane went on battery power, lighting up his warning board like a Christmas tree. Kit declared *that* emergency, then was warned that the only airport where he could land was experiencing a thunderstorm. But he had

no choice. Since he had an emergency, all traffic was cleared for him so he could land, and he had to make a very difficult approach while fighting shifting and stiff winds, and landing on a runway that was very short, forcing him to make a short strip landing on one engine, on battery power, in a thunderstorm.

But he did it. From as near as he could tell, he put the wheels down about fifty feet from the safe edge of the runway, and hit all the brakes as he executed a short strip deceleration. The simulator rumbled and shivered as it simulated a jet making an emergency brake, and then the simulator rolled to a stop about three hundred feet from the end of the runway, a runway that was just barely long enough for the plane to begin with.

Kit's paws were actually shaking on the yoke when the simulator stopped moving, and he blew out his breath, but didn't stop. The check ride was not over until he successfully completed all emergency procedures pertaining to the emergency, and that required an emergency shutdown of the other engine and to engage all the emergency fire suppression protocols to prevent another engine fire in case he was leaking jet fuel into the damaged engine or onto the runway. That required a total shutdown of the electrical system to prevent sparks and warning the tower that he had a potential fire hazard, so they would mobilize the fire trucks to come to the jet.

When the lights in the simulator controls winked out, Kit blew out his breath, and Justin said nothing, which made Kit very, very nervous. He was silent nearly a full minute, and then he looked Kit in the eye and smiled. "I'd say that's a pass," he said. "You made a couple of minor mistakes and answered a couple of questions wrong, but nothing worth a pink slip. And I think that's the most difficult emergency situation we have programmed in

the simulator, which you handled very well. Congratulations, you're now rated for solo flight on a Mustang."

Kit could not suppress the whoop of delight. He jumped out of the seat and ran down the ramp, and then wrapped Jessie in a huge hug, picking her up and spinning her in a circle. "Congratulations, baby!" she said happily, giving him a big kiss on the nose, and then kissing him full on the lips. He felt absolutely ecstatic, as happy as he did the day he got his license, because he had just completed a childhood dream.

Despite everything his father did to stop him, Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan III had finally learned how to fly a jet.

They awarded him his type rating after the check ride, a beautiful little form that was a temporary rating authorization until he got an updated license from the FAA. Right there, on the field on his license that marked his endorsements, were those wonderful little letters that denoted that he, Kit Vulpan, could fly a jet. And not just fly it, but fly as the Pilot in Command, which in a single pilot rated jet meant he could fly it alone, without a second pilot in the cockpit.

Luke shook his paw, Amanda shook his paw, David shook his paw, Justin shook his paw, then Luke smiled and pointed him towards the door. "It's time to go to Wichita, Kit," he declared. "You just landed in a thunderstorm, so I think we can trust you to take off in the real thing in the rain."

They took him to a different small hangar, where three jets were sitting. Two of them were Citation Mustangs, and the third looked like a CJ model. "Alright, newly rated pilot, fly me to Wichita," Luke grinned, pointing at the nearer Mustang.

Kit smiled evilly. "I don't remember how!" he whined, which made Luke give him a startled look, then explode into helpless laughter.

It had been a nervous Kit that had done the check ride not an hour ago, but Kit's paws were now trembling for an entirely different reason. He was almost too excited to stand still, but he kept his composure enough to remember everything he'd been taught. Luke watched on silently as he did all the necessary preflight checks, did the walk around, then got in and started a cold engine start checklist. The sound of the fuel pumps clicking and the batteries humming were almost like music to his ears, and then the sound of the engine starting sang through his soul like a chorus of angels when the FADEC controls started each engine in turn.

"Has this plane ever been flown?" he asked impulsively as he noticed the absolute spotless condition of the cockpit.

"Once," he answered. "This is going to be our second live trainer, what we'll use as what you might call the second check ride. Pilots will rate on the simulator, then come out here and do an actual flight, just like you're doing now. But for now, it's your personal taxi from here to Wichita and back. You're going to help shake it down so other students can use it."

"I'll enjoy every minute of it," he grinned.

"For the seventeen minutes we'll be in the air," Luke chuckled. "You won't even get to ten thousand feet before you have to descend."

"I'm still going to love it. I've worked for this day since I was sixteen," he said.

"Well, you're nowhere near done yet," Luke reminded him. "I still have four other training programs to give you."

“Four?”

He nodded. “You’ll do your CJ, Encore, and ten training in Wichita, then come back here to rate on the CJ four, which isn’t in production yet. And we’ll be squeezing in an hour here and two hours there doing your ground training for your CFI ratings. Since you’ll also be doing the FOI classes, you’ll need to be there by five every weekday starting Monday. They hold them at the Wichita facility, so it’s kinda good that you’ll be in Wichita for the next few weeks. At least you’ll be able to go from a simulator straight to class.”

“What are we going to do in Wichita today?”

“Test,” he answered. “Same as we did the first day of Mustang training. I need to see how much you remember from the study material we sent you, so I know where to focus your classroom time.”

“Ah, okay. What kind of schedule are we looking at?”

“I’d say a week for the CJ depending on how much you studied, two or three days for the Encore, then a week to ten days for the ten,” he answered. “The CJ will be the hardest for you because it uses the Collins instead of the Garmin, but so does the Encore. So you’ll skate through the Encore, and then have to study a new avionics suite for the ten. You’ll also have to get used to working with another pilot for the Encore and ten training.”

“Will I rate as a pilot in command?”

He shook his head. “No one can rate as the PIC immediately. You have to do twenty hours in the right chair first, because we train you *as* the PIC. But there’s no test, just the hour requirement. Once you have your twenty hours, we’ll sign you off, and you can sit in the left chair.”

“Well, I doubt I’ll pull that off while I’m here unless I spend an entire weekend in a simulator,” he chuckled.

“Nah, four hours a day in a simulator for five days, and you’re set. You can do it in a week, and from the way things look now, you’ll have a week to kill waiting for Jessie.”

Kit got an electric thrill through his tail as they taxied out onto the ramp, after he’d plotted a flight to Wichita using the Garmin’s navigation system. The rain had stopped, and the sun was peeking through a break in the clouds, sending a golden shaft of light down onto the prairie west of the airport. Kit taxied the Mustang out, then he got clearance to take off and pulled out onto the runway. He could only smile as he saw the runway laid out before him, and then his paw tingled as he put it on the thrust control and pushed it forward. The engines roared as they spooled up, he let go of the brakes when they reached the desired power, the Mustang surged forward, and he felt a wonderful push into his seat as the little jet galloped down the runway, quickly reaching takeoff speed. He picked her up off the ground with a light pull on the yoke, then retracted the landing gear even as he turned towards Wichita.

“Wonderful feeling, isn’t it?” Luke asked with a big smile. “I remember my first jet flight. I felt like I was king of the sky.”

“That’s a good description,” Kit laughed.

Kit was almost disappointed when he landed at Wichita, putting the tires down right on the second set of stripes. Wichita was 90 miles away from Independence, nearly 2 hours by car, but only 17 minutes by jet, which included take off and landing time. When one was going 300 knots, which was around 345 miles an hour, 90 miles was about how long it took

to listen to a couple of songs on the radio. The Mustang accelerated up to 300 knots quickly, really pushing it to fly so fast at low altitude, but Luke let him have his fun and didn't mention how much fuel they were burning to go that fast at 9,000 feet. They didn't even really reach a cruise altitude because it was so short, it was more like a ballistic arc, ascending to an apex, then descending to Wichita.

After they arrived, they toured the Wichita flight facility. It was about ten times larger than what they had in Independence, with classrooms, hangars, and two flight simulators for every jet they taught...so that put 16 simulators in the complex; two each for the CJ1, CJ2, CJ3, Encore, XLS, Sovereign, and X. Before they started the tests, though, Luke took him to a hangar and gave him a tour of the three CJ models. "You only take one rating test for all three," Luke explained. "They're all similar, there's just slightly different handling characteristics because of size. But the avionics, the systems, the procedures, they're all the same for each of them."

"So this is the fabled Collins pro line twenty-one," Kit said, looking at the glass panels in the cockpit of the CJ3.

"Best in the business," Luke said. "After you rate on this, you'll think a Garmin is steam controls. Every jet you rate on from here out uses the twenty-one or some system based on the twenty-one. The ten uses a different system, the Primus two thousand, but it's laid out almost exactly the same way as the twenty-one you see here. That makes transitioning up through the Citation fleet very easy."

"So I just learn new systems instead of having to relearn everything every time."

"Exactly."

Luke was expecting Kit to know a great deal about the CJ and the Pro Line 21, and Kit did not disappoint. They tested not in a classroom, but in a simulator, as Luke grilled him about the jet and its systems, and Kit justified Luke's belief that Kit came loaded for bear when he came to this school to rate on jets. He had all but memorized all the material they sent him, he had really used the software they had sent him that let him apply that knowledge in a practical manner. They talked about the CJ systems the rest of the afternoon, until Luke looked at his watch. "Woah, it's nearly seven!" he said, then he laughed. "We'd better get back."

"So, what's the verdict?" Kit asked curiously.

"Two or three hours in a classroom, then you hit the simulator," Luke smiled. "And I *promise* we won't be that mean to you on the CJ check ride. We always introduce an emergency situation into the check ride when we use a simulator to see how the pilot responds, and we kinda decided to give you the nastiest scenario we had to see how well you'd do. I promise, your CJ emergency won't be quite so ruthless."

Kit laughed. "So, now I know whose house to firebomb," he grinned.

"Guilty," he said, raising his paws. "Don't shoot me, Sheriff, I got five kids to feed!"

"You're on the list!"

Luke allowed him to fly the Mustang back, and when they landed, he patted the console. "Damn, would I love to own a little jet like this. I bet it can land anywhere my four hundred can land, and it has almost the same range."

“Yeah, it can, and your four hundred actually has *more* range than a Mustang. If you want one, though, you’d better put down a deposit and stand in line. We have a line stretching back to two thousand ten for these little puppies. I kinda don’t like them, though.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, they fly very nice,” he said as they taxied towards the hangar. “But they’re really meant for short range recreation, a jet version of a private aircraft. After all, it *is* very small. My view is this; if I’m going to own a plane, I’d like something that can go some distance, has some legroom, and has a *real* lavatory, not a seat with a bucket and a pull curtain.”

“Well, that’s a step up from the portable urinal we keep in my four hundred,” Kit chuckled.

“This Mustang has just slightly less range than your four hundred, but it does go faster. And it’s pressurized,” Luke said. “But if I could afford any Citation, I’d buy a CJ three. It has almost double the range of a Mustang, able to go intercontinental if you go along the right routes, it’s very economical to fly, it can take off and land at some *really* short strips when it has to, it’s single pilot certified, and it’s roomy. And it has a lavatory,” he chuckled.

“And it’s what, seven million dollars?”

Luke nodded. “So I won’t be buying one anytime soon,” he laughed. “The Mustang is around three million. It’s really aimed at, pardon the comparison, furs like you. Furs of means who want a private jet for their own recreational use, the private pilot who wants to move up to a jet, and can afford it. Though, I have to admit, we’ve had quite a few orders from

air taxi services to use it for short range trips, since it's *very* easy on the wallet when it comes to operational costs. It factors out to about three dollars a mile for total fuel and maintenance."

"That's not bad at all for a jet," Kit nodded as he taxied up to the hangar.

"If you don't mind landing to refuel and don't need a lot of space, I guess a Mustang will do you. After all, you can use the bathroom when you land to refuel," he chuckled. "But if I could afford it, I'd go with a CJ three."

"By the time I can afford a jet, they'll probably have warp engines or something," Kit chuckled as they rolled to a stop, and Kit shut down the engines. "The only reason I'm here is because my sister is rich, and she loves me. I'd never be able to afford this otherwise."

"Huh. To be honest, I was sure you'd be flying out of here in your new jet, and your wife would be flying your plane home. I thought you were just rating on more than one jet because you wanted to, you know, get the whole experience. I mean, you'll be here for six weeks, that hints that you have the time and resources to do something like this."

"She *is* flying the four hundred home...just with me in it," he chuckled. "I make less money than you do, Luke. Hell, half the reason I want my flight instructor rating is so maybe I can earn a little money on the side, since I have my own plane. A flight instructor with his own plane can freelance. My sister bought my four hundred for me," he explained to Luke's surprised look. "Actually, my whole family did. I couldn't afford a one seventy two, let alone a four hundred. If you come down to brass tacks, Luke, I'm actually poor. The only reason I got to do this is because my rich

sister loves me and is helping me achieve a boyhood dream. When I go home, the dream will be over, and I go back to my twenty thousand dollar a year job and scrape to make ends meet, just like everyone else. All I'll have is the memory of doing what I've dreamed of since I was a boy."

"Well, that's a surprise. Really a surprise," Luke said, tapping his chin in consideration.

"I know, a poor Vulpan," Kit chuckled as they started post flight. "Shouldn't the world be exploding right now?"

Luke gave him a startled look, then laughed richly.

What was almost as good as getting his first jet rating was telling Vil. He called her that night after getting home, and didn't even give her the chance to say a word. "I got it, Vil!" he announced. "I passed my test for my first jet! I'm a *jet pilot* now, sis!"

"Alright!" she said with a laugh. "I'm so happy for you, bro! You finally did it!"

"And I have you to thank for it, sis," he said gratefully. "I can't ever thank you enough, for everything. For my jet rating. For sending Jessie to flight school. And for letting them give me FOI classes so I can get my flight instructor rating."

"This six weeks is all part of what the family owes you, bro," she said seriously. "The family stole six years of your happiness away from you, and if not for our bastard father, you wouldn't be missing your ear and have screws in your back."

"That's odd logic."

“If he wouldn’t have driven you out, you would have never been hit in the first place.”

“And I would never have met Jessie,” he pointed out.

“Well, I’ll be very selective about what crimes I feel you deserve compensation for,” she said flippantly. “I think these six weeks are just a pebble on the beach of what you’re due.”

“We can consider the six weeks here payment in full, Vil,” he told her.

“I’ll be the one to decide when you’ve been fully repaid, bro. I *am* the ruler of the family now.”

“I think you’re terribly biased.”

“So?”

Kit and Jessie had been *busy*.

It was almost three jobs now. Kit was doing research and writing for the magazine, taking video anywhere and everywhere he could. On top of that, he was busting his tail working on the CJ model rating. He had finished his classroom work, and had been logging hours in the simulator, adjusting to the Pro Line 21 avionics, which required a lot more work than rating to the Mustang, since it had the Garmin suite. But Kit was able to adjust, picking up the Pro Line quickly given how much different it was.

Luke was right, it was *better* than the Garmin. It was intuitive, comprehensive, and very well laid out, easy to use and easier to learn. It simplified the complicated systems of a jet to nearly “hit a switch” levels, automating many things pilots used to have to spend a lot of time

calculating or looking up themselves. The autopilot was exceptional, and flight planning and management was a dream.

And now, on top of that, Kit was taking Fundamentals Of Instruction classes, or FOI. They were classes to teach how to teach, and while the classes weren't mandatory, they would help him pass the flight instructor FOI test that *was*. It wasn't a one on one class, it was Kit and two other furs being taught by a *teacher*, not a flight instructor. These were not flight courses in the conventional sense, though in some places, a flight instructor did teach FOI. But Cessna was a big company, they could afford to bring in a real teacher to teach pilots how to teach, so they could be flight instructors. The classes weren't hard, at least, and Jessie, who had taken similar classes in college for her preparation to be a teacher, was able to help him quite a bit.

The classroom time wasn't all he was doing, either. He was logging ground training hours on top of his FOI classes, squeezed in after simulator or classroom sessions. He needed about 40 total hours of ground training for all the ratings he wanted, and that put a real demand on his time. Luke did it in a linear fashion, but all the training he was getting was turning every day into a 14-16 hour day...and then he had to go home and study afterwards. It was a murderous pace, almost too much, but Kit was determined to squeeze absolutely everything he could out of the six weeks that Vil had arranged for him. He hadn't really come here to get his flight instructor rating, but they offered it, and with a lot of hard work, he could get it...and he may never have another chance. So he was going for it.

It was a bit funny, really. Kit and Jessie both had been very busy all last weekend, and between the two of them, they logged nearly 45 hours in flight or in flight simulators. Kit had spent 23 in the simulators on Friday,

Saturday, and Sunday, and Jessie had spent 14 hours flying, logging her hours for her license, then spent 8 hours in a simulator after clouds moved in and forced her to land; that was the curse of being a VFR pilot. When Monday came, he was settling in to spend a good 6 hours in the simulator, but Luke reminded him that he had to go to that class, which was also held in Wichita, and he had had to hustle there.

Jessie was moving right along. She had completed all of her logged hour requirements for her private pilot license, and was schedule to take her check ride today, 11 days after beginning, on a clear, sunny Thursday. She had taken her written exam yesterday, and had passed with a 96, only missing 4 questions on the whole 100 question test. David had decided to wait one more day to help solidify her on some parts of the oral exam dealing with the Cessna 400 itself, since questions about the plane was part of her check ride oral exam...and this actually worked against Jessie. Most pilots took their check ride in a much simpler plane, like a 172, but Jessie was taking hers in a 400, with all of its additional systems and controls. The 172 didn't have anti-icing systems, speed brakes, TCAS, and so on and so on, where a 400 did. And since they were part of the plane, she had to be able to answer questions about them as part of her oral exam.

Kit was very busy, but he couldn't miss her check ride. He also didn't want to crowd her, so he took video of her and her check ride examiner from a distance, a portly possom, as they walked around the 400. The examiner would point to something, then the two of them would talk for a while. He seemed to talk about the wings and the flaps, then they went around the tail, then they walked around to the propellor. Then they did it again, this time clearly for the walk around preflight, as Jessie tested flight control surfaces and inspected the plane.

Then they got inside. Kit held his breath as they talked in the cockpit for a while, then she started the engine. Luke and David joined him as the 400 taxied out onto the ramp, and Kit taped as she taxied out to the runway, lined up, and then accelerated to take off.

“And there she goes,” David said with a chuckle. “Tom’s in for a shock.”

“Tom?” Kit asked.

“The examiner. I was a bit ticked when he was assigned, since he’s prejudiced against femmes. He’s always harder on femmes than he is on males. But he’ll be in for a shock against Jessie.”

“He’s that bad?” Kit asked.

“He’s not blatant about it,” David answered. “But when he does Citation checkrides for femme pilots, he always asks them harder questions, and always gives them harder emergency situations in the simulator. Jessie will beat him up,” David laughed. “She will *ace* this.”

Kit taped it when they came back from the navigation part, and watched as she performed a slow approach, her flaps fully deployed, but too high to land. He saw the plane shudder slightly, as the examiner made her stall the plane, but she correctly got herself out of the stall without losing more than ten feet of height, powering up and retracting her flaps. Then she went around and performed a short strip landing, landing smoothly and then hitting the brakes, bringing the plane to a stop in half the runway length, right in the intersection between the runways. She then started the plane forward again, then turned on the first ramp leading to a parallel taxiway.

“That had to be her fifty foot obstacle as well,” David mused. “Typical Tom, a short strip landing with an imaginary obstacle to boot. And he always makes them stop at the intersection.”

“Yeah,” Kit agreed. “She aced that landing, didn’t she?”

“Beyond aced it,” David laughed.

They went over to the plane after it came to a stop on the flight line, and the two of them talked a minute in the cockpit before the possum opened his door and started climbing out. He approached the three of them as they came towards him, and gave David a nod. “She should have flown her check ride weeks ago,” he announced with satisfaction. “She scored perfect.”

Kit had to resist jumping into the air, passing the camera to David and rushing forward. Jessie climbed down from the trainer and got swallowed up in his arms as he gave her a nearly crushing hug, then hooked his paws under her arms, picked her up, and swung her around like a child. “Congratulations baby!” he said giddily.

“So I passed?” she asked excitedly.

“You scored perfect, Jessie!” David told her, taking video of Kit swinging her around.

“Yes!” she squealed, then leaned down and kissed Kit on the nose. “So who’s flying the plane home now, my handsome fox?” she asked.

“You are!” he told her, pulling her down into a hug. “Congratulations, pretty kitty, you’re a *pilot* now!”

“And now we start flying the twin engine plane, right?” Jessie asked.

“Just as soon as we get your temporary license from the FAA office here, we will,” David told her. “We only have four more weeks, Jessie, so we can’t stop to celebrate too much. You still need your multi engine and IFR, and we’ll be just squeaking you by on your requirements.”

“How long will it take to get the multi?”

“About a week,” David answered. “It’s basically just learning how having two engines changes how you do things, and the entire test is practical. An experienced pilot could pass his multi practical after as little as two full days of training, if he really buckled down and had complete access to the plane. But since you’re a new pilot, you’ll need a little more time. Then comes the IFR, and *that* will be what takes up the majority of your time with us, because you have to log about fifty hours of flight time under certain conditions. We can use a flight simulator for some of it, some of it will be solo, and some of it has to be in in a plane. There’s a lot to it. I figure that will take us about two weeks minimum, three weeks maximum to get the logged hours done, and then there’s fifteen hours of devoted training I have to give you, then you have to do your checkride. You should be ready for ten hour days preparing for your IFR, Jessie, and most of that either flying or in a simulator.”

“But if I get my IFR done in two weeks, that leaves us a whole week,” she realized.

“Which you’ll be spending in the Mustang rating program,” David said with a big grin at Kit.

“I thought I needed my commercial—“

“No. All you need to rate to fly a jet is your private, multi, and IFR. Once you have those, you *can* rate. It’s no guarantee you’ll finish in time,

just to warn you. But you already know the Garmin, so that shaves a good week off the usual training. You'll have a week to try to learn enough to try a check ride. If you pass, good for you. If you fail, don't worry about it, it's enough that you tried with so little flight experience. We're of a mind to give you the chance just to see how well you can do, because you have *impressed* us, Jessie. You won't be able to rate as pilot in command because you have no experience, but you *can* rate to fly a jet as the copilot. Now, getting insurance would be ridiculously expensive, but hey, you'll have the rating, won't you?"

"They'd insure me?"

"They *have* to," Luke smirked. "Anyone who graduates from our training program is guaranteed insurance, since *we* trained you, and we don't sign off on furs who can't fly. Believe it or not, this isn't a free ride for either of you, you have to *prove* you can do it. An insurance company would be forced to offer you a policy, because you were given your rating by *Cessna*, not a flight school. They'd charge you through the nose, but they'd have to offer you the insurance."

"That's why I want to sign off on my four hundred through *you* while I'm here, so my insurance comes way down," Kit nodded.

"Take a test, you have it," David grinned at him. "Because we seriously doubt you don't know your plane. You've been flying it, after all. And it's very clear you taught Jessie almost everything she knows."

Kit and Jessie went to eat a celebratory lunch of hamburgers at a McDonald's near the airport, and Jessie was a mixture of happy and tentative. "Do you really think I could do it?" she asked. "Really learn to fly a jet? Like *really*?"

“It won’t be easy,” he warned her, taking a bite out of a French fry. “I won’t lie about that, pretty kitty. But you’re one of the most intelligent femmes I’ve ever known. It would take a lot of work, love. And I mean a *lot*. You’ll have to study a lot, and fly long hours in the simulator. You’ll have a hell of a lot of information thrown at you all at once, because you have to get your multi and IFR done before they throw the Mustang at you. It would be like being in the mother of all pressure-cooker crash courses. You’ll definitely have a few sleepless nights studying. And you don’t have to do it. If you find it’s too much for you while you’re doing your IFR, then tell them you don’t want to do it. There’s nothing making you, love. Hell, you’d be like me, rated to fly a plane you’ll never fly. But, it’s up to you. If you want to try it, then I’ll do everything I can to help you.”

“Well, let’s see how well I do learning to fly multi-engine planes, then decide from there.”

“A wise move,” he said with a smile and a nod.

It *was* a terrible burden on her, but Kit thought that it was possible. Flying was nothing but a combination of memorizing information and practicing the procedures once in a cockpit. Theoretically, they could take someone with absolutely no flight experience and teach him to fly a 747 just by letting him practice enough. And that was where Jessie, and him for that matter, had that advantage. In regular flight schools, like the one that Sheila and Allison were now attending, they were restricted by time. They only did an hour here, an hour there, and maybe a few hours on the weekends. But Kit and Jessie were here literally full time, spending 8 to 10 hours a day, every day, working on their skills, and learning what they had to learn to do it. Sheila could probably get her license in two weeks if she spent 12 hours a day on it, 7 days a week, and spent most of her off time

studying the bookwork that came with the course. That was how Jessie bulled through to her private in just 11 days, because she walked into the place already knowing most of what she needed to know...and that knowledge came from consistent study and access to a plane whenever she wanted it. But from here out, both he and Jessie knew that it wasn't going to be very easy. Kit couldn't really prepare her for multi engines because he had no access to one, he could only explain things to her as best he could from memory. And IFR could not be easily prepared for, since the vast majority of an IFR rating was logged hours and *training*, not *studying*. Jessie couldn't really study in advance for an IFR, only study after she was trained. So, it was good to wait and see how well she did now that they were delving into area where Jessie's preparation and prior training would not help her.

Could she really walk out of Kansas rated to fly a Mustang? Oh yes. But would it be easy? Hell no. In fact, it would be the hardest thing she'd ever do in her life.

They separated after lunch. Kit went back to Wichita to continue logging hours in the CJ simulator, while Jessie began her work on multi engine planes. He went to FOI class after, and got back to the hotel around eight. Jessie hadn't yet got back, so he made sure to make her a nice dinner of broiled salmon steaks and asparagus. When she didn't come back by nine, he called her. She answered on the first ring. "Hey, handsome fox."

"Are you okay, love? It's nearly nine."

"It is? Oh my goodness!" she gasped. "Dave, it's nearly nine! I'm so sorry, handsome fox! I'll come home right now and cook."

“I’ve already cooked, you silly kitty,” he chuckled. “I just want you to come get it before it gets cold.”

“I’ll be there in just a little bit.”

“What made you lose track of time?”

“We just got back from a night flight,” she answered. “It’s both for my multi and for my IFR, Dave said. We were talking about how I did.”

“Ah. Well, broiled salmon awaits you, pretty kitty.”

“Oooh, you’re so good to me, handsome fox!”

“It’s a congratulation dinner for becoming a real pilot,” he told her.

She got back to the hotel in about fifteen minutes, and ate with her usual speed. She was very happy and bubbly, a welcome and wonderful change from the almost frenetic femme that had kept her nose in a book or her laptop almost continuously for the last three days. “Feels nice to finally take a breather, doesn’t it?” he smiled.

She laughed. “I’m not unhappy, though,” she told him. “All that work was worth it. Have you told Vil or my folks?”

“And ruin it for you? No! I left that happy chore to you, love. It’s your accomplishment, it’s your privilege to spread the happy news.”

She did that after dinner, calling Vil, her mother, and Sheila while Kit worked on more research for the magazine. They were definitely treating him with kid gloves, he could see. The research assignments Rick sent him were child’s play, almost like it was token busy work. But he made up for it with his articles, for he had an article to write tonight about Jessie’s victory, about getting her private pilot rating, getting her pilot’s license. It was such

an easy article to write. He captured the joy of finally holding that temporary license in your paw, knowing that all your hard work had finally culminated in the right to get into a plane and fly off into the wild blue yonder, that the world was opened up to you like an oyster holding a pearl. He then described what was next for her, how she was moving on to multi-engine planes, and then would get her instrument rating that would allow her to fly in cloud cover and at night, and make instrument approaches to airports. He then talked about his own feeling of anxiety and trepidation at tomorrow, for tomorrow he would do his next check ride, on the CJ series. He would do his check ride in a CJ3 simulator, and that would also cover the CJ1 and CJ2 if he passed, since they had the exact same systems and procedures, and the differences between them were minimal, though he *would* be tested on those differences during the check ride's oral exam. "Even though I'm already a jet pilot, and still giddy about it, I find myself with the same knot in my stomach," he wrote. "I know it's a bit silly, but I can't help it. A test is a test, and I'm being tested on how well I learned, and that reflects on both me and my wonderful sister, who paid a *lot* of money to send me and Jessie to this training center. If I don't do the best I can, I'll feel as if I failed myself, and what's worse, I failed my sister. So, I guess you can say that my own desire to earn a new jet rating is only half of my motivation. The other half is to make sure my sister isn't embarrassed by me, that she has good reason to spend her money on me, that I won't let her down. I want her to be proud of me, because I love her."

Jessie spent a very happy evening calling friends and family, and then went to bed around eleven. Kit again stayed up almost all night studying the CJ series, going over everything over and over and over, until Jessie came out into the living room at three in the morning, collected him, and forced him to go to bed by literally grabbing hold of him and holding him in bed,

assaulting him with her purring. It never failed to seduce him into a sense of peace and contentment, and he fell asleep soon afterward.

Kit took his check ride at eight in the morning, almost as soon as he got out of the Mustang with Luke. Justin was again his examiner, and they got right down to business. He spent nearly a half hour answering questions, and then Justin again sat in the copilot's seat of the simulator as Kit began the practical section of the test. He got his destination, plotted his course, input all the information into the Pro Line 21, and then went through the procedures to start the jet. Once he had it up and running, he taxied it out to the simulated runway, got clearance, and took off. The simulated check ride would take about half an hour, a jaunt from Wichita to Topeka, and as Luke promised, his simulated emergency was nowhere near as nasty as his Mustang one. The one this time was an indicator showing that the nose landing gear did not fully deploy, which caused Kit to undertake the procedures dealing with such an emergency. Cycling the gear did no good, did not clear the warning light, so he declared an emergency and requested a low speed fly-by of the tower so they could visually check his gear and see if they were deployed or not, if it was a gear problem or some problem with the indicators themselves. The simulated fly-by was done and the controller, who was actually Luke over an intercom, told him that his nosegear was indeed down. But, that was no indication that it was actually locked, so he decided to undertake full safety. He requested an emergency landing and permission to circle to burn fuel to lighten the plane...and at this point, the conditions of the simulator diverged from actual reality. To speed things up, Luke informed him that they would *assume* that Kit had circled long enough to reduce his fuel to the amount he specified he wanted on hand to make the landing. The fuel indicator on his plane magically changed to reflect about thirty minutes of flight, and then he lined up with

the runway and executed a bad-gear landing. He put the back wheels down first, and ran with the nose off the runway, slowing down as much as possible before putting weight on his nosegear, and then he let the plane's nose come down. The weight hit the nosegear, and then the simulator shuddered as indicators told him that the nosegear had buckled and collapsed under the simulated plane; it had *not* been locked. He jacked the brakes to stop the plane as fast as possible, kept the sliding nose of the plane aimed straight down the runway, then quickly shut down the engines and the electrical systems to prevent a possible fire the second the plane slid to a complete stop.

“When do I get to land in a check ride and actually *land*?” Kit asked with a rueful chuckle. “You may not even know if I know how to actually land a jet.”

Justin laughed, and made a final note on his clipboard. “Anyone who can put his back wheels down and run a good six hundred feet of runway before putting the nose down can land a damn jet,” he grinned. “Oh, by the way, you passed. Congratulations.”

And so, Kit was happy all over again. He had earned his second jet type rating.

After lunch, and calling Jessie to tell her of his success, they started on the Encore. Again, they started with a quiz of what he knew, and he again did not disappoint Luke. They spent about three hours doing that, then Luke chuckled and had him go straight to a simulator. The Encore required two pilots, so Luke was in the simulator with him acting first as the pilot in command, and then as the copilot, teaching him the way two pilots worked, how the Encore had certain tasks performed by one pilot or the other.

After about seven hours in the simulator, Kit went to his FOI class, then flew back to Independence and went back to the hotel. Jessie was already there when he arrived, and had made him Cincinnati style chili. “How did you do today, pretty kitty?”

“I flew for about six hours,” she smiled in reply. “David says I’m doing just fine. It’s a lot more complicated flying a multi-engine plane,” she complained.

“That’s why they call them complex, pretty kitty,” Kit chuckled. “Did you like it?”

“That plane isn’t as nice as ours I felt really weird flying using a *yoke*.”

“The stick in our plane is an exception, not the norm.”

“Well, I like our plane better.”

“So do I, truth be told. The side stick feels natural in your paw.”

Kit got to spread the good news of another rating, and wrote another article about his experience that night. Jessie had taken video of her night flight in the 303, so they sent that into the magazine as well. And both of them, as if by unspoken agreement, put aside all studying that night and went to go see a movie, just relaxing a bit. Tomorrow they’d both be doing a lot of flying time, since it would be Saturday, and poor David and Luke had yet to have a day off. They’d been completely at Kit and Jessie’s beck and call since they arrived in Kansas.

Kit arrived in Wichita at the Encore simulator the next morning ready to log more hours, and Luke didn’t disappoint. They put about five hours in the simulator, and then they went to lunch, which was lunch with Jessie, since she flew their plane to Wichita to have lunch with him, and so he

could show her around. After his long lunch, he was majorly derailed when Justin appeared again, right out of the blue. “Alright, let’s do this,” he said.

“What? *Now*? I haven’t had time to study! I’m not ready!”

“Humor us. If you fail, this check ride won’t count. Fair enough?”

“Well, I guess.”

Kit felt very uncomfortable. He didn’t answer questions about the Encore with his usual immediate certainty. He had to stop, to think, to consider, then he gave his answers. Justin quizzed him for nearly thirty minutes, asking him about Encore systems, about the differences between the Encore and the CJ, asked him about different controls in the Encore compared to the CJ, and asked him about how things were different in a two pilot cockpit, what rules he had to follow. Justin didn’t pink slip him immediately during the oral quiz, so Kit figured he must have answered enough questions correctly...or Justin was just waiting to pink slip him after the flight. From the flight standpoint, though the Encore was so much like the CJ it was almost like it was the same jet. The Encore was bigger, so it was a bit heavier and more sluggish on the controls, and Kit already knew which controls were different so he had little trouble adjusting. It was also a two pilot jet, so Luke served as his copilot, but did nothing except what Kit told him to do, just occupying the space while Justin sat in a seat behind them. Kit had to act as the pilot in command, even though even if he rated, he could not be the pilot in command until he logged 20 hours in the right seat.

They had to throw a curve ball at him as well, since he got an emergency. The emergency, though, was blown breakers and a shift to backup power. Kit declared the obligatory emergency and went through the

main power loss checklist, but couldn't find the problem. So he diverted to the nearest airport, which was a short runway, and landed using just about the entire thing, bringing the jet to a stop about fifty feet from the end of runway warning stripes.

As he did the emergency condition post flight, he sighed and looked at Luke. "Alright, how bad did I do?" he asked.

"So badly we'll have to pass you," Justin answered with an amused tilt to his voice.

"What? Are you kidding?"

"You made only two minor mistakes during the flight, nothing you'd get a pink slip over, and only answered one question wrong during the oral."

"What mistakes?"

"You set the thrust levers to start the engines using the procedure in a CJ, then caught yourself and did it the right way. That had to be counted as an error, but since you corrected your error, it's minor. I'll chalk that one up to you taking your CJ check ride this morning," he chuckled. "The other mistake you made was you missed a call from ATC and they had to call you again. Again, a minor error, nothing we all haven't done, but also something I have to mark as an error during a check ride. But neither are worth a pink slip. So congratulations, that's two ratings in two days," he grinned. "That gives you plenty of time to work on your ten rating. And trust me, you're gonna need it."

"The ten is probably the most difficult rating to get in the Citation program," Luke agreed. "New avionics, and the ten handles much

differently than every other plane you've flown so far. So you'll get plenty of time to work on it."

"This was a filler rating anyway, Encores are two pilot jets and I doubt you'll ever fly one," Justin laughed. "They'll be all but obsolete once the CJ four is certified. There's serious talk to reduce production on the line when the CJ four is in production."

"But it's a rating, and it looks pretty on my license," Kit said, which made both of them laugh and nod in agreement.

Kit added that little blurb in his article that night, after he spread the news that he'd completed *two* ratings in two days, and was now about to start learning to fly the fastest civilian airplane in the sky. "It was an ambush test if there ever was one," Kit laughed to Vil that night. "I had no idea they were going to do it. But they said I passed, and I'm positive they wouldn't pass me unless I passed for real. You don't fake things in the world of aviation, or furs die."

"What now?"

"For me, I start training on the Citation ten, the fastest civilian jet in the air. Jessie's still working on her multi-engine rating, and probably won't finish that until sometime next week."

"How long will it take you to do this ten training?"

"Probably about two weeks," he answered. "We're starting on Monday, and I'm ready for some work. They told me that the ten is the hardest of the Citations to fly, because it's so fast. It has different handling characteristics."

"That's all Greek to me, bro."

He chuckled. “When are you coming to see us?”

“The last weekend you’re there,” she answered. “So when you have one week to go. It’ll be me and Kendall, and I’m picking up John, Hannah, and Ben on the way over. Sheila said she’s coming up too. We’ve already decided to let you give us a flight,” she told him. “If you finish your rating on the ten, you’ll be carrying us in that. If not, we’ll take the biggest jet you can fly and have you give us a ride.”

“I sorta have to, since you paid for all this,” he laughed.

“Damn right, baby bro,” she said teasingly. “I want my money’s worth!”

Sunday, Kit and Luke worked on the required ground training he needed for his flight instructor rating, and he also logged enough hours in a CJ simulator to give him the magical 5 hours logged in make and model to be qualified to train students on that model. Kit intended to get enough logged hours to be able to teach the Mustang and CJ, since he fully intended to train his wife someday, when he could afford a jet of his own. He wanted to be ready, and he also wanted to be able to be able to do her training for her commercial license for both single and multi-engines. Kit intended to go back home with the ratings to teach VFR, IFR, single engine, and multi-engine, and most important of all, be able to train a pilot to rate in every jet in which he held a rating. With those, Kit could probably get a job in almost any flight school as an instructor if the magazine ever failed and closed down.

It was always smart to have a fallback plan, especially for a fur about to have a baby.

Jessie had finished early, so she was already in the hotel room when he returned. She was in the bedroom, putting on her new swimsuit, because the pool was now open. “How did it go, love?” she asked as she pulled on her bikini bottoms and snugged them over her hips. Her baby bump was more pronounced now, but still wasn’t detracting overly from her figure. She felt comfortable enough to wear a two piece, baring her belly.

“Same as always, I ground hours in a simulator,” he chuckled. “Nice suit,” he said with a wink.

She laughed. “It *does* have a top, handsome fox,” she said pointedly.

“I like it better like that.”

“I’m so glad that you do,” she said primly. “You just like looking at my swollen breasts.”

“This is a bad thing?”

“Behave, you naughty boy,” she laughed. “And give me the top.”

“No, I think I’ll take you out just like that,” he told her, grabbing up her top and holding it firmly in his paw.

“Kit,” she warned.

“Yes, dear?”

“Don’t you dear me, you rascal,” she told him. “Give me my top.”

“Make me.”

That, naturally, was the wrong thing to say. It was quite a lot of fun to have her chase him around the bedroom, but it wasn’t as much fun when she caught him. After what she considered was suitable chastisement with a

pillow from the bed, she wrested her top from him, held him down long enough to get off of him, then swatted him rather firmly on the backside with her paw. “Bad fox!” she chided him.

“I love being bad for you, pretty kitty,” he said unashamedly, rolling over on his side and grinning at her.

“I’ll train you yet, you bad boy,” she giggled. “Now put on the trunks I bought for you and come swim with me!”

“I’d love to.”

The air was a bit cool, and the water cooler, but it was nice to swim. The hotel’s pool was large and had a diving board, and they had the pool to themselves with just a bored lifeguard looking on as they enjoyed the pool, then sat on the steps leading in from the shallow end and soaked as they talked. “I don’t think I’m going to go for the Mustang rating, handsome fox,” she told him. “I’m starting to get a little burned out. I think I’ll be happy getting my instrument rating.”

“That’s fine with me, love,” he told her, kissing her on the cheek. “I told you, it would have been very hard, and it would have been a lot of work for you.”

“Well, I can always come back and get it some other time, maybe after our daughter’s born,” she smiled. “After I have time to enjoy what I already have.”

“No shame in that, love, none at all,” he said honestly. “You know, we need to think of a name for her.”

“I’ve already got a list,” she giggled.

“How about Andromeda?”

“Oh no, no mythology, no Shakespeare,” she laughed. “How about Laura Julie Vulpan?”

“Too normal,” he smiled. “Vulpans aren’t normal.”

“Well, this Vulpan will be,” she told him.

“Alright, well, how about Laura Beth Vulpan?” he asked. “Beth was what everyone always called my mother, and Laura Beth has a nice flow to it.”

“I like it,” she said, then she sighed and leaned against him. He put his arm around her, and she leaned her head on his shoulder and started to purr.

Things got serious for both of them starting on Monday.

Kit began his training on the Citation X, which was *very* complicated. The X was a large jet, and it had swept wings, which was a wing design Kit had never flown before. That changed just about everything about how the jet handled, and Kit found himself in class all over again, learning about how to fly a swept wing aircraft. That lasted three days, then he had two days of marathon classroom instruction on the X’s avionics system, which was different from the Pro Line 21 used in the CJ and the Encore. He would go from X class straight to FOI class every weekday for the first week, then he studied the avionics and specs of the plane on his own at night. After that, he would do his boring, milktoast research assignments while he wondered just what real research they weren’t sending him, wrote his articles, and uploaded videos when they made them.

Jessie was busy as well. She took her multi rating practical test on Wednesday, and Kit felt awful that he hadn't had a chance to be there for it. But he was in classes now, classes with two other pilot trainees learning the X as well. David got video of it for him, though, and taped Jessie passing her multi rating practical check ride with flying colors. After she got her multi rating, she focused on logging hours, getting more and more comfortable behind the controls of a plane, and also completing the required hours she needed for her IFR, as well as the special conditions on those hours, such as her three stop cross country hours, her night time hours, and her solo hours that had to be logged in a plane, and not a simulator. She no longer used the 400 trainer, she flew the 303 trainer almost exclusively, both logging IFR required hours and also logging hours behind the controls of a multi-engine plane, which were critical hours. She'd been told that she needed to get her multi hours now, that her single engine hours would come in her own plane, since she could fly it whenever she wanted. But after she got her multi, she slowed down, considerably. She'd already told David she didn't want to try for the Mustang rating, so she was enjoying her training instead of cramming every night, enjoying her flights, getting the chance to finally enjoy the fruits of her labor. So though Jessie was busy, she was much happier than she'd been when she was working non-stop to get ready for her license. She was pacing herself to take her IFR tests in their final week.

As they entered their fourth week, and as Jessie's stomach started becoming slightly more pronounced with her baby bump, Kit entered his last week of FOI classes, and also moved from the X classroom to the X simulator. He was paired with Luke in the simulator half the time, but the other half of the time he was paired with one of the other X pilot students. When Kit was with Luke, he did all the flying, learning how to fly the

finicky, very responsive Citation X. It did truly handle differently from every other jet he'd learned to fly, and it took him about ten hours of simulator time to finally adapt to the light, touchy, almost reactive controls of the X. Once Kit had gotten accustomed to the flight characteristics of the X, he was paired with the other students, where they took turns being the pilot in command and worked together, learning both how to control the cockpit and how to take orders when not in control.

On Friday, Kit arrived in Wichita very nervous, for today he was scheduled to take his check ride for the X. Again, it was Justin who met him at the simulator, and as usual, he wasted no time. Almost as soon as he shook Kit's paw, he started the questions. Kit was ready this time, though, this wasn't the ambush check ride like the Encore, and he answered quickly and confidently. After nearly an hour of questions about the many systems and the avionics, it was time to do the flight. Luke again served as the copilot, and Kit acted as pilot in command. A solid week in the simulator had gotten him used to the cockpit and the touchy controls, so he was able to taxi and take off smoothly. His flight plan was to fly to Denver at 41,000 feet at Mach .91, almost the maximum cruise speed of the plane. And yet again, they introduced an emergency situation into the check ride. As Kit began his descent to Denver, the simulated plane lost pressurization. Kit performed the proper emergency procedure, donning his oxygen mask, then making an emergency descent to under 12,000 feet as he declared an emergency. But once he was under 12,000 feet, the main urgency of the emergency faded, and he got his emergency clearance to land at Denver while he ordered Luke, the copilot, to conduct the emergency checklist to try to find out why the plane depressurized, and also to make sure no other systems were affected. Kit landed the simulator smoothly, the first time he'd got to land without some kind of landing issue that required him stop in the

runway and execute an emergency shutdown, letting him taxi all the way to where ground control guided him so they could inspect the plane to find the problem.

When he shut down the engines and the simulation ended, he blew out his breath and took his paws off the yoke. “At least you let me *land* this time,” he said, which made Luke and Justin erupt into laughter.

“Congratulations, Kit, you’re now rated to fly the fastest civilian aircraft in service,” Justin told him with a light smile.

“The rest of today is basically yours, Kit. If you want to work on your twenty hours to get your PIC for the ten, you can start the simulator time now. Monday is a down day, and so is the rest of next week,” Luke told him. “You’ll take your FOI exam, and if you pass, you’ll have a week to prepare for the check rides. We’ll do the required flight maneuver checks and training on Wednesday and Thursday. We’ll arrange your flight instructor check rides for Friday, Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. Type one, type two, MEI, then MEII, scheduled for eight in the morning each day. A CFI check ride can last anywhere from three to eight hours, depending on how well you answer everything, so after you finish your check ride, Luke will take you to CJ four training. After the MEII, you’ll type rate the Mustang and CJ, and if we have enough time and you have the simulator hours, you can try to rate the ten. Remember, you have to be PIC rated to instruct on a two pilot jet, so if you want that rating, you have to PIC the ten by next week. The week after is your last week with us, and we’ll be spending that in Independence, rating you on the CJ four when you’re not doing your CFI check rides. You’ll be rated on a plane only our test pilots and instructors are rated to fly so far,” he smiled. “You’ll be our first civilian pilot rated for it.”

“Wow, I’m honored,” Kit said earnestly.

“I’d say you’ve earned the honor,” Justin said. “You’re a very good pilot, Kit. We didn’t spoonfeed you these ratings. You have definitely earned them. I’d put my entire family in a jet you’re piloting without batting an eye.”

Kit laughed. “Think I can get an instructor rating for the CJ four? That way I can teach a plane that doesn’t exist. I like the irony of it.”

Luke laughed. “Technically we can’t do it because we can’t flight rate a plane not in production to people not working for the company. But we’ll give you the check ride test in the simulator and give you an *unofficial* endorsement.”

“That sounds fine to me,” Kit grinned. “What time is it?”

“Oh, about eleven,” Luke answered.

“Think we can go back to Independence and let me take the check ride for my four hundred before I start my twenty hour marathon slog in the simulator? I’d *really* like that cert so I can get my insurance down.”

“Hell, why not?” Luke laughed. “Feel like dusting off your prop check ride hat, Justin?”

“Sure. I think we have a four hundred here. We’ll check ride it back to Independence, and Luke can fly the Mustang back. You can have lunch with your wife, then we’ll come back up here so you can start logging sim hours.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Kit nodded.

Actually, they didn't have a 400 in Wichita at that moment, but that was quickly fixed. Kit called Jessie, and about forty minutes later, as Justin filled out the forms to do a check ride on a 400, she landed their private plane and taxied it up to them at the mouth of the biggest hangar of the Citation Flight Training Center. She had a huge grin on her face as she opened the gullwing door after shutting down the engine. "Did someone call a cab?" she winked.

"I did, and you're late!" Kit teased in reply. "Now get outta there and let me borrow it."

"Where's my cab fare?"

Kit climbed up onto the wing, leaned into the cockpit, and kissed Jessie noisily on the cheek. "There, paid in full."

"That wasn't even a tenth of my fare," she winked at him. "But you can pay me later."

Justin knew it was a formality, but he also did not skimp in any way. He had the 400 sheets with him, so he asked Kit questions just as detailed and indepth as they would have been if Kit was taking his initial test. This wasn't a check ride for the FAA, it was Cessna's own type rating check ride, which would officially give him a graduation certificate from their training course, and would drastically lower the insurance that Vil had to pay on the plane. Despite the aire of technicality surrounding the exercise, both Justin and Kit took it seriously. Justin *would not* pass someone that could not pass the test, the *real* test, and Kit would not just accept a piece of paper thrust in front of him saying he passed something he could pass on his own merit and ability. Luke flew Jessie back to Independence on the Mustang as Kit and Justin got into the 400, and he took off to follow them.

Justin had him go up to ten thousand feet though, and broached a subject that seemed to be on his mind. “You know they’ll make you recover from a spin to pass your flight check ride,” he warned. Without batting an eye, Kit dropped throttle and nosed up. Justin laughed and nodded. “I want to see a full developed spin!” he ordered. “None of that jacking the rudder the instant the nose drops chickenshit!”

“You asked for it,” Kit grinned as the stall horn blared.

Kit showed Justin he could, in fact, recover from a developed spin. Kit let the spin get very deep, as they corkscrewed down, and then he nursed the rudder and stick expertly to rebalance the wings, clear the spin conditions, then regain control of the plane. In all, they lost about a thousand feet of altitude when Kit finally pulled level. He looked over to Justin, who had a big smile on his face. “Kit, you’ll have *no* trouble passing your type one,” he announced. “I just hope you can fly a twin as well as you can fly this baby.”

He snorted. “It’s even *easier* to recover a stall in a twin engine plane,” he scoffed. “Which is a good thing, since you don’t want to spin a multi. That’s the express elevator to the deck.”

“Amen,” Justin nodded.

By the time they got to Independence, Justin had given over testing Kit’s ability to fly and knowledge of his plane, and they landed smoothly. As soon as they were in the hangar, Justin got out and went to the office, so he could have them file the paperwork that graduated Kit from the Cessna 400 training program.

He had lunch with Jessie in the McDonalds near the airport, and she told him about her day so far. She’d done flight time in the simulator that

morning, and she had the rest of the day to herself because she and David were going to take a night flight. “Tonight and tomorrow will be my last required night hours,” she told him. “I do two hours with Dave tonight, then I fly two hours solo tomorrow.”

“Have you been doing ILS approaches?”

She nodded. “And I’ve already gone through my hold pattern training. And I’m finally getting the hang of talking to air traffic control,” she laughed.

He smiled. “Almost feels like we left our lives behind, doesn’t it?” he asked suddenly and a little wanly. “I miss home.”

“Me too, but I look at this as an extended vacation that will let me fly *you* around when we go back to our lives,” she winked. “Besides, only two weeks left.”

“And only seventeen weeks and two days for you,” he said with a glorious smile.

She patted her expanding belly and giggled. “Laura is going to be in *so* much trouble when I get her out of here,” she said. “For making me feel fat!”

“Like you’ll be mad for more than a half a second,” he teased. “When’s your next appointment with Doctor Mac?”

“Tuesday,” she answered. “I already have a ride down.”

“Oh?”

She nodded. “David worked it out for me. I’m riding in a Citation ten,” she beamed. “I think they were going to offer you the chance to fly down

with me.”

“Of course I’m going, Doctor Mac will thrash me if I don’t show up with you for the appointment.”

“Then you need to talk to David after we finish lunch,” she said.

“I think they already know, now that I think about it. Luke said nothing about us doing anything on Tuesday. I’ll ask him when I get there.”

David did in fact have it all arranged. “Your sister, Miss Vulpan, arranged it,” he said. “We’ll fly you two down on Tuesday morning, and bring you back when you’re finished. So, if you want to *fly* the plane, Kit, get your sim hours this weekend,” he winked. “If you get your twenty, I’ll let you PIC it.”

“You will?”

He nodded. “I’m going to be doing the flying,” he said. “I *am* rated in every Citation jet there is,” he added with a grin. “I’m just teaching Jessie prop planes as a special favor.”

“Well, we do appreciate it, Dave,” Kit told him honestly.

“Well, your sister *is* paying to charter the jet,” David admitted. “So it’s not entirely because we like you.”

“She did say she’d handle getting Jessie to the doctor and back while we were here,” Kit nodded.

“I didn’t realize she was pregnant until last week,” David laughed. “She was wearing a tighter tee shirt, not her usual sweater or baggy tee, and I saw her baby bump.”

“She hides it well,” Kit chuckled. “She thinks she’ll look fat, and I’m afraid that my pretty kitty has just a slight touch of vanity. She’s very proud of her figure.”

“She’s gorgeous.”

“She’s also very shy, and thinks that if I think she’s fat, I’ll lose interest in her. I keep telling her she’s being ridiculous, but she’ll learn.”

“Femmes can be fickle sometimes,” David said sagely. “It’s all those hormones.”

“And this is why you’re not married.”

It was another long weekend, but it was long because Kit had a goal.

Twenty hours by Tuesday.

He worked out a schedule that would let him get his hours in and study for his two written tests that came with the flight instructor rating, that he would take on Monday. He returned to Wichita and put nine hours in the simulator that afternoon and evening, and flew back in the Mustang they were letting him use and got in at nearly eleven...but that was alright, since Jessie too was still out, probably just finishing up the solo night flight she needed for her IFR. He spent the next morning cooking Jessie quiche, which lured her yawning out of the bedroom, wearing nothing but a pair of skimpy panties. “Rowr,” Kit said with a smile, which made her laugh.

“Did I wake you when I came in last night?” she asked.

“You’re certainly waking me up now,” he grinned.

She blew him a playful kiss and detoured into the bathroom. “What are you doing today, handsome fox?” she called as the shower started.

“Six hours of simulator time in Wichita on the ten, then I’m coming home to study for my FOI and instructor written,” he answered. “What about you?”

“Four hours cross country solo time in the Crusader simulator. David says I’ll take my IFR practical on Friday,” she called over the sound of the shower.

“You’re not flying live?”

“I’ve been having to pee too much to want to spend a long time in a plane,” she complained loudly. “I almost wet myself trying to get to the bathroom last night!”

“Why didn’t you take a urinal?”

“Have you tried to use a femme urinal behind the controls of a Crusader?” she said immediately. “I’d rather hold it!”

“Well, you win that argument,” Kit laughed. She was right; a 303 cockpit *was* rather confined, and since it was a yoke, it put the controls in the way when one tried to use a urinal. For a femme, who would have to sit on the very edge of the seat to use it, it would be *very* awkward.

Kit fielded a call from Rick as he put the quiche in the oven. “Hey boss, how’s it going?”

“Doing great, son. I get my cast off on Monday.”

“That’s almost a week earlier than they said.”

“Well, Martha’s been the ultimate nurse,” he chuckled. “They want my leg to have a few more days, and then the cast comes off.”

“Well, this is going to work, boss. Me and Jessie are coming back for an appointment with her obstetrician on Tuesday. Want to get together for lunch?”

“Why don’t you come by the office?” he asked. “We can have catered lunch there and you can catch up with everyone, and meet the two summer interns. They’re actually not too bad.”

Kit had never met them face to face, but he’d talked to both of them on the phone at various points over the last month. Both of them were femmes, Lisa Schaeffer and Paula Yates, and from the way Rick talked about them, they were very good. They were getting no official school credit for working at the magazine over the summer, they’d signed up for the unpaid intern positions just for the experience of working in a magazine that was showing itself to be successful. “That sounds wonderful. And you can meet one of our instructors, he’s the one flying down with us.”

“You’re not flying yourself? What have you been doing son?” he laughed.

“The plane we’re going to fly requires two pilots, so it’ll be me and him. I get to fly it, he’ll be the copilot making sure I really do know what I’m doing.”

“Ah, that makes sense. So, you *are* learning something up there,” he chuckled.

“Yep. If you’ve been listening to me when I call you every day, you’d know that!”

“Yes, you can fly a bunch of fancy jets now,” Rick chuckled. “And as soon as you get that flight instructor license, you’ll abandon us and open your own flight school,” he accused.

Kit laughed. “No. It might be something I do for fun when I’m fifty, and I might do a little teaching on the side, but it sure as heck won’t be my career. I like the magazine too much. I find it much more challenging and exciting than having eighteen year olds try to kill me on a daily basis.”

Rick laughed. “We want you to get your interviews in with the Cessna folks so we can put it in the next issue.”

“Sure, I can do that,” Kit said as he set the timer on the oven. “I’ll do them on Monday and get the articles in by Tuesday evening.”

“Sounds good. You know something?”

“What?”

“I know I shouldn’t say this, but I miss Sheila,” he chuckled. “The office just hasn’t been as much fun since she left. The two new girls are too serious to be much fun.”

“Has she been keeping in touch?”

“Yeah, she drops by the office about every other day and still comes to the ranch to cook with Martha. She and one of her friends are taking flying lessons, but I think you know that.”

“Yeah, I knew that. She’s been keeping me up to speed on her progress over at AAIA.”

“Where is she at as things go?”

“About a third of the way there. She’s taken her first solo flight already.”

“She didn’t tell me that.”

“She did it yesterday,” he answered. “I’m sure she’ll tell you all about it when she comes over to cook tonight. She has two more months before she graduates, and she’ll have her private license.”

“So, how does it feel seeing Jessie flying around in the plane by herself?”

Kit laughed. “Go watch that crosswind video and understand that I am *very* comfortable seeing it,” he chuckled.

“Jeffrey’s getting nervous,” he chuckled. “You realize she didn’t leave any scripts past getting back, so she’ll have to put something on his desk like the day you get home.”

“I have no doubt she has like a month’s worth of scripts in her laptop,” Kit noted. “I’ll have her email a couple to Jeffrey so he doesn’t have a snit. How were the figures?”

“I won’t know until Monday, you know that,” he said. “But I’m hopeful.”

“Consistent increase since I got up here, right on schedule,” Kit chuckled. “You looking for that assistant for Jeffrey?”

“Yup, already put out the ads, both for that and for your assistant. I hope to have them hired by the time you get back. Oh, and the first raise goes in next week.”

“That’s good,” Kit said. “It’s about time we paid the gang back for all their hard work.”

“No argument here. I’d pay everyone a hundred grand a year if I could afford it. I certainly don’t do this *just* for the money.”

“Nobody believes you do,” Kit chuckled.

“Well, I’m gonna crutch on into work, son,” he said.

“On a Saturday? Why?”

“I shook off the rust and did an interview yesterday, so I want to edit it a bit.”

“An interview? You?” Kit teased.

“I used to do it all the time when I was a younger dingo,” Rick told him playfully.

“Who’d you interview?”

“Read Friday’s issue and find out,” he chuckled in reply.

“Oh, it’s on now, you old dingo,” Kit taunted, which made Rick laugh.

Kit logged 23 hours of simulator time from Friday evening to Monday morning on the Citation X, and when not in the simulator, he was getting his required ground training for his flight instructor ratings with Luke, since he needed a certain number of training hours for each rating he intended to get. On Saturday, he was there for nearly 17 hours, and on Sunday he was there 14. And when he was back at the hotel, he spent almost every moment studying. The FOI and written tests for an instructor rating were *hard*, and he had to be absolutely ready; the instructor rating was the second hardest test to take, only the air transport test was tougher. He arrived in Wichita

just before 8:00, and that gave him just enough time to get to the classroom where the FOI exam was being held. Kit sat the exam with the other two furs what had been in the FOI classes, a 50 question test about teaching methods, learning styles, lesson plans, and other very un-aviation type subjects. Kit finished the exam first, and stole a quick hour in the X simulator waiting for the tests to be graded. Amanda had come to Wichita, and she was the one who called over the intercom. “You got a nintey-two, Kit, that’s a comfortable pass!” she called. “You need to finish up and get ready for your instructor written!”

“Yes, mommy!” he answered.

Two seconds later, the simulator went dark and settled to a rest. “Never tease the femme who has the remote control!” she shouted, which made him explode into laughter.

He did review the material over lunch, then he sat the written exam... and felt like a novice. The questions were *tough*, and they only got harder. Kit was spending over a minute on each question, having to carefully read it and consider it before venturing an answer...and he just flat out *guessed* on 11 questions out of a 100 question test. Given only a 25% chance of a correct answer, then if he got nothing else wrong, he was looking at a best-possible scenario of 92 and a fraction, going by the statistics.

It took him nearly the entire allotted time to take the test. He went back to two questions he was still pondering when he was given the five minute warning, and then handed it in with two minutes to spare. After the test, he went out to the break room and sat heavily in a chair, almost feeling like someone had just pulled out one of his eyes with a vice grip.

It was a curse and a blessing that they graded them electronically, since Amanda came out with a little piece of paper not five minutes after he sat down.

“Do you want the good news or the bad news?” she asked.

“I’ll take both.”

She smiled. “The bad news is you passed.”

He gave her a surprised look, then laughed earnestly. “Then what’s the good news?”

“You scored an eighty-nine, which is good for this test,” she answered. “The median score on the written is eighty-four.”

“I woulda took a seventy-one,” he said honestly.

“A few of our instructors did just that,” she said with a slight smile. “So, Wednesday, Luke will go through the performance requirements with you, and you’ll do your first check ride on Friday.”

“That’s going to be hell,” he groaned. “Four check rides inside a week. All those oral tests!”

“It’s the best way to do it,” she said. “The others have said it’s best to do them all at once, since many of the same questions are asked at each check ride. They say the only odd test out is the type two.”

“It’s still going to be rough,” he said, waving his paw.

“Alright then. You and Jessie need to be here tomorrow at seven,” she told him. “The plane will be at the big hangar waiting. Luke said you’ll be the PIC and he’ll be the right chair.”

“It’s nice of him to let me do it. By all rights, I should be in the right chair.”

“You earned your rating, you got your hours to upgrade to the left chair. If we didn’t stand behind our ratings, then yes, we’d put you in the right chair. But you *earned* the left chair, Kit, and if we didn’t believe it, we’d never have rated you for it. And I’m not just making a stump speech, I’ll *be on* the plane with you. I’m going to go talk to a flight school in Austin about rating one of their instructors for a CJ, so I’ll be hitching a ride with you rather than do a conference call with them. I think they’ll appreciate the personal visit.”

“Thanks, Amanda. I really appreciate the faith in me.”

Jessie was very happy for him passing the tests, so much so that she made him a huge fully decked out Kit Special hamburger, so big he couldn’t eat the whole thing. He was so drained from the effort that he went to bed early, and Jessie joined him, cuddling with him in bed as he listened to her purr, and that lulled him to sleep.

She was also the one to wake him up. She kissed him on the nose in his sleep, which stirred him, then she giggled when he slapped absently at her. “Wha?” he asked sleepily.

“Up, sleepy fox, you have to take me to the doctor,” she told him.

“It’s morning already?” he asked.

“It’s six. I’ll make you some tea, love.”

“Make it strong,” he said as she padded into the other room. He pulled himself up and scrubbed his face, blew out his breath, and then the excitement of flying surged blood through him. Jessie was humming to

herself, making eggs and bacon and tea as he went into the other room. “We’re in a good mood today,” he noted as he kissed her.

“I’ve been feeling really good lately,” she answered as she flipped the eggs. “Guess my hormones are kicking in,” she giggled.

“Mmm, then this would be the perfect time,” he purred in her ear, putting his paws on her thickening waist.

“Aat, don’t you start,” she warned playfully. “We have to be at the hangar in forty-five minutes!”

“Spoilsport.”

“You can explain to everyone why we’re late,” she said. “Then *you* can tell Doctor Mac why we missed our appointment!”

“Ah, no, I’m not that brave,” he said mildly which made Jessie laugh.

“Now go get dressed, you silly fox.”

They managed to eat breakfast and get to the facility on time. David, Luke, and Amanda were already there, and a shiny, new-looking Citation X was standing on the flight line, a fuel truck standing beside it, with its hatch open and waiting. They greeted the Cessna furs, and then Amanda led Jessie up into the jet, who was taking video of it as they went. David and Luke helped conduct a walk-around, and then they too entered the jet.

It was clearly a special configuration. Usually there were supposed to be around eight seats in a X, but this one had only six, six large, deep, luxurious seats, spaced widely apart, and with a lavatory in the back. Each seat had its own folding table and rail-mounted LCD monitor resting against the side of the plane, which could swing out for easy viewing.

“We mocked up the interior of this ten to mimic a CJ four,” Luke explained. “That’s how a four will look inside, but not quite as spacious.”

“They’ll have those monitors?” Kit asked in surprise.

David nodded. “This is the club configuration.”

David sat with the femmes as Kit and Luke took the pilot seats. Kit felt a little thrill when he sat in the pilot’s chair, but he didn’t let his elation cloud his judgment. He had a job to do, and he bent himself to that task with total sobriety, for *his pregnant wife* was on the jet with him. It took Kit and Luke about fifteen minutes to get their flight plan filed—straight from the cockpit of the X to the FAA—and the preflights done. Kit started the engines once the fuel truck was finished fueling them and well clear, and then they taxied out in the dark pre-dawn, as the sun just started to rise to the east-southeast.

“What’s the weather like along the way?” Amanda called.

Kit turned on the intercom. “Should be clear all the way to Austin with a little daytime heating turbulence if we stay up too long,” he answered. “Austin weather is forecast sunny and eighty-four degrees, which is kinda normal for late May I’ve been told. Forecast up here for today is slight chance of rain and seventy-five degrees.”

Kit got clearance to take off, and then had to suppress a grin as he spooled up the huge Rolls Royce engines to takeoff thrust, released the brakes, and let the powerful machine hurtle down the runway. He lifted her into the air with a gentle touch, aware of the very sensitive controls of the X, then turned as they ascended to their planned cruise altitude of 47,000 feet. At Mach .92, maximum cruise speed, the plane would make the trip in a little over an hour. That was a trip of about 500 miles in a plane that flew

at Mach .92, which was about 700 miles an hour. An hour and ten minutes, for a trip that took them nearly four in his 400...granted, because they landed in Oklahoma to refuel and eat.

It was almost like blinking his eyes. By the time they reached cruise altitude and hit top cruise speed, he and Luke were already planning their landing in Austin. They only cruised for about half an hour, and then they started descending. Kit got to see the landscape north of Austin from the front windows of a jet, watching Texas blur by under them, and then they started their approach at Bergstrom.

They landed on the same runway he used for his 400, the 9,000 foot long general aviation runway at Bergstrom at 8:46, an hour and 21 minutes after they taxied away from the hangar in Independence. Kit taxied the X to the Signature Flight Support FBO hangar terminal at the very end of the flight line. Line workers rushed out to chock the wheels after the engines powered down, and then they started post flight, shutting the jet down. "We're here!" Luke shouted. "I hope you didn't blink, or you missed it!"

"God is this thing fast!" Kit laughed.

"Now you know why I love flying this jet," Luke grinned. "If I could afford this, I'd buy it sooo fast, rate my wife, and then we'd always have two pilots and be able to fly anywhere we want to go, and get there fast."

"That's not a bad idea," Kit chuckled, glancing back at Jessie as she stood up. "Now I just need to borrow thirty million dollars."

"Pft, you can find that laying in the floor in Zimbabwe," Luke chuckled.

If not for the gang, they'd have had to take a cab to go get their own car. Martha pulled up in Kit's Pathfinder not long after they landed. They gave her a fond hug in turn and then introduced her to the Cessna furs. "Luke's been the poor fellow training me, and David here's had the joy of teaching Jessie."

"What do you do, dear?" Martha asked Amanda.

"I make sure they do it right," she winked. "I'm one of the directors of our flight training program."

"Keep them on a tight leash, dear."

"Oh, she does," Luke laughed. "She loves to choke us with it."

They went about their business then. Luke and David stayed with the X as Amanda went down to AAIA; it seemed that they were the ones looking into buying a used CJ1 for their flight school and would need to rate their instructors on the jet. Martha rode with Kit and Jessie as they took her to the office, then went on to their appointment with Doctor Mac. The doctor gave her a thorough physical, and frowned a bit as she checked Jessie's stomach. "You haven't been exercising," she said critically.

"I've been spending most of my time sitting in a cockpit and studying my tail off," Jessie said with her cheeks ruffling.

"You need to keep active, hon. Find time to exercise, even if it's just a brisk walk around school between classes."

"We well, I promise," she said contritely.

Outside of Jessie gaining a bit more weight than Doctor Mac liked, she was otherwise perfectly healthy, and so was little Laura. After the

appointment, they had lunch with the gang, Sheila, and Allison, where Kit and Jessie met Lisa and Paula, and they showed them video Jessie had taken of the X. “You came in that, cousin? Now that’s riding like a Vulpan!” Sheila grinned.

“I *flew* it,” Kit said with a huge grin.

“You did? Wow, I guess you really are doing something up there, and not just lounging around the pool!” Mike teased.

“We’ve been too busy to sit around the pool more than once,” Jessie laughed. “This week both me and Kit are studying to finish important training. I’m getting my instrument rating, and Kit is taking the tests he needs to become a flight instructor.”

“An instructor? Really?” Sheila asked with a sudden smile. “So, you could maybe give us private lessons?”

“Lessons? Yes. Just signing your logbooks without making absolutely sure you know what you’re doing? Hell no.”

Sheila sighed. “So cruel!” she accused with a smile.

“I told you once before, brat, you *earn* a license. I won’t sign off on anyone and give them something they didn’t earn.”

“But, you can definitely help us keep going after we graduate from AAIA? It’s rather expensive,” Allison noted. “I didn’t realize just how expensive until I started looking at the training after the pilot’s license.”

“Now there I can help you. I’m sure you’ll find me much cheaper than AAIA.”

“You’ll make me *pay*?” Sheila gasped in sincere outrage.

“Well, when a Vulpan has certain marketable skills, shouldn’t he get paid for developing them?” he asked, giving his cousin a sly smile.

“Bastard!” Sheila accused, but the lightness in her Vulpan eyes betrayed her serious-sounding voice.

“What’s after you do those tests?” Lilly asked.

“Kit’s going to learn how to fly one more jet. I’m just going to putter around,” Jessie laughed. “They offered to train me to fly a little jet called a Mustang, but I decided not to, because it’s *so much* work, and I’d like to just rest a while. We’ve been so busy,” she said, and Kit put his paw on her shoulder. “Besides, Doctor Mac told me I’m not getting enough exercise, so I need to focus a little more on this,” she added, patting her expanding belly meaningfully.

“I’ll be type rated for a Mustang, love, *I* can train you if you ever want it,” he winked.

“Well, that’ll help,” she grinned back.

“Saturday, cousin, me and Ally will be up,” she said. “We’re going in style, too,” she said lightly. “We hired a jet from that place that rents you hangar space, Avia.”

“Sounds good. I’ll love to show you around up there, we’ve had a lot of fun.”

“And worked a *lot*,” Jessie laughed.

“Well, show it off, honey!” Marty demanded. “Show us your pilot’s license!”

Jessie laughed. “I don’t have the real one yet, just my temporary one,” she said, but she did dig it out of her purse and pass it around so they could see it. “Dave said the FAA is going to *hate* us,” she laughed. “Every time we earn a new rating, the FAA has to make us *another* new license. So, right about when I get my first one, the paperwork will hit them telling them they have to make me another one!”

“Luke told the FAA to just hold off on sending my permanent license until after I finish flight school,” Kit chuckled. “So there’s not a series of licenses stacking up for them to send out to me.”

Kit found that Rick was right about Lisa and Paula. Lisa was a short possum and Paula was a lanky cougar, and both of them were too worried about doing a good job to have much fun. They wanted to take the job way more seriously than anyone in the office took it. But despite that, they were both nice and friendly, and seemed to know what they were doing. It made him feel really out of touch, since they’d been here for a month, and Kit had only just met them face to face. He’d barely get to know them before they were gone at the end of July, and new interns took their places in mid-August. “Lisa and Paula have been doing a lot of the research that isn’t important enough to send to you,” Rick explained. “The ability to research is a job requirement for a journalist, so we indoctrinated them into your research system,” he grinned. “They picked it up fairly quickly.”

“Shh, that’s my trade secret, Rick!” Kit protested. “If you bandy that about, I’ll be out of a job!”

“I can’t get rid of you now,” he said morosely. “You’re a partner!”

“Duct tape, chains, the river, do the math,” Barry noted idly as he went by, which made Kit and Rick laugh.

They stayed about an hour, and then, regrettably, it was time to go. Martha again took them to the hangar, where she pulled up and held them a second before getting out. "I hope you don't mind, dear, but I've been using your truck," she admitted.

Kit laughed. "I don't mind at all, Martha," he assured her. "As long as you don't burn out my clutch, you're welcome to it."

"Well, would you mind if we use it this weekend to take some things to our son in El Paso?"

"Be my guest," Kit said immediately. "Is he off weekend forecasting now?"

"He's still doing it, but he's also doing real news pieces and fills in for the weekday meteorologists when they have days off, so he's moving right along," she answered.

"Thanks for being our chauffer, Martha," Jessie said after they got out. She gave Martha a warm hug. "I'll call you tonight and give you the full details of my checkup. It wasn't pretty," she sighed.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm not getting enough exercise, and Doctor Mac chided me for it."

"Well, it can happen dear. You know the problem is there now, so it's easy enough to fix."

Luke, David, and Amanda were all ready to go when they arrived, so Martha stood by the Pathfinder and took video of them all filing back into the jet after they were ready to leave, as furs removed the chocks from the wheels. Kit again settled into the left chair, but this time Jessie was standing

behind and between the cockpit seats, taking video of their preparations. Kit and Luke explained what they were doing as they prepped for the flight back to Kansas, and she braced herself when they accelerated to take off; they were not in an airliner, the only rules they had about passengers were the rules they cared to enforce. So Jessie stayed braced against the wall behind the cockpit and taped them taking off. “And there you go, that’s my handsome fox taking off from Bergstrom, and we’re on our way back for our last ten or so days in Kansas.”

“Where Kit becomes our first civilian CJ four pilot,” Luke chuckled.

“And Jessie earns her IFR so she can fly our plane whenever she wants,” Kit said with a glance back to her.

“I *am* flying us home,” she winked at him.

The only thing that got him through Friday was knowing he’d never go through something like that again...or at least until Monday.

The check ride began at 8:00 on a clear day, and Kit had stayed up most of the night preparing for them. Justin was not his check ride examiner this time, instead he had an actual FAA examiner with him. The examiner was a short, jolly skunk named Gary Akers, who had an earnest smile and joked with Kit a bit. “So, you’re running the whole gauntlet, eh?” he grinned. “I saw your name on the schedule four times, just running up through the ratings!”

“Well, they said I should do them all at once,” Kit said.

“Cessna just loves to do that, they hate a CFI that can’t teach everything,” he winked. “But I have to admit, they *do* like to run their check

rides in a row, and their instructors have yet to fail the check rides. They train them well around here,” he finished with a nod. “Don’t worry too much, though. The oral test is actually harder than the instructor check ride, since you’re just going to show me you can keep control of the plane when a student stalls you or spins you out or some such. So, after you finish the oral, it’s basically a victory lap. The only one that’s really different from that is the type two, that one’s where you have to demonstrate your knowledge and ability to teach IFR in the cockpit. You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” he said, a touch nervously.

It wasn’t as bad as the written, but it was close. For his check ride, Kit chosen his own personal plane, so he had no problems answering any question about it. But the examiner’s questions were detailed, assuming the role of a student and expecting Kit to be able to ask any question put to him about the plane, about flying a single engine, and all about the FAA regulations and rules, and also questions from the FOI, questions about teaching techniques and instruction, which challenged him more than any of the others. Kit had been flying long enough to be able to answer most of the aviation questions almost instantly and correctly, but he had to stop and think about the questions about teaching...and the questions kept coming, and kept coming, and kept coming. For three hours, he was tested, and every correct answer staved off the dreaded pink slip. But after those three hours, Gary told him it was time to start the flight. Kit and Gary climbed into his plane, Kit continued to answer questions as they went through preflight, and then they took off. While in the air, Gary had Kit perform every maneuver he was required to teach students, and then had him perform the maneuvers and flying skills he’d need to be able to recover from any predicament into which his student might place them. He had to

recover from stalls, recover a spin, and forcibly abort a bad-attempt landing...and he had to do all of it from the *right* seat. That was where a CFI sat, so that was where he had to demonstrate his flying ability.

Gary kept them in the air for three hours. So, after a six hour check ride, Gary had him land for the last time and taxi back to the hangar. When Kit shut down the engine, Gary offered his paw over the center console.

“You did excellently, sir, congratulations. You pass.”

Kit couldn’t suppress a whoop of delight and a huge grin. “Thank you very much, Mister Akers!” he said.

“Now, according to the schedule, you’re trying your MEI on Monday, then going for your type two on Tuesday and MEII on Wednesday, and I’m giving you those as well. What plane are we doing it on?”

“A Crusader.”

“Bah, I hate those little things,” he grunted. “Oh well. Anyway, you can be assured that the other tests usually aren’t quite as hard as this one. This one is what you might call the gatekeeper test. To get your type two and MEI, the tests will certainly ensure you know what you’re doing, but they’re not quite as severe as this one. After all, you proved you know what you’re doing to get this rating.”

“That’s a relief,” Kit said earnestly. “That was the hardest test I’ve ever taken.”

“It’s meant to be,” Gary chuckled. “Monday, eight o’clock, right here, then?”

“I’ll be here. How ready I’ll be is another matter,” Kit chuckled.

Gary wrote up a temporary rating license for him on the spot. "I think I'll hold off submitting it all until you finish your other rating check rides," he grinned.

"That would be a good idea," Luke said as he came up. "We have you set up for MEI on Monday so you have a little extra time with the Crusader, Kit."

"Works for me."

He wanted to celebrate, but he was derailed around 5:00 when Vil called him and told him she was on her way, literally as he shut down the engines of the Mustang and Luke did him the favor of doing postflight as he talked on the phone. "We should be there around eight or nine," she told him. "I started with Kendall, but when the family got wind of the trip, I got stowaways," she laughed. "I'm bringing Suzy, Muffy, and Terry, they wanted to come see you."

"Wow, well, Sheila and Allison are coming up from Austin tomorrow morning."

"Yeah, that's why Terry is coming," Vil chuckled. "He's still trying to woo her."

"That boy needs to take a hint."

"He's quite determined."

"He's in for a heartbreak," Kit sighed.

"I'm not so sure," Vil said. "Terry knows there's something about her that doesn't quite gel. He's a Vulpan, bro, he checked her out, and there are

some *big* holes in her life story. He put two and two together when he saw how much money she has, he knows she's not squeaky clean."

"But it's how she got the dirt under her claws that will turn him off."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Only time and the truth will tell. Woop, there he is now, he just pulled up. Talk to you later, bro."

Kit brought the good news back to Independence only to hear the other good news. Jessie ran out to the Mustang from the back office as he opened the hatch, and she gave him a crushing hug. "I heard you passed, congratulations, handsome fox!" she declared. "I passed too! I got my IFR!"

"That's fantastic, baby!" he said, spinning her in a circle in his arms. "Now you can fly anywhere, anytime!"

"Yup, you can't lord it over me!" she giggled, kissing him on the muzzle.

"I can always lord it over you," he winked.

"Mean fox!" she laughed, hugging him again.

"Vil called, she's coming in tonight. She didn't tell me where she's staying, though. Suzy, Muffy, and Terry are coming with her."

She nodded. "She called me before you. She said she's gonna buy me my own plane," Jessie laughed. "I told her I already have one."

"Did you tell her you're gonna take her flying tomorrow?"

"No, but I think I will now that you've said it," she grinned. "I have to show her what I've learned!"

“I think she’ll love it, at least after she gets over the whole ‘I’m flying with someone who didn’t even have a license a month ago’ deal.”

She gave him a start, then laughed helplessly.

They had a light dinner to celebrate their respective victories. Jessie was watching her food now, still taking her vitamins but cutting back on the junk food they’d both been wolfing down since they came to Kansas, trying to lose the weight that Doctor Mac said was not good for her, then they just waited for Vil right there at the facility. Luke decided to play a little and let Jessie try her paw at the Mustang simulator, just for pure fun, while Kit studied the Cessna 303 Crusader for Monday’s MEI check ride. But the fun was suspended when Vil arrived at the airport on her private jet, and they went out in front of the big hangar to meet them, standing over by the two limos she’d hired to ferry them around.

Vil was wearing her usual dress attire, a skirt and blazer with a white silk blouse, and the diminutive vixen gave Kit a hug when he met her at the base of the steps. “Hey sis,” he said. “How was your flight?”

“Nice and easy,” she smiled. “Well, how is my *jet pilot* brother?”

He laughed. “Busy. I’m in the middle of my flight instructor check rides, so you’ll have to excuse me if I’m a little distracted this weekend. I have to study for the one I’m taking on Monday.”

“Well, I’m here to see you, not mess things up for you,” she smiled. “But I will demand my time.”

He laughed. “You always do,” he teased.

“I’m not used to being ignored,” she smiled, flicking him on the nose playfully.

“Well, you’re ignoring me!” Jessie complained, which made Vil laugh and give Jessie a warm hug.

“Look at this!” Vil said, putting both her paws on Jessie’s expanding belly.

“I know, your brother has ruined my figure,” she sighed.

Vil laughed. “It’s a *good* ruining,” she reminded her. “And only temporary.”

“Where’s Ben?” Kit asked as the others came out of the plane.

“He’s at Ohio State doing orientation, he couldn’t make it,” John said as he reached them. “He’s taking a summer class so he can get a head start, and also so he can establish a nice pattern for himself and get some work in with the football coaches before practice officially begins.”

“Oh. Well, good for him.”

It turned into a receiving line as Kit and Jessie greeted Kendall, Suzy, Muffy, Terry, John, and Hannah in turn, and then Kit introduced his family and friends to the three furs who had worked with them at Cessna. “This is Luke, he’s been my primary flight instructor,” Kit introduced. “And this is David, he just finished Jessie’s training so she can fly our plane. And this is Amanda, she’s one of the managers here at the training facility.”

“A Bombardier? Shame on bringing that thing to a Cessna airport,” David laughed, to which Amanda gave him a hot glare. But her hot glare softened when Vil laughed lightly.

“I didn’t order it, but I can’t complain, it’s been a good plane,” Vil smiled in reply. “I’m afraid Cessna doesn’t make anything big enough to

suit me, David,” she told him.

“Well, when we introduce the Columbus, maybe we can woo you,” Amanda said with a smile. “It will be the largest business jet we’ve ever built.”

“You’ll have to suitably impress me, since my company ordered my jet here before I was even the CEO. I inherited it from the last CEO. So I’d have to really justify buying another plane so soon after we bought that one,” she winked.

“Well, I can certainly try, Miss Vulpan,” Amanda said with a light smile. “A client like Vulpan Shipyards would be a coup for any aircraft company.”

“We’re not easy to capture, Amanda. We demand the same excellence out of our vendors as our customers demand from us. But, we’re in the market for a small short-distance jet to ferry our execs from the Boston headquarters to our New Hampshire and Norfolk facilities, so we just may talk about that, Amanda.”

“Where are you staying?” Kit asked.

“There wasn’t much here, so I’m staying at the Apple Tree,” she answered. “There aren’t any luxury hotels in this little town, so I went with the best I could find, and I rather liked the pictures of the place. It looked quite nice. It even has an indoor pool.”

“So, are you going to take us flying, Jessie?” Muffy asked as she hugged her.

“I sure am!” she said with a big smile. “It’ll be an all girl flight, I’ll take you up in our plane!”

“Good, that leaves the real plane for us males,” Terry said mildly, which earned him a swat from Muffy.

“Actually, I’ve chartered one of their tens for tomorrow,” Vil announced. “So Kit can fly all of us somewhere and prove I didn’t waste my money,” she winked. “Sheila and one of her friends will be arriving tomorrow morning.”

“That sounds fun,” Terry said. “I just hope it’ll fit all of us.”

“I’m sure it will,” Kit said, kissing Suzy on the cheek in greeting. “They’re actually pretty big jets.”

“We have a ten available with seating for ten. We have seating configurations for up to twelve,” Amanda told them.

“Well then, it sounds like that’s all settled,” Vil said. “Now, unless you want to come with us and help us settle in, bro, how about we just meet up tomorrow morning?”

“Actually, that’s fine with me, sis,” Kit answered. “It’s been a long day for us too.”

Kit and Jessie did chat briefly with them as some furs from Cessna helped the two drivers load their baggage into the limos. Jessie told Suzy and Muffy all about her flight lessons and how she’d been doing with her pregnancy, as Vil, Kit, and Terry discussed recent economic trends and political developments. “Ugh, I’m still heartbroken over Romney,” she sighed. “I don’t know who I’ll support now. Huckabee’s too evangelical, and McCain is just too much a firebrand for me. I like nice predictable politicians I can buy and put in my pocket,” she said with absolute sincerity.

“My guy’s still in it, though he’ll never win,” Kit chuckled.

“Paul?” Terry asked, and Kit nodded. “I know I’m violating the Vulpan tradition, but I actually kinda liked Bill Richardson. Too bad he’s out too.”

“A *democrat*? Good God, Terry, did I make a mistake promoting you?”

“Muffy’s voting for Clinton.”

Well, she’s in the Party Pack,” Vil said dismissively...and in a way, Kit saw from Vil just how frustrated some of the younger cousins felt in the family. They truly did get no respect at all.

“I liked Richardson’s experience, and he was very moderate for a Democrat. I would have voted for him. Too bad the Clinton machine bulldozed him out of the way.”

“I can root for Clinton as a fellow femme, but I don’t think I’d like a third term of Bill Clinton,” Vil snorted. “God, I yearn for the days when us, the Kennedys, the Rockefellers, and the Fords ran things.”

“Things move forward, Vil,” Terry chuckled. “And we just couldn’t get away with it in the modern age.”

“We get away with it now,” she scoffed. “You think I don’t have the entire northeast wrapped around my little finger, Terry? I didn’t let the strings Dad used to pull get away from me when I took the chair.”

“Ted doesn’t interfere now that Uncle Luke’s passed?”

She shook her head. “He’s too interested in playing in the Senate to bother. They haven’t caused us any problems since the eighties, after they ceded Boston to us and moved to Cape Cod. God, the fights Ted had with Dad, sometimes I’m amazed they didn’t kill each other.”

Kit noticed that David, Luke, and Amanda, who were standing nearby, were listening with stunned expressions as Vilenne Vulpan talked quite casually about controlling politicians and states. Kit forgot just what family he belonged to from time to time.

The three of them kept looking a little fearful as the limos pulled away, and Kit and Jessie looked at them for a moment. Then Kit laughed. “Now that you’ve met my sister, we can go back to normal,” he teased.

“She’s not what I expected at all,” Luke admitted.

The next morning started early and kept going. Kit and Jessie woke up early and drove to Vil’s hotel so they could all have breakfast together, and Sheila and Allison arrived at the hotel about half an hour after they got there. Muffy folded immediately in with Jessie, Sheila and Allison, getting to know her, as Kit, Vil, Kendall, and Suzy sat at the table, and John and Hannah were over at their room, changing clothes. Terry hovered between the two, already looking to find some way to talk to Allison. “Were we ever that young?” Vil asked, a tad wistfully, as they listened to Muffy and Sheila giggle over something Allison said.

“I don’t think you were, Vil,” Suzy laughed. “Even when you were eleven. The first time we met, you stood up straight and tried to shake my paw. ‘Good morning, I am Vilenne Vulpan, it is nice to meet you,’ you said, so stiff and formal and proper. Such a backslide from then,” she winked.

“That was when Dad was sending me to that God-awful diction school,” Vil snorted. “Right before I started at Weston.”

“I won’t even talk about what my old man made me do at that age,” Kendall chuckled.

“You know, Vil’s right,” Suzy said, reaching over and tipping Kendall’s chin up. “That little black spot *is* cute.”

Kendall laughed. “It’s my beauty mark,” he grinned. “My old male has it too. Vulpans have their eyes, but the Brighton males have the spot. It attracts the femmes, you know.”

“I think if you two marry, Vil will make you shave it out or dye it,” Suzy winked. “There will be no femme fishing once she has you.”

“She’ll have to work for it,” he said with a grin. “I’m easy to catch, but hard to hold.”

“Isn’t he cute, thinking that he has a choice,” Suzy mentioned to Vil.

“If I decide to keep him, he’ll learn,” Vil said calmly.

“If?” he asked challengingly.

“You’re easy to catch but hard to hold. *I* am easy to hold, but almost impossible to catch,” she said with a light smile.

“I’ve always loved a challenge,” Kendall smiled.

“You’ll find me to be the challenge of your life, Ken,” she said, reaching over and patting him on the muzzle like he was a child.

Their flight in the Citation X was actually very fun. Everyone piled into the jet at 11:00, and with Luke as the copilot, the Vulpans, Kendall, and Allison took off from Independence. Luke gave him a little leeway to have some fun, and allowed him to push the performance of the jet by doing a maximum angle power climb, sinking everyone back into their seats as they climbed as fast as the safety range allowed. He leveled out at the maximum ceiling of the plane, 51,000 feet, flying almost on the roof of the world with

the land laid out under them like a green carpet. “So, we’re going a little over seven hundred miles an hour. Where do you want to go, guys?” Kit asked over the intercom.

“Faster!” Sheila shouted.

“This is as fast as she goes, Sheila,” Kit answered. “Want to go overfly the great lakes?”

“Ooo, that sounds cool!” Suzy beamed.

“I’ll call it in so ATC knows what the hell we’re doing. We’ll let them fight with the FAA over our flight plan change,” Luke chuckled.

At 703 miles an hour, it didn’t take them long at all to reach Lake Michigan, just a bit under an hour. Kit and Luke gave them a flight up and over Lake Michigan, with Lake Superior and Lake Huron in the distance as they neared the upper peninsula, then they turned around and headed back to Independence. During the flight, they came up one by one to look at the cockpit, Jessie took a lot of video, and Kit saw Terry and Allison sitting side by side in the back row, talking quietly. Terry was leaning on the arm of his seat towards her, but her body language showed Kit that she was nervous and uncertain.

They landed smoothly about twenty minutes ahead of a coming storm front, and Kit was directed to a hangar to park the plane to get it out of the coming weather. He parked and started shutdown and postflight. “Well, did you like it?” he called.

“That was awesome!” Muffy said excitedly. “I’ve never been in a plane that seemed to go so fast before!”

“You haven’t, silly girl,” Jessie laughed. “This is the fastest there is!”

Terry's reaction was much more telling. "I have *got* to buy one of these," he said to Vil.

"Amanda said she'd impress me. I'm impressed," Vil laughed. "It's too small for me, though. But I think I'll see if there's one around I can charter from time to time just for the fun of it."

After the flight, they took shelter from the thunderstorm in the facility, where Kit and Jessie showed them around. Vil got to try her paw at flying the Mustang simulator, Sheila intentionally crashed into the tower when she tried, but she actually flew the 400 simulator properly and well. Allison also flew a turn in the 400 simulator, and flew it very well. Cessna brought their bigwigs in from Wichita to meet Vil, and Vil rubbed elbows with them as they talked her into going to a mock-up of a Citation Columbus, but then she talked about what kind of jet would be best to ferry one to four executives from their Boston headquarters to the shipyard facilities they had in both New Hampshire and Norfolk. That made the Cessna execs *very* excited, and they talked about the Mustang CJ, and Encore models, taking her aside with Terry as they went to go tour a couple of jets they had in the hangar.

Kit would have been suspicious of that, had Vil not mentioned her interest in buying a couple of small short-range jets when she got her new Bombardier, when she was talking about how the other board members would fight over the jet she was passing down. When he heard Vil say "Four million, you say? What kind of operating costs does it have?" Kit had a feeling that Vil might be closing a deal or two before going home. Vil was actually a big fan of brand loyalty. That was why she tended to buy Fords when she bought cars as gifts, because she had always liked the brand, and had had good relations with the Ford family...so she bought their cars. The

Cessna furs had treated Kit and Jessie very well, far better than any other student they had taught, and she would reward their devotion to her brother by giving Cessna serious consideration when she started looking for those small jets she was interested in buying. Selling jets to Vulpan Shipyards would be Cessna's contract to *lose*, not to *win*.

Kit figured that she'd buy maybe three CJ1s for the shipyard. A CJ1 could carry five or six furs, it easily had the range to reach Norfolk, and it was economical to maintain. And they were nice to fly, though he only flew one in a simulator. He'd had to put six hours on one in the simulator in order for his blanket CJ rating to cover it.

They all went out to dinner after the storm abated, and it was a very nice, relaxing evening given how much he'd been working, and how much more work he had to do. He talked with Hannah and John about their cruise in greater detail, and listened to them go on for half the night about how fantastic it was to be treated like royalty on a cruise ship plying the Caribbean waters. "We came home broke, but we were so happy we didn't care," Hannah admitted with a laugh.

"If you don't regret spending money, then it is always money well spent," Kit nodded. "I still want to know where you took that picture of John paragliding, and how you got him up there."

"He lost a bet," Hannah smiled. "I bet him he couldn't go a full day without skeet shooting. He lost."

Jessie laughed. "Dad, you should have known better!"

"What can I say? I'm weak," he laughed. "It was free! Free skeet shooting, all day! I think I used up all their pigeons."

“Did you enjoy the paraglide?”

“After I got over the initial terror, yes, I did enjoy it,” he nodded.

But, unfortunately, it was just a quick visit. Almost as soon as they finished dinner, Kit and Jessie went with them back to the hotel to pack, and then they returned to the airport. Kit and Jessie kissed their way down the line, at least until he got to Allison. “When I get home, we have to talk,” he told her.

“I think we do,” she said, glancing at Terry. “Talk a *long* time.”

“It’ll be a good kind of talk,” he told her in a low tone, kissing her on the cheek.

Hannah, of course, did not miss that. “What are you up to, Kit?” she asked in a near whisper.

“My cousin has been chasing Allison. We have to talk about it.”

Hannah gave the beautiful vixen a calm, slightly frosty look. “I see,” she said.

“Paws off, Hannah, let them work it out,” he warned. “That means no long talks with Terry.”

“Kit, I—“

“I *mean it*, Hannah,” he said in a tone that was not the usual conciliatory tone he used with her. “If you say a word, you will be breaking *my* promise, and a Vulpan *is his word*. Do you understand?”

She drew herself up coolly. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“I know exactly just what you *would* do when you think you have the high ground,” Kit cut her off. “Or do I have to say the three magic words?”

“What?”

“Austin Police Department,” he said calmly.

The wave of rueful chagrin swept over her face, then she sighed and nodded. “Alright, I promise.”

“That’s all I needed to hear,” he said, kissing her fondly on the cheek. “Have a good flight, Hannah. I love you.”

“I love you too, dear,” she said reflexively, patting him on the side of his neck before starting up the steps.

“Well, bro, I’ll see you in Austin on next Monday,” Vil said with an impish smile. “We have a surprise to drop on Rick.”

“We’ll be there, sis,” Kit grinned.

“I don’t want to miss the look on his face,” Jessie giggled.

Kit and Jessie watched the jet taxi away, friends and family waving from the windows, and they waved back. “What’s going on with Allison?” Jessie asked.

“Terry’s not giving up. She wants to talk to me about it.”

“Why?”

“Because I think she doesn’t want him to stop, but she’s afraid of how he’ll react when he finds out the truth.”

“Well, if he can’t see the femme inside, he has no business being with her,” Jessie said immediately. “Because if he can’t, then all he’s interested

in is what he sees, not the femme he gets to know. Allison is a wonderful, smart femme, and if all Terry can see is her face, he has no right to find out what's underneath it."

"Well said, pretty kitty. Now if you would only practice what you preach," he teased.

"I do so!"

"Then the next time that you say I'll think you're ugly when you're fat, I'm going to wash your mouth out with soap."

She gave him a surprised look, then laughed helplessly.

It was their last week there. For Jessie, it was a chance to relax, swim, get some exercise, take cookies and other goodies down to the training facility for the workers—which earned her their undying loyalty—and have a little fun.

For Kit, it was like the Marine boot camp's Hell Week.

He had three check rides in three days, and they were *brutal*. Gary gave all three of them, which made it feel nice and consistent, but he didn't go easy on Kit in the slightest. The Monday exam was the MEI, or the multi-engine exam, and Kit had went into it with only one day of study on the 303 Crusader he was going to fly. He had to work a little to answer the plane questions, but the other questions were indeed many of the same he had from the single engine exam, which Gary was still required to ask despite having asked them just three days prior. He stayed up almost all night preparing for the test, and he was too keyed up on caffeine to be sleepy when they started. He again spent nearly three hours being quizzed,

and then they got into the plane. They flew for only ninety minutes, though, where Gary really only checked him on the maneuvers and techniques unique to a multi-engine plane.

Kit passed, but had only enough time for a short nap before beginning his CJ4 training. The classroom part took place that afternoon, as Luke trained him in the differences between the CJ4 and the prior CJ models. Kit went home early, and spent the afternoon and most of the evening preparing for his CFII, or what was also called the type two rating, which was the ability to teach IFR.

Gary had been right about that test. It was very different from the other ratings because it focused on the instruments. The oral was about teaching and the plane like before, but it also discussed methods of teaching instruments, IFR rules, IFR procedures, and approaches. After the oral exam, Kit demonstrated his knowledge of IFR to Gary in his 400, demonstrating the very things Gary had questioned him over in the oral test. The flight took about two hours, as he went through every aspect of IFR to prove to Gary he not only knew the procedures, he could execute and teach them.

Kit passed that as well.

The last rating given by Gary was a relatively new rating, the MEII, or multi engine instrument. It was, by far, the easiest of all the CFI tests, since it was based on everything else. The oral exam only took an hour, and the check ride flight only took about 45 minutes, where Gary focused on the minor differences in IFR for multi rated planes, and those were primarily in jets. Kit performed the check ride in the same Mustang they'd been letting him fly back and forth to Wichita, demonstrating he knew the IFR

procedures more common in multi rated planes...which there weren't very many. So, the check ride didn't take long.

When they landed the Mustang, Gary looked at him and smiled. "Why don't you go for your ATP?" he asked.

Kit laughed. "Someday I will, since I turned twenty-three in March and I have the logged hour requirements done, but not anytime soon," he answered with a chuckle. "I've spent six weeks burning out on flying. After this is over, I'm going back to my job and be happy with what I have. But someday, I'll do it. It'd only take me about a week or so to do the ground training, then take the test and check ride."

"I'm sure you'll pass. You're a very good pilot, Mister Vulpan."

"Thanks, I appreciate that."

Thursday, Kit took his simulated check ride on the CJ4, administered by Luke, and passed that as well, but it didn't mean anything. He also earned his type ratings to qualify to instruct on the Mustang, CJ series, the Encore, and the X. But they didn't let him get completely away. After everyone heard that Kit had passed all his CFI exams and was now a certified flight instructor for everything but the ATP, they threw him a little party. Amanda was there, and got video of them putting Kit on a chair and parading him around the facility like some kind of Egyptian pharaoh. There was also a little ceremony. Out on the flight line, Kit and Jessie both were awarded little Cessna wings, keepsakes of their training there. Jessie's wings were silver, marking her as a private pilot, but Kit got silver wings with a wreath and star, marking him as a flight instructor. When he finally got his ATP and rated his CFI license to teach ATP, he'd get gold wings with a wreath and star.

Friday was their last official day at Cessna. Kit and Jessie spent the morning packing up all their things, then having a professional UPS shipper come and take the bed apart, pack it up, and ship it home. They picked up all their other boxes too, leaving them with nothing but a single suitcase and carryon holding their laptops. After they were packed up, they returned the rental cars, then spent the rest of the morning writing his final article while at Cessna, taking video, and saying quite a few goodbyes. Amanda took them on a tour of the Mustang assembly plant on their final day, treated them to lunch, and then, it was time to go back to reality.

At 1:00, on a brilliantly sunny and warm early June day, Kit and Jessie went back to their plane. Luke, Amanda, and David went with them, and quite a few pawshakes and hugs were exchanged. Kit and Jessie gave them their personal cell numbers. “Now don’t be strangers. Call us, we’d love to keep up with you guys!” Jessie said happily.

“We certainly will, Jessie,” David said, giving her a brief hug of farewell.

“When you want that ATP, Kit, call us,” Amanda told him. “We can do a two week course for it if you do enough study beforehand. I checked your record, and you qualify for the ATP now, you just need the ground training and need to study for the test and check ride.”

“I couldn’t afford it,” Kit laughed.

“Pay? Did you ever hear me mention having you pay for it? You’re almost like family here now. If I tried to make you pay, I think the training staff would lynch me,” Amanda smiled. “Hell, Kit, if you ever need a job teaching pilots, *you call me*. I’d hire you so fast you’d be on the payroll before the ink dried.”

“I’ll keep that in mind if Rick ever fires me,” Kit laughed. “But the boyhood dream has been fulfilled. It’s time for me to climb back into my little rubber band propeller plane and fly home very, very slowly.”

“Excuse me, *I’m* flying. I didn’t spend five weeks up here working the fur off my tail to sit in the right seat!” Jessie corrected, which made them all laugh.

“But really, *thank you* all of you,” Kit said honestly, patting Luke on the arm. “You guys gave me six weeks of hell, but you also made me very happy. It’s not every male who can say he got to fulfill his boyhood dream.”

“It was an honor and a pleasure, Kit,” Luke said, abandoning formality and clapping Kit on the back.

“You two were wonderful students, and we’re going to miss you,” David agreed with a nod. “If only all the rich brats were as smart and dedicated as you.”

Kit laughed. “That’s a contradiction in terms, Dave, *dedicated rich kid*.”

“Nah, you proved it wrong.”

“*I’m* not rich. My sister is,” Kit winked.

“We get to enjoy the occasional dip into luxury when Vil comes to see us, but then we go back home to our little apartment and return to the real world,” Jessie giggled. “Vil’s great for making us feel special from time to time, like her letting us take this training, but the rest of the time we’re just your average young couple trying to make ends meet.”

“You two will never be average,” Amanda told her with serious eyes.

“Aww, thanks, Amanda, you’re so sweet,” Jessie smiled.

They helped them pack their suitcase in the plane, and then Amanda handed them the large, thick leather satchel she’d been carrying. “It has certificates declaring all your ratings inside,” she explained. “We put them in thin frames so you can hang them on your wall, so you can look at the wall and remember your six weeks with us.”

“Wow, thanks Amanda!” Jessie said with a bright smile.

“We gassed up your plane, and since you were here, we had our mechanics go over it for you,” Luke added. “They noted their inspection in your plane’s logbook.”

“Nice, thanks a bunch, it was about time for me to find someone to do that.”

“There’s a certified Cessna maintenance facility at the airport in Georgetown that’s qualified to work on your plane,” Amanda told him. “I’ll email you the details.”

“Thanks, Amanda.”

“Hey, you may be back in your rubber band plane, but it’s one of ours, and we’re damn proud to build it,” she smiled.

“This plane is *why* I got my pilot’s license!” Jessie said once again, with a giggle.

They waved as Jessie taxied them away from the facility. Kit felt a little nostalgic about leaving, but was also looking forward to getting back to reality. He’d spent six weeks learning things he’d probably never use again, but at least he was going home a *jet pilot*, he was going home after doing something he’d always wanted to do. But, more importantly, he was

going home with all his CFIs, and that was something tangible, something he could really use. He could teach Sheila and Allison if they wanted, or do freelance instructing on the side, or whatever he wanted to do.

He would take them up on the ATP offer. Maybe in the fall, but definitely after Laura was born. For now, Austin was where they needed to be, and Austin was where they were going to stay.

Jessie took off smoothly and turned the plane south, and they headed back home to return to reality after six weeks of living a dream.

Chapter 28

It was almost...bizarre.

It had been six weeks since they'd set foot in their own home, and coming back to it was almost like coming into a hotel room after a minute. Kit and Jessie both had to stand there a minute and look around, until the *home* feeling started to sink in. His little Capitol Building on its stand by the wall. The entertainment center unit that had cause their first fight, with the LCD TV sitting atop it and the gaping hole in the shelf under where their DVD player would usually sit. The dining room table beyond the comfy couch and sofa and chair that ringed the coffee table, which had the silver tea set resting on a lace doily in the center of the table. And in the middle of the floor in the area between the living area and dining area were the boxes they'd sent from Kansas, stacked and waiting for them.

Yes...this was *home*.

Lupe was running up from behind as they stepped in, Kit with the suitcase and Jessie with their attaché and the little leather case that Amanda had given them. The place didn't smell musty or stale, and Lupe had turned on the air conditioner for them after it started getting hot, leaving the apartment at a nice comfortable temperature. "Home again, home again, jiggy-jig," Jessie intoned, which made Kit laugh as he set the suitcase on the chair. "At least Lupe turned on the AC for us."

"I certainly did, babe," Lupe said as he reached the door. "Hey brash, babe, they sent something else too, something like monde huge. I didn't

want to try to put it in here cause I didn't know where you wanted it, so I got it stored over in the show unit. Looks like a bed."

"Yeah, it is," Jessie nodded. "We got it while we were there, and it's *really* nice."

"So, you ditching' your old bed?"

"Well, we need it for the guest bedroom, but we don't have anywhere to put it until the move."

"Well, you can store it over in the show unit till the move."

"Sounds good," Kit nodded.

"Now you earn all that food we let you have, Lupe," Jessie told him. "You can help us move the bed out."

"I knew there was a catch," he grinned.

"There always is," she said gravely, which made him laugh.

"Well played, pretty kitty," Kit said with a playful nudge as Lupe went to go unlock the show unit.

"You go ahead and work on the bed, handsome fox, I'll start putting the apartment back together."

"Sounds like a plan."

It took them about three hours to get everything finally all back where it was supposed to be. Lupe called in Dan, and the three of them brought the Sleep Number bed over, figured out how to put the Sleep Number bed up with the old bed frame which matched the bedroom suit, and moved the old mattresses over to the show unit. There, they put the mattresses in the show

unit's spare bedroom, which was empty. "I guess I'll need to buy a new frame for the mattresses," Kit mused. "We're going to put this bed in the spare bedroom in the new apartment."

"Why'd you buy the bed? The one in the hotel not work for yaw?" Dan asked.

"I never found out. My sis bought the bed for me and had the hotel set it up in our room before we ever got there," he chuckled.

"Dude, where can I get a sister like yours?"

"That's a double-edged sword, Dan," Kit smiled. "You get the toys, but you have to come with the cunning manipulator that tries to control your life that comes with it. Every one of Val's gifts has a hook in it."

"You seem to be hook less, dude," Dan grinned.

"I know where they are and I can steal the bait without getting snared," Kit answered. "But just remember one thing, Dan. If Val ever gives you a gift, remember that it *is not* free. She finds ways of getting something back for everything she gives."

"I'll keep that in mind," he nodded.

After the beds were all done, Kit helped Jessie put their apartment back together. She was almost done when he arrived, but she left him the task of putting their entertainment system back together. While he was doing that, Jessie called around to tell everyone that they were back home and they were safe. "It was a boring ride home," Jessie laughed as she talked to her mother. "I got to fly us home, but there's not much to it when you get up in the air. You just set the autopilot and read a book until it's time to do something." She snapped her fingers and pointed to the attaché, and Kit

passed it to her. “Yeah, they gave me a little pair of wings and a certificate. Want me to scan it and email you a copy so you can see it? Oh, it’ll be easy, Mom, really,” she assured her. “I think we’ll hang our certificates up over our little model of the Capitol,” she mused, looking over at that side of the living room, where they had a painting of a flower and vase where her eyes were obviously visualizing their 13 certificates, one for each of their ratings and accomplishments. Jessie’s private, multi, IFR, and check ride certification in their 400 would be up there among Kit’s four jet ratings, four CFI ratings, and his Cessna 400 check ride certification.

Kit saw that coming, so he just got up and took down the painting, which made Jessie giggle. “I haven’t put the desktop back together yet,” he warned.

“Oh? Darn,” she fretted. “I’ll have to scan it later, Mom, we have to put our desktop back together and it runs the scanner.”

“Just stall her for ten minutes, I’ll get it back up,” he winked. “Think you can make her prattle on for ten minutes?”

“Kit, Mom says she heard that,” Jessie said with a grin.

“Well, then, I’ll just have to keep my eye out for another beating by proxy,” he said roguishly as he sauntered past Jessie. She swatted him on the backside as he went by. “That was from Mom!”

“Tell her that if she doesn’t stop touching my butt, I’m going to draw some very wrong conclusions.”

Jessie gasped, then laughed helplessly.

Kit got the desktop out of the box and put it back together, then tested it out while Jessie talked with Hannah about her next doctor’s appointment.

“I’m trying to lose the weight Doctor Mac said was bad for me,” she explained. “It doesn’t help much, though. I can’t look down and see just my chest, I see this bulge that’s threatening to hide my toes from me.” She laughed after her mother must have replied. “I know, but I can’t help it. I’ve never been like this before, it’s creepy. I *know* I haven’t been pregnant before, I mean I’ve never been pudgy before.”

“I can believe that,” Kit chuckled. “Scanner’s working, love, have at it.”

“Thanks my handsome fox,” she said, giving him a kiss on the muzzle. “Alright Mom, I’ll have it scanned in and on the way to you in just a minute.”

Kit touched base with work as Jessie did that, calling Rick. “We’re home, boss,” Kit said. “You get that last article?”

“Yup, I’m editing it now,” he answered. “Did you get video of your last day?”

“There was too much to send over the net, I’m going to bring it in tomorrow morning,” he answered. “I’ll be back at work tomorrow.”

“Nah, take Saturday off, son,” Rick told him. “Just come in on Tuesday like normal.”

“I’m an owner now, Rick, I don’t take that much time,” Kit chuckled. “I’ll go ahead and take tomorrow off so I can rest, but I’ll be in on Monday morning for our daily meeting.”

“I can’t make you stay away,” Rick laughed. “How was the flight home?”

“Smooth,” he answered. “Jessie worked very hard to be able to fly us home, and she did and did it perfectly. I got to sit in the right seat and just read and rest. After six solid weeks of hardcore flight training, I was *very happy* to just ride along without having to do anything.”

Rick laughed. “So now instead of fighting over who’s driving, you’ll fight over who’s flying.”

“I think I’m more or less going to be permanently stuck in the right seat,” Kit chuckled. “I’ll insist on Jessie flying anyway, because she needs to log hours to start working for her commercial license. I’ve basically written my plane off,” he said with a sigh. “She’s going to wrest it away from me slowly and inexorably.”

“I’m sure she’ll let you borrow it from time to time,” Rick laughed. “So, what’s next for our resident pilot?”

“Get ready for our daughter,” he answered. “Flight wise, I have two more things to work for, my air transport license and my air transport instructor rating. The air transport is what we call the ATP, and it’s the big daddy, the highest license there is. I’ll get mine, but not till after our little Laura is born and settled in.”

“It sounds like you’ve got your usual plan.”

“I plan everything, Rick, even the surprises. Now, how badly has the magazine deteriorated since I left?”

Rick laughed. “We’re swinging from the lights and using hammers to type out our articles.”

“Sounds normal, then.”

They again had to go to the store to replenish their food, and spent nearly two hundred dollars. Lupe had indeed stripped the kitchen of just about *everything* edible, even digging into their canned soups and other things that wouldn't have spoiled while they were gone. But they were expecting it; Lupe couldn't cook to save his life, so he relied on prepared food and whatever he could sweet-talk out of Jessie. Jessie had even cooked everything they had left over she could and loaded the fridge with it so he'd have plenty of food to steal. They had to restock almost from the ground up, but they wiped out and got some takeout Chinese rather than cook.

It was a warm, muggy evening after they finished fully settling in, and they spent it surveying the amazing progress the contractors had made on the new Westwood while they'd been in Kansas. The line of duplexes that contained theirs and Lupe's new apartments was now fully built both inside and outside, and only needed to have the carpet installed to finish them. The second line of duplexes were up but hadn't had their interiors completely finished yet, and the third line of them on the far side looked only about three quarters finished on the outside. They were up, but needed to have their siding installed to look complete. Hay was spread around the ground at the first line, and Kit saw that the drawings Lupe had shown them had been faithfully followed. Lupe would live in the end unit, and Kit and Jessie's apartment was right next door, with a small break to the next duplex unit, putting two luxury apartments in each unit. They had an actual yard, and then there was the parking lot holding their assigned spaces. Across the lot was the community center and the pool, and it was set up so the gate in the fence faced their apartments, giving them the fastest access to the center. The center too was already built, but they were still finishing it inside, and were indeed ferrying in paneling and carpet as Kit and Jessie watched. Despite it being nearly 8:00, they were still hard at work, and would be all

night. The contractors had been working 24/7 since they started, and they used the night hours to do inside finishing work, so heavy machinery didn't wake up the residents on the other end of the block or the houses across the street. Beyond the luxury units that would be in the center of the new complex, the apartment buildings had also literally sprouted since they left six weeks ago. They were building all of the new buildings at once that they could, leaving only the far side of the block with the old Westwood untouched, so there was construction both to the side and behind the center of the complex. There were going to be thirteen buildings total ringing the center, four to each side, and five in the middle, so the contractors had been working on 8 of the 13, unable to work on the furthest one in the back because it was partially on land already covered by the old complex. The left and back buildings had been built while they were in Kansas, since they'd been nothing but foundations when they left. Four of them had been completely built and looked finished, four were constructed but waiting to have their exteriors finished, and it looked like they'd have this first stage of the construction done probably in the next three weeks. After that, Lupe would have residents of the old Westwood move into the new Westwood building by building in a set schedule, and was everyone eager for it. When they got moved and the contractors moved out to begin knocking down the rest of the block, the pool and community center would be open and available to the residents. They were still closed right now because the contractors didn't want the residents milling around an active construction site.

Lupe had promised them they'd be in their new apartment before Laura was born, and he had kept his promise. From the look of it, they'd be moving into their new apartment in late June or early July, more than enough time to be fully settled in and ready for the baby. They'd have time

to set up the nursery and get their house completely baby-proofed and ready.

It would be a very, very nice apartment. It was a townhouse style apartment with two floors and a covered carport on each side of the building big enough for two cars, then with a narrow strip of grass separating them from the next duplex over. The first floor was dominated by a huge living area, taking up almost half the first floor, with the back half split between a den or bedroom, dining room and a huge kitchen that would make Jessie ecstatic. Upstairs there were four bedrooms, two smaller ones—but still very nicely spacious—a slightly larger one, and a large master bedroom that took up about half the upstairs that had a private bath with a luxuriant hot tub and a shower. They had already decided to keep the baby with them in the master bedroom for about the first six months, then move her into her own room that would start as her nursery, then slowly change over time to be her bedroom. There were two other bathrooms besides the master bedroom's bath, a full bath on the second floor and a half bathroom on the first floor, between the living room and dining room. There would be a sliding glass door in both the dining room and kitchen that led out to a deck, with an open grassy area separated from the rest of the complex by a privacy fence that ringed the inner compound and kept furs who lived out in the rest of the complex from cutting between the duplexes to get to the community center, forcing them onto sidewalks between the main lines of duplexes, at the corners. That would keep furs out of their back yard. The back yard was shared by everyone along the line, each townhouse with its own deck, but Kit and Lupe's duplex had a brick patio built behind it that shared a barbecue pit and had a few outdoor tables. The design of the driveway that ringed the community center was rather ingenious; it was gated on both sides, preventing furs from parking in the residential area,

opened by a garage-door style clicker and also buzz able from each townhouse, where a resident could open the gate for a visitor. Each duplex had two visitor parking spots per duplex in front of them, and there was a small yet functional parking lot in front of the community center both for visitors and for tenants. The gate only kept out cars, leaving the sidewalks open, which was how it was ingenious. It would allow a prospective tenant to park at the community center and visit Lupe in his new office in the community center building, or walk in and visit someone in the inner ring.

“And to think, Lupe said that all sixteen luxury apartments are taken,” Kit chuckled as they looked at the front of what would be their new apartment. “Doesn’t look much like an apartment, does it?”

“I’ll feel like I’m back home,” Jessie said with a short giggle. “We’ll have stairs.”

“I’ll get used to it,” he said. “I wonder when he’ll let us start moving.”

“I’m not sure. Are we going to do it ourselves?”

“I’m not sure,” he answered. “It wouldn’t cost much to hire movers to do it for us, since they’re moving us like half a block. But, since it is so short, I guess we could do it ourselves. Hell, we could walk most of the furniture down here.”

“Hmm,” Jessie said, tapping her muzzle in thought. “Maybe not walk it, but maybe carts.”

“Carts?”

“Yeah, like they have at Home Depot, those flat carts. Some of them are big enough, handsome fox, we could probably put our washer and dryer on it. We buy some carts, use them to ferry our stuff down here, then we sell

them to Lupe when we're done so he can keep them in the community center for whenever he needs stuff moved. We can do it over a few days, so there wouldn't really be a big rush. We move our bed and bedroom stuff over first, then we do a room a day until we're moved."

"We're going to need new furniture," he noted. "And remember, we have to pay him the difference between what he was going to buy for our apartment and the cost of the fridge and stove you wanted."

Jessie giggled. "Money well spent," she said. "Those appliances he wanted to put in our apartment are too small! And he'll find that out when he moves in and his tenants complain. A family of four couldn't possibly keep all the food they need in that fridge he wanted to install!"

"Yah," Kit chuckled in agreement. "I'm just not sure why you wanted a six burner stove."

"I like to cook," she said simply. "And that restaurant-style stove will let me cook better."

"Lupe looked like he was going to strangle you when he found out the contractors would have to cut almost a foot out of the counter to fit it in."

"He offered to let me pick my appliances, he should thought ahead," Jessie winked. "I'm just going to love that island in the kitchen! It's going to make cooking *solo* much easier, I'll have more counter space than I'll know what to do with!"

"I love that little bread oven you wanted in the island," Kit said.

"It fit perfectly, and it only cost me one cabinet," she smiled. "Those small ovens are *very* useful, handsome fox. I'll use it for more than just

bread. It's just big enough to fit a cake, so I can bake in the little oven and fix big things like turkey in the range oven."

"Really big things," Kit noted. "I think I could crawl into that oven."

"Well, when you have the potential to be feeding like fifteen furs, you want a *big* oven," she grinned at him.

They wandered back home eventually, and Kit spent much of the night organizing all their videos and creating a nice timeline of them to take to work tomorrow. Jessie hung up all their certificates in a circular pattern over their Capitol model, putting her own IFR certificate and Kit's MEI certificate, their greatest individual achievements, in the center with all the others surrounding them, and with the wings Cessna gave them pinned to a silk band that was nailed up between those two center certificates. Kit rather liked the way she'd arranged it, and took a picture of it to post online. To his surprise, Luke called him while he was just finishing up. "Luke! Wow, it's a surprise to hear from you so quick! Couldn't resist razzing me one more time, eh?" he asked.

Luke laughed. "Amanda wanted to schedule you for your ATP training, and asked me to call you. Of course, she really just wants to make sure you got home okay, and so did I for that matter."

"Well, I'm not planning on doing ATP until after Laura's born, so like November," he said. "If then."

"Well then, I'll just tell Amanda to put you on the schedule for sometime in early November," he answered. "I've already sent you the ATP materials we use, so you can study them at your leisure. And hell, you'll have like five months to do it," he added.

“Wow, thanks Luke.”

“I’ve also added the manuals, books, and software we use for our commercial program for Jessie. I’ve also added some DVDs of some training films we use, and you might find useful for your own students. And we know you can do her training, but when she does her check rides, bring her here. We’ll do it for you for free, and we’d love to see you again.”

“I doubt she’ll do that until after the baby’s born either, but I’ll let her know.”

“We do demand constant picture updates,” Luke told him. “And we may sneak a jet down to come see you from time to time,” he chuckled. “Have to do those maintenance flights, you know.”

Kit laughed. “Just say the word, and Jessie will cook up a dinner to make your knees weak.”

“God, did she seduce like half the facility with her pastries,” he laughed. “That last week was just heaven, cookies and cakes and cupcakes and pies everywhere. I think I gained five pounds.”

“You should try her pineapple upside-down cake, it’s awesome.”

“Oh hush,” he laughed again. “Anyway, I’ll let everyone know you’re home safe, and expect a box from us in the next few days.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for it,” he promised.

Jessie was in the kitchen when he came out of the den, and had her paws in a mixing bowl. “Luke just called,” he said. “They wanted to make sure we got home, and they’re sending us some books so we can keep

studying. You have a commercial to work for, and I have my ATP left to get.”

“But the baby—“

“It’s just for us to have as reference,” Kit told her. “He said so we have five months to study before we decide to continue our flying careers.”

“Career,” she giggled.

“And he said the Cessna furs are in despair now that you’ve left,” he laughed. “No more cookies and cupcakes on the table when they came in!”

“What do you think I’m doing now?” she winked. “I’m making up some toll house cookies and I’m going to mail them to them. And I’m sending another batch of cherry scones up to Clancy.”

“He looks forward to your scones,” Kit said. “He said yours are better than the kitchen’s.”

“I make mine with love,” she said primly.

“That or you make them with drugs,” he noted dryly.

“Kit!” she warned, then laughed helplessly. “Are you going in tomorrow?”

He nodded. “To make sure they didn’t strip my office bare of anything even remotely usable if nothing else. Besides, we took so much video and so many pictures the last few days, it would take like ten hours to upload it all. Did you get your scripts done for Jeffrey?”

She nodded. “I just have to get them to him. I can go with you and drop them off in his office.”

“How many did you do?”

“Fifteen,” she answered. “He should still have six scripts to go, unless Rick’s been doubling up.”

“I doubt he’d do that with you in Kansas,” Kit noted, scratching his cheek. “So, want to do something tonight?”

She gave him a look and laughed. “I *am* doing something!” she proclaimed. “Go research something if you’re bored.”

“I’d rather stay in here and rub your tummy till Laura kicks my paws away,” he teased, coming up behind her and pushing his paws up under her shirt, putting them on her expanding belly.

“Don’t start something you’re afraid to finish, love,” she warned in a calm voice, almost sounding like Hannah for a moment as she put the beating tines in her paw mixer and plugged it up.

“Oh, I’m not afraid of this,” Kit said in her ear, patting her tummy.

“It’s what that’s attached to you’d better fear,” she giggled, reaching down and grabbing his paw, letting him feel the tips of her claws through his fur and skin.

“Then I’d better placate the beast,” he said huskily, sliding his fingers through her soft, sleek fur.

“You’ll let me finish these cookies,” she said tartly. “*Then* you’d better find some way of making me happy.”

“Bring it on, baby,” he teased playfully.

“You’d better bring some basting,” she said impishly, swatting him on the leg with her tail.

He felt a little weird going in on Saturday, almost like it was his first day again. The office seemed familiar yet oddly new, but he was welcomed home warmly by Barry, Lilly, and Marty, who were all in to do some work. He sat behind his desk and found everything right as he left it, his computer on but his monitor off, and a little card on his planner welcoming him home. He brought up his laptop and started downloading the videos they took, then sent his last article to Rick's desktop for him to look over. Rick was off today, but he'd probably pull it off his desktop from his laptop at home and do it from there.

He visited with the others, getting to hear what had happened while he was gone, and hearing in some surprise that his series of piloting articles had been resold to *Plane & Pilot* magazine, and that national publication was going to run his entire series of articles, and even offer the videos they'd taken at their website; Rick had even sold the videos to them. Kit was surprised that a national magazine had picked up his articles, and that made him almost beam in pride, but no less pride than he had felt when a national newspaper had picked up their election special articles. They had even been printed in *Newsweek*, but that was Barry's article with the Governor, not Kit's.

He piddled around a bit, just getting back into the swing of being home, when someone opened his door and stepped in. He glanced up and saw Allison there, and almost stood up. "Hey Ally, come in," he offered.

"Kit, can we go somewhere?" she asked. "I need to talk to you."

"Sure, we can go see what Jessie's making for dinner," he offered.

"Can we go somewhere else?" she asked, a bit nervous. "I don't think...." she trailed off.

“Certainly.”

They ended up walking around on the campus of U.T. for a while, in relative silence. It was clear that Allison desperately wanted to breach a subject, but seemed terrified to do it. He didn’t have to think very long to wonder what it was she wanted to talk about. He walked her over to John’s Pizza, and they sat down and shared a small veggie special. “Kit, I—I don’t know how to say this.”

“I think we’ve been friends long enough for you just to say it, Ally.”

She gave him a grateful look. “Your cousin, Kit. He just won’t give up.”

“And you don’t want him to give up anymore, do you?”

She looked away, her cheeks ruffling. “I don’t know what to do, Kit!” she said, almost desperately. “I really like him, but, but it’s *me*. How is he going to react? And God, what will your family say? I think they’re still reeling from you marrying Jessie, but right after, he starts dating *me*,” she said, then she sighed somberly. “I just don’t know what to do.”

“Tell him the truth.”

“I *can*’t,” she said, giving him a powerful look. “I’ve tried so many times. I can’t tell you how many emails I’ve typed up, but I was never brave enough to send them. I thought I was a strong vixen who could face anything, but I,” she said, looking away. “I can’t face him. I can’t face this. I never thought I’d ever care, and that it wouldn’t matter. But I was wrong. Wrong!”

“First thing, Ally, is that this isn’t a lost cause,” he assured her, reaching over and taking her paws in his own. “You don’t know my cousin,

but I can tell you that he's very different from the rest of my family. I honestly don't know how he'll handle it, but that's a good thing. Because I know *exactly* how the rest of the family will."

"But I'll get him in so much trouble!"

"Terry's the son of Uncle Tom," Kit said dismissively. "All his kids are a little strange. They'll just consider it one of his eccentricities. It's not him you have to worry about, Ally. It's *you*. If you are serious about this, you will be opening up a hornet's nest. You have to understand that. The Vulpine don't fight fair, Allison. They cheat. They'll do almost anything to get their way. Don't let me and Sheila fool you about the true nature of my family. And if you do this, then you have to be ready for it. You'd better expect it. And you had *better* expect to be ousted. They'll do it in a heartbeat."

"You told them?"

He shook his head. "I don't have to. It won't take them long to dig up the truth, Ally. You have no idea what kind of resources they have. My sister's bodyguards could put your entire life history on her desk four hours after she asked for it. So be ready for it, Allison. They *will* find it." She looked very frightened, so he squeezed her paws gently. "But also understand that you won't be alone. Sheila will fight for you, and so will I. And unlike Sheila, I have a fast track right to the most powerful Vulcan of them all. One call to my sister can step on a *lot* of necks."

"But won't *she* object?"

"Maybe," he said honestly. "But Val has a much different concept of the family than my aunts and uncles. She dismisses the actions of the younger, just like our parents, but she also is much more tolerant of them

going their own way. She doesn't see the Vulcan pride and the Vulcan traditions as necessarily a *good* thing. I think as long as you don't flaunt yourself, you behave and show true contrition and don't embarrass the family, she'll accept you, as long as you stay out of sight. She'll get angry if there's tabloids all over the place."

"But you said they'd do that to me."

"Yes, and that will *make her angry*," Kit told her. "She does not tolerate any kind of inter-family spats that degrade the family name, but where she's different is she'll defend *you* just as strongly as she defends *Jessie* if you and Terry get serious. Val is the key, Ally. If you can win her support, the family will knuckle under. And you win that support by being *discreet* and *submissive* to Val's demands. She is the ruler of this family, Ally. If you obey her, she'll get along with you as right as rain. You just never, ever, *ever* want to cross her. Odds are, if she agrees to this, she'll set down rules that you and Terry had better follow about being quiet and discreet. As long as you follow those rules, she will be on your side."

"I...Kit. Will you do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"I just can't face him, Kit. If I looked into his eyes and saw him reject me," she said, looking down. "I can't do it."

"I will tell him, Ally. I'll be honest with him, and make it clear to him you're coming clean because you *are* interested in him."

She gave him the most profoundly grateful look he'd ever seen in his life.

“Don’t you worry a bit. You just go home and try to relax. I’ll call Sheila and have her come over and keep you company. I’ll call Terry and tell him I want him at my front door as soon as he can get here. I guarantee you, he’ll be on a plane to Austin within the hour.”

“He’s coming here?”

“It’s best if this is done face to face,” he told her simply. “This is not something you discuss over the phone.”

“I—alright, Kit. I trusted you once before and have never regretted it. I’ll trust you now.”

“Just keep calm, hon. You have at least two Vulpine on your side, and that’s a lot of weight. So go home, try to keep calm, and let me take care of it.”

“I’ll owe you so much,” she sniffled a little.

“You can pay me back by wearing baggy clothes for the next three months and complain to Jessie that you’re starting to gain weight. You’ll make her utterly thrilled.”

Allison gave him a startled look, then laughed helplessly. “I take it I can go on an amazing crash diet after your baby is born?”

“Isn’t it just amazing how these things work out?” he asked in a deadpan voice.

Kit was a fox of his word. As soon as Allison gave him a kiss on the cheek and left to go home, Kit called Sheila first. “Cousin,” he called. “What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to figure out how to make this soufflé not deflate like a punctured tire,” she said in an annoyed voice.

“Pack it up for now, and go to Ally’s house. She’s going to need a paw to hold for a bit.”

“She’s moving forward?”

“Yeah.”

“About damn time. Lemme guess, she wussed out and you’re doing the icebreaking?”

“Right again,” he affirmed.

“That pansy,” she complained. “Alright, lemme go over and do my girl thing, cousin. Have you called Terry?”

“I’m going to right now. I’ll make him come down, this needs to be done face to face.”

“Good plan.”

Kit had to dig Terry’s personal cell number out of his Blackberry, and called as he walked back to his truck. “Hello?” he answered.

“Terry.”

“Kit! How are you?”

“I’m fine. Where are you now?”

“That’s an odd question,” he answered. “I’m being driven home.”

“So, you’re in your car?”

“No, my car got sideswiped when I stopped at a Speedway for gas, so it’s in the shop. I’m using a car from the office, and it came with a driver,” he said, a bit disapprovingly. But that was Terry, he preferred to do for himself. “I’ll just drive my truck till they get my BMW fixed.”

“Actually, this works out. Pack an overnight bag and go to Logan.”

“Where am I going, and why?”

“You’re coming to Austin. And the why of it, well, I can’t really tell you over the phone. So consider it a special favor you can do for me.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Call when you have specifics, I’ll come pick you up.”

“You got it.”

“Thanks, Terry.”

“No problem.”

Kit called Val immediately afterward and warned her. “I’m borrowing Terry this weekend, Val, he might not make it into work on Monday.”

“Huh? Why?”

“It’s a personal matter between me and him,” he said directly.

She was quiet a moment. “This has something to do about *her*, doesn’t it?” she asked in a cool, assessing tone, a tone he did not miss.

“Yes, it does,” he said. He knew better to lie to Val when she asked him a direct question in *that* voice. “She’s going to tell him the truth, and let him decide where he wants to go with it.”

“Alright,” she said, “but I’ll tell you right now, bro, I *do not* like this. This could turn into an unmitigated disaster.”

“You gave me a chance, sis, and things turned out alright.”

“You’re my brother. Terry’s just a member of the family. I don’t owe him any particular loyalty or leeway.”

“Val, that’s not very nice.”

“I’m not really a very nice Vulcan, bro,” she said honestly. “I rule this family, brother, but I don’t particularly like them all that much. However, I do have a responsibility to the name. Allison could be an absolute *scandal* to the family.”

“That’s why I’ve already warned her that her only chance of making this happen, even if Terry can stomach it, is that she’d better be as quiet as a mouse and obey you utterly,” he told her.

“Well, you see to the heart of the matter at least,” she grunted.

“I know you well enough, sis. You won’t care too much about what Terry does as long as he doesn’t sully the family name. You’re not a megalomaniac overlord like our bastard father was. If they can keep it low-key, then you’d probably relent. Besides, I get the feeling you *like* Allison.”

“Liking her doesn’t factor into this,” she said succinctly. “But, you’re right. If I’m satisfied they’re going to keep this as quiet as possible, then I’d be inclined to give over and let it see where it goes. But if even one word of this gets out, I’ll have to put a foot down, Kit.”

“Fair enough, as long as the ones leaking it aren’t from the family trying to get rid of her.”

“They’d *better* not,” Val growled.

Kit told Jessie what was going on when he got home, and she was a little surprised. “So you’re going to tell him? Here?”

Kit nodded. “I thought Ally was going to faint when she was talking about it. She’s utterly terrified of the idea of telling him. So I’m going to do it.”

“I, I think that’s something you’re best doing alone, handsome fox. Poor Ally,” she sighed. “I’ll go over to her house. She probably needs some support right now, she must be frantic.”

“Sheila’s on the way over now.”

“Well, girls like lots of company when they’re upset,” Jessie said, rubbing her paws together. “You’re on your own tonight, love. I’ll pack an overnight and settle in. Ally’s house is actually really nice, and she has a spare bedroom.”

“I’ve never been there,” Kit told her. “We both consider that to be an out of bounds location for me, since you’re jealous of her.”

Jessie gave him a sharp look, then it softened to a loving smile. “I love you, Kitstrom Lucas Vulcan.”

“And I love you, Jessica Desdemona Vulcan,” he said as he gave her a gentle kiss.

Kit had a while to wait, so he spent his time catching up on his very rusty guitar practice. He really had no idea how this was going to go. Terry was determined about Allison, but he had *no idea* what he was getting into. Allison was a wonderful femme, intelligent, charming, and witty, but her

dark secret might be too much for most males, and certainly one of Terry's stature and status. There was just no way of telling how he'd deal with what he would learn about the femme he wanted to court.

Kit pondered it as he waited for Terry to call him back, even going so far as to write a vague journal entry that he called *Secrets*, about how holding onto a secret like the one he had held had affected him, and how much responsibility came with it. "The Vulpine are a family with a lot of secrets," he mused. "I have no doubt some gossip reporter would sell his or her tail just for a chance to sneak into Stonebrook and spend one day overhearing what goes on behind the walls of the Vulcan family compound. But I can let you in on a little secret...they have the same problems your families do. They have their rebellious teens, they have their struggle to maintain a standard of living they have come to expect, no doubt much different from most furs, but still a major force behind the actions of the family. And then there is the *prestige*. That is the greatest secret of the Vulpine, I reckon, the need to be respected and revered. Even I suffer from my own bout of it, for I have a need to be taken seriously as a journalist, a desire to help make my magazine great. It doesn't seem like much of a secret until you think about what the family has sacrificed to gain that towering respect.

"Secrets," Kit wrote, "can be the power or the downfall of a family like mine. Secrets must be kept to maintain our status and our position in the social circles of the New England blue-blood aristocracy, where our family rules supreme. But secrets keep the family mysterious, enigmatic, dangerous qualities for any enemy that might seek to bring the family down.

“I suppose the greatest secret the family was never able to keep was me,” he mused at his computer. “When I walked out on the family and then was summarily disowned by my father, they tried to make me disappear. I won’t go into the specifics of all that, because even today it’s a very painful subject. But I was definitely a secret. I was kept hushed up by my family, and any attempt by any journalist to find me was crushed. Reporters lost jobs because of it. Two tabloid newspapers that would not back down were bought out and shut down because of it, which sent a chilling message through the world of journalism; seek to uncover the Vulcan family’s secrets at your own peril, for the entire power of the Vulcan family will destroy you.

“Even today, my family is a keeper of dark, terrible secrets. Some of them I understand why they keep. Some of them, I think are ridiculous, but what’s even more ridiculous is that I keep those secrets as well, because it is the position of the family, and I will not dishonor or shame my family unless it comes down to a choice between keeping my word and keeping my family’s honor. But, my word also binds me to my family honor, so I guess that’s not much of a difference. I pledged my silence when I left the family, and I have kept my word.

“That’s the greatest secret, I suppose, and one that has just been exposed. I guess no matter how much I want to be apart from my family, away from them, distanced from them and considered free of them, I will always be one of them. I will keep the secrets of the family, and I will obey our matriarch, which is my sister. Certainly, I will fight savagely with most of them because they are purists and object to my wife, but after all is said and done, I can’t deny that their eyes are my eyes, and that is a tie that I simply cannot break.

“I will always be a Vulcan. I won’t be one of their kind of Vulcan, but I will still be a Vulcan.”

He saved it and picked up the phone when it rang. “Hello.”

“Kit, I’m about an hour out,” Terry said. “I borrowed Val’s jet, so meet me wherever it usually lands.”

“Alright. I’ll be there.”

“Care to tell me what’s going on?”

“When you get here, sure.”

Kit had enough time to raid the fridge for a late lunch, and then he drove out to Bergstrom. He got there about fifteen minutes before Terry arrived, and read a paper, leaning against his Pathfinder on the flight line until Val’s jet taxied up to the hangar and shut down. Terry rumbled down the stairs as soon as they were deployed, and he shook Kit’s paw when he reached him “Alright, I’m here, now what’s going on?”

“We’re going to have a little talk,” he said, waving towards the passenger door. “Get in. Avery!” Kit shouted.

“Yes, Mister Vulcan?”

“Just hang here for a while, Terry’s not sure when he’s leaving!”

“I have to return by tomorrow evening, sir, Miss Vilenne needs the jet Monday morning!”

“Then just hang here till then! If you don’t hear from us by tomorrow at noon, you can go back!”

“Will do, sir!”

Kit was quiet, almost eerily quiet to Terry, as they drove back to his apartment. He had come with no baggage, wearing a dress shirt and a pair of slacks but with no tie, and he kept fingering his shirt nervously as Kit brought him back to his apartment. He ushered him into the apartment, had him sit down, then went into the kitchen to put on a kettle for tea. When he came back, he sat down in the chair facing him. "Alright, you're here to listen," Kit told him. "Not to talk, and I'm pretty sure you already know why you're here."

"Allison?"

"Allison," he nodded. "When you came to Kansas, you told me that you knew there was something about her that didn't add up. Something she keeps a secret."

"That's obvious. I've tried to dig it up, but whatever it is, it's very well hidden. I'm starting to think she's the daughter of some underworld figure, or the estranged bastard child of a rich family."

"Nothing like that. Allison is just Allison, Terry. There's nobody behind her at all."

"Then we're here because she wants me to know?"

"I knew you were smart," Kit nodded. "But she's too afraid to tell you herself. So I agreed to tell you for her."

"This isn't easy to say, Terry. It really isn't. There's no easy way to lead into it either. All I can really say is I want you to think about Ally *before* I tell you this and remind yourself of exactly why you're so interested in her. So, why are you interested in her, Terry?"

“She’s *gorgeous* for one,” he said. “But I love her mind. She’s very, very intelligent. One of the smartest femmes I’ve ever met. Every time I talk to her, she challenges me, and I’ve never met a femme that could outside of the family.”

“Then keep that in mind, Terry.” He blew out his breath. “Allison is a self-made femme. She has quite a lot of money, and she earned it all on her own. She put herself through college, and has managed to save up a nice little nest egg. After she gets a job in her chosen field, she expects to only work for about ten years before she retires...and she really doesn’t have to work at all. She’s only going to work because she wants to. Now, *how* she made that money is the crux of it.”

“She’s a criminal,” Terry said quietly.

“In a way,” Kit said, a bit wryly. “There’s no easy way to say it, so I’ll just say it. Terry, Allison made her money stripping and working as a prostitute.”

Terry gave him a long look, then laughed. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Not one little bit,” he said with quiet intensity, staring right into his eyes. “I have something here for you to read, Terry,” he said, pointing at the issue of *Lone Star* holding Allison’s article in it, already open to that page. “That is Allison’s story, as she told it to me. I kept her identity secret, and got into quite a bit of trouble with the Austin DA because of it,” he said wryly. “Now you know *what* she was, but I want you to understand *how* she got there, and *why* she did it. If you just look at her as a stripper and a whore, you disrespect everything else that she is, and turn your back on everything she could be. So read this, Terry, and reserve your judgment until you do.”

Terry gave him a long, searching look, then nodded and picked up the magazine. While he read it, Kit made them both a cup of tea, then brought it back to the table and set it down. Terry read it much faster than most other furs could, then put the magazine back on the table and leaned back. "I...I don't know what to say. You're right in that she's not what you'd expect. But, Kit...she was, she was a *whore*."

"It was *business*," Kit said bluntly. "Vulcan Shipyards does much worse every single day. The only difference is the company screws people on paper, where Allison did it personally. But to her, it was just a job. I thought that much was blatantly clear in the article."

"I, I...how can I even know if she *can* have feelings? Aren't I just another john to her?"

Kit gave him a dark scowl. "I hoped you wouldn't react like this," he growled. "When you look at only what you see on the surface, Terry, you miss *everything*. Why did she ask *me* to break this to you?" he asked, a bit harshly. "Because she's terrified of facing you herself. Do you think she'd *care* if she didn't have any feelings for you? She's be here herself, playing you for everything she was worth."

"But—"

"I told you the first time you met her that you didn't understand her," Kit reminded him. "That you'd be best just backing off and letting her make the decisions. Does that warning make sense *now*, cousin? You're the one that pursued *her*. Has she ever called you? No. Has she ever come to Boston to see you? No. You've been the one to chase her, and she tried to keep her distance, but I guess you charmed her enough, because now she's letting me basically bare her soul for your benefit, because she's too afraid to do it

herself. She understands exactly who you are and what kind of family you're from. She's willing to look past that and live by the rules the family puts on her, because she wants to see you. She wants to date you. But that's up to you.

"She didn't want you to even ask her out for the first time without you knowing *exactly* who she used to be. She didn't want to keep that kind of a secret from you. So, there it is, Terry. You know Allison's secret, and what I think is more important, you've had a chance to understand who she is a little better. There's nothing else I can really tell you except for this. Allison is *worth it*, Terry. She's worth the hassle and the problems, because she is *exactly* the femme that caused you to take an interest in her. She quit working at the club because she wanted her second chance, her chance at a real life after making a brutally practical decision to sacrifice one moral to gain financial security. How does that make her much different from some other furs you've met at the shipyard, Terry?" he asked pointedly. "You know how? Because at least she's *honest* about it," he answered strongly. "She knows what she was, she knows what it made her, but she *left it behind*. It's up to you to decide if you see the Allison you know and like, or the Allison you never met, and never will, because that Allison is long gone."

Kit took a sip of tea. "I'm going to go see my landlord. You sit here and think about it, and I'll be back in a little while."

Kit went over and talked with Lupe at home a while, basically just passing time, giving Terry time, space, and privacy to think it over. Again, Kit was unsure. Terry was a hard Vulcan to know, for he was much different from others in the family. He was more intelligent, driven, and enigmatic. Since Kit didn't know him very well, he had no real idea just how he was

going to react, and still wasn't sure. Terry seemed unable to let go of the word *whore*, yet that mind of his wouldn't let him ignore the other evidence that it was a job description, not a lifestyle or personality.

He gave Terry about an hour, then went back. His tea still sat on the table, untouched. Terry sat on the sofa, leaning forward, elbows on his knees, looking at the cup of tea in quiet introspection. Kit sat down beside him on the sofa and looked over at him.

"How long have you known?" he asked without looking at him.

"How long have I known her, or how long have I known her past?"

"Both."

"Allison danced at my bachelor party," Kit said honestly. "That's where I met her. I've known about her the whole time. But it doesn't bother me," Kit said. "If I'd never have met Jessie, I wouldn't bat an eye at the idea of chasing Allison. Because I don't see her in the narrow confines of a single word. I see the whole femme."

"Did you sleep with her?"

"No."

"Well, that's something at least," he said, then he laughed ruefully. "I don't believe this. And I don't believe I'm even considering this!"

"There's no considering here, Terry," Kit said seriously. "If you want Allison, it has to be all or nothing. She won't tolerate games, and she's smart enough to see through them. This is not something you play at, and Allison is not a toy. Remember that, Allison is not some fun little toy you can have fun with until she bores you, then throw her away. She is *not* what

she was, and if you *ever* treat her like that, you'll find yourself in a world of pain. Cause if you do that, I swear, you'll have both me and Sheila coming after you like you wouldn't believe."

Terry gave him a calm look, then chuckled. "She must be *something* to get such loyalty from you and Sheila."

"Allison is an *amazing* femme, Terry. If you can get past your bigoted concept of her, you have a chance to find out just how amazing she is."

"Bigoted?" he asked with a curious look.

"You're judging her by a stereotype, a *word*," Kit said bluntly. "That is the textbook definition of bigotry, or prejudice. Allison is *not* a word, Terry. She is a femme, a living, breathing femme who is witty, intelligent, clever, kind, and interesting. She has hopes, she has dreams, she has desires, and she has needs. You know her story, and you know her secret. All you can do now is decide what you want to do about it."

"I want...to think I'm insane," he said, then he chuckled. "I want to talk to her. Where is she?"

"At an undisclosed location," Kit said dryly, which made Terry laugh. "I can call her if you want."

"Please."

Kit speed-dialed Allison, and she picked it up before the first ring. "Kit? Is he there?"

"He just heard and read a story, Ally," he said simply.

He heard her gasp.

“And now he wants to talk to you. Do you want to talk to him on the phone, or meet him somewhere?”

There was a pained silence. “Put me on speaker. And don’t leave.”

Kit pressed the speaker button and held the phone out. “Go ahead.”

“Terry, I’m, I’m...I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you,” she said. “But I was too afraid. I couldn’t face you. I didn’t know how to say it, I didn’t know how I could ever say it. I know you must think I’m a coward,” she said, sniffling.

“Actually, I think I understand,” Terry answered. “Can we meet?”

“You...want to see me?” she asked in a small voice.

“I think we have a *lot* to talk about,” he answered. “I can’t give you an answer yet, but I would like to talk to you about it. Can we meet?”

“Kit, can you give him directions to John’s Pizza?” she asked.

“I’ll let him borrow my car. As long as he can drive a stick,” Kit added, giving Terry an appraising look.

“I can do that,” Terry said.

“Alright, he’s on his way, Ally.”

“I’ll be on my way in just a minute.”

Kit gave Terry the keys to his Pathfinder and gave him detailed directions to the pizzeria. “I’ll be here, so call me if you get lost.”

“Okay.”

“Terry.”

“Yeah Kit?”

“Be honest with her, even if it’s to say no.”

“I will,” he said with a simple nod.

And so, Kit had to wait again. He still wasn’t sure just what was on Terry’s mind, because Terry was a hard fox to know. He decided to distract himself by editing his journal entry a little, then, on impulse, sending it into the magazine. After that, he practiced guitar a little, then decided to watch some TV, trying to keep from thinking about it too much. Jessie didn’t come home, and he didn’t really expect her to, since she’d want to be there for Allison when she got home.

He’d have to have Jessie get some pictures of the inside of her house. Kit thought it would be a fascinating view into Allison’s mind.

Nearly four hours after he left, Terry opened his door without knocking. His sleeves were rolled up now, looking much more casual, and he came in and closed the door. Kit turned off the TV and looked at his cousin with calm eyes. “Well, you were gone a while.”

“We went for a walk along the river,” he said.

“And what did you talk about?”

“About her,” he said. “I made her tell me about her past, and not to pull any punches. I wanted to hear the truth from her own mouth.”

“And?”

“And I was honest,” he said, sitting down. “I told her I had to think about it, but I wanted to hear it from her, and get to know *all* of her, not just

the part of her she was letting me see. But, I did score one little victory,” he said with a slight smile.

“What is that?”

“I got her *number*,” he said.

“The question is, will you use it?”

“Honestly? I’m not sure yet. I have to really think about this, Kit, because it’s not just me here. The family will have an absolute hissy fit when they discover the truth. This isn’t like Bess and her disposable boytoys. I’ll be bringing someone in from outside the family who has a notorious past, and you know they’ll object to me not marrying some New England blue-blood. No, I’ll be marrying some Texas harlot in their eyes, who they think will be a gold-digger. But she’s not that.”

“She’s already well off,” Kit nodded. “It’s not about money to her.”

“You know something? I rather like that idea,” he said honestly. “Every femme I’ve ever dated saw my last name long before they saw my first. But Allison, she sees me as *Terry*, not a *Vulcan*. I, I rather like that.”

“I told you before, cousin, she’s worth it. Yes, there will be a lot of problems because of her past, but in the end, she’ll be worth it.”

“I’ll have to think about it.”

“Don’t think too long,” Kit told him. “Or you’ll lose her.”

The reason that Val needed the jet back on Monday was because she was coming to Austin, to spring a little surprise on Rick.

Kit and Jessie already knew what was coming, mainly since they helped plan it. So, they were both at work much earlier than unusual, at 8:00, and actually beat Rick into work. Kit settled into his office and Jessie opened her office door as Rick ambled in, still walking with the faintest hints of a limp as his leg muscles recovered from the time they spent in the cast. “Morning son,” he noted as he came into the big room. “What’s up with bein’ so early?”

“I’m still trying to get my house back in order, and Jessie came in to try to come up with something for the article you want her to do.”

“Ah, well, no hurries, Jess,” Rick told her.

“I just don’t know what to write about. I mean, you said anything, but when you can write about anything, it’s hard to pick *something*, you know?”

Rick chuckled. “It’s about your aspect as a young married femme, hon. You’re the only one in the office, you know. Lilly, Denise, and Janet are all single, they don’t have the same point of view you do. So it’s about how a married femme sees the world.”

“But still, I have no idea what to write about at all.”

“Well, how about this. Write about who you want to vote for for President, then explain why.”

“But that has nothing to do with me being married.”

“So, you’re telling me that you’ll get into the booth and not once think about your baby before you press the button?”

She started to say something, then closed her mouth and nodded in understanding. “So you want me to explain what I’m looking for as an expectant mother?”

“It’s part of being married, after all,” he noted.

“Now *that* I can do!” she said with sudden enthusiasm, unlocking her office door and hurrying inside.

Savid also got there early, because he too was in on the secret. They had to coordinate with him to arrange the time off for Rick. He came in and flashed Kit a knowing grin, then mouthed the word “when?” to him. Kit shrugged, for he was honestly unsure when Val would show up. So Savid slinked off to his office and kept himself busy, waiting for the surprise to be sprung.

The non-writing staff filtered in over the next twenty or so minutes, but Kit didn’t see it because he was in Rick’s office going over the weekend’s figures. Again, their circulation had increased by a steady and appreciable amount, which resulted in a nearly \$7,000 profit for the magazine for the week. That was a *huge* profit, which would immediately go right back into the magazine to pay for the salaries of the new workers they intended to hire, starting this week. They talked about the upcoming interviews, and also about Rick’s plan to reorganize the magazine into departments in advance of them being big enough to need them. Rick tried to set up a payment plan for Kit to be repaid some of the money he’d pumped into the magazine, but Kit knew that they needed capital to expand, so he delayed that. They were at the perfect point to slow their rapid expansion, allow their circulation to solidify and increase steadily from their established sale points and focus on expanding their operations instead of expanding their circulation. Increased circulation was now guaranteed so long as they

continued to print a magazine worth reading, and it would increase slowly but steadily for the next couple of months while they expanded their staff and instituted many of the ideas Rick had to make the magazine even bigger and better. He was planning another page count increase, increasing to 52, adding a couple of new features that would be the domain of the new hires under the supervision of the current gang. The magazine now had a *waiting list* of advertisers willing to buy space, and one of the reasons Rick was looking at increasing the length of the issues was to give them more space to advertise will still adhering to the 21% rule.

To Kit's shock, one of the new advertisers was AAIA, the flight school Sheila and Allison were attending. Kit figured that with the series of articles he had written about his pilot training, AAIA could strike while the iron was hot and see if they couldn't lure a few new students from those who had gotten curious about flying from the articles.

Kit could only grin hugely when Val strode into the office with Jessie right behind her and a pack of curious workers lurking outside the door. "Val!" Rick said in surprise, standing up. "It's good to see you, if a bit surprising!"

Savid hurried into the office, and Rick glanced around at the three huge smiles on his employees and the smug little expression on Val's face. "What's going on?"

"We, your workers and investors, take offense that you have not had a vacation since you started the magazine that was the result of breaking a bone," Val announced, snapping her fingers and holding her open paw up over her shoulder. Stav stepped up and handed her a small folder, which she then presented to Rick. "So, on behalf of the workers of the magazine and myself, we are hereby officially *forcing* you to go on vacation."

“What?” he asked in surprise.

Val pushed the folder into his paw. “On Wednesday, you and Martha will be on a plane to Hawaii, where you will spend one week at the Honolulu Diamond Hotel. I hear it’s right on the beach,” she smiled.

“There, you will relax, enjoy yourself, and have fun. If you have enough fun, we’ll allow you to come home. If you don’t, we’ll make you stay there until you do,” she said with a slight little smile.

“Me and Kit are already ready to work for you,” Savid told him. “We do it before, we are happy to do it again, for much better reason this time.”

“But, but the interviews,” he protested.

“I rescheduled all interviews to take place today and tomorrow,” Kit told him. “Try to worm all you want, you old dingo, you’re not getting out of it. You *will* be going on vacation.”

“And my folks are going with you,” Jessie grinned. “They’ll meet you in the hotel!”

“Yes, I came straight here from dropping that little bomb on them in Cincinnati,” Val smirked. “So say thank you, you ingrate!”

Rick laughed, both embarrassed and almost awkwardly grateful. “I don’t know what to say except thank you, really. It means a lot to me that you were thinking of us.”

“We always think of you, you old dingo!” Lilly laughed. “But why didn’t you tell *us* about this, Kit?”

“You didn’t know?” Rick asked in surprise.

“We want it be complete surprise,” Savid grinned, looking back at her. “Me and Kit and Jessie and Miss Val been working on this for a week!”

“Yes, we have,” Val smiled. “Your tickets are first class, and a limo will take you from the airport to the hotel. While there, you’ll have a rental car available to you, and I’ve also arranged a nice helicopter tour and a one day boat excursion. The rest of the time is your own.”

“I’m...touched. Thank you, thank you so much, everyone!”

The gang erupted into applause, and Jessie hugged Rick fondly. “It’s about time you got a reward for all your hard work, Rick!” she told him. “So go have fun!”

“Oh, we will, I promise you that. Martha has been asking for a vacation ever since we expanded.”

“We can mind the shop, boss, it’s time for you to start enjoying the fruits of your labor,” Kit assured him. “But until then, we have work to do,” he winked. “We have to get you ready to go on vacation!”

After they had a little impromptu party, Val took Kit aside and took him into his office and closed the door. She sat down in his visitor’s chair and gave him a steady look. “I want to talk to *her* before I leave,” she told him. “Call her and arrange a meeting.”

“She’s in class right now, and won’t get out until four thirty.”

“Then I’ll see her at five. I want to explain some things to her and lay down some rules.”

“But Terry hasn’t made his decision yet.”

“I know, but I want her to understand what I expect from her before he even gets that far. I want her to fully comprehend and be ready from day one.”

“Nothing wrong with that, I suppose,” Kit noted, scratching his cheek.

Kit arranged the meeting, and then Val took her leave to go talk with someone in the city, whom she didn’t name and was intentionally vague about, which worried Kit just a little that she was about to attempt to meddle somehow. But when 5:00 rolled around, she returned to his apartment, where Allison appeared right on time. Kit, Jessie, and Sheila were hustled out, and they spent the time over at Lupe’s as Val and Allison had a long and probably very frank talk.

After about two hours, Val emerged from the apartment. Kit, Jessie, Sheila, and Lupe had been sitting out on his porch, just chatting away the time, and she came over to them. “I’m on my way home now, bro,” she announced.

“Alright, sis. Thanks for coming.”

“It was totally worth it to see that look on Rick’s face,” she said with a brilliant smile. “That’s one of the *fun* things about being rich.”

“If only I knew!” Lupe lamented.

“I’ve seen your profit projections for that,” she said, pointing at the construction behind the complex. “Give it fifteen years, you sneaky canine, and you’ll know.”

“Well I’m totally honored you approve of my idea,” he said with an honest smile.

“It was the perfect idea in the perfect location at the perfect time. Just sit back and rake in the cash, Lupe. You’ll be making easy money as long as you keep the complex in good working order.”

Jessie was out of school, and she had already taken next semester off, so she found herself with little to do while waiting for Laura to be born. But, Jessie being Jessie, she kept herself busy over the next week.

Jessie was a creature of habit, but she was also open to new ideas and trying new things, and all her free time suddenly got taken up by that. On the night Terry had gone back to Boston, and after staying over with Allison that night, she had become much more involved with the Austin Party Pack. Jessie would cook or knit or work on her strip or write her article while Sheila and Allison were in flight school from 9:30am to 4:30pm. She would bake scones for Clancy every couple of days, and sent about a platter of assorted cookies, cupcakes, cakes, and pastries a week up to Kansas, which only made the Cessna furs even more devoted to the Vulpine. They’d never had such a *friendly* couple of students. After they were done, though, she would go join them, and the three of them became the core of a little group of young femmes. Sam was still in Austin because of Kevin, not willing to be apart from him over the summer holiday, so more often than not Sam was with them. Two of the sorority femmes were also still in Austin, Danielle and Lisa, since both of them were taking summer classes. Sometimes they joined them, sometimes they didn’t. Every night, the three of them and whoever was going with them that day would go do something. Jessie had been playing a heck of a lot of golf, since Allison also didn’t know how to play, but Sam did. So, the four of them would play doubles a few times a week. She also took them up in their plane, giving Sheila and

Allison a little unofficial opportunity to fly...but only with very stringent conditions Kit set, since it was technically against FAA regulations for students to be flying with passengers, and Jessie and the student not flying would definitely be considered passengers. Jessie had to fly in the right seat, Sheila and Allison could not try any slow-speed or low-altitude maneuvers since they were not familiar with the 400, and he only allowed it after he took Jessie up for about six hours and let her practice take-offs and landings from the right seat, until she was completely comfortable as a right seat flyer. It wasn't being on the right side of the plane that mattered, it was that the controls were backwards and the PFD was on the wrong side. Jessie would have to fly holding the stick in her right paw and actuating controls with her left paw, and that took practice when one was used to doing it the other way around.

Sheila and Allison took up a lot of her time, and also introduced her to new things. Sheila took them horseback riding in the hill country, then Allison took them water skiing on Lake Travis, which Jessie didn't like all that much because her pregnancy made water skiing a bit uncomfortable. Jessie took them skeet shooting, which had been the first time Allison had ever held a shotgun, and Jessie understandably whipped their tails at it. She'd gone skeet shooting with her father way too many times not to be a good shot with a shotgun.

Kit found it amusing that Sheila and Allison both held Jessie in something akin to awe that she actually knew how to handle firearms, and Kit could see one reason why. Jessie just didn't seem the "gun" type, since she was young and pretty and shy and demure, but she was also thoroughly competent and even professional when it came to shooting. They didn't

own any weapons, but Jessie would know what to do with them if they ever did. She even knew how to clean and maintain them.

Kit found himself with the femmes as well, since they spent a lot of time over at the apartment. Jessie was teaching Allison how to knit, and continued to help teach Sheila how to cook, and the three of them went over to their now finished townhouse almost every other day and talked about furniture, curtains, and other home decoration things that didn't really interest Kit all that much. Jessie was going to have a clean slate in a brand new townhouse, and she wanted to put her personal stamp on the place as much as she could. She had been the one to choose the style and color of the carpet, and Lupe had caved in and had the townhouse painted to her specifications. Jessie had honestly pestered Lupe about the apartment with things like that, tailoring their new apartment to her exacting specifications, which made their apartment quite different from the others. The six burner stove, the pile carpeting, the soft pastel paints, the chandelier in the dining room, the adjustable indirect track lighting in the living room, those were all different from what was put in the other townhouses.

It was Jessie who had received shipment of the box from Cessna...or in this case, boxes. Luke had sent them three boxes, filled with all sorts of things. Jessie's commercial pilot books and materials were in one box, Kit's ATP study materials were in one box, and then there was a very large third box. Inside, Kit had found when he got home, was a *huge* amount of material. Books, manuals, charts, software on burned DVDs, everything a *student* pilot would need to work for his private. They were also sent a huge number of DVDs from a company called King Air, which were video tutorials for pilots for almost every level; there were even two ATP tutorial DVDs in them.

Kit called Amanda over it, wondering if they sent them by accident. “Oh no, we sent you those,” she assured him. “We used to use the King Air videos in our training program, but then we created our own videos that are tailored specifically to our own course. Those have been sitting in a storeroom for almost six months, so why not give them to someone who might actually use them?”

In all, Kit realized, Cessna had sent him enough to open his own flight school...as long as he only had one or two students. And of course, he *would* have two students after Sheila and Allison graduated from AAIA.

The time of the move was actually fast approaching, the opening of the new complex to tenants tentatively scheduled for July 7, when the contractors would be completely finished and allow them to move so as not to have to work around residents. Kit rather liked the cart idea Jessie had, and so did Lupe. Lupe went out and bought five large flatbed six-wheeled carts and put up a sign-up list for residents to use them at certain times, helping them move, but reserved them for himself and Kit to use first, since they had the honor of being the first ones to move. The first weekend after the contractors moved out of the inner ring, they would move, which was looking like it would be the last weekend of June, which was only two weeks away as Kit headed into work early on Friday morning. Kit no longer went in late on Fridays, he worked daytime hours the same as Rick, and today was going to be an important day anyway, for he would be interviewing three applicants for the research assistant’s position. Jeffrey had already interviewed a few applicants for the artist position that would be helping him over the week, but Kit didn’t have much chance to get to know them much. There was a hyena, a cougar, and a femme mink that Jeffrey had interviewed, going over their portfolios to get a sense of their

artistic style, and he was still debating over which one he liked. Just as Jeffrey had done, Kit had interviewed the applicants in addition to a separate interview they had with Rick, since whoever was hired would be working directly under him, working in the newly created Research Department, which he was department head. Jeffrey was the new head of the Illustrative Art Department, which was part of the overall Art Department of which Savid was head. Jeffrey, Janet, and the new hire would all ultimately answer to Savid, but each was given the official “Department Head” title. Janet was the head of the Photography Department, and Lilly and Mike answered to her when they did photography work for the magazine.

Rick had departmentalized the rest of the magazine as well. There was an Editing Department, which Rick headed, the Research department, which was Kit’s domain, the Writing Department, which was headed by Barry, and the I.T. Department, which was commanded by Mike. There was certainly overlap, though. Kit ran the research department, but also answered to Barry when it came to writing, and was a junior editor under Rick. Barry didn’t get away from it Scot-free, since Barry answered to Kit when he did research. Lilly and Marty answered to just about everyone, since Lilly did writing, photography, and had her own section of the website, where Marty did writing, editing, and also was responsible for sections of the website dealing with reader feedback and interaction. Janet was split between the art and I.T. departments, doing photography for Savid and acting as their second computer god with Mike. The only fur in the office that wasn’t claimed by more than one department was Denise, who only did writing in addition to her duties at the front desk.

Kit had interviewed four furs for the job as his assistant, and devised the simplest means of all to deciding who to hire; he made them do a simple research project that would take about an hour. Two of them were clearly applying because they thought it would be an easy job, one was exposed as completely unqualified after just ten minutes, and the fourth had impressed Kit enough to recommend him to Rick for the job. He was a short, thin, almost neurotically energetic young badger named Patrick Henry Pinatiello, named for the figure out of American history. But it wasn't Patrick's energy that impressed Kit, it was his almost *encyclopedic* memory and vast curiosity. The young male could recite research quotes that were downright obscure, and his knowledge of current events was profound. This was a fur that must read every newspaper in America on a daily basis to be so well versed, and that kind of curiosity was imperative for a good researcher. A good researcher just fulfilled the requirements of the writer, but a *great* researcher *wondered*, and he branched out, searched for more, dug for everything, and sometimes those exploratory excavations required curiosity and the ability to think outside the box for places to look for those little gems and nuggets that might help the writer write a much better article.

Wednesday, they all saw Rick off at the airport for their weeklong vacation, and Kit and Savid again found themselves running the magazine. But this time they both knew what was going on and were completely ready for it, so it was very easy. But not everything was all light and sunshine, because Kit had been tasked with doing the hiring paperwork for two new employees, Eliza Gaunt and Patrick Pinatiello. Eliza was a tall, lanky, awkward-looking young lynx, with tufted ears and a bobbed tail that barely managed to poke out of her dress when she arrived to discuss the job. She looked like a fragile young femme, at least until they started discussing salary, bonuses, and perks. Then she bargained like a rabid wolverine,

pushing Kit's Vulcan instincts on getting the best of a bargain. Rick had left a salary range that was acceptable, and Kit fought to stick her on the low end while she battled to take the top. Kit wasn't trying to short-change her on purpose, but it had been so long since someone had bargained so powerfully against him, he was determined to battle her to the bitter end, if only to see who would win. The battle took nearly four hours, even raging through lunch, as they struggled over the details. But eventually the dust settled, they shook paws, and agreed on a figure almost exactly in the center of the range, with a review of the salary after three months of employment.

Patrick was the other extreme. When Kit called him and offered him the job, he took it immediately and without hesitation. When he came in to discuss things and do the paperwork, he didn't even *try* to negotiate his salary. "I'm just glad to have a job," he said honestly. "And you'll pay me what you think I'm worth. If I do a good job, I'm sure I'll get a raise."

Such blind faith was touching in a way, but it also made Kit regard the badger with a curious eye, wondering if he'd really chosen the best candidate. A real researcher would have walked into the office armed with a slough of facts and figures to assault him, just as Kit had done to Rick. "So, if I offer you minimum wage, you'd take it?"

"Sure," he shrugged. "Because I'm absolutely sure that after three months, you'll see I'm worth much more than that."

"What makes you so sure of that?"

"Cause I could see it as soon as I met Rick. He's a decent and fair male, he'd never underpay me. Besides, from what I've managed to find, the furs here earn more on the average than others in comparable jobs in the region."

Kit could admit when he was wrong.

After doing their paperwork, he released them to their bosses. For Eliza, that meant Jeffrey, but Kit was Patrick's boss, so he just kept him in the office after the young badger got all his paperwork finished. Kit began by making it clear to the young male that Kit demanded that he exceed the expectations of the office. "When Barry or Lilly or Marty send me something, I make it my mission to send them *more* than they asked for," he explained. "I want them to know everything about the subject they ask me to research, absolutely everything. So when they get our work back, they are armed with absolutely everything they need to write good articles. The key to exceptional journalism is research, Patrick, and here, that duty falls on you and me. It's our job to make this magazine great, and we do that by making sure our writers never have to wonder *what if*. That's *our* job. We give them what they ask for, and we give them everything they *don't* ask for. When Barry sends you a project, what he's asking you to find out is just the beginning of what we send back to him."

"Makes sense to me," he nodded.

Kit spent the rest of the day explaining his research methods to him, and teaching him the archiving system and how to retrieve information from it. Kit kept all the research he did, every single document, in case he ever needed it again, and his archiving system made that information easy to find if one knew how it worked. Pat proved his mettle that day, asking insightful questions that hinted at what was underneath, about nearly everything. His analysis of the archive system was right to the point. "So, we keep it encrypted and use this rather tricky system to throw off anyone who tries to snoop through it without permission?"

Kit laughed. “Yep. We’ve already had one brush with the Austin police over confidentiality.”

“Right, and that was you. I remember reading about it. You refused to reveal the source of an article you wrote about an illegal whorehouse. They even tried to subpoena you, but you beat it in court, and since then the police have decided to let the matter drop.”

“That’s about right. You have a good memory.”

“I suffer from insomnia a lot,” he shrugged. “Reading gives me something to do.”

A project popped up on Kit’s desktop, sent to him by Marty. “And here we go, Patrick, your first project,” Kit said as he opened it. It was a request for background information about one of the school governors at U.T., asking specifically for his educational background and his voting record from when he was a state senator. Included in the project request was the purpose of the research; Marty was investigating the school governor for possible homophobic actions in the past. “Notice that the writer will always include the reason for the research, so it gives you an idea of where he or she is going with it, but that’s not a pair of blinders. Remember, when we send it back, they get *everything*.”

“But knowing why he wants it shows us where to focus our effort.”

“Exactly. This shouldn’t be too hard, so this one is all yours, Patrick.”

“Please, call me Pat,” he said. “Where can I work?”

“For now, you have a workstation set up in the big office. Rick hasn’t entirely decided what he’s going to do with our new hires. And since he’s

on vacation and we didn't discuss it in much detail, I'm afraid you're stuck at an open desk for now."

"As long as I have access to a computer that has internet and our hard records, what else do I need?"

"True. And you won't be alone, the new art assistant is out there for now as well."

"I really want to meet Jeffrey," Pat said eagerly. "I'm such a *huge* fan of *School Daze*! And it's awesome that I'll be working with the writer of the strip as my boss!"

Kit laughed. "You know, I think you're the first *ever* to realize I work on the strip."

"It's right there in the panels, JD, KV, JV, Jeffrey Daniels, Kit Vulcan, Jessie Vulcan. Why doesn't your name show up on the new strip?"

"Because I have nothing to do with that one, that's exclusively the domain of Jeffrey and my wife. Jeffrey draws it, Jessie writes it."

"Ah. I still think you should get credit, it's clear the new strip split off from yours."

"I created the original Missy and Cutler, but my wife took them over after the first strip," he said. "So she's been the one to develop them. She totally rejected their personalities," he chuckled in reverie. "So I told her if she could do better, then write the strip. And she did. And God, was it hilarious," he laughed. "Ever since, Jessie's written the Missy and Cutler subplot, and now it's its own independent strip. I only get my name on it when the characters from *School Daze* appear in *Missy and Cutler* as guests."

“Yeah, can’t really completely separate them, since Cutler is Buck’s roomie, and Missy is best friends with Ginny and is friends with Jo-Jo. So, will the other subplots ever split?” he asked. “I mean, Razz could be a strip all by herself, and then there’s the whole Zeffier versus Gralbixx the Overlord thing.”

“Well, we haven’t really talked about it. Besides, the subplots give us time to develop the main plot. And they’re fun to write,” Kit chuckled.

Were they. Razz was one of Jo-Jo’s experiments that went bad, a Chinese panda pulled from the ancient era into the modern world. Nobody could pronounce her name, so they dubbed her Razz, faked her identity as Razz Beh Ree, and enrolled her in school as an exchange student from China, and what made her funny was her anachronistic outlook on the modern world. There’s a great deal of hilarity involved for a fur from 1,000BC who can barely speak English trying to unravel the mysteries of a flushing toilet, cell phones, and electric lights. Zeffier and Gralbixx the Overlord was another Jo-Jo disaster. Jo-Jo zapped Oxnard into a parallel dimension with one of her inventions, which was an intergalactic empire ruled by Gralbixx Zrff, Supreme Overlord of the Fifth Dimension. Gralbixx actually wasn’t a bad guy, a kinda clueless emperor ran roughshod over by his bureaucratic government, but he had a towering arrogance and an absolute belief that he was the paramount living thing in all creation. His personality was like a corrupted King Arthur from Camelot, with his own rather twisted sense of honor, a collection of Beanie Babies, a crush on Ginny that always delayed his return to his empire, and a fatal weakness for strawberry shortcake. Zeffier was a *Lobo* clone from the DC comics, a rough, tough, rude, crude, ill-mannered brute that rode a space cycle, and spent what time when he wasn’t carousing in some bar trying to kill

Gralbixx for scratching the paint on his bike, which he called Jezebel and loved more than life itself. Gralbixx's starship ran Zeffier off the road, in a spaceship sense, and ever since then the outlaw had devoted his life to making Gralbixx pay for scratching the paint on his beloved bike... but never quite managing it, since Zeffier was the worst shot with a laser blaster in the history of this or any other universe, though he considered himself the ultimate marksman. Any time he fired a shot, somehow, some way, that shot ended up starting a series of events that allowed Gralbixx to evade Zeffier and get away, and it had been both challenging and fun to try to come up with these ridiculous, outlandish, complex and subtle chains, akin to the old *Mouse Trap* game. Oxnard got caught up in the eternal war between the two of them, and they both got pulled back with Oxnard when Jo-Jo managed to repair her machine and get him back. Now Gralbixx was trapped in Jo-Jo's world, trying to adjust, and Zeffier was out there still trying to kill him, but never quite managing it.

Kit busied himself with Rick's work and let Pat handle the research, but he went back to his own job when he realized it was about time to start working on the next major phase of the election special, which was the conventions. Kit wanted to know everything about the conventions. He wanted to know how they worked, what they did, and how they affected the races. He wanted to contrast the difference in the way the two parties ran their conventions, he wanted to know everything about the two cities where they would take place, Denver and Minneapolis, and he wanted a very thorough history of each convention, the things that had happened either in them or around them. Barry's current piece in that series was how the races were tightening, how McCain had won the Republican nomination, but the Democratic nomination was still contested...but almost over itself. Barack Obama was quite nearly there, just needing one more good win to secure

the nomination, while Hillary Clinton was still trying to come back and win.

But before that, Kit leaned back in his chair and looked at the calendar, and realized that Jessie's birthday was coming up. She'd be 22 on July 5, in 15 days, and he hadn't yet bought her a present, nor had he considered how he wanted to celebrate it with her. Her birthday fell on a Saturday, which meant that he could swap days off and be off for her, and it also meant that they could have a rather nice party.

A party was certainly necessary, but he was of two minds about it. He'd like to take her back to Cincinnati for her birthday and have a party with her family.

Her family.

Yes, now *that* would be a very nice birthday for her.

Kit wanted to discuss the matter with her parents, but they were on vacation in Hawaii, and he wasn't sure he wanted to bother them. But then again, this was important enough to intrude, so he called Hannah's cell phone.

She answered immediately. "Hello?"

"Hannah," he called. "How's Hawaii?"

She laughed. "We've been having quite a bit of fun so far," she answered. "Right now, we're in our room, getting ready to go to the beach. What's so important that you'd call during our vacation, dear?"

"Well, Jessie's birthday is coming up, and I have a favor to ask."

"What is it?"

“Would you mind if we had her party at your house?”

“Not at all!” she said immediately.

“Well, there’s a bit more to it than that,” he said. “Would you mind hosting quite a few furs? I was of a mind to see if we could get some of your family to come, and I’m certain that Val and maybe Sheila will come as well. They have the means to get to Cincinnati. Turn it into a family reunion type of thing.”

“Hmm,” she mused. “It would be very short notice, of course. But I can make some calls and see who might be interested. Would you mind if I called you back tonight? It might be quite late for you.”

“That’s fine. I’m not going to hide the party from Jessie, but I’m not going to tell her exactly who’s there, either.”

“Alright. I’ll call tonight, dear, we’re about to leave.”

“Thanks for the help, Hannah, and even on your vacation no less.”

“I don’t mind. It is for my daughter, after all,” she said dismissively, and then they said their goodbyes.

There would have to be two parties, of course, so Kit called Sam and told her his intentions. “So, we need a party for her here, then we’ll be going to spend the weekend with her parents so she can have another birthday party. Can you come up with something, Sam?”

“I’ve been thinking about it for a while,” she said. “As long as we don’t let Sheila plan the party, we’ll be alright.”

Kit laughed. “Amen. How has it been going between you and Kev lately?”

She was silent a second. “Well, we’re getting along quite well,” she said. “I’m not sure when he might propose, but if he does, I’ll certainly say yes.”

“I’ll give him a little nudge.”

She was quiet again. “I kinda nudged him a little in that direction last night,” she said, her voice hiding a little catch that was a touch of embarrassment. “I’m sure Jessie will tell you, so may as well hear it from me. Me and Kevin, ah, deepened our relationship last night.”

Kit laughed. “It’s about time!” he said. “I thought you were going to string that poor male all the way to the altar!”

“That’s what a femme is supposed to do,” she said, a trifle primly.

“Well, was it any good?”

“Kit!” she gasped. “That’s an entirely improper question!”

“Both of you are my friends, so what’s a few improper questions among friends?” he bantered.

She laughed helplessly. “It was good enough,” she said in reply. “And I think I’d better get off this phone before we start talking about things that are downright scandalous. Besides, I have a party to plan.”

“Wimp,” he teased.

“I’m just not a hussy,” she said in an erect tone. “And I’m going to tell Jessie about this conversation!”

“Go ahead, she hasn’t had any excuse to punish me for nearly a week, she knows it’s about time for me to misbehave,” he said flippantly. “This

way it's a curve ball she never saw coming. If she punishes me by proxy, I may as well misbehave by proxy too."

Sam erupted into gales of laughter.

The next call was to Val. "Sis," he greeted, "you mind clearing your calendar enough in a couple of weeks to spend the day with us?"

"Jessie's birthday?" she asked.

"Yeah. I'm going to celebrate it with her at her folks' house in Cincinnati, and see if we can't get a few of her relatives to come, make it a little impromptu family reunion. Jessie would like that, she adores her relatives."

"I can clear that Saturday no problem," she said. "I was going to invite you two up to Boston to watch the Pops do their July fourth concert down at the harbor."

"Hey, I like that idea," Kit said brightly. "I'll have to call Sam and tell her to schedule the party here for Thursday, so we can take Jessie up for the concert, then just fly from there straight to Cincinnati. Hmm. That's going to be a long flight in our plane," he grunted. "A good nine hours."

"I can send my jet for you."

"But then what happens on Saturday when we have to go our separate ways?" he asked pointedly. "Unless you don't mind having to fly us down to Austin and then go home, I think we'll have to fly on the airlines this time around."

"That's a valid point," Val conceded. "I see I have to be in Norfolk on that Monday morning, and I also have an appointment in New Orleans on

Monday afternoon for the ceremony at Avondale Shipyards.”

“So you did buy it out?”

“Sure did,” she answered. “Five hundred million and change, which was a *huge* bargain. Seems the owners have had a lot of trouble with the union there, and they’re still trying to recover from the hurricane even after three years. So, I bought it for a song, probably the best deal I ever made. The owners get to walk away with golden parachutes, and as you know, the change of ownership voids the contract their union had, meaning now they have to bargain with *me*. So Vulcan Shipyards has a new facility now, and added about thirty Navy contracts in the bargain. Vulcan Shipyards is set for about the next thirty years on Navy contracts alone. I’ll need to decide who I’m going to send down there to run it, though. Maybe I’ll send Uncle Zach down there and get him out of my hair,” she mused with an evil tilt in her voice. “God, would he explode if I ordered him to New Orleans! It’s almost worth it just to see the look on his face!”

Kit saw a real war coming there. Val was notorious as a union buster, because she was almost draconian in dealing with unions. She actually didn’t object to unions in theory, but she *did* take offense when employees she had treated with kindness and regard backstabbed her by demanding things that were utterly outrageous. Of the four major facilities of the Vulcan facilities, the Jacksonville and San Diego facilities were non-union and the Norfolk and New Hampshire facilities were union. Of the many smaller shipbuilding facilities and maintenance facilities they had, about half were union and half non-union, and the non-union shipyards made just as much as the union yards because Val offered very competitive salaries and good bonuses, including a very comprehensive health insurance plan. Val took it personally when a shipyard went on strike trying to get a

contract that she considered to be too demanding or out of proportion with the pay and benefits of other Vulcan facilities. Since she'd taken over from her father, the New Hampshire submarine facility threatened to strike when their contract expired, and they were demanding a pay raise that was way, way higher than those given to the other Vulcan facilities. Val went to the shipyard personally, called a union meeting, and got up there and told them, in no uncertain terms, that she would *close the shipyard* if they went on strike, move the contracts to Norfolk, eat the penalty she'd incur from the Navy for being behind schedule, and they'd all be out of a job because she would *not* hire anyone who went out on strike. And to prove it, she brought a copy of the documents she'd had prepared that was already signed by the board, and only awaited her signature. And after that, she told them she'd approve the same contract signed by the Norfolk yard, which gave them a comfortable pay raise and extended their health coverage, which was good contract.

Needless to say, the union backed off and agreed to the same terms as the Norfolk facility.

That move only increased her reputation as the Ice Queen, absolutely *daring* a union to strike against her, and would probably make the union leaders in New Orleans wet their pants at the thought of having to deal with *Vilenne Vulcan* when it came time for Avondale to bargain a contract with the new owners. But, as long as they didn't ask for anything outrageous, they'd do just fine. Val was actually very fair when it came to dealing with the employees, for she understood that the company was only as good as the lowest janitor. She paid her workers very well, and in return, she demanded loyalty and excellence. For example, a Vulcan journeyman welder earned, on the average, nearly two dollars an hour more than welders in other

companies, but not just any welder could get a job at Vulcan Shipyards. The welder had to pass a tough welding test that would separate the mediocre from the real craftsman, but if he passed, he was guaranteed a good salary and benefits in exchange for doing his best, for maintaining the legacy of excellence for which Vulcan ships were famous. Of course, it wasn't the end if he failed the test, for Vulcan Shipyards offered apprenticeship programs for every trade, but those too were competitive and had high standards. They only accepted men who had high school degrees, had at least a 2.8 GPA, could pass a general test given when they applied, and had a recommendation from someone either in the company or from the high school. The apprenticeship programs were how the shipyards maintained their high degree of quality, since Val much preferred to train her own workers rather than hire them from someone else. When they earned their certification through Vulcan Shipyards, Val knew they were trained *right*.

And for that matter, ex-Vulcan tradesmen were never unemployed long. Other companies would hire them in a heartbeat, for they knew that they were good.

"I don't think you'd want to start that kind of a war," Kit chuckled. "So, how do you want to do this?"

She was quiet a moment. "Tell you what," she said. "Since you have that shiny new jet pilot rating, I'll charter a jet for you to bring whoever you want up to Cincinnati, that way we're not at each other's mercy."

"I won't complain a bit," Kit laughed. "But I doubt we need a ten this time. A Mustang or any CJ should do it. It will probably only be Jessie and Sheila."

“Well, you’ll want to have a few empty chairs for anyone else that might want to come, like maybe Rick and Martha. So let’s go with a CJ three.”

“That’s an idea,” Kit said in agreement.

“Alright, lemme call over to Cessna.”

“Cessna? There are jet charter companies right here in Austin,” Kit protested.

“I’m not trusting my brother to some fly-by-night’s shoddy maintenance,” she said immediately. “I want a Cessna jet, so I’ll get one from *Cessna*. At least I’ll know beyond any doubt that the jet is serviceable and dependable, and since they trained you, they won’t raise a stink when I make it clear I only need the *jet*, and not a *pilot* to go with it.”

“Well, that’s a viable argument,” Kit chuckled. “Their insurance carrier would have a conniption if someone not on the policy flew the jet.”

“Oh, by the way, thanks for lowering your insurance on your plane,” she laughed. “When Cessna sent in the training certificates for both you and Jessie, they offered me a *much* more attractive rate. And I added Jessie to the policy, since she’ll be flying it.”

“Only wise,” Kit noted.

Kit went back to work, setting up an outline of required work for the convention research, and dividing it between himself and Pat, giving him a chance to prove himself early. That would, of course, let both of them get much more detailed in their research, since they’d have the time. Kit decided to give Pat the work on the conventions themselves, leaving it up to him to research how they worked and what they did, while Kit would

research the history of the conventions and the cities in which they were being held. Pat came back to him about three hours after he started his project, and announced that he was done.

“Well, that was pretty quick,” Kit noted. “Let’s see what you came up with.”

Kit started honestly fearing for his job right about then. Pat had researched absolutely everything there was to know about the school governor, his personal life, his vinyl siding business, his family, his history with the IRS including an audit four years ago, his voting record, he’d even dug up the male’s U.T. transcript and school record. He discovered the male had three arrests for minor offenses, and there had been an attempt to purge a fourth from the records when he was a minor for an assault against a gay male. Pat had tried to use Kit’s system of organizing and displaying the information, which made it *almost* look like Kit himself had done the work. It was that thorough, and it was done with the same speed with which Kit usually completed his assignments.

“Outstanding,” Kit said with an approving nod. He offered a few suggestions to edit the material to more closely follow the established report style for research, and then gave Pat his next assignment, explaining what he had to research. “I want a comprehensive guide to how both party conventions work, Pat, so that someone who had never even heard of a convention could read your research and understand exactly how they work. You can leave off researching the primaries, just focus on what happens from gavel to gavel.”

“Got it,” he nodded. “Do I write this in research format, or am I writing a part of an article?”

“Put it in research format,” he answered. “If Barry wants you to put it in article format, he’ll let you know.”

“Okay, got it.”

“Good work. Have Mike show you how to send your work to Barry when you finish editing it, then it should be about time to knock off for the day.”

“He already did,” he answered. “He taught both me and Eliza how the network works after you sent me to my desk. It’s not hard.”

“Oh, well, in that case, you’re free to go after you finish the edits.”

“Thanks, boss,” Pat said with a smile, then he got up and filed out of his office.

Boss. Kit almost laughed hearing himself called by that title. He certainly didn’t feel like a boss.

He heard Jessie outside, heard her meet Pat and sound a little embarrassed when Pat gushed over her work on the strip, then she bounded into his office with a big smile on her face. “Hey, handsome fox!” she said with a smile.

“Well, we’re in a good mood,” he chuckled, then he laughed when she rushed around his desk and sat on his lap quickly.

“I felt the baby kick just a minute ago!” she said excitedly. “Quick, quick, feel it!” she urged. Kit put his paw on her baby bump, and almost immediately he felt a very faint vibration under his pads. His eyes widened, then he laughed.

“I guess there really is a baby in there, and it’s not you getting fat,” he teased, which made her laugh helplessly.

“I’ll get you for that, love,” she threatened with a smile.

“You don’t have to, you’ve already got me,” he said with a loving voice, kissing her under her chin, which made her giggle. “By the way, I’ve been planning your birthday party,” he told her.

“Oh? No surprise party?” she asked.

“Nah, I want you to see it coming. But, we’re going to have two. One here on Thursday, a special trip on Friday, and on your birthday we have your party at Cincinnati.”

“Really? That sounds wonderful!” she said happily. “What are we doing on Friday?”

“Val invited us up to Boston to attend the fourth of July concert the Boston Pops gives at the harbor. It’s quite an event, and it’s worth braving Boston to go see it. I think you’ll love it, so I accepted.”

“That does sound nice,” Jessie agreed.

“Val invited Rick and Martha as well, and odds are Sheila will want to go, and maybe Sam or Allison or someone, so she’s going to charter us a jet that I’ll fly up, so Val doesn’t have to fly all over the country picking us up and taking us home and we have room for a few passengers.”

“Ohh, I’ll bet you jumped all over that,” she giggled.

“You know I did,” he grinned in reply. “We can fly up Friday afternoon, see the concert, stay in a hotel in Boston overnight, then fly to

Cincinnati the next day. From there, we either stay overnight and fly back Sunday or fly back Saturday night, whichever you want.”

“Such a silly question,” she teased. “Of course we’ll stay over till Sunday. If it’s our own rental jet, we can leave whenever we please.”

“That we can,” he smiled. “So, let’s talk about this little indigestion you have down here,” he said, nuzzling her as he put his paw under her shirt and rubbed her furry tummy.

“That indigestion is *your* fault,” she giggled, wrapping her slender fingers around his wrist.

“All you had to do was say no, so I’d say that the blame is shared between us,” he told her as he nuzzled her under her chin.

“Like I could ever say no to you,” she said with a bright smile, kissing him on the nose playfully.

“Hey! Get a room, you two!” Mike called tauntingly from outside the office.

“We have one!” Kit retorted. “If you can’t manage seeing how *adults* act, you can shut our door!”

“Janet, fetch the video camera!” Mike called. “It’s about time we put up a pay portion of the site, after what we did to our readers with the Sheila hoax.”

“What hoax?”

“We claimed to put up a picture of her naked, but it linked to the Disney website,” Mike grinned. “We Rick rolled our readers!”

Janet laughed, but Jessie gave Kit a curious look. “Rick roll?”

“An internet term for claiming a site leads to one place, but it actually leads somewhere else. It got the name from furs who would put up Youtube links saying it was some cool video, but it actually linked to Rick Astley’s video *Never Going to Give You Up*. So, it became known as ‘Rick rolling’ someone if you did that.”

“Oh, internet slang,” Jessie said, then she laughed. “It’s funny, though.”

Jessie went to go talk with Jeffrey in his office, and Kit chuckled when he saw Janet, Eliza, and Pat all looking at the door, wondering what they were doing. When Kit went to see Jeffrey, they weren’t sure if they were talking about the strip or some other business, since Kit was working for Rick. But when Jessie went to see Jeffrey, there was no doubt it was over the strip.

Denise sent a call to him, so he picked it up. “Kit Vulcan,” he intoned.

“Hey cousin,” Terry’s voice returned.

“Hey Terry,” he said. “What’s up?”

“I just wanted you to know. I’m calling Allison, and I’m asking her out.”

Kit was quiet a moment, then he chuckled. “So, you think she’s worth it?”

“I think I owe it to myself to see what’s there more than I owe the family to be a proper and submissive member of the family,” he answered. “You’re living proof that we *can* leave the umbrella of the family and make it. Besides, I doubt Val will fire me unless me and Allison do something stupid, so it’ll just be between me and the elders.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that, Terry. Just be ready for the firestorm that’s coming over it.”

“I’m ready. I’ve already considered all the angles. There’s just one angle left that I can’t really predict.”

“What is that?”

“Allison,” he answered. “I had to think a *long* time before I finally came to terms with her past.”

“And what did you decide?”

“That maybe you were right. Maybe it was just a *job*, and she really can love me. I want to find out, and the only way to find out is to get to know her. So, I’m inviting her out for the holiday weekend. We’ll be in Boston for the fourth. I’ve got tickets for the Pops, and I want her to see it. Then we’ll go to New York for the rest of the weekend.”

“Damn, cousin, that’s going for the throat,” Kit said seriously. “You’re going to show her off in *Boston*? You know the tabloids are going to go nuts when they see you with a stranger vixen. You’ll be kicking an anthill. And you’re also bringing a stranger to the family without asking for permission to date her. You know the uncles are going to be pissed off.”

“It’s going to happen no matter what. Whether some paparazzi snaps of photo of us at an Austin restaurant or here, it’s going to get out eventually. So why try to delay the inevitable? As to the elders, screw them. They’ve done my family no favors over the years, treated my whole family like lepers, so I don’t feel particularly inclined to care. They can’t take away my trust, they can’t take my family stocks, and so long as I don’t anger Val, they can’t touch me.”

“Dear God, I’ve created a monster,” Kit laughed.

“You opened my eyes, that’s for sure,” he said simply. “You showed us cousins that we *can* be happy if we don’t toe the line set by Uncle Zach. The only line I dare not cross is the one Val draws in the sand. I don’t give a flying flip about Uncle Zach or Jake or Aunt Maxine. They’re impotent. Val is the true power in the family, and so long as we follow *her* rules, we’re just fine.”

Kit pondered that a second. Hearing Terry say it made him realize that there was a coming rift in the family, a coming struggle of the elders against the children. The elders gave the children no respect, and the children resented it...though they certainly didn’t behave in ways that garnered respect. The conflict between Sheila and her mother, Sarah, was a good example of it. Sheila was a shallow and selfish vixen, but when she really needed help, her mother had rebuffed her, and that drove her away.

Terry had made the one point that made that rift inevitable. The elders truly had lost their power to control the younger, because of the deal that divided up the family money among *every* member of the Vulcan family. The children were no longer at the mercy of the family head and beholden to their parents for their livelihood, and that freedom was starting to foment rebellion among the Vulcan ranks. Sheila and Terry were just two examples of that rebellion; Sheila had forsaken Boston to move to Austin to stay with her friends there and go to school to be a chef to open her own restaurant, and Terry was about to openly court a femme not approved by the family elders, and a femme with a very dark and sordid past to boot.

And Terry had put his finger right on the biggest truth. The true power in the family was now Val, and Val did *not* share the same ideals as her elders. She was much, much more progressive and lenient than the aunts

and uncles were, more willing to let the Vulpine be themselves, pursue their own interests, so long as they didn't stain the family honor. That was why she was so adamant about the very stringent restrictions she placed on Terry as he pursued his interest in Allison, about keeping it discreet. He wondered how Val was going to react to him bringing her to Boston, so much so he asked about it.

"She already agreed to let me do it, you know I wouldn't even ask her without permission," he answered. "She agrees that I have to introduce her eventually, so she gave me permission to ask her to Boston, but we don't mingle. We have to keep to ourselves, we don't answer questions, and we don't show up anywhere but the concert. So, after the concert, we get on a plane and go to New York, and we'll have dinner and see a show, and a more normal date down there on Saturday. She's *only* coming up to Boston for the concert."

"If Allison agrees, anyway," Kit noted.

"I'm going to stress that we'll have *separate* hotel rooms, and she'll be home on Sunday afternoon," he said immediately. "I'm not expecting anything out of her. I just want to take her to a concert, have dinner, take her to a show, and get to know her better, get to know the *real* Allison."

"You've really thought this through."

"Of course I have. If I'm going to do this, I want to do it right, and I also want to respect Allison. No matter her past, she deserves that respect. I want to show her I *won't* be like all the other males who have treated her badly."

"I think you'll do just fine," Kit chuckled. "Thanks for telling me, Terry."

“Feel free to tell Jessie and Sheila, because I’m going to call Allison right now. She should just be leaving her flight school. It’s a touch after five thirty, that’s when she gets out.”

Kit looked at his clock, and saw that it was indeed 4:34. Sheila and Allison had just finished ten minutes ago. It was an hour later for Terry because he was in the Eastern time zone.

“Then let’s get off the phone so you can get her before she gets in her car,” he noted.

“Good idea. See you later, cousin.”

“Oh, tell Allison that Val invited me and Jessie up for the concert too, so she can catch a ride with us up to Boston.”

“Nice! I’ll tell her. Bye-bye cousin.”

“Bye Terry.”

Kit started wrapping things up, getting the last pieces of data inputted into the computer to close out the week. They had turned a record profit that week, \$13,655.68 to the black due to stronger sale figures for their sale issues and the initial payment of two major new advertisers in the same week, Papa John’s Pizza and Frontage Auto, a very large car dealership just off the interstate on the frontage road. The profit would be squirreled away for the coming expansion, building capital the magazine would need in just a month or two. There would be new salaries to pay, more costs to the printer to print both a larger issue and more copies, new expenses for equipment, and there would be only a marginal increase in incoming revenue from advertisers because of Rick’s adamant 21% rule. The expenditures would quickly swallow up their profit margin, and it would

start next week, when Eliza and Pat's salaries started to be paid out, and the expense reports Mike filed for the equipment he bought to supply the two new hires would be officially tallied into the ledger, since he hadn't officially turned them in yet, he was still buying some equipment to finish and he wouldn't turn it in until he finished. Another major hit to their profits would be when Rick finally chose a health insurance plan to offer to the employees. He'd been researching the various companies and looking for the best deal, and that was going to be *expensive*, but it was also necessary. Rick very much wanted to offer health insurance to his workers, for he understood how important it was. His own accident proved that; one never knew when the unexpected would occur. So the profits they earned now would be the money that got them through the next expansion phase, the bankroll upon which they would draw when they were again posting losses on Fridays.

His cell phone rang, and he opened it and answered; unlike Jessie, he still used his cell phone for personal calls, leaving his Blackberry for business. "Hello?"

"Kit," Allison answered, her voice excited. "Terry *called me!*"

"I know, he called me to warn me he was before he called you," he answered her. "Did he ask you out?"

"He did!" she said happily. "He invited me up to New England for the holiday weekend."

"You sound excited."

"I thought he wasn't going to call me back," she said honestly. "I thought my past was too much for him, but he said *it doesn't matter to him!*" she said, almost deliriously happy. "He said we'd go to the holiday

concert in Boston, then go to Cincinnati to attend Jessie's birthday party on Saturday afternoon, then go to New York to see a Broadway show on Saturday night."

"Well, that sounds pretty good," Kit mused, noting the change in Terry's original plan. "He told me only about his hope to take you to Boston and New York."

"Yeah, I kinda already accepted Jessie's invitation to her party in Cincinnati," she said. "So Terry agreed to go to the party with me."

"Wow, my pretty kitty moves fast, I just told her about the Cincinnati party like a half hour ago."

"She interrupted the end of my flight class," Allison laughed. "I forgot to turn off my cell phone. I'd literally just got off the phone with her when Terry called me."

"Did he stress the hotel arrangements?"

She laughed. "He did. He said we'd be in separate hotels if that's what I wanted, and he said he didn't want any kind of misunderstanding at all about his intentions, which I thought was very sweet of him. I told him that as long as we're in non-adjointing rooms, I'm comfortable with it."

"I'm glad. I'm really happy for you, Ally."

"Thank you. You've been a true friend, Kit. I wanted you to know how much I appreciate everything you've done for me, and I'm *glad* I trusted you."

"I'm grateful you feel that way."

“Now if we could just get Jessie over her jealousy,” she giggled. “I’d love to have you over at my house.”

“Just give her time, she’ll get used to it. But I’m afraid that as long as she’s pregnant and you’re gorgeous, she’s going to be jealous.”

She laughed. “Well, we have, what, fifteen weeks to go?”

“Fourteen weeks, three days,” he recited instantly. “If she delivers on her due date. Our doctor told us she could be as much as a week in either direction from that, but she was fairly sure she’d deliver on or around September thirtieth.”

“Well, I think I can wait that long. Besides, I’ll have something else on my mind,” she mused.

“What do you think about Terry?”

“Honestly? I think he’s the most intelligent male I’ve ever met,” she answered. “His mind is amazing, and it’s a delight to talk to him. He’s very handsome, and he’s witty, and he’s kind. And I want to get to know him better.”

“And he’s rich.”

“Like that even crossed my mind!” she challenged.

“Oh, it did and you know it, don’t lie,” Kit teased.

She laughed ruefully. “I try very hard *not* to think about that,” she answered him. “And after all, I don’t really need his money. I have plenty of my own.”

“You do indeed.”

Chapter 29

When Rick and Martha came home, they were both almost dreamily content, and their fur was sun-bleached from day after day out in the Hawaiian sun. Kit and Jessie picked them up at the airport, and the first thing they did after he got them home was show him an onslaught of pictures. Kit and Jessie saw quite a few pictures of the Sanders and the Williams enjoying their trip, from the luau they attended on the first night, pictures of black sand beaches, pictures of breathtaking scenes from a helicopter, and pictures of a whale they spotted during their boat excursion. Vil had put them in swanky rooms, they had a rental car at their disposal, and had paid for their helicopter tour and their boat trip.

But the vacation didn't dissuade Rick from work, for he was there the next morning, where he wasted no time getting to know Eliza and Pat better, and also talking to Kit and Jeffrey while they were at lunch to gauge their performance during their first few days. "Elly's very, very good," Jeffrey said. "She's already taken over doing the designing on the Frontage ad."

"Elly?" Rick asked.

Jeffrey nodded. "That's what she likes to be called. She can caricature as well, so she can do editorials."

"So, so far so good?"

Jeffrey nodded again. "She's a hard worker."

“What about Patrick?”

“Pat, and I’m glad you found me before you found him, or I might have missed out on this job,” Kit chuckled. “He’s easily as good a researcher as I am. He’s thorough and he’s *fast*. I wouldn’t bat an eye giving him any project.”

“Good,” Rick said, “because you have more important things to do than handle all the research.”

“Such as?”

“You’re a partner, son, you have other duties. I want you to take a firmer paw in the editing. So, I want you to at least split the research evenly with Pat and start working with me and Savid. Eventually, I want you to master every aspect of the magazine’s operation, from Denise’s front desk to handling the main editing.”

“Practice what you preach, old dingo, you don’t bother Mike at all,” Kit laughed.

“I avoid this modern sorcery,” he winked in reply, pointing at his computer. “I leave imperiling mortal souls to the digital Satan to the youngsters. How are the strips going, Jeffrey?”

“Fine now,” he chuckled. “Kit and Jessie have put in about five weeks of scripts in advance, and I’m about three weeks ahead on the art.”

“So, does Jo-Jo *really* blow up the bell tower?” he asked curiously.

“You’ll find out on Friday,” Jeffrey grinned in reply.

“I’ll find out as soon as you submit the strip so I can put it into the issue,” he snorted.

“I’ll send you a blank template that’s the same size as the strip,” he teased in reply.

“And you’ll find yourself at half pay this week, too,” Rick warned, which made both Kit and Jeffrey burst into laughter. “Have you considered who you’re going to syndicate with?”

“No one right now,” he answered. “We decided to do our own syndication, not go through a syndicate and have to pay them a share of the profits. The *American-Statesman* has offered to pay to run the strips, so I might just start with that and see how it goes. They only have a hundred and three, so they’ll recycle pretty quickly unless they take them weekly.”

“I’ll let it be known through the editor’s circles that *School Daze* is now available for reprint if you want.”

“That works for us, boss. But we wanted to let you know something.”

“What?”

“One quarter of the profits from syndication are going to the magazine,” Jeffrey told him. “The strip started here, so the magazine deserves to profit from getting the strip off the ground.”

“You don’t have to do that, son,” Rick shook his head. “We get all the readership boost we need from the fact that the new strips are only found here.”

“Well, me and Kit agreed to it, and you don’t have a say, boss,” Jeffrey told him. “We decided that the magazine is as much entitled to profits off the strip as we are, so it gets a quarter of the syndication revenue. But, I do expect steady and healthy pay raises,” he winked.

Rick laughed. “You have my promise. And next month, I’m gonna contract to a health insurance provider, so we’ll all have health insurance too.”

“That’s good to hear.”

Rick’s offer to let it be known that the strip was available for syndication didn’t seem like such a big deal...at least until Friday.

Friday, much to Kit’s surprise and delight, *nine* newspapers and three magazines had contacted Jeffrey to bargain with him over syndication for *School Daze* and *Missy and Cutler*. Kit had made it clear to Jeffrey that handling the business of the strip was his responsibility, and though he was young, he wasn’t dumb. He bartered very nice syndication fees from them of \$50 per week, which was an extremely high fee as far as syndication went, but the other publications considered the fee acceptable to get access to the strip, because it was already popular. Jeffrey also made it clear that they could run the strips daily if they so pleased, but that the strip itself was *weekly* and they’d eventually find themselves out of strips. He also made it clear that reprint rights would lag behind *Lone Star* by two weeks, which permanently protected the magazine’s first print rights to the strip.

The publications bought the rights with those conditions without even hesitating. The three magazines were all either weekly or monthly, so the weekly nature of the strip didn’t bother them, but the newspapers found themselves in a curious predicament. The Houston paper decided to split the difference and run the strip as a daily until they ran out and then switch to weekly, but the Dallas paper decided to run the strip as a 4-strip block every week in their weekend section, which would delay them hitting the end of the available strips.

Either way, it was \$600 of weekly income, which was split up as \$150 for the magazine, and \$225 each for Kit and Jeffrey; Jessie had declined to ask for a share, since she was part owner of the other strip with Jeffrey and her marriage to Kit gave her access to his share anyway. And they got it by syndicating themselves and not going with a syndication company, which would have probably gotten a \$20 a week fee and then taken half of it for themselves. The simple truth was, Jeffrey and the Vulpans had a successful strip that other publications wanted to reprint, and they were smart enough to make those publications deal with them directly, and pay *real* money for it.

Jeffrey left that as the conditions of syndicating the strip to all publications, and every day another publication called the magazine to talk to Jeffrey about it, trying to bargain him down. But he was steadfast, for he knew that they'd eventually settle for the same deal if they wanted the strip.

Rick had agreed to manage the actual finances of the syndication, and it was he that cut the first royalty checks to the strip, Kit, and Jeffrey on the first Friday after they syndicated. Rick decided to put the magazine's portion of the income into a special fund that would become the yearly bonus for the magazine, splitting it evenly with all the employees except for Kit and Jeffrey, so everyone could profit from the strip that helped anchor their magazine's readership. Even though it was only \$150 a week for now, it would also have a good five months to pile up before it was handed out in mid-December.

"I wish I didn't have to cash this," Jeffrey laughed as he looked at his first royalty check for his work.

"Don't," Rick chuckled. "I'll draw the money out as pure cash for you. Just frame the check, just make sure you void it on the back so someone

doesn't steal it and try to cash it."

Jeffrey laughed. "Nah, I'll cash it. But I'll make a copy of it first and frame *that*."

"Now that's smart thinkin'," Rick grinned.

"With Elly and Pat here and taking part of the load off us, me and Kit have agreed to accelerate the strip production," he told Rick. "We're going to see if we can take it to a daily. If I have enough time to do the art, since Kit seems to be able to bang out a whole month of scripts in like an hour," he said, giving Kit a playfully dirty look.

"Hey, my part of the job's easy," Kit shrugged. "Besides, if we can sustain a daily production rate, it'll make the strip much more appealing to newspapers."

"So this week I'll see if I can produce five strips," Jeffrey told the dingo. "But we're leaving *Missy and Cutler* as a weekly, so that means I only have to produce six strips a week. I think I can do it. I just need about four hours a day to produce a good quality strip, and the other four hours I devote to the magazine. I can do the other strip on Saturday, and that leaves me with a day and a half off."

"If you follow that schedule, anyway," Rick mused. "The first night you go home and you're bored, you'll end up working on the strip."

"Probably," Jeffrey agreed with a laugh. "Is that alright with you, boss?"

"Surely it is," he nodded. "I told you we'd put you on part time so you could pursue your own work, so four hours a day is just fine. And if you choose to spend that free time working on *School Daze*, who am I to argue?"

It just helps the magazine,” he chuckled. “So, you want a block for five strips reserved in the next issue?”

Both of them nodded. “If we’re gonna run five strips a week, the newspapers will see they can run it as a daily and not run out of material for a long time.”

“If you find you can sustain the pace, I’ll announce that *School Daze* will print five strips a week from now on, and pass it on that it’s now a daily strip.”

“And we’re gonna adjust our deal with the syndicators and tell them they only have to stay a week behind, if they ever catch up,” Jeffrey said.

Kit took the \$225 that was the Vulpan share of the royalties and banked it, but Jeffrey took his check and made 2 copies of it. One he hung in his office, the other he hung in his studio in his apartment.

That was just one way in which Elly and Pat had impacted the office. It gave Kit and Jeffrey more time to work on the strip, but they also showed that they had some unique talents of their own that they were happy to share with the magazine. Elly was quite good at both caricature and illustration in a way Jeffrey was not, and so it was one of Elly’s illustrations that graced the cover of their next week’s issue, a wonderful illustration of the Texas capitol building that highlighted the top story of the week, which dealt with U.T.’s budget and the state money granted to the school by the state government. Pat, it turned out, was good at writing poems and riddles, so he added a riddle into the issue, with a prize of a *Lone Star* tee shirt to the first person who emailed the right answer. But Pat’s riddles weren’t easy, and it took nearly five days before someone got the right answer.

That week, as promised, there were five strips of *School Daze*, all part of a running series, or arc, dealing with a one of Jo-Jo's inventions run amok, which was a self-spinning, levitating yo-yo that ravaged the entire campus, chipping bricks, breaking windows, and denting doors. The yo-yo was attracted to the color green, so it chased anyone wearing green all over the campus, or at least until they got outside and the yo-yo buzzed randomly over the grass until it wandered beyond the lawn and again went crazy. There was also one strip of *Missy and Cutler*.

Elly seemed inspired by Jeffrey's work and Pat's contest, so she also included her own contest in the issue, providing a three strip panel with the final panel's word bubbles left blank, and calling for readers to supply their own word bubbles to the panel to make it funny. The winner would also get a tee shirt, and their word bubbles would be printed in the next week's issue.

The week passed quickly for Kit and Jessie, though. Jessie's birthday was coming up fast, and their next issue was going to release on July 4, though Kit, Jessie, Rick, and Martha wouldn't be there. They worked hard to get everything put to bed so they could leave on Friday and come back Sunday morning, while Jessie got everyone ready to go. Kit and Jessie were bringing, Rick, Martha, Sheila, Allison, Sam, Kevin, Lupe, and Danielle with them, and it was difficult getting hotel rooms for everyone, since it *was* July 4 in Boston. Jessie also made it clear that this wasn't a free ride for the guests, they had to pay for their own hotel rooms. That was what made it so tricky, and eventually the Vulpans had to assert their authority, or more to the point, Kit did. Instead of trying to get everyone into hotels, he instead arranged to have them stay in the guest houses at Stonebrook.

That was easy for him to do, since he and Vil were the deeded co-owners of the property. Though he would never live there, it was *his* property, and if he wanted guests to stay in the guest houses on the manor's grounds, then no one, not even Uncle Zach, could reject it. Zach lived at Stonebrook by Kit's suffrage, and he had no say in what Kit did with or to the property. Kit would never sleep anywhere near that place, so Vil was going to put them up in her personal house in Chelmsford, which kept him far away from the rest of his family. Kit would stay in Boston overnight, but he would come nowhere near the rest of his family, keeping his wife far away from them, and the extent of his foray into the city would be limited to going to the concert, which would be attended by everyone, even Clancy. Outside of that, he would go no further into Boston than the hotel room near the airport.

Boston didn't frighten him as much as it did before he learned of Vil's hamstringing of the family concerning him, but that didn't mean that the ghosts of Boston wouldn't continue to haunt him.

Luke had also called him and told him that the jet was chartered and ready. A Cessna pilot would fly it down to Austin on Thursday night and stay in the city over the weekend while Kit used it, then fly it back when he returned. Kit reviewed his manuals and materials for the CJ3 in preparation to pilot it, which seemed easy now that Pat was there to help him research.

Work seemed almost...easy now. Pat was such a good partner for Kit that the two of them could plow through almost everything they were given with blazing speed, yet also provide the same standard of excellence that Kit demanded. The problem was that, right now, there was too much work for one researcher but not enough for two, so Kit and Pat found themselves with spare time, which they both used trying to help others in the office as

they could. Kit knew that their workload would increase when Rick increased the pages per issue and hired another writer, both of which were slated for July. When those happened, there would be enough work for both of them. Until then, Kit would continue to learn about editing with Rick and Savid while Pat roamed the office putting in a helpful paw wherever it was needed.

When they put the issue to bed on Thursday evening, Kit and Jeffrey both received their normal paychecks and royalty checks that were now at \$300, for now they had 16 publications syndicating the strip, the furthest out being the *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans. Again, Kit was not surprised to find that the publications were willing to pay \$50 a week for the strip, which was higher than fees for comics, and again he felt vindicated in having them handle the syndications themselves, which let them keep the entire syndication fee.

Kit took the afternoon off, though, and would be off the rest of the weekend, because he was going to fly. He met the Cessna pilot down at Bergstrom because he wanted to take a short test flight in the jet with the Cessna pilot before he took it up solo. He'd only piloted a CJ3 in the simulator, and he wanted at least one take off and landing with a rated pilot in the right chair before taking it solo. The pilot was, surprisingly enough, Justin. The leopard met him outside of the Signature hangar, where they had the jet parked, shaking his paw fondly. "So, did Jessie bring me any cookies?" he asked.

Kit laughed. "None made, but I think you could come by for dinner tonight," he offered.

"That sounds heavenly. So, shall we?" he asked.

The jet was parked outside on the tarmac, and from the number on the tail, it had just come off the assembly line, and it had already been sold. It had a registration number; someone in Texas had bought the plane. It was painted with blue stripes and chasers, and when they got inside, he saw that it was set up with the eight passenger club configuration, eight seats with a lavatory in the back. “Isn’t whoever bought this plane gonna be a little ticked you lent it to me?” he asked.

Justin laughed. “We contacted the buyer, and they didn’t mind, since we’re more or less delivering it to Austin.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “A flight charter company here at Bergstrom, so when you’re done with it, it goes back with us to Kansas to hold it for the buyers until they’re ready for it, then it comes back here. The client already came out and saw it, but they don’t need it yet, so they’re letting you use it. Vil set it up.”

“That’s my sister, always finding some way to take advantage of a situation,” he laughed. “What’s the company?”

“It’s called AV Charters, it’s that little hangar up in the crossover, the one on the end on this side.”

Kit nodded, he’d passed by that hangar before, so he knew where Justin was talking about. “Why didn’t you park it up there?”

“Like I said, they’re not ready for it yet. I think they’re remodeling the hangar.”

“Oh.”

Kit hadn't forgotten his training at all. With Justin watching on, Kit finished preflight, started the engines, and taxied them out to take off on the short strip. He found himself behind a Cargomaster, and had to wait nearly a minute before he was cleared to take off. Justin just watched as they took off, and Kit took them quickly to 17,500 feet heading due east. They passed within two miles of a little Piper, keeping a very close eye on the small single prop private plane as they passed it by, then he angled more to the south, enjoying the freedom of flying a jet on VFR rules, zooming along at 306 knots and knowing he could get to 417 knots, the maximum cruise speed of a CJ3, which was nearly 475 miles an hour, if he went up into the stratosphere. The CJ3 was actually pretty large, the largest of the CJ series and the largest one that was single pilot certified, but it flew much like the Mustang they'd let him fly, light and responsive and easy to fly. The avionics certainly made it like that, since the Pro Line flight deck made the plane easy to manage for a single pilot. Kit and Justin discussed what he'd be doing for a cross country flight to Boston, and how he'd be letting the autopilot do most of the work.

"So, am I allowed out of the cockpit with the autopilot going when I'm the only pilot?" Kit grinned at Justin.

"For short and reasonable trips, yes," he answered. "To the lavatory, to grab a snack, and so on. But no sleeping, no playing cards back in the cabin, and so on."

Kit chuckled. "I'll be carrying so much weight, I'm may have to stop somewhere to refuel," he noted as he adjusted the engines and prepared to turn around.

"I doubt that, this thing has a thousand pounds of payload at full fuel."

“I think I might. We’ll be way over the payload at full fuel.”

“How many are you taking?”

“There’ll be ten of us, gonna fill this thing up,” he answered. “Between fuel, them, and their baggage, I expect we’ll be at around fifteen hundred pounds of payload, so I’ll have to fill my tanks just to max weight. I’ll be taking off at maximum weight.”

“Just remember that a max weight takeoff makes the controls a bit sluggish,” he warned. “You’re best off using as much runway as you can to get up to about ten knots over lift-off speed, that makes it a bit easier.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Hmm, that’ll be close,” Justin mused as he thought about it. “Boston is well within normal range at full fuel, but if you’re gonna be five hundred or so pounds of fuel down on takeoff, you’d really be pushing it to try to make it all the way to Boston on one leg. You’d have to get some help from prevailing winds.”

“That’s why I think I’ll plan for a fuel stop,” Kit said as they started a long, wide circle to turn around and go back to Bergstrom.

“Whatever you do, do *not* land at Tri-State Airport in Huntington, West Virginia,” Justin laughed.

“Why not?”

“It’s built on the top of a mountain, so the ends of the runway are like on cliffs,” he replied. “It’s the closest thing you’d ever come to landing on an aircraft carrier. It’s a nervous landing, especially at night.”

“It sounds like you speak from experience,” Kit chuckled.

“Guilty. I suggest Lexington Municipal Airport. Nice and roomy, and they use fueler trucks that come out to a staging area, since they get lots of refuelers landing there. You’ll be able to do a hot refuel and be on your way after like a half hour.”

“I’ll take your advice on that one.”

Kit landed softly and smoothly back on the short strip, and taxied the jet back to Signature, parking it right where it had been. After he shut down, he looked to Justin. “Well?”

“You’re already rated, don’t look at me,” he winked. “But would I feel comfortable letting you solo cross country? Without batting an eye,” he affirmed.

“That’s all I wanted to know.”

After he dropped Justin off at Hertz, Kit went on to the mall and bought Jessie’s birthday present. Jessie wasn’t big on jewelry, but he’d seen her eyeing an emerald and diamond heart pendant at Zale’s Jewelry in the mall, only \$300, and he’d bought it using a piece of the money market funds he’d have to put back later. He also bought her a kitchen set for their new apartment, a whole new set of knives and other cooking implements like tenderizers and spoons, and a cast iron rack to hang over the island from which to hang pots, pans, and other utensils. The kitchen set and the rack he wouldn’t take with them, but he did take pictures of them to show her on her birthday so she knew what she got. But the necklace was going with them. He also bought a gold plated frame with *Laura* inscribed across the top, which would hold a picture of their baby when she was born. The most expensive thing he bought wasn’t the necklace, it was a complete \$1500 set of Eagle Pro composite shaft golf clubs; three woods, nine irons,

three wedges, and two putters, along with deluxe golf bag filled with golf accessories and a deluxe wheel caddy for when her pregnancy made carrying the golf bag too hard, since she had really become interested in golf over the last couple of weeks, she really liked the game. Eagle clubs were rather pricy, but were also considered some of the best clubs available, useful for every skill level. Kit had used Jessie's clothes and had snuck some measurements of her while she slept to send to the company so they could give her clubs that were right for her, since clubs sized for the golfer were critical to the golfer's game. He had also bought her a Remington 332 over-under 12 gauge shotgun she could use for skeet shooting, which put him back nearly \$1,400, because it was specifically made for sport shooting, came with extra parts, and had a long reinforced barrel. He'd seen a few high-level competition skeet shotguns going for as much as \$8,000, so \$1,400 for a competition-grade shotgun seemed like a bargain compared to that. He was spending a whole lot on something she'd use only occasionally, but since Jessie had started shooting skeet again, he wanted her to have a good gun with which to do it, and she was worth it. Almost as an afterthought, he bought a second shotgun, a Remington 12 gauge Wingmaster pump action, which was \$600 at a local gun store, to use as an emergency backup in case they had to have her regular one fixed, and also for a guest to use, so Jessie didn't have to share *her* shotgun with anyone else. Jessie hadn't just taken Sheila and Allison skeet shooting once, she'd taken them several times, so the idea of having a second shotgun available seemed like a good idea. The pump action was also viable for skeet shooting, with a long barrel and the proper choke, but from what he'd researched most serious skeet shooters didn't use pump action shotguns for sport shooting...but he couldn't afford a second over-under. When he asked John about pump-action skeet shotguns, he was told that many recreational

skeet shooters did use them, and that it was a personal matter of choice. Some furs could pump the shotgun to reload just as easily as others moved their fingers to a second trigger or the shotgun's trigger switched over to the second barrel. They'd keep them in a locked gun cabinet he intended to buy, upstairs in their bedroom when they moved, which should keep it well away from Laura once she became ambulatory.

How a pump action shotgun could cost less than a much less complicated over-under shotgun just mystified him.

He'd considered buying her a Stairmaster, her favorite workout machine, but the community center was going to contain a small yet complete workout center, with stair machines, rowing machines, stationary bikes, treadmills, and two fixed weight stations in the workout room, with a room that could be used for dance lessons, martial arts lessons, or other activities.

In all, Kit spent over \$4000 on Jessie, plus the extra \$600 for the second shotgun which he didn't entirely consider a present for Jessie but he felt he didn't spend enough. She was his entire life, and he wanted to shower her with presents on her special day. But, he felt that she would like his presents. He bought her a piece of jewelry and gifts for her many hobbies, which would keep her busy and happy both before and after Laura was born. She'd golf until her pregnancy made it too hard, then move on to cooking or skeet shooting or flying.

After shopping, he called Eagle and had them next-day ship the clubs to John and Hannah's house, then called Hannah and warned her it was coming. "Golf clubs? Golf clubs, Kit?"

“She’s really gotten hooked on golf,” he chuckled. “Sheila’s been taking her to play. I have no doubt that she’ll go right back onto the course after she recovers from the pregnancy, the courses stay open here in Texas until December, then re-open in March. I think there’s one private course here that doesn’t close at all.”

“That’s really surprising. She doesn’t talk about golf.”

“That’s because Sheila kicks her butt,” Kit mused. “But when she goes out next time with her own clubs, Sheila’d better watch out.”

“I hope you got her something other than golf clubs.”

“Of course I did. I bought her a rack for pans we’ll use in our new apartment, a whole set of kitchen things for the new kitchen, I got her a gold frame with our baby’s name engraved on it, and I bought her a diamond and emerald heart pendant necklace. Oh, and I bought her a competition-grade shotgun for skeet shooting, since she’s been taking Sheila and Ally skeet shooting lately. Sheila was very annoyed,” he laughed. “She likes to lord it over Jessie a little bit in golf, but Jessie mops the floor with her in skeet shooting.”

“I would think so, since she used to go with her father,” Hannah said with a slightly smug tone.

Justin joined them for dinner, and he got to meet Danielle, Sheila and Allison, who had come over for dinner as well, a dinner that both Jessie and Sheila had cooked. They made lasagna italiano, steamed broccoli with cheese sauce, artichoke hearts, and homemade black bread. “So, you two are taking flying lessons as well, are you?” Justin asked, looking at the two vixens over the dinner table. “How far along are you?”

“We’ll do our test rides on July thirtieth,” Sheila answered.

“Do you like it?”

“I think it’s awesome,” Sheila grinned. “Me and Ally are gonna go in together on a Cessna four hundred! If we’re gonna fly a single engine, we decided to go for the best!”

“You could always borrow theirs,” he chuckled, pointing at Kit and Jessie.

“They’re stingy with it,” she complained.

“After you graduate and after *I* train you, I’ll let you fly my plane, but not a moment before,” Kit said adamantly. “My plane is a hell of a lot more complicated than the one seventy-two trainers you’re flying at AAIA. I’d like to keep my plane in one piece.”

“You think I’d crash?” she challenged.

“Not on purpose, but I think you’d say ‘watch this,’ and then I’d be visiting you in the hospital.”

Danielle burst into laughter, but sputtered to a stop as Sheila glared at her, which caused Allison and Jessie to burst into laughter. “What do you do, Justin?” Danielle asked.

“I’m a flight instructor for Cessna,” he answered. “When someone buys a jet, what I do is teach the owner or the pilot he hires how to fly the plane.”

“How much does something like that cost?”

“For a buyer, nothing. We train one pilot and one maintenance technician for the owner as part of the price of the jet. But if someone is

buying the training, it depends on the training the pilot wants. Rating in a Mustang costs about seven thousand dollars. Rating in a CJ or an Encore is about six thousand. Rating in a Citation ten, our most popular jet, is about twelve thousand.”

“Wow, I didn’t realize it was so expensive to learn to fly,” she said in surprise.

“It can be,” Justin said, to which just about everyone else at the table nodded. “How much is your private costing you, Sheila?”

“Eight thousand,” she answered. “But that includes everything.”

“I’ll be going for my air transport license at the end of the year, and after all is said and done, I figure I’ll have spent about a hundred thousand on flight training to get there,” Kit told her.

“That sounds about right,” Justin nodded. “But if *you* want to learn to fly, Danielle, talk to him,” he said, pointing at Kit. “He got his flight instructor’s permit while he was training with us in Kansas, so he can train pilots himself. I’m sure he’d probably be much cheaper than learning from the school where Sheila’s going.”

“Yeah, we’re still a bit ticked over that,” Sheila grinned at him. “We both think you owe us a little, like helping us get our instrument ratings. It’s annoying as hell not being able to fly because a single little cloud is sitting over the airport.”

“I’ll help you, Sheila. But it’s still gonna cost ya,” he winked.

“Bastard.”

“I’m a Vulpan,” he said simply, which made everyone burst into laughter.

Friday morning, Kit leaned over and kissed Jessie on the ear while she slept, putting a paw on her belly and feeling a little faint wriggling down there. Little Laura had become a lot more active over the last week or so, and it wasn’t unusual to feel her kicking or moving as Jessie’s belly continued to expand and thicken. Her “thin” clothes didn’t fit her anymore, and she had started wearing maternity-style clothes, pants with elastic waistbands and loose fitting shirts and blouses. In the last couple of weeks, her baby bump had developed into full-blown, blatant pregnancy. Furs who looked at her could tell she was pregnant now, not just a touch chubby around the middle, and that subtle change had done much for her mood. Jessie was shy, but she was a beautiful femme and she knew it, and she had her own share of vanity. She liked being thin, she liked being pretty, and it had stung her ego to think that others thought she was fat. But now, they didn’t think she was fat, they could tell she was obviously pregnant, and that was like a dark cloud had been lifted off her shoulders.

She hummed lightly in her throat and opened her beautiful blue eyes, looking up at him a little fuzzily at first, but then he saw her eyes sharpen and a smile bloom as she looked up at him. “Morning, my handsome fox,” she said in a near whisper.

“Good morning, my pretty kitty,” he returned, kissing her lingeringly on the lips, ignoring the fact that both of them had morning breath. “Happy almost birthday.”

She giggled and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. “My *almost* birthday, hmm?” she asked with a smile. “And what present do I get for my almost birthday?”

“You get to go to the kitchen and make me breakfast while I lounge around in bed,” he said with a teasing smile.

She laughed. “Oh really? And what kind of present is that?”

“Well, you’ll be happy knowing that you’re making the most important male in your life happy,” he said flippantly, brushing her hair back away from her face. “And after I smell breakfast cooking and it rousts me out of bed and into the dining room, I’ll get to sit at the table and watch your sexy little butt wiggle back and forth while you’re cooking the bacon.”

She laughed again. “Let’s not even go there,” she told him with an amused twinkle in her eyes. “I do *not* want you to have those kinds of thoughts of me while I’m cooking. I’ll never be able to so much as boil water ever again!”

“You’re too late, I have those kinds of thoughts about you all the time, no matter what you’re doing,” he told her, then he leaned down and kissed her lingeringly. “I’m having those kinds of thoughts right now,” he informed her.

“Well, I think we might have to do something about that,” she giggled, tightening her grip on him and pulling him down into her embrace.

After he finally let her escape from bed, they took turns showering, and Kit cooked breakfast. They were going to head to the airport around one, since everyone had already been told that they had to be over at the complex at 10:00, where they would park their cars and pile into Kit’s

Pathfinder and Martha's van to get to the airport. Everyone already knew that they needed to eat before they got to the complex, and that dinner was already planned for them in Boston before they went to the concert, as well as a couple of hours to sightsee in Boston. Kit asked them to try to limit their luggage, reminding them this was only a weekend trip and they didn't need to bring their entire wardrobes, but he did warn everyone that it was best to bring shoes to Boston if they wanted to sightsee in the time between dinner and the concert, that in some places in Boston one had to have shoes to get in; that was how they discriminated against tourists.

Since they'd decided to have a little married fun before getting up, they found that it was nearly time to go after they cooked breakfast. Kit packed Jessie's gifts in the Pathfinder in a box as she got their suitcase and attaché ready, and Lupe hurried over to his car as he was putting the box in the back. "Hey brah, I'm ready to go!" he said, holding up a small suitcase. "Two changes of clothes and Jessie's gift!"

"Bring shoes?"

"In the suitcase," he nodded. "Brah, thanks again for this trip! You know how long it's been since I took a vacation?"

"We're happy to take you, Lupe," he smiled. "You're one of our closest friends, you deserve something for all that loyalty," he winked.

Lupe laughed. "So, I finally get to see the big mansion where you grew up!"

"Only from the outside," he said. "You'll be staying in the guest houses on the grounds. I wouldn't let you stay in the house itself, there's too much danger of a confrontation with my uncle. He lives there."

“Ah, yeah, the nefarious Uncle Zach.”

“That’s him,” he nodded as he packed Lupe’s suitcase in his truck, then closed the back gate. “To prevent bloodshed, I’d rather keep us and him separate. I won’t even be staying there. I, I just can’t stay there,” he said, shivering. “Way too many bad memories. I’ll be pushing it just staying a night in Boston. Jessie’s gonna have to cuddle up to me like a giant teddy bear to keep me calm enough to sleep.”

“Well, I think you should be alright for one day. We ain’t goin’ nowhere we’ll run into your family, will we?”

“Nah, we’re just gonna run around the harbor and take the walking tour, and Jessie wants to show everyone the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, where we went to have our second ceremony to honor my mom’s wishes.”

Rick and Martha pulled up in the spot beside Kit’s truck in Martha’s van, and he saw that Danielle was already with them, having picked her up from the sorority before coming over. Right behind her was Allison in her junk Camry, the car she drove when she didn’t want furs to know she had money, who went down and parked in a visitor’s spot, then piled out of her car with a small suitcase and a garment bag which held a dress. “What are you bringing a dress for, Ally?” Danielle asked. “They told me to wear jeans and a tee.”

“I’m going to go to a Broadway show with Terry after Jessie’s party, so I have to take something nice for it.”

“Oh. Well, you gotta tell us what it was like when you get home!” she said brightly.

“I’m taking a camera, I’ll see if I can’t get a couple of good pictures,” she said as she put the suitcase and garment bag in the back of Martha’s van.

“Where’s Sheila?”

“I haven’t seen her yet, but she should be along in a minute,” Kit answered as Jessie came out with a camera bag and hurried over to the cars. “Did you bring shoes, guys?”

“I remembered,” Danielle nodded.

“We have ours in our suitcase,” Rick added.

Sheila rushed up with her own suitcase as Lupe went to go get a bag holding snacks they could eat along the way. “Sorry guys, I was making us some lunch we can eat on the plane!” she said. “Lupe! Go to my pad and get the Tupperware dish on my coffee table!” she shouted.

“Sure thing, baby! Want me to lock up for ya?”

“Go ahead!” she answered.

“It’s so weird thinking about flying in a private plane,” Danielle laughed. “We’re bringing our own food to eat!”

“If Sheila cooked it, it probably won’t be much better than airline food,” Kit mused, which earned him a swat from both Jessie and Martha, who had been teaching her to cook.

“Denigrating her cooking is denigrating mine!” Martha warned. “Now, do you want to say that again?”

“Not while I’m in paw’s reach of you, Martha,” he told the great dane seriously, which made her laugh. “Where the heck are Kevin and Sam?”

“Right there,” Sheila said, pointing as Kevin pulled up in a hurry on the other side of Kit’s truck.

“Sorry guys, there was a wreck on the interstate!” he said as he and Sam piled out of his Altima. Kevin got their suitcases as Sam brought out a plastic bag holding drinks.

“Did you remember shoes?” Kit asked as he put their suitcases in Martha’s van.

“Sure did, in our suitcases,” Kevin answered, and Sam nodded in agreement.

Jessie set the alarm and locked their apartment while Lupe returned with the lunch Sheila made, then he went back and locked up his own apartment and threw a set of keys to Dan, who had come out to see them off. “Bring back a Red Sox pennant, guys!” he called as they pulled out of the parking area, waving to him and Mickey as they headed out. Kit and Jessie were carrying Lupe and Sheila, while Rick and Martha were carrying Danielle, Allison, Kevin, and Sam. They quickly drove to the airport, and Kit led Martha between the hangars and out onto the flight line, pulling up by the jet that Vil had arranged for them. He used the keys Justin had left for him to open the cargo doors, then used the keyless remote to unlock the hatch and open it. “Stay out of the cockpit!” he warned all of them as he helped Lupe and Rick load their luggage in the plane, making sure it was balanced, as the femmes and Kevin climbed the stairs and disappeared inside. After they got the luggage loaded and secured, he locked up the cargo door and ushered Lupe into the jet, and he and Rick parked their cars in Signature’s long term lot. When they got back, Kit sent Rick into the jet, and he did the walk-around, making sure the flight control surfaces weren’t jammed, nothing was leaking, the tires were in good condition, and

everything looked to be in proper order. He then climbed up into the jet himself, but didn't close the hatch, he only raised the stairs to get them off the tarmac so he could get their weight and know how much fuel to load. He saw that there had to have been a fight of some kind over the seats, for Martha and Allison were in the first row, which faced backwards, and Sheila and Danielle were in the next row. Kevin and Sam were in the next row, leaving Lupe and Rick to sit in the very back. Jessie was stowing their food and drinks in the refreshment center by the hatch. "What's next, Kit?" Allison asked, looking over the seat at him.

"I have to weigh us and then figure out how much fuel to take on," he said.

"How do you do that?" Danielle asked.

"The plane weighs itself," he told her. "It has a scale in the landing gear, part of a system called weight on wheels. The plane knows how much weight it's carrying."

"That's pretty clever," she nodded.

"Planes are full of very clever things," Kit chuckled as he squeezed past Jessie and climbed into the left seat.

The calculations didn't take long. He took the plane's resting weight, which included the fuel that was already in the tanks, and pulled out the jet's cheat sheet to calculate how much fuel he could take on without exceeding maximum weight. Once he had his fuel figures, he used the radio to call it in to Signature. In a matter of minutes, a fuel truck rumbled up to the jet. It took them about twenty minutes to load the fuel he wanted, balancing it in the tanks, then he went back out and paid for it using the Transport card that Vil had given him. The fuel furs pulled the chocks for

him, and also helped him pull up the stairs. He closed and sealed the hatch, then climbed back into the cockpit. After making sure the fuel truck was well away from the jet, he started preflight. “Everyone get ready, we’ll be heading out in just a minute,” he shouted as Jessie climbed into the copilot’s seat and strapped in, but kept his paws well away from the controls. She instead watched him intently. She knew she could rate to fly the jet herself, she had all the necessary ratings to qualify, so she had an earnest interest in watching what he was doing. He started the engines, explaining it to Jessie in a low voice, then put on his headset and called the tower for permission to taxi out onto ramp for takeoff. They sent him to the long runway for some reason, but that didn’t bother him. He taxied out behind a Boeing 767, keeping his distance, and then an Airbus pulled up behind them, pulling out from the main terminal. “We’ve got airliners sandwiching us, I hate that,” he grunted. “Airline pilots like to ride your ass in their big jets,” he complained as the taxi ramp turned, and he glanced out his side window to see where the Airbus was. “I always worry that they’re gonna lose sight of me and run me over.”

“Does that happen often?” Danielle asked from the cabin.

“It never has to my knowledge, but I still can’t help feeling like I might be the first in history,” he answered, which made her laugh.

After the 767 pulled onto the runway, Kit answered traffic control and heard other traffic, including a plane which had declared a flight emergency getting ready to land, then nodded. “No wonder they put us over here, there’s a flight emergency over on the short strips,” he told Jessie.

“Yeah, I heard it,” she nodded, tapping her headset.

“Still can’t get over that, my wife the pilot who understands ATC jargon now,” he winked at her.

“You bet, handsome fox,” she smiled in reply.

“Cessna Tango one one one seven, requesting takeoff clearance three six,” he called after the 767 pulled into the air and Kit replaced it at the end of the runway.

“Cessna Tango one one one seven, cleared for takeoff runway three six, follow flight plan VFR,” the male controller answered, which Kit had put on the speaker so everyone could hear what was going on.

“Roger, flight plan VFR,” Kit answered, acknowledging that he would be under VFR rules until he got above 18,000 and then enter his filed flight plan. They usually warned of that if they’d be near commercial traffic. “Alright, here we go guys!” Kit shouted, spooling up the engines.

They were in the air and climbing quickly, and he saw why they were warning him. “Look at that airliner to our right,” he called over the intercom. Everyone piled over on that side, those on the left getting out of their seats, and Jessie took video of it from her side of the cockpit. “That’s an Airbus,” Kit added as they passed within about two miles of the jet as it maneuvered to land, preparing to circle the airport to land. Kit saw why they had him wait on the runway, that was so the airliner could get out of the way as he climbed. “Pretty cool, eh?” he called. “You’d never see one this close in an airliner.”

“Is it legal to be this close?” Lupe shouted.

“Yeah it is, Lupe,” Kit answered. “I’m a good ways from him and moving in a different direction. He knows I’m here, and he can see that I’m flying away from him, not towards him.”

The Airbus quickly dwindled off in the distance, since it was flying away from them, and Kit monitored the pressurization of the jet as they climbed up and over 12,000 feet. He ensured that the jet was properly pressurized, then explained to Jessie what he was doing as the jet ascended up into flight plan airspace. He called into traffic control, then double-checked their input flight plan into the navigation system. With that flight plan, the autopilot could take over and keep them right on course and schedule. He optimized the autopilot so it would focus more on maintaining speed than fuel efficiency, since they had more than enough fuel to reach Lexington, then he let it take over once they were up at a cruising altitude of 40,000 feet. "Alright, we're level now," he called to the others.

It was two hours of easy flying to Lexington, which Kit spent letting the plane fly on autopilot as he taught just about everyone in the plane just how a jet plane worked, and what most of the controls did. He let them sit in the cockpit as well, usurping Jessie and letting them sit in the right chair in turns. He didn't make them sit down as they descended and landed at Bluegrass Airport, since Lupe, Sheila, Allison, and Danielle wanted to see what it looked like to land from the cockpit. Kit just had them brace themselves as they soared in over Lexington, then landed easily. A FBO there did indeed offer quick turnaround fueling in a little staging area near their hangar, so Kit negotiated with them over the radio as he taxied along a ramp approaching them, using a graphic of the airport on the center screen that even showed his location, and pointed out the location of the FBO to him. He pulled into the stretch of tarmac and parked, and a fueler truck rolled up to them after he shut down the engines. Being the solo pilot, he wasn't about to idle the engines without him behind the controls. He pulled out his cheat chart and calculated how much fuel he needed, then radioed

that out to the fueler. “Everyone stay on the jet, we’re out of here as soon as the fuel’s loaded,” he told them as he opened the hatch.

He oversaw the loading of the fuel, chatting amiably with one of the crew, then paid for it using the Transport card that Vil gave him. “We can put this on file if you want, so you don’t have to get out of the jet next time,” the crewman offered as he gave the card back to Kit.

“No thanks,” he said mildly. If it was *his* card where he’d see the statement every month and could catch any fraudulent charges, he would probably allow it, but he wasn’t taking chances with Vil’s gift.

“Alright, we’re on the way,” Kit called as he sealed the hatch. “Next stop, Boston!”

“Vil wants to know when we’re getting there,” Jessie asked, putting her paw over her cell phone, looking over at him as he climbed into his seat and strapped in.

“Tell her about two hours,” he answered as he began a hot-start of the engines, at least after ensuring the fuel truck and all the crew were well away from the jet. “We’ll be taking off from Lexington any minute.”

“She wants to know why we landed, she said they said the plane could reach Boston non-stop.”

“If we weren’t flying with eight passengers and all their luggage, yeah, we would’ve easily,” he chuckled. “But we’re carrying an awful lot of extra weight. We might have even made it to Boston on one leg, but I didn’t want to push it, it was too close to our range on the fuel we had. Boston was right on the edge of my maximum range without violating reserves, and pilots always err on the side of caution. One headwind or unforeseen problem, and

we'd have come up short. It only cost us about forty minutes to land and refuel, that's not bad. I'll take a planned forty minute layover over an unplanned layover in New York or Connecticut because air traffic control put me in a holding pattern."

Jessie summarized that to "He said that we have so much extra weight that it made getting to Boston on one tank of gas too risky to try."

"Well put," Kit chuckled as he settled his headset over his ears. After he had the jet ready to go, he bartered with the tower for taxi clearance as Rick, Kevin, and Sam crowded into the narrow doorway to the cabin, Sam with a video camera. Kit pulled out in front of a Beech King and taxied down to the end of the runway, letting Jessie explain everything because Kit was too busy to give a narrative. Jessie did a very good job, then had them brace themselves as Kit pulled out onto the runway, powered up, then executed a smooth takeoff. "Two hours to Boston, guys!" he called. "Tower, Cessna Tango one one one seven, course seven seven, roger," he acknowledged when the controller had him change course to avoid incoming traffic not yet visible to him, adjusting his course.

He went back and ate lunch with Jessie, and embarrassed her half to death when he brazenly pulled up her shirt to show off her pregnant belly to Rick, Lupe, and Kevin. "That's my daughter in there," he said with a smile, caressing her expanding tummy. "My little Laura."

"Buster, you're making sure it's your *last* child!" Jessie warned, smacking him on the shoulder and pulling her shirt back down, her cheeks ruffled.

"Jessie, no, if you kill him we have no one to land the plane!" Lupe laughed.

“I can land us, I saw him fly the simulator enough,” she growled as he snatched one of the sandwiches Sheila made and retreated quickly back towards the cockpit, laughing.

“Yeah, I’m just surrounded by pilots here,” Lupe chuckled as Kit got back in his seat. “Kit and Jessie fly, and the two vixen babes are learnin’! I should learn too, just to fit in with the crowd!”

“I couldn’t fly *this*,” Allison protested.

“Yet,” Jessie corrected her. “It’s not so hard to fly a jet, I think, there’s just lots more controls.”

“Next time we need to get a jet where I can stand up straight,” Rick chuckled.

“Sometimes it pays to be short, brah,” Lupe laughed.

It took them about 95 minutes to get to Boston from Lexington, and Kit had to pay attention, because he was landing a small jet at Logan International Airport, which usually wouldn’t even be allowed under most circumstances. Logan was a huge international airport that looked at general aviation as dirt under their claws, since it was a huge commercial airport that served airliners. The airport had a spiderweb of six runways, and Kit spent a goodly amount of time studying a chart of the airport he clipped to his yoke, so he’d know exactly where he was going when they finally told him where he was landing. But, landing didn’t come quickly, for Kit was put in a holding pattern because of a flight delay, which made him feel quite justified in landing to refuel, or he’d be declaring a flight emergency and pissing off a whole lot of furs, and probably get his tail hauled in by the FAA for a review. Finally, though, they gave him permission to land on runway 4L, which would at least make it easy for him to get to Signature

FBO, which was where Vil said she'd arranged to park the jet overnight. He touched down right on the stripes, almost in the intersection of runway 9R, then hit the brakes and thrust reversers to slow down enough to get off the runway immediately, as ordered by the controller. He pulled off and turned onto a parallel taxiway, moving slowly behind a Air France 767 as it ambled along towards the terminal. They made their way slowly yet surely to the very corner of the airport, where Signature had their hangar and terminal. A signalman guided him in, parking him at an open-air spot right by the terminal, and then workers ran out and chocked the wheels after he shut down the engines. "We're here!" he called, taking off his headset. "Sheila, go find Vil, and you guys unpack our stuff while I do postflight!"

When three limousines pulled up onto the flight line, he figured that Vil knew they were there. He finished up postflight and secured the controls, then came down the stairs to see Vil hugging Jessie, and all the others gathered around her. Kendall was with her, as was Muffy and Terry, and much to Kit's shock and surprise, Aunt Sarah and Uncle Brian were with them. It was clear that Sarah had come to see Sheila, for the two were sharing a surprisingly loving embrace. Brian was shaking paws with Kevin. Seeing his elders there tempered his enthusiasm quite a bit, and he saw that he wasn't the only one. Allison stood just outside the group with Terry, and the two of them were talking without touching. Kit noticed Brian giving Allison a long, appraising look...which wasn't a surprise, since Allison was a drop-dead stunner of a vixen, and she was wearing a pair of half shirts that were layered and a pair of shorts, which showed off her perfect figure. Kit came up to them almost reluctantly as workers emptied their cargo hold, and hugged Vil while keeping his eyes bored on Brian and Sarah, his expression making it abundantly clear he did not want them there.

“I’m here to see my daughter, not you, Kit,” Sarah told him simply. “God help me, but I’ve actually *missed* her since she moved to Texas.”

“Mom!” Sheila protested.

“Muffy was coming to see you, so I decided to tag along,” Brian shrugged. “How have you been, Kit?”

“Good enough,” he said as Jessie hugged Muffy, then his cousin embraced him warmly.

“Hey you, how you been?” Muffy asked.

“It’s been fine, cousin,” he told her, patting her on the back.

“Just pack the suitcases anywhere, we’ll sort them out at Stonebrook!” Vil barked to the workers, who were trying to figure out which suitcase went in which limousine. “We’re going to go see Clancy first, bro, then go on to the city. Would you *please* reconsider and stay at Stonebrook tonight?” she asked, almost pleadingly. “You can stay in a guest cottage, bro, you don’t have to stay in the main house. Clancy wants to you stay there, just once.”

“No, Vil,” he said sternly. “The only reason I’ll even go there now is because Clancy is there.”

“I think you’re being a tad immature, Kit,” Sarah told him. “Lucas has been dead for over a year. I doubt his ghost is haunting the manor. You should be in the family estate, not hide in Chelmsford with your sister,” she sniffed.

“Then call me immature, Sarah,” he said, a bit coldly. “You forget, I have *this* to remind me of how wonderful my life in Boston was,” he said,

pointing at his missing ear.

She fell silent. She knew that she had no defense against that argument.

“Let’s not start a family war right here on the tarmac,” Vil said briskly. “Let’s get going. Everyone just pick a limo, they’re all going to the same place!”

Kit made sure that Brian and Sarah were in some other limo before picking one...or more to the point, getting pulled into Vil’s limo. Kit and Jessie shared the limo with Vil, Allison, Kendall, and Terry, as Sheila went to sit with her mother. “Wot, Kit, I didn’t realize things were quite that tense in your family,” Kendall said. “Villy told me that you and your family were at odds, but that was more than just at odds.”

“I hate my family, Ken,” he said honestly. “Outside of Vil, basically anyone older than me in the family can go to hell. I’ll never forgive them for what they did to me.”

“Yet you’re friends with Sheila.”

“Sheila was too young to understand what was going on when it happened. That’s why I don’t necessarily blame my younger cousins, and I’ll associate with them. But my elders *did* know what was going on, and since they did nothing, I’ll never forgive them.”

“One of our few points of contention, I’m afraid,” Vil sighed. “I think he’s being entirely too stubborn. He can take his pound of flesh out of the elders, then forgive them and move on without having much to do with them. That would go a long way to settling things down in the family.”

“How would *you* feel if the family left you for dead, Vil?” he asked hotly. “It was bad enough laying in that hospital bed, but to do it alone, with

only Suzy—“ He cut himself off when Jessie put her paw on his arm and gave him a compassionate look. “I would have forgiven them for abandoning me if they’d just come when I was in the hospital, but they did nothing. And because of that, they will *never* get a kind word from me.”

“Well, then perhaps your family should just stop trying,” Kendall said. “And forgive me, dear lady, for not giving you a more proper greeting,” he said, kissing Allison’s paw rakishly, clearly trying to lighten the mood by irritating both Vil and Terry. “Kendall Brighton, at your service.”

“Allison Gallagher,” she returned, giving Terry a light smile in return of his slightly jealous look.

“So, you’re going out with Terry?”

“This is our first date,” she answered. “We met when he came down to see Kit. He had to convince me I should bother with a two thousand mile relationship.”

Kendall laughed. “I know the feeling, milady, I live in London and my girlfriend lives in Boston. Yet I jump across the pond at least once a week to see Villy.”

“I *will* make you stop calling me that,” Vil growled.

“So, you may have a long-distance relationship, but ours is *international*.”

“Once a week? How do you afford it?”

He laughed. “I’m a *Brighton*, Allison. My old male is all but drooling over the idea of the Brightons and the Vulpans marrying, so he ferries me

over on his private jet just to make sure I have plenty of opportunities to woo Villy into marriage.”

“You’re awfully brave to say that out loud,” Allison smiled.

“Nothing but the truth, Miss Allison,” he said with an outrageous smile. “But I’m rather taken with Vil despite my old male pushing me at her. I know it, she knows it, but it seems that we actually *like* each other.”

“There!” Vil said. “See that, Ken? You *can* call me by my proper name when you want to!”

“But I like calling you Villy,” he grinned. “I like seeing your hackles up. They’re such *cute* hackles.”

“They’re usually the last thing a fur sees before I have them gutted,” she warned, which made Allison giggle.

“Then I’ll just have to be careful,” he winked.

“I don’t think annoying your girlfriend is going to make her amenable to your marriage proposal there, Ken,” Jessie smiled at him.

“If a male wants a femme like Vilenne Vulpan, he can’t play by the rules,” he said immediately and with utter honesty. “If I knuckle under to her, she won’t respect me. If I walk on eggshells around her, she’ll think I’m being fake. If I try to assert authority, she’ll bristle, because she’s used to being in charge. So, all I can do is approach her as an equal, and equals aren’t afraid to tease each other,” he said, blowing a kiss at Vil. “So, how did you meet Terry, Allison?” he asked curiously.

Terry and Allison took turns describing how they met, and how Terry had pursued Allison despite her misgivings, which she made vague, hinting

that it was the distance between them that put her off. “But he wore me down,” she said with a smile, touching Terry’s arm.

“It was worth the effort,” Terry returned, patting her knee.

“If it wouldn’t earn me the eternal hatred of two femmes in this limo, I’d say that you’re very, very beautiful, Allison,” Kendall told her, which earned him a hot glare from Vil.

“Watch it, male, I can have you replaced from my stable of suitors,” Vil warned, which made Kit laugh.

“But if they were anywhere near half as interesting and intellectually stimulating as me, I’d have been replaced already,” he said flippantly.

“He has such a high opinion of himself,” Jessie mused to Vil with a slight smile. “You need to do something about that.”

“Oh, there’s a reckoning coming, believe you me,” she warned. “I’ll knock that British superiority right out of him.”

“But I won’t let you until *after* we’re married,” he winked. “Until then, I’m a lump of clay your fingers are twitching to mold, but aren’t allowed to touch. Part of my irresistible charm, you know,” he said with a nod to Terry, which made just about everyone, even Vil, laugh.

Kendall amused them for the rest of the ride, at least until they turned onto Stonebrook Road. Kit fell silent and watched as they went through the huge gates of Stonebrook Manor, feeling that familiar sensation of fear and anger rise up in him as they went down a driveway road he knew so well. It had been late winter last time he was here, but now it was the middle of summer, and the gardens and lawns were bursting with vibrant color, the centerpiece being the Vulpan crest laid out in flowers in front of the grand

entry, where the front drive circled around the grand front entrance, which was rarely if ever used. The limo went around to the garage, and instead of pulling into the drive-through garage, she instead had them stop in the large paved courtyard beside it. “Alright, let’s sort all this out!” she shouted as a horde of servants hurried out. “Bring up a cart for each guest house, Stanley, and load luggage accordingly,” she ordered the chief butler, who was Clancy’s son, a tall, thin, stately-looking fox that was about 45. Stanley’s son, Bartholomew, was attending him, the next generation to serve at Stonebrook. “Rick and Martha in the pool house, Lupe in the boat cottage, Allison in the garden cottage, Danielle in the autumn cottage, and Kevin and Sam in the gazebo house.”

“What of you, Master Kit? Are you staying with us tonight?” Stanley asked hopefully.

“Afraid not, Stanley,” he said, shaking his head. “I’ll be staying in Chelmsford tonight, with Vil.”

“Ah. Well, we keep your room ready for you, Master Kit, for whenever you do finally decide to come home.”

“Each guest house has a phone,” Vil called as they started milling around. “You have to dial nine to get an outside line, and if you dial zero, you get the main house. The staff will bring what you need out to the guest houses, so if you need towels or you want something to eat, just ring the house. We have two pools on the grounds, an outdoor pool and an indoor pool. The indoor pool is part of a gym, feel free to use it. We also have a tennis court and basketball court outside, and a racquetball court in the gym. The golf carts are yours to use while you’re here, but if you wreck it, you buy it,” she warned. “So no drag racing or hot rodding on Stonebrook carts! If you get lost, remember this: uphill always leads back to the main house!

The grounds are fenced, so you can't possibly end up off the grounds unless you climb the wall or go through a gate. Servants will lead you to your guest houses. Go settle in and rest a while, and be back here at the main house in two hours! Two hours, then we go have dinner and sightsee Boston before the concert!"

Stanley pulled out his cell phone, which had a push to talk feature, and he used that to summon more servants and also to have the garage bring around more carts. Kit left them to their preparations to enter the garage, and, with Jessie holding his paw, they traced the familiar path leading to Clancy's door.

Clancy allowed them in after the first knock, and they found him sitting at his chair, sipping a cup of tea. He had a quilt tucked in around his legs, and he looked *much* better than he had in March when they came to see him. His fur was glossier and thicker, and his eyes had lost that listless quality, though he was still quite thin. "Ah, Kit, Jessica," he said with a bright smile, and they hugged him in his chair. "I'm so glad to see you, my boy. How was your flight up?"

"Kit *flew* us, Clancy!" Jessie said, giving him a bright smile as they sat down on the sofa facing Clancy's chair. "Vil rented a jet for us, and Kit flew it!"

"She told me she would. Did you enjoy it, my boy?"

"I loved it," he laughed. "I finally got to use all that training Vil paid for."

"It's a sad state when a Vulpan has to *rent* something," he sighed, which made Kit laugh. "Now, I see that Miss Jessica is starting to look quite radiant. Have you any new pictures of the baby for me?"

“Not yet, I’m not scheduled for another ultrasound for two weeks,” Jessie laughed. “But we would like you to come down and see Laura when she’s born, if you feel up to it.”

“I’m feeling quite chipper nowadays, my dear,” he smiled. “It took me quite a while to recover from that flu, but I *have* recovered. Instead of catching up in this room, I’d prefer a walk through the garden. You truly must see our garden when it’s in bloom, Jessica.”

That was what they did. Clancy walked with his cane as they strolled through the large and well-maintained garden on the far side of the house. The garden was one of the physical reminders of his mother, Beth Vulpan, who had a love of flowers and had expanded the size of the garden and had also built a small greenhouse where she could grow flowers year round. Clancy could name every single flower, and gave Jessie quite the lesson in botany and gardening. “I used to tend these very flowers beside your mother, Kit,” he mused. “She introduced me to gardening as a hobby, which I pursued with enthusiasm until arthritis made it too hard to kneel down.”

“We named our baby after her,” Jessie said. “Laura Beth Vulpan.”

“It would have been more proper to name her Elizabeth, since that was her name, but she did prefer to be called Beth,” Clancy chuckled. “And she would be quite pleased to know that you thought so much of her, Jessica, even though you never knew her.”

“I’ve heard Kit talk about her enough to feel like I could have been her friend,” she said.

Clancy chuckled. “Ah, if only it were so, my dear, but no, she would not have befriended you quite so easily, my dear.” He picked a small violet flower from a bush. “Elizabeth was a wonderful femme, Jessica. She was

kind, caring, loving, and strong. But, like so many in her social class, she was not the perfection that Kit recalls. She would not have approved of your marriage, my dear,” he said honestly. “She was a purist.” He saw Kit’s sudden frown, but brushed him aside. “I know it can sometimes be hard to hear the truth about someone whom we loved more than life itself, someone whom we only have memories. Time apart after they pass tends to make the blemishes fade, and leave nothing but that picture of perfection we build in our minds. But it is good for you to know the truth of Kit’s mother, my dear. I think that as a *femme*, she would have found you a delight and a wonderful, kind, caring young cat, much like herself. But in some things, Beth could be as blind as Lucas. She would have approved of you being Kit’s *friend*, but not his *wife*. Sometimes it’s best to remember the faults as well as the strengths, for that lets us love our friends and family who have passed on without putting them on a pedestal they would probably not entirely like to occupy.

“The truth, my boy, is that your mother would have forced you to marry within your class, as she and your father did, as all Vulpans do except for you. But that does not mean that we must love her less. I cannot come out into this garden without a thousand wonderful memories of Beth filling me so much I smile,” he mused, smelling the little purple flower, then giving it to Jessie. “But now, I’m sure she sees how truly happy you are, and she smiles down upon you from above. Beth was many things, but what defined her more than anything else was the fact that she was a *mother*. She would be happy for you so long as you are happy, even if she disapproves of the choices you made.”

“Why do I get the feeling I should be looking for a moral here?” Kit asked.

Clancy chuckled. “Just a little advice, from a grandfather to an expectant father. Your daughter will not be the perfection you think she will be, my boy. She will try your patience. You may even want to strangle her. But you will always love her, despite her attempts to drive you insane.”

“Oh, I’ll love her, Clancy, there’s no doubt about that. I couldn’t do anything but love something that’s a part of my Jessie.”

“Just remember that when you catch her drawing on the walls,” he said, which made Kit laugh.

They walked along and talked of less important things, hearing about Clancy’s newest hobby. Clancy was an amazingly well educated fox, endlessly curious, and as such his hobbies changed quite often. He had studied archaeology as a hobby, and genealogy, and was still an avid student of history...which was one reason why Kit had taken history as a major after the accident, since Clancy had taught him so much about it as a child. But his illness had brought about a need for sedentary activity, and he’d become quite curious about blogs and the dissemination of information on the internet. Clancy, being quite ready to embrace technology rather than be anachronistic like most furs his age, was already exploring the many blogs and teaching himself about blog culture and society. He had even started his own blog, about Massachusetts politics...and he certainly knew about everything there was to know about that, since he was a lifelong employee of the Vulpans.

Few 73 year olds could boast both a Mac desktop and a Macbook sitting on his desk.

As Jessie and Clancy walked, Kit stopped to look at one of his favorite features of the garden, a small bronze fountain of a vixen pouring a jug,

from which water flowed over rocks at her feet and into the fountain pool below. He wondered why Clancy decided to bring that up, to bring up his mother in that way. Maybe he was just being honest, and didn't want Kit to forget the *reality* rather than his *memory* of his mother. But he'd only been nine when she died, and such things would have never really mattered to him. His mother had never really talked to him about when he'd get married, what he remembered of her were things like her sitting on the edge of his bed, reading him stories, her holding his paw as they walked, her gentle voice, sitting in her lap and smelling the perfume from the soap she used in her fur, and her glorious smile....

He blinked. Clancy was right. All he had of his mother was a construction, an image of the perfect mother. But she was from an aristocratic New York family, the Stocktons, who had made their money in the newspaper business. She had been born into the ranks of the idle rich, and her marriage to his father had been arranged at first. But his mother and father had come to love each other deeply, to where the fact that they had been matched had vanished in the mists. His mother had never hired a nanny like many other Vulpans did, too busy for their own children, she had been devoted to Vil and Kit. He guessed that was why it was so devastating when she died, because it had been so sudden. He still remembered her funeral, almost unbelieving that she was dead, thinking she would open her eyes and sit up and laugh at any moment, at least until they lowered the casket into the grave. That was when he knew, and he remembered that his father and Uncle Jake had to grab hold of him, then Clancy had to all but drag him away to keep him from trying to stop them from putting his mommy in the ground.

That was so long ago. A lifetime ago. That had been the beginning, where it all began. His marriage to Jessie and everything that led up to it could be traced back to that one moment, for that was the moment that the father he had always known had also died, and left him an orphan in his soul.

A paw on his shoulder made him blink, and he saw Jessie, looking at him in concern. She always seemed to know what he was feeling, for she gave him a gentle, compassionate hug. He buried his muzzle in her hair, held her close, felt her belly press up against him, reminding him of the new life growing inside her, and he felt her paws slide down and under his shirt, then come to rest on the scars on his lower back, the place to which they always seemed to be attracted. Just her presence seemed to banish the dark memories and remind him of the good that had come into his life after all that struggling...and he would gladly struggle through it again, even longer, if Jessie would be the reward waiting for him at the end of the gauntlet. "Are you alright, my handsome fox?" she asked quietly.

"Just too many bad memories," he replied. "But you always chase them away."

"For the rest of my life," she whispered. "I'll always be your guardian angel."

"I love you, Jessica Desdemona Vulpan."

"And I love you, Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan." She kissed him on the muzzle. "Now let's go, Clancy wants to walk us to the reflecting pool."

They spent the entire two hours with Clancy and then walked him back to his apartment, but when they tried to urge him to come with them, to spend the evening with them, he declined. "I'm much more content to stay

here, my boy,” he told them calmly. “I’m just a bit too old to roam all over Boston and then go to the concert. So go on and enjoy your evening.”

“I wish you’d change your mind,” Kit said, giving Clancy a warm hug.

“I’m quite sure, my boy. Now go enjoy your evening, and I will see you tomorrow. Vil has agreed to ferry me to Cincinnati so I can attend the party.”

“She’d better have, I asked for you to be there,” Jessie told him, kissing him on the cheek.

He almost seemed embarrassed, patting her on the forearm. “Get on your way, before I start trying to steal you from young Kit,” he said, which made both Kit and Jessie laugh.

They hurried back down the familiar halls, heading for the garage, when he turned a corner and found himself almost face to face with his uncle Zach. Kit almost had his heart freeze in his chest when Zach and his wife, an effete bitch named Alicia, were moving through the hall that led from the garage. Kit almost instinctively put an arm out to stop Jessie, then backed both of them up, giving Zach a cold stare. He didn’t say a word, but he did get out of Zach’s way. Zach kept eye contact with him the entire time, and a muscle under his white ruff on his muzzle twitched, betraying his almost overwhelming desire to say something.

It turned out, though, that Alicia was not quite as reserved as Zach. “You have some nerve bringing *her* into Stonebrook,” she said snobbily, pointing at Jessie. “I’m sure your father is rolling in his grave! Or is that why you did it, just to spit on the memory of your father?”

“Alicia,” Zach said warningly, but Jessie had drawn herself up in righteous indignation, and Kit saw there was no stopping her now.

“What right do I have? What right do *you* have!” Jessie snapped hotly. “This isn’t even your house! You just live here to make life miserable for Vil!”

“We are the *real* heads of the family!” Alicia shouted. “Lucas should have *never* put his daughter in the chair, but no, he couldn’t let go of his pride as the family head, even for what’s best for the family!”

“So, you’re feeling betrayed and use that as an excuse for being childish, no wonder!” Jessie shouted back.

“Childish? This family has gone to the *cats* since Vil took control!” she said shrilly. “A Vulpan marrying outside the species, Sheila leaving Harvard to be some, some *line cook*, Terry dating some commoner Texas tramp, and Vil sitting back and letting it happen! It’s a *scandal*! And it’s all your fault, Luke! You’re destroying the Vulpan name!”

“DO NOT CALL ME BY HIS NAME!” Kit thundered, which made Alicia start and retreat back behind her husband. “He is no part of me! You ask if I’m spitting on his grave? I am, every day, every day until I die! I *hated* that bastard for what he did to me!”

“He obviously didn’t do enough! It’s too bad that car didn’t kill you, *Lucas Vulpan*!” she snapped. “Because you’re an utter failure as a Vulpan! We should never have allowed you back into the family! It’s just a damn shame Cybil’s assassin was incompetent!”

Kit only just *barely* managed to grab hold of Jessie, and that was a damn good thing, else Alicia would have lost some pieces of her face.

Jessie's claws were unsheathed and she snarled at Alicia, showing off her impressive little fangs. She struggled against Kit as she tried to claw out Alicia's eyes, and Zach wisely backed his wife away from her, getting between them. "You arrogant *bitch*!" Jessie spat at her. "Wishing for someone to die just to save your reputation? You're even *worse* than Cybil!"

"Jessie! Jessie, stop!" Kit said, trying to avoid grabbing her around her stomach. "Just leave it be!"

Jessie growled, laying her ears back, but then she blew out her breath in a short snort and stopped fighting him, letting him pull her back so he was between her and Alicia.

"I won't leave it be!" Alicia spat in reply. "Leeching off the family, pretending to want nothing to do with our money but stealing it from us whenever you can! You certainly didn't waste any time forcing your *sister* to give you Vulpan stocks, so you can leech from your father's hard work! What else have you taken from our family, hypocrite? Or are you simply content to leech from Vilenne?"

"Alicia!" Zach barked.

"But—"

"No, Alicia! Just leave it alone!"

"You'd better listen to him, *Aunt* Alicia. Haven't you read the agreement between me and your husband? If I return to Stonebrook and take up residence, you and your family have to leave, and you *cannot* come back. If you don't, then you violate the contract, and you surrender *everything* you gained from my father's death. That means basically

everything. What Zach is warning you about is I have *power* over you. Just remember that this is *mine and Vil's* house, we *allow* you to live here, and I can evict you like any other landlord! So keep talking, *bitch*," Kit growled, glaring at her. "Just give me a reason to move back home. I *dare* you."

She looked like she'd bitten off her tongue, she made such a hot and angry face.

"So remember that the next time you want to insult my wife or wish I were dead," he said with a cold glare. "Because I'll move back into Stonebrook and force you out if for no other reason than to spite you. I'm still Vulpan enough to devote my life to ruining yours, Alicia, the same way Vil is crushing Cybil as we speak. The children of Beth and Luke Vulpan share the same ruthlessness when you piss us off. *Remember that.*"

"You don't scare me, Luke," Alicia spat. "You're too much of a coward to return to Boston."

"You go too far, Alicia," Zach said in a commanding voice. "You can accuse Kit of many things, but not cowardice. Now go," he ordered, pointing down the hall. Alicia gave them a cold stare, then turned and marched down the hall, towards the east wing, her tail straight behind her and her nose in the air. "I'm...sorry about that," Zach said reluctantly. "Alicia should not have said those things."

"Don't apologize for her saying what you believe," Kit told him coldly. "Just make sure we *never* cross paths again. If I come to Stonebrook to see Clancy, just stay the hell away from me. Because if you don't, if I ever see yours or Alicia's face in Stonebrook again, I *will* move back and force you out, just because you violated your word when you said that we would never have to deal with each other again."

Zach gave him an imperious look, and looked on the verge of saying something. He finally nodded, reluctantly, and hurried after his wife.

“What a stuck-up *bitch*,” Jessie growled, which made Kit put his paw on her shoulder.

“Just let it go, love,” Kit told her.

“I’m not sure I want to,” she said vindictively. “She said she wishes you were dead!”

“That’s the sentiment of most of my family, Jessie. Don’t let Sheila, Terry, and Muffy fool you. You’ll notice that none of my *other* cousins will have anything to do with me.”

“That’s not the point!” she declared. “I don’t care how much you don’t like someone, you just don’t say something like that!”

“I ignore them, love,” he said as they started for the garage. “They’re just hateful because I’m happy and they’re not.”

She was silent a moment. “Promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“That you carry out your threat,” she said in a strong voice. “If your uncle Zach or that horrible femme he married ever give us another unkind word, we force them out.”

“That’s a promise,” he said immediately.

They met Vil and about half the others out on the paved courtyard, where Lupe was driving his little golf cart in circles around Danielle and Allison. Rick and Martha, who had the closest guest house, had walked up, and Kevin and Sam were visible driving up along one of the paved paths

leading away from the house. “Brah, this place is *incredible!*” Lupe said to him with a huge grin. “The house they put me in by the boat dock has *three* bedrooms in it!”

“I think the smallest of the guest houses is the autumn cottage,” Kit told him as Lupe stopped the cart. “It’s a four room cottage, perfect for a single fur staying a few days.”

“Why are there so many guest houses on this estate, Kit?” Allison asked.

“Because the Vulpans are a very large family, and our father didn’t really like guests in the main house to stay longer than overnight,” Vil answered for him. “So he had a series of guest houses built on the estate grounds to accommodate family or other visitors, spread out so each house feels like it’s alone, to give a sense of space. There are eight of them out there. The three we’re not using are the river cottage, the gate house, and the brook cottage.”

“That house I’m in is bigger than my house in Austin,” Allison chuckled.

They again divided up into limos for their trip into Boston, and Kit and Jessie found themselves again with Vil and Kendall, but now with Rick and Martha. Kit and Jessie related their brush with Zach and his wife outside the garage, which made Vil scowl darkly when Jessie told her what Alicia had said. “I think I might want to step on that bitch a little bit,” she growled.

“I already made Kit promise that the next time they insult us, we’re moving to Boston,” Jessie declared. “We have to introduce Laura to the family, after all,” she said with a slight smile.

Vil laughed. "I'll make a Vulpan out of you yet, Jessie," she told her.

"God, I hope not," Kit sighed.

They spent most of the afternoon leading up to the concert showing the Texans the city of Boston. Vil had lived in Boston all her life, and she had a surprising knowledge of the city that someone that rode in a limo all the time. She started at the back bay, and worked her way inland, starting at Copley Square and the huge public library. They visited the museum for the Boston Tea Party, then saw Ben Franklin's birthplace, then visited the church garden, then moved on to the Cathedral of the Holy Cross. They went to the state capitol, and Vil used her clout to get them inside to tour the state houses, then they went down to the Governor's mansion and got a tour while the Governor was at the harbor, preparing for the concert. She took them to Fenway Park, to Louisburg Square, and then they went to the U.S.S. Constitution. She pointed to one of the Vulpan Shipyard facilities, just down the coast, a smaller facility that served mainly as a repair facility for destroyers and minesweepers. When Lupe professed an interest, she took them there, scaring the life out of the security guards that were keeping watch over the facility that was closed for the holiday. Vil gave them a tour of the repair facility, with its three drydocks, two of which were occupied by the destroyers *U.S.S. Ingraham* and *U.S.S. Taylor*. "They're in for repainting and inspection," she explained. "We built that one, but San Pedro built that one," she added, pointing at the *Ingraham*.

"You mean Vulpan Shipyards doesn't build *all* the Navy ships?" Lupe laughed.

"About two thirds of them, we do," she said with pride. "And now that I've bought out Avondale, it's closer to three quarters."

“Don’t they get on you for anti-trust?” Lupe asked.

“Anti-trust laws don’t apply to awarded contracts,” Kevin answered. “Because it’s a competition. If Vulpan Shipyards can beat all other competitors for the contract, then they get it.”

“Right. As long as we can build ships better and cheaper than our competitors, we will win the contracts. Most of the contracts we don’t get are for ones like that ship over there, where the Navy wants a certain number built by a certain date. We can only build so many at a time because we have all those other contracts, so other shipbuilders get those contracts. But I’ll bet you a million dollars that that ship there will be decommissioned *long* before *our* ship,” she proclaimed. “Vulpan-built ships are better than anyone else’s, because we know what we’re doing, and we don’t settle for anything less than perfection. I wouldn’t let that ship out of our shipyard unless it meets *our* quality standards, which are much higher than the Navy’s. Add that to our established cost-efficient system and Vulpan Steel, which cuts the cost of materials compared to our competitors, and that adds up to letting us build the ships cheaper than our competitors too. That’s why we consistently beat out all our competition for new contracts. Other companies just can’t build them as well as we can, or as cheaply as we can, and the Navy knows it. We have an unparalleled track record.”

“She’s so modest,” Lupe teased.

“I’m never modest about our family business, Lupe,” she answered with a smile. “Because I’m proud of it, and I’m proud to run it. You just ask any Navy officer which company he wants to build the ship *he’s* sailing into battle. I’ll guarantee you, they’ll want to be in a Vulpan ship every time.”

After the tour of the drydock facility, they went to the harbor. Vil had gotten them a private box for the concert, in an area populated by the rich and elite of Massachusetts; the Vulpans, the Reeves, the Vances, the Kennedys from Cape Cod, the O'Malleys from Worcester, the Jenkins of which Suzy was part, the Bristols, and the Astors, the last segment of that famous old family. Kit didn't recognize anyone in their stand except for a couple of his cousins, Victor and Bridgette Bristol Vulpan, with her husband Paul Bristol, eight year old son Tyler and her six year old daughter Theresa. Sheila's uncle Gordon Vance was also there that Kit could recognize. Bridgette and Victor, Kit noticed, kept their distance from them. They settled in as the audio system piped random music in for the audience, Kit sitting with Jessie on one side and Vil on the other, doing his best to ignore the occasional camera flash in their direction, as reporters and photographers took pictures of the VIPs that had come to the concert.

"Man, I feel like I'm courtside at a Spurs game," Lupe said, looking around.

"This will be better than basketball, Lupe," Vil chuckled. "Now sit."

It was *much* better than basketball. The concert lasted nearly 90 minutes, and as per tradition, the final piece of the night, Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, was choreographed with fireworks. The concert was the high point of the year for the Boston Pops, and they worked very hard to always make it the best part of all the festivities that took place on Independence Day. Lupe and Danielle seemed absolutely spellbound by the fireworks, and Jessie was elbowing him and pointing with every new explosion as he tried to watch the musicians. But the performance was definitely worth flying all the way up to Boston and braving the demons of his past to see it, because it made Jessie very happy, it made his friends

happy, and it made Vil happy that he'd come back to Boston. He could face those bad memories if it gave those he cared about good ones.

After the finale, there was a brief silence, then a thunderous round of applause that lasted nearly five minutes. "Now *that's* how you have a concert," Vil chuckled as she stood up. "Let's get back to the limos before the traffic gets too heavy."

The limos were all parked nearby, more than just theirs, waiting for the VIPs to arrive. Vil got them all into the limos quickly, and they were on their way. Kit and Jessie were again with Vil, Kendall, Rick, and Martha. "My, that was definitely worth the flight up," Martha mused. "What time are we leaving tomorrow?"

"I'd like to be in the air by ten," Kit answered. "Terry and Ally have tickets to a Broadway show, and I'd like to give everyone some time before we head to the hotels. We *do* have all the reservations set?"

"Silly questions," Vil chuckled. "Yes, I have everything set up. You and Jessie are staying at her parents' house, and everyone else is in the Cincinattian. I'll be heading back tonight, and Terry has chartered a private jet to fly him and Allison from Cincinnati to New York. They should get there just in time to get to their show."

They returned to Stonebrook, and Kit could only be thankful that it was dark, for it gave him this strange feeling that he was invisible to the house, to the ghosts inside that haunted him. The limos all pulled around back, and Kit waited in the limo as Vil got out to help everyone get back to their guest houses. Jessie stayed with him, holding his paw and patting it lightly. She was such a godsend, always seeming to know when he was upset and there to chase the bad memories away. "I was hoping that bitch

would come out and yell at you some more,” she noted absently as she looked around outside, at their friends getting into golf carts. “So we could do something about her. I’d *love* to see the police pushing her out the front gates with her trying to carry her thirty suitcases full of clothes.”

Kit laughed helplessly.

Vil and Kendall rode with them in the limo as they went to Vil’s house in Chelmsford. Chelmsford was a suburb of Boston, and it was nearly a forty minute drive to reach it from Stonebrook. Boston’s suburbs were massive; the 495 outer loop around Boston was somewhere around 80 miles, and the loop was nearly 20 miles from the city. It was on 495 that they traveled once they got away from the city, avoiding I-90 both because it was a toll road and because it was always crowded. The limo driver knew every back road and street in Boston, and he guided them through a maze of secondary roads that actually got them to 495 faster than if they’d taken the interstate. After they got on the outer loop, it was a 20 minute drive to the Chelmsford exit, and another ten minutes to reach Vil’s house. It was a new house, built back away from a winding road so the trees hid it from view, with a stout iron gate manned by a lone security guard. The guard opened the gate as they approached and waved them in, and her house came into view as they cleared the blocking trees. Vil’s house was not a “house,” it was a mansion. Much smaller than Stonebrook, but still a mansion, with three stories and two small wings off the main house. Kit had never been to this house, for she had had it built especially for her about two years ago, finalizing the plans just before leaving for England and coming home to find it built and waiting for her. It was a “new old” style, looking like it was a hundred years old but was made with all the modern conveniences and with a very modern floorplan. It had no grand entrance hall like most

mansions did, no wings, no ballrooms. She didn't really need them, for that was what Stonebrook was for. Her house, which she called Hart's Crossing because of the many deer that roamed in the area, was truly a house, designed for her to live inside. They entered through a door in the back, where her enclosed and attached garage was located, with a huge hangar-like garage opposite the house, which Kit knew held the classic and antique car collection that their father had left to her.

The garage was large enough for three limousines to sit side by side, a similar two-door circle design as Stonebrook where a limo or car entered through one door and left the other. A single servant met them in the garage, a tall, thin raccoon with black hair who opened the door for them as they got out. "Evening, Will," Vil greeted as she got out of the car first, and Stav and Marcus got out from the front.

"Evening, madam. Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes. Was the concert as good as it looked on television?"

"Oh yes, it was quite good," she nodded. "Will, this is my brother Kit, and his wife Jessie," she introduced. "Guys, this is Will Marks, my butler and head of staff here at Hart's Crossing."

"Hi, it's nice to meet you," Jessie said, offering her paw to him.

"A pleasure, madam. Madam Vil speaks very highly of you both," he said with shake of Jessie's paw. "We have your room ready for you, and your room as well, Master Kendall," he said to Kendall as he got out of the limo.

"I do hope she didn't put me in that closet."

“No, sir, she put you in the attic this time,” Will told him in a deadpan voice that made Jessie giggle uncontrollably.

“This time?”

“He fell asleep on the couch last time he came here, I had them put him in a guest room,” Vil shrugged as she swept past the raccoon. “Let me show you my house.”

Vil’s house inside was a reflection of the woman, for she had designed it and decorated it. The layout of the house was very practical, dominated not by large, grand-looking rooms filled with ornate or extravagant furniture, but by medium-sized rooms that each served specific functions. Some rooms were clearly for show, filled with works of art laid out for display, or pristine rooms filled with antique furniture that was for formal occasions, but those rooms were divided off into the north side of the house. The south side of the house was filled with rooms clearly meant for living, a spacious living room decorated in rich golds and browns, a large kitchen that was staffed by two cooks but looked more like the kitchen out of a large middle-class house, an exercise room, a billiards room, a home gym, a conservatory where Vil could practice playing the violin, which she learned while in England, and was still learning. She had a room for each of her hobbies, for she was an avid billiards player, she liked to run and worked out religiously to keep her slim figure, she was learning to play the violin, and enjoyed swimming, which was why there was a full-size indoor pool beside the garage, enclosed in glass. The room where she spent the most time, however, was her personal office, which looked like something out of a stock broker’s dream. She had a large desk with five computer monitors arrayed around it, two on the desk and three mounted on the wall behind it, and her office was complete with a couch, TV, and her game consoles, her

Wii and X-Box 360. Vil played video games to relieve stress, and she enjoyed computer simulation games like *Civilization* and *SimCity*, games that allowed her to use her ability to organize and manage resources to produce results. She used to play tactical war simulation games like *Warcraft*, but she mastered them too quickly for them to truly challenge her. Kit would guarantee that one of those monitors on her desk would have a game of *Civilization IV* running on it when she was home and using her office.

The small wings of the mansion were, again, part of Vil's way of thinking. The east wing was where her 12 servants lived, and the west wing was a "guest wing" that had everything it needed to be its own house, even its own entrance and kitchen. It was part of her need to separate herself from "outside," even considering her own servants to be outsiders. They cleaned her house, cooked her food, washed her clothes, kept her life ordered and running smoothly, but they lived in their own wing, separated from her and her sense of personal space. And the guest wing was a similar thing, allowing a guest in her house, but walling that guest off in a wing of the house, creating a line between her and her guest. It was the guest wing where Vil brought Kit and Jessie after the tour and showed them around. "You'll be staying here tonight," she told them. "I'll stick Ken in a guest room in the main house. A small one with no bed," she said, giving him a light smile.

"Two words for you, Villy. Holiday Inn."

"Any time you want to leave, duckling," she replied. "Now let's go eat, I'm starving."

God bless Vil, because she didn't try to wow them with fancy food. A hamburger awaited Kit at the dinner table, and she'd had salmon steaks

grilled for everyone else. Vil wasn't big on pomp and circumstance in private, which was another way she was different from most other Vulpans. Their dinner was intimate and relaxing, a good end to what had been both a trying, emotionally exhausting and a fun day. Vil seemed to sense that Kit was drained, so she sent him and Jessie off to bed. Kit took a long, relaxing shower, and Jessie jumped in right after him after he got out, sitting in a full body dryer next to it as she showered, and they talked about the day. "Just don't let your uncle and that horrible femme taint the day, my handsome fox," she said from the shower. "It was a good day outside of that."

"It was, but I don't think I'm looking forward to going back to Stonebrook in the morning," he answered. "I'll be glad to get out of Boston. I'll probably be rousting them all out of bed at the crack of dawn."

Jessie turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, dripping wet and looking like a drowned rat, but still beautiful to him. Her belly looked just a tiny bit bigger than it did a couple of days ago, not quite distended but obviously pregnant. But to him, she couldn't be any more beautiful. He stood up and left the dryer and took his towel in his paws, then started drying her off...maybe a little more slowly than he would himself, enjoying putting his paws on her. She glanced slyly up at him as he scrubbed the water from her back and shoulders, letting him dry her off, and letting him touch her. She giggled when he wrapped her up from behind and pressed her against his front, leaning her head against his neck and shoulder. "I'm getting you wet again," she pointed out.

"I can dry off," he answered, putting his paw on her expanding belly. "God, I love you, my pretty kitty," he breathed in her ear.

She reached up and behind her head, putting her paw on the side of his head, patting him gently. "And I love you, my handsome fox. What did you

get me for my birthday, hmm?”

He laughed. “Mean kitty, trying to trick it out of me in a tender moment. I should punish you the way you punish me!”

“You wouldn’t dare hit a girl, my handsome fox,” she giggled, then she squeaked in surprise when he swatted her on the rump, right beside her soaked tail.

“You were saying?” he asked.

She laughed and grabbed hold of his paw, and marched towards the dryer, pulling him along with her. “Let’s dry off, love,” she ordered. “So we can go to bed.”

“We do have to get up early tomorrow.”

“Who said we’re going to sleep?” she asked archly.

She laughed when he started pushing her towards the dryer.

Vil just never seemed to sleep.

When Kit came out of the guest wing at 6:00am and came down into her kitchen, she was sitting at the small kitchen bay table in the corner, a cup of tea in front of her along with a plate of scones and bagels, wearing a simple white tee shirt. Kendall was sitting across from her wrapped in a terrycloth robe, a cup of coffee in his paw, and he looked not entirely awake. A possum femme and a young cat male, wearing gray uniforms, were busy at the stove and counter, cooking breakfast. “Morning,” Kit sounded. “Where’s the tea?”

“Over there,” Vil said, pointing to a small warmer on a counter holding a teapot. “Brewed and waiting. Where’s Jessie?”

“Still asleep, but she’ll be up in a few,” he answered. “She doesn’t sleep long once I get up. I think she misses me,” he chuckled.

“Of course I miss you, silly,” she said from behind him, padding into the kitchen. “Thank you for the card, love, it was so sweet of you,” she announced, coming up and giving him a hug.

“Happy birthday, pretty kitty,” he told her.

“Thank you, my handsome fox. He left a card on his pillow. He’s so romantic,” she cooed, nuzzling him.

“Only for you, love. I think if I was romantic with Danielle or Allison, you’d stripe me.”

“You bet I would,” she said with a giggle, and she sat down at the table as he went to the tea kettle. “Pour me some tea please?”

“Of course, pretty kitty,” he nodded, picking up one of the overturned teacups by the kettle before one of the chefs could do it for him. Kit swatted her paws away when she reached for the kettle and poured the tea himself, which made her chuckle softly.

“What would you like for breakfast, Master Kit?” she asked.

“Fried eggs over medium, bacon, toast, enough for two, if you please,” he answered as he poured another cup of tea.

“Happy birthday, Jessie,” Vil said, taking a small card from the table by her and giving it to her.”

“Thanks Vil,” she said with a smile, taking the card and opening it.

“Happy birthday, Jessie. I’ll give you your card at your party. Don’t want to ruin the surprise,” he said with a grin.

“Thanks, Ken. All this attention, I’m feeling a little self-conscious here,” she laughed, then she read the pink card with a frilly rose on the front. “Aww, you’re so sweet, Vil!” she gushed. He brought the two cups of tea over to the table and set Jessie’s in front of her. She gave him an appreciative smile and took a sip, still holding the card in her other paw.

“Mmm,” she hummed. “This is good!”

“We don’t drink mass produced tea in this house. Jing Sari, straight from India,” she told them.

“You’re too malely for me, Jessie,” Kendall quipped. “No milk, no sugar?”

“He started me on this, and he drinks it straight,” she said, pointing at Kit when he sat beside her. “I really like this tea, handsome fox.”

“It’s a little out of our price range, love,” Kit chuckled. “It’s about two hundred dollars a box. It comes out to about ten dollars a pot of tea.”

“And worth every penny,” Vil stated. “I’ll send a few boxes home with you for your birthday, Jessie.”

“Aww, thanks, Vil,” Jessie smiled.

Vil’s cooks were good. There wasn’t much to making fried eggs and bacon, but they got the eggs perfect, and even asked how crisp each fur at the table wanted their bacon. They even had the choice of white, wheat, rye, or black bread toast. Kendall seemed to wake up and get back to his usual chipper self after finishing his cup of tea, and was bantering lightly with Vil

as Jessie finished her toast. “So, how are we all getting to Cincinnati?” he asked.

“Half with Kit, half with me,” Vil answered. “Kit has a bunch of luggage to tote in his plane, so I’ll probably fill every seat in my plane and let him carry the rest.”

“I wonder what it’s like to fly it yourself rather than hire a pilot,” Kendall mused.

“Just watch your pilot next time you fly home, you’ll get an idea of what it takes,” Kit told him. “I enjoy it, so for me it’s not work.”

“And he got me into it,” Jessie laughed. “And Sheila, and our friend Ally.”

“Yes, Villy told me, flew your plane home yourself,” Kendall smiled. “How did you survive the stress?” he asked Kit curiously, which earned him a smack from Vil.

“I played games,” Kit chuckled. “I trust my pretty kitty behind the controls with my very life, Ken. She’s a *good* pilot.”

“Can you fly jets, Jessie?”

“Not yet, but that’s next,” she answered. “I have all the ratings I need to be rated to fly a jet. After Laura’s born, when Kit goes back to get his ATP, I could try to get a rating.”

“You need your commercial first,” Kit reminded her. “That’s more important than a jet rating.”

“I think I need this explained to me,” he chuckled.

They did just that over breakfast and continuing after they were dressed and ready to go. Vil called Stonebrook and told the staff to wake up the guests and get them ready to go as Kit and Jessie finished the explanation. “Ah, I see,” he finally said as they pulled out onto 495. “So, you could fly a jet without this commercial license, but without it, you’re limited as to what you can *do* with a jet.”

“More or less,” Kit nodded. “A jet rating without a commercial is what a rich private pilot would have, someone who has something like an Eclipse or a Mustang, a VLJ, a *personal* jet. But pretty kitty would be much better off with her commercial. That way, in case something truly drastic happened, she’d always be able to find work as a commercial pilot. I want her to get her flight instructor’s rating too, all of them,” he said, smiling at her. “She can *always* find work as an instructor.”

“Well, I don’t know if I need that,” Jessie giggled.

“Sure you do, you can legally teach Sheila and Ally.”

“Oh. Ohhh, I could!” she said with a sudden enthusiastic nod. “And keep them from bugging you!” she laughed.

“That did cross my mind,” he smiled lightly.

Thankfully for Kit, the visit to Stonebrook was brief. He tensed up the second they passed through the front gates, and Jessie kept hold of his paw to keep him at least partially relaxed. He did not, however, get out of the limo. Vil and Kendall did, however, meeting his friends and watching as the Stonebrook staff loaded luggage and gifts into the limos. Allison, Rick, and Martha got into the limo with them, and all three of them looked a little sleepy.

“Sorry to drag you out of bed,” Kit chuckled. “Sleep well?”

“Too well,” Allison complained, rubbing her eyes and then yawning widely, showing off her vulpine teeth. Like Kit, she had impressive canine fangs and the next couple rows of teeth behind them were sharply ridged, made to pierce and cut meat apart like scissors, but the rest of her teeth were omnivoric teeth, not truly carnivore. Her front teeth and back molars were perfect for eating plants and grains. “I think I’m going to nap on the plane.”

“There’ll be time, it’ll be about two hours to Cincinnati. I guess I could nap too and let Jessie fly us,” Kit teased.

“No you won’t, buster,” Jessie replied with a light jab in the ribs.

“Oh, happy birthday Jessie,” Rick told her. “Did you get any presents yet?”

“Thanks, Rick,” she smiled. “And I already have the best present ever right here,” she added, patting her expanding belly with a gentle paw.

Logan was packed, but then again, it usually was. Vil acted like a general when they got there, ordering everyone around as his friends and family milled around and workers collected up their luggage. And they weren’t the only ones here. Another limo pulled up, and Sheila, Terry, and Muffy piled out of it. Muffy screamed “birthday girl!” and ran up to embrace Jessie as Kit watched a curiously chaste greeting between Terry and Allison. He almost put his paws on her shoulders but then caught himself, looking Vil’s way, and she stood there and just looked up at him, her paws folded before herself demurely. So, they started walking together, side by side, Terry with his paws behind his back and Allison with her paws before her.

Since Vil's jet was also going to Cincinnati, and it was much bigger than the rented jet, Kit only ended up with five passengers; Allison, Terry, Danielle, Sheila, and Lupe. Rick, Martha, Sam, and Kevin went along with Vil on her jet, along with Muffy. Kit had everyone settle in as the workers finished loading the luggage and while he did the preflight inspection, then he used the cheat chart to figure out his maximum fuel load as Jessie locked the hatch. "It's about two hours to Cincinnati guys, so take a nap, or grab breakfast from the galley," Jessie told them. "Vil had them put in some donuts, coffee, and tea."

"I need some coffee," Danielle yawned. "It's not even seven!"

"Get it quick, we'll be taking off soon," Kit told her, then he radioed in his fuel request, and read the note left on his yoke about which airport to use and which FBO to call when he got to Cincinnati. Vil had even had his flight plan filed for him...always thorough, that sister of his.

They were in the air about thirty minutes later, a good fifteen minutes ahead of Vil, and after he got them level, he went back and got a second cup of tea from the galley. "Jess love, can you call and warn your folks we're on our way please?" he asked as he took a sip of the tea.

"Sure thing," she answered.

The plane handled like a dream for the flight to Cincinnati, and he touched them down around 9:45 at the city's main airport, where Vil wanted him to land. He should have figured that Vil would have organized things, for it wasn't John and Hannah that met them at the airport, it was a quartet of limos. Workers rushed out as soon as he shut down the engines, chocking the wheels and opening the cargo door. Terry opened the hatch after Jessie explained how to do it, and Kit did postflight as the workers unloaded the

plane. Vil's jet landed about ten minutes after them, catching up to them in the air, and it taxied up and parked beside the CJ3. The others filed out of her Bombardier as workers unloaded several boxes from the plane, boxes that were rather suspicious in nature.

"Alright, troops, let's get moving!" Vil barked. "Terry and Ally have to be in New York in seven hours, we don't have all day!"

Under Vil's militaristic commands, they were on the move within twenty minutes, and at John and Hannah's within forty. They met them at the driveway, Jessie's entire immediate family, John shaking his paw as Hannah gave her daughter a warm embrace. "We have everything all ready," she promised as Kit shook Ben's paw and gave Jenny a warm hug.. "A birthday cookout, since this is too many to have in the house."

Jessie gasped. "Aunt Penny!" she squealed, and rushed towards the house as the plump cat came down the stairs.

"There's my little mother to be!" Penny called, wrapping the taller cat in a great hug. "Happy birthday, sweetie!"

"You came for my birthday?" she gasped.

"Sure did!" she laughed, kissing her on the cheek. "Me, Jim, and Grandma Pearl came up from Florida. Surprise!"

"This is better than a present!" she said excitedly as the plump cat pulled her into the house. Hannah had tried to get more of the Williams to come, but none could manage it given the short warning. Jim, Penny, and Pearl were the only ones who made it.

Much like Kit's birthday had been held out in the courtyard, Jessie's birthday party, which started immediately on their arrival, took place in the

backyard of the Williams house. It was a chance for Jim, Penny, and Pearl to get to know the Vulpan family, as Hannah put out a feast of home fried chicken, potato salad, corn on the cob, and vegetables. Kit could only smile as he watched Jessie, saw how *happy* she was to be surrounded by friends and family. Jessie was a very social femme, shy in public but very kind and gentle and loving in a more intimate setting. She was radiant, she bloomed like a sunflower basking in the glow of family, laughing and smiling, firmly the center of attention without ever seeming to understand it, even though it was her birthday. But it being her birthday wasn't why she was the center of attention. It was *her*. She was so sweet, so wonderful, everyone wanted to be around her.

And he had the absolute *gift* to be married to her. What did he do to deserve such a wonderful femme? Whatever it was, he hoped he kept on doing it. Jessie was his very life. Without her...what would life be? He hadn't lived before he met her, he'd just, just *existed*. She had shown him what life really was, she had pulled him out of the purgatory that had been his existence before he met her.

He was the luckiest male on earth.

After two hours of food, conversation, and fun, the cake was brought out. Everyone sang to her, which made her cheeks all but stand on end, and she laughed as she tried to blow out the candles because Jenny touched a feather to her nose just as she took in her breath. Hannah had actually baked two cakes so there was enough for everyone, angel food cake with coconut icing, one of Jessie's favorites.

After the cake, came the presents. Kit was actually dreading this a little bit, because there was no telling what his rich family was going to give her. They knew better than to do anything outrageous with him, but they also

knew that his one weakness was Jessie, and he would not deny her anything she wanted. Vil could truly go crazy by giving gifts to *Jessie* instead of him, and he wouldn't gainsay it. He wouldn't be entirely happy that Vil was trying to buy his wife, but if it made her happy, then that was that.

But it wasn't as bad as he feared it would be. Jessie's family bought her quite a few things for her, and Kit was glad that they didn't buy her baby things. Those could be given during the shower, and though Jessie would love gifts given for the baby, this was *her* day. Her family and friends gave her new clothes for both her maternity and for after she had the baby, a new Ipod, Sheila bought her several real and gag gifts, the most striking of which was a bomber jacket with a P-40 fighter on the back and a handsome, muscular male tiger stripped to the waist and wearing aviator's sunglasses with the caption *Flying Tigers*, Ben gave her one of his new Ohio State jerseys, an official player jersey right out of his locker, with his number 32 and name, Jenny bought her a book on advanced knitting and a couple of gag gifts and a book titled *101 Things To Do When You Can't See Your Feet* which earned her a smack from her sister, Terry bought her a new cookbook dealing with Cajun recipes and a large wrought iron antique spice rack filled with Cajun spices for her kitchen, which accounted for most of the volume of the boxes he'd seen unloaded from Vil's plane, Jim and Penny bought her a very handsome mantle clock, and her grandmother Pearl had bought her a little model plane of a Cessna 400 they could sit on a stand in their house. But then she picked up Vil's first present, a small glove-sized box, and opened it. Inside was what looked like a credit card, but Kit saw that it was actually a gift card, much like the ones she'd given the Williams family.

“Kit said you don’t have the furniture to fill your new apartment,” Vil told her. “That card has five thousand dollars on it for you to furnish your new place, because I know you’re a little tight with money right now. Just make sure you do a good job,” she smiled.

“Thank you, Vil!” she said happily, hugging the smaller vixen. “I know just what to get!”

Vil wasn’t done yet, and that *did* annoy Kit just a little bit. Her next gift was also a small box, and when she opened it, inside was a key...to a car. “A mother can’t drive around in a Corolla,” she winked. “I bought you a nice Ford Windstar van, just like your mother’s. That way you never have to worry about having enough room for your baby.”

Jessie gasped. “Vil, this is too much!”

“You won’t say that the first time you have to take the baby out and you don’t have Kit’s truck,” she said seriously. “Believe me, hon, a mother needs *lots* of room to carry what she needs for the baby. Where are you going to put your stroller and your bag holding extra diapers and bottles in that car of yours, Jessie?”

“Actually, she’s right,” Hannah chuckled in agreement. “You’d have a lot of trouble putting your baby things in that little car of yours, Jessica.”

“I dare you to tell me she doesn’t need it,” Vil said to him as she sat back down.

Kit sighed, then chuckled ruefully. “I guess I didn’t think of that,” he admitted. “Alright, she *needs* it.”

Kit did feel a bit of vindication that Jessie seemed as enthusiastic about his gifts as she was about the van. She was a bit surprised when she

unwrapped the shotgun first, looking at Kit and laughing. “Are you trying to tell me something, love?” she asked.

Kit grinned. “I’m telling you you’ll whip Sheila even worse in skeet shooting when you’re using your own shotgun,” he answered.

“Hey, I’ll just use it too!” Sheila warned.

“You will *not*, this is mine!” Jessie countered.

“Then see if I let you use my clubs again!”

“You always do best with your own weapon,” John said in agreement. “May I?” he asked. Jessie handed it to him, and he inspected it. “Very nice, Kit, you know your weapons!”

“I’m a researcher, John,” Kit laughed. “I knew nothing about shotguns until I wanted to buy one for Jessie. I spent nearly three days picking that shotgun for her.”

“Remington three thirty-two, twenty-eight inch barrel, and I see it comes with all the chokes she’ll need. This model is good because she can swap out the barrels if she wants to use a different gauge. Well researched, Kit,” John agreed. “Jessie dear, remember to buy a gun cabinet with that gift card. Make it a good one, with sturdy doors and a solid lock.”

“I will, Dad,” she nodded.

“You get a trigger lock for it, Kit?”

“Yessir, it’s in the box,” he answered.

“Good male. Never leave a weapon unsecured.”

“Oh, Sheila, about Jessie using her clubs,” Kit said, looking at her, going over to where the box holding the clubs was, then pulling the blanket off it. “She doesn’t have that problem anymore.”

“Golf clubs! Oh, thank you, handsome fox!” she said excitedly, rushing over and giving him a kiss. “And they’re Eagles, just like Sheila’s!” “And these were sized just for you, love,” Kit told her with a smile.

“Way to yank my leverage there, cousin,” Sheila laughed.

She unwrapped the photo frame next, and laughed brightly when she saw it. “Telegraphing something to me, love?” she asked with a darling smile.

“I knew you’d want one, so I beat you to it,” he countered.

She giggled. “I saw a nice one I was going to buy when we got home,” she admitted.

The next gift confused her a little bit, until she realized it was a picture and not a postcard. “Oh, did you buy this?” she asked quickly.

“I thought it was perfect to hang over the island,” he answered.

“Well, that’s one thing to cross off the list with the furniture card!” she said with a bright smile. “Yes, love, I did want a hanging rack, and it looks like it’ll be *perfect* for the kitchen!”

The diamond and emerald heart pendant, which was only \$300 from Zales, made her eyes go wide when she took it from the box. “Oh, it’s beautiful,” she said in a wondrous voice. “Put it on me!” she said, pushing it to Kit. He took the chain in either paw, a very fine chain so it wouldn’t snag her fur, and she held her hair out of the way as he fastened it around her

neck. "I thought this was so lovely when I saw it in the window," she said, touching the pendant gently. "Thank you, Kit!" she said happily, turning and giving him a crushing hug.

"For you, my pretty kitty, anything. Anything," he replied, putting his arms around her and holding her close.

Much later, the party started to wind down. Jessie sat with him, Vil, and her family at a table as they watched Terry and Allison cleaning off a table, talking quietly, and Lupe playing Danielle basketball by the garage, as Grandma Pearl bantered with Sheila. The old femme had a warm spot in her heart for the fearless Vulpan vixen. "I'm glad you had a good birthday, dear," Hannah told her. "It's not every day you get a van."

Jessie laughed. "My handsome fox bought me something I'll treasure," she said, putting her paw over the little pendant that was now under her shirt.

"What makes anything a treasure is what someone thinks it's worth," Kit told her. "That makes *you* my treasure."

"There's nothing wrong with me giving you a van," Vil protested with a laugh. "I may buy you what you need, but I know you'll love it the first time you need it. I was thinking of the baby as much as you!"

"I truly appreciate the van, Vil, and you're right, the first time I have to put Laura in a car seat, I'll be sending you fifty thank you letters," she giggled.

"How's Ohio State treating you, Ben?" Jim asked.

"Pretty well, Uncle Jim," he answered. "You saw my jersey?"

“Sure did.”

“Tell me when I can get one, I want to hang it on the wall in my office,” Vil told him.

“Sure, I can do that. They’ll let me buy official style jerseys that I can give away to my family, special ones meant to be worn by furs without football gear. You know, authentic material and stuff, but made for wearing, not playing. They’re forty-four dollars each. I can buy extras of my actual jerseys I use to play for fifty-two dollars each.”

“Well, put in an order for ten of each, Ben, I’ll pay for them. I want to show them off, give some to some of my friends. Suzy would love one, she’s a football nut.”

Ben laughed. “No reason to show anything off about me, Vil. They gave me my high school number, and they’re doing what they said they would. I’m learning both sides of the playbook, and get to play special teams and reserve linebacker when I’m not second string running back.”

“Second string,” Vil scoffed. “You should be the starter!”

“I’m not sure I’m gonna unseat Chris Wells,” he chuckled. “He’s a darn good running back, and he’s a senior. I’m just lucky that the sophomore they had transferred to Ball State after I committed to Ohio State, so I’m not third string anymore. But I’ve been promised carries, and like I said, I get to play some special teams and linebacker too, so I’m happy.”

“Good. I’d have to lure you to U-Mass if they don’t treat you right at Ohio State.”

Ben laughed. "I don't think Coach Tressel would appreciate you poaching me."

"If he can't keep you happy, then it's *his* fault if he loses you," she told him. "When's your first game?"

"Late August," he answered. "Would you like to come see me play, Vil? I can get tickets."

"You bet I am!" she told him immediately. "And I'll get my own tickets," she told him. "In fact, I think we should all come down and see Ben's first game."

"Sure, we can make it," Jim promised. "That's one of the benefits of being semi-retired. Me and Penny can go somewhere at the drop of a hat, and Pearl loves to travel."

"I'd love to," Kit said. "We can fly up the day before, that way we have plenty of time for tailgating."

"And again, I'm tossed aside and forgotten," Jenny said in a melodramatic voice, putting the back of her paw to her forehead and looking up. "What is a poor underappreciated femme to do?"

"You took a big step when you took your foot off the gas pedal," Vil told her. "I'm glad my warning finally sunk in."

"Warning?" Jessie asked.

"Vil threatened to take the car if she got another ticket," Hannah said with an approving nod.

"I didn't *mean* to get the tickets, they just happened," Jenny said with a grunt.

Kit chuckled. “Well, I’m glad you’re watching the speedometer now, Jen. How’s school going?”

“Pretty well,” she said with a smile. “My summer class term is over, so I’m off the next month. I’m gonna use it working at a clinic in Columbus, working with doctors.”

“Sounds good,” Kit nodded. “Sometimes practical experience is way better than the classroom.”

“Yeah, they said that it’s best for a doctor to see what it’s really like before they commit,” she laughed. “Cause it’s hard work.”

“Pays well, though,” Vil noted.

“Yeah, about paying, I have to do *something* or I’m gonna be the pauper in this family,” she said, giving Jessie a wink. “My older sissy marries a rich guy, my younger bro’s gonna be an NFL superstar, and the middle kid gets the shaft.”

“Thank you Janet Brady,” Kit said dryly. “Be glad you have a brother and a sister. All I have is *that*,” Kit noted, pointing at Vil. “Know what kind of hell it was to be *her* brother?”

“Why you little ingrate, after everything I’ve done for you!” Vil retorted, though she was smiling. “You can *walk* home, buster! You forget, I *paid* for that toy sitting out at the airport, and paid for you to learn to fly it!”

“This got me from Baltimore to Charlotte,” he said, sticking out his thumb. “I think it can get me home. If it doesn’t, I’ll just steal Hannah’s van.”

“You’ll have better luck with Vil, young male,” Hannah threatened.

“You wouldn’t make me walk home, would you Hannah?” he asked with outrageously pleading eyes, a trick he learned from Kendall.

“I’ll drive you to Maine and let you walk from *there*,” she warned.

“No sweat, I’ll just hitch to Boston and steal the Ferrari,” he winked at Vil. “I’ll drive that home to Texas!”

“You have a Ferrari, Vil?” Jenny asked in surprise.

“It’s part of my father’s antique car collection,” she answered. “It’s very old, and I never drive it. I never drive any of them. To be honest, I don’t think I’ve even driven once since I came home from England. And I’d probably drive on the wrong side of the road,” she laughed ruefully. “I drove myself a lot over in England, a little Ford Astria. I didn’t really become a limo jockey until I came home and took over at the shipyard.”

“I wonder what it’d be like to have a limo drive you everywhere,” Penny mused. “I’d feel rather weird about it, myself. For one, where do you park it?”

“It has its drawbacks, such as when you want to stop at a fast food joint,” Vil chuckled. “But, I ride in a special Lincoln going to work and back, not a limo. That’s just a big car. It’s not stretched, but it’s big enough to feel roomy, yet small enough to park in about any parking lot if I want to stop somewhere. I save the limo for after hours, and for carrying friends and passengers.”

“I always feel lost when she puts us in a limo,” Jessie giggled. “It’s nice to live the princess dream for a weekend, but it’s even nicer to go home and go back to being *us*.”

“We’re definitely not the limo set,” Kit chuckled. “I’m a blue-collar blue blood.”

“You’ve been ruined. Ruined!” Vil complained with a smile.

“Well, I like him ruined,” Penny laughed. “The boy’s lucky Jessie found him first, or I’d have to divorce Jim!”

“I think someone else wants to walk home,” Jim teased lightly, patting Penny on the knee.

“You’re the one trying to ruin me, sis,” he retorted. “Trying to spoil me. I’m just glad you didn’t do something outrageous and give Jessie a house or something.”

“Who says I didn’t?” she asked with a smile. “This day isn’t over yet.”

“Vil, we like our apartment,” Jessie countered. “It’s more like a house anyway, didn’t you see the pics I sent you?”

“Yes, and it’s nice inside, but it’s not a house. It’s not *yours*,” she said seriously. “I don’t like you living at the mercy of someone else.”

“Vil, seriously, my landlord is like one of my best friends, and he went out of his way to set up our apartment exactly the way we wanted,” Kit protested, pointing at Lupe. “I think you’re being just a bit silly. That, or trying to manufacture a reason to do what you want us to do so you can justify it in your own mind.”

“She’s been as much your mother as your sister, Kit, she has that right,” Hannah defended. “And I’m on her side. I would feel *much* better if you were in a house. A house is security. I could never feel the same comfort and security living in an apartment as I do here, in our house. And

the kids wouldn't have felt as secure either. Apartments mean you move, that you have no *home*. A house is a *home*."

"Don't you start too, Mom," Jessie flared.

"I'm sorry dear. You're right, we'll save this for some other day," she said in a mollifying tone, patting her on the forearm.

"Hmm," Vil mused, looking at Lupe. "I wonder if Lupe would consider changing his luxury units to condos and giving the occupants the option to buy. That would settle my mind, and you'd get to keep your apartment."

"There's a whole lot of legal issues that come into play there, Vil," Kit told her. "But, if he gave us the option to buy, I'd probably go for it. Our rent would go up, since he's giving us a deal on our rent and he couldn't do that if we were buying, but it'd be worth it. We'd own but still get all the perks that come from living in the apartment, like the community center and being where we love to be."

"Well then, excuse me for a minute," Vil said, standing up and going over to Lupe.

"Oh dear," Jessie sighed, then she giggled. "I think she's about to get a surprise."

"Yeah. Lupe won't roll over for her," Kit agreed.

About sunset, the party was officially over. Terry and Allison left in a cab to head for their private chartered jet that would take them to New York, Jim, Penny, and Pearl settled in at a nearby hotel, and Vil quartered herself and the others in the Cincinnati, giving them a night in a luxury hotel. Kit and Jessie stayed in Jessie's old room, and Kit was startled to see

that the room had been remodeled, and it was complete with a new bed. The room was done in simple cherrywood furniture, with a queen size bed, dresser, vanity, and an old-fashioned armoire. “Jessica told us we could box her things and convert her old room into a guest bedroom, since I doubt she’ll ever come home,” John chuckled. “We knew her old bed kills your back, so we bought this one instead. We’re going to ship all Jessica’s old things to her once you move, since she’ll probably want to store most of it.”

“I certainly appreciate that,” Kit said honestly as he sat on the bed and tested it. It was fairly firm, and that was a good sign. Jessie came in behind them and kissed her father on the cheek, then gave him a hug.

“Thanks for a wonderful birthday, Dad,” she told him.

“You’re welcome, pumpkin,” he told her, patting her on the back. “But you’d better thank your mother and Vil too.”

“I already did,” she assured him.

“Have you set a date for your baby shower yet?”

Jessie laughed. “I haven’t even *thought* about that yet.”

“It’s getting close to when you’d have it, you know.”

“Yeah, but I’m not supposed to be the one to throw it, you know,” she winked. “I think you’ll have to ask Sam, and Sheila, they’d probably be the ones to plan it.”

“Dear God, do not let Sheila plan your baby shower,” Kit said seriously, which made Jessie explode into laughter.

“I think I’ll let Sam, and Sandy when she comes back from summer vacation,” Jessie assured him. “That way there won’t be any strippers.”

“But at least then your shower wouldn’t be boring, Jessica,” John said mildly.

“Daaad!” she protested.

“Stop being mean to my wife, John,” Kit laughed.

“She’s my daughter before she’s your wife.”

“You gave her to me. She’s *mine* now.”

“Oh really?” Jessie asked archly.

“That’s right, you’re all mine,” he told her, standing up and pulling her against him. “Mine, mine mine! So go make me a sandwich.”

John exploded into laughter, and Jessie pushed him, knocking him backwards onto the bed. “Shut the door on your way out, Dad,” Jessie said with a cool look at him. “I think we can spare Kit the humiliation of someone seeing him get beaten up by a girl.”

“Have fun, you two,” John chuckled, closing the door behind him.

“I plead mercy upon the court,” Kit laughed, holding his paws out to her.

She laughed and let him pull her down onto the bed atop him, and gave him a lingering kiss. “Consider yourself on probation,” she teased.

“Oh good, I can violate my probation and get an even better punishment when we get home,” he cooed in her ear.

“We really need to take you to a psychiatrist to talk about this love of punishment, handsome fox,” she giggled, kissing him again, quite seriously.

Chapter 30

The van turned out to be rather useful earlier than they expected.

Vil had parked it out by their apartment, or more to the point had had the dealership park it there. It was a Ford Freestar, like Hannah's van, but Jessie's van was dark blue with a tan leather interior and just about every extra and perk there was for it. It had power everything, XM satellite radio, a CD player for the driver, a DVD player with multiple screens for the passengers, an integrated GPS monitor in the dash that had van functions as well, LoJack vehicle protection service, Vil had even had an infant car seat bought and put in the back, an omen of things to come for the couple. Jessie was very appreciative of the van, and after inspecting it and driving it, she parked it and basically forgot about it...until the very next time she drove her Corolla and had to work herself down into the seat. After that, it was the Corolla that Jessie parked, for she liked the roominess of the van, and she declared that she needed to learn how to drive it anyway. Gas prices were high, though, so Kit more or less gave up his truck and drove the car, since having to gas up both the truck and the van was a very expensive undertaking when gas was nearly \$3.60 a gallon. So, to save them some money, Kit parked his Pathfinder and drove the car, and Jessie drove the van.

But, the truck and the van turned out to be *extremely* useful, because the day after they returned home from Jessie's birthday trip, the contractors declared they were finished, and allowed the residents to start moving into their new apartments. Everyone already knew exactly where they were

going to live, and Kit and Jessie weren't the only ones that immediately started ferrying things over to the new apartments on the very day that Lupe made the announcement by putting flyers in everyone's mailboxes. Lupe made the announcement on Tuesday morning, but Kit and Jessie already had the keys to their apartment, and had several boxes moved over into their new apartment before anyone else knew what was going on.

Good Lord, did they have so much space in that apartment! It was a four bedroom with a small basement and a small attic, both more or less meant for storage. The attic was for long-term storage, with one of those pull-down folding stairs that retracted up into the ceiling. The small basement, actually more of a cellar, was perfect for a small wine cellar or storage room. The basement was curiously unique in that it had been dug as a single room between the two apartments and then walled off, but it wasn't the same size as the duplex's foundation, it was smaller. The basement was about half the size of the first floor of their apartment, basically under the back half of the apartment, which left the front half untouched, probably where all the utilities came in underground. Kit and Jessie moved their first boxes in on Tuesday night, mainly the gifts she'd received that they'd yet to unpack, as well as some of the wedding presents they'd honestly had no room to put up or use and had been boxed and kept in storage. But now, in the new apartment, they'd have room for everything.

Tuesday, Kit left work after the morning meeting with Rick, foisting all the research off on Pat because he had a lot of running around to do. First, they had to get the utilities put in their names, though they were already turned on in the complex's account. They had to put the electricity and the gas in their names, and call to have the cable installed and a cable modem set up. They had to change the address on their licenses, had to put in an

official change of address form at the post office, and Kit had to call ADT to have them install the new alarm system over there and then remove the one from the old apartment once they were out of it. They also needed to get boxes, and they had furniture to buy for the new apartment using the gift Vil gave them. They had decided to do the move themselves rather than hire a moving company, and the complex had organized something of a pool of moving labor. Kit and Jessie would get help moving from Lupe, Dan, Mickey, and Sheila, and when they moved, Kit and Jessie would be there to lend a paw as well. Similar “moving buddy” groups had formed in the complex, where clusters of families and furs would move at the same time and help each other. When six furs were moving furniture, it got moved quickly. But they intended to move a good deal of it by themselves, getting help only on the big things. And since Jessie currently wasn’t working, she had plenty of time to ferry over a box here, a box there, all day, slowly but surely getting their things moved over.

Her plan was simple. Once ADT had the alarm installed, they would move their bedroom and the kitchen first, getting help from friends with the furniture. Once those were set up, they’d move over, and Jessie would ferry over little things during the day, then she and Kit would move over larger things in the afternoon. On Saturday, the six of them would all band together and move everyone’s furniture over to their new apartments, using the carts Lupe bought as well as a flatbed truck that Dan borrowed from his job, which would let them load up a large amount of furniture in one shot and move it the half a block over to the new apartments. Lupe had put the three of them in the luxury units beside theirs, with Sheila beside Kit, Dan by her, and Mickey in the next one over, so they could park the truck in one place and move all the furniture to where it had to go easily, and also so they were very close to Lupe, Kit, and Jessie. Dan, Mickey, and Sheila were

Lupe's best friends in the complex outside of Kit and Jessie, so he liked keeping them very close. Lupe was giving Dan and Mickey a break on the rent so they could afford living in the luxury units, but Lupe expected Dan to help out when it came to fixing things, since Dan was a mechanic by trade and had been a contractor, so he was very good at fixing things and could do general maintenance, and Mickey was an air conditioning technician, so he could fix any AC unit in the complex if necessary.

Jessie split up their errands, and they got to work. Kit was tasked with ADT, the cable company, and the running while Jessie would be doing all the calling, but first they had to get their licenses changed, so they went to the DPS office and waited in line for over an hour with their official letters from Lupe and the county stating that he had moved them to a different apartment in the complex, and the county letter gave the new address. They were moving from 1642 Guadalupe Apartment 1-B to 1664 Guadalupe. Each of the luxury apartments had its own address, mainly because Lupe had bought out the entire block and freed up all the address numbers, which had to be reassigned by the county. When the fur arrived from the Texas Emergency Commission, which handled both 911 services and allocating addresses to new buildings, he had granted Lupe's request to give the community center and the luxury units their own individual addresses, mainly because the luxury units were stand-alone homes set up in a duplex system, not multiple homes in a single building. The community center was 1660, Lupe's was 1662, and they numbered evenly around the ring from there. The large buildings surrounding the center had the low numbers, and all buildings on the block, even those closer to other streets, were all assigned Guadalupe street number addresses. The TEC fur could have given the buildings near other streets numbers from those streets, but it was a long-standing practice to give all apartments in a complex similar

addressing as long as there were enough numbers to accommodate it so as to make it easy on the postal workers, police, firefighters, and utility workers. Generally, whichever street where the rental office was located was usually the street from which addressing numbers was assigned, and since Lupe owned the entire block, they had access to 50 addressing numbers...and there were only 32 buildings in the complex that needed addresses. That was more than enough to give every building in the complex a Guadelupe address.

It did put some residents in a kind of lurch, though. On Friday, three of the existing buildings would *lose* their official addresses, once the new addressing scheme was officially adopted by the county, because those addresses would be claimed by buildings built next to the existing old buildings. The old buildings would be address-less, and everyone in the complex would have to start using the addresses of their new apartments, as well as pick up their mail from the new mailboxes on the other side. Everyone already knew where they were going to be living, had their new addresses, but they'd have to go get their mail from the new mailboxes, which meant they'd be walking for a while.

Fortunately for Kit and Jessie, ADT was always quick. When Kit called them once they got home, they set up an appointment to install the alarm for the new apartment the next day. After that was done, Kit jumped in Jessie's Corolla and started the running. He stopped at the post office first to turn in an official change of address form, which would have their mail start delivery to their new address as soon as the post office could make the switch. After that, he drove down to the office for the cable company and discussed packages with them, then arranged to have the cable installed in the new apartment, which was put on the schedule for Thursday. Kit would

use the same box he had, but he wanted a second box for cable they'd install in their bedroom, and the cable modem would be installed in the den on the first floor. Kit also changed their service package to include a few more channels, including spending the money to buy a Video On Demand service for Ohio State college football games. Any time an Ohio State game was televised, anywhere, it would both broadcast live on a special channel on their converter boxes, and they'd also get it digitally recorded by the cable company and accessible via an on demand channel, viewable until the next Saturday, when the game would be erased and copied over by the new game. That way they could always watch Ben play, and if they weren't home, they could watch it when they had time. Kit had already bought a bunch of blank DVD-R discs to record Ben's games, ready to build a library of Ben's football career.

Kit was also waiting for Ben's jerseys to arrive. Kit had copied Vil's idea and had left the money with Ben, Ben had bought them, and they were in the mail, five jerseys. Two for Kit, one for Jessie in maternity size, and two in her regular size. It was a well spent \$220, because they were special jerseys made by the same company that made the play jerseys, only altered so they were wearable without football pads but authentic in every other way, that Ben could buy for \$44 each through the school. Ben had bought them that morning when he went back to school, and the company was going to next-day air them out as soon as they made them, which they expected to finish by tomorrow. So, they hoped to have their new jerseys by Wednesday. John was going to send them some Ohio State decals for their car windows as well, but he also demanded that if they were going to put up those, they also had to put up the Cincinnati Bearcats decals he was including with them. John *did* work at that school, and he had his school pride, even if his son was playing for an in-state rival school.

After finishing at the cable company, he had to warn Alice that his address was changing. And that was also a problem. Kit had to move his plane by the end of the month, because the space he was using would be needed by the company. Alice had warned him that the jet that occupied that spot would be back on July 24th, back earlier than expected because they were getting their new jet a little early, so he had to find other accommodations for his plane. This...was a problem. There was no hangar space available *anywhere* in Austin, and everywhere he'd called had waiting lists that were ridiculously long. Once they kicked him out of the Avia hangar, he'd have to tie up the plane out on a tarmac. There was available space at Bergstrom, but it was much more expensive to rent there than it was at Georgetown, and the Cessna mechanics were at Georgetown. But, that was a good forty minutes of driving, where it was just 15 minutes or so from Bergstrom, depending on lights and traffic. Odds were, he'd just eat the higher tiedown rental spot at Bergstrom and fly the plane to Georgetown when it needed maintenance, paying for the convenience of having it close at paw.

It was almost silly, the hangar situation in Austin, and if he had the money, he'd see it as a prime business opportunity to buy some land near an airport and build a *huge* T-hangar complex, but the problem was there wasn't really anywhere to do it. The four airports in or around Austin were all encircled within developed land, so there was nowhere available to build.

So, after July 24, his plane was going to be out in the elements, and he'd be back to tying down the plane after getting home.

He lingered at Avia maybe a little too long, chatting with Alice and her maintenance furs. Alice was still going out with Lupe, surprisingly enough,

and the small collie seemed quite content about it. “He pretends to be a player, but he always heels when I call,” she told him with a giggle. “We have a date tomorrow night.”

“Glad to hear it, Alice,” he told her. “I see you have planes in,” he noted as he looked at the two jets in the front bays of the hangar. One was a Citation CJ2, the other was a Lear 450. The old Cessna turboprop was gone. It had been sold, and now that spot was taken by a Citation CJ1, one of the older ones before they came out with the CJ1+ model.

“That’s the plane that goes in the spot you’re renting,” she told him. “It’s going out to L.A. after it gets the overhaul for a couple of weeks to replace that CJ two, then it’s back here permanently. I wish we could get it back fuckin’ *now*, but they need it in L.A. They have booked passengers and no jet to fly them.”

“Ah, so, that’s the plane I have to crash,” he mused.

She laughed. “I know you did it if it happens,” she winked. “So, you’re rated on Citations now?”

He nodded. “All the single pilot CJ plus models, the Mustang, the Encore, and the ten,” he answered. “My sis gave me six weeks to get as many ratings as possible. So I got those, and also got my CFI ratings, type one, type two, MEI, MEII.”

“Nice! You gonna freelance?”

“I might,” he answered.

“Hmm, you rated to instruct on Citations?”

“Yeah. I can teach everything I’m rated for. I got my rate requirement hours in on everything.”

“I might do a little business with you,” she told him. “We sold the old turboprop and the company’s talking about basing that old CJ one here permanently. We still do enough business here in Austin to keep two planes here, at least after we get our Lear back. Rather than ship any new pilots off to our trainers in Jacksonville, I could have you train on the CJ one. We’d pay you the same rate we pay our in-house instructors.”

“I couldn’t do it full time, but if you need me to fill in for a couple of days or something, that’s cool.”

“Well, how long do you think it’d take to train a pilot already rated for another type of jet on a Citation?”

“Two or three hours a night? Maybe two weeks,” he answered. “Depends on how well they know the Collins.”

“That CJ doesn’t have the Collins, it’s one of the older ones,” she answered. “It’s not a plus model, it’s a standard model. It has the combo Rockline suite.”

“I don’t know that suite, I’d have to train on it to teach that jet,” he laughed. “I *think* that my rating covers the older versions of the jet, I’d have to ask Amanda. If it does, I’d just need training on the older avionics and I’d be good to go.”

“Well, we can let you do that when it’s in, that way you can charter it from *us* the next time you need a jet,” she winked. “You’re a CFI and Cessna trained, our insurance will cover you no sweat.”

“Fly something that old? Never!” he said with mock outrage, grinning at her.

“Well, we can’t have all the shiny new toys like our new competitor,” she chuckled.

“Eh? Who?”

“AV Charters,” she answered. “According to airport scuttlebutt, they’re opening for business next week, cause it seems that they’re done remodeling that old hangar, all the contractors are gone. They towed a brand *fuckin’* new CJ one into their hangar yesterday. The serial number on it was literally the last produced jet, I looked it up. And one of the airport admins says that they’re expecting delivery of a Mustang, one of those new real small Cessna jets. That surprised me, they must have been planning opening here for a while. There’s like a two year list for those Mustangs, they had to put the order in back in two thousand six.”

“Hmm, and I know for a fact that they have a brand new CJ three too, cause I rented it,” he mused. “Cessna made a deal with them to let me charter the jet and fly it before they took delivery, while Cessna technically still owned it. Sounds like they’re gonna compete with ya, Alice, they brought in small jets for short jumps or lone customers and a bigger one for more distant charters or larger groups.”

“Actually, there’s enough business for both of us,” she admitted with a laugh. “We’re booked up for the next two months, and if Avia had a third jet to send down here, they would. I’ll bet my tail that’s why AV opened, cause there is a market for two small charter outfits here. That’s why they moved that Citation in after selling off that old *fuckin’* dinosaur turboprop. Nobody wanted to charter it anymore in the age of jets. This is a rare day for us, Kit,

to have the jet in and sitting idle. When we're at full strength, have both planes, usually one of them is out, and the CJ one *will* be going out at four. Some suit chartered it to take him to Florida."

"There's that much demand?"

"Yeah. Between the businesses here and the state government, we're usually pretty busy. We've been trying to get them to get us a third jet for fuckin' ever, and then they go and yank our four-fifty and send it to London and leave us with nothing but a turboprop and whatever jet's in for maintenance that can handle a charter before it goes back to its home base. I'll be happy when we get both our planes back, then maybe I can show them how many clients we're turning away and convince them that *we* could use a new jet instead of them buying jets and sending them everywhere but here. They just don't wanna, cause they get higher fees at our other locations. They'd rather send the jets to where the bigger fees are than make up for the lower fees here with quantity. Which would you do, one client for a thousand bucks or three clients for five hundred each?"

"Eh, there is fuel and maintenance to think about," Kit noted.

"I know, but still, profit's profit. AV will make money, and we'll make money, but if they send us another jet, we'll make *more* money than AV will."

"Well, I'm glad to hear you're not afraid of the new company," Kit chuckled.

"Nah, not really. They'll have more jets than us, though. That might spur the home office to send us a third charter jet, maybe even have them buy *us* a new one. That CJ one is old, and the Lear isn't much younger. We could use a new Lear or Cessna, maybe even an Eclipse."

“I thought there were some major issues with the Eclipses. Didn’t the FAA ground them last month?”

“They did, and there were, but I think they got it all ironed out, cause they’re not grounded anymore. They’re not bad little jets, I checked one out at the last airshow I went to. They’re *ridiculously* quiet.”

“I’ve never seen one except in pictures,” Kit said as he waved to Mike, one of the maintenance furs.

“They’re kinda cramped inside, but they’re pretty nice. It’d be the perfect jet to ferry a single client.”

His personal phone rang, and he saw that it was Jessie. “Yeah love?” he asked.

“Where are you?”

“Over at Avia, talking with Alice.”

“Get back to work,” she teased lightly. “And bring home some french bread when you’re done.”

“Actually, I’ve done all the running, so I’ll be home in a bit,” he told her.

Kit picked up the needed french bread on the way home, and then caught up on the work he’d shirked to get the running done today, pulling it off his desktop at work and working on it in the den as Jessie finished making calls. He was still working on the history of the conventions, and had pulled his work from the office to finish it up. He had all the information, he just needed to organize it and send it to Barry. He did look up a little more information about the infamous 1968 Democratic

convention and the riots that happened outside of it, included that, then formatted it, finished it, and sent it back to the office to Barry's workstation. When he came out into the living room, he saw Jessie in the dining room, packing the good china into a box. "You all finished, love?" he asked.

"Yeah. The utilities switch to our names tomorrow. As soon as I finish this, let's get to work."

"With?"

"Going down to Frontage Auto and furniture shopping, silly," she winked at him. "And we need to get our bed from Lupe's show unit and get it over to the new apartment."

"Oh, yeah, I ordered a second converter box, love," he told her. "Since we have the tube TV, I figured we could put it in our room, and what use is a TV without cable?"

"Did they have that College Gameday thing?"

"Sure did. We're set up for Ohio State games this season. We'll get them all, both live and on DVR, watchable any time during the week."

"Cool! Now we can always see Ben play!"

"When's his first game?"

"August thirtieth," she answered. "Remember, we're gonna go up and watch him play!"

"I'll warn Rick. I just hope you like the five hour plane ride up," he winked.

"I hope you enjoy being a passenger," she teased as he came over to help, kissing him on the nose playfully.

“Put in the right seat of my own plane. It’s a travesty of justice,” he sighed morosely as he knelt down and grabbed the next stack of plates.

“You’re the one who started it,” she laughed. “All you had to do was keep me from getting my license.”

“And deny you what you want? What kind of husband do you think I am?” he challenged with a smile.

“The very best kind,” she said with a loving smile, then she kissed him on the cheek lightly.

“Boy, do I have you fooled,” he said flippantly, which made her laugh helplessly.

They did have to go out one more time, to make three new keys to the apartment, and also to pick up the key for the van for Kit from Frontage Auto, where Vil had bought the van. She’d only brought one key and remote for it, but there was a second set for Kit that the dealership was holding. Besides, Jessie had to go sign the papers for the van to finalize everything, since Vil had bought the van in Jessie’s name, and she couldn’t fake everything the way she could with Kit. Vil had bought Jessie’s Corolla at Tucker’s Auto, which was about a mile from Frontage, and it was something of a curious departure from the norm for her. She had a preference for Fords, but she had bought Jessie a Toyota, and had bought Kit a Pathfinder mainly because she knew that Kit rather liked Pathfinders. Maybe the fact that Tucker’s sold both Nissans and Toyotas had something to do with that. She’d bought the Pathfinder there, and just picked up the Corolla from the same place as a matter of convenience. Frontage was waiting for them, and it was a quick hour there for Jessie to sign the papers, pick up her temporary title and registration, and get the second key and

remote. Kit wouldn't use the remote because he used his Pathfinder remote and that was just too many things to put in his pocket. Fortunately though, the alarm was set to automatically disengage when any door was unlocked, and automatically engage when all doors were locked.

Once that was done, they stopped by Lowe's and had new keys made for the apartment, then headed for the furniture stores. Jessie had a list with her, and she already knew exactly what she wanted and where to find it. Kit had taught her the power of researching, and she was very good at it when it came to shopping for deals. They visited five different furniture stores all over Austin. They bought a cheap but nice bedroom set from Value City for one of the empty bedrooms to go with the bed they already had, then bought a kitchen table they could use in the large kitchen for informal meals and a couple of matching pieces for the living room suit at Wentmore's. Then they went all the way across the city to Dickerson's Furniture and bought their very first purchases for Laura, her bedroom suit that would be hers when she was old enough to use it herself. It would go in her room, and though she'd start in a crib, they also bought the bed that went with the suit, which they'd store in the basement until she was ready to move from a crib to a bed. Then they went to Capitol Furniture and bought two new pieces for their bedroom that matched the current bedroom suit, an armoire and another dresser, and also bought a matching china cabinet to go with the china closet for the dining room and two wine racks to put in the cellar, to make part of the cellar into a wine cellar. After that, they made their last stop at Yeager Furniture, and bought a nice cherrywood gun cabinet for the shotguns, one that had the safety features that Jessie wanted yet also matched their bedroom suit. It had both a door lock and a locking bar that locked the weapons into the rack, which used different keys. That made it that much harder for a curious child to get hold of one of the weapons in the

rack...and there would be more. Jessie was already professing an interest in buying a .22 rifle and maybe a pawgun to use for target shooting... something that both was good for sport shooting and also had considerable stopping power if used in self defense, such as a .40 caliber. Rick had saved Kit's life because he had a concealed carry permit, and Jessie had never forgotten that. She saw the value of having a weapon in the house for personal protection, she was already trained in the use of them thanks to her father, and a firearm was perfectly safe in a house occupied by children so long as proper precautions were taken. Jessie arranged to have all the furniture delivered on Thursday, when she'd be there to accept it and have them put it where it was going to go. They started with \$5,000, and when they were done, they had \$360 left, because Jessie had done her homework when it came to planning what to buy and from where, finding both furniture that matched their existing pieces and going where what she wanted was the cheapest.

After they finished that, they went home and went back to packing. They packed everything they didn't use, things like their china, the utility closet, a good portion of the kitchen, most of their decorations and knick-knacks, and then started moving it. That was where the van was really useful, for they packed the truck and the van both with boxes, drove the half block over to the new apartments, then started carrying them in. They stored all the boxes in the corner of the dining room, and Jessie realized that they had more things they needed to buy, things like hooks for the pictures they hung on the walls, and she decided that a grandfather clock would look just *perfect* over in the corner of the living room. The truth of the matter was that they had money left on the gift card Vil gave them for furniture, and Jessie was just looking for a reason to use it. But, he had to admit, having a grandfather clock in the living room *would* look rather nice, and kinda

classy. And there was a pretty nice one at Value City that was \$400. Once they got the non-essentials stored over in the new apartment, Jessie cooked dinner for four, since Sheila had called during lunch at flight school and asked if she and Allison could come over. Kit was curious as to how Allison's date with Terry went, so he was more than amenable to the idea. Jessie made goulash, homemade french garlic bread, and asparagus, and was just taking the bread out of the oven when Sheila opened the front door without knocking. "We're here!" she called as she marched in.

"How was it today?" Jessie asked from the kitchen as Kit came out from the den.

"I did my first cross country solo today!" Sheila called. "I went to new Braunfels and back!"

"Nice! Get lost?" Kit teased as Allison came in.

She laughed and slapped him on the arm. "As if I'd get lost!" she challenged. "Ally does hers tomorrow."

"When's your check ride?" Kit asked them as Allison kissed him on the cheek.

"Two weeks from today," she answered before Sheila could.

"Now that the pleasantries are out of the way, what happened in New York?" Kit asked immediately, which made Allison laugh.

"Can I even sit down first?"

"No," he said bluntly.

She laughed again. "Then come to the kitchen and I'll explain as we help Jessie set the table."

“That works.”

They did just that. “I really had a good time,” she began as they came into the kitchen and Jessie gave Allison a fond hug, but she didn’t interrupt. She wanted to hear it, too. “We changed on the plane and went straight to the show from the airport.”

“What did you go see?” Sheila asked.

“It was a premiere of a musical called *One Fine Day*,” she answered. “It was really fun, and funny, too. I had a great time. Afterward, Terry took me to this *incredibly* fancy French restaurant in Manhattan, called Renoir’s.”

“Holy crap, he took you to Renoir’s?” Kit said as Sheila grinned hugely.

“Yeah. The food was *amazing*!” she said with a dreamy smile. “We sat at the table and talked for *hours*,” she continued. “About anything that crossed our minds. We were the last furs to leave. After that, he took me on a limo tour of Manhattan. He showed me the Chrysler building and Times Square, then we went to the Waldorf Astoria, showed how pretty they were when they were lit up at night. The Astoria!” she exclaimed. “The next morning he picked me up, and we went on a carriage ride in Central Park, then he took me to the Statue of Liberty, then we got on a jet and flew to Norfolk and he showed me one of the Vulpan shipyards because I was really curious about what a shipyard did and how it worked, so he took me to one and showed me. We flew back, packed up, and he flew me home. He even saw me to my door like a proper gentlemale,” she said with a light laugh and a gentle smile as she remembered it. “And he was the absolute

soul of courtesy! He didn't even try to kiss me goodnight or goodbye all weekend."

"Oh, tell me you didn't let him get away with that!" Sheila laughed.

"Of course I didn't," she said with a wicked little smile. "I curled his toes quite satisfactorily on the front porch of my house. After all the hard work he put in to give me such a wonderful weekend, he definitely *earned* that kiss. But it wasn't all fun and games," she said with a sigh. "Terry's dad kept trying to call him all day on Sunday. I think it was because of me."

"Don't worry about any of that," Sheila told her immediately. "What Terry does is Terry's business. Remember what Vil said. Did you break Vil's rules over the weekend?"

"No!" she said immediately. "We didn't talk to any press, we didn't announce ourselves, and we didn't cause any trouble. Terry didn't throw his name around, but he must have called in a favor to get us into that restaurant," she mused. "We took the public ferry to the Statue of Liberty and everything!"

"Then that's all you need to worry about," Kit told her. "As long as you obey Vil, don't worry about the rest of the Vulpans. They can't do a damn thing about it."

"Still, I don't want to cause him any trouble, Kit. He's a sweet male, kind and wonderful, and I'd feel awful if your family gives him too much grief over me."

"Terry knows the score, Ally," Sheila told her as they sat down. "There *will* be some friction in the family, but Terry fully knows it, and remember

that he did take you out anyway. He thinks you're worth the trouble it'll cause, and so do I."

"So let Terry manage that, Ally," Kit agreed as Jessie brought the goulash out in a huge bowl and set it on the wicker pad in the center of the table. "If he's willing to deal with the family to go out with you, then you can honor that effort."

"Oh, I will!" she said quickly. "Kit, Terry was so *wonderful*! I've never gone out with such a considerate or engaging male before! We must have sat in the restaurant and just talked for six hours! We already have our next date planned. He's coming down here and we're going out this weekend. I just wish he wasn't so far away," she sighed.

"Well, Vil can feel your pain, her boyfriend lives in England," Kit chuckled. "But Terry's rich, Ally. He can afford to fly down here every weekend and spend it with you."

"Well, even rich, he can't keep it up forever," she said. "Maybe I should move to Boston."

"No," both Kit and Sheila said in unison. "Don't move into *their* territory, Ally," Kit told her. "You're just asking for trouble. Besides, you set the stage like this. As long as Terry has to come down here or pays to bring you up there, it's very clear just who is courting who. If you move to Boston, you'll raise the gold-digger alarm."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously," Sheila agreed. "Terry can *buy* a jet if he wants, Ally. He certainly wouldn't be the only Vulpan with a private jet, I know Vil and Uncle Zach have their own jets, and there are like six different charter

companies in Boston where a Vulpan can charter a private jet any time they want, even on a moment's notice. I know I could call and get a jet in ten minutes to take me to the beach or skiing or something. Terry's even richer than me, don't forget that. Just let him worry about how he gets down here to see you, as long as he does come down to see you."

"Yeah, I guess so," Allison nodded.

Jessie put the last of the food out and sat down. "I think you should listen to them," Jessie agreed. "Terry sounds like he's working very hard for you. Don't ruin it with a whole lot of *what ifs*. Just let him be the male and you get to be the femme and let him do things for you," she winked. "If Terry is anything like Kit, he'll bend over backwards for you."

"Don't use Kit as a measuring stick for the Vulpans," Sheila giggled. "Most Vulpan males wouldn't be quite so, well, *romantic*. Then again, most Vulpans marry who the family says they'll marry, so they don't take romance seriously. We marry our matched partner, then screw anyone we want on the side. That part's fun," she said with a wicked grin. "But it certainly sounds like Terry's gonna play this by normal furs' rules and court you."

"He'd better," Allison laughed. "If I want that kind of treatment, I can go back to work at the Top Hat."

"Wash your mouth out with soap!" Jessie told her. "You're never going back to *that*!"

"Oh, I never would. But Terry'd better get it through his head that despite my past, I won't stray and I won't let him stray either," she chuckled.

“One date and we’re already sitting around talking about marriage,” Sheila laughed. “Let’s get back to reality and eat!”

“And who’s the one changing the subject? The one that can’t get a date with the guy she wants,” Allison teased.

“Oh, kiss my furry ass, Ally!” Sheila growled, then she laughed helplessly. “I keep trying, but Ben won’t play with me!”

“Ben’s a very smart young male who knows better than to get involved with girls like you,” Jessie told her with a slight smile as she spooned goulash onto her plate.

“Sure he will,” Sheila grinned. “I’ve gotten quite a few hot kisses out of him, and I’ve put my paws in places no respectable girl would dare go.”

“And that’s about as far as you’ll ever get with him,” Jessie told her. “Mom taught him which girls to avoid, and I think she had you in mind when she taught him.”

“Pshaw,” Sheila snorted. “I’m not that bad.”

“Yes, you are,” Allison and Kit told her in unison, which made Jessie giggle. “Ben will never give you anything but meaningless kisses so long as you look at him as a piece of meat, Sheila,” Kit told her mildly. “You should take a long look at Terry and Allison. Would you like it if Terry treated Ally like a piece of meat, to take to bed then toss aside after he had his jollies?”

“Hell no!”

“Then why are you looking at Ben like that? Until you start thinking about something other than his body, he’ll never let you so much as get

your foot in the door. Hannah's teachings are too deeply ingrained into him."

"Pft, that's how you get hold of a male," she challenged. "Males are slaves to what femmes keep in their underwear."

"And as long as you think that, you'll never get *anywhere* with Ben," Jessie told her bluntly. "Think about something, Sheila. Ben's a football star, he's devastatingly handsome, and he's modest and polite. The girls at our old high school used to follow him around like puppies. He can have any girl he wants. Why would he want to go out with someone who'll just toss him aside the minute she gets bored with him? If he wants an empty physical relationship, he can more or less take his pick of almost any girl in Ohio."

"Well, I'm cuter, and I'm rich."

"Those things mean nothing to Ben, Sheila," Jessie told her as she passed the basket of bread down to Kit. "Mom didn't raise just one of her kids to be traditional. Jenny's the odd one out, not me. Ben's just as old-fashioned as I am. He's a modest, unassuming sweetheart who'll make some girl deliriously happy someday, but only a girl he knows will be there for him as much as he's there for her. You won't give him that, and he knows it. That's why he won't go out with you."

"I'd listen to Jess, Sheila," Kit chuckled. "She's his sister. If anyone knows him, she does."

"Hmph," Sheila grunted, taking a bite of the goulash. "I'll show him that I'm after more than just his bod."

“You’d better do it some other way than just going after his bod,” Kit chuckled.

“Well, it’s always a good jumping off point,” she explained. “Sleep with the guy and see if he’s any good, and if he is, then get to know him.”

“Sheila, most girls like to know a guy more than a couple of hours before jumping into bed with them,” Jessie protested.

“Well, I’m not most girls. I’m a *Vulpan*,” she declared.

“And that’s not going to help you here. Ben’s not impressed by your name or your face or your body, Sheila. I’m sure there’s a ton of girls at Ohio State that are just as pretty as you, who will throw themselves at him. They won’t impress him either. What will impress him is your determination. You have to *win* him. He’s not going to fall into your lap.”

“Well, I could win him a lot faster after I get him into bed.”

“That won’t work.”

“He wants it. All males do. So do I. What’s wrong with going after what you want?”

“Because Ben won’t *respect* you,” Jessie told her directly. “Ben wants a girl like *me*, Sheila. He wants a loving wife that will be *faithful* to him, someone he can share his life with, someone to be his *lifemate*, not just someone sharing his bed. And he knows that you won’t be faithful. So, if you want any chance at all with him, you have to show him that you’re willing to commit to him, and *only* to him. You’d have to swear off all other boys and show him that you can commit to a monogamous relationship, and I’ll guarantee he’ll test you by not sleeping with you either.”

“Go without sex?” she asked, sincerely mystified. “For how long?”

“For as long as it takes to prove to him you can be faithful to him,” she answered. “Months. Maybe years.”

“*What?* No way can I go that long without sex!”

“Then you’d better look for another boy, cause he’ll never look twice at you,” Jessie said with a simple shrug, then she took another bite of her goulash.

“She’s gotta be joking!” Sheila protested to Kit. “Go without sex for that long?”

“I’d say she’s serious,” Kit said mildly.

“That’s like *impossible*! No one can go that long without!”

“Uh, Sheila. I was a virgin before I met Kit,” Jessie admitted, her cheeks ruffling slightly as she glanced at Allison. “I went three years after leaving home without sleeping with a male.”

“Well, you didn’t know what you were missing. I do!”

“I’ve told you what you have to do. What you do next is up to you.” Jessie pointedly changed the topic by looking at Allison. “So, what are you going to do with Terry next week?”

“I don’t know, he wouldn’t tell me,” she answered, taking a bite of goulash. “He just said that he hopes I like it.”

“Well, that could be almost anything,” Kit chuckled.

They talked through the rest of dinner, grilling Allison for a more detailed accounting of her date with Terry, which she supplied with a

surprisingly demure smile. Kit saw that Allison had been quite bowled over by Terry, how he had been nothing but polite and respectful to her, treated her like she was special, and she'd probably throw herself at him the very first time he invited her, judging by that look she had in her eyes when Sheila remarked that Terry had a reputation for being quite a vigorous lover. Allison was a little shocked to be treated by a handsome male as more than a hired hooker, to be treated like an intelligent and sophisticated femme, to go out on real dates where there were no preconceptions or conclusions, and she was quite overwhelmed by how it made her feel. But she wasn't quite so emotional for her to lose her common sense or wariness. So far, Terry was doing everything right to earn Allison's loyalty, but Terry had better be careful and understand that Allison's loyalty would never be *undying*. She was far too worldly and cynical to believe in endless love. He would have to prove to her every day that he was worthy of her, which actually wouldn't be all that difficult. All he'd have to do would be to love her, and she would be his for as long as she knew that love was there. But the instant she felt that the love was gone, then she'd be gone too.

It would be good for him, Kit felt. Allison was probably the second most interesting unrelated femme Kit had ever known, second only to his wife, and she was definitely worth the effort of keeping her. Allison would make Terry's life rich and vibrant, and he'd love her for it. Few things could hold Terry's attention for long, because he was so intelligent, but Allison seemed to be able to challenge Terry's mind, and that would keep him glued to her. Terry would get a femme able to keep up with him, and Allison would get a male that would worship her. They'd be good for each other.

After Sheila and Allison left with Jessie to go pick up Sam and get in a quick eighteen holes of golf before sunset, trying out Jessie's new clubs, Kit

called Vil and found out things weren't quite so rosy up in Boston. "I'm not surprised Tom tried to get hold of Terry all day Sunday," she grunted, the acoustics telling him she'd put the Blackberry on speakerphone. "Ally's little secret is out up here, and you would not believe the uproar."

"Already?"

"Zach was digging as soon as he saw her, and her past isn't hidden *that* well," she said pointedly. "The elders are all in an absolute hissy fit. Tom was trying to get hold of him all day Sunday, and Zach was waiting in his office when he came to work this morning. Terry..." she trailed off, then she laughed. "Terry's secretary called security. Terry *decked* Zach, Kit. Punched him dead in the face."

"Holy shit," Kit gasped. "What happened?"

"Well, from what I managed to piece together, Zach made all kinds of ugly threats, but Terry basically blew him off. Well, that pissed off Zach, Zach pushed Terry and knocked him down, and Terry hauled off and punched him. Put him on his ass," she said with a little chuckle. "So, right now, Terry's just got home after getting arrested, but Zach didn't press charges so he's been released, Zach's already trying to get Terry fired, Maxine's blaming Tom for his son being so out of control, Jake's stating he'll kill Terry before he lets him go out with a hooker, Tom's blaming Zach and Jake for trying to threaten Terry, Sarah's waiting to see who's gonna win so she's on the winning side, and Brian's staying way clear of the whole thing. Oh, and Terry asked me for something that piqued my curiosity, something I think I'll grant."

"What?"

“He asked to be transferred,” she answered. “Well, as you know, I’m in New Orleans right now, I just signed the papers that bought Avondale like two hours ago and finished up the tour about ten minutes ago. I’m in a limo heading for the airport to go home. Terry asked me to be transferred to Avondale to either run the facility or act as a liaison between the Avondale facility and the home office. He wants out of Boston, and I guess I can’t blame him,” she sighed. “Zach’s already made it abundantly clear that he’s going to make Terry’s life absolute hell until he dumps Allison. He’s already put a resolution on the schedule for tomorrow’s board meeting to get Terry fired, which I’m going to pre-empt, since Zach thinks he’s got me hanging over his barrel at the moment. Zach’s already threatened to lean on the state to cause problems for Terry in any way he can, and he’s already talked to his lawyers about suing Terry for hitting him, even though Zach started it by pushing Terry and knocking him down. And, if he moves to New Orleans, he’ll be that much closer to Allison,” she added. “I think I might just do that,” she mused, mainly to herself. “I could use a good fur there to oversee the reorganization of Avondale to our system, and Terry is definitely competent. It would be a good test of his abilities, since he did such a good job whipping the safety department into shape. It would get him out of Boston at least temporarily and give me someone I can trust in New Orleans to handle things for me. Yeah, I think I do like that idea. I can assign Terry to New Orleans temporarily as temporary director to coordinate the conversion of Avondale to a Vulpan facility without even having to run it through the board, too, they can’t interfere. I can have him there by Wednesday,” she said, clicking her teeth together. “And the sooner I get him out of Boston, the better. If Zach confronts him again, Terry might do something more than just punch him.”

“Criminy,” Kit sighed. “I knew the elders wouldn’t like it, but that’s a little ridiculous. That’s like what Dad did to me.”

“I think Zach learned the wrong things from the wrong brother,” Vil grunted. “He’s absolutely livid. I’ve never seen him so angry. And I’m sure you’ll be overjoyed to know that he blames you,” she chuckled. “That was part of his tirade when he stormed into my office to demand I do something about it. He said that you’re destroying the family, little bro, and giving the other cousins all bad ideas that make them forget that they’re *Vulpans*. Then, after he found out I approved of Terry’s courting of Allison so long as they keep it very quiet, he went off on me. He even threatened to try to take me out of the chair by any way he could,” she noted dryly. “So, you’re destroying the family by making us cousins rebel against the traditions the family’s built on, which basically boils down to *do what your elders tell you*, and I’m in your pocket, cheering you on. I’ve never been one to adhere to that old meme,” she said clinically. “The old family’s rulebook was thrown out the window the instant Dad put me in the chair. As far as I’m concerned, as long as you don’t sully the family name, live your own life.”

“Terry gets close to that line,” Kit admitted.

“Yeah, and I’m still not entirely happy about it, but as long as they obey my rules, I’ll let them see each other,” she said. “If only because Allison suitably convinced me that she wants nothing to do with her old life and hopes to start a new and better one with Terry. That really moved me, bro,” she chuckled.

“What are you going to do about Zach?”

“Pull his leash,” she answered in a grim manner. “He threatened *me* in his little diatribe too, and I don’t respond well to threats. I think Terry is the

perfect opportunity to demonstrate to the elders once and for all just *who* controls this family.”

Kit was quiet a moment. “You planned it like this, didn’t you? That’s why you let Terry go out with Allison, even though you don’t entirely approve.”

She laughed. “I cannot tell a lie, I was hoping that I’d get just such an opportunity when I gave Terry my blessing,” she admitted. “I’m tired of the elders skulking around behind me and trying to push me out of this chair, especially uncle Zach. You would not believe what he’s been trying to pull, trying to undercut me, and it’s not just Zach and Jake, it’s now six other members of the board as well, which gives them a voting majority on the board. Zach and Jake and Maxine have bribed six of the other board members to help them unseat me. They’ve formed this nice little alliance to try to get rid of me. Kit, they’re willing to hurt the business, even drive us to the brink of bankruptcy, in order to make me a disaster as the CEO and force me to quit, which would let Zach step in and lead the company back to profitability,” she told him seriously, which sincerely startled him. “I can’t let that go on anymore, bro. So, I want a nice little open confrontation so I can show them just *who* wears the crown around here.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Start clearing out the hostile members of the board, one by one,” she answered. “I let the elders buy those furs, now they’re gonna find out how far their money went.”

“I thought you couldn’t fire any member of the board without a vote from the board.”

“I can’t. But I can make them retire for personal reasons,” she said smugly. “Kit, bro, Dad kept files on all the board members, and so do I. I don’t think they realize that I know what’s going on around here. What’s *really* going on around here.”

He laughed suddenly. “You’re gonna blackmail them!”

“Blackmail is such an ugly word,” she said lightly. “I prefer to think of it as using available assets against a business rival to gain a tactical advantage. I have enough on three of them to make them take an early retirement package, that or they’ll be staying in Club Fed for the next few years and change their titles to *convicted felon*.”

Kit laughed brightly. “Mean femme!”

“I’m a businessfemme, bro, I’m supposed to be mean,” she told him. “I’ll start with Rogers. I’ve already sent him a memo telling him I want to see him in my office first thing tomorrow morning. I guarantee you he’ll be clearing out his office by lunch. That’s a board member that the elders spent good money buying, and now he’s gone. I wonder if they’ll demand their money back,” she mused with a wicked little chuckle. “And I won’t give them a chance to even think about it, because I’m going to see Lewis after lunch. He’ll be gone by quitting time.”

“So, you’re sending Terry to New Orleans to protect him from Uncle Zach, and declaring war on the elders,” Kit noted dryly.

“That about sums it up,” she said, then she laughed. “But this has been brewing for a while. Since you left the family, really. Actually, it became inevitable the instant Dad died, and the fortune was divided up among all the Vulpans, and not just the elders. The cousins don’t have to listen to the elders anymore, and the elders don’t want to admit it. It’s not really

necessary to control them like they're children, in my opinion. As long as the cousins don't do anything outrageous, just let them be themselves. The elders are totally unwilling to abide by Dad's wishes, or the agreement, so the gloves are coming off. They've been trying to undercut me, and now they're going to try to do harm to the company to force me out. It's time for a reckoning." She blew out her breath. "Reckoning my ass. It's time for war."

"I think I'm not accepting any offer you make to come to Boston anytime soon," he said seriously.

"You're right. Stay out of Boston, bro, no matter who invites you. And I'll tell Terry to stay out too. You two are the focal point of the elders' wrath right now, so just stay out of their sight."

"I can do that."

"And don't tell Sheila anything I plan," she added. "Anything you tell Sheila will end up in Sarah's ear. Sheila tells Sarah what goes on in Austin, at least what she thinks isn't important. But sometimes big things can be learned from a conglomeration of little things."

"I didn't know Sheila rats us out."

"She doesn't rat you out, bro, she just gossips with her mother. Unfortunately, Sarah knows that Sheila still wants her approval, so she pumps Sheila for information by being nice to her and getting her to gossip," she sighed. "Sheila will tell her about things that she thinks don't matter, but Sarah's very clever. She can pick through the gossip and get real information."

"I didn't want to hear that," he grunted.

“She never means harm, Kit,” she said, a bit defensively. “She’s not telling her mother anything secret. But I can learn a lot by listening to her talk about daily life in the complex, with you and Jessie, and with the furs from your company, and your friends. I don’t want any hint of what’s coming to get to the elders.”

“Alright,” he answered. “I’ll keep it quiet, but I will tell her that Terry’s moving to New Orleans.”

“That’s fine, I have no doubt she’ll find out like ten minutes after I tell Terry. And remember. Stay out of Boston, Kit. No matter what.”

“You know how I feel about Boston, Vil,” he said bluntly.

“Good enough. Let me call Terry and tell him to start packing.”

“I’ll tell Allison when they get home. They’re out playing golf right now.”

“She’s trying out her clubs?”

“Yeah, I hope I got the right size,” Kit laughed.

“They looked about right. She won’t be playing golf much longer with her belly expanding.”

“She’ll play until she has to stop, she loves it,” Kit chuckled. “I’m already looking at a country club. They’ve been playing at a public course here, I want her to play on a nice course.”

“You should play. You’re pretty good.”

“It makes my back ache around the sixteenth hole,” he answered.

“Then cut some strokes off your game,” she teased. “I should get out on the course before the season’s over.”

“Go play in Scotland this weekend.”

“Hmm, that’s a good idea. Lemme call Ken after I talk to Terry and arrange a trip to Saint Andrews.”

“Have fun, sis. I’m gonna call Jessie and break the news.”

“Enjoy,” she chuckled, and they said their goodbyes.

Kit held onto the phone for a moment, pondering what was coming. Vil was right in that this was basically inevitable. None of the elders wanted Vil in control of the company from the start, and it was no surprise that they were going to try to force Vil out of the CEO’s chair. It was surprising, though, that they were willing to go to such extremes, to damage the company in order to make Vil look so bad that she had no choice but to step down...for the board could unseat her from the chair with a unanimous vote. That was a stipulation of her takeover of the company. They couldn’t take her stocks, but they could force her out of the company and remove her voice from how the company was run. So, the positioning and the threatening were over now. Vil had actually incited Zach to do something overt in pushing Terry, and now she was going to attack, go after them before they could go after her.

It was going to get *ugly* in Boston very soon. Terry was wise to ask to leave, and Vil was granting his wish in sending him to New Orleans. Though Terry had no idea what Vil was planning, he really didn’t want to be there when Vil started cleaning house. Heads were going to roll, and when the family realized what Vil was doing, they’d fight back. But in business, just like in war, the fur who fired the first shot from surprise often

had the advantage. All Vil had to do was hold out against the elders once she swept two hostile board members out of the company, and she'd eventually win...because she was just as ruthless as her uncles.

Yes, putting Vil in that chair rather than him was the best thing. She wanted it, he didn't. She could have it.

Terry was in New Orleans the very same day.

As soon as Vil told him, he literally ran home, packed an overnight bag, had his butler pack up the rest and follow him to New Orleans, and he was on the company jet to New Orleans at 5:00pm. And when he arrived at 8:00pm, Allison was there to meet him. Somewhat surprisingly, Allison convinced Jessie to fly her to New Orleans as soon as Terry called down and told them he was leaving Boston. Jessie reluctantly agreed, but only with the understanding that she would be flying home first thing in the morning, and Allison would be coming with her. Kit thought about going with them to see Terry, but he decided against it. He had absolute faith in Jessie's flying ability, and her IFR rating allowed her to fly at night. He was totally comfortable letting her fly to New Orleans for the night.

Though, her being out of the apartment for the night made it hard for him to sleep that night.

She called him from the plane at 7:45 the next morning, as he was on his way to work, the droning of the propeller audible in his ear. "Hey pretty kitty, on the way home?"

"Sure am, handsome fox," she answered. "About to taxi out and take off now. I should have Ally at AAIA right on time. I think it'll be the first

time one of their students was delivered to the hangar from the flight line,” she giggled. “Here, talk to Ally, I gotta do the pilot thing.”

“Hey Kit,” Allison called. “Thanks for letting Jessie fly me to see Terry.”

“She doesn’t need my permission, hon, she’s a licensed pilot and that plane is half hers,” he chuckled. “How was the trip?”

“We got here at eight, and we literally met Terry on the flight line,” she laughed. “He took us out to a nice restaurant and we had a nice meal, then he put us up in a hotel downtown. Jessie got us up early so we could fly back in time for me to get to school,” she said sourly. “I wanted to stay here today, but Jessie won’t let me,” she laughed. “She said I paid too much money to skip out on school.”

“You did. Just think, once you get your license and your instrument rating, you’ll be able to fly to New Orleans yourself, no matter what time of day and what kind of weather.”

“Yeah. Yeah!” she said brightly. “Let’s get back, Jessie, I need to get to school!”

Jessie delivered Allison to school right on time, and as Kit worked, she continued packing. He left early so he could meet the installation furs from ADT at 2:00pm, and he and Jessie signed the contract and received a training session with the new system. They were installing three keypads for the alarm, one by the front door, one by the back door, and one in the master bedroom, and it was a slightly better keypad and system Kit had bought, so the installation team spent nearly an hour with them explaining the system and its features and functions. After they had that done, they cancelled the contract at their old apartment and scheduled a Monday

appointment for ADT to come in and remove the system from the old apartment, and they were ready to move in. Dan, Lupe, and Mickey helped them move their bed, dresser, and dining room table over to the new apartment and set it up, and then Kit and Jessie spent the rest of the afternoon moving over the other important rooms, the kitchen and the bathroom. They intended to spend the night in the new apartment, so they needed enough to live over there. After they got in the boxes and brought over a couple of chairs, Kit put up the shower curtain in the master bedroom while Jessie hung her spice rack Terry gave her and started putting her cooking equipment up in the new kitchen. Kit went back and cleaned out the refrigerator and pantry, then brought over all their food. He left Jessie to unpack as he, Dan, and Mickey helped Lupe move his bed over to the new apartment as well, the four of them laughing as they wrestled with the king size bed.

“Such a big bed for such a little dog,” Dan teased as he and Kit picked up the box springs.

“Brah, I need plenty of space for my love harem,” he said, smoothing back his hair.

“Such a liar,” Kit laughed. “Alice has you on a leash and you know it.”

“She’s just in the dark about the rest of my girlfriends,” he said grandly.

“She’ll shave your fur off if she finds out about them,” he warned with another laugh.

“Brah, I can handle Alice,” he said with a grin.

“So, we still on schedule this weekend?” Mickey asked.

“Yah brah, eight o’clock on Saturday mornin’, be at the office. We’ll get everyone’s furniture moved all at once. We got a flatbed comin’.”

“Yeah, I’m bringing it from work,” Dan affirmed.

“Who are we moving?”

“All of us and Sheila, but furniture only,” Lupe answered. “Anything small enough to be put on the carts stays behind, we’re mainly after couches, beds, big dressers, washers and dryers, that kind of stuff.”

“I can’t believe Sheila’s taking a luxury unit for herself,” Dan laughed. “One little girl in a four bedroom townhouse!”

“Brah, you can’t talk, you and Mickey are takin’ units too!”

“Well, I’m a big guy, I need lots of space,” Dan said airily, which made Lupe chuckle.

“She’s used to living in a big place,” Kit said. “And I’m sure she can afford the rent.”

“Yah, she ain’t got no problem payin’ the rent,” Lupe chuckled in agreement. “I did make her sign a one year lease for it, though.”

“A year?” Mickey said in surprise. “Why so long?”

“So she won’t decide to move out next month,” he answered. “She wanted the apartment next door to Kit, so I made her pay for it with a long term lease,” he chuckled.

“Eh, I won’t mind,” Kit shrugged. “I get along with Sheila.”

“Ah, so she’s my duplex buddy,” Dan chuckled.

“Yah, and Mickey’s in the next one over. That keeps the poker gang all close to each other,” Lupe grinned. “I got an interesting call yesterday, too.”

“From who?”

“Kev. He’s lookin’ at a luxury unit. I think he’s gonna pop the question to Sammy.”

“Good, those two would be a good couple,” Mickey said, to which they all nodded.

“I thought you had the luxury units all booked,” Dan noted.

“Nah, I was keeping one in reserve,” he answered as they wrestled the mattresses out of Lupe’s apartment and towards Mickey’s waiting pickup truck. “Just in case. And Kev was kinda why I was keeping one held back, just in case a friend wanted one.”

“Can he afford the rent?”

“Brah, he’s a *lawyer*,” Lupe laughed. “You should just be glad I’m givin’ you a break on the rent, or you wouldn’t be able to afford it!”

“Yeah yeah, I know, and I also know that we keep it quiet,” Mickey chuckled. “If anyone asks, I’m paying twelve hundred same as everyone else.”

“That’s about six hundred out of my price range,” Dan chuckled as they waited for Kit and Mickey to pull the box springs up onto the truck. “I have no idea what to do with all that space. I’m gonna end up closing off some rooms. I don’t even have enough furniture.”

“I know that feeling,” Mickey laughed in agreement. “They’re gonna be echoes in my pad for like a year.”

“Take on roommates, make them pay a portion of the rent, live there for free,” Kit said idly.

Dan and Mickey both laughed. “Dude, that’s an idea!” Mickey said brightly.

“I ain’t got a problem with that, but remember that these aren’t the old units, guys,” Lupe said. “The inner ring has to maintain a certain appearance, cause I got snobby professionals moving in here. So there can’t be no beat up thirty year old cars in the carports, and you’d better find responsible furs that won’t bust shit up. The party jocks an’ shit have to stay out in the main complex. I gotta keep these luxury units in top shape.”

“No sweat, Lupe,” Dan assured him. “Alright, let’s go get the dresser so Lupe has something to wear tomorrow.”

By the time they were done moving Lupe’s bedroom over, Kit went to his own apartment and was greeted by a large, empty living room, with boxes stacked in the far corner. Where he’d go left and through the dining room to get to the kitchen, now he’d go through the short hallway almost across from the front door, which had the stairs going to the second floor, a tiny closet under the stairs, and a door for the den all on the right, a large utility closet and the door to the bathroom on the left, and the hallway ended in the kitchen, with the back door visible at the front end of the hallway. He padded back to the kitchen and saw Jessie bent down, stacking her baking tins into a lower cabinet in the island. “What a way to greet me,” Kit teased, patting her on her rump as he went by, to which she responded by swatting him with her tail.

“Get Lupe’s bed in?” she asked.

“Yah, and his dresser. He’s going back for his bathroom stuff now, but that’s his problem. Lupe said that Kevin called him about one of the luxury units, he’s gonna rent the last one available.”

“Really? That’s awesome news!” Jessie said with a bright smile as she stood up. “That means that he’s gonna propose to Sam! He doesn’t want to try to move her into that little efficiency he has, so he’s finding a suitable house for them!”

“Did you really think he wasn’t going to propose?” Kit chuckled. “He was waiting until he was established at the firm, and now he is. He’s billing hours now, a lot more than the other rookies in the firm. He wanted to be stable and secure, and he’s stable and secure. I hope we hear the good news soon. He’ll have to pop the question quick after Sam finds out about the apartment, or she’ll know something’s up.”

“Well, here’s hoping it’s soon,” Jessie smiled. “Now let’s go get more stuff.”

They did that, moving some small furniture and several more boxes, anything they could fit in the van and the truck. They wanted to move as much as they could on their own, leave only the heavy furniture and appliances, and also so they could accept delivery of the furniture they bought over the next two days. Most of it was coming on Thursday, but the overhead rack Kit bought for Jessie’s birthday was coming tomorrow, and the furniture store from which he’d bought it was going to install it and run the wiring from the light in the center. That was why it was so important to get ADT over here today, because they had things coming that were going to be installed in the apartment, and they needed the alarm installed first.

They managed to move quite a bit over in the four hours they had before they planned to stop, and Jessie made their first meal in the new, much bigger townhouse. She decided to fry hamburgers on the grill attachment that came with her new six burner stove, a layover grill that went over two burners, one of three layovers. She also had a flat griddle layover for pancakes and other griddle cooked food, and a large pot layover so a large pot could be set stably over two burners. It was just one little feature of their new restaurant-style stove, a stove which had cost Lupe a lot of money to buy and install and therefore would cost them since Kit had agreed to buy all special appliances that Jessie wanted in the apartment and pay Lupe back in installments, but a stove that Jessie absolutely demanded. And after seeing how useful it could be, Kit didn't mind paying for it all that much. He'd have to see if the other appliances built into the kitchen, large-volume washer and dryer, jacuzzi tub in the master bedroom, and the tankless water heating system that Jessie wanted and Lupe had installed would be worth it in the long run. But, he figured they would be. Jessie was very savvy about appliances and what should be in a nice house, and had been quite insistent about Lupe installing *exactly* the appliances she wanted, and installing several amenities that hadn't been part of the original design. But, she'd been so insistent, and Lupe had seen the practicality of her insistence, and that had made Lupe install a few of her demands in all of the apartments as standard amenities. The tankless water heating system, the small baking oven in the island, the enclosed microwave cubby by the spot for the refrigerator, the larger, family-sized refrigerators that Jessie wanted rather than the smaller apartment-standard refrigerators he initially intended to install, the intercom system in the house that had outlets in the living room, den, kitchen, master bedroom, and the front door so they could query visitors before opening the door, the laundry chute that ran from the hallway

on the upper floor and into the basement, and the dumbwaiter that ran from the attic to the hallway just outside the master bedroom to the kitchen and then to the cellar, these were all original Jessie demands that Lupe had standardized for all the luxury units, for they seemed to be reasonable ideas for everyone in his eyes. He especially liked the idea of the dumbwaiter, put something in it and press a button for the floor the item was going, and one didn't have to lug it up the stairs.

He didn't have the heart to tell Lupe that the dumbwaiter was actually his idea. Dumbwaiters were quite standard in mansions, and were very, very useful, if a little pricy to install. The location of the dumbwaiter ate a little bit of attic and cellar space, but it let it run from the attic to the basement, which would give them a useful means of moving awkward items between floors. Instead of hauling a box up the stairs, they could put it in the dumbwaiter and let it take it up for them. The dumbwaiter carriage Lupe had installed had a load rating of 150 pounds and was three feet wide, two feet deep, and three feet high, which let them put a fairly good size box in it. It had also been very easy for the contractors to integrate into the designs, because of where it was located. They only had to reroute one electrical wire and an air conditioning duct to make room for the dumbwaiter shaft, since the motor was installed in the attic.

Vil called as they were eating, and Kit put it on speaker on the middle of the table. "Hey sis, how goes it?"

"It's on," she answered, a bit grimly. "Rogers and Lewis both retired today, effective immediately. Uncle Zach realized what I did as soon as Rogers cleared out his office, and he couldn't move fast enough to keep Lewis from following him out the door. In one day, I've taken away Zach's voting majority on the board, and now he knows he can't get rid of me

easily. So, the elders are now on the warpath. Zach's put two names into consideration for the vacant board seats that are basically his yes-males. So there's gonna be open warfare in the boardroom tomorrow. Aunt Maxine visited me personally in my office and more or less just told me that Boston wasn't big enough for both of us, and one of us was going to be gone by Christmas. And she *wasn't* hinting that one of us would be moving. I got Terry out of here just in time, because Zach was looking for him this morning, and I intercepted an order out of his office to try to get Allison arrested in Austin, arrested for prostitution, but Zach learned quickly that he can't have someone arrested on a whim in a city I already control. So the gloves are now off. I'm already under lockdown. Stav and Marcus won't let me so much as walk by a window, and they hired some security guards for my house from the company they used to work for, so now my house and grounds are filled with large males wearing body armor and carrying assault weapons."

"Holy cow," Jessie breathed. "Are you going to be alright, Vil?"

"I'll be fine, Jess," she answered confidently. "I've actually been preparing for this for a while, so I'm ready."

"What's going to happen, Vil?" Kit asked.

"For now? The key to taking control of the family from me is to take my chair, so that's where the main fighting will take place, over my position as CEO. I'll be openly opposed in the boardroom by Zach and Jake, over absolutely everything. Even if I want to buy a new toner cartridge for my printer. Zach's now making it publicly clear that he thinks it was a disaster that I was put in the chair, and he wants me out, effective yesterday. He'll try to convince the board to vote me out, but I'll keep weeding out his sycophants one by one and either making them retire or having them

arrested,” she said grimly. “I’ve already sent a few very interesting documents to the FBI over Simpson, because I found out she’s doing some pretty bad things. That old vixen bitch is going to get arrested as soon as the feds realize what I sent them. I’m sending a clear message that nobody that sides with the elders is safe from me. They’re going to attack me. I’m going to ignore them and strike out at anyone who sides with them against me, because they really aren’t important in the scheme of things. They need support to get rid of me, so I’ll attack them through that need. The rest of the board will learn quickly that anyone who openly opposes me won’t be working at Vulpan Shipyards for long. I don’t have to *fire* them to get rid of them.”

“What about the other three elders?”

“Well, Tom’s still seriously pissed at Zach for getting into a fight with Terry, so he’s too angry to be very useful. Sarah’s still riding the fence, as she usually does, waiting to see who’s going to win so she can support that side. Brian is actually washing his paws of this. He told Zach that the shipyard made a record profit last year, and he sees no reason to rock the boat. He told me earlier that Terry going out with an ex-stripper doesn’t come close to what Bess has done, so he sees that as no reason to start a war in the family over it. He certainly doesn’t approve of it, but he thinks a more diplomatic approach would be better than the older elders basically trying to unseat me from the chair.”

“What about the cousins?”

“As soon as the word got out, Boston cleared out quickly,” she answered with a grim chuckle. “Nobody wants to be in the middle of this, and they certainly don’t want their parents to know that they don’t agree with them. They want their freedom, but they’re more than happy to let me

do the fighting so they can stay out of it. Every cousin in college decided to either go back to campus or go on an impromptu vacation. The femme cousins are bunkering down with their kids, and some of them left for summer houses. Bridgette took her kids to Florida, Chris sent his wife and kids to their vacation house in the keys, Louis sent his wife and kids to England to visit Matty's parents, and Wendy moved her family to their vacation house in Puerto Rico, getting *way* away from Boston. The short of it is that the others don't want to get pulled into this, so they're clearing out of Boston. They're giving me and the elders plenty of room to fight."

"Well, be careful, sis," Kit said seriously. "Don't underestimate the uncles."

"Oh, I'm not. But I'll have to leave them alone for now, until I cut away their support in the company. After I force out all their lackeys, then I'll push *them* out of the company. Maxine's right that there's not enough room for them and me in Boston. I won't stop until I'm the only Vulpan left on the board. Zach's made it clear that he won't stop until I'm gone, so I'm going to play by the same rules. By the end of this Zach and Jake will be out of the company. I may even force them completely out of Boston."

"What if they try to do to you what you're doing to them?" he asked in a roundabout way, fully understanding that if they were now at war, then no phone call was safe from tapping, at least on his side. He was fairly sure that Vil's phones were secure, but no cell phone was secure. So he had to be careful in how he phrased certain things.

She chuckled. "They're not ready to try that with me," she said. "If they want to blackmail me, they'll find that I have a hell of a lot more dirt on them than they have on me. They've had more years to build the skeletons in their own closets. All I have is a bone or two." She was silent a

moment. “I’ve called Vanguard and told them to tighten up security in Austin, just in case,” she told them. “Stav and Marcus have also suggested a bodyguard to send to Austin. And I’m sending him down tomorrow. He’ll live in the complex so he’s close to you, but outside of that he’ll only be there if you need him. His name is Nick Lawson, and he’s a veteran of the same company where Stav and Marcus used to work before they became freelance bodyguards.”

“Vil, you don’t have to go that far.”

“It’s for my peace of mind, not yours,” she told him immediately. “I want a seasoned fur down there in case Zach goes crazy and does something insane, and also a seasoned security expert to be available for when me and Terry visit, someone that can make sure everything’s safe and normal. And the boys assure me that Nick is one of the best in the business. He just finished a contract working in Japan, and I contracted him for the next six months. He has extensive experience in this kind of thing, and has impeccable references. He’ll be very discreet, guys. He’ll be in the building right behind your apartment, so he’ll be close by if you need him. I’ve just finished talking to Lupe, and Lupe’s already agreed to rent him whichever apartment he wants.”

“I can’t believe you think it’ll get that out of control,” Jessie said fearfully.

“Actually I don’t, but furs in our position never take chances, hon,” Vil answered. “I’m sending Nick down there *just in case*. I don’t think he’ll be needed, but I’d rather have him there if you need him, than have you need him and him not be there.”

“Oh. Okay,” Jessie said, taking Kit’s paw and squeezing it.

“He’ll be calling you in about ten minutes. He should be there sometime tomorrow. Like you two, he has a pilot’s license, and he’ll be flying in using his own personal plane.”

“Well, we’ll have that much in common with him,” Kit laughed.

“He’s not the only one. Both Stav and Marcus are pilots too, though they don’t often fly. It’s considered a necessary job skill in their line of work. It’s hard to bring your weapons when you’re flying commercial, so most of them fly privately. A high-level bodyguard or mercenary usually has a pilot’s license, and most of them own their own planes.”

“They never told me,” Kit chuckled.

“They don’t tell anyone much of anything, Kit. If furs knew what they could do, it would make it harder for them to do their jobs. They like to keep their secrets, and one of those is that those two can fly my jet, and they can also fly the helicopter I often use for short trips around Boston.”

“I guess that’s a good idea.”

“It’s a matter of my safety, that way one of them can take over if my pilots get sick or hurt,” she said simply. “When I hired them, one of the things both of them did was find out what jet and helicopter I fly in and get rated for them.”

“Smart.”

“They’re professionals, Kit. Now, I’m gonna go ahead and go, I have some reports to read, and I have to get ready for battle tomorrow,” she chuckled. “Nick should call you very soon.”

“Alright.”

“Before I hang up, I want you to do one thing, bro.”

“What?”

“Make this very clear to Allison, bro. Make it clear that the family is after her, and that she must not, for any reason, leave Austin without either of you two, Sheila, or Terry with her. Zach’s already tried to get her arrested, then he found out that I control the DA and police down there. He may try to get the Texas Rangers or the FBI after her. I can prevent it, but it’s a lot easier if she stays close to my base of power, and that’s Austin. My protection doesn’t extend much past Austin. She has to stay close to the city unless she has a Vulpan with her, for her own good.”

“I’ll make sure she understands that.”

“That’s what I needed to hear. Be good you two.”

“Be careful, Vil,” Jessie said in a fearful voice.

“I’ll be very careful, sis-in-law,” she promised. “Don’t you worry about a thing. Like I said, I’ve been waiting for this, and I’m prepared for it. I’ll be fine.”

“I’m still going to worry.”

“Don’t worry too much. It’s not good for the baby,” she said. “Be good, bro.”

“I will. And *do* be careful, sis.”

“I’ve been planning this almost since I took the chair, bro. I’m more than ready for Zach and Jake,” she said confidently. “Bye guys. Love ya.”

“Love you sis,” Kit said, and the call was over.

“I hope she’s right,” Jessie said worriedly, squeezing his paw.

“Vil’s not one to not be prepared for what she knows is coming, pretty kitty,” Kit told her. “From the sound of it, she has a plan, and that’s always a good thing.”

“Do you really think that your uncles might try to *hurt* her?”

“I once thought they tried to kill me, love, I think they’re more than capable of it. But, Vil’s ready for that too. If they try, they’ll find themselves in a world of hurt.”

“Do you think we’ll be safe?”

“They have no reason to come after us, love,” he told her. “We have nothing to do with this. This isn’t so much about me as it is about Vil’s willingness to let the cousins do things the elders won’t tolerate. I may have started it, but it’s Vil that’s letting it happen. Sure, they could threaten us as a means to blackmail Vil, but to do something like that, you have to have credibility...and they don’t. Remember, Vil said that Zach tried to get Ally arrested, and he found out Vil utterly controls Austin. There’s nothing the elders can do down here, so we can just basically stay out of Vil’s way and let her crush our uncles. That she can do it, I have no doubt.”

“I hope she’ll be okay.”

“She’ll be fine, pretty kitty. Vil’s a big girl, she can take care of herself.”

“I think I’ll worry more about us,” she said fearfully. “You two were right about your family. They *did* go after Ally.”

“And Vil saw it coming, so she was ready for it,” Kit nodded. “She’ll be fine as long as she stays in Austin, love. Vil made it clear she’s protecting *all* of us, and that includes Ally and our friends. I’ll be Zach never saw that coming,” he said with a wicked chuckle.

The fur Vil hired was quite punctual. About ten minutes after Vil called, the phone rang again, and Kit answered it as Jessie picked up her plate. “Hello?”

“Mister Vulpan?” a male voice, deep, asked in a definite Australian accent.

“That’s me.”

“Nick Lawson, sir, did Miss Vulpan call you?”

“She did.”

“Good, good. As she told you, I’ve been hired to make sure you can go on about your business without a care in the world, and that’s exactly what’s gonna happen. That’s my mission in Austin, Mister Vulpan, to make sure you and your wife never feel a whit like anything’s wrong. I won’t intrude on your life in any way until it becomes necessary for me to take steps to keep you safe. Unless that happens, just consider me to be your neighbor. I’ll always be around to help you, even if it’s just to help your wife carry her groceries into the house.”

“Alright,” Kit said.

I’ll be arriving in Austin tomorrow at five o’clock, at Bergstrom. Now, I’ve been told you know the general aviation section of the airport. I’ve bought a tiedown spot out by Signature Services. Can you meet me there?”

“We can do that,” he answered.

“Good. I fly a Beech King Air. Now, may I speak to your wife please?”

“Sure. Jessie!” he called. “Nick wants to talk to you.”

She hurried from the kitchen and took the phone. “Hello? Mister Lawson? Nick,” she said with a light giggle. Kit picked up his plate as she listened. “Yes, that’s fine. I’ve never seen that plane before. Really? Yes, I have my multi rating. I’d love to!” she said with growing enthusiasm. “He offered to take us flying in his plane!” she told Kit. “Yes, we’re in the middle of moving to a new apartment right now. Yes, we have an alarm already, we wouldn’t move until it was installed. No, that’s fine. It was nice to talk to you, Nick. Here,” she told Kit, holding the phone towards him.

Kit took it, and Jessie took the plate from him and headed for the kitchen. “Hello.”

“Nice lady you have there, Mister Vulpan,” he chuckled. “She sounds like a sweetheart.”

“That’s a good description.”

“I need to ask, Mister Vulpan, do you keep a firearm in your house?”

“My wife shoots skeet, so we have two shotguns.”

“I see. Have either of you ever had training with a pawgun?”

“I haven’t. Odds are Jessie has. Pretty kitty, have you ever used a pawgun before?”

“Yeah, I used to go target shooting with Dad before he got into skeet shooting,” she answered from the kitchen.

“She has.”

“Good. Next week, both of you need to keep a day open for a training session. I doubt you’ll ever need a pawgun, but I’m a huge believer in firearm safety, so I train all my clients in the safe use of firearms as a matter of course. Consider it a free service I provide.”

“Well, that’s nice of you, Nick, but why do we need firearm safety training?”

“Like I said, I’m a big safety male,” he chuckled. “I carry a firearm as part of my duties, so I make sure that my clients are well versed in firearm safety in case they ever touch my weapon. I’m a firm believer that anyone that is even *near* a firearm should be trained in its safe and proper use, and you will be near my firearm. I don’t want you to visit me in my apartment and pick up my weapon by accident and not understand exactly how to be safe with it.”

“Well, when you say it that way, it makes much more sense,” Kit said with a nod to himself.

“I’ll let you get back to what you were doing, Mister Vulpan. I’ll meet you tomorrow at Signature at five.”

“We’ll be there.”

“G’day, Mister Vulpan.”

Kit disconnected the call and chuckled. Nick sounded like a nice guy. “At least he didn’t sound all professional like Stav and Marcus,” he told Jessie.

“I love that accent,” she laughed from the kitchen. “What’s a King Air, love?”

“It’s a twin engine turboprop, and a very nice one,” Kit answered as he came into the kitchen. “One of the few turboprops still actively produced. If he wanted a plane with a lot of cargo capacity and good all-around usefulness, he picked a good one. He can take off from a dirt runway with a King Air, where a jet can’t do that. I flew one of those when I was in flight school,” he chuckled. “We called it the old son of a Beech. It was an ancient King Air, made back like in the seventies. I swear, it had duct tape holding it together,” he laughed.

“That was the plane you always flew and made everyone else mad at you?”

He nodded. “Yup. An old Beech King Air, but if you just say you’re flying a Beech, pilots will automatically assume you’re talking about a King Air. I lived in that thing for about a year. I was logging twenty or more hours a week in it, and the other students could never get it, cause I always had it,” he chuckled. “Now let’s get the dishes done. We should start the dishwasher,” he laughed.

“For two plates and a skillet? *Please*,” she snorted, turning the water on in her brand new twin sink with a third smaller bay for washing vegetables, complete with its own sprayer. “Okay, so, what’s on the schedule for tomorrow?”

“The Lowe’s furs are gonna install the rack,” he said. “Outside of that, we meet Nick. That’s it. The rest of the furniture comes on Thursday.”

“Alright. What time are they coming to install?”

“Two, I think. If they’re still here when we go get Nick, I’ll have Lupe watch ‘em for us while we’re gone.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll be busy in here for a bit, love, can you go make the bed up?”

“I surely can,” he smiled in reply.

Nick Lawson wasn’t what Kit expected.

Kit had expected a dingo or other Australian breed, but Nick Lawson was a wolf, a black-furred wolf with amber eyes, fur so black that it looked like it was spun out of a moonless night. He was also *huge*. His voice was deep but wasn’t *that* deep, leading Kit to believe that he was maybe around six feet tall or so. But Nick Lawson was nearly seven feet tall, a huge, muscular, powerful wolf that had a nick taken out of his right ear and a small but visible scar on the end of his nose, the physical indications that Nick had seen combat in his life. He pulled in at Signature at 4:50pm in a white King Air with a large black stripe along its side, clearly his own private plane. It was one of the newer King Airs, one of the C90B’s, and probably had a glass cockpit...and had cost Nick a couple of million dollars. That he could afford a plane like that said much about his qualifications. This was a very high-priced bodyguard and security expert. Despite that professional pedigree, he got off his plane wearing bermuda shorts and a plain black tank top instead of a suit. “G’day!” he called as they came up to him. “Nick Lawson, nice to meet ya!” he said, shaking Kit’s paw energetically.

“Nice to meet you too,” Kit answered, and he shook Jessie’s paw.

“Hi,” Jessie said to him shyly.

“Well, bless me, I’ll be looking after a mommy to be!” he said with a toothy grin. “When’s your due date, Miss Jessie?”

“September thirtieth,” she said with a sudden smile.

“Wot, I’ll be here for the delivery, then!” he said brightly. “Let me lock up the plane, and we can go in. I should have a rental waiting here for me. What you can do for me is lead me to your complex, so I can talk to, uh, Lupe. That’s his real name?”

“It is,” Kit chuckled.

“Odd name there.”

“Lupe’s an odd chihuahua, but he’s a cool guy,” Kit laughed.

“He should have a lease for me to sign, as soon as I look over the complex and decide where I want to settle in,” he added. “Then it’ll just be a matter of makin’ myself cozy.”

“I’m hoping you were hired for nothing,” Jessie said, then her cheeks ruffled slightly. “I didn’t mean I’m not happy you’re here, it’s just, you know.”

“Of course I do,” he smiled. “Believe me, Miss Jessie, fellas in my line of work *never* want to actually work. As long as we’re bored, it’s all good. I’m here to make sure you never have to worry about a single thing. As long as I do my job right, the only time you’re gonna see me is when you wave to me in the parkin’ lot.”

“I don’t think it’ll be quite like that,” Jessie giggled.

“Not *really*, but seriously, I’ll just be your neighbor, and I hope that’s all I’ll ever be. Miss Vil hired me just in case. She said odds are I’d not have to lift a finger after I got everything all set up to my satisfaction, but she wanted me here to see that you’re not hassled or bothered, just in case.”

“That’s what she said to us,” Kit said. “Just in case.”

“Yah yah yah,” he said with a nod. “I’ll do a few inspections, install a couple of cameras, make some contacts with the police and other fellas in my line of work that are here in Austin, then it’s just settling in and earning my paycheck without you ever seeing a thing. That’s what guys like me love, when our clients never know we’re here, and yet you’re kept safe and sound.”

“Sounds good to us,” Kit told him.

“But, if you need me, I’m here for ya,” he told them. “I’m here to help in any way I can, even if it’s to help you move or unstick your garbage disposal or change that pesky ceiling light you can’t quite reach without a ladder. Twenty four seven, I’m always just a call away.”

“That sounds good, Kit can’t change a light bulb,” Jessie giggled.

“Hey! I can so! Just don’t expect it to work,” he said flippantly, which made both of them laugh. Kit was rather pleased that this Nick Lawson wasn’t quite so serious as Stav and Marcus. It made him much more affable.

Nick and Kit tied down his Beech, and then they went in. There was indeed a rental waiting for him, and it was a big Ford Expedition SUV. He followed them to the complex, and he looked around with a nod after he got out, parking on the curb in front of the house rather than pulling into the driveway. “Nice, nice,” he said approvingly, looking around. “Just built?”

“Yeah, they just let us start moving in on Monday,” Kit answered.

“Okee, take me to Lupe, and let me look around,” he said.

Kit did just that, since Lupe was in their apartment. The Lowe’s furs were just finishing installing the rack over the island, and they had it up when Kit and Jessie came into the kitchen with Lupe and Nick behind them. “It’s gorgeous!” Jessie squealed in delight, clasping paws before her. “Oh, Kit, it’s just perfect!”

“It did turn out very well,” the ocelot leading the three fur team nodded from the ladder where he was installing the wiring for the light in the island. “We installed the island on the same circuit as the main kitchen lights, Misses Vulpan, replacing the light that was here before we installed the rack,” he added with a point at a slender chain hanging down from the center. “But this chain is the switch for the light, so you can turn it on or off by itself. Just remember, the main lights have to be on to turn on the island light.”

“That’s fine, I wouldn’t use it without the main lights being on anyway,” she assured him. “Oh, Kit, I love it! I can’t wait to hang my pans up on it!”

“I’m glad you like it, pretty kitty,” he told her, putting his arm around her and kissing her lightly.

“Brah, they didn’t tell me you’d be so tall,” Lupe laughed to Nick, shaking his paw.

“I get that a lot,” Nick grinned in reply. “Now, I need to look over the units in the building behind this apartment, so I can find a good one.”

“No prob, brah, Vil explained what you’d need, and I’m ready,” Lupe said. “Said you might want to install a couple of cameras and would give me some recommendations of security I could install here.”

“Yah, I’m a licensed security analyst. I’ll inspect the complex and give you some recommendations, free of charge.”

“Cool, brah, cool. Lemme get my keys and we’ll take a walk.”

Lupe and Nick left, and Kit and Jessie watched as the installers finished with the rack. They tested the light and found that it worked, and Kit signed the installation form as the ocelot’s crew packed up their tools. “There you go, folks, we hope you enjoy it,” the ocelot smiled.

“I already love it!” Jessie gushed. “It looks *perfect* with the kitchen!”

“It does indeed,” the ocelot nodded. “You chose a very good piece for the kitchen.”

Kit and Jessie walked the installers out, and Kit saw Lupe and Nick come out of the community center, where Lupe had his new office. “Did the cable company come today, love?”

“Uh-huh,” she answered as he closed the door. “They ran a line to the living room and our bedroom, and the cable modem line is in our den. He tested it with his laptop and it’s working. So, we can move the computers over today.”

“I’ll call Mickey and see if he can lend us his pickup.”

With Mickey’s help, they moved the computer desk, printer table, and bookshelf, and Kit moved over the desktop. It took him over an hour to set up the cable modem and get the home network set up. He came out of the

den and walked into the living room to see Lupe and Mickey talking with Nick. “Dude, how can you not have a home?” Mickey asked in surprise.

“I live where I’m needed,” Nick told him. “I keep my gear on my plane. When I take a new contract, I move in where I’m needed, like here. I’ll go out and buy a car and furniture tomorrow, then sell it all off when I’m done here and move on.”

“So, you’re here to guard Kit and Jessie like the way those panthers guard Vil?” Lupe asked.

“Nah, nah, I’m here just in case,” he answered. “Miss Vulpan wants some added security down here for a few months, because of the baby coming I’d guess, so she hired me to assess the situation and stay down here a while to make sure everything’s fine. She made it clear I’m only here as a precaution. I’ll be staying in the background unless I’m needed. Just makin’ sure,” he said with a smile.

“Well, that’s cool,” Mickey said with a nod.

“It’s an interesting way to make a living,” he chuckled. “I get to see the world, and if I do my job right, nobody notices a thing. That’s the way we like it,” he said with a smile. “Now, it’s a little late, so I’ll be headin’ to a hotel for tonight, Mister Vulpan.”

“Please, just Kit,” he corrected.

“Kit it is,” he nodded. “I’ll be back here at around nine tomorrow morning. Will you be here?”

“Jessie will,” Kit answered.

“Ah, good, she can let me in to do my initial walkthrough, and then I’ll assess the complex. Then I’ll go buy what I need to settle in. After that, I’ll sit down with Lupy here and give him my assessment of the complex from a security standpoint.”

“You got your apartment?”

“Yah, I found the one I want, and lucky for me it’s not already rented,” he laughed. “It overlooks the privacy fence, lets me make sure everything’s okay.”

“I guess he’s gonna be a peeping tom,” Kit laughed.

“It’s my job,” Nick grinned.

Nick was affable enough, but he was also all business.

Jessie told him about it during lunch. He came in and inspected their townhouse, and found it initially good. He liked the alarm package options that they’d chosen and the locations of the keypads, and his only real suggestion was the installation of locking bars to place in the tracks on the sliding glass doors leading to the deck and a deadbolt lock on the back door in the kitchen. He did *not* ask for the combination to the alarm, for a simple reason, Jessie said. “He said that if he needed to enter the house without our permission, he *wanted* the cops to come,” she told him, which Kit could understand as smart. The police were not Nick’s enemies. Kit was a law-abiding citizen whom Nick had been hired to protect, and the police and Vanguard security were part of that protection, so he would more than welcome their assistance. After inspecting the townhouse, he inspected the complex with Lupe, which took a good two hours. Nick pointed out

possible problems to him, and they talked about a camera system that Lupe could install that would cover the entire complex but not be outrageously expensive, and they discussed the possibility of hiring a security guard to keep watch mainly over the community center, which might not be a bad idea given there was some expensive equipment in it. Nick even offered to help him set up his security, which Lupe rather liked. Additional security features like cameras, gates, and guards lowered the insurance for the complex. The one thing Nick liked was the gates that Lupe had installed on the inner ring, preventing unauthorized cars from entering the luxury apartment area. After the inspection, Nick left to go buy what he needed for his apartment, which was a two bedroom on the second floor of the building behind their townhouse, which would let him stand on his small balcony and see the backs of the townhouses. He was also going to meet with furs from Vanguard and the police, make the contacts he'd talked about the day before. "He said that he could be at our back door in thirty seconds from his apartment if we need him. I don't see how unless he jumps off his balcony and jumps the fence," she giggled.

"I'll bet that's exactly how he'd do it," Kit said seriously. "A wolf that tall could jump off a second story balcony without hurting himself, and I'll bet he could get over the privacy fence in about ten seconds."

"Maybe. He's out right now buying furniture for his apartment, and buying a car. He must have a lot of money to just go out and buy things like that, then sell them when he's done," she laughed.

"He's an elite bodyguard, love, I'm sure he's very well paid for what he does. I'm just glad he didn't try to move in with us."

"Well, he said he's here just in case. He doesn't need to be in the house with us unless things are for real."

“True,” Kit nodded in agreement.

“He did say that he *might* move into our townhouse if he thinks he needs to be there to protect us,” she added.

“I’m not surprised. Is the furniture there yet?”

“The bedroom pieces, gun cabinet, and the kitchen table are, the rest of it’ll be delivered around one or so,” she answered.

Nick *was* a professional, though. When Kit got off work, he saw the wolf arrive in the complex with a brand new Ford Expedition with temporary tags, the car he bought, and it was filled with suitcases, boxes, cases, and items from his plane. Some of those boxes and cases looked decidedly oddly shaped. Kit figured that they were filled with equipment, and probably weaponry, not available to him here in Texas, and maybe not even in the United States. Nick was an ex-mercenary and was now a personal bodyguard for hire, so Kit had no doubt that he was highly trained in military-grade weaponry, and most likely owned some...which was why he moved it all around in a private plane. He put it all in his apartment, and then a furniture truck arrived, pulling into the drive on the far side and disappearing behind the building. That had to be Nick’s furniture. Later, as they were moving more furniture and boxes to the townhouse from the old apartment, they saw Nick and Lupe up on the roof of the community center. Nick was installing a very small, almost invisible camera under the eaves of the roof facing their row of townhouses, Lupe on the roof and Nick on the ladder, securing the mount into place with a screwdriver. Nick motioned towards the townhouses while talking to Lupe, then both of them waved to them when they got out of their cars. After they finished, both Lupe and Nick helped them carry boxes and the small furniture they’d brought over

from the apartment into the townhouse as Jessie fussed over the furniture that had been delivered earlier that day.

“You know, I should interview you,” Kit chuckled as he and Nick carried the coffee table into the townhouse. “I think it’d be an interesting article.”

“I’m a ham,” he grinned. “As long as you don’t ask me about trade secrets or what kinda guns I own, sure. I’m not a secret, Kit. I *want* anyone that might want to tangle with you to know that I’m here.”

“Odd position to take. Won’t that make them more careful?”

“It stops more trouble than it starts,” he answered seriously as they put the table down near the wall, since the other furniture wasn’t in the house yet. “Besides, how can I stay a secret? I’m just a tad easy to identify,” he grinned. “Anyone who works in my profession, or the professions my profession is hired to stop, already knows I’m here, they know exactly who I’m contracted to protect, and they know that me being here makes any attempt your family makes to cause you trouble much more expensive. Me being here may not stop the two-bit hoods that might try to steal your car, but me being here *will* scare away the professionals that might try to bug your car or try to hack into the state system to make it look like you didn’t pay your taxes or try to frame you for some crime so you get arrested.”

“Ah. I didn’t know you ranged out into those kinds of things.”

“I don’t personally, but I have mates that do,” he grinned. “When you hire me, Kit, you don’t hire just me. You hire me and any mate I call to ask a favor. I have a couple of mates makin’ sure your computer records don’t mysteriously change or vanish, and another mate is doing me a favor and making sure your IRS status doesn’t suddenly change. I also have a few

mates that are in my direct line of work I can call and have them come down to help out if I think I need it,” he added. “Paying them comes out of my fee, so don’t you worry a bit about it. But I seriously doubt that you’ll ever need me to do that. Miss Vil hired those nutty panthers, and they’re *very* good. They won’t let anyone sneak anything up on me down here, because odds are they’ll nose it out and have Miss Vil take care of it before it ever gets down here. I’m only here *just in case* something gets past them...which is highly unlikely.”

Kit chuckled. “You know, I should be much more nervous that Vil thinks she has to send a bodyguard down here, but for some reason I feel much *safer*.”

“Then I’m doing my job,” he said seriously. “I want you to live your life without a care in the world and without ever feeling like you’re being protected.”

“Well, there’s one reason I’m glad you’re here.”

“What’s that?”

“I can slack during the move and let you do the heavy lifting.”

Nick gave him a look, then laughed brightly.

The day of the big move came with more than just the six of them ready to move some heavy furniture. Nick was glad to put a paw in, but they also got help from Sam, Kevin, Rick, Martha, Jeffrey, Mike, Danielle, and Lisa, basically most of the crew that didn’t work on Saturday. Savid had to bow out because he was taking his wife to Dallas, and Patrick wanted to come help, but Kit made him go to work and get some research done. They

all met out at the old complex at 8:00am, and Jessie and Sheila greeted them all with homemade donuts made in Jessie's deep fryer, one of the gift appliances from the wedding that they'd left in a box for lack of space for it. But if Jessie had anything in her kitchen now, it was space for anything she wanted. The helpers were warned that they were moving a cluster of five apartments, which they didn't mind doing.

Lupe had a plan, and it worked out *very* well. Nick, Dan, Mickey, Mike, and Lupe moved the big, bulky items from apartment to flatbed while the femmes moved boxes, packing them into vehicles, and Kit, Rick, Martha, Jeffrey, and Kevin all moved smaller furniture on the paw carts, loading up an item or two and wheeling them over. Every single box or piece of furniture was either marked with the owner's name or tagged with a small colored paper tag, which indicated which fur owned it and which townhouse to which it would be taken once moved over. Once the truck and cars were full, they drove over, parked in front of Sheila's apartment, and they started unloading while Kit, Rick, Jeffrey, and Kevin continued ferrying over furniture on the carts. They would then unload, putting the furniture in the proper apartment and in the proper room but not setting it up while boxes were stacked in the living rooms of the appropriate apartment. Once the first load was done, the paw cart team traded with the box team so they didn't have to constantly walk back and forth, and they loaded up a second load. They moved the second load over and stopped for lunch, pizza, breadsticks, and soda bought by the six getting moved. After lunch, they started on the third load, which Lupe estimated would just about do it for the big stuff. They'd moved all of Kit and Jessie's furniture, Lupe's furniture, and Sheila's furniture, so they were working on Dan and Mickey's big furniture. Kit and Jessie's apartment was officially cleared out after Sheila and Martha brought out the last of the boxes and stacked them

in Martha's van, and then Sheila's apartment was completely cleared when Kit and Jeffrey brought out a stand-alone full length mirror wrapped in blankets and put it on a cart, then started wheeling it the half block over to the townhouses. They managed to move all the big furniture with two more loads—more like one and a half—and then they used the flatbed to load up everything that was left. Lupe pointed to four moving vans out in the complex and chuckled. "I see we weren't the only ones that thought it was a good day to move!" he declared.

"So, when's the pool gonna be open full time?" Dan asked as he loaded a box of cookbooks from Sheila's house onto the flatbed.

"Monday," he answered. "I finally got a third lifeguard. That's why it was closin' early, brah, I didn't have enough guards. Next time I won't try to hire them in June, they ain't none left by then," he laughed.

"Could just go without guards, you know," Mickey noted.

"Not in Texas you can't," he answered. "At least not a pool used by kids. If it wasn't nothin' but adults then yeah, I don't need lifeguards. But Texas law's strict, brah. Any public pool a kid can use has to have a lifeguard on duty or the pool can't be open, even just open to adults. The only way I could get around that is to permanently ban kids from the pool, and I won't do that."

"Didn't know that," Mickey mused.

"Welcome to business, brah. They's always somethin' you don't know."

It took them about another hour to finish up. The flatbed and cars hauled over the last of the boxes, and they carried them and the small pieces

of furniture into their respective houses. After the last box was carried into Dan's house, they all gathered out in Sheila's yard, then headed over to the community center. There, Jessie, Sheila, and Martha grilled steaks bought by the beneficiaries of the move, and they sat out on the outside tables, ate steak, baked potatoes, and grilled corn and sauerkraut, drank beer or juice, and relaxed after finishing a good day's work. All five of them were fully moved into their new apartments, though a few hours of work waited for them to put their new houses together to their satisfaction. "The rest of my stuff will be here tomorrow," Sheila said as she gave Kevin a plate holding a steak and a grilled ear of corn. "I had my apartment's furniture packed up and shipped down, as well as the rest of my things. The townhouse should be just big enough for it."

"What did you have up there?" Danielle asked her.

"A three bedroom condo with a den near the campus," she answered. "I may be putting some furniture out, since I have a living room suit coming, but I can fit the rest of my stuff in the new townhouse."

"Well, we could always use a new couch over at the sorority," Danielle said with a smile.

"I think I could see fit to have you guys hold it for me," Sheila grinned. "Since I'm not going back to Boston for a few years, I decided to just have my stuff sent down."

"I thought that your apartment was given to you by your mom," Lisa noted.

"The apartment yeah, but Higgins furnished it for me, and I bought the furniture. Hmm, I could hire myself a butler now that I have a spare bedroom," she mused. "Maybe I'll send up a call and see if any of the

Vulpan servants want to come live in Austin for a while. I'd much rather have a family servant than hire someone I don't know."

"Never hurts to ask," Kit nodded.

"A family servant? You almost make it sound like a slave," Jeffrey noted.

"You've heard me talk about Clancy MacArren. The MacArrens have served the Vulpans for four generations, Jeffrey," Kit told him. "A MacArren has been the chief butler at my family's manor, Stonebrook, literally since it was built, and I think Clancy retired with nearly four hundred thousand dollars in the bank. It's not slavery, it's literally an institution, a tradition, for children to work for the Vulpans after their parents, and the Vulpans actually prefer it. They grew up with us, they know us and know what to expect, and we can trust them to keep the family secrets. In return for that loyalty, we pay them very well and give them good benefits. I think some of our servants have servants of their own," he chuckled.

"Yah," Sheila nodded. "Higgins is the third Higgins to serve my family. His grandfather used to work in Stonebrook, and his father left Stonebrook to serve in my mom's manor. My Higgins came to work for us after he got out of college, and he came to live with me when I went to Harvard to be my butler."

"Stonebrook isn't just a big house with one family in it," Kit explained when Danielle gave Sheila a curious look. "Some of the servants live on the manor grounds as well, and they have husbands, wives, children. Since some of the servants that work there also live there, much of what they do around the manor is for themselves as much as it is for the Vulpans who

live there. I used to play with the servant kids when I grew up. There's like fifty furs working at Stonebrook, and about twenty who live there, mostly the senior staff. It's a matter of some prestige for a servant to be allowed to move to the manor. There are only like five Vulpans there."

"Wow, all the rich talk again," Lisa smiled. "I used to dream about being rich when I was a kid. Then I met you, and you ruined the fantasy," she laughed.

"Being rich doesn't solve your problems, dove, it just introduces a whole different set of 'em," Nick chuckled.

"Yah, when you cross over from earning money because you love what you do and enter the realm of earning money for the sake of earning money. That's when you get into the curse, when greed overtakes ambition. Ambition is good. Greed can corrupt it."

"Do what you love, hon, not what pays," Rick told her, taking a cup of beer from Lupe with a nod of thanks.

"What are you majoring in, dove?" Nick asked her.

"Geology," she answered. "I want to be a vulcanologist."

"Ah, now that's an interesting field!" Nick said. "What got you interested in volcanoes?"

"Well, I'm from a town in Washington State called Puyallup, and we have Mount Rainier and Mount Saint Helens near there," she said. "Mount Saint Helens erupted long before I was born, but I was always curious about it, and I've been interested ever since. So, I'm not going to school for the money," she giggled.

“Sam and Danielle are the sorority brains,” Lisa laughed. “The rest of us are taking much easier majors. I’m majoring in anthropology, but I don’t know what I want to do with it. I just like the classes.”

“Nothing wrong with that, dove,” Nick smiled. “Just don’t go into criminal justice. You’re too cute to be a cop!”

Lisa’s cheeks ruffled. “What do you do, Mister Nick?”

“Just Nick, dove, and I’m in the professional security business,” he answered. “Have you ever met Miss Vil?” Lisa nodded. “Notice those two wonky panthers with her?” She nodded again. “That’s what I do, dove. I’m hired by furs to make sure they’re safe. Miss Vil hired me to come down and check over the security here in Austin for her brother and Jessie, and also for herself when she comes visit them, and she hired me to be down here for six months. So, after I finish what I’m here to do, I’ll just kick back and take a vacation until my contract is done. So you’ll be seein’ a good deal of me if you come to see Jessie.”

“So you’re a bodyguard?”

“More or less, dove, but mainly what I do is assess security for a fur and a location, make recommendations on how to improve it, then make those changes if the client wants them. For Kit and Jessie, I’m more of a consultant than an active guard, because they don’t need me to guard them that way. I’m only down here *just in case*. Miss Vil wants a comprehensive analysis of Austin, so she hired me to come down here and inspect the city, inspect the new apartment complex, and assess possible security problems for her brother and sister-in-law, and also for Vil for when she comes down. But she also wants me on paw for a while, kind of on reserve, so she hired me for six months.” He chuckled. “This is a dream contract for me, wot,” he

admitted. "I'll do a month of real work and have a five month vacation, with pay."

"Well, I certainly don't want you to have to work," Kit laughed.

"Too right," Nick nodded. "Oh, by the way, I'll be giving firearm safety training classes while I'm here, once I find a good shooting range to conduct 'em. I'm always happy to teach anyone. Free, all you have to do is pay for any ammunition you use during the training."

"That sounds interesting," Danielle said.

"Always worth it," Rick said mildly, giving Kit a slight smile.

"Thank God you thought it was," Jessie smiled, looking at Martha.

After the steak grilling party to thank the helpers, the real work began. Kevin and Sam stayed to help Kit and Jessie get the furniture just right while the rest of the helpers went home, and Jessie unpacked boxes, hung pictures, and set up the house to her personal tastes. Kit had already given the house to her, more or less, to decorate as she wished, because he loved her sense of style and it would make her very happy to be surrounded by a place that was wholly and completely *theirs*. And it was truly theirs. Jessie had chosen the paint and carpeting, Kit had included some of the amenities, and Jessie had customized the kitchen to make it a serious cook's dream. She had bought the furniture, and it was by consensus that the two of them placed it in the house. Kevin and Sam were good sports about helping them try several layouts for the living room before deciding on one with the wall unit against the wall near the door, opposite the hallway, and the couch and love seat flanking their chairs, which faced the TV and stereo. A small tea table stood between their recliner chairs, Jessie's knitting bag was resting under the small stand, and the coffee table was in the middle. The stand

with the capitol building was on the wall near the opening to the dining room, and beside it was a new stand with the model Grandma Pearl had given them for Christmas, a model of their Cessna 400. Over it was their little “wall of achievement” holding their type rating certificates hung in a circle and the silk banner upon which their wings were pinned in the center. Jessie had mirrored the layout of the old dining room for the new one, the table dominating the center of the room, with the china cabinet and china closet side by side on the far wall, and the chandelier she’d picked out hanging over the table just so. The kitchen only held one piece of furniture, a small table set near the window and right beside the sliding glass door. Kit went down and hooked up the washer and dryer in the basement, their hookups not far from the laundry chute and the pillar-like shaft of the dumbwaiter. The basement had been cordoned off into two sections. One was clearly the laundry, with a rack for detergents, a clothes hangar pole, the washer and dryer, and room for an ironing board, all close to the stairs. The wall under the stairs held three wine racks setting side by side, running from the edge of the stairs to the wall, which would eventually hold their wine collection. A draw curtain had already been installed so the wine could be kept in the dark. The other side of the basement held several boxes and totes that they were storing, mainly some Christmas decorations that Hannah had sent them, old ones she no longer used in her extravagant Christmas trees. Hannah went through decorations like crazy, buying them, using them only once or twice, then storing them away to eternally collect dust, so her unused decorations were enough to decorate three trees. Jessie’s old things from her room were also down there, but those were going to be sent to the attic once Jessie went through them and decided what to keep and what to store.

And the dumbwaiter would make that *easy* when they attended the matter...just load them in the basement, press a button, take them out in the attic.

Getting that washer and dryer down into the basement had been *fun*, and exposed one of the small design flaws of the house. The stairs came down to a landing and then turned and came down two more steps before reaching the basement floor, and that turn had been something of a bottleneck. The washer and dryer had been too big to easily navigate that turn, because of the banister pole.

The upstairs was much easier. They'd put all their furniture in the master bedroom where they wanted it when it was moved in or brought in by the furniture store furs, so there was no moving around, and the furniture furs had set up and placed the baby's bedroom furniture and the first guest bedroom furniture already. That only left them to set up the bed in the second guest bedroom, and that was basically all there was in the room. They'd not bought any other furniture for the room quite yet, nor did they really plan to do so anytime soon. But that was furniture, and there were boxes to move. Kit and Kevin carried the lighter or smaller ones, but Jessie would load one of the heavy or large ones into the dumbwaiter and send it up. Once they got every box into the room where it was destined to go, Jessie made them fruit smoothies, which they enjoyed on the back porch, which was a spacious deck with a built-in propane grill, built right into the deck, and with the bricked patio beneath it with the large barbecue pit. The deck grill was their personal grill, the pit was for old-fashioned barbecue and also for parties. The deck had a family picnic table built into the deck near the grill, and also had a retractable awning which would cover the deck with shade. The retractable awning was something extra that Kit had bought

after first seeing the deck, but Lupe was thinking of buying one for his own deck.

“So, Lupe told me that you’re renting the last inner unit,” Kit noted as he showed Kevin the retractable awning, which rolled overhead to cover the deck with a sheet of sturdy nylon cloth.

“Yeah, I’m signing the lease for it tomorrow,” he answered. “It’s gonna be a bit empty for a while,” he chuckled. “I can afford maybe three rooms of furniture, and that’s also using my credit card.”

“Dude, I know you make more than that,” Kit pressed.

Kevin coughed uncomfortably, then came close to him. “If I hadn’t bought a *ring*, I’d have more money,” he said quietly.

“So the truth is revealed,” Kit laughed. “Congratulations in advance.”

“Dude, she’s gotta say *yes*,” he said nervously.

“You won’t know until you ask,” he pointed out.

“But then she can say no,” he said, scrubbing his muzzle nervously.

“Kev. Ask her. I can say with some authority that you’ll like what she has to say. Remember, she’s one of my wife’s best friends, and my wife talks to me.”

“Really?” he asked with hope in his eyes.

“Trust me. Ask her tonight.”

“I’ll be so nervous I won’t be able to get it out,” he chuckled ruefully.

“Don’t say a word, just hold the ring case out. She’ll know what you’re going to say. *After* she says yes, it’s much easier to ask properly,” he smiled.

“I may do that,” he chuckled. “I asked her over to my place tonight. I was going to try, but I wasn’t sure if I’d have the nerve. I’ve never felt this way, Kit.”

“In love?”

“Terrified,” he answered with a wincing smile. “I’m terrified she’ll reject me.”

“That’s love alright,” Kit chuckled. “All I can say is the longer you wait, the longer you’ll *not* be married. And it gets to a point where you want that more than anything else in the world. I swear, the last week of my engagement to Jessie was hell. Not because we weren’t already intimate, but it was that she wasn’t *mine*. I wanted that ring on her finger worse than anything in my whole life.”

“I remember, you were bouncing off the walls,” he laughed.

“Don’t get that bad, ask early,” he advised with a light smile.

“Well, since we’re basically done here, maybe I’ll ask her as soon as I get her home,” he said as Kit retracted the awning.

“Works for me, we still have some things to put away, and we don’t really need any help. I certainly don’t want you to see Jessie putting her underwear away,” he grinned.

Kevin laughed. “I’ll have to get used to five bottles of shampoo in the shower.”

“It’s worth it, bud, it’s worth it,” Kit told him sagely.

Kevin did just that. He collected up Sam abruptly, almost pulling her out of the kitchen as she helped Jessie put away some of her rarely used

utensils, and Sam looked a little annoyed as he hustled her out of the house. “Well, what was that all about?” Jessie asked from the kitchen, looking down the hallway as Kevin closed the front door.

“Kevin wants to take her home,” Kit told her. “He’s going to propose to her tonight.”

“Really! That’s wonderful!” she gushed, clapping her paws happily, then giving him a quick hug. “That poor male, Sam won’t even let him finish popping the question before she says yes,” she laughed.

“He’s really nervous about it,” Kit told her. “I told him to just take out the ring box and let her see it, then ask after she says yes.”

“That’s a dirty trick, taking away Sam’s moment,” she accused, then she laughed.

“If I remember right, a certain overenthusiastic kitty proposed to *me*,” he noted playfully.

“Well, I did let you ask properly afterward,” she replied haughtily.

“Then nearly burst my eardrums screaming,” he teased.

“I had every right to be excited, my deepest wish had just come true,” she said with a smile, sidling up against him and kissing him on the muzzle. “Well, my second deepest wish. The deepest wish is in here, keeping me from seeing my toes,” she laughed, putting a paw on her rounding stomach.

“Eleven weeks and four days,” he purred in her ear, nuzzling her, which made her purr for real in reply. “And you are *not* fat.”

She laughed helplessly. “I’m not that big yet,” she told him. “We’ll see what you say when my belly’s all the way out to here, and I can’t even get

out of my chair without help,” she grinned at him.

“I’ll think you’re the most beautiful femme that has ever lived,” he told her. “Hmm, I wonder if I can carry you up the stairs.”

She giggled. “*After* we finish. I want us to go to bed with everything in place. I want to go to bed in our new home, and not have to get up and have to unpack a single box!”

“We’re almost done,” he noted.

“Yeah, we are,” she winked. “So, the more you help, the sooner we get done,” she said invitingly.

Kit bent to the task with exaggerated enthusiasm, which made Jessie laugh. But he did get back to business, because he rather liked the idea of going to bed knowing that the unpacking was done.

It took them nearly four hours to get everything finished, because they weren’t just unpacking, they were also hanging pictures, tweaking furniture arrangements, and completely finishing all the little things that would make them officially completely moved in. It also took them longer than they expected because they took quite a few things that had been stored in boxes since their marriage, gifts from friends, things from home, Kit and Jessie’s things from their respective prior homes, all those things they’d been keeping in boxes because their two bedroom apartment just didn’t have the room. Kit went through the boxes he’d gotten from Boston and took what he wanted out, and boxed what he didn’t want and sent it to the attic. Jessie did the same, going through the things from her high school days, keeping some of it, boxing the rest. She kept out her collection of plush and figurine unicorns and putting them in Laura’s room. Around 11:00pm, Jessie carried the last box to the dumbwaiter, a box filled with broken-down boxes they

intended to keep, stuck it in the dumbwaiter, and sent it to the attic. Kit, who was in the attic, took it out and set it with some of the other boxes they'd put up there. Jessie met him in the upstairs hallway as he came down the attic steps, folded them up, and pushed it back up and into the ceiling. "Well, we're done, handsome fox," she said with a naughty smile.

"So we are," he noted with a smile, slipping a paw around her waist and pulling her into an embrace. "Well, fancy meeting you here, Misses Vulpan," he said as he nuzzled her cheek. "Aren't you supposed to be home?"

"Why I *am* home, Mister Vulpan," she said teasingly, her fingers seeking out the scars on his back, tracing the lines she knew so well with her fingers. "Congratulations, handsome fox. We are *moved in*. Completely, totally and irrevocably moved in!"

"May we never move again," he said seriously.

She laughed and nodded. "Once is enough!" she agreed, then she squealed in surprise and delight when he bent down and pulled her off her feet, picking her up. "Well now, it was so nice of you to come upstairs so I wouldn't have to carry you all the way up."

"I should make you take me down just so you could," she winked.

"I'll just put you in the dumbwaiter and ship you up," he grinned.

"You will *not*!" she declared with a laugh.

"I dunno, I'm sure you'll fit, and you certainly don't exceed its maximum weight rating...*yet*," he hummed, which earned him a smack on the shoulder.

“That way!” she said imperiously, pointing towards the door to the master bedroom, at the end of the hall, with her longhaired tail.

“I thought you’d never ask,” he hummed, turning and carrying her in the direction she wanted to go.

They woke up that Sunday morning and knew they had *nothing to do*.

It was a glorious feeling. There were no boxes to pack. There were no pieces of furniture that needed to be moved. There was nothing to do but enjoy their new house, their new four bedroom, two story townhouse with the big swimming pool literally right across the street, the kitchen Jessie could get lost within, the big deck in the back, the jacuzzi tub in the master bedroom, the new TV in their bedroom, and still with that *new house* smell that told them they were the first furs to live here.

And Kit hoped they were the only furs that would be there for a long, long time.

It would take a while to adjust to the new townhouse. They’d been there since Wednesday, but before it had been half empty, and all of their stuff had been over at the old apartment. But today, Kit woke up with Jessie curled up against his back, her arm thrown over his side, and saw their furniture in the new room, which was twice as big as their old room, saw the picture of the vase and ivy on the wall, saw Jessie’s robe tossed over the back of the vanity bench, saw the dressers with the pictures of Vil and Jessie’s family atop them, saw his alarm clock and little lamp on the nightstand, and saw that it was 10:17am. Neither of them were used to sleeping so long, but they’d done a lot of work yesterday. There were new things, though. Things like the ceiling fan over the bed which turned

silently and slowly, circulating the air. The soft blue pile carpet was definitely different from the beige, worn-out carpet in the old apartment. There were new pieces of furniture flanking the vanity, and the new gun cabinet was over in the corner, Jessie's skeet shotgun locked safely inside it. The ADT alarm pad was on the wall across from the bed, right near the door, and on the right wall was a pair of doors. One went to the large bathroom, the other went to a very large walk-in closet. There were windows on the wall behind the bed, flanking the bed, windows that looked out over the pool, and a single window on the left wall that looked out into the area between their townhouse and Sheila's townhouse. Sheila's townhouse was mirrored in layout to theirs, so the window over on her townhouse was to her master bedroom, which would let them wave to each other over the carports and the strip of grass between them.

Their first morning waking up to being officially moved in.

Naturally, that meant that they'd be disturbed. The doorbell rang, and Jessie groaned beside him and put her paws over her face. "Whoever that is, I'm gonna shave their fur off!"

Kit was mindful enough to realize that they had the new toys now. He got up and went over to where the ADT pad was, for right beside it was the intercom. "You have thirty seconds to run before Jessie chases you down with a pair of clippers," he said in a weary tone, which made Jessie explode into laughter from the bed.

"But I brought beignets!" Allison cried through the speaker.

Before he could even turn to look, Jessie was by him, her finger on the button. "Ally!" she said excitedly. "Wait right there, I'll come unlock the door!"

“Robe!” Kit called warningly when she opened the bedroom door and moved to run down to the front door.

Jessie laughed and skidded to a stop, and caught the robe Kit threw towards her. He turned off the alarm as she pulled on her robe and hurried down the three steps then made the turn, vanishing from sight.

Kit put on his shorts and grabbed a tee shirt, and padded down the stairs to the living room to see Jessie already giving Allison a tour of the house. Allison was wearing a pair of khaki shorts and a tank top, and she looked lovely, as usual...but she was still only second fiddle to the absolute perfection of his wife. “The living room just came together perfectly!” Jessie gushed, waving her paw towards the living room set. “Oh, and you have to see my kitchen!” she said, grabbing Allison by the paw.

“Woah, woah!” Allison laughed. “You can give me the grand tour tomorrow,” she declared as the door opened again, and Terry looked in. Terry was wearing a simple white tee shirt and a pair of knee-length shorts, the kind with the oversized pockets on the outside near the hem.

“Hey cousin,” Kit called, “come on in.”

“Sorry to disturb you guys, but we were in the neighborhood and wanted to see the new place,” he said.

“Not a problem,” Kit assured him.

“You guys hungry? We just got up and I need to cook breakfast,” Jessie invited.

Allison looked to Terry, he looked to her, then they both laughed. “Sure, why not?” Terry said. “We’re not doing anything we can’t postpone.”

“What are you doing today?” Kit asked.

“Dunno, it’s Ally’s turn to pick the things we do,” he smiled in her direction. “Yesterday I picked the activities, now it’s her turn. She told me to dress this way, so I guess we’re gonna be outside today.”

“How’s New Orleans?” he asked as Jessie and Allison went upstairs, chattering like little girls.

“A mess,” he grunted. “The employees just let everything go when they found out the owners were negotiating with Vil to sell out. The first thing I had to do was assure everyone I’m not clearing them out,” he grunted as he came in and sat on the couch. Kit sat in his chair and listened. “Right now I’m going through their paperwork trying to get a sense of where things stand. Yesterday I had to deal with a threat of a general strike by the shipyard workers,” he said with a groan, leaning back. “I think I got in over my head with this.”

“You’ll do fine,” Kit chuckled. “Why were they going to strike?”

“Because when Vil bought the shipyard, their contract was voided,” he answered. “Right now they’re working at the same pay and benefits as their original contract, but you know Vil will never keep that contract. The union furs know it, so they’re trying to get the workers to strike *now*, and cause all kinds of problems during the transition, which just totally mystifies me. I mean, why start off like this? They’re doing themselves no favors making this confrontational not even a week after the sale.”

“Well, Vil said the prior owners had lots of problems with this union.”

“Yeah, but this is *dumb*,” Terry snorted. “Do they really think threatening to shut down the shipyard not six days after the new owners

take over sets a tone of cooperation? I had to call Vil to tell me how she wanted it dealt with. I can't make a call like that on my own."

"I know Vil," he chuckled. "Did the union reps pee their pants when you called them into your office?"

"Just about," he laughed. "I told them that anyone who struck would be immediately fired and not hired back, then I told them that if the union went on strike, I would fire every member of the union on Friday, whether they honored the strike or not, which means that anyone who wants to work at the shipyard will quit their union. Classic Vil union-busting tactic. When they laughed at me and said we'd never finish our contracts on time, I showed them a faxed schedule of moving workers from our other facilities to Avondale to replace them. Then I told him that they weren't dealing with a little company that didn't know how to play the game, that they were dealing with *Vulpan Shipyards*, and if they didn't want to adhere to our high standards and be part of our family, they could walk. They're supposed to have their vote at a meeting today. I expect the vote will pass, but I also expect that quite a few workers will quit the union and cross the picket line. We've made it clear we can build ships without them, and anyone who doesn't want to be part of Vulpan Shipyards can walk. If they want to keep their jobs, they'll be at work tomorrow morning."

"And if they strike?"

"Let them," Terry shrugged. "We'll bring in a security company and clear them out. They're not striking over the contract, they're just trying to force us to accept that bloated piece of garbage they managed to bully the previous owners into accepting. These Louisiana furs are about to find out what *bullying* really is."

Kit laughed. “Vil said that the previous owners sold out for a song because of the union,” he mused. “I guess this is their way of getting revenge, selling to someone that will crush the union that basically ran them out of business.”

“What will piss them off even more is after we’ve swept out that union, we’ll allow the union from Jacksonville to send representatives to form a new one,” Terry grinned. “Vulpan Shipyards isn’t anti-union, it just won’t tolerate it when unions try to blackmail us for benefits far beyond what they deserve. We treat our workers well, and we expect our workers to treat us well in return.”

“The paw of the Ice Queen reaches far,” Kit said sagely.

“It feels weird being the paw of Vil in New Orleans,” he laughed. “I wonder if she’ll put me there permanently after I finish the transition. This *interim* shipyard director title feels clunky.”

“Who knows? If you do a good job, maybe she will. After all, by then, you’ll know more about Avondale than anyone in the company. Who’d be better to run it?”

“If I want to stay there,” he laughed. But the way his eyes softened when Allison came down the stairs in front of Jessie, who was now wearing a pair of sweats and a tee shirt, Kit had the feeling that Terry would want to stay close to Allison, and keep Allison away from Boston for the same reason that Kit kept Jessie away from Boston.

“Hey boys,” Allison said with a smile, seeing the appreciative look that Terry was giving her. “What do you want for breakfast?”

“Jessie, love, we have the stuff for crepes?”

“Sure do,” she said with a smile and a nod. “Come on, Ally, you can see my kitchen in action!”

“I need to see this kitchen,” Terry noted, his eyes never leaving Allison until she vanished into the short hallway back to the kitchen.

“Come on, I’ll give you the dime tour,” Kit offered.

Kit showed Terry the whole apartment, from the cellar to the attic, pausing in the kitchen to goose Jessie and nearly make her spill a cup of milk, and also got them chased out of the kitchen with a wooden spoon. Terry seemed quite impressed by their townhouse, both in its construction and its decoration. “It’s a little small, but it seems to have everything,” he noted as they walked out onto the deck behind the house.

“Small? Terry, this place is *huge*,” Kit protested. “Room for four bedrooms on the second floor, and with the master bedroom taking up almost half the floor by itself! That’s *big* out here in the real world.”

“The real world!” Terry laughed. “What, Boston’s not real?”

“Real as in the world most furs live in, not the fantasy world the Vulpans occupy,” he said, leaning against the picnic table. “Out here, furs don’t own four houses, ten cars, have money in Swiss banks, and have servants doing everything for them.”

“I only own two houses, thank you very much,” Terry laughed. “My house in Boston and a vacation home in Vale. But I’m looking for something more permanent in New Orleans. I found a nice apartment in the central business district that’s a fairly straight shot to Avondale, just get on the expressway, over the bridge, and it’s an easy drive to the shipyard. It’s a little small, but it’s got a lot of amenities that’ll make it feel more homey.

I've already found a nice place here too," he smiled. "Out on Lake Travis, in a community called the Vineyard. Five bedrooms, garage, private pool and basketball court, pool house, private boat dock, boat house, two acres of grounds, fenced and gated and in a gated community, a cozy little place, for one point six mil cash up front. I had an agent buy it at auction, it was a foreclosure, and I sign the papers for it tomorrow morning before going back to New Orleans," he announced. "God I love the housing crisis, that same estate was going for two point nine mil at its highest, then came down and down and down, and finally went to auction," he laughed. "But I guess it's a sign of the times when luxury houses in exclusive communities get foreclosed upon."

"You bought a house here?"

"A vacation house, yeah," he answered. "I want someplace *mine* when I come to see Ally."

"Sounds like you're settling in," Kit chuckled.

"Nah, I'll sell the house after I'm done with it, or just keep it so I have someplace to stay when I come visit you. I'm sure Vil would love having a place to stay, and I could earn some bonus points letting her use my vacation house," he grinned.

"Careful or she'll make you give it to her," Kit teased.

"Eh, if I'm not using it, she's welcome to it. Besides, it's five bedrooms, I'm sure we could share it if we're here at the same time. But we'd fight over the master bedroom I suppose," he laughed.

"So, what did you do yesterday?"

“Yesterday we went all over Austin,” Terry answered. “I drove all over the city, exploring it, then we went out to a local ranch and went horseback riding. We went to New Braunfels to swim and float down the spring river, to get rid of the smell she said,” he laughed, “then we came back and went to the baseball game, the Express. I had no idea that Allison loved baseball, and the team here isn’t bad for minor league. We went to the Blanton museum, then I took her out to one of my favorite sports.”

“They play polo here?”

“Of course they do,” he smiled. “We went to watch a polo game, and then we played a round of golf. I had to let her keep it close,” he laughed. Terry was *extremely* good at golf. Just like Muffy had taken many lessons in ice skating and had become very good, Terry had loved golf when he was in his teens and spent a great deal of time and money taking lessons and practicing, just as he’d learned to play polo, and was actually pretty good. Terry was a very physically active Vulpan. “After that, we went to a nice dinner, then I took her to a movie. That surprised her,” he chuckled. “From polo and golf to going to see a movie. After the movie, we went to a few bars that had local bands she likes, then I took her home. I had no idea she was so into heavy metal music,” he chuckled.

“Quite a shock to a blue-blood,” Kit laughed. “I wish Jessie liked metal. I have to listen to that God-awful pop music tweenie crap when Jessie gets her paws on the radio dial.”

“Hey!” Jessie protested as she opened the sliding glass door. “You leave my good music alone, or no food for you!” she warned.

“There’s a Denny’s about two blocks from here,” Kit noted to Terry, which made him laugh and Jessie give him a hot look.

“Oh, inside, you tin-eared curmudgeon!” Jessie said, pointing behind her.

“I think you’re gonna pay later,” Terry said slyly.

“Eh, I pay every day, it’s the price I pay for what I get from her in the bedroom,” he said flippantly, then squeaked in surprise and a little pain when Jessie reared back and slapped him hard on the rump, then he laughed brightly as he rubbed his backside with both paws even as he wagged his tail at Jessie teasingly.

“We have *two* beds that don’t hurt your back now, you treacherous male!” Jessie warned. “You can’t keep me from tossing your tail out of the bedroom!”

“She has a point,” Terry noted as he followed Kit into the kitchen.

“I wouldn’t be there long, I’m just too loveable,” he said haughtily, which made Allison giggle.

Jessie swatted him again on the rump, more lightly this time, then kissed him on the side of his neck. “He *is* loveable,” she agreed in a kittenish voice. But then her claws came out and sank into his shoulder and side, giving her a grip on him that would cost him some fur, skin and blood to break. “But he forgets who has the claws in this family,” she added, which made him explode into laughter.

“One of the dangers of being married to a cat,” Terry noted clinically to Allison, to which she nodded sagely.

“Well, at least she can’t bite him that hard,” she added. “That short little muzzle has no character.”

Jessie laughed. “Stop the racist comments,” she giggled, pointing at them. “I can’t help it if I’m a cat living in a world of foxes. Blame this handsome fox here for chasing me down and making me marry him,” she giggled, nuzzling Kit’s neck from behind.

“Well, at least you’re *part* fox,” Kit told her. “We’ll give you an honorary membership into the snobby fox club.”

“I don’t need in a club like that,” Jessie laughed, letting him go with another kiss. “Now let’s eat.”

Terry got to enjoy Jessie’s crepes at the kitchen table, the four of them sharing it, with a selection of syrup, blueberries, strawberries, and bananas, and they listened as Allison told them about all the places they went yesterday, then smile when Jessie asked them where they were going today. “I made sure he wore his outdoor clothes,” she said with a wink at Terry. “I’m not going to ruin any of the surprises, but let’s say that he’ll be going to bed with sore feet tonight,” she laughed. “Gotta work the rich boy,” she winked at him.

“Baby, you’re looking at the most outdoorsy Vulpan of them all,” he said challenging in reply. “I fly fish, deep sea fish, ride horses, ski, ice skate, backpack, ride snowmobiles in the winter and motorcycles in the summer, play polo, golf, tennis, and hockey, I do almost everything!”

“We’ll see,” she said with a slight little smile, taking another bite of her crepes.

“That sounds like a challenge to me, Terry,” Kit said mildly.

“I do believe you’re right, cousin,” Terry answered. “A Vulpan never backs down from a challenge,” he said with a smile at Allison.

“Yo! Anyone home in there?” Sheila’s voice came over the intercom, and then the front door opened. “Kit! Jessie!” she called.

“In the kitchen!” Jessie shouted back.

Sheila strutted in from the hall, wearing a pair of workout shorts and a halter. “Hey!” she said with a smile. “So you two are taking a break from the whirlwind?”

“A little,” Terry chuckled. “How you doing, cousin?”

“Doing great,” she answered. “I’m gonna go get a workout in, then come home and unpack. I’m still getting my place set up. Good news!” she said with a grin. “Higgins caved! He’s coming down!”

“Higgins is moving to Austin?”

She nodded. “I had to give him a raise, but he’s agreed to come down and keep my new house. But I told him we’re sharing the cooking duties,” she grinned. “Higgins is actually a good cook, so it’ll rock to have him right there to help me learn. I think he refused earlier because of the apartment I was in,” she laughed. “But when I told mom about my new place and how it’s more suitable for a Vulpan, Higgins asked for some pictures of it. When I sent them to him, he agreed to come down. He’s gonna live in the first floor room, so I have to go out and buy him some furniture tomorrow after class.”

“All that work to make you normal, and it’s all gone,” Jessie laughed.

“I’m a *Vulpan*, Jess. I’ve been slumming down here since I came to get away from Cybil, but now that I’ve decided to stay here, I’m settling in properly. That means a nice house, a butler at the very least, and being waited on in a manner more suitable for a fox of my station.”

“Listen to this,” Kit noted to Jessie, who laughed at his tone. “Your *station*, eh? You’re a whiny little brat. I didn’t realize that was an official station.”

“You’re the brat, Kit,” she retorted. “And Terry would agree with me. It’s a crime you don’t have a butler, and you make Jessie clean everything!”

“He doesn’t *make* me clean, he does half the cleaning himself!” Jessie protested.

“And that’s a scandal!” Sheila announced, giving Kit a grin. “A Vulpan does not *clean*.”

“Afraid I’ll have to side with the brat on this one,” Terry chuckled. “I have a butler, a maid, and a cook. They’re still up at my house in Boston, but if I move to New Orleans permanently, they’ll either come down or they’ll fold back to Stonebrook and I’ll be hiring new servants.”

“Kit, any word on things from Boston?” Sheila asked. “I talked to my mom yesterday, and she’s all kinds of pissed off.”

“Nothing since Friday,” Kit answered, “after Vil shot down the board nominations that Zach was trying to push through, then adjourned the board until next Tuesday, when she’ll nominate her own board members. She went to England for the weekend, and hasn’t called me since she left. What did your mother have to say?”

“Just what you’d expect,” she grunted sourly. “You’ve set a bad precedent and Terry followed it, you two are destroying the reputation of the family, us kids have no idea of the proud traditions of the family, we’re all a bunch of whiny ingrates, yadda yadda yadda and all that shit,” she said. “I spent nearly an hour listening to her spew. I think she’s majorly

overreacting,” she frowned, leaning against the island, her tail slashing to her side. “The tabloids don’t say a word about you and Jessie up in Boston, and while the tabloids are wondering who Allison is, they’re not sure where she comes from. She came in with Kit and nobody saw her either arrive or leave, so they have no idea who she is and where she’s from...and they’re searching for her,” Sheila chuckled, giving Allison an amused look.

“They are?” Allison asked.

“Yeah, but don’t worry about it,” Sheila chuckled. “The tabloids think that Terry got in trouble with Vil and she shipped him out of Boston, so they’re not quite so curious about it now as they were. They’re more interested now in the juicy gossip of why Terry got thrown out of Boston. Sure, that’ll come back to you, but once they know, they’ll basically let it die. After all, Terry’s not in Boston, and how can they hold attention on him the next time they get shots of Bess doing her best to make Paris Hilton look like a nun?”

“How do you keep up with the Boston tabloids down here?” Terry asked curiously.

“Muffy, George, and Joy, they call me a lot,” she answered. Joy was the fourth child of Uncle Jake, 18 years old and had graduated from Weston last month, the elite high school for rich kids that just about every Vulpan had attended since the family struck it rich back in the early 1910’s, building iron and steel battleships for the Navy. Joy was a Party Pack member in training, far more interested in parties and boys than she was in attending Yale in the fall. George was the second youngest child of Maxine, 19, and was starting his sophomore year at Harvard. As Vulpan went, George was pretty typical. He was intelligent, but had little ambition or motivation to do anything other than chase girls and play games...though

Kit had to admit, George was very good at hockey, playing goalie for Harvard. His problem would be when the NCAA finally realized they were getting the run-around when it came to testing George for banned substances. George indulged in drugs as much as most of the other younger cousins, and he'd get suspended the first time they managed to test him. "Muffy said that her dad's staying out of it, but Joy got into a fight with her mom and dad when she defended Terry and Kit. She said they called her a *harlot*, which Joy thought was funny," Sheila laughed. "She shot back that her parents had slept with everyone but each other since she was twelve. Her mom almost slapped her, she said."

"Well, they don't have anyone to blame but themselves," Jessie said simply, taking another bite of breakfast. "Kids learn by watching their parents, and what do your parents do? Nothing. So the kids do nothing."

"Well, I can't argue that one," Terry laughed. "My dad certainly didn't do anything. I don't know why I grew up to have actual ambition. That's something that's like nonexistent among the cousins. I think only like six of us actually work, work for real and not just pretending to work in black hole departments in the shipyard, and I think me and Kit are the only ones that have jobs that actually *matter*."

"The only elders that work are Uncle Zach, Uncle Jake, and Uncle Brian," Sheila said. "My mom's never worked a day in her life, and if Jessie's right, I guess that's why me and all my brothers and sisters don't do shit."

"It's more than just not working," Jessie said. "If the way your mother treated you when she came down here is any indication how the other parents treat their kids, well, I'm not surprised so many Vulpan kids hate their parents so much."

“Hey, my mom’s getting better,” Sheila said defensively. “She hates the idea I moved down here, but she *does* like the idea that I have a plan to do something with my life now. She thinks a restaurant is a silly idea for a business venture, she thinks I’d do better starting another kind of business, but at least I’m not cutting classes because I’m hung over from a night of raves and chasing down guys to screw.”

“See, if they’d just let you do what you want, you and your cousins would straighten up,” Jessie said darkly.

“Well, not all of us,” Terry chuckled. “Some of the Vulpan cousins are hopeless, and I’ll be the first to admit it.”

“Bess,” Kit said with a nod.

“Mary,” Sheila nodded.

“Victor,” Terry added.

“True, but look at Sheila and Muffy. They’re in the Party Pack, yet each of them has a plan,” Jessie motioned at Sheila. “The parents want to *control* the kids like they were controlled, but that’s not going to work. The kids have money, they don’t need their parents, and they’re rebelling against that control. The parents should just let them go and be who they want to be.”

“That will never happen,” Terry sighed. “So long as we bear the name Vulpan, our parents will try to control our lives.”

“And that’s why Vil has gone to war against the elders,” Kit said simply. “They want to control *her* too, and she’s tired of it. So she’s showing them that they are no longer necessary in the family.”

“That’s why I think you’re the lucky one, Kit,” Sheila said without much humor. “I’ve never seen you happier, and if you ever really, really need anything, well, Vil’s there. And so am I.”

“You introduced me to Ally, so I guess I owe you a little something too,” Terry chuckled, reaching over and patting Allison’s forearm fondly.

“I’ve said it thousands of times, Sheila. The Vulpan fortune is a curse, and I want no part of it.”

“That’s not entirely true, you know,” Terry said sagely. “The Vulpan fortune bought you your plane, and most of the furniture in this house, and your flight training, and you’re living off your dividends from the stock Vil sold you...which she sold to you for like a hundredth of what they were worth, I might add,” he chuckled. “You seem to have no problem getting some of the benefits of the family fortune, you just don’t seem to want the burdens that come with all that money. And if you had the money yourself, if Vil hadn’t have let you split it up among us, I think it wouldn’t change you too much, if anything because you truly understand just what it really means to have that money. I think what you should really say is the curse of the Vulpan fortune is that it’s become an institution rather than a family, and those of us who were born into the name never had to work for what we have, all we had to do is obey rules that are ridiculous today. That makes us jaded and robs us of our ambition. That’s something you’ve always had, Kit, and that makes you immune from the most sinister part of having money. I think you dreamed of flying fighter jets the first time you ever saw one, when you were like five,” he chuckled. “And after your accident, you just refocused that dream on your magazine and on your wife. You still have ambition, and that makes you safe from the family curse.”

“Well, the curse will be broken, then,” Sheila said sagely. “Vil will break it when she kicks our parents’ asses. She doesn’t seem to much care what we do, as long as we don’t stain the family name.”

“Vil’s a realist, Sheila. She knows she can’t change the cousins, so she’s letting them go,” Kit told her. “The ones that want to end up in an early grave from overdoses and diseases are being released to pursue that early grave. The ones that want to work and make something of themselves will get that chance, because Vil won’t stop anyone from doing what they want to do.”

“In a strange way, Vil’s doing the same thing our parents are trying to do, just from the other direction,” Terry noted, lowering his fork and pondering a second. “Vil is restoring the family’s honor by releasing the cousins from the control of the elders, and letting them be who they really are, be it bad or good. There’ll be some scandals, that’s for sure, but in the end, the cousins will be *happy*. And happy cousins will probably be more productive, more respectable, and less apt to be daily fixtures in the tabloid rags. You’re perfect example of that, Sheila. You went from devoted member of the Party Pack to a femme with a plan for the future, all because you felt like you got free of your mother’s control when you came to Austin and realized there *is* a life beyond what you knew. And we have Kit and Jessie to thank for coming to that epiphany, they taught you how to *live*, not just *exist*. Our parents want the family to be this mythical construction filled with foxes who all think the same way and march lock-step with the wishes of the family’s leader. Vil is taking an entirely different approach, one more sensible in today’s culture. But in the end, both approaches end up with the same result, a family that appears united on the outside and moves with a single purpose on the inside when it comes to family business. And Vil can

pull that off because once she frees us from our parents, the cousins will *obey* her, obey her in ways we'd never obey our parents. Our parents use a stick, Vil will use a carrot. And when it comes to family business, well, the cousins who are pursuing their own interests aren't dead weight dragging the family down. Vil and move forward with a much lighter ship. She'll truly become the matriarch of the family, because she'll have control over everyone. She'll gain control by letting us go."

They were all quiet a moment, then Sheila laughed. "So deep," she grinned. "We should all be wearing togas and debating Socrates."

"I think Terry hits the nail on the head," Kit nodded in agreement. "Vil can control the family by giving them a longer leash to be themselves. She'll free the cousins because they'll break free of their families after they realize that their parents can't stop them, but Vil will put her foot down and lay out the new rules, which basically say do what you want as long as you don't tarnish the family name. That's how she'll control the cousins, by reining them in when they get too wild, but other than that she'll just let them go on with their lives. Everyone's happy in the end except for Jake, Zach, and Maxine."

"They could use some misery," Sheila grunted. "They've given me enough of it since I moved down here."

"How so?" Jessie asked.

"Uncle Zach tried to get me thrown out of Harvard," she said with a dark frown. "Mom stopped it and smoothed it over, but he still tried to do it. Uncle Zach seems to think he's Uncle Luke, and he uses the same ham-fisted tactics." She laughed. "But I guess Vil will fix that."

“God, the last thing we need is another one like my bastard father,” Kit sighed.

“Just another reason to root for Vil,” Terry chuckled.

“I swear, they’re better than the midday soaps, aren’t they?” Allison asked Jessie, which made all three Vulpans explode into laughter.

“The green eye is for intrigue, the amber eye is for scandal,” Terry said cheekily. “That’s how we keep our eyes on two things at once.”

“Well, let’s finish breakfast so I can make those eyes focus on one thing,” Allison smiled at him.

“And which part of your lovely body should I stare at today, hmm?” Terry asked, which earned him a smack from Allison.

“I’d say you walked into that one, Ally,” Sheila laughed. “But that’s a point. I got a lot of work to do, and I’d like to have it all done *before* Higgins gets here Tuesday. My last hurrah doing my own work,” she giggled. “So lemme go get my workout done, then tackle those boxes in my living room.”

“Don’t break a claw doing that manual labor, Sheila,” Terry teased, which caused Sheila to flip him off.

“I’ll let myself out, later guys.”

“You should, you let yourself in all the time,” Kit noted.

“Bite my furry ass, cousin,” she called as she left the kitchen.

They finished breakfast quickly after Sheila left, and Jessie forced Terry to help her with the dishes afterwards, make *him* do a little manual labor, which made him laugh, but he also did it. Afterward, Allison begged

off another attempt by Jessie to give her a tour of the house. “We have to go, Jess, we have things to do!” Allison laughed, taking Terry’s paw. “And we’re wasting daylight!”

“I guess here comes that twenty mile forced march,” Terry laughed. “Eh, I’ll live, I have to prove to Ally that I’m no creampuff,” he winked at her.

“I’ve seen the pads on your feet, you’ll be begging for mercy after an hour,” Allison challenged, but she was smiling.

“I’m from Boston, dear, my pads may not be calloused, but I guarantee you that they’re five times tougher than yours,” he said with a smile. “Unlike most furs in Boston, I *don’t* wear shoes in the winter.”

“Then let’s see who gives up first,” she teased.

“I’ll put twenty bucks on you quitting first.”

Allison’s eyes lit up noticeably. “So, you’ll put money on it, will you?” she asked with a dangerous smile. “If you’re going to put your money where your maw is, it has to be *real* money. I’ll bet you a thousand dollars you’ll give in before I do.”

“I thought you said *real* money,” he teased flippantly. “Ten thousand.”

“You’re on,” Allison said immediately.

Kit exploded into laughter, almost falling over.

“What?” Terry asked, a bit annoyed when Kit wouldn’t stop.

“She just boonswoggled you, cousin!” he wheezed. “You didn’t ask what you’re going to do!”

“So? I can out-march her on a hiking trail no problem.”

“She just said you’d quit before she did. She didn’t say *what* you were quitting!”

“Kit!” Allison said warningly.

“She just has to pick something that you’ll refuse to do!” he laughed. “And you lose the bet!”

“What are you talking about?”

“I think you’ll look quite smashing pole dancing, or walking the jogging path along the river in a bikini, Terry,” Kit wheezed, which made Jessie explode into laughter herself. “You left the conditions up to her!”

Terry gave Kit a strange look, then laughed helplessly. “So I did, so I did,” he admitted, giving Allison an amused look. “But she wouldn’t do that. Allison likes to fight fair. She wouldn’t cheat me out of the bet.”

“You don’t know me very well, Terry,” she purred. “Get your checkbook out, you’re going to need it,” she warned, which made Terry laugh helplessly.

Chapter 31

Allison won the bet.

She came by the office during lunch and showed him the check she made Terry write, a \$10,000 check, that had the word **VOID** scrawled across it in big bold letters. Allison hadn't cheated at all when she took him out, but she beat him by literally running him into the ground. Allison jogged as a means to stay fit, jogged to give her endurance when she used to dance, and she was more than capable of running Terry to exhaustion and force him to stop. She did that first, and after he recovered, they went on a canoe trip on Lake Ladybird, which turned out to be a comedy of errors since neither of them knew how to paddle a canoe, then they went on a driving tour of the hill county to the north and west and then the ranchlands to the south and east. They went to dinner and an opera that night, and when Allison took Terry back to his hotel, she made him write her the check. Then, when he wrote it, she voided it right in front of him and reminded him that their relationship wasn't about money. She kept the check, though, which was now voided on both sides and had the account number on the check cut off to prevent anyone from ever using it, and she intended to put it in a little frame and hang it in her bedroom. That fact amused Terry to no end, for some reason.

Terry also checked in, as he and Pat were going over the next and last major section of the election special, the elections themselves. They were going to research the voting method, voting laws, and the history of voting, but from the discriminatory days against African and mixed breeds and also

the Trivia Pursuit style questions, like the one state election in Arizona that was won by one vote...and the losing candidate had forgotten to vote in his own election. "Tomorrow a courier is going to drop a box off at your house, cousin," Terry told him. "Inside is a set of keys, a remote, and a code for the alarm. Those are for my new house. The remote opens the gate, and the code is for the alarm. There should be three keys. One is for the front door, the second is for the boat house, and the third is for the pool house."

"So it's final?"

"Yup, I signed at nine this morning and wrote a check," he answered. "Took a huge bite out of my account, but it's worth it. That house was being sold for a tenth of its value, so I just have to wait for real estate to come back from the bottom-out. I'll be able to sell that house for more than I paid for it when I'm done. The agent's gonna do the legal paperwork for me, but the house is mine. I wanted you to have a key to it, just in case you need access to the house. And when Vil comes to visit, she can borrow your key to get in." He chuckled. "I also gave a key and remote to Ally. At first she didn't want them, but I told her it wasn't about giving her anything, it was so furs I can trust have access to the house in case there's a problem. I trust her not to go in there and trash the house, I just want someone I know and trust down there with a key in case it's needed. And I told her not to give Sheila the key to that house for any reason," he added, which made Kit laugh. "I'll hire a caretaker for it in the next couple of days. I may offer it to a Vulpan servant before I look locally, but I'm not sure if any of them would want to move to Austin."

The more serious call came from Vil, who called him as he and Rick were going over the layout for the issue after next. They'd had the financial meeting that morning, and it was good news and bad news. The good news

was that circulation had increased faster than Kit expected, by nearly 5% more than he expected, but the bad news was that the first bill for the health insurance plan had come in, and that took a big chunk of the good profits they'd been making right out of the mix because they had to make a larger initial payment than they would monthly payments. But they'd been expecting that, and they'd built up a solid war chest for expansion with several weeks of strong profits and few expenses. The magazine had \$57,394.55 in the bank, the result of six weeks of strong sales and an average profit of \$6,700 per week added to the money they already had available. Some of that money was the investment that both Rick and Kit were owed by the magazine, which they had both opted not to take, to keep the magazine flush with capital and capable of expansion. Kit himself had pumped \$46,394 into the magazine since he became a partner, paying salaries, paying for radio advertising, and paying for two weeks of printing large circulation, and Rick had put \$52,000 into the magazine through business loans and personal investments, and there was only one loan left outstanding the magazine had to pay. The \$12,250 owed to Bank of America would be paid back immediately, the check going out tomorrow, since getting that debt off the books was their primary goal. Both Kit and Rick wanted the magazine to have no debt, because the dark clouds on the financial horizon told both of them that getting the magazine on solid financial legs was a very good idea. And one way to do that was to eliminate their major outstanding debt. It would cut some of their capital, but both of them agreed that right now, given the way the financial world was looking, clearing their debt would be a good idea.

It had been serious enough for Kit to decide to sell most of the stocks in his portfolio and reinvest that money in T-bills. Kit had a feeling that Kendall was right, and it might be a good idea to cash out of the market

now, wait a few months to see what happened, and then buy back into it when things looked stable. Kit had sold the stocks that morning, and had even managed to make \$433 out of the deal, his stock picks more up than down. If Kendall was right, there was a crash coming, and Kit could just buy back in when things bottomed out, which would give him a net profit in the long run. Selling a thousand stocks for \$4,300 then buying the same thousand stocks six months later for \$2,000 was sound business.

“Hey sis, how was Britain?” he asked as he got back to his office.

“Windy,” she answered, “but we had fun. How did the move go?”

“All done,” he answered. “We unpacked the last box Saturday night. We’re all settled in.”

“Good, you’ll need to send me a video, I want to see it.”

“Sure, Jessie already did a video documentary of the entire house, she even narrated it,” he chuckled. “It’s nearly an hour long.”

“Overnight it to me, bro.”

“Sure, I can do that,” he promised. “So, any news on the front?”

“Oh, yeah, there’s news,” she said darkly. “Simpson is gone. And I mean *gone*. She’s nowhere in Boston, and the FBI is looking for her. Turns out she got advance warning of what I did from someone, and she cleared out her bank account and ran. So, given that information, she was voted off the board this morning. And, on another note, it seems Uncle Zach has found a different way to come after me. Uncle Zach is suing me.”

“Suing you? Over what?”

“Breach of contract,” she grunted. “I got served the papers today. He’s pretty clever in how he worded it. He’s not suing over my ownership else he treads into the forbidden zone of the contract, so he’s instead suing me saying that I didn’t uphold my promises when I took the chair, which was a condition of me being CEO. If he wins, I lose the CEO chair...but he can’t take my stocks, so it’s a pointless exercise, since I can exercise my rights as the majority stockholder and boot anyone that takes my place. He can’t take control of the company from me, but he can aggravate the hell out of me.”

“Does it have legs?”

“Of course not,” she snorted. “It’s a nuisance suit, bro, there just to annoy me. He knows he’ll lose, he just wants to tie me up in court. He’s attacking me through my bank account.”

“Huh?”

“I can’t pay for my legal defense through the shipyard, not for this,” she growled. “I have to pay for it personally. In all, I got served with sixteen different sets of papers today, bro, sixteen different lawsuits. Add five miscellaneous lawsuits over different aspects of my running the company with eleven other lawsuits he filed this morning suing me over aspects of Stonebrook, and it adds up fast. And you know I don’t have as much money as he does. He’s trying to bleed me.”

“Criminy,” Kit grunted. “So, what are you going to do in revenge?”

She laughed darkly. “Oh, I have a plan,” she affirmed. “It starts tomorrow, when I put a new piece of business before the board.”

“And what is this?”

“Getting rid of Zach,” she said bluntly. “First thing in the morning, I’m putting his termination up for vote by the board.”

“What?” he gasped. “I didn’t think you could!”

“Oh, I can *now*,” she told him with dark humor. “When he filed suit against me, he violated his Vulpan Shipyard executive contract. He didn’t introduce the matter before the board before filing suit, which violates the internal resolution clause in the contract, and he also violated the non-disclosure agreement surrounding my CEO contract, which violates *his* secrecy clause in his contract. His lawyers filed the suit as a sealed proceeding, but the judge threw out the seal order, which made it open and violated Zach’s contract with the shipyard,” she said smugly. “And he can’t say he never signed one. I have it in front of me right now.”

“I seriously doubt they’ll fire him. Doesn’t it take a three-quarters majority and no dissenting Vulpan to fire a Vulpan off the board? I thought you said you had a voting majority, but not a three-quarters majority.”

“Yeah, I have a two vote edge since I canned Rogers and Lewis and Simpson fled the country, and that’s why immediately after I lose the termination vote, I’ll exercise my power as CEO in a way the board can’t stop. I’ll censure Zach for misconduct, levy the maximum fine I can, which is half his yearly salary, and then suspend him from the company for the maximum period without pay. That’ll be one month he’ll be suspended from the company. Hell, he won’t even be allowed into the shipyard, and I’ll take delight in watching security take his ID and escort him out of the yard. The board can’t stop me, because when I introduce the motion to terminate him, I’ll have to prove I have standing. When I prove that, then when it comes time for me to punish Zach for breaking his contract, the board can’t stop me, I’ll have already proved his misconduct.”

“That’s probably why he did it, sis. All it costs him is a quarter million and a month of sitting at home engineering his efforts to get rid of you.”

“Ah, yes, but consider this, brother dear,” she said smugly. “While he is suspended, he is *not* a member of the board. He *officially* loses that title while he’s serving his suspension. What that means is that if I can prove he got information about confidential board meetings while he’s suspended, I can temporarily suspend the *entire board* until such time as I discover who is leaking classified information. That’s one of my powers as CEO. And in instances where the board is suspended, the CEO can fire the offending board members *without votes*. Simply put, if I suspend the board, I can fire Zach and whoever told him what’s going on in the board meetings, and nobody can gainsay me. It’ll be an easy way to get rid of both Zach *and* Jake in one fell swoop. Jake won’t be able to resist telling Zach what’s going on in the meetings, especially after I bait him into it by doing something in a meeting that’ll make him run straight to Zach like his tail was on fire. And the instant he does, they’re both *gone*. I’ll sweep them out, then get rid of every fur they bribed, and reform the board with furs loyal to the company, *not* our uncles. And the instant he’s out of the shipyard, he loses standing to file the suit, and it gets dismissed.”

“Yes, and you telling me that just told Zach exactly what you’re going to do. This isn’t a secure phone, sis.”

“You think Nick’s down there for his health?” she asked lightly. “Your cell phone is secure *now*, bro, and your work Blackberry should be secure by tonight, including everyone on the network. Nick took care of it.”

“How did he pull that off?”

“Ask him if you want,” she chuckled. “He’s not down there for a vacation, bro. It may not look like it, but he’s working, and he sends me daily progress reports.”

Kit backtracked. “Wait, he’s suing you over Stonebrook? How?”

“He’s suing over operational costs and an attempt to make changes to the manor, to tear down a couple of the guest houses on the grounds. Like I said, bro, he’s trying to bleed me. He’s being very careful not to sue over anything that you can challenge as part of the agreement we signed, but he’s going after every tangent he can find. He has eleven different lawsuits suing to make changes to Stonebrook which I won’t permit, attacking me because I’m the primary owner on the deed. He’s even suing to force me to change cell phone plans at the manor. His strategy is to find any reason to sue, no matter how frivolous, and then overwhelm me with legal fees. A classic tactic of a rich fur exploiting the legal system. He’s going to try to break me defending myself from him.”

“Oh, *hell* no,” Kit growled. “He’s dragging *me* into this when he starts filing lawsuits over Stonebrook, and I’m not getting dragged into this mess. If Zach doesn’t withdraw every Stonebrook suit by tomorrow afternoon, I’ll kick his ass.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Make a very ugly threat,” he answered in a steely tone, which made Vil laugh. “Is the main phone number the same?”

“Sure is. I’ll let you have at it, bro. Have fun,” she said with a laugh, then she hung up.

Kit then dialed a number he hadn't used since he was 15 years old, but knew better than his own name. "Stonebrook Manor, this is Stanley MacArren, how may I help you?" came the rich voice of Stanley MacArren, the chief of staff of Stonebrook, the servant that ruled the house. That number used to ring into a switchboard, but now it ringed into a phone that the chief butler carried, not a cell phone but rather a landline using a floating phone that could be used anywhere on the manor just like a cell phone, and a phone from which Stanley could route calls to their destination. The number was the official number for the manor itself, and it was actually rarely used, since it dealt mainly with manor business. Those inside the manor all had their own personal cell phones, and so they were called directly. But since Kit didn't know Zach's number, he knew if he called the manor, Stanley could route the call to Zach.

"Stan," Kit called.

There was a gasp. "Master Kit!" he said excitedly. "Is something wrong? Did Father not answer his phone?"

"No, I'm sure Clancy's fine, Stan. I'm not calling to talk to him. Is my uncle there?"

"Umm, hold on. Dee!" he called away from the phone. "Has Master Vulpan returned home yet? Yes, he's here," he answered. "Sorry I couldn't answer, but I've been down at the docks. They've been replacing the dock planking the last couple of days, and I was down there fighting with the contractor."

"Put me through to him," Kit said grimly.

"Certainly, Master Kit. Should I tell him who's calling?"

“Oh, yes, do so,” he growled. “And tell him that if he does not answer the phone or shunts me off to someone else, I will come up there *personally*. And tell him to remember what I said the last time we talked face to face about what would happen the next time he saw me.”

There was a startled silence. “Yes, Master Kit, I’ll make sure he understands the, ah, gravity of the situation.”

Kit had to wait for about two minutes, and then the phone went live. “What do you want?” Zach asked in a grating voice.

“Neither of us wants to talk to the other, so let’s make this to the point. You will withdraw every lawsuit you filed over Stonebrook tomorrow, and you won’t file another one. Ever.”

“And just why should I do that?” he asked challengingly.

“Because if you don’t, you’ll be out of the gate by Wednesday afternoon,” Kit answered immediately. “I don’t care what games you and Vil play with each other in Boston, they don’t concern me, but you *will not* drag me into your fight, and you’re doing that when you start filing lawsuits over Stonebrook. My name is on that deed. You have no right to pull me into your petty bickering.”

“What makes you think you can give orders over Stonebrook? You won’t even spend the night here,” Zach sneered. “I have every right to do anything with Stonebrook I please, since my name is on the deed. The manor and its accounts are all *mine*, no matter what that piece of papers says.”

“What makes me think I can do it is because I *can*,” he snapped. “I’m not debating the point with you, Uncle Zach. You can drop the Stonebrook

lawsuits or you can paw over every cent the entire family has over to me, and then you'll get to explain to your brothers and sisters why they're suddenly penniless."

"What?" Zach asked hotly.

"It's simple, Uncle," Kit growled. "Vil will sign her portion of the deed over to me if I ask her to do it, and that's legal. That's the way it's set up. And when Vil does that, then *I* will be the primary owner. So, if you don't drop every suit you have going concerning Stonebrook, that means that all those suits you have concerning Stonebrook aren't filed against Vil anymore, they're filed against *me*. And do you remember what it says in the agreement about you suing me, Uncle?" he asked. "If you don't remember, allow me to remind you. If you try to sue me, you invalidate the *entire* agreement, and I get everything. So, I'm going to call Vil right now and have her draw up the document that signs Stonebrook over to me as the primary owner and makes her the secondary owner, switching our spots on the deed, and she's going to fax it to me. I'm going to sign it and fax it back to her. And there's not a damn thing you can do about that, since your position on the deed doesn't change...and if you try to sue to stop it, I can bust your ass from here to Poughkeepsie because *you cannot sue me*. So, Uncle, if every lawsuit concerning Stonebrook is not dismissed or withdrawn by five o'clock tomorrow, she'll file that deed at the courthouse first thing Wednesday morning. And the Vulpan family will be penniless by lunchtime, because I will invalidate the agreement and take *everything*."

"You fucking son of a bitch!" Zach howled into the phone.

"You dragged me into this stupid fight, *Uncle*," Kit growled in reply, "when you started messing with Stonebrook, and now I'm going to take Stonebrook right back out of it. You forget, my name is on that deed, and I

don't want any part of your scheming against Vil touching me. And when you mess with Stonebrook, you are messing with *me*. This is your only warning. Leave Stonebrook and anything else with my name on it out of any games you play with Vil, because you're encroaching on *me* when you do. I *will not* be pulled into your games. Just leave me the *fuck* alone, and I mean that in every single way possible. If you and Vil want to kill each other with a thousand paper cuts, go right on ahead and do it, but if my name is anywhere near it, it is *off limits*, do you understand? Just leave me *alone!*"

"Now listen here, you stupid child!" Zach raged at him. "You are sticking your nose in business that has nothing to do with you!"

"It has everything to do with me when you are taking Vil to court over something that has *my name* on it," he snapped in retort. "You do *not* own Stonebrook by yourself, Uncle. You are just a tertiary owner, you are an *afterthought* on that deed, third in line. That gives me a hell of a lot more right to stop you from screwing with Stonebrook than you have using it as a tool against Vil. And since it's clear that you think that Stonebrook is your personal toy, Uncle Zach, I think I'm going to have to make sure you're not destroying *my family's house* for your own amusement. I'm going to have Duckworth and Pennington go over the accounts of the manor, which I have the right to do as a deeded owner of the property," he added with a growl. "If there's even one penny out of place, you will be seeing me again face to face, *Uncle*, when I come up there and evict you," he said in a cold voice. "That money is not yours. It's not mine. It's not Vil's either. None of us has any right to any of that money. It belongs to Stonebrook, it pays the bills and the taxes and the salaries and benefits of the workers, and it had damn well better be there. And I mean *every damn penny*," he growled.

“I want you to understand one thing, Uncle. You had better leave me alone, or you will find out just how much like my father I really am,” he growled threateningly. “I forgave you and the family once before when I signed the agreement that gave you your money back and was willing to live down here in peace and away from you, but you are *fucking* testing my patience. I have only come back to Boston twice, once to see Clancy when he was sick and once to visit with Vil by her invitation, and I’ve kept to myself and out of family business. I’ve kept my side of the bargain, but you are not keeping yours, because you are dragging me into this by fucking with the only piece of real estate on this *earth* that has my name on it. If you drag me into this, if you get me tangled up in your little war with Vil, and if you *ever* threaten Stonebrook again, I will come up there and I will *destroy* you. Do you understand me?” he asked in a dreadfully cold voice.

“God damn you to hell, Luke!” Zach shouted, then he very noisily hung up the phone.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Kit said in a low, deadly tone into the dead receiver, then he hung up the phone.

Kit blew out his breath, trying to get himself back under control. That emotion wasn’t faked, and that threat was not an idle one. Zach was honestly pissing him off with his attempts to use Stonebrook against Vil, and Kit was not going to put up with it. But, Zach’s possessive statements about Stonebrook’s finances set an alarm off in Kit’s head, and made him call back as fast as he could hit redial. “Stonebrook Manor, this is Stanley MacArren, how may I help you?” Stanley went through his ritual greeting.

“Stan,” Kit said again.

“Master Kit! What happened? Did you get disconnected?”

“In a manner of speaking, since Zach hung up on me,” Kit said without much humor. “I want you to do something.”

“What is that?”

“Call Duckworth and Pennington right now and initiate an audit of the manor’s accounts. And I mean a *complete* audit. I want to know if even one penny is missing, and I want that audit started *right now*.”

Stanley laughed suddenly. “I can most certainly do that, Master Kit,” he said brightly. “I’ll see to it right now.”

“Do that. Oh, and Stanley.”

“Yes?”

“Do an inventory of everything at the manor. I want to know if there’s anything missing.”

“I’ll have it conducted immediately. At what number can I reach you?”

Kit gave him his number for his Blackberry. “I’m sorry to make work for you, but something Zach said rang all kinds of bells and whistles in my head. I want to make sure everything is the way it should be, both in the manor and in the manor’s accounts. I may hate that place, but I don’t hate the furs who work there, and you’re the ones I’m worrying about.”

“You’re not the only one who feels that way, Master Kit,” Stanley said seriously. “Let’s just say that I’ve been keeping an exceptionally close eye on things since your uncle moved in.”

“I’m glad we understand each other, Stan,” Kit said simply.

“On this matter, we do indeed, Master Kit,” he said soberly. “I’ll take care of this immediately.”

“Thanks, Stan.”

“For you, Master Kit, anything. Goodbye sir.”

“Bye.” Kit speed dialed Vil, and she answered before the phone even rang. “Sis.”

“So, what happened?”

“Uncle Zach blew a head gasket,” Kit answered, which made her laugh delightedly. “He called me a son of a bitch, and that was the nicest thing he said.”

“What exactly did you do?”

“I threatened to have you sign Stonebrook over to me tomorrow if he doesn’t drop every Stonebrook suit,” he answered. “Since that would make me the primary owner, that means those suits would be against *me* instead of *you*.”

She howled with sudden exuberant laughter. “Oh God, baby bro, that’s going for the jugular!” she said with glee, laughing even more. “And it’s *legal*! The suits are against me as the primary owner of Stonebrook! If I signed it over to you, those lawsuits would transfer to you, the instant I proved to the court that I’m not the owner anymore. Zach would get caught trying to sue you through the back door!”

“I’m carrying through the threat, sis,” he said. “Send me the paperwork that switches us on the deed, with me first and you second. I’ll sign it and send it back, and if Zach doesn’t drop his Stonebrook suits by the close of business tomorrow, file it Wednesday morning. If he does, just tear them up or burn them or whatever you want to do with them. And when you see him

tomorrow, show him the document. Let him *see* that I was not joking one little bit.”

“That’s a deal, bro. A courier will show up at your place in five or six hours with the papers, I’ll just put the lawyer on the plane and he can draw them up on the way down. Sign them and he’ll bring them back.”

“One other thing, sis. When we started arguing about the manor, he said a few things that rang an alarm in my head. I asked Stanley to have Duckworth and Pennington audit the manor’s accounts, and he’s going to inventory everything that’s supposed to be there. I, uh, I kinda have to have you pay for that, sis, I can’t afford them to do the audit, but it needs to be done. I wouldn’t put it past Zach to pillage the manor’s accounts and leave the manor bankrupt in revenge for whatever we may do to him.”

She laughed again. “God I’ve missed you, bro,” she told him. “I love how thoroughly you do things.”

“I’m a researcher, we define thorough,” he said simply, which made her chuckle.

“I’ll have the audit’s cost taken out of the manor’s accounts, bro, don’t worry about that. It’s a justifiable expense.”

“Well, I guess, because someone has to do it,” he grunted. “I can’t believe how petty Zach’s getting. You should have heard him, sis. He all but dared me to do something about him filing lawsuits against Stonebrook. I took him up on it.”

“God, did you!” she laughed delightedly. “I think Uncle Zach’s gonna be too busy tomorrow putting the money back in Stonebrook’s accounts to be able to pay much attention to anything else,” she snickered.

“He’d better, or I’ll come up there and punch him in the nose,” Kit growled. “Just like Terry.”

“I’ll send a jet down for you to come up,” she offered.

He laughed. “No thanks,” he answered. “I’d much rather go home and nuzzle Jessie than go to Boston and punch Zach. I’m a lover, not a fighter.”

“Lightweight,” she teased. “I’ll go take care of this, bro. Remember, stay close to home tonight.”

“We don’t have any plans, we’re both still recovering from the move.”

“Oh, give the courier the video instead of sending it.”

“Sure, I’ll send it with him.”

“Okay, baby bro, I’ll call you tomorrow and tell you what happened.”

“Alright, sis, be good.”

“Never,” she chuckled. “Bye-bye bro.”

“Bye sis.”

Kit hung up the phone and pondered for a moment. He didn’t really want to get involved in the fighting between Vil and Zach, but them dragging Stonebrook into it was going too far. Not only were they dragging him into it as an owner, they were messing with the lives and livelihoods of the furs who lived and worked at the manor. Kit wouldn’t like it at all if the manor was damaged in the fight between Vil and Zach, if the court made some kind of injunction freezing the manor’s assets or something like that. And that was definitely possible if Zach didn’t stop hounding Vil over the manor. Kit had no happy memories of that place, but it *was* where he was born, and it was part of the family’s history. Kit wouldn’t let it get destroyed

in a power struggle between Vil and Zach. If worse came to worst, he'd take it from both of them to protect it from their machinations. Vil would sign over the manor to him if he asked it, redo the deed where he was the primary owner and Vil was the secondary owner, and if he feared she was losing her objectivity where the manor was concerned, he'd make her give it to him. Then he'd go up to Boston and force Zach out of it, thereby protecting it from them. After that, he'd just let Stanley take care of it until Laura was of age, and he'd give it to her. He sure as hell didn't want to live there.

The manor had ten million dollars in its accounts thanks to the agreement that Vil had him sign after Cybil's lawsuit was killed, money that belonged to the *manor*, not the *Vulpans* living inside it, and that was enough for the manor to literally be self-sustaining for perpetuity. The interest the manor made from safe investments like T-bills more than covered the operating costs the manor incurred over the year. The manor's accounts were managed by Duckworth and Pennington, one of the most prestigious accounting firms in Boston, and they had specific rules about how to invest that money that prevented them from losing it in bad investments. That was Vil's intent when she set it up, because she knew that the manor would be a point of contention and didn't want the manor to become a hostage to the family, then fall apart when it was starved of money during the fight. So, she made sure the manor didn't *need* any outside money nor any Vulpan to operate. The manor ran itself, and while Zach had access to the manor's accounts, that money was not his, and neither was he the primary fur that managed that money. That responsibility was actually Stanley's, since he was the chief butler and primary overseer of the estate. Zach only had authorization to use that money to pay any unusual expenses the manor might incur, such as a renovation, contract work, emergency repairs, or

other similar things. Zach would have a lot of explaining to do when withdrawals from those accounts authorized by Zach did not appear in Stanley's meticulously kept records, because the conditions under which Zach could access those accounts was laid out *in writing*. If he violated those rules, he could be arrested and charged with embezzlement, unless he tried to frame Stanley for the missing money. That wouldn't be easy, though. Stanley wasn't kidding when he said that he'd been extremely careful since Zach moved in, according to Clancy, making sure that he had written authorizations from Zach personally for everything Zach wanted done around the manor, and Stanley was extremely thorough and careful when it came to his own management of the manor, capable of producing a detailed trail of exactly where the money he took from the accounts went. If Zach wanted to frame Stanley, he'd have to spend almost as much money in the attempt as he took from the manor in the first place...but then again, he wouldn't be taking the money because he wanted it, he'd be taking it to spite Vil and force her to spend her own money keeping the manor going.

Yes, thinking of it that way, he was sure that was exactly what Zach was angling to do. All the lawsuits were just the groundwork to try to tie up the entire manor account in court, and then he'd simply refuse to pay for anything, since he wasn't the primary owner. He'd try to blackmail Vil into giving him the manor else she'd have to lay off workers who had been in the employment of the family for *generations* and see Stonebrook fall into disrepair. And Kit's threat to retaliate, forcing Zach to withdraw all present and future lawsuits over Stonebrook, would just shoot that right in the foot. Kit had to chuckle when he imagined Zach sitting there realizing his intricate plan to bleed Vil dry over Stonebrook fell apart in his lap...and not because of Vil, but because of *Kit*.

No doubt Zach was screaming in frustration right about now.

Good. Kit hated Zach and his other uncles and aunts for what they did to him, and if he could make Zach miserable without really having to do anything, then he was more than happy to do so.

Rick knocked and opened his door. “Hey, son, what’s going on?”

“Not much, just family stuff,” he grunted, motioning sourly at the phone. “What’s up?”

“Just wonderin’ if you were coming back,” he smiled. “We’re not done yet, you know.”

Kit laughed. “Yeah. I’m done,” he nodded. “Sorry. That wasn’t exactly a *good* call.”

“Mind if I ask what’s goin’ on?”

“Just typical Vulpan skullduggery, Rick,” he sighed as they went back to his office. “And they were pulling me into the middle of it, so I had to put my foot down. They can fight among themselves, I want nothing to do with it.”

“Well, you can get back to reality by helping get this ad on this page,” he laughed, pointing at the monitor.

The magazine was going to do pretty well this week, Kit felt. They were now running at 52 pages, which was *huge* for a small local magazine, and it was filled with content...and was working the nerves of the employees. Filling 52 pages with good articles and material was working them all hard, almost as hard as their first expansion, even with Marty, Jessie, Lilly, Mike, and even Denise all doing writing for the magazine now,

and Janet, Pat, and Elly contributing non-article content of their own. But Rick was going to address that, for the next round of hirings were taking place this week. Rick was two new staff writers to help fill the magazine's pages, both of which would be splitting time between writing and researching, as well as a new art assistant who was well versed in computer graphics, mainly to help Savid, and Rick was going to hire his 16 year old nephew Timmy to be their office gopher until their interns arrived next month. Rick had a stack of resumes to pick through to decide who he was going to interview, and Kit knew that Rick would pick good ones; Rick had a knack for finding the perfect furs to work in the office, and had yet to choose wrong. This week, they had another installment of their election special, Kit had written another article about flying, Jessie had written two articles, Rick had edited another story from Kit's journals for *Through My Eyes*, Marty and Lilly had collaborated on a special article about the upcoming semester and the changes taking place on campus as far as entertainment went, and Barry had done a pretty good article about the big debate about them raising tuition at U.T. on top of his election articles. There were five new *School Daze* strips, two new *Missy and Cutler* strips, and Marty had done his usual good job with the mailbag and *Ask Away*, this time nailing Janet for the weekly question. Elly had drawn a hilarious editorial cartoon lampooning the board of governors and their decision to raise tuition, them deciding to raise tuition so they could get raises to afford \$3.75 a gallon gas, and another one needling the infighting between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination, them beating each other with spiked bats while John McCain cheered from the background. Kit had to admit, Elly was *awesome* at drawing caricature, and that was the bread and butter of an editorial cartoonist. They were buying reprint rights to a couple of stories, and they'd gotten a few outstanding

pictures from readers for the submitted photo gallery and got a pretty good column from a journalism student about the parking situation on campus for *15 Minutes of Fame*. Savid would put a very handsome weather forecast graphic in for the weekend, that added at the last minute so it would be as accurate as possible, and this week they were starting a new advertiser, Thunder Outfitters, which sold skateboards, skateboarding supplies, and clothing.

They were expecting to pay out \$7,237.34 this week in printing costs, salaries, insurance, and expenses, but were projecting to take in \$13,250 in advertising revenues, reprint royalties, syndication royalties from *School Daze*, website revenues, and unit sales. The magazine was heavily outperforming its costs, and that infusion of profit was being bankrolled to fund further expansion, which would start taking place this week with the three new hires. They were doing that thanks to strong unit sales, revenues from the website, which was a recent and surprisingly strong source of income, and a heavy amount of reprint royalties, which was something of a prestigious matter for the magazine. *Lone Star* was one of the most reprinted magazines in Texas when it came to articles and features in the magazine being picked up by other publications. A *Lone Star* article could be found in nearly every other magazine in Texas. And in addition to that, no other city magazine in Texas could boast articles being reprinted in national magazines. *Newsweek*, *The New Republic*, *Plane and Pilot*, *Rainbow Magazine*, *Aviator*, and *Photography* magazine had all reprinted material from *Lone Star*, and *School Daze* was now in 29 newspapers and 16 magazines nationally, which was also a nice source of personal income for Jeffrey and Kit.

Their success made both Rick and Kit hopeful, but both of them saw the dark clouds looming, and were preparing to nurse the magazine through hard times ahead. The best way to do that was clear the magazine's debt and make it an appealing buy for a cash-strapped populace, which they felt they'd done already. *Lone Star*'s main difference from other magazines was the somewhat irreverent way it approached things. It wasn't afraid to laugh, even at itself, and it entertained even as it informed. In a recession, furs would want to buy their magazine because it would make them laugh.

And still, another project was itching under Kit's fur...his CFI, his adamant intent to get his ATP and ATP trainer certificate, and to see Jessie get her CFI. Getting his plane, Vil's gift of the training as a pilot, the rekindled love of flying his training had imparted into him, and the local flight situation, they all combined to offer a couple of unique opportunities. Kit may not have anything to do with his family, but he was a Vulpan to the roots of his fur, and he had a nose for business, and there was money to be made in the central Texas aviation business. They could open a nice little flight school on the side, maybe even a charter flight company, which he could anchor by building some T-hangars somewhere. The recent major downturn in real estate would make buying the land for it affordable, but the trick would be finding an airport where there was enough room to expand T-hangars. There was a very large bank of T-hangars at Bergstrom and a fairly good sized one at Georgetown, but Georgetown had no room for expansion, where Bergstrom, well...Bergstrom had some empty land around the short runways, primarily on the south side. He wondered if they'd entertain a proposal to build another bank of T-hangars down there in that empty area. With so many hangar complexes all with waiting lists, there was a business opportunity.

But was there really an opportunity there, or a chance to lose some money? With gas prices so high, employment falling, housing still tumbling and a credit crisis starting to loom, a high-price item like a plane might become a luxury some couldn't afford. Maybe Kit could pick up a few bargains in used planes, sold off by furs who couldn't afford them anymore, and maybe buy someone else's hangar space to boot. Families like the Vulpans were actually overjoyed by recessions and depressions, because their main source of income was absolutely guaranteed, and had very little to do with the economy in general. Navy contracts were guaranteed money as long as they built the ships on time and within budget, and recessions actually drove down their costs, which ended up with more profit for them. Much of the non-shipyard wealth of the family had been accrued during the Great Depression, the recession of the 70's, the 80's crash, and then through the boom years of the 90's. Furs like his family had money when no one else did, and that let them buy stocks and land dirt cheap and just sit on them and let them mature as the economy recovered, then sell them at a profit. Kit had already moved into a recession mindset, selling off his volatile investments and retreating into safe T-bills, which also would give him a good supply of cash on paw for bargain purchases. If he played his cards right, Kit could make some wise purchases and investments when Kendall's predicted crash came and the bottom fell out, scoop up some bargains, then reap the rewards when the economy recovered. He'd watch mainly for some bargains on planes. If he wanted to train pilots, he needed a real trainer, like a Piper Scout or a Cessna 152 or 172, and a Beech King Air would be the twin engine of choice for training multi engines, though an older Piper, Cessna, or a Grumman might be cheaper. If he could snag a couple of good trainer planes and buy them in a down market, he could train pilots freelance and keep his 400 for himself, he'd just have to

carefully weigh what he might earn training in them against how much it would cost to maintain them.

But the shameless kid in him wanted to own an entire hangar full of planes, his personal toys, from a vintage P-51 to a shiny, brand new Cessna Citation X. How to buy all those planes, and the hangar, and pay to keep them maintained didn't intrude on that dream...but that was the point of dreams, to ignore the frivolous little details and concentrate on the good parts.

His daydream persisted when he got home, when, in his first official workday after moving in, Kit went to the den, dug out his ATP study books, and carted them into the living room and sat down after greeting Jessie properly and getting chased out of the kitchen when he offered to cook dinner. "Not in my new kitchen you won't," she protested with a smile. "This is my toy, I get to play with it first! You can have it when I get bored with it," she added with a wink, which made Kit laugh.

"Just for that, I'm gonna have to sneak down here tomorrow before work and play in your sandbox," he teased.

She giggled. "Alright, you can cook breakfast. But don't break anything, clean up after yourself, and put everything back where it belongs. I worked too hard to get my kitchen just so to have you come in and wreck it!"

"God, you sound like Hannah," he told her, which made her blink, start, and erupt into gales of helpless laughter.

Kit started studying the first of the ATP study guides that Luke suggested, giving him a study guide to tell him which books to read first and explaining the training software to him, which he had yet to install on

any of the computers yet. He quickly got engrossed in the highly complicated and detailed world of the air transport pilot, pilots who knew just about everything about flying, the most highly trained pilots there were. Luckily, Kit could go straight to the coursework, ground training, and the specific flight instruction when he went for his ATP, because he already met all the FAA requirements to get his ATP rating, having accrued the necessary logged hours in the necessary planes, and had all the necessary ratings. When he started his ATP, he'd be looking at three to four weeks of dedicated flight school training to get all his training requirements complete, and then it would be a six to ten hour check ride, the hardest and most demanding check ride in all of aviation. Not even the ATP CFI check ride was as tough as the ATP check ride, because ATP pilots could be responsible for the lives of hundreds of furs and be flying jets worth hundreds of millions of dollars. The CFI check ride for ATP was more or less a victory lap compared to the ATP check ride.

He'd all but be torturing himself to get his ATP and then his ATP CFI, but he wanted them, and he was willing to work for them...even if they were never more than just a piece of paper hanging on his wall. He wanted to walk the path of the pilot to the very end, and the very end was the ATP CFI. He wanted to have every rating there was, even wanted to get his rotorcraft and amphibious plane ratings, which would literally require him to start over from the very beginning for each one. He doubted he'd ever use an amphibious rating, but he could see using a rotorcraft rating.

"Uh oh," Jessie giggled when she came into the living room from the hall. "Here we go again!"

"Just using my time wisely, love," he smiled. "What are we having?"

“I’m baking a tuna casserole and I’m making some shrimp scampi to go with it, I’ve been having a craving for seafood lately,” she told him, rubbing her stomach. “I think Laura here is cat enough to want seafood before she’s even born.”

“I already won the muzzle,” he winked.

“I’ll get her claws,” Jessie teased.

“Speaking of spoiled brats,” he said dryly, “I had a little run-in with my family today.”

“Uh oh, what happened?” she asked as she sat down on the love seat, the closest seat to the hallway.

Kit related what Vil had told him, and then his ensuing spat with Zach, without much emotion. “So, after I threatened to strip the entire family of its money if he didn’t take Stonebrook out of the pissing contest he’s having with Vil, he said some pretty ugly things and hung up on me,” he finished. “Then I immediately called Stanley, Clancy’s son and the current chief butler, and told him to conduct an audit of the manor’s finances and do an inventory of everything on the grounds. The way he said it, pretty kitty, I just get this gnawing suspicion that Zach’s pillaging the manor’s money in an attempt to blackmail her into giving him the manor. He doesn’t need the money, he’s just doing it to spite Vil, I’ll bet my good ear on it.”

“Well, it sounds like you stepped on that. I’d be really mad if poor Clancy got kicked out of the only home he’s ever known just because Zach and Vil are fighting.”

“Yah, that’s the main reason I warned Stanley. I can’t step through the gates of Stonebrook without having a panic attack, but there are some good

furs there that I care about. So I basically took Stonebrook out of the sandbox while those two fight over the rest of the toys.”

“Did your uncle really say something awful to you?”

“Pretty much, yeah,” he nodded.

“Well,” she said, slapping her knees with both paws. “Maybe you should think about taking a trip.”

“Huh?”

“Remember what I made you promise? That the next time they said something awful to you, you’d force him out of Stonebrook? Well, he said something awful to you, and a promise is a promise.”

Kit laughed. “Well, I’m not quite so furious that I’d leave you to go up there and kick Zach out of Stonebrook, love,” he told her. “I’d have to stay up there long enough to clearly establish residency, so it’d be at least a few weeks, maybe a month. Besides, Vil told me to stay out of Boston no matter what, and that trumps the promise. Anyway, I don’t want to be away from you for a day, being away from you for weeks would destroy me.”

“Who said I’m staying here?” she winked.

“You *are* staying here,” he declared immediately. “I would never in a million years take you to Boston right now, love. And if I was that insane, you’d never leave your room while you were there. If you think Alicia was awful to us when we were there for the fourth, you have no idea just how brutal they can be when they think they have good reason. The entire family would be enraged if I go up there and kick Zach out of Stonebrook, because I’m supposed to stay out of family business. That’s what the whole *us here them there* deal is about. The only reason I went as far as I did was because

my name is on the Stonebrook deed, and Zach was dragging *me* into a fight between him and Vil by virtue of that. And I was very careful to make that lone point when I threatened him, that him dragging me into it was inciting me to take immediate and drastic action to take me right back out of it. Now Zach knows where my line is, and as long as he keeps me out of it, I won't interfere again."

"That's what you told him, but what's the truth?" Jessie asked with a wink.

He laughed. "Well, I'm clearly on Vil's side in this and he knows it, I'm just not giving him a reason to think that I'm *actively* fighting him."

After dinner, the promised courier arrived with the lawyer, meeting Nick on the front step, whom Jessie had invited over to dinner, but he'd been late because he was out doing something. The courier was an Australian koala, a rare fur in America, and the lawyer looked a typical Boston fox, both of them wearing tailored suits, the koala in gray and the lawyer in black. "Mister Vulpan," the fox said, shaking his paw. "Art Merriwether. I have a document for you to sign, correct?"

"That's right," he said.

"Wot, Kit, trouble?"

"I know you already know everything, wolf," Kit teased, which made him laugh and nod guiltily.

"Yah, the nutters and Miss Vil both keep me up to speed in the shenanigans of Boston," he admitted. "Jessie! Sorry to be late dove, but I was out inspecting shooting ranges!"

"I'm in the kitchen!" she called back. "Come get your leftovers!"

Kit and the lawyer sat down at the dining room table as Nick ate in the kitchen, as the lawyer meticulously explained the document in simple terms. “This is nothing but a change in an existing deed,” he said, pointing at the sheaf of four papers. “Basically, what this document will do is change you and Vilenne’s order on the deed to Stonebrook. You’ll become primary owner and the fur responsible for the manor, and Vil will become secondary owner. The change is only between you and Vilenne, Mister Vulpan. Vil’s first child will still have primary claim to the manor over your child as per the original agreement, and Zachary Vulpan’s position within the deed hierarchy doesn’t change.”

“Alright, where do I sign?” he asked.

Kit signed two copies of the two page document, Kit gave him the DVD of the video to take back to Boston, and the lawyer and courier shook his paw and went on their way. Kit went into the kitchen to see Nick enjoying the casserole at the kitchen table as Jessie did the dishes. “That’s all taken care of,” Kit said. “What were you doing out there, Nick?” “I was inspecting shooting ranges and gun clubs,” he answered. “And I found the range where I’ll be doing my teaching. Place called Red’s out in Oak Hill. They agreed to let me teach there.”

“You mean you paid them for the opportunity to teach,” Kit corrected.

Nick laughed. “Yah, yah,” he agreed. “Tomorrow after Kit gets off work, we’re going out for our first training, mainly for you, Kit. Once I get you two trained to my satisfaction, maybe I can talk you into getting concealed carry permits.”

“I’d never carry a gun, Nick,” Kit scoffed.

“We’ll see,” he smiled. “Where do you shoot skeet, Jessie?”

“Capitol Skeet and Trap,” she answered.

“Ah, I visited them this mornin’. Nice place they have.”

“Yeah, and they’re not too expensive,” Jessie agreed. “When the four of us went, it was forty dollars for a round for each of us, twenty-five targets. That’s not bad.”

“Not bad at all. Do they offer memberships?”

“Yeah, but I don’t shoot skeet often enough to need a membership,” she said. “I haven’t even taken Kit yet,” she giggled.

“That’s your fault,” he answered. “You haven’t shot skeet since we met until just last month.”

“What kind of skeet shotgun do you have?”

“Kit bought me a Remington three thirty-two for my birthday,” she answered. “He also bought a Remington Wingmaster pump, mainly for himself and anyone I take with me.”

“A pump for a beginner? Ouch!” Nick laughed.

“It’s a pretty good shotgun,” she said, a bit defensively. “Wingmasters are almost perfect skeet guns as is, and though I haven’t used it yet, it seems to have a fast reload action. Not *all* skeet guns are over unders. I’ve seen guys at the range back home use pumps before.”

“I’m not accusin’,” he laughed. “Want to go try it out?”

“What do you say, love? Want to learn how to shoot skeet and try out our shotguns?” Jessie asked.

“Sure, I’ll try it,” Kit nodded.

“I’ll go get my shotgun after dinner, then,” Nick smiled. “I didn’t bring my K-eighty with me, but I have twelve gauge pump with a thirty inch barrel and skeet-friendly chokes with me I can use.”

“You have a K-eighty?” Jessie gasped.

“Yeah. Don’t use it, though, bought it from a mate for five K who was selling his collection,” he grunted. “Thought I’d try it out. It doesn’t fit me well at all, I do much better with my Beretta when I’m shooting competitively. I have it up for sale on Ebay right now for six K, so I can make a profit off the deal.”

It was an interesting experience. They arrived at the skeet range about two hours before sunset, and it was actually busy. Nick carried a long bag holding the three shotguns they brought with them, and they went into a lobby and retail store where Jessie greeted the raccoon behind the counter with a smile, bought a couple of boxes of shotgun shells, and bought them time on the skeet range. Kit followed her out to a pair of skeet ranges with one set of the target launchers back to back, launching them in opposite directions, and another launcher on the other side, with a semicircle between them. Along the semicircle there were little marks and small metal boxes, which he saw were foot pedals, seven in total and with an eighth in the middle of the semicircle. The launcher buildings were actually a lot taller than he expected. He saw that the back to back launchers weren’t both for their range, one of them was for the range beside theirs. The other range was occupied, and Kit found the constant sounds of shotguns being fired both on their range at other ranges on the site to be rather noisy. Kit then received his first real lesson with a firearm, as Jessie explained the basic safety rules of never, ever point it at anything one didn’t intend to shoot, and always assume the gun is loaded. She showed him how to hold the

shotgun and how to line up the sights, then she explained skeet shooting to him. “There are launchers on both sides that throw the pidgeon in an arc in front of us,” she explained. “The left house them throws them high, the right one throws them low. You see the seven circles? Each of those is a shooting position. We shoot certain shots from each position. For example, the first position, we shoot at one target from each trap house, then we shoot a double, where they launch targets from both houses at the same time. That’s why you see most serious skeet shooters with an over under, love,” she told him. “But some skeet shooters use a pump, if it’s a fast pump and you’re quick. I’ve seen shooters who can pump a shotgun as fast as others can move their finger to the second trigger on an over under. And I’ll be learning how to do that, I’m going to try out the pump shotgun first to see how well I do and let you use the over under,” she giggled. “This is the first time I’ve used a pump action shotgun shooting skeet, Dad won’t use anything but over unders, and I’ve always used his guns. You watch it move, draw a bead on it, then shoot. I know it’s terribly unfair to make you try to shoot something moving the first time you’ve ever shot a gun before,” she giggled. “But Sheila, Sam, and Ally had never shot a gun either, and they gave this a try. Sam’s actually getting pretty good,” she laughed. “After their first try, we went to a stationary target range and let them get the hang of aiming, and we’ve been shooting skeet ever since.”

“Hey, I’ll give it a shot,” Kit assured her, putting the shotgun to his shoulder and keeping it pointed safely down the shooting range, eyeing the sights. “But after you embarass me here, we can go to that shooting range you were talking about and I can learn how to do this the right way.”

“I think you’ll do alright,” Nick told him as he took out a sleek-looking black-stocked pump action shotgun with a reinforcing bar running over the

barrel and a carrying handle, a piece of equipment that blatantly had no business being on a recreational target shooting range. “This is *my* baby,” Nick chuckled. “Mossberg X nine pump action twelve guage. This was actually a combat model shotgun, made for the battlefield, but it can load both light and heavy shells without changing tubes and it’s pretty damn accurate because it has a thirty-two inch barrel and I have it choked for target shooting. They stopped making these when they developed rugged and dependable automatic shotguns for combat.”

“They make automatic shotguns?” Kit said in surprise. “I read about semi-automatic shotguns when I bought Jessie’s gun, but I’ve never heard of an automatic shotgun.”

“Sure do. I own one, I’ll show it to ya when we get home,” he answered. “It’s not meant for skeet shooting, though,” he laughed. “It’s designed for use on a battlefield, it only shoots big shells and heavy shot. You don’t use heavy shot for skeet shooting, you use light shot.”

“This is all Greek to me,” Kit laughed.

“It’s a combat shotgun, Kit, it’s meant to stop furs, it loads three or three and a half inch shells filled with heavy shot. We’re shooting shot here to hit a little clay target, using little two and three quarter or three inch shells filled with light shot. *Big* difference.” He patted the shotgun. “This baby can load and shoot any size twelve gauge round without changing hardware thanks to the way the barrel is designed, which is a requirement for a combat weapon. That’ll let me shoot birdshot today, then I can take it home, clean it, and load it with buckshot rounds meant to stop furs.”

“I didn’t realize there was such a big difference,” Kit chuckled.

“Oh yeah, there is,” Jessie told him as she started loading their shotgun. “Can I go first? I’d like to get a feel for this shotgun, and let you use mine, since it’ll be easier for you,” she said with a wink at Kit.

“Be my guest, love,” Kit laughed. “I think I want to watch and see how this is done.”

The range was actually automated. Jessie started on one side of the semicircle, at one of those marks right beside the right launcher house. When she was ready, she stepped on the foot switch, which would launch the target exactly three seconds later, giving her time to set her feet and get ready. Kit watched as Jessie quickly tracked the little flying target with the shotgun, and then the target shattered when she pulled the trigger. She reloaded, following her own rule she gave Kit and only loading the shells she intended to fire with the next round, and stepped on the switch again, and this time the target came out of the other launcher, much lower than the first. Jessie moved quickly and fluidly, tracking the target, then it too shattered when she pulled the trigger. “Now we see how fast I am,” she giggled as she loaded two shells and pumped the shotgun to chamber the first shell. She stepped on the switch, and Kit saw a target come out of each launcher. She went after the low target first, shooting it down, then quickly pumped the shotgun with it braced against her shoulder even as she drew a bead on the other target. She pulled the trigger as it soared almost away, and it broke into two pieces and wobbled to the ground. “Yes!” she said excitedly, pumping her fist. “I can do it!”

“Why is there only one launcher over there?” Kit asked, pointing at the other side as Jessie moved to the next position, then loaded one shell into the shotgun.

“That’s a trap range,” Nick answered. “Trap is something like skeet, except the targets all come from the same side. The launcher randomly changes its height and direction to give the shooter a challenge. When you do a double in traps, they come from the same launcher.”

“Oh. I didn’t realize there were different ones. Do you ever shoot trap, love?” he asked her.

“Uh-huh,” she answered as she stepped on the foot switch. She shot down her skeet, then glanced back at him. “But it’s easier than shooting skeet. I like the challenge.”

“Well, if you want a challenge, you should shoot skeet with a rifle,” Nick teased.

“I’d never hit anything!” she laughed as she reloaded. He watched as she shot down the single target, then she had to shoot another double. She shot down the low one, pumped the shotgun, and fired at the second one, but missed. “Dang!” she said in frustration, stamping her foot.

“You’ll get the hang of it, love.”

“I know, I just don’t like to miss.”

“Who does?” Nick laughed.

Kit watched as Jessie shot her way through the positions, and ended at the position in the middle. In all, she fired 25 shots and hit 23 targets, which Kit thought was amazing. She only missed on doubles, because she was adjusting to learning how to pump the shotgun to reload it rather than just pulling a second trigger. “Alright boys, who’s next?” Jessie asked as she pumped the shotgun, ejecting the last smoking shell from it.

“Did you ever win the lottery when you found her, eh?” Nick asked Kit with a chuckle. “I’ll go.”

Nick made Jessie a little mad, for he was, simply, *amazing*. He fired his shotgun almost immediately after each target was launched and shot it down. On the doubles, he pumped the shotgun so fast that it was almost a blur and fired his second round almost seeming like before he finished pumping the shotgun. He waltzed through each of the positions with utter confidence, and when it was over, he didn’t miss a single shot...and not only that, no target managed to go for more than half a second before it was shot down. “Not bad,” Nick said with a nod.

“Compared to what?” Kit asked, then he laughed. “So, now that you’ve set the bar, allow me to fail miserably,” he said cheekily.

“Eh, it’s your first time, you expect to score a perfect?” Nick grinned.

Both of them gave him some detailed lessons about shooting a shotgun, from how to aim it to the recoil to how to reload. Nick had him aim the shotgun and swing it to and fro on his shoulder while it was empty several times to get a feel for it, and then Jessie taught him how to load the weapon. When he was ready, he blew out his breath, stepped into the first position, shouldered the shotgun, and stepped on the switch to launch the first target. The target flew out, and he did his best to lead it the way Jessie explained, getting the barrel in front of it but in line with it, then he pulled the trigger. For the first time in his life, Kit fired a shotgun, and missed the target completely. He was surprised by the recoil, since it didn’t seem that hard when Nick and Jessie shot...but then again, they were experienced. They knew what to expect. Kit missed the second target, and when the double came, he got so flustered trying to hit the first target that he didn’t even try to shoot the second target, which made him laugh ruefully. He kept

his perfectly awful record all the way to the very last position, where he finally managed to hit on the first target. “Finally!” he shouted, pumping a fist in the air, and accidentally stepped on the switch. “Oh crap!” he gasped, shouldering the shotgun quickly, which made Jessie burst out laughing when he pointed it at the wrong trap house. He saw the target come from the other side, wheeled around, and rushed his shot, which naturally made him miss. “Okay, I suck at this,” he laughed ruefully as he loaded two shells into the shotgun the way Jessie showed him, for his second to last set, the double. After the double, there was a “bonus” target which he could shoot at from any position.

“You’ll get better, handsome fox,” Jessie assured him. “It’s the first time you’ve ever tried!”

“We’ll go to the static target range they have here so you can get some experience shooting at something that doesn’t move,” Nick told him.

“That would help,” Kit laughed as he closed the shotgun. “But this is actually kinda fun.”

“I never minded it when Dad brought us,” Jessie agreed. “But Jenny’s actually a lot better than me.”

“I want to try this again, and hit more than one target next time,” Kit said with a chuckle.

“I’ll have to go buy us another round and some more shells,” Jessie said.

“I’ll go get it,” Nick said. “I gotta pay for that dinner you fed me, Jessie,” he grinned.

They were there until sunset, when the range closed, and Kit actually enjoyed himself. Jessie was a very good skeet shooter, and Nick was just godly, but he could see the appeal in target shooting. It was actually *fun*. In the second game, Jessie used her new shotgun and Kit tried the pump shotgun and did a little better, hitting four out of 25, and in the last try he used the pump shotgun again and hit five of 25. He was terrible at it, hitting a total of only ten targets out of the 75 he shot at in three games, but he sincerely enjoyed himself. “We are *so* doing that again!” Kit declared when they walked back towards Nick’s Expedition. Nick had driven them out.

“I’m glad you had fun, love,” Jessie told him, kissing him on the cheek. “Maybe I’ll have you buy an over under for yourself, they’re a little easier to use than a pump for skeet shooting, as I’m sure you noticed.”

“Yeah, and I need all the help I can get,” Kit laughed, “but I’ll learn. If you and Nick can do it with a pump shotgun, so can I. Your shotgun is *yours*, my love. I bought the pump for the rest of us, and I’ll learn how to use it.”

“We’ll try some target shooting tomorrow when I give you your lesson, but we’ll be working with pistols, not shotguns. But, I’ll bring a few different weapons with me to show you, so you can get an idea of the different types of weapons there are,” Nick said as he opened the back gate of the truck and put the bag holding the shotguns inside. “I’ll take care of cleanin’ your shotguns, guys,” he added. “Gives me somethin’ to do, ya know. I’ll bring ‘em with me tomorrow and you can take ‘em home.”

“That’s sweet, thanks Nick,” Jessie nodded as she got into the truck.

That night, they got the official announcement from Kevin and Sam, who came over unannounced for dinner, but were more than welcome.

Jessie was still being militant about keeping Kit out of the kitchen, so he was again studying his ATP books. The first thing Sam did when she came into the living room was hold up her left paw, which was now decorated by an engagement ring. Kit laughed, Jessie gave a little squeal of delight and rushed over to hug her, and Sam could only smile foolishly. “He proposed!” she finally announced as Kevin came in.

“And she said yes!” Kevin added, receiving a hug from Jessie.

“Congratulations, you two!” Jessie gushed. “Did you set a date yet?”

“We haven’t set a solid date, but we want to marry in October,” Kevin answered. “Right now I’m trying to convince her to say yes to my other proposal,” he laughed.

“He wants me to move in with him before the ceremony!” Sam protested.

“Hey, it worked for Kit and Jessie,” Kevin told her. “I think their marriage is even stronger because they lived together while they were engaged.”

“You just want to sleep with me before we’re married!”

“Well...haven’t we already? And wouldn’t you like the chance to decorate the townhouse before you move in?”

Sam’s cheeks ruffled immediately. “We’ll talk about this later,” she promised, pointing at him.

“Don’t look at me, I’m biased,” Jessie laughed when Sam looked at her. “Come on, you can help me cook, and tell me all about the proposal!”

she said happily, taking Sam's white-mittened paw and dragging her towards the kitchen.

"So, did you get it out?" Kit asked with a chuckle as Kevin sat down on the couch.

Kevin laughed. "I surely did. I was nervous as sin, but I got it out. She almost knocked me down taking the ring from me. We hit one little problem, though."

"What?"

"The ring I got was too small," he said. "She doesn't wear any rings for me to steal and get her size, so I had to guess. I guessed wrong, but at least I guessed on the side of caution," he chuckled. "If it had guessed too big, I might have heard *you think I'm fat* for the next fifty years."

Kit laughed brightly. "She wouldn't do that to you."

"Sure she would," he grinned. "We went to the jeweler after I got off work and they resized it for her."

"That's good. It's also good they got it back to you the same day. Jessie never takes hers off. It's already worn the fur off her finger. So has mine," he laughed, holding up the paw where he wore his wedding ring. "And God did I get in trouble when I took it off to check," he laughed. "Jessie scolded me for half an hour straight."

"Why would she do that?"

"She wasn't being serious," he grinned. "She likes to play the bad cop, pretend to be stern like her mother, so I indulge her. It's good for her," he shrugged. "Gives her confidence, and she needs practice being stern to keep

Laura in line. Besides, I like to be punished,” he said with a sly smile. “So I have to make sure I misbehave at least every few days.”

Kevin laughed. “I don’t think we need to go much further,” he grinned.

“You’re engaged, soon to be a married male, Kev,” Kit told him. “I think you’re old enough to hear about the truth of marriage.”

“What truth is that?”

“That marriage is a curse put on males by God because Adam was too much of a wuss to go it alone,” he called loudly, with a light smile.

“Dude, you’re askin’ for it,” Kevin laughed.

“Ten seconds,” he said confidently, leaning back and putting his paws behind his head. “Four, three,” he mouthed as Jessie stalked up behind him, coming from the dining room, “two, one,” and then Jessie put her paws on his shoulders and looked over his head, down at him.

“Did you say something, love?” she asked sweetly, but with an edge in her voice. She was smiling lightly.

“Yes, I did,” he answered, reaching up and grabbing her by her own shoulders. “I said I know exactly how to get you in here so you can give me a kiss.”

She laughed and acceded to his demand, kissing him on the top of the muzzle. “Naughty boy,” she chided, swatting him very gently on the top of his head, between his ears. “What do you want for dinner, Kevin? Sam decided that since you finally maled up enough to pop the question, we’ll let you set the menu.”

Kevin laughed. "All this time, the secret to making Jessie cook for me was hiding right in plain sight," he lamented. "How about some steaks grilled out on the deck, salad for Sam, and some baked potatoes done grill style?"

"That sounds great to me," Kit agreed.

"I don't have any steaks, you'll have to go get some," she warned. "I have everything else."

"Consider it done," he nodded.

"I'll go with you, I need to get some toothpaste," Kit offered. "And that way the girls can feel free to gossip all they want without fear of us eavesdropping," he winked at Jessie.

Kit and Kevin ran down to IGB, where they liked to buy their meat, and Kevin had four steaks custom cut to make them huge while Kit bought the fixings for a salad. Sam was usually vegetarian, but she would eat meat rarely and for special occasions, and she *did* like steak. She also had a weakness for hot dogs. Kit also bought a cake on an impulse and had *Congratulations Kevin and Sam* written on it in icing. He bought chocolate with white icing, and Kevin gave it a curious look when he came back to the meat department. "Can't go without a cake," Kit grinned. "Get used to cake, you'll see a lot of it from here out."

Kevin laughed. "That reminds me. You have the number for ADT?"

"Yah, you gonna get an alarm?"

"Naturally. I'm moving in on Saturday."

"Cool," he said. "Which one is it?"

“Lupe put me in beside Mickey. Creating a buffer between us and the rich furs I guess,” he laughed. “I’m part of the poker gang, but I’m also one of those snobby professionals Lupe rented out all the other units to. So, I’m the buffer between us and them. So, the six of us are all together,” he chuckled. “I hope we don’t get mad at each other, since we’re all neighbors.”

“Then you’d better stop cheating at poker,” Kit noted, which made Kevin laugh. “No more musical apartments though. Lupe said from now on, the games will take place in the community center.”

“Right near the keg dispenser,” Kevin noted.

“You know it,” Kit laughed. “Lupe had to dance through some hoops to be allowed to install it in the center, after he swore up and down it would only be used for private parties as a courtesy for the guests. So, from now on the two dollars each goes into the keg fund, and the winner chooses the brand once we finish the last keg.”

“Six of us on a pony keg? It’ll take a month to finish it,” Kevin laughed.

“More like two weeks, given how much Dan, Mickey, and Sheila drink when they play,” Kit corrected lightly. “But, at least it won’t go bad with a gas pump. As long as we don’t buy any cheap beer,” Kit grunted. “God help us if Mickey wins on the week we replace the keg. I think a pony of Milwaukee’s Best will go bad before we finish it.”

“Not if we sneak over and pour it out before Sunday,” Kevin said, which made Kit laugh. He laughed even harder when the butcher gave Kevin four steaks that were slightly smaller than roasts, that had to be two pounds each.

“Dude, I don’t think even *I* can eat a steak that big!” Kit protested.

“It’s a celebration,” he replied airily.

“I’m glad you’re paying for them,” Kit noted.

Jessie was almost as startled to see the steaks as she was the cake when they got back. “Did you buy four roasts or something?” she asked when she took them out of the bag in the kitchen, as Kit put the cake on the kitchen table.

“They’re steaks. I wanted something momentous for a momentous occasion.”

“Well, they’re certainly...big,” she said, holding one up.

“I’ve grilled them this big before. But, I like ‘em rare, so it’s not hard,” he chuckled.

“Well, you wanted big, you’ll get big,” she laughed. “Can you start the grill please, love?” she asked Kit.

“Sure thing. Want help making the salad?”

She gave him a light look. “You’re not sneaking into my kitchen,” she teased. “You can light the grill, and that’s *it*.”

Kit laughed. “She won’t even let me make toast,” he complained to Kevin and Sam. “And she used to let me cook all the time in the other apartment,” he said accusingly.

“I was in school then. I have no job and no school, I’m literally just waiting for Laura to be born, and cooking keeps me busy and happy,” she answered with a smile. “Besides, you’re not even *touching* my kitchen until I’m finished playing with it.”

“Girls and their toys,” Kit sighed.

“At least we’re not talking about Sheila here,” Kevin said sagely.

Jessie’s cheek fur instantly stood straight out, and Kit gave a startled laugh.

They decided to eat out on the deck, and once the grill was shut off, Kit extended out the awning to take the sun off them; they’d warned him specifically never to run the grill with the awning out. And then they enjoyed a fantastic meal of steak, potatoes, salad, and the celebratory cake for the engagement, as Kevin talked excitedly about the townhouse and the furniture they were going to buy for it. “I got her to do that much,” he laughed. “That’s going to be *our* apartment, so we’re going out tomorrow to buy a bedroom and living room suit, and whatever I have left over will go into a table and pots and pans for the kitchen. She picks, I pay. I hope that’s not going to be an ongoing thing.”

“Of course it will be,” Kit chuckled, giving Jessie a sly look. “Femmes are very good at spending the money we make.”

“It’s the natural order,” she teased. “You have no style, so you need us to keep you from getting utility spoons and folding chairs.”

“They work,” Kit laughed.

“No style at all,” she winked. “Just like when you tried to furnish the apartment. Did you know he bought food to cook, but didn’t buy pots or pans to cook it in?” she asked Kevin.

“Every time I look at you, all I think of is scissors,” Kit bantered.

“Oh that is such a lie!” she laughed.

“Yes, scissors. Her and a pair of scissors...and no clothes,” he told Kevin. Jessie gasped, and he erupted into laughter when she stuck her tongue out at him.

“I’ll have to do what you did, Kit, buy a piece here and a piece there. As long as we get matching pieces, it should look alright. We’ll just have some empty rooms for a while,” he chuckled.

“Close the door, you’re good to go,” Sam said with a smile.

After dinner and a nice evening watching the sun set from their deck, Kevin and Sam helped them do the dishes, then went back to Kevin’s apartment for a little private celebrating. Kit made sure to leave Jessie’s commercial pilot books out where she could find them, then got his daily briefing on the war in Boston from Vil. “Hey sis,” he said as he drew a bath up in the master bedroom, sitting on the edge of the tub, which was built in a raised area with two steps leading to it. “How did it go?”

She made an indelicate grunt. “About what you’d expect, bro. The board nearly had a heart attack when I called Uncle Zach up for a vote to fire him. He certainly wasn’t expecting it. Neither were they. He tried to shout me down in the boardroom, but when they found out about the lawsuit, there wasn’t anything they could do. He did break the terms of his contract. They didn’t fire him, but he was suspended. So, Uncle Zach is out for a month, and he put a check for a quarter million on my desk before walking out, after promising to skin me and hang my pelt on the wall behind the CEO’s chair in the boardroom. I had him escorted out of the yard by security as a thank-you for his lovely death threats. In the meantime, the press has caught wind of what’s going on, mainly because some freakin’ yahoo took a cell phone photo of Zach being pushed out the front gate without even his car, and standing there waiting for his limo to come out to

get him. The tabloids are all over the family, even chasing down the cousins who left town. I'd expect some annoyers, bro."

"We'll be careful," Kit assured her. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, bro. How is Nick panning out?"

"We like him, he's a nice guy," he answered. "He went skeet shooting with us today, and humiliated both of us," he laughed. "He's *unbelievable* with a shotgun."

"He's paid to be so, bro," she answered. "How did Allison take being grounded? Is she getting second thoughts?"

"Surprisingly well, and no she's not," he answered. "She's pretty tough, sis. The only time she ever seemed to show any fear is when she outed herself to Terry. When I told her that the family was gunning for her but you were making all of us safe in Austin, she just shrugged and said that that was fine. She promised to stay in the city unless she was with a member of the family."

"Good. She can't be a wuss if she's going to date a member of *this* family."

"Girls who work in her former career aren't known for timidity, Vil. Ally's a tough girl, she can take it."

She laughed. "I guess not. From the sound of that water, you're about to take a bath, so I'll let you have at it, bro."

"Yeah. I'm gonna see if I can't get a little company in here," he said lightly.

"Oh, hush," she laughed. "I'm alone until Friday."

“Pft, it’s not like you do anything with Ken,” he teased.

“Oh really?” she asked archly, which made him laugh.

“Yes, really, or I’d have heard all about it,” he retorted.

She laughed ruefully. “Okay, okay, point. I’d have been gossiping to you like the house servants used to if I did, but I’m *certainly* putting it on my calendar,” she said with a little hum. “I got Ken out of his clothes last weekend, and I *liked* what I saw.”

“You got him naked? How?”

“Scotland has fickle weather,” she purred in reply. “We got rained on, and I got a good look at him when we changed. What I saw has changed my schedule this weekend,” she hummed.

Kit almost fell in the tub laughing. “You’re the only femme I know who pencils in a seduction!” he accused.

“Oh, he’s *definitely* on my calendar,” she said eagerly. “I haven’t had a good fling since Oxford, and I’m missing the fun part of a relationship. I can’t so much as stop at Burger King here without the tabloids making note of it, it’s been all but impossible to have a nice dirty little affair,” she mused. “I’ve known him long enough now, I think it’s just about time to see how well he can use that impressive equipment.”

“I don’t think I’m old enough to hear the next sentence,” he teased.

“Hush, you gossiped all about Jessie, now you have to endure listening to me go on about Ken,” she retorted. “But you’ll get that *after* I have reason to gossip,” she said with a smile in her voice. “Now, just to prove you wrong, I think I’ll be a little spontaneous and call Ken and tell him I’m

desperately lonely and need a male to comfort me in this time of emotional crisis and see how fast he gets here,” she said with a trill in her voice.

“Sis. You. Are. Evil.”

“Yes, I know,” she purred. “I *am* a Vulpan, after all.”

The promised call came early the next morning, not five minutes after he settled in at his desk to get his notes together for the daily meeting with Rick. Vil called him at his work phone, and he pressed the button to put it on speaker when it rang into his office. “Kit Vulpan,” he said absently as he rearranged his budget projections, which were good, but not as good as they were a month ago. The magazine was still making money and was still going to expand, but they were scaling back some of their plans a little so they had some cash in reserve for emergencies.

“*Now* we can gossip,” Vil said triumphantly.

Kit laughed helplessly. “How long did it take for him to get there?”

“I called him at eleven. He was at Hart’s Crossing by four. I left him sleeping at home and came to work.”

“He’s whipped,” Kit laughed.

“He knows he’d better keep me happy,” she said with a wicked chuckle. “And did he make me happy last night,” she added in a content voice. “I forgot how much fun intense, passionate sex could be. Ken almost made me late for work,” she laughed.

“Now you sound like Sheila,” Kit grunted, which made her laugh.

“I could never be that bad,” she protested. “But he’d certainly make Sheila talk about him,” she chuckled. “That’s the good thing about rich boys, bro, they know what they’re doing.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Sure you would, you *are* one of the rich boys,” she teased. “I told Ken to stay, too,” she purred. “He doesn’t know it yet, but he’s here for good. He’s moving into Hart’s Crossing effective today.”

“That desperate?”

“That clever,” she chuckled. “With the family war going on, I want to keep him very close to me when he’s here. And I keep him at paw for when I want some attention,” she purred. “Now that I’ve experienced every aspect of Ken and I find I like them all, and add to that what’s going on, I’ve made a decision.”

“That sounds like there’s a proposal coming,” Kit laughed.

“There’d *better* be,” she said immediately. “I know it’s dreadfully fast as far as courtships go in our circles, but I can’t deny that I want Ken. After last night, I want him *badly*. I think we’re a good match. He’s my intellectual equal, he makes me happy, and now I know he can keep me happy in bed. And besides, being married to a Brighton will make any subsequent attempt to take me off the chair much harder because Winston Brighton may have something to say about it. And between Vulpan Shipyards and Brighton industries, our families will control the largest combined shipbuilding companies on Earth. So the marriage is good for me, good for the Brightons, and good for the shipyard.”

“Always keeping an eye on politics,” Kit chuckled.

“Naturally, but the advantage here is I *like* the male I’m marrying for politics,” she chuckled. “I think I could learn to love him, easily. So, after giving him a suitably enthusiastic greeting this morning, I left him at home after hinting that there’s something I want him to ask me when I get home tonight.”

“Hinted?”

“Naturally. You never just come out and *say* something like that, bro. But I told him that it would be slightly scandalous for him to be staying at Hart’s Crossing for a few weeks without some kind of *official* announcement to give the press, and that he’d better think of something official we can tell our families. The look on his face when I left told me he got the point.”

Kit laughed. “So, you think he’s on the phone to his father right now crowing?”

“He’d better be,” she laughed. “That dodgy old fox certainly had wedding bells in his ears when he introduced me to Ken, I’m sure he’s having the engagement ring sent over by courier as we speak. From what Ken said, *if* he engaged, he’d be giving me his grandmother’s engagement ring, and we’d be wearing his grandparents’ wedding rings. It seems that there’s a something of a tradition in the Brighton family. There are two identical sets of wedding rings and engagement rings that are passed down from one generation to the next, to the firstborn. His father and mother are wearing the other set. And the funny thing is, his grandmother is still alive, so she’ll be giving up her engagement ring to me. I hope she doesn’t mind,” she mused.

“You think he’ll propose tonight, then?”

“If he doesn’t, I’ll be very angry,” she answered immediately. “I want a fast engagement, too. I want to be married by the first of September. I want to be married before Laura is born.”

“Holy cow,” Kit breathed. “You’re serious?”

“Deadly,” she answered.

The door opened, and Jessie came in, carrying a plate of home-cooked bagels. “Morning again, handsome fox,” she smiled.

“Close the door,” Kit called. “Vil, Jessie’s here.”

“Hey sis-in-law!” Vil’s voice came over the speaker as Jessie closed the door.

“Hi Vil! How are things going up there? Is everything okay?”

“Just fine, just fine. But I thought I should let you know something.”

“What?”

“I more or less told Ken this morning that I’m waiting for him to propose to me,” she said. “And I’d better not wait long.”

“Really? That’s wonderful!” she said happily. “Congratulations!”

“I expect him to propose tonight. He’d better,” she said seriously. “And I intend to marry before you have Laura. Very early in September, or late August.”

“Wow, so soon? Why?”

“Because the sooner we’re married, the better off we’ll be,” she answered. “The family will be a lot less willing to mess with me if I’m married to a Brighton.”

“I hope that’s not the only reason you’re marrying,” Jessie said, slightly accusingly.

“Of course not. I think Ken is a wonderful male who’s intelligent and engaging, and I found out this morning he can satisfy me in bed,” she said in a purring voice that made Jessie’s cheeks ruffle. “So, I’ll be sure to let you know what happens tonight.”

“I’m sure we’ll like what we hear,” Kit chuckled. “What happens today outside of that?”

“Today, first thing this morning I get rid of Abermathy, which will leave only two of the elders’ bribed members on the board. He has a meeting with me in twenty minutes, and I’m sure he already knows what’s coming. After Abermathy’s history, probably after lunch, I’ll call a meeting of the board and I put the bait on the table,” she said. “Now that I’ve *gotten Zach out of the way*,” she said lightly, “I’m going to introduce an idea before the board that’ll make Uncle Jake go up in flames. I’m going to propose that we take Vulpan Shipyards public.”

Kit almost swallowed his tongue, then he choked and coughed enough to make Jessie slap him on the back. “Good *God*, femme!” he wheezed, then he laughed helplessly. “You know how to bait a trap!”

“What does that mean, go public?” Jessie asked.

“To sell shares of the shipyard to the public,” Vil answered over the phone. “Which would decimate the money the family earns from the shipyard, because we’d have to share it with anyone who bought stock. The offer might make them vote me out, if some of the board wasn’t privy to what I’m doing.”

“You told them?”

“The ones I can trust, yes. I told Akers, Longwell, and Sievers that I think someone is leaking Vulpan secrets to the public, and then I trust explicitly not to say anything to the rest of the board, so I’m setting a trap. Something like this would be huge, huge news. I told them that if rumor of this hits the public, then we *know* someone on the board is doing something naughty. The side effect is that if anyone tells Zach, I can fire everyone involved. The only way Zach could get out of it is if he comes to me and tells me someone tipped him off on his own. If I can prove he was told and said nothing, he’s gone.”

“I hope it doesn’t get too messy,” Jessie said.

“Just the usual family intrigue, Jessie,” Vil chuckled. “I’ll be fine, trust me.”

“Well, I’ll worry anyway.”

“I know, but trust me. I have everything under control.”

“Well, it’s just a little nervewracking, especially since what’s going on up there can spill over down here.”

“Well, I’m doing my best to keep that from happening, Jess. Just trust me. And keep your laptops close tonight, I’ll want to show you the ring when he gives it to me,” she chuckled.

“We’re going out with Nick after work, he’s going to teach us about guns,” Kit told her. “He said that since he carries a pistol and we’ll be around him, he wants to train us in gun safety.”

“That sounds familiar,” she laughed. “The first week after I hired Stav and Marcus, they did the same thing. I haven’t shot a gun since then, but they taught me how to use the guns they carry.”

“Wow, who knew Vil could use a gun,” Jessie giggled.

“I’m full of surprises, sis-in-law,” she answered cheekily. “Anyway, I gotta go, it’s time to go drop a bomb in the boardroom. Talk to you tonight.”

“Be good, sis.”

“Good luck, Vil!” Jessie added.

After the call ended, Kit and Jessie looked at each other. “I hope Ken proposes to her,” she said.

“Oh, that’s a given,” Kit laughed. “She all but hit him over the head with it. If he doesn’t ask her tonight, she’ll probably toss him out. He can’t be *that* dense.”

“What did she say?”

“What she told Ken is literally hitting him over the head with *ask me to marry you*.”

Jessie giggled. “She should just ask him herself, like I did you.”

“Vil doesn’t work that way, love,” he smiled. “She asks without asking, and does without doing. She’s told Ken she wants to marry him, and that’s all she needs to do. Ken had better do what she told him to do and propose to her. So she did propose to him in a way, by telling him that he’d better propose to her. The same way you told me I’d better propose to you,” he winked.

She laughed. “Liar! I proposed to you!”

“Only because Cybil interrupted me from doing it first,” he countered. “I already had the ring!”

“Suuuuuure,” she teased, sitting on the edge of his desk with the platter in one paw as the other tapped him lightly on the forehead.

“Don’t make me get Rick to prove it,” he replied, putting his paw on her belly. “In the end, all that matters is we’re married, and there’s a little something in here that’s waiting to be spoiled rotten,” he smiled.

“We will *not*!” she laughed, putting her paw over his. She laughed harder when he slipped his paw under her shirt and ran his fingers through the silky fur on her expanding belly. “Kit,” she said in a sudden purring voice.

“Hush, I’m petting our daughter,” he told her.

“*Petting?*” she asked, giggling uncontrollably, then she put the platter down and wrapped her arms around him and slid down into his chair. “Such a silly fox!” she laughed, giving him a kiss on the cheek. “So, I’m going to have a brother-in-law,” she purred in his ear. “I like him. I should have stolen him from Vil and abandoned you. After all, I love the boy foxes,” she purred in his ear.

“Such a mean kitty!” he laughed, nuzzling her neck. “I guess I’ll have to lock you up so I can keep you for ever and ever,” he teased.

She giggled. “Nah,” she retorted. “I might stay with you if you give me a kiss.”

“Such a hard bargain,” he hummed, then he paid her price.

“Hey, hey! No hanky-panky in here!” Lilly called as she opened the door. “Rick’s waiting for ya, Kit,” she winked.

Jessie laughed. “I have to do my article anyway,” she said, kissing him on the muzzle. “Go make us some money!”

“Yes, mistress,” he replied, slapping her playfully on the rear when she got up.

The training session with Nick wasn’t bad at all.

It lasted about three hours. He spent an hour with them thoroughly teaching them about his weapon of choice, the Glock .45 caliber Model 38 compact semi-automatic pistol, a powerful yet not overly large pistol that was favored by professionals for both its stopping power and its rugged reliability under even the worst conditions. It was the same model pistol Nick carried at almost all times, and therefore the one with which they may come into contact, and then an hour using it. Kit learned how it worked, completely, even learned how to take it apart and clean it. He learned how to load it, how to check to see if it was loaded, learned how to unload it and clear a chambered round safely using dummy rounds that looked like bullets but would do nothing if he pulled the trigger with the dummy round in the chamber, learned about safe use and storage, learned how to aim a pistol, learned the proper technique to shoot it, and then he got the opportunity to fire it. It had more recoil than he expected, but it wasn’t that bad. Nick let him fire about 100 rounds total, having to load rounds into the clip himself, and after a little practice and getting the hang of the sights, he found that he wasn’t a bad shot. Steady paws, Nick said he had. Jessie received similar training, and after he let them fire the two pistols he

provided, he showed them some other weapons he'd brought with him and gave them the chance to test fire them. He showed Kit the automatic shotgun he'd talked about the day before, a Mossberg product that was illegal to be *bought* by civilians, though it wasn't illegal to *own*, due to a loophole in American gun laws. The fact that it was automatic, that it would fire a shell about every second, was what made it illegal to be sold in the United States, but since it was a shotgun, it wasn't illegal to *own*, at least not since the repeal of the assault weapons ban. It was sleek, black, evil-looking thing that looked heavy and rugged, and fired large shells filled with buckshot or slugs. Nick let him fire it, but wouldn't allow him to fire it in its automatic setting, and the thing nearly dislocated his shoulder...as well as attracting quite a bit of attention from both visitors and workers at the range. He was shown a Colt AR 15, which was the civilian equivalent of the military M-16. He was also shown two different pistols. The first was a classic revolver, a Smith and Wesson .38 special, what many called a police standard revolver, and the second was an small Beretta .25 caliber pistol, showing them how small a pistol could be. Nick allowed them to fire a few rounds from the AR 15 and the pistols, which showed Kit the big, big difference between an assault weapon like the AR 15 and a pistol.

After learning how to shoot the pistol and letting them test fire the other weapons he brought with him, Nick produced their own shotguns, and Kit practiced with the pump shotgun at a static, non-moving target. Kit fired about 20 rounds with the shotgun, and then Nick showed him how to clean it. After it was cleaned, Nick bagged up all the weapons and drove them home. He brought their shotguns into the house with them and made sure they were locked in the gun cabinet before he was satisfied, and then bid them goodnight and went home.

Once the playing was over, Kit called Vil to find out what happened. She didn't answer her phone, going straight to voicemail, so Kit figured that she and Ken were talking—or something else—and didn't want to be disturbed. So, he dropped Jessie's commercial rating study books in her lap and ran into the kitchen to cook dinner. He made one of her favorites, lemon grilled salmon, using the grill and hurrying because there was a thunderstorm brewing out to the west. Salmon wasn't exactly cheap, but Kit never scrimped when it came to Jessie. She loved salmon, so he bought salmon. She loved shrimp and lobster, he bought shrimp and lobster. What Jessie wanted, Jessie got.

"Kit! Vil texted me!" Jessie shouted from the living room when Kit brought in the freshly grilled salmon. "She wants us on conference!"

"Set it up, love, I have to shut down the grill before it starts raining!"

He got into the living room, where Jessie had her laptop on the coffee table and Vil was already on the monitor. "Vil!" he said with a smile. "So?"

She held up her paw, showing off a very impressive diamond ring. Her smile was almost smugly victorious.

"Congratulations!" Jessie beamed as Kit laughed lightly. "Where's Ken, we have to say hi and congratulations too!"

"He'll be back in a few minutes, he's up in our bedroom."

"Our?" Kit asked with a chuckle.

"Ours now," she answered. "He proposed, I told him from now on, when he's in Boston, he stays here. It'll be something of a scandal, but at the present time and under the current circumstances, I want him *right here* if he's not in England. He'll be living here after we're married anyway. Ken

may have his manor in England, but he'll live here. And we've already had our first fight," she laughed.

"Over what?"

"Vil refuses to take my name!" Kendall said from behind her, coming into view. "She's keeping the name Vulpan!"

Congratulations, Ken!" Jessie beamed.

"Thanks, thanks," he grinned. "But seriously, I'm the male, here!"

"Ken, no femme Vulpan has *ever* given up her name after marriage," Kit told him. "If Vil follows tradition, she'll adopt your name in front of her Vulpan name and go by Vilenne Brighton Vulpan."

"That's exactly what I'm going to do," Vil nodded, patting Kendall on the shoulder. "Sorry, Kenny boy, but a Vulpan never gives up the name."

"Not even when taking on a more important name?" Kendall grinned, which made Vil laugh.

"There's no name more important than Vulpan," she teased. "I should make you go by Kendall Brighton Vulpan too."

"Bugger that," he retorted. "I'm a Brighton, lovey, not a Vulpan."

"I'm happy for both of you," Kit told them. "I'm also glad you're not dense, Ken."

Kendall laughed. "I almost peed the bed when she kissed me on the nose and told me that she was waiting for something official to tell our families," he said, putting his paw on her shoulder fondly. "Totally *floored* me. I thought she'd dangle me on the end of her string for at least six more months, but wham, right outa the blue! The old male had to get the ring

here before she got home from work so I could be ready for her,” he laughed. “But wot, I can say that I’m *very* happy she accepted,” he smiled at her. “Villy’s some kind of woman, and I’m gonna enjoy making her love me.”

“You’re doing a good job, Ken,” Vil chuckled, patting the paw on her shoulder. “And you *will* stop calling me Villy,” she said, gripping his paw and digging her short claws into the back of his paw.

He winced, then laughed. “I guess I’ll have to be nice now,” he grinned at her. “And call you Misses Brighton from now on. Just anything but what you want.”

“Remember that speech about unformed clay I can’t touch? Well, I can touch now,” she told him.

He laughed. “Then I’d better run back to England,” he winked at her. “I have to go back for a few days and get everything ready for me to move over. You know, go on a leave of absence from Brighton Industries, lord it over my brothers and male cousins that I’m marrying the biggest prize across the pond, and open that bottle of hundred year old scotch the old male has waiting for me for accomplishing my mission of wooing young Vil with my irresistible charm and roguish good looks and making her fall head over heels in love with me,” he said with an outrageous smile into the camera.

“Oh, go pack your suitcase!” Vil barked, swatting him on the shoulder, then kissing him soundly on the muzzle before pushing him out of the camera’s view. “God, what have I done,” she grunted, which made both Kit and Jessie explode into laughter, then she continued. “He’s going back home to get himself ready to move, while I arrange our wedding. We

decided on August twenty-ninth, and we'll marry at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, just like mother wanted. It'll be both a social event and also something of a scandal, but I *want* a little harmless scandal right now. I'm sure the sudden announcement of our engagement and the almost unheard-of short wedding date will get furs talking more about me and less about the family war going on right now."

"Probably both," Kit chuckled. "After all, they can point at your very abrupt wedding plans and say it has something to do with what's going on. Which it does."

"Only abstractly," she chuckled. "It just hastened an inevitability. I'd have married Ken no matter what."

"So nice to know!" Kendall's voice bubbled from the background.

"Pack, you!" she ordered, looking away from the camera. "I see I'm going to have to work a while to train this one," she noted to Kit. "Good thing too, I'm running out of room in my garden for the unmarked graves."

He laughed and gave his sister a smile. "And you'll enjoy it as much as I enjoyed taming Jess."

"You did *not*," Jessie laughed. "If anyone got trained in this house, it was *you*, you scurrilous scoundrel!"

"I *love* being married to an English professor, she never insults me the same way twice," Kit sighed lustily, looking at Jessie, which made both femmes laugh. "So, how do you think the family will react?"

"The cousins, eh, like they care," Jessie shrugged. "But the elders will probably pee themselves when they hear about it. It's hard enough to get rid of me on my own, but when I'm married to Ken, then suddenly the

Brightons have a big say in just who's sitting in my chair. They'll want to keep their daughter-in-law in control of the Vulpan companies, since that puts Kendall literally in bed with me," she chuckled with a wicked little smile. "Maybe they'll think I'll be too distracted with my upcoming wedding to keep an eye on what they're doing," she mused. "And they'll make a foolish mistake that lets me crush them in one fell swoop."

"Doubtful," Kit answered. "I take it you're gonna make me come to the wedding?"

She laughed. "Why did you even bother asking that, you silly boy?" she told him. "This is justification enough for you to come to Boston. Your sis doesn't get married every day, you know."

"I'm going too, and when we go, we *are* staying in Stonebrook, handsome fox," Jessie told him. "I want to be there so that horrible femme Alicia can just baste in her hatred when she sees me in my last month of pregnancy, which she'll only see from the window since they'll be too afraid to come out of their room as long as we're there."

"*Now* she's a Vulpan, bro," Vil told him with a bright smile.

"I'm not sure about that, pretty kitty," Kit said uncertainly. "I don't think I could ever stay there. You know what that house means to me."

"I know that that house means more to you than you think it does, else you wouldn't have gone after your uncle Zach so furiously over what he did. You were really angry, handsome fox. I think that the ghosts are starting to fade a little, love. And I think Clancy would be overjoyed to have you in Stonebrook one more time, just so he has a chance to have one more good memory of you in your family home."

“I don’t know,” he said, his paws starting to shake.

“I think we can manage one night,” she said gently to him, putting her paw over his.

“I’ll think about it.”

“You don’t have long, you have a little over a month,” Vil grinned at him.

A rumble of thunder echoed through the house, and Kit laughed. “Think we’d better call this short, sis. I need to go cover the grill before the rain starts, anyway. I hope it’s cooled down,” he mused.

“Too late,” Jessie giggled as the first sheet of rain hit the living room windows.

“Well, we’d better pack it up anyway, I have some things to do,” Vil said. “I think I’ll waylay Ken while he’s packing,” she hummed, licking her chops in an anticipatory manner. “Get my last hurrah before he goes home.”

“Be nice, sis,” Kit laughed.

“Oh, it *is* nice,” she purred.

“I think I should have never married, I’ve created a monster,” Kit teased. “You saw the good life and now you want it too!”

“Excuse me?” Jessie asked archly, though she was smiling.

“Pft, the Ice Queen had to melt sometime, she does have hormones after all,” Vil said, which made Kit and Jessie explode into laughter. “I’ll give you a status report tomorrow, guys, and I’ll send you some newspapers with the official announcement.”

“Sure thing, sis.”

“Have fun, Vil,” Jessie called.

“Oh, I will,” she said in a seductive manner, and she ended the conference.

“Have fun?” Kit asked, then he laughed. “You naughty girl!”

Jessie was about to say something, but the lights wavered, then went out, as they lost power. She laughed and closed the laptop, then wrapped her arms around him. “Yes, I’m a naughty girl, and I demand my male be naughty too,” she purred in his ear.

She laughed when he got up and picked her up out of her chair. “Now, to the dumbwaiter!” he called, which made her laugh in his arms.

Vil’s sudden announcement, quite simply, knocked Boston on its ear.

Vil emailed a bunch of links to websites to him the next morning, and Kit spent the morning surfing them out of curiosity. The first, out of the *Boston Globe*, had a huge headline dominating their front page, supplanting all other news, ***VULPAN MATRIARCH ANNOUNCES ENGAGEMENT TO SON OF BRITISH INDUSTRIALIST***. In the *Boston Herald*, the headline was ***VILENNE VULPAN ENGAGED TO KENDALL BRIGHTON***. The Boston tabloid *Boston Today* had a big picture of Vil and Kendall at the basketball game Kit and Jessie attended, with the caption ***IT’S OFFICIAL!*** underneath them. *The Back Bay*, another gossip paper, had a picture of Vil and Kendall kissing, taken by a paparazzi with a telephoto lens, with the title *Vulpan Ice Queen and British Boytoy engaged*, and under that was the teaser *August wedding date set...is the Ice Queen*

pregnant? It even went national. The *Furs* website had Vil and Kendall as their top story, showing a picture of them at the July 4th concert with the headline *Vilene Vulpan of the storied Vulpan family announces engagement to Kendall Brighton, son of British industrialist Winston Brighton*. It even hit the major news networks, with a link to CNN that showed a file photo of Vil and the headline *Vulpan CEO to marry son of Brighton Industries CEO*. It even got into Fox Business Channel's website, a picture of Vil and a very austere middle-aged fox that had to be Winston Brighton, with the headline *Mergers: Vulpan and Brighton families to marry. International shipbuilding dynasty in the making?*

Kit just had to step back for a moment and admire the pure, raw cunning of his older sister. This marriage was so many things on so many levels that it took a detailed analysis to fully comprehend its impact, and that was a reason to admire Vil for her intelligence and savvy. The short engagement was brilliant, absolutely brilliant. By Kit's estimation, Zach would only have about ten days after he got back from his suspension before Vil got married, and when she did, she'd have the shield of Kendall Brighton to stand behind. And when she gained that defense, she would be almost untouchable. Winston Brighton, Kendall's father, had probably been praying that throwing Kendall and Vil together would lead to marriage, for he was drooling over the idea of a corporate alliance between the Vulpan companies and Brighton Industries. He was probably dreaming of access to Vulpan shipyards, of the two companies exchanging teams so they could study each other and learn from each other, both becoming better by learning the tricks the other company had developed to increase quality, efficiency, and safety while reducing costs. Winston wanted to study their shipbuilding methods, which were the most efficient and cost-effective in the world while still producing some of the highest quality ships and doing

so with an outstanding worker safety record. He was looking forward to the two companies trading their master tradesfurs, their master welders, shipfitters, pipefitters, painters, sandblasters, and electricians, so they could compare their skills and see where they could learn from each other to become even better. And Kit was certain that he was all but foaming at the mouth at the idea of being able to buy Vulpan steel below market, since it was a bit expensive on the open market because of its outstanding quality; Vulpan steel was considered one of the best quality commercial steels made, and it could be custom ordered to spec for special requirements. More than anything else, Winston wanted that direct line to Vulpan Steel, which would allow him to buy top-quality steel below market and increase his profits...and Vil would sell to him at the same price that Vulpan Steel sold to Vulpan Shipyards, which was 1% over cost. Once Vil was married to Kendall, his uncles would have to contend with the powerful Winston Brighton if they tried to unseat Vil from her chair. To keep his direct access to the Vulpan companies, Winston would fight on Vil's behalf, and Winston would be a powerful, powerful ally.

And if that wasn't good enough, the sudden announcement and speed of the engagement would be weapons unto themselves. The uncles would not want Vil to marry Kendall because of the support she would get from the Brightons, but they'd have virtually no time to come up with some way to delay or prevent the marriage, and the engagement itself was a bombshell, something that he was absolutely sure none of them expected to happen so soon. Three months from now, maybe, five or six months, definitely, but not after just three months of dating! It was literally scandalous in the upper crust, the speed from which Vil and Kendall went from meeting to engagement, and since it was so scandalous, it was a curve

ball that literally nobody saw coming...not even Kit, and he knew his sister very well.

Which also explained why the elders were moving now. Kit and Terry were an excuse, the match to the fuse that was already laid down, the straw that broke the camel's back. The simple fact of the matter was that they had to unseat Vil before she married Kendall or they would never get her out, and they knew it. They knew that Kendall and Vil got along and that a marriage was virtually inevitable, so they had to move before that marriage could take place.

And then Vil comes along and drops an anvil on their tails.

Something like ruining a marriage usually took a couple of months to plan and execute, and Vil wasn't giving them a chance. She had ambushed them with the engagement announcement, and by the time they managed to get some plan in place to prevent the wedding, it would be too late, they'd already be married. And since Vil already told Kendall *everything* that was going on, they couldn't even try to scare him off with threats of the Brightons getting embroiled in scandals; in Britain, the reputation of a family was almost as important as its money. Cybil had been crushed by Vil both financially and socially, for Vil had ruined her reputation and stained the Whitmore name, and as a result, she was an utter pariah in Britain. The threat of scandal wouldn't scare the Brightons in the slightest, because they had far more to gain in Vil marrying into their family than they had to lose.

The simple problem for the elders was that Vil was too firmly entrenched. She was in the position of advantage, and she had prepared herself for the possibility that she might have to defend her perch from jealous family members who wanted to knock her off of it. She had had over a year to get ready for this confrontation, and they were finding out

that Vil was both ready for them, and she fought *dirty*. Kit was fairly sure that his elders had no idea that she could force their bought and paid for board members to retire, quit, or simply run away as in the case of Kay Simpson, and that swift reaction to Zach's open declaration of war had left his elders flustered and out of sorts, unsure of what to do next. They had plans, yes, but they were probably having trouble executing them against Vil, who was dug in behind her walls and was doing a damn good job of lobbing hand grenades over her wall while they tried to batter it down.

And on top of all that, Vil could use the wedding as a viable and devastating excuse to all but shut down the board. She didn't schedule the board meetings, but with her preparing for her wedding, she had a valid reason to veto any attempt to schedule regular business for the next month. She would cull a day here and there at first, then cut board meetings in half, then probably all but put the board on hiatus until after her wedding... probably right about when Uncle Zach got back from his one month suspension, thereby robbing him of even a single paltry attempt to call for a vote for her dismissal.

And while they may hope that she'd be too busy with her wedding to pay attention to what was going on, they'd find out that Vil was quite an effective multitasker. She would plan her wedding and loom over the board at the same time, even as she fought with the elders over control of the family business, and therefore the family's power.

In one simple move, Vil was panicking the elders, drastically reducing their chances of stopping the wedding, securing Kendall for herself, and wrapping herself in the added protection of the Brighton family. And all it cost her was marrying a male she intended to marry in the first place a little earlier than she planned.

Vil was just so *damn* cunning, it was almost criminal. Well, actually... it *was* criminal, given she didn't exactly use her cunning for legal pursuits.

"Yo, son, what's up?" Rick asked. "You comin' to the meetin' or what?"

Kit chuckled. "Sorry. I don't know if you've heard, but since it's now official, I can tell you. Vil got engaged last night."

"Really? To the British fox?" Kit nodded, and Rick chuckled. "Well, Martha is right yet again," he declared. "She said the first time she saw them together that they'd tie the knot. That femme of mine is never wrong when it comes to pickin' couples. She pegged you and Jessie, she picked Sam and Kev, and she picks Vil and that Brighton fella."

"Well, why didn't she tell me?" Kit laughed.

"Why does she have to tell you somethin' you already know?" Rick challenged. "Now come on, Savid's waitin'."

Kit was going to announce Vil's engagement at the wrap meeting later that day, but he wasn't the only fur who checked the news in the office. Pat was the first to find it, and he quickly spread the news while Kit, Rick, and Savid were having the morning meeting. When Kit came out of the meeting, he got a round of pawshakes and congratulations on behalf of his sister. "Dude, we *so* have to go!" Jeffrey said. "Do you think Vil would invite us, Kit? She's been so awesome to us, I'd love to return the favor by being there to see it. I'd love to go to her wedding!"

"Think of the story that'll make!" Barry said. "And we could score an interview with both the bride and groom, since Vil's an investor here...she's family!"

“We could wrap the issue a day early and go up,” Rick mused. “But the magazine couldn’t afford flying everyone up there. I guess we can make it optional. If you wanna pay your way up, you’re more than welcome to go. Provided Vil invites us, that is,” he said, scratching his chin. “Vil’s a big important femme, guys, and I’m sure there’ll be like princes and billionaires fighting for spots in the cathedral. She might not have room for us.”

“Let’s find out,” Kit said, opening his phone and speed-dialing Vil. “Sis,” he greeted, “Rick has a favor to ask.” He held his phone out to the dingo, who took it with a slight wince.

“Uh, Vil, congratulations, hon,” he said first, then he smiled. “Ain’t no thing, hon. But the gang kinda wants to come to the wedding. I’m sure you have lots of invites to send out, and may not have room for us. That’s fine, that’s fine! I told them they have to pay their own way up, though. Good. Thanks, hon. Need to talk to your brother? Okay then, bye-bye. She said we can come, all of us,” he announced as he closed Kit’s phone and gave it back to him, which was greeted with a round of excited cheers. “She said we were silly to think that she wasn’t gonna send us invitations!”

“Well, you never know, she might not want me to outshine her in the cathederal,” Marty said flamboyantly, striking a little pose. “She’d better be looking her best, or Princess Marty’s gonna make her sun set!”

“Well, we’ll talk this over at the wrap meeting, guys. Until then, back to work, you freeloaders!” Rick said with a grin. “Where’s that article you said you’d have finished, Lilly? Why are you standing here when you should be in your office working on it?”

“Watch it, old male, or I’ll pierce your ears!” Lilly shot back at him.

Rick laughed. “Seriously, though, send me what you have and estimate how much more it’ll be, we need to fit it in.”

“No prob, boss, all I have to do now is spellcheck it,” she said with a smile, hurrying towards her office. “I’ll send it right over!”

Vil’s good news made it a quick and happy day for them. They got the issue put to bed, and once it was put to bed, Kit left work a little early to pick up some lobster tails to take home for dinner. Again, it was expensive, but Jessie was on a seafood kick, and money was no object when Jessie wanted something. Jessie only really liked lobster tail, she didn’t eat whole lobster the way Kit did. He got home, however, to see a trio of Vanguard cars in the visitor lot in front of the community center, and there were two uniformed security guards standing out in front of the community center, one of them smoking a cigarette. Two *armed* security guards, he noticed. The front door was unlocked, and when he came in, he found himself in a room with Jessie, Nick, and two others he didn’t know. One was a tall lioness with long tawny hair pulled into a ponytail, the other a short badger with his black hair in a crewcut, like a shoeshine brush between his ears. Both of them were wearing jeans and button-down blue shirts with the Vanguard logo embroidered on the left breast. Both of them, Kit noticed, were carrying pistols in holsters at their belts.

“Kit,” Jessie called, hurrying over to him and kissing him.

“What’s going on, pretty kitty?” he asked uncertainly.

“Heya,” Nick smiled. “Kit, meet Tanya Jackson and Ernie Ayers from Vanguard.”

“Mister Vulpan,” the tall, powerful-looking lioness said with a smile, shaking his paw. Her grip was rather firm. “Nothing to be alarmed about.

Nick here invited us over to talk about security at the complex, and he brought us over to meet Misses Vulpan.”

“The owner’s going to hire Vanguard to provide security here at your complex,” the badger said, shaking Kit’s paw. “We’ve been discussing things with Nick. Your sister was clear to us when she sent him down that he has a primary interest in your personal security, Mister Vulpan, so we’re coordinating with him.”

“Armed guards? Is that really necessary?”

“The guards here won’t be armed,” Tanya assured him with a smile. “We’ll just have one guard here during the evenings and nights, who’ll basically just make sure all is well and be available to help any of the tenants if they need it. You must have seen our males out at the community center?” Kit nodded. “Those are roving Sergeants, who move from site to site to deliver paperwork, assist when our guards need help, or check to make sure everything’s alright,” she explained. “They have to have an intimate knowledge of all sites in their territory, and this is their territory. If you saw them there, they must have completed their walk of the complex. And they *are* armed.”

“Ah, I see,” Kit nodded. “I brought lobster tails, pretty kitty,” he said, holding up the bag.

She laughed. “You read my mind!” she told him, taking the bag and hurrying towards the kitchen with it.

“I have to say, Mister Vulpan, that you married an *angel*,” Tanya said quietly and with a gentle smile. “She is the sweetest femme I think I’ve ever met.”

“That’s my Jessie,” Kit smiled. “So, now that she’s busy in the kitchen, you can tell me what’s *really* going on.”

Nick’s smile faded. “Vil sent down a warning to tighten security,” he said. “Lupe really is hiring Vanguard to watch over the complex, so we’re using that as a convenient excuse to increase a visible presence around the complex.”

“There’s going to be a marked Vanguard unit and an unmarked unit at or near the complex at all times,” Ernie told him. “There will be the one visible unarmed guard, but there will also be two plainclothes armed guards within a one minute response time to the complex.”

“Did Vil say what was going on, Nick?” he asked.

Nick shook his head. “Afraid not, Kit,” he answered. “She just told me to tighten up. It might just be a precaution, because I’m sure if she knew of something specific, she’d have told me so I’d know what to look for. I think she’s just being careful. She loves ya, you know, and she wants you to be safe.”

“I guess so,” Kit chuckled.

The Vanguard furs stayed for about twenty more minutes, then they and Nick both took their leave to continue whatever it was they were doing. Kit did call Vil about it, after he knew she was home. “Oh, I’m just covering the bases, bro,” she told him. “I’ve had Vanguard step it up all over town, not just with you. You forget, I’m not just protecting *you* down there. Besides, they didn’t strike their first blow at you.”

“What happened?”

“They went after Terry,” she answered. “Terry was arrested on suspicion of drug trafficking by the N.O.P.D.”

“That’s ludicrous!”

“That’s what the DA said when he got the case. Terry spent about two hours at the precinct, bailed himself out, then the DA dropped the case a couple of hours later. I didn’t even have to do anything,” she chuckled. “Whoever tried to frame Terry didn’t do a very good job, Terry’s bodyguard was able to unravel the whole scheme in about four hours. No doubt the DA read the cops the riot act about believing unsubstantiated anonymous tips. I’m sure Terry is about to have a little something to say about that, since I told him who did it to him. And that’ll also piss off Tom. He’s still angry with Zach over punching Terry, and now Maxine attacks his son. Tom may hate that Terry is going out with Allison, but he will *not* tolerate the others trying to destroy his son, not when Terry is the brightest star in Tom’s family. Zach, Jake, and Maxine are quickly alienating the other elders.”

“Terry has a bodyguard now?”

“You think I’d let him walk around outside of Boston right now without protection?” Vil asked. “Stav and Marcus dug up another of their business contacts who could come quickly. He got there yesterday, and the very next day he has to clear his client of a frame job,” she sighed. “At least he proved he’s good.”

“Wow,” Kit breathed. “I didn’t realize it was getting...messy.”

“This is war, brother,” she said grimly. “The elders will attack me any way they can, and they know one way to do it is through you, Austin, and Terry. It won’t be easy for them to attack Austin because I own the city, so they took a cheap shot at Terry while I get New Orleans settled and under

my control, striking in a moment of opportunity. Besides, you're the root cause of of this, in their minds. Your lurking on the edges the family and Terry's defiance in dating Allison are intolerable to them, and you two would be...corrected, once they remove me and take control of the family. Terry would be forced to stop seeing Allison, and they'd basically disown you."

"Like I'd shed a tear if they did," Kit grunted.

"Well, *I* would," she told him. "And so would Sheila and Muffy. Those two really love you, bro. The rest of the family may hate you, but you have four Vulpans who care, and one more that *would* care if you let him."

"Brian can go to hell," Kit said immediately and with heat. "There is nothing he can say or do for me to forgive him. Nothing!"

"Forever is a long time, brother," Vil said gently. "I think that over time, you may change your mind."

"Not anytime soon," he declared. "You don't know what it was like, Vil, to lay in that hospital bed, not knowing if I would live or die, with nothing but the pain and knowing that I was alone. Where was Brian when I was in the hospital? Why didn't he come to see me? Why didn't he try to call from a pay phone, write me an anonymous letter? He did *nothing*, sis. Nothing! He left me there to swim in an ocean of pain with nothing but Suzy and her messages from you to keep me company! If it hadn't been for you and Suzy, I think I would have died in that bed, she was the only thing that kept me from giving up. They didn't care about me. They wanted me to die, because I was an *embarrassment* to them!" he said angrily. "I will *never* forgive them, Vil. Never!"

Jessie was there. Soothing paws came to rest on his shoulders, and his paws, which had been shaking with both anger and the memory of that traumatic time, sought her out. Jessie sat down beside him and took the phone from him and put it to her face, wrapping her arm around him and holding him close. “Vil, I think he’s done talking now,” she said gently. “He’ll call you back when he feels better. Bye-bye.”

Jessie comforted him through the worst of the anger and fear. Even now, he couldn’t think back to the time he spent in that hospital without shivering, and her presence soothed him in ways nothing ever had, or ever could. The feel of her fur under his fingers, the smell of her, her warmth, and the life growing inside her, they were balms on the raw, open wounds of the past, soothing the pain away. He clung to her for quite a while, until she had his head in her lap, and his damaged ear was pressed up against her swelling belly, feeling the little nudges from within that was their daughter Laura. Kit felt much better, holding Jessie’s paw close to his chest as her tail swished back and forth over his stomach and lower chest, her gorgeous longhaired tail that was even thicker and more luxurious than his bushy fox tail, with that adorable dark tip, her fox markings that betrayed her mixed heritage. The dark tip of her tail, her dark-mitted paws and feet, the black backs of her ears that were so obvious against her blond hair, they were all fox markings. “Thanks, pretty kitty,” he said with a loving smile at her.

“Any time, my handsome fox,” she smiled, stroking his hair back from his face, then playing with his good ear absently. “I love you.”

“God, I love you, too,” he declared emphatically. He started when little Laura kicked him in the head, and he laughed. “But I think our daughter is a little mad at me right now.”

“Nah, she’s just telling you she loves you too,” she winked, putting her other paw on the top of her belly, just over his muzzle. “I can’t wait until she’s out of there,” she laughed. “I want to see my feet again!”

“Hush, you are not fat, you are *pregnant*.”

“I never said I was fat. I’m just starting to feel what Mom said was coming. The back strain, the need to pee every half hour, the cravings, the mood swings,” she told him.

“I haven’t noticed any mood swings.”

“I’m careful to keep you out of them,” she winked. “Anytime I feel a sudden change in mood, I just go lie down or put on a good face until it passes. Besides, you keep me too busy to suffer too much with them.”

“I keep you too busy? You’re the one who I have to drag out of that kitchen,” he teased. “How many boxes of pastries did you mail to Kansas yesterday, hmm? You’re the cooking freak here, not me.”

“Speaking of that, why don’t we put dinner on hold for now, and go flying? I’ll let you sit in the left seat,” she offered.

He laughed, then sat up and kissed her lingeringly. “I would love to go flying with you, my pretty kitty. And you can fly. I love it when you chauffeur me around.”

“Sounds like I need a little chauffeur’s uniform,” she teased.

“Then I can bring you home and we can play naughty boss,” he said, nuzzling her neck.

She giggled. “Well, you were a fox of your word,” she sighed, putting her paw on his neck as he nuzzled and lightly nipped at her neck. “You said

me being fat wouldn't keep you from wanting me."

"Mee-yow, baby," he said into her neck and pushed her down onto the couch, which made her laugh.

Chapter 32

There was a war going on in Boston. But, the war had multiple fronts, and Austin was one of those fronts.

In the week since the war began, Austin had become a front in the war, but the invaders were stymied by the powerful defenses that Vil had put in place in the city. Vil *owned* the city of Austin, lock, stock, and barrel, with the police and the DA's office in her pocket, and a personal line straight to the Governor of Texas. An example of Vil's power was the old DA that went after Kit. He wasn't a DA anymore. He wasn't even in Texas anymore. While Kit and Jessie were in Kansas, he suddenly retired, "to spend more time with his family" was the official reason, but the truth was that Vil retaliated for the male daring to go after her brother, and she did it when Kit wasn't in town to see what was going on. Vil didn't just force him out of the DA's office, she forced him out of Texas. He moved his family to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he was now a private practice attorney after passing the New Mexico bar. He was stark evidence of what happened to furs that crossed Vilenne Vulpan and the Vulpan family. The new DA was much more "sympathetic" to the Vulpans, which in other words meant that he was owned by Vil. Kit could probably blow up a bus full of kindergartners and confess on live national television, and the Austin DA wouldn't prosecute.

Their elders had to fight an uphill battle against the protections Vil had put in place in Austin to get at those she protected, and that was a very tall order. Their knee-jerk attempt to get Allison arrested showed them that Vil

had planned for this very event, and was ready for them. This left Kit, Jessie, Sheila, Allison, and everyone else free to live their lives, to ignore what was going on up in Boston, which was a brutal, knock-down drag-out slugfest. The elders had pulled out all the stops and were attacking Vil any way they could, from the cruel to the ridiculous, filing lawsuits against her, mocking her, spreading false rumors about her in the press, and trying to use their money, power, and influence to turn the furs of the shipyard and Boston against her. But Vil didn't bite on their attacks, she just hunkered down and played defense against their attacks, but she was also fighting back in other regards. She had filed a harassment case against her elders, pointing at the dozens of lawsuits filed against her in a matter of days and claiming that they were using the court system to harass her. She walled herself off in her manor and didn't talk to the press to answer the charges her elders had leveled against her in the court of tabloid public opinion, just letting the tabloids print whatever they pleased, but she did release a single press release stating that everything going on was part of an attempt by the elders to wrest control of the company away from her.

That single release all but dropped a bomb in Boston. The press knew *something* was going on in the Vulpan family, for Zach's assault on Terry was now public knowledge and the Vulpans had cleared out of Boston like they were running from the law. Vil's release suddenly made everything make sense, and it put the elders on their heels. They never expected Vil to air Vulpan dirty laundry in public like that, thought she would keep the reason for their war secret, as the Vulpans kept everything secret. Reporters that had been eating up the slander and rumors spread by the Vulpan elders literally turned on the paws that fed them. The pack of reporters that had been all but camped out outside Hart's Crossing were now stalking Zach, Jake, and Maxine, trying to get the juicy details on this war within the

Vulpan family, which put them as much on the defensive as Vil. Now they had to explain themselves to the public, and that was something that none of them wanted to do.

So, since the Vulpans weren't talking, the press started digging, and their actions were making it much harder for the elders to continue attacking Vil. Every single car that left Stonebrook, Twin Oaks, and Sun Garden was followed. Everyone anywhere near the families were questioned, and any strangers that moved in and out of the manors of the elders were noted and checked out. All they could do was call, and when one was arranging potentially illegal acts, one didn't like to do it over the phone in the age of federal wiretaps.

They even went so far as to send clandestine agents to New Orleans to whip up the workers of Avondale against Vil. They spread leaflets and told bald-faced lies to try to incite them to strike, but the simple fact of the matter was that they were too late for that, by about a week. Terry had already stamped out any strike talk because he did *exactly* what he threatened to do. On the Monday morning they were to vote on striking, there was an *army* of security guards waiting right across the street from the shipyard entrances, a naked show of force to prove that Terry would carry out his threat to fire anyone who went on strike. When the union representatives indignantly claimed that management couldn't fire strikers, that it was against the law, Terry dared them to try and see what happened. Literally. He said to them "I *dare* you to strike against Vulpan Shipyards, gentlemans. We are not the spineless cowards you dealt with before. When we are threatened, we don't capitulate, we retaliate."

It was an example of the willingness of the elders to hurt the family business in order to get rid of Vil. But she was ready for them here too. In

the week since the war began, the six board members the elders had bribed to form a majority alliance against Vil were all gone. Five had retired, and one had fled the country. There were now only eight furs left on the board, because Jake had vetoed every single candidate that Vil had put into consideration for election to the board, and Vil had blocked every attempt by Jake to fill the board vacancies with furs loyal to the elders, paralyzing any attempt to fill the empty seats. The usual complement of 15 members was down by six due to Vil's actions, and Zach was suspended, leaving only eight left, which would have made it ridiculously easy for Vil to push through anything she pleased were Jake not on the board wielding his power as a Vulpan to gridlock the board. The six remaining board members were absolutely terrified of Vil, and would not vote against her, no matter what, leaving only Jake to block Vil. They didn't want to be called into her office next. Vil's draconian actions had scared the board and Jake enough that they didn't take her bait when she proposed taking the company public. Despite having ears near Zach and Jake both, neither Jake nor any member of the board leaked that bait beyond the boardroom, probably smelling it out as the trap it was.

But that didn't slow her down. Since she now had an iron-fisted grip on the board, she moved decisively. She made her move on a hot, sunny Monday. Kit should have been at work, but he, Jessie, and Sam were all at the airport, sitting on the back of Kit's Pathfinder gate watching as Sheila taxied out in a Cessna 172, going on her check ride. Still on the flight line in the other trainer, Allison was standing by the wing of the 172 talking with the FAA examiner, still undergoing her oral test before they got into the plane and took off. Today and tomorrow were test days for the summer flight class. The seven furs in the class would be doing their check rides, and Sheila and Allison had volunteered to go first. Kit and Jessie had helped

them study for it all weekend, and Kit was utterly confident they would pass. Sheila was actually serious about learning to fly, but she was nowhere near as serious as Allison was. Kit's casual comment that her IFR was the only thing standing between her and being able to fly to New Orleans to see Terry whenever she wanted had lit a fire under that femme's tail. She had been studying like mad ever since, and had also already enrolled in a three week IFR course that AAIA offered, which Kit would help augment with personal lessons and also by giving Allison lessons in his plane. Sheila and Allison were still quite serious about going in together on a plane, but Kit had convinced them to hold off on a Cessna 400 and consider other possibilities, like a used King Air or a Crusader or a Grumman. A used twin engine might be cheaper for them to buy and still give them the same functionality as the 400, and Kit was certified to train them in multi engine planes.

Sheila's fun of flight and Allison's burning need to be able to fly to New Orleans had prepared them well for the check rides. Kit, Jessie, and Sam were watching from a discreet distance as Allison motioned at the wing, the ferret examiner nodded, and then they climbed into the plane.

"There goes Sheila," Jessie said, pointing as the 172 took off, climbed, and then started a banking turn to the left.

"Think she'll pass?" Sam asked.

"Oh, heck yeah," Jessie giggled. "She's ready."

"Let's watch Ally take off, then go do the deed," Kit sighed.

Today wasn't just all fun and games. Today, Kit had to move the 400 out of Avia's hangar. The Lear 450 would be back this afternoon, and he had to surrender the spot. Alice had agreed to lease him a tie down outside

the hangar, at one of their tie down spots, which would maintain the plane as based at Bergstrom and allow them to evade several fees levied on visiting planes. In a show of faith, they even let him keep the remote to their hangar doors and gave him and Jessie access to Avia's building, letting them use their flight plan computer, lounge, and bathrooms. Alice had been quite fair to them, and she honestly regretted having to kick Kit and Jessie out, but they all knew that the day would come, and it was just business. Kit had rented the space fully knowing that it was only temporary, and he did not begrudge Alice or Avia one bit. They had been very kind to him, and he honestly appreciated them letting him rent the open space in their hangar while he could. The 400 would just have to sit out on the flight line until he could get hangar space for it.

They watched as Allison took off in the flight school's other trainer, then they got into the truck and drove to Avia. Alice met them in the hangar, and there were quite a few pawshakes all around as Kit and Jessie greeted Alice, Mike, Tommy, and Hank, the maintenance furs that worked on the jets. "I really hate to do this to you guys," Alice said earnestly.

"We knew it was coming, Alice," Kit chuckled. "But thanks for the tie down and the run of the hangar."

"Hey, we may have kicked you out, but we can still pretend to be your FBO," she winked. "Any leads on hangar space?"

"Nothing," he said with a shake of his head.

"We put ourselves on the waiting list for those tee hangars down on the south end," Jessie added. "It'll be a while til we get in, though."

"Well, you can always bring the plane into the hangar to load it, guys," she told them. "That's why you're keeping the remote for the hangar doors."

We don't mind that at all. That way only Kit has to get wet untying the plane and getting it in so you and the baby can board it under cover," she said with a grin at Jessie.

"That sounds good to me," Jessie laughed, winking at Kit.

"Mean kitty," he teased.

"You want to taxi it out, or want us to hitch it to the crawler?" Alice asked.

The crawler was how they got the jets in and out of the hangar. It was a low-slung motorized towing unit about the size of an exercise treadmill that hitched to the front wheel of an airplane and then pulled it, guided by a controller using a remote steering device. It moved at a slow walk, which was why they nicknamed it *crawler*, but it could tow just about any small jet. Despite being very small, the thing had a lot of towing power, and was more than capable of towing about anything up to a Cessna CJ3 or a Lear 450.

"I'm going to taxi it out," Kit answered.

They took care of that quickly. Kit didn't bother with preflight, since the plane wasn't going very far, so he just went through cold start, started it up, and Tommy guided him out with paw signals as Jessie picked up their wheel chocks and followed him out. The tie down they gave him was at the corner of the hangar, the first available tie down, which would make it very easy for him to taxi the plane into the hangar when he needed to do so. It was also close enough for the auxiliary AV gas hose to reach his plane without him having to move it. "Are you guys going to even bother with carrying AV gas now that you've gotten rid of the turboprop?" Kit asked as he and Jessie got help tying down the plane from Alice and Tommy,

basically giving Jessie a refresher course on how to tie the plane down. From now on, it would be a necessity.

“Actually, no,” she answered. “What we have left is basically yours,” she chuckled. “There’s about enough left in the tank to fill your plane up twice. We’ve put in a work order to have a contractor come convert the AV gas tank to jet fuel. Until they get here, feel free to use what gas we have left.”

“Hmm, I think we could do that,” Kit chuckled. “We’re planning on taking a trip tonight.”

“Not a trip insomuch as a joyride,” Jessie corrected. “I’m taking the girls flying to celebrate Sheila and Ally getting their pilot’s licenses. They’re taking their check rides as we speak.”

“Really? Well, tell them congratulations from me.”

“We will,” Jessie nodded. “This’ll be my last hurrah too,” she laughed. “After today, I’m grounded until I have the baby.”

“There’s nothing stopping you from flying while pregnant, Jessie,” Alice protested. “I think the FAA doesn’t ground a pregnant femme until she’s two weeks from her due date, but I’m not sure.”

“I’m getting to where I don’t feel comfortable in the seat while flying,” she explained, patting her rounded belly. “I’ll be a passenger after today until Laura’s born.”

“Ah, well, in that case, I understand completely,” Alice smiled.

They returned to the flight line close to AAIA and waited. Both of them were still out, and would probably be out for about another half an

hour, so Kit tuned a portable scanner to the local tower frequency so they could listen to the girls calling in, and Jessie and Sam discussed her baby shower. They'd set the shower for August 23rd, which was fairly early to have a baby shower given Jessie wasn't due til September 30th, but Jessie wanted it done before Vil got married. Vil intended to attend her baby shower, and that meant that Jessie had to have it before Vil went on her honeymoon. August 23rd was about the only day that Vil could spare to come down for the shower.

Jessie and Sam fell silent when Sheila's voice came over the scanner, as she requested permission to land. They heard the controller grant her permission, then they watched the runway. Sheila's trainer appeared from behind a hangar as it slowed on the runway, coming to a stop at or near some spot the examiner chose for her runway positioning test; a pilot had to bring the plane to a stop within 200 feet of a determined point to pass a check ride, and within 100 feet of it for a commercial rating. Sheila stopped the plane, sat there for just a second, then started moving again, turning off the runway at a taxi ramp and entering the flight line, taxiing towards AAIA's hangar.

"If the examiner aimed her at the taxi ramp, she passed," Kit noted.

"Huh?" Sam asked.

Kit explained the landing test, then pointed. "She's pulling in. I think we can go over now," he said.

As they approached, Sheila's actions told them everything they needed to know. The examiner, a short femme raccoon wearing a white blouse and a pair of black slacks, got out of the plane and came around as she chocked the wheels, then after she said something to her, Sheila gave out a squeal of

delight, jumped up and down, then hugged the startled raccoon. She let go and ran towards them. “I passed!” she screamed ecstatically, and then literally jumped into Kit’s arms, giving him a fierce hug. She hugged Jessie, then Sam, then she ran over and hugged several AAIA teachers and the other students who had come out to see how she did. “I’m a *pilot* now, cousin!” she beamed, accepting a form from the examiner after she called Sheila back over. “I’m going to go get my temporary license from the FAA office right now!”

“Let’s wait for Ally,” Jessie urged. “Then you can go together.”

“She’s still out?”

Jessie nodded. “She left about five minutes after you.”

They didn’t have to wait long. Allison’s confident voice came over the scanner in Kit’s paw, and then they all looked to the runway. Allison’s trainer landed near the end of the runway and rolled to a slow and smooth stop right at the turn-off to AAIA’s section of the tarmac, then moved forward and turned towards them. Allison taxied the plane to a park beside Sheila’s trainer, then she turned off the engine and performed postflight actions inside as the ferret seemed to be talking to her. They got out of the plane, and Allison immediately rushed over to them. “I passed!” she declared with a smile, hugging Jessie fondly. “And tomorrow I start the IFR training course!”

“So do I!” Sheila added. “She talked me into it!”

“Congratulations, Ally!” Jessie beamed.

“Thanks guys, for all your help!” she said as she hugged Kit.

“No problem, Ally, no problem,” Kit told her. “Now, you and Sheila need to go get your temporary licenses from the office, and I’m sure AAIA has other things for you to do,” he added when Allison hugged Sam.

“And when you’re done, we’re going on a victory flight in our plane,” Jessie told them.

“Ooooooh, can I fly it?” Sheila asked, which made Kit laugh.

“Not til you’re thoroughly trained on a four hundred, cousin. I told you, my plane is a lot more complicated than the trainers you’ve flown. There will be no flying our plane til we know you won’t crash it.”

“What? Don’t you trust me, cousin?” she gasped.

“You? Hell no,” he answered immediately, which earned him a slap from her.

“Girls! We have paperwork to do!” the ferret called to them. “And there are other students waiting for their turn!”

“Go, go, go,” Jessie shooed them. “And call me when you’re done, so we can go flying!”

“I’m going to head on into work, love,” Kit told them. “Got your keys with you?”

“Mmm-hmm,” she nodded. “Can you lock up my van on your way out? I don’t think I locked my door.”

“Sure thing, pretty kitty. See you tonight, have fun, and remember what Nick said.”

“I know, no extended stays anywhere. If we land, just get gas and go.”

“That’s my girl,” he smiled, then he kissed Sam on the cheek. “Have fun, Sammy.”

“This should be fun, especially when I make those two sit in the back seat,” she winked.

Kit laughed. “Let the front seat war begin,” he told them as he headed for his truck.

He was happy for them. Sheila had been bitten by the flying bug just like Jessie had, but Allison was very, very serious about getting her IFR, already with an appointment with Kit tomorrow evening to go over things and go for a flight in his plane so he could show her IFR in action. Kit wouldn’t be formally teaching Allison, AAIA was going to do that, but Kit *could* teach her if she wanted to spend the time. Kit couldn’t get her her IFR as fast as AAIA could through their training program, and she was willing to pay the \$4,500 to take their dedicated IFR course, which covered everything, to get her IFR as fast as possible. Sheila didn’t mind blowing \$4,500 on something she liked to do, so they’d both enrolled in the IFR training program. In about three weeks, right before the wedding, they’d be getting their IFR ratings. And they’d work for them. There were a *lot* of requirements for an IFR, and they’d be in a very demanding program to get it, one requiring a lot of work and was scheduled for their check ride the Friday before Sheila’s first semester at U.T.; the next semester started August 18th, and the program scheduled the last possible day to take the check ride the Friday before, on the 15th. AAIA set it up that way on purpose so their IFR program didn’t overlap U.T. They had to do the logged hours, the ground training, and the studying to learn the procedures and rules of IFR. They’d be looking at 8-10 hour days in school, most of it spent in the cockpit getting the logged hours done, flights at all kinds of times,

including the required night flying, and a lot of studying. The only real advantage they had was that since they were trained at AAIA and it was on Bergstrom, they already had experience dealing with air traffic control, and they also had Kit and Jessie to privately tutor them.

Kit got to work around 11:00, but nobody said anything. Nobody ever really did, since Kit got all his work done even if he left early or came in late, often working from home. They all knew that he had to go move his plane today anyway, so it wasn't like he didn't have a good reason to be late. What was out of the ordinary, though, was the three furs waiting for him in his office. All three were foxes, two males and a femme, wearing dark suits and a dark skirt with a blazer respectively. "Mister Vulpan," the taller of the two males said as he stood up, offering his paw. "Arthur Bridgestone. I'm from the legal office attached to Vulpan Shipyards. My associates, Leah Manchester and Richard Cooper." Both of the younger foxes nodded to him upon hearing their names.

"What's a company lawyer doing down here?"

"I was instructed to have you call Miss Vulpan upon our arrival, Mister Vulpan. She'll explain it."

"Uhh, sure," he said, sitting down and picking up the phone on his desk and speed-dialing Vil. She picked up.

"Hey bro, are they there?" she asked immediately.

"Uh, yeah, but what's going on?"

"First things first. Is Jessie there?"

"No, she's down at the airport."

“Call her and have her get there as fast as she can,” she commanded.

“Why?”

“I’ll explain when she gets there, so I only have to do it once. Call me back when Jessie’s there.”

Kit hung up and dialed Jessie’s cell phone. “Any idea what the hell this is about?” he asked the lawyers.

“We’ll abide by Miss Vulpan’s wish, Mister Vulpan, and allow her to explain it.”

“Alright, but all this secrecy is a touch ridiculous. Pretty kitty,” he called when she answered the phone. “I need you to come to the office, right now.”

“What’s wrong, handsome fox?”

“I...honestly have no idea. Vil wants you here, she has something she wants to talk to us about.”

“Oh, okay. I can be there in about twenty minutes.”

“Alright. See you then.”

“Do you have a coffee maker in the office, Mister Vulpan?”
Bridgestone asked amiably.

“Sure, in the break room. It’s across the main room, you can’t miss it. It has no door.”

The three lawyers left his office and went over to the break room to get coffee. While they chatted with the gang, who was curious as to what was going on, Kit could only guess at what was going on. Was this part of the

war? If it was lawyers, then it meant something pretty serious. But he had no idea. He could only wait and find out.

Jessie got there about a half hour after he called her. “Sorry, love, I caught every red light all the way here,” she fretted when she came into his office. The three lawyers quickly joined them, and Kit picked up the phone again and redialed Vil as Jessie sat at the extra chair Kit kept near his desk just for her, so he and Jessie could look at his computer monitor while sitting down.

“Is Jessie there?” Vil asked without even a greeting.

“She just got here.”

“Good. Close the door and put me on speaker.”

“Could you close the door please?” Kit asked. One of the lawyers hurried to do so, and Kit turned on the speaker and hung up the receiver. “Alright, Vil, what’s going on?”

“We’re burying the uncles, effective today,” she said immediately and in a very brusque tone. Vil was in her business mode, and he knew that he’d get nothing but terse replies and exacting comments from her right now. “Bridgestone?” she called.

“Yes, Miss Vulpan?”

“Give them the contracts.”

Bridgestone opened his briefcase and withdrew two sheafs of papers and put them on the desk and pushed them towards them. Kit saw that they had their names on them, and Kit’s was nearly twice as thick as Jessie’s. “What are these, Vil?” Jessie asked.

“If you’ve ever trusted me before, bro, sis, trust me now. Sign them. Both of you have to sign Kit’s, but Jessie has to sign her own. Sign them immediately and in the presence of Bridgestone.”

“What’s in them?”

“I’ll explain later.”

“I don’t like where this is going, Vil,” Kit said suspiciously.

“It will take too long,” she told him. “I need those contracts back in this office by four, so you don’t have time. So *sign them*. I’ll explain after Bridgestone is on his way back here.”

Kit really did *not* like this. He trusted Vil...up to a point. Her willingness to meddle in his life was an established pattern, and now she shows up telling them to sign thick contracts when he had absolutely no idea what was in them, and being very pushy and intentionally evasive about what they were for. “Right here, Misses Vulpan,” Bridgestone said, flipping papers to the very end, where there were five pairs of signature lines separated by short paragraphs. “Sign here and here on Mister Vulpan’s contract.”

“It’s Vil, handsome fox. If she does something naughty, she knows we’ll spank her,” Jessie told him with a slight smile, taking the pen that Bridgestone offered, and she began signing. Kit grunted and sighed, then he took a pen from his desk and pulled the contract over in front of him.

“Where do I sign?” he sighed

“Hold a second, Mister Vulpan,” he said, opening Kit’s pages to about the middle, where there were two sets of signature lines separated by a large paragraph. “Sign here, and here. And on the back page, sign here and here.”

“Can you tell me what the hell we’re signing while we’re signing?” Kit asked in irritation, but he did start signing his name.

“Are they signing, Bridgestone?”

“Yes, Miss Vulpan,” he answered. “I witnessed Misses Vulpan sign her sections of Mister Vulpan’s contract and is now currently signing her own contract, and am currently witnessing Mister Vulpan signing, as are our two notary witnesses.”

“Good. Make sure they do it exactly right, and make sure they don’t scrawl. We don’t have a second chance.”

“Yes, Miss Vulpan.”

Kit and Jessie dutifully made all their signatures, and then Bridgestone took the sheafs from them. “Will the witnesses to the contracts please sign and affix their seals?” the lawyer prompted. The male and female took the contracts, signed them twice on the back page, then they used notary crimping stamps to stamp their signatures, notarizing their validity. “The contracts have been legally signed and notarized, Miss Vulpan.”

“Good. Return immediately.”

“We are on our way. Good day, Mister Vulpan, Misses Vulpan. Congratulations,” he said with a smile, nodding to them, and then the three foxes quickly hurried out. They almost *ran*.

“Vil, what the *hell* are you up to?” Kit demanded.

Vil laughed brightly. “Congratulations, bro. You’re a member of the board of directors of the company.”

“*What?*” Kit gasped.

“Just what I said,” she answered. “You are now a member of the board. That’s what the contract was, guys, that was the executive agreement contract with a few extra clauses for Jessie. Jessie is also an employee of the company. You are a member of the board, and Jessie is now your executive assistant, who has the right to vote for you by proxy should you send her to the board in your place.”

“Vil!” Jessie gasped. “Why would we want to move to Boston?”

“You’re not moving to Boston,” she purred.

“How did you pull that off, sis?” Kit demanded. “If any Vulpan vetoes the election of a board member, it’s shot down! And it takes a three quarter vote to vote in a new board member! It’s in the company charter!”

“Usually yes, but this morning, Uncle Jake got into a car accident,” she said. “He should be checking out of the hospital any minute. That’s why this had to be done fast.”

“Is he alright?” Jessie asked in concern.

“He’s fine, actually,” she answered. “They put ten stitches in his leg and splinted his tail, but outside of that, nothing major. But, what’s more important is the hospitalization clause of his contract,” she said in a purring voice. “It clearly states in the contract that any board member hospitalized for any reason surrenders the right to vote at board meetings while hospitalized. When Jake was taken to the hospital this morning, I simply walked into the boardroom during a *previously scheduled* board meeting and nominated six new members of the board. All six were voted in unanimously. And *you* are one of them. Terry is the other one that you’d know. The other four are just company executives who are loyal to me.”

“I don’t understand,” Jessie said in confusion.

“Vil cheated. Outrageously,” Kit said, nodding as he understood what Vil had done, and more importantly, what it meant. “Vil used a loophole in the way the company runs to basically sneak her nominated executives through a vote, and there’s nothing our uncles can do about it. Uncle Zach is suspended, and Uncle Jake was in the hospital, which removed his ability to vote. Since neither of them could vote, there was no Vulpan on the board to veto our nominations. The other board members are too terrified of Vil to vote against her, so they voted for who she told them to vote for.”

“That about sums it up,” Vil said smugly.

“Why Kit and Terry?” Jessie asked curiously.

“Simple, pretty kitty,” Kit said, looking at her. “Vil is absolutely untouchable now.”

“That’s right,” Vil laughed victoriously.

“The only way the uncles could get Vil out of her chair was with a unanimous vote of the board to fire her,” Kit explained. “Well, think about it, pretty kitty. Will *you* vote to remove Vil from her chair if I send you to vote for me?”

“No!”

“Exactly,” he said simply. “You and me and Terry are absolutely unbribeable. There is no way our uncles can convince us to vote with them against Vil, not unless Vil *deserves* to be fired. And so long as just *one* of us refuses to vote Vil out, she can’t be removed as CEO. Vil has a problem with two Vulpans on the board working against her, so she put two *more* Vulpans on the board that will support her. Vil, this has to be the most

sneaky, cunning, underpawed, and *brilliant* thing you've ever done," Kit told her with strange pride in his voice. "I thought your engagement to Kendall was brilliant. This puts that to *shame*." He blinked. "Vil. Did you *arrange* Jake's accident?"

"Ask me no questions, and I will tell you no lies, brother," she said cheekily.

"*Vil!*" Jessie gasped in shock.

"I was joking, Jessie, seriously! Jake's Cadillac was hit by a school bus. A *school bus*, guys! Go look at it on the news! Do you think I'd arrange for a bus full of kids going to summer school to hit Uncle Jake's car? Get a grip!"

"Oh. Well, in that case, I guess I'll believe you, Vil," Jessie said. "Are the kids okay?"

"Nobody was hurt but Jake and his driver," she answered. "Jake got a lacerated leg and a broken tail because he wasn't wearing a seat belt, he slammed into the wet bar in the back of his car and cut himself. His driver suffered a mild concussion and a broken finger, and that's all." She laughed, then sighed and blew out his breath. "Of course, this is where it gets touchy," she admitted. "They'll never get me out of the chair now, and they know it, not when I have *two* absolutely unbribeable Vulpans on the board backing me up, and one of them with proxy powers for his wife. So, Zach has to either accede that fact and try to take control of the family in other respects, or he does something desperate to try to force me out. When he finds out about it, we'll see what he decides to do."

"Well, sis, congratulations. You win," Kit noted.

She laughed. “Not yet. I just scored a *huge* victory on the battlefield, but the war is still being fought,” she said. “So, you two gonna attend our next board meeting tomorrow?” she asked winsomely.

“You’re serious? I thought Kit was just a board member on paper,” Jessie protested.

“Oh, no, Jessie, not at all!” Vil said brightly. “He *is* a member of the board, and you are his executive assistant, a company executive yourself! You’re employees now, just like me and Terry. I’ll have to make some IDs for you two. You even get keys to the executive bathroom here at the main shipyard,” she said with a giggle. “I guess I can give you Lewis’s office, bro, and Terry can have Simpson’s. They’re fairly nice. Both of them overlook the back bay.”

“Vil, be serious,” Kit snorted. “I’ll just be a phantom. We’re not really employees, we’re just a clever trick you set up to keep them from threatening your chair.”

“Be that as it may, you’re still a member of the board. If you don’t want to vote, you can always allow Jessie, or me, to vote for you by proxy.”

“Which you want, naturally.”

“Naturally,” she laughed. “There’s absolutely no way the elders can vote me out, not when I can cast a no vote by proxy. And since I’m casting the vote by proxy, I can even get around the stricture preventing me from voting in a matter of my own termination,” she said smugly. “I’m not voting *myself*, I’m just casting a vote on behalf of someone else.”

“You realize, sis, that Zach will go absolutely *ballistic* when he finds out you gave Jessie the power to vote on the board by proxy, and you put

the two Vulpans he hates the most on the board of the company. I mean ballistic. He may have a stroke on the spot.”

“Yes, I know,” she said seriously. “I *want* him too angry to think straight, bro. Sure, it makes him more dangerous, but it also makes him more prone to making a critical mistake that can allow me to can him.”

“Why can’t you just fire him since nobody will vote against you?” Jessie asked.

“Because I can’t fire a Vulpan off the board for no reason,” she answered. “I have to show cause. When I tried to fire Zach once before, I had cause, and the board didn’t vote to fire him. And the board has what you might call double jeopardy rules for Vulpans, sis-in-law,” she explained. “I can’t call him up for another vote to fire him using the same evidence. That’s also why I can’t fire Jake since there’s no Vulpan on the board to oppose me. I have to prove that I have a reason to fire him, because he’s a Vulpan, where I could call a vote to fire any other member of the board for any reason, even if I just don’t like them. Getting a Vulpan off the board is very, very hard. The same rules that keep them from getting rid of me also more or less protect them.”

“Sis. You said I’m a member of the board.”

“That’s right, bro. Fully and completely,” she said pointedly. “Your salary was in your contract.”

“Vil!” he barked angrily.

She laughed. “Your salary is *one dollar*. Read the contract when I send you a PDF of it,” she soothed. “You earn one dollar a year. You *do*, however, get a twenty thousand dollar bonus for employment because I

know you drained your bank account investing in the magazine and buying Jessie her birthday presents and paying out expenses with the move. You're eligible for bonuses like any other board member, and you get the typical shares of Vulpan stock that comes with the chair, which you have to surrender when you quit. So, put your outrage back in your pants, bro, I didn't throw money at you through the back door. You'll earn about quadruple the norm at the next dividend check because you control much more stock now, but I can't do anything about that and you know it. You know as well as I do, those stocks come with the chair. That is established policy. If I put you on the board without awarding you the stocks, the uncles would claim you have no authority to vote. Aside from those future dividends, you're still disgustingly poor."

"I'm glad you thought about that," Kit said.

"I almost put you in at a million a year, but I figured that might tempt you to vote to fire me," she said honestly. "But *Jessie* is another matter," she purred. "I gave her a low salary for an executive assistant, but still a good salary. A hundred grand a year. I know better than to give you money, bro, but I also know you won't say a word when I give to *Jessie*," she said smugly.

"We can invest more in the magazine, Kit," Jessie said, a little soothingly. "And put more money back for our children. And she's right, we can take the money and put it back in our investment portfolio, we've taken out so much to put into the magazine. And maybe buy a few more things for the house. And maybe help Ally buy a plane so she can go see Terry."

"I guess, but I'm not happy about that, sis."

“Bro, you deserve *something* for your help, and I do not want you to even have to *think* about money with Laura coming,” she said seriously. “My niece is *not* going to be poor! You think I like the idea of you being in danger because of me? Hell no! That’s why Nick is down there. As far as I’m concerned, what I’m paying Jessie is danger pay for me embroiling you in this. And you’re not getting even a fraction of what you’re due. Between your dividends and Jessie’s salary, that’s enough steady income for me to feel completely secure that Laura will have everything she needs.”

“It’s far more than what I want.”

“Well, we’ll just have to compromise between nothing and millions, then,” she said cheekily. “So, anyway, I’m going to have to go. Jake should be getting here, and boy, do I have something to tell him,” she said with an amused chuckle.

“Okay, I guess I can go back to the airport. Sam’s still down there waiting for me to come back,” she laughed. “Bye Vil, love ya!”

“Love you too, sis-in-law, and congrats on your new job!”

“Job, yeah, right!” Jessie giggled, then she kissed Kit on the muzzle and hurried out. Kit picked up the phone to take it off speaker as she left.

“Sis,” he said as she closed the door. “Perhaps you can explain how you had two thick contracts all ready to go when Jake had his *accident*.”

“My, isn’t it just amazing how I just *happened* to have those contracts at paw in the brief window where Jake was in the hospital and unable to vote, which happened so fast he was unable to arrange a proxy to vote for him?” she asked knowingly. “What an amazing coincidence.”

“You’re upping the ante, sis.”

“It’s Jake’s fault for not having a proxy agreement on file that would have let his assistant vote in his place. They can’t whine when I beat them at their own game.” She chuckled ominously. “We’ll see if Zach has a stroke when he finds out that *Jessie* can vote by proxy.”

“That was a very bad idea, sis. I can appreciate why you did it because *Jessie* won’t turn on you, but you just pressed the one button you had no business pressing. You know how rabid a purist he is, and now you just gave my *pregnant mixed breed* wife the power to vote on the board of the *company*. And on top of that, you just put the two Vulpans that he sees as destroying the family on the board. That’s the worst thing you could have possibly done. Zach would probably try to kill her right there in the boardroom if she showed up to vote in my place.”

“From my view, it was the best thing I could have done,” she hummed in reply. “An angry opponent is easier to beat. He’s much more prone to making a critical mistake if he can’t think straight.”

“He has Maxine to hold him in check,” Kit reminded her. “She doesn’t get angry like that.”

“We’ll see. So, brother,” she said with a chuckle. “Welcome to the family business. All that running, and look where you ended up.”

“And I will *get you* for this, Vil,” he answered seriously.

“Just don’t try to vote me off, and you can punish me all you want,” she chuckled. “I take it you’ll give me proxy power?”

“Of course. You know I’m not about to set foot in Boston.”

“I’ll email you the form. Print it, sign it, fax it to me.”

“Fine. Do you think Terry will take the board position?”

“We already talked about that. He’ll stay in New Orleans to finish the Avondale work, and then decide from there. It’ll depend on how much heat he’ll take from the family over Allison. If they won’t give up on it, he’ll stay in New Orleans and run Avondale, but hold his seat on the board and vote by proxy and attend routine meetings via videoconference. He’s on the *board* now, bro, you know what it takes to get him off. He’s basically set for life in that regard. But for now, he’s given me proxy until we set up a system that lets him attend board meetings by videoconference. I already have our IT guys on the job.” She giggled. “Terry also brought up the ultimate weapon to use against the uncles, should it look like they’re about to do something really, really stupid.”

“What?”

“If it looks like they’re about to get out of control, Terry will threaten to sue you.”

Kit drew a breath, choked on it, then exploded into laughter. “Dear *God*, sis, that is *brilliant!*”

“Yes, I’m quite proud to call Terry my cousin,” she agreed. “Terry could challenge the agreement in court, which would invalidate the entire thing. Yes, that strips him of his fortune, but it *also* strips the rest of the family, and leaves it up to you how to redistribute the family assets...which would allow you to cut off the family members that have been mean to you,” she giggled girlishly. “I couldn’t do that because I’m blood related to you, but Terry *could*. I’ll be honest that I never considered that possibility, because I can’t do it. The agreement specifically states that I can’t challenge the agreement in any manner, just as you can’t. Terry would take a big risk

that you'd backstab him when he killed the agreement, but it would be a threat so dire that it very well might make the uncles back off."

"I should say so!"

"We decided that using that will be the last resort," she told him seriously. "To make a threat like that might tear the family apart, disintegrate the whole family and turn this into an open civil war, because it brings *everyone* into it. And whoever did sue you would be an absolute pariah in the family forever afterward. They'd never be forgiven for disrupting things and stripping them of their fortunes."

"You're right. If Terry ever did that, it would be over for him. And it would be the absolute last resort." Kit sighed, then laughed ruefully. "Sis, you'd better live in a bunker for the next month," he warned.

"Yes, I'm expecting it," she agreed. "All week I've been running around putting out the fires they set, answering their lawsuits, countering their gossip and rumors, chasing them away from Austin, and tightening my grip on New Orleans to protect Terry, and have done nothing in reply except get engaged to Ken. They knew I'd eventually retaliate much more directly, and I think they won't really like the way I've done it," she laughed. "In a month, I'll be married to a Brighton, and my *brother* and a Vulpan who owes me way too much to go against me is on the board. Zach has *no chance* of taking the company from me now unless he does something drastic."

"And that's exactly why you need to be very, very careful. I would not put it past Zach to try something drastic."

"I know, bro, I know. I won't be leaving Hart's Crossing except to go to work, and effective today, I'm commuting via helicopter. Stav and

Marcus don't even want me riding to work in my car. They don't want me having an *accident*," she chuckled. "Anyway, I need to go, bro. I do have some work to do, and Jake will be here soon. When he gets here, I'm going to tell him all about the six new members of the board and watch his tongue flop out of his mouth," she laughed. "I'll call you tonight, bro, and tell you what happens."

"Alright. Despite being mad at you at the moment, I love you, Vil."

"I love you too, Kit. Bye now."

"Bye sis."

Kit hung up the phone, both mightily impressed and a little angry with Vil. He could see the utter brilliance in her move. By putting Kit and Terry on the board, she ensured that it would take something very, very big to get her out of the chair. Zach couldn't bribe Kit or Terry; in fact, both of them hated Zach as much as Zach hated them. Kit's hatred of his elder was the same hatred he held for all his elders, while Terry had a very personal and very viable reason to hate his uncle, the fox that tried to get his girlfriend arrested and had gotten *him* arrested after pushing him down in his office. Vil had stacked the board not just with furs loyal to her, but with two furs that the elders could not buy off. Just as Vil had wrapped herself in the protection of the Brighton family when she engaged Kendall, she solidified her hold on the company by loading the board with two allies that would fight Zach and Jake to the bitter end. He could admire her cunning and intelligence, but he was a bit miffed that she had included *Jessie* in her little games. She'd employed Jessie as well, made her an executive in the company, and gave her a huge salary that rang Kit's bell just a little bit. She certainly knew better than to try to give Kit that money, but she also knew that Kit would not say a word if she gave that money to *Jessie*. What Vil

and Jessie did was their business, and he would never give a single word against what Jessie wanted. She had proclaimed that she was alright with the salary, and that was that. But he was still a bit angry with Vil for sneaking it around him, for pressuring them into signing those contracts without letting them read them first. She may have only given him a dollar's salary, but she could have easily given him a *million* dollar salary, and given Jessie a similar salary. Instead, however, she went on the side of caution, giving Kit basically no salary and giving Jessie probably one of the lowest of the upper executive salaries, so at least nobody in the company could accuse her of loading up the payroll.

Of course, Kit having no salary also made a statement. It said that he wasn't there for money, that he was there more or less to back up Vil.

He was taking sides.

He may take some heat for that, but he honestly didn't care. Zach had tried to get Allison arrested, tried to frame Terry, and was harassing his sister. Damn right he was taking sides.

Terry's idea of the last resort was also clever, but it was very, very dangerous. If Terry made that kind of threat, then the entire family would explode, which would make it almost impossible for anyone to maintain any kind of control, even Vil or Uncle Zach. The family would shatter into bickering factions, and it would be the social death of whoever made the threat. Such a dangerous weapon was like a nuclear bomb...it would only be there as the deterrent of last resort to prevent the uncles from doing something inexcusable, stopping something outrageous with something equally outrageous. Vil was too right in deciding that Terry's idea would be the *last* thing they'd try, since it had such an awful risk of backfiring and destroying the entire family.

His involvement certainly didn't escape attention, either. After lunch, he got another phone call from Boston, and this time it wasn't from Vil. "Kit Vulpan," he answered absently, pointing to a filename on the computer screen to Pat. "This one, Pat."

"Got it, boss," Pat nodded.

"Kitstrom Lucas," came a low, angry voice. It was Maxine.

Kit's tail nearly stuck straight out when he heard that voice. He shoed Pat out of the office quickly and switched the phone to the other ear, to his undamaged ear. "What do you want, Maxine?" he asked coldly.

"To find out what insanity possessed you!" she answered. "This is not *your* business, young male! You agreed to stay out of family affairs when you moved to Austin, and you are breaking your word!"

"No, Maxine, I'm not, because *you* broke your word to *me* first," he answered flatly. "Uncle Zach had no right to drag Stonebrook into this, and you have no right trying to change what everyone agreed to when we sent Cybil back to Britain! We all *agreed* to the way things were, and Vil being in the big chair was part of that agreement! You're trying to change the agreement, so damn right I'm going to say something about it! You want me to get out of family business? Stop fighting with Vil!"

"Do you think we relish this, Luke?" she asked tersely. "We do not, I assure you! I for one think that she's doing an excellent job as CEO, but your sister is allowing this family to crumble! She is allowing the children to run wild! What is the company and the money if we lose our pride and our reputation? We'll be a laughing stock in Boston! We'll be no better than *new money*," she said with an audible sneer in her voice. "We gave Vil a

chance, but she has failed to uphold her duties as the family head, and so she must step aside!”

“What? No accusations that I’m destroying the family, Aunt Maxine?” he asked caustically.

“You may have been the first to rebel against the family, but you won’t be the last,” she answered, a bit ruefully. “The children are drunk with their trust funds and have let the money blind them to the proud traditions of the Vulpan family. It was a mistake to divide the money among *all* the Vulpan. It should have been left in the paws of the elders, for it’s becoming clear that the children were not ready for the responsibility of it.” She blew out her breath. “*That* is why we are fighting Vil, Luke. She won’t rein in the children. She’s *allowing* Terry to date that, that, that, *whore*. Allowing it!”

“First off, watch just what you’re calling Terry’s girlfriend, Maxine, because she is my *friend*. It’s not her fault that Terry came after her, she tried to warn him off several times, and so did I, but he was insistent. He eventually wore her down and charmed her enough to go out with him.”

“But that’s what she is, young male!”

“I can’t deny that,” he admitted. “Or more to the point, I can’t deny that’s what she *was*, Maxine. She was only in that line of work for the money, and she left it behind the instant she had enough money to be comfortable. Besides Terry, Vil knows what she’s doing. She’s giving the cousins a little leash now so she can get a tighter hold on them later. You’re right, Maxine, the cousins are going to rebel if you keep trying to treat them like little soldiers. They don’t *need* the elders anymore, and they know it. You’ve totally jumped the gun going after Vil, because she’s actually trying to do the same thing you are, just from a different angle.”

“No, Luke, we didn’t.”

“Don’t call me by his name,” Kit retorted, almost automatically.

“Well, it’s not easy,” she said. “You’ve been *Luke* to me all your life, young male, and I’m not trying to insult you using it. But aside that point, we’ve had quite a few talks with Vil, and she refuses to take any action against the children to rein them in. You we have let go, but this business with Terry, and Sheila wanting to be a *cook*, and Joy dropping out of college before she even begins, and her refusal to banish Bess from Boston and institutionalize Dahlia when that poor girl needs professional help, it’s unconscionable and totally against the traditions of the family! And what is worse, it’s spreading. Why, even *Victor* is defying me!” she said in an outraged voice. “He refuses to come home from New York!”

“He’s staying out of the line of fire, Maxine. Victor’s spoiled rotten, but he’s not crazy.”

“That’s my son you’re insulting, Luke!” she said with heat.

“Then you shouldn’t have raised him as a brat,” Kit shot back.

“Luke. Kit. I didn’t call you to trade insults. I called to try to make you see reason. Vil refuses to take control of this family before it flies apart, so we are forced to usurp her and do it ourselves. We thought you would be a fox of your word and stay out of this, but now we find out you’ve gone behind our backs and let Vil appoint you to the board!”

“I’ll be on that board as long as you try to overthrow Vil, and not a moment longer. The instant you leave it be, and I’m convinced you’re serious about it, I’ll resign. I’m there to remind you that *we had a deal*, and

you're going back on your word. You just need to trust Vil, Maxine. I do. I know she knows what's best for the family, even if it doesn't look it."

"What *you* think is best for this family is obviously not what *we* think is best for this family," she said icily.

"You said it yourself, Maxine. The youngers are rebelling. They don't need the elders anymore, and that means that the vaunted traditions you're trying to uphold need to change with the times. This is the modern era, Maxine, not the Victorian age. I for one am shocked you're defending family traditions that stuck you with marrying that unmitigated ass of a husband of yours, denied you a position at the company, and let you watch your *younger brothers* take what was rightfully yours!"

She was silent perhaps half a second longer than she needed to be, telling Kit he hit a nerve. Maxine's disdain for her husband, Robert Graham, was almost legendary in the family, and it was worthy disdain. Robert Graham *was* an unmitigated ass, on top of being stupid, selfish, petty, and spoiled. If there was any Vulpan elder Kit felt had a right to cheat on his or her spouse, it was Maxine. If Kit had been forced to marry a female version of Robert, he'd have strangled her after a week. But Maxine was a devout Catholic, and she would never divorce him. Catholics did not divorce.

Which was truly a pity for her. Much as he hated her for what she did to him, Kit could admit that Maxine deserved better than that asshole.

"My personal desires have nothing to do with the needs of the family, young male," she finally said, rather tartly.

"Oh yes they do, Aunt Maxine," Kit answered. "Your personal desires are to keep the family in the past. We're not in feudal England anymore,

we're in modern America. The family is a black and white picture in the era of Youtube. It has to change, or it's going to die."

"It needs to maintain its traditions or it won't have respect!"

"It's been forty-four years, I think you can take the steel rod out of your ass!"

"Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan, don't you *dare* talk like that!" she gasped.

Despite it all, Kit erupted into laughter. "I'm a big boy now, Maxine, I can talk however I please," he finally said. "But you get my point. The family can change and still be respected. The traditions you're trying to defend just have no place in the world anymore. The family needs new traditions that let us keep our respectability but also let us move into the future."

"That's a point we'll discuss later, young male," she told him tartly. "You have to convince Vil to either step aside and allow us to get this family back under control, or fulfill her responsibilities as the head of this family and do it herself."

"My, this must be the *good cop* version of it," Kit mused. "Because what you said to Vil last week was much less friendly. It went something along the lines of *one of us will be six feet under before this is over.*"

"I said no such thing! Vil was overdramatizing things, as usual!"

"So, Boston *is* big enough for the both of you now?"

There was a short silence. "I was angry, Luke, don't you say things you don't mean when you're angry?"

“Ah, but now that you’re losing, you’re suddenly feeling much more accommodating,” he reasoned lightly. “You realized rather quickly that with me and Terry on the board, Zach and Jake can’t touch her, so now you’re trying to negotiate when that’s what you should have done in the first place. If you and Vil would have just sat down and talked it out rather than getting on your high horse and demanding she do as you say, we could have avoided all this stupidity. It’s not too late to do that, Maxine. Vil’s not unreasonable. I’m sure if you talked to her, you could work something out. She doesn’t like fighting with you any more than...well, I guess that would be a lie,” he chuckled. “She enjoyed bashing your heads in. Revenge for you treating her like a child and then trying to push her out of her rightful place. I’m sure after she gets over her period of insufferable smugness, she’ll listen.”

She sighed. “If only it could be that easy now,” she admitted. “But we can’t trust her to do what’s right. She has failed in her duties to the family, and she must step aside.”

“She won’t do that.”

“She must. A trained sea otter can run the company, Luke, it basically runs itself. But if she will not do what’s right for the family, she must surrender the chair.”

“To who? Zach? You’ll put us all back under the rule of a tyrant, Maxine?” Kit pressed. “I don’t relish the idea of putting someone in control of the family whose first action will be to banish me from the family again. Not that I really care about most of you, but I do rather love my sister, and I don’t want to have to go back to sneaking around in back alleys to talk to her.”

“Stop thinking about *yourself*, young male, and consider the needs of the *family*!”

“And who’s thinking about herself, Maxine?” he challenged. “Isn’t making the whole family miserable just so you keep your reputation being selfish? What *is* a reputation? Do you really care so much about what others think of you that you’re willing to live in misery and pretend that you’re happy? Doesn’t that defeat the purpose of having money, if you use it to make everyone think you’re happy when inside you’re screaming and screaming and screaming? I was there once, when that bastard father of mine tried to make me do what I didn’t want to do, and I said no. I don’t *care* what you think about me, or what others think about me, and guess what, Maxine? I’m *happy*. I’m broke but I’m happy, and you’re rich but you’re miserable, yet you *pretend* to be happy so you don’t sully the family name. And *you* of all Vulpans know what it’s like to scream inside, Maxine! Jesus Christ, why are you trying to do to your children what your parents did to you? Do you want Kate to marry a male like her father? Do you *really* want that?”

“This isn’t about me,” she flared, but without much conviction.

“It’s about *reputation*, isn’t it? Well answer me this, Maxine. How can a family with an impeccable reputation like the Grahams cause you to end up with that *asshole* you call a husband?”

There was a long silence on the other end.

“At least with Vil running the family, you could leave Robert and not be forced to go back to him the way my father did to you when you walked out on him when I was a kid,” he pressed his advantage. “You could throw

him out and banish him to your house in Los Angeles and finally be free of that parasite. Because God knows, you deserve a little happiness!”

She hung up on him.

“Think I don’t know how to fight back, Auntie?” Kit said with a humorless chuckle as he hung up the phone.

But the phone call was enlightening. Maxine was very smart, very stable, and was actually probably the most dangerous of all the elders because she didn’t lose her temper. Years of dealing with that ass of a husband of hers had toughened her in ways her brothers didn’t have to endure. She was losing, so she tried calling Kit to state her case and try to get Kit to talk Vil down. She knew that was impossible, but what she was doing was a very coy way of offering a white flag. Maxine wanted to talk it over with Vil, but she was too proud to come out and say it, so she instead tried to be reasonable with Kit. And Kit was impressed. Not once did Maxine harp on him about his wife or the past, she tried to be very civil to him. She got a little short a couple of times, but that was an amazing exercise in self control.

Why she was defending family traditions that screwed up her life was beyond him.

Things were relatively quiet for a few days after Vil’s devastating counterattack against the elders. Kit knew from Maxine’s call that they had no real answer to it, and they had withdrawn somewhat to mull it over and consider their course of action...which would doubtless be dramatic and extreme. Vil had quite effectively boxed them into a corner, and left them with few options to pursue to try to force Vil out of the chair. About all they

had left was blackmail and violence, and both of those would be virtually impossible to pull off. Vil couldn't be blackmailed for threat of her retaliating in kind, and she was now behind the safety of her manor walls, not even driving to work anymore, which made it extremely hard for anyone to reach her.

Kit spent that time actually using the CFI ratings he'd worked so hard to attain in Kansas, for he had two students. Sheila and Allison went out with him every afternoon, and he both helped them retain what they'd learned that day at AAIA and also taught them related material to what they were learning, using his personal plane as the schoolroom. AAIA's trainer planes also used Garmin glass cockpits, though his 400 had a little more functionality and was therefore more complex, but it was similar enough for them to be able to understand what he was teaching. Each day he would have them tell him what they'd learned that day, and he went over it again, then branched out, explaining related material. Then he would take them up and show them what they were learning in action. He would also teach them things AAIA hadn't started yet, such as the procedures for entering and running a holding pattern, and the basics of the ILS approach. He also allowed them to get used to his plane. After teaching them about IFR material, he taught them about the systems in his 400 they'd never encountered before, things like TCAS, the function of mode S transponders, the speed brakes, and the anti-icing systems in the 400, systems that one usually didn't find on a single prop private plane and why the 400 was considered the Rolls Royce of single props. Sheila learned quickly, but Allison learned like a femme possessed, spending almost all her time focusing on her flight training.

The two of them were also looking at planes. As Kit suggested, they were looking at both new and used, and also looking at both single engine and multi-engine. Kit had promised to train them for their multi ratings if they bought a twin prop. They had agreed to go in on a plane together, which was more or less a necessity for Allison, since she didn't have enough money to buy a good plane that would make the trip to New Orleans fast and comfortable. Trying a flight like that in a 172 would be a three hour slog in a cramped plane where a femme would have fun trying to use a urinal. If they spent just a little more money, they could get a faster plane with more room that would make the trip much more comfortable. They'd need a plane capable of at least 150 knots cruising speed, which cut out most cheaper small single engine planes. They'd need at least a Cessna 182, but a twin engine would be more comfortable and give them more space. In the downturned aircraft market, they could pick up a deal if they kept their eyes open and buy a very nice plane, like a used King Air, Piper Seneca, or Cessna 310.

Vil had carried through on their contracts. She'd direct deposited to their regular checking account Kit's \$20,000 bonus and also Jessie's first weekly paycheck, which was \$1,407.25 after taxes, her salary for being an "employee" of the shipyard. That \$1,407.25 would be a weekly occurrence, deposited into their account every Thursday morning at midnight. Jessie was now making a heck of a lot more than him, her official salary for "having to put up with a male like you," as she had so teasingly put it when they got the money. Kit didn't like the idea of it too much, but it was Jessie's money, Jessie didn't seem to mind, and that was that. What Jessie wanted, Jessie got. But then again, she also didn't let it go to her head. She promptly arranged it with the bank that a thousand dollars of her weekly deposit would be placed in their money market account automatically. The

money in their money market account was off limits to daily expenses, that was their investment money, so Jessie was making a clear statement that she considered that money to be their children's money rather than theirs.

Kit was honestly fearing next year's taxes. They were going to be in the "mugged in the alley" tax bracket.

"Oh, this one's nice," Sheila said from the back seat of the plane as Kit let Allison fly. Sheila had her laptop out and was using the internet connection in the plane to surf plane listings. "A Beech King Air for a quarter mil."

"How old is it?" Kit asked. "Ally, we're VFR. Why aren't you checking for traffic before making your turn?" he chided.

"Sorry," she laughed. "But I looked already!"

"You never *already* looked when it comes to VFR, silly femme," he teased. "I don't want some little Skyhawk to come along and cut me in half because the pilot's too busy gawking at a cloud. So check for traffic."

"Yes, Master," she giggled, looking upwind before making a planned turn.

"It's a 1983 King Air," she said.

"Too old," Kit said. "You want a C ninety minimum, so look for one built after 1997. The only old twin you should consider is a Piper Seneca, because they're very rugged and age well. Anything else you want as new as possible."

"I still think I should just buy a four hundred," Sheila protested.

“You can, but you’re looking at a half million, and the insurance will be very ouch,” he warned. “You could pick up a Skyline or Stationair much cheaper that’ll do the job, or find a good used twin that’ll give you plenty of room.”

“I’m not used to buying anything *used*,” she laughed.

“I’m just giving you advice, girls. What you decide to do is up to you. Okay, what’s the first step of making an ILS approach, Ally?”

Kit allowed Allison to land them at Bergstrom, which she did smoothly. She’d had a few days behind the controls of his plane, and after a day practicing touch and gos over at Lakeview, he felt comfortable allowing her to land. Kit turned his phone back on, and it rang almost immediately. “Yeah, hello?” he called as Allison unbuckled herself from the left seat.

“Kit!” Jessie said urgently. “Vil’s chopper crashed!”

“What?” he gasped.

“It crashed taking off from her work!” she said hurriedly. “She’s okay, but she broke her leg and they have her in the hospital right now. They showed it on the news, a camera caught it! Oh, Kit, it rose up and then the tail rotor stopped, and it spun in circles crashed back onto the landing pad!”

“Oh my God,” he said. “Is she okay?”

“Kit, she’s okay,” she said. “She broke her leg and the fur on her arm got singed off when the chopper caught fire, and Stav broke his arm, but nobody else got hurt. Stav and Marcus carried her out of the chopper.”

Kit swore sulfurously, fear going through him. They really did it! They tried to kill his sister, he’d bet money on it! There is *no way* that was an

accident! Damn Maxine, calling him and trying to be reasonable, and then turning around and trying to kill Vil!

A fury unlike anything he'd ever felt raged through him. His eyes narrowed dangerously as Allison and Sheila looked at him. "Jess. Make up a suitcase for me and ship it next day air to Stonebrook," he said in a low, dangerous tone. "And for God's sake, *stay safe*. I want Nick in the house with you. Do you hear me?"

"I, I hear you, Kit," she said uncertainly. "You're going up there?"

"Yes, I'm going up there," he growled.

"Kit? What the hell is going on?" Sheila asked.

"Our elders tried to *kill* Vil," he said gratingly in reply, which made both Allison and Sheila gasp. "Her chopper crashed on takeoff and she broke her leg, and there's no way that was an accident. I want both of you in the complex," he told them. "I want you all together where Nick can watch over you. So go get what you need and go to the complex, Ally. I don't care if you stay with Sheila or Jess, but you're staying close to us."

"You're welcome with me, Ally," Sheila told her.

"Handsome fox, how are you getting up there?"

"I'm going to find a jet that'll take me right now," he said.

"Do you have your wallet with you?"

"Of course I do."

"Do you want anything specific shipped up?"

“My birth certificate,” he answered. “I’m going to need it. I...I may be up there a while, pretty kitty.”

“That’s fine, we’ll deal with it, love,” she assured him. “I’ll pack you an overnight and your laptop right now and have Lupe run it down to Avia. If he can catch you before you leave, you can take it with you. I’ll next-day you a box of clothes. I’ll send them to Clancy, okay?”

“Alright,” Kit said seriously. “I’m going to tie down the plane and send my keys home with Sheila, alright?”

“Alright. I’ll call Rick and tell him what happened.”

“Alright. I’ll call when I have more information, love. Try to get in touch with Vil and have her call me as soon as she can.”

“I will, I promise. Kit, please, be careful,” she said fearfully.

“I will,” he said.

Moving with dreadful urgency, Kit climbed out of the plane and was helped by Sheila and Allison in fearful silence as they tied it down. When he tugged on the securing lines and nodded, he dug his keys out of his pocket and gave them to Sheila. “Take my truck home and give my keys to Jess,” he told her. “Do not burn out my clutch,” he added, which made Allison giggle helplessly. He was a little startled when Sheila gave him a crushing embrace, digging her claws into his back.

“I hope she’s okay,” she said in his damaged ear. “Go up there and kick their asses, cousin!”

“I intend to,” he promised.

Allison gave him a hug as well, patting him on the back. “Keep us up to speed, Kit,” she said. “And we’ll keep ourselves safe for you.”

“Thanks, Ally,” he said, patting her on the back.

He waved to them as he backed up, then he turned and literally ran into Avia’s hangar. Mike, who was elbows deep into the engine housing of a CJ2, nodded to him as he rushed in. “Mike, is Alice still here?” he called.

“Afraid not, Kit, she went home two hours ago.”

“Damn,” he growled as he realized that both the CJ1 and the Lear 450 were not in the hangar, which meant that they were hired out. “Are the jets due back anytime soon?”

“What, what’s wrong?”

“I need to get to Boston, Mike, like *yesterday*. It’s an emergency!”

“Aww, damn, male, I’m sorry to hear that,” he said, taking his paw out of the housing and scratching his chin. “I’m afraid both jets are due back tomorrow,” he told him. “And this one’s in no shape to fly right now, I have it in about fifteen pieces.”

“Mike, can you run me up to that new place, AV?” he asked.

“Dude, I didn’t drive today, my wife is gonna pick me up. Sorry.”

“I heard that!” Sheila said as she came in behind him. “We’ll drive you up there. Ally, call Jessie and tell her to tell Lupe to take Kit’s overnight up there instead.”

“On it,” she nodded, taking her phone out of her purse as she came into the hangar behind him.

AV Charters was in a relatively small hangar, but it was newly remodeled, the exterior of their hangar painted red and with flowing white script. The doors were open, and there was a rather cute femme badger sitting behind the reception desk, wearing a red polo shirt with *AV* embroidered on the left breast. “May I help you sir?” she asked in a pleasant voice.

“Yes, I need to charter a jet to Boston. Right now.”

“Uh, now? Well, let me call the manager so you can discuss it.” She picked up the phone and dialed a number. “Yes sir, I have a gentlemale here who wishes to charter an immediate flight to Boston,” she said in the phone. “Your name, sir?”

“Kit Vulpan,” he said.

Her eyes widened slightly, and her voice quavered just a bit. “Uh, Kit Vulpan, sir,” she said in the phone. “Yes sir,” she said, putting the phone down. “He’ll be out in just a second.” She looked closely at him, at his eyes, and Kit had to chuckle despite everything.

“Yes, I’m one of *those* Vulpans,” he told her.

“I’m so sorry to stare,” she said, her cheeks ruffling slightly.

“Happens all the time,” he assured her, crossing his arms.

The manager was a gray fox who was slender and a little short, his fur a smoky color and his eyes a piercing green. “Lou Billings, Mister Vulpan,” he said as he offered his paw. Kit noticed that his fingers were all tipped with large curved claws, like a cat’s claws, and they looked sharp. Kit shook it firmly. “You need to charter a flight to Boston?”

“Yes, and I need it right now. It’s an emergency.”

“I only have one jet in, sir, and it’s not exactly conducive to a long flight. It’s a Cessna Citation CJ one. I could charter it for you, but it won’t make the flight in one leg.”

“I’m a pilot, sir, so I know all about that,” Kit told him. “I’ll take it. It’ll still get me up there faster than anything else.”

“I, uh, don’t have pilots here at the moment, sir. I’ll have to call them in.”

“They’d better get here fast,” he said.

“Sandy, call Tom and Jack in please,” he said to the badger, “while I take Mister Vulpan here back to my office and we arrange the charter.”

“Oh, a chihuahua is going to bring me an overnight bag here,” he told the receptionist. “He should be here any minute.”

“I’ll take it for you, sir, and let you know when it gets here.”

“Thanks,” he said as the gray fox led Kit back into the hangar.

In the office, Kit wasted no time accepting the terms of the charter. It was \$2,000 an hour, which included fuel and refreshments, and Kit would leave immediately upon the arrival of the pilots. Kit signed the charter agreement, then sat through a safety briefing which was required by the Transportation Security Administration. The badger opened the door and came in, offering Kit his black canvas overnight bag. “Your bag, sir,” she said, and he took it with a nod. “Tom should be here in about ten minutes, and Jack twenty. They’re preparing the jet for departure now. Is there anything specific you’d like stocked in the refreshment center, sir?”

“I don’t really care,” he answered.

They took him to a very nicely appointed waiting room complete with a TV and a coffee maker, which included a hot water tap and teabags. Kit made himself a cup of tea while he waited, and his phone rang just as he finished getting his tea to his liking. He saw it was Vil on his phone, and he almost dropped the teacup opening his phone to answer it. “Vil! Vil?”

“Hey bro,” she said in a very weak voice.

“Thank God!” he cried. “Are you alright?”

“I feel nauseous and dizzy,” she answered. “I just got out of surgery not long ago. They had to put the bone back in my leg,” she explained. “Outside of a broken right leg, a singed left arm and one hell of a headache, I’m alright.”

“What happened?”

“My chopper crashed trying to take off,” she told him. “It happened so fast, bro. We’d just lifted up off the ground and then suddenly I hear this bang, and then I was flying all over the place. I felt like a rag doll in a dryer. Next thing I know, Stav is pushing me into Marcus’ arms out of the chopper and the sleeve of my blazer is on fire. Stav broke his arm and the pilot has a concussion, but thankfully there’s no permanent damage.”

“Sis, I’m on my way up,” he told her. “I’m waiting for the pilots of my charter to get here and I’ll be on my way up.”

“I’ll be happy to see you, bro. They have me at General.”

There was a pause, and then the deep voice of Marcus was on the phone. “I’m afraid Miss Vil needs to rest, Mister Vulpan,” he said. “It’s not

easy to focus after surgery. I'll let her call you back after she takes a nap and shakes off the anesthetic."

"Alright. How is Stav?"

"Broken forearm, but otherwise just fine. Thanks for asking. Are you coming up?"

"I am," he said grimly.

"Call back on Vil's phone when you're an hour from landing. I'll have a car and a guard waiting for you."

"Alright. Keep her safe for me, Marcus."

"That is a promise, Kit," he answered earnestly.

He waited about ten more minutes before they came and got him. They brought him out into the main hangar, which was larger than he expected, and was also empty. The jet was sitting out on the tarmac just outside the doors, the hatch open and a tall lynx in a similar red polo conducting a walk-around of the jet. The lynx stepped up and offered his paw to Kit. "Tom Rivers, Mister Vulpan, I'll be your pilot for this flight. We'll be leaving as soon as my co-pilot arrives. The flight plan is filed, and if you'd board, I'll get us ready to taxi out as soon as Jack arrives."

"Thanks for being quick," he said honestly.

"I heard about the crash, it was on the news. Is your sister alright?"

"I just talked to her. She's going to be okay, but I still want to be up there as fast as possible."

"We'll get you there as fast as we can, that's a promise."

“I appreciate that. Where did you decide to stop for fuel?”

“Lexington. They have a very fast turnaround fueling system there.”

“I’ve stopped there myself,” Kit agreed. “We landed, fueled, and took off in a half hour.”

“That’s exactly why we’re stopping there,” the lynx nodded, motioning with his paw for Kit to mount the steps and board the jet. “Luckily, since we’re only carrying you and no baggage, we’ll be taking off with max fuel. That’ll let us get there with only one stop for fuel.”

“Do you have a wireless router on this plane?”

“Just installed yesterday,” he chuckled. “I’ll let you know when it’s on.”

“Thanks.”

The interior of the jet was what he expected. The club configuration was the most popular seating arrangement because it allowed the most seats and still gave the passengers the most room, and this jet used it. There were two seats facing backwards just behind the entry hatch and two seats facing forward at the back of the cabin, with the lavatory’s door behind and between them. The interior of the cabin was in fake wood with red trim and indirect LED tract lighting, the seats were light tan leather just like the seats in his 400, and the refreshment center was across from the entry hatch. Kit saw that they had a coffee dispenser in the refreshment center. “Is there coffee or tea in that?” he asked.

“It’s empty. Shall I make tea for it while we’re waiting for Jack?”

“I’ll do it, I’m not afraid to work,” he said curtly. “Just get us ready so we can literally taxi out when your copilot arrives.”

“I can do that,” he chuckled.

They did exactly as they promised. Kit made tea and poured himself a cup, and the captain finished all the preflight up to starting the engines. Kit sat in one of the rear-facing chairs and pulled out his laptop, then pulled out the folding table and set it on top of it as a short weasel rushed into the plane. “I’m sorry, traffic was a mess!” he said. “Tom, where are we?”

“Waiting for you!” he answered from the cockpit. “Close the hatch, Jack, we’re leaving!”

The weasel hurried up into the cockpit, and a moment later the captain called over the intercom. “The router is up and ready, Mister Vulpan, and you’ll find a satellite phone along the bulkhead to your right. We’ll be taking off in just a moment. It’s about two hours to Lexington, we make a fuel stop, and another two and a half hours to Boston. Barring any unforeseen delays, we’ll land at Logan Airport at about twelve fifteen Eastern time.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Kit called, and he just barely heard the copilot’s voice over the engines as the first one started.

“Vulpan? We have a *Vulpan* on board?” he asked quietly, but not quietly enough. Kit didn’t hear the reply, but he was fairly sure what it was.

Kit spent almost the entire first leg of the flight on the satellite phone and on the internet. He kept in contact with Jessie and the furs at home, and also called Terry several times. Terry was already in Boston, for it had been nearly two hours since the crash before Kit heard about it, where Terry was

informed almost immediately. Terry was at the hospital, and he gave Kit constant updates as to Vil's condition. She was sleeping, sleeping off the anesthetic, and from Terry heard the doctor's assessment. His sister had a compound fracture of her lower leg, almost what they would call a "ski boot" break, probably caused when her leg got caught on something and the rest of her body kept going. She had first degree burns on her left arm, which was basically just being singed, for her jacket sleeve had caught fire as the panthers got her out of the chopper. Stav had a broken arm and some burns on his back and tail, and Marcus had a few minor cuts and bruises. The pilot of the chopper had suffered a mild concussion and a broken finger. From the internet, Kit saw the crash via a video on CNN. It was caught on a security camera that always pointed at the landing pad, which was beside the Vulpan Shipyards headquarters building. The chopper took off normally, then the tail shuddered and the tail rotor seized up in a sudden gout of sparks and smoke when it was about fifteen feet off the ground. The pilot quickly tried to bring the chopper back down, but without the tail rotor, there was nothing to prevent an effect called *autorotation*. The chopper blades spun in one direction, and simple physics meant that while the chopper was in the air and wasn't braced, the rest of the chopper's body would want to spin in the opposite direction, the equal and opposite reaction. The tail rotor prevented that reverse rotation, and without it, the chopper quickly began to spin. It got out of control of the pilot, wobbled in the air, and crashed back to the landing pad tail first, snapping the tail clean off the body of the chopper. It hit the pad, turned sideways, then fell the rest of the way in a spray of shattered rotor blades, dust, and chunks of concrete and aluminum. A fire started near the shattered tail almost immediately, and within seconds of the wreck coming to a stop, Marcus appeared, punching the mangled side door of the chopper open, which came to rest on its side,

scrambled out, and then reached down into the chopper as the fire quickly spread. He hauled Vil out of the chopper with a paw gripping the back of her blazer, almost by the scruff of her neck, then reached down and pulled Stav out, whose lower arm was at an odd angle and was most definitely broken. Vil's leg was also twisted unnaturally, which became very clear when Marcus flinched away from the rapidly spreading fire, slung Vil over his shoulder, then jumped off the wreck. Stav slid off after him, and the pilot appeared, wobbling on his feet, around the back side of the wreck, staggering away. Marcus carried Vil away, her sleeve still on fire, and they disappeared from the angle of the camera.

At least the captain understood Kit's haste. When he came to look into the cockpit, he saw that they were flying at the maximum cruising speed of the CJ1 at 40,000 feet, close to the operating ceiling of the jet, and were burning a whole lot of extra fuel pushing it.

They landed at Lexington in a light drizzle but no wind, and the jet immediately moved to the same area where Kit had taken the CJ3, where a fueler truck was literally sitting there waiting for them. It took a while to refuel the jet, however, since the captain had burned quite a bit of fuel getting them there nearly fifteen minutes faster than expected, but they were back in the air about thirty minutes after they landed.

When they crossed into Pennsylvania, Kit called Vil's phone, and Marcus answered. "We're about ninety minutes out," Kit told him. "The captain said we're landing at Logan and they're dropping me off at Signature. He said we should land around twelve fifteen."

"Very well, Mister Vulpan, I'll have a car waiting there for you, as well as an escort. He'll be a rather burly brown bear named Will."

“Alright. Are you bringing me to the hospital?”

“Yes. The staff won’t try to stop you from seeing Miss Vil.”

“Is she awake?”

“Not yet. The doctors assured me that it’s natural, she has strong vital signs.”

“That’s a relief,” he sighed. “Has anyone else come to see her?”

“Terry, Suzy, and Clancy have, but no one else. I think they’re honestly afraid to,” he said.

Kit chuckled. “I wonder why,” he said dryly. “I’m going to call Jessie and give her an update. I’ll see you in about two hours.”

“I’ll be here.”

Kit made quite a few phone calls over that ninety minutes. He called Jessie, Rick, Terry, and then called Clancy to keep him up to date, and those calls made the time fly by. When he got off the phone with Clancy, Tom the lynx was telling him that they were making their descent to Logan, and that it might be a little bumpy because it was raining and a little windy in Boston. They had him put his table away and buckle up, and Kit felt a little turbulence as they landed at Logan.

Boston. He was back in Boston. But this time, instead of feeling fear or the ghosts of his past, he felt *anger*. He did not come this time like a thief, sneaking in to do what he came to do and then sneak out, oh no. This time he was here with a fanfare of trumpets, and he was too mad to feel the familiar old ghosts try to lodge themselves in the back of his mind. Just about the only thing that could make him come back to Boston for anything

other than a brief visit had happened, and that was that Vil *needed* him. His love for his sister was ten times more powerful than his fear, and now that she needed him, he would be there for her. After years of her taking care of him, now he would take care of her.

And the first thing he would do was kick the asses of the Vulpans who tried to kill her.

There was a car waiting when they pulled up, a small limo; bigger than a car, but not big enough to really be called a stretch. A very large, very wide grizzly bear stood by the back door of the car, waiting patiently for him, a newspaper under one arm and an umbrella in his other paw. He advanced once the jet came to a stop and its engines powered down, and Kit saw him when the copilot opened the hatch for him. "Mister Vulpan!" he called, stepping up to the bottom step and holding the umbrella out so Kit would stay dry. "I'm Will, sir. I'm going take you to the hospital, sir!"

"Any word on Vil while I was landing?" he asked as he came down under the umbrella, and the bear took his overnight.

"Not that I've heard, sir," he answered as he helped Kit down to the tarmac.

"Thanks a ton, guys, and thanks for getting me here as fast as you could!" Kit called back up towards the plane.

"Any time, sir!" Jack answered with a wave, and Tom appeared and waved as well. "I hope your sister is going to be okay."

"Last I heard, she'll be just fine, and thanks for your concern," he said as Will hurried him towards the limo, where, he saw, a driver was already behind the wheel and waiting to drive away. Will opened the door of the

limo for him and helped him in, then he rounded the car quickly and got in the front seat passenger side. Kit settled himself into the seat, and Will handed his overnight bag back to him once he was inside. "Let's go, guys, let's go!" he said urgently.

The driver took them through Boston speedily, but not recklessly, getting them on Interstate and sending them down into the heart of the city. The Vulpan headquarters was on the back bay, a large ten story office building surrounded by grassy lawn and with a landing pad beside it, not far from Boston General, so that was naturally where they'd take the injured from the accident. Kit tapped his foot impatiently as the limo weaved through slower traffic on I-95, then exited the interstate and rushed down the streets of downtown Boston, along streets Kit knew intimately, streets where he had lived as a homeless fox for nearly four months as he tried to get himself back on his feet. He passed by an intersection where there was an alley a half a block down where he'd been beat up by a trio of street toughs, and over there was a day labor center where Kit had stood out among other indigents and illegal immigrants, trying to find work...work at which he'd been awful, since he had no real job skills. But fortunately, Kit was in decent shape despite being rich, and carrying something didn't take much skill, so he'd spent most of those months working as a manual laborer at construction sites, and had even worked on a section of the Big Dig. He'd been doing menial labor mostly, but one day he got to wear a vest and be a flagman to wave traffic away from the work site. That wasn't that bad, actually. They passed the homeless shelter where the police had dropped him off after taking him to the hospital the night of his 16th birthday, the night he left the family, and the night he very nearly froze to death trying to walk from Stonebrook to Boston with no coat, no shoes, just a shirt and a pair of thin slacks.

In Boston, it was still very much winter in late March. Spring didn't come to Boston until early May.

Finally, the hospital came into view. The limo pulled under a covered loading area in front of the hospital, and Kit didn't wait for Will to open the door for him, something nearly any other Vulpan would not have done. There were several reporters outside the front door, and as a result several cameras flashed in his face as Will met him by the limo, and the bear instructed the driver to wait nearby and be ready to come at a moment's notice. Will escorted Kit in through the double doors, shielding him from the reporters as best he could. "She's on the third floor, sir, in a private room," he said, motioning Kit to go ahead of him. There were several reporters in the main lobby as well, but Will intercepted them and slowed them down as Kit hurried past the main desk and towards the elevator. Will ran up behind him as he pressed the button to call a car, and when the nearest doors opened at the button, Will escorted him into the car with a huge paw lightly on his back and shoulders.

Familiar faces met him at the elevator. Suzy buried him in a fierce hug before he fully stepped out, and he guided her back to let him out. "Oh Kit, I was so worried!" she said in his neck, holding him almost painfully tight.

"It's alright, Suzy, it's alright," he said soothingly. "Is she awake yet?"

"Yes, she's awake now," she answered, kissing him on the muzzle. "Clancy, Corey, and Terry are in the room with her, and Kendall just called, he just landed at Logan and should be here in just a few minutes. She's a little out of it, they have her on some strong pain meds."

"Good. Let's go see her, Zee."

She laughed. "I haven't heard you call me that in forever!"

Vil was surrounded by friends and family, in a hospital bed that was of the mobile variety, the type that would allow them to just wheel her out in her own bed. She was sitting up thanks to the head of the bed being elevated, and Clancy was helping her drink a sip of water. Her right arm was wrapped in bandages from her wrist to her elbow, and she had her left leg in a sling elevated at the foot of the bed, the leg wrapped in bandages but not put in a cast. A single sheet covered her from knees to breast, and he could see that she was wearing a hospital gown. An IV was strapped to her right arm, the needle entering into her arm just above her wrist, held in place with tape wrapped around her entire forearm. Corey was sitting against the table near the window, Terry was sitting at the chair by her bed, and Marcus stood opposite Clancy at the head of her bed. “Kit!” Corey said in a hushed yet excited voice as Suzy led him into the room by the paw, and Will took up a place by the door in the hall. Kit shook paws with Corey and Terry and hugged Clancy, then sat down in the chair and pulled his sister into his arms as she hugged him as strongly as she could. “You’re a wreck, sis,” he chided, digging his claws into her back as his arms started to tremble.

“I’m alright, little brother, I’m alright,” she told him, patting him on the back. “The docs have already cleared me to go home tomorrow afternoon, as soon as they put a cast on my leg and they make sure I won’t get an infection. They didn’t have to do much but set my leg and sew up my skin when they did the surgery. They said the breaks of the bones in my shin were clean and set without any help, they didn’t even need to put pins in my leg. It looked much worse than it really is, they found that out when they got me here and took some X-rays. So I’ll be fine.”

He placed her gently back in bed and held her paw, gazing at her with worried yet relieved eyes. “I made Jess stay at home,” he told her. “I didn’t want her to be up here.”

“I can agree with that, Kit,” Vil nodded wearily, leaning her head back on the pillow. “God, I feel like I drank a whole barrel of scotch. It’s that damn medicine they gave me.”

“Who did it?” he asked after a second.

“We don’t know yet. The FAA is still going over the wreckage,” Terry answered.

“Well, I’ll be here until we find out,” Kit declared. “Someone tried to kill my sister, and I’m all kinds of pissed off at the moment. Heads will roll,” he growled angrily.

“That’s good,” Vil laughed weakly. “You can do me a favor, bro.”

“Anything.”

“I want you and Terry at the board meeting tomorrow at eleven,” she told him. “I don’t want Jake to think that he’ll have a whole day to jam the gears at the company, because you know I can’t vote while I’m in the hospital. And I made the same mistake he did, I don’t have a proxy agreement to allow anyone to vote in my place.”

“We can do that, cousin,” Terry assured her. “Just oppose anything he brings up?”

“Yeah. Oppose anything he introduces, vote to reschedule the issues that were on the schedule for the meeting, and move to adjourn the meeting every chance you get. Eventually he’ll give in and won’t object. I’ll be back

the day after tomorrow, so you only have to run interference for me tomorrow.”

“I’ll be there,” Kit promised with an angry voice. “Right now I’m too angry to care what it is I’m doing, as long as it helps.”

“You’ll be helping, bro, trust me.”

Kit listened as he got another version of what happened from Vil and the others, this time including her being tended at the scene by paramedics. “I was laying there looking at my own bone sticking out of my leg,” she chuckled weakly. “I felt like Rick, but at least I didn’t break mine falling off the roof. Something a little more spectacular had to happen.”

“They showed a video of the crash,” Kit told her. “I saw it on the internet on the way up.”

“Yeah, they showed it to me. God, that looked awful,” she said ruefully.

The door opened, and Kendall rushed into the room. The usual lightness and joviality that normally graced his features was gone, leaving behind a very worried, very serious looking young fox. He rushed over and gave her a fierce hug, then kissed her several times on the face and muzzle. “Dear God, Vil, you scared me to death!” he declared. “Are you alright, love?”

“I’m alright,” she assured him. “They’re sending me home tomorrow afternoon. You’re not getting out of marrying me, boy,” she said with a weak smile. “I’ll be on crutches for our ceremony, but it is going to happen.”

“I wouldn’t dream of anything different,” he said frankly, kissing her again, then taking her paw and kissing it tenderly. “Oh no!” he gasped, looking at her bandaged arm. “Oh, Vil, you’ve lost your ring! I’ll run right out and get you another one, an even better one!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” she smiled. “Marcus has it, and it came through the crash without a scratch. But that’s touching, Ken, that you’d go get me another one.”

“You’re my bride to be, Vil, you can’t very well go around without a nice and fancy ring to show off to your friends,” he told her, getting back a little bit of his playfulness, probably because he was relieved to see that she was indeed going to be alright. “Why, I’d be laughed out of Britain if my fiancée didn’t have an engagement ring!”

“They can laugh you out of Britain, because you’re coming to America,” she teased with a tired smile.

“Only you could drag me out of England, love,” he told her, kissing the back of her paw again. “And I won’t be going back. I’ll be right here with you, my love, to help you, until you’re right as rain and dancing the tango again. My old male is going to finish up my preparations to move to America for me. I don’t want to be anywhere but right here.”

“Well, you’re going to have to share the bedrail with my family,” she smiled at him.

“I *do* get the best spot at the rail,” he said airily.

She laughed weakly. “I’ll let you and Kit fight about that. But now that I’ve seen everyone that matters, and they’ve seen me, I think I’d like to get

some sleep. I'm *really* tired, and this medicine they have me on is like someone is stuffing my head with wool."

"Of course," Kit told her. "I know what that feels like, sis. Just get some sleep and let us take care of you for a change."

"I've never felt safer," she said, holding her bandaged paw out to him. He took it, then leaned over her bed and kissed and hugged her, and she nuzzled his neck. "I'm so glad you came home, Kit," she whispered in his ear.

"I love you so much, Vil," he breathed to her.

"I love you too, brother mine, I love you too. Now let me get some sleep, but don't waste your time sitting around here waiting for me."

He nodded in understanding. "I'll be in that boardroom at eleven tomorrow," he promised. "And I'll be back here when they release you."

"I'll call you when I wake up," she promised.

"I'll have news for you when you do."

Kit left Vil to hug the others goodbye, hugging Suzy and Clancy and shaking the paws of Corey and Clancy, then he stalked out of the room. Will started and hurried to catch up with him as he hurried towards the elevator. "Mister Vulpan? Are you done?"

"For here, for now," he answered as he pressed the button to call the elevator car. "Vil told me to do something, so we're going to go do it."

"What is that?"

"Clean house," he said as the elevator door opened.

Kit ignored the reporters that tried to stop him outside the hospital as he waited for the limo to come around, called by Will when they were in the elevator. Several more pictures of him were taken, but then hospital security rushed out of the doors and started pushing them off hospital grounds. The limo pulled up, and Will just barely managed to grab the handle before he did. He climbed into the car as Will shut the door behind him, and then the bear got into the front seat. “Where to, sir?” the driver asked.

“Stonebrook,” he answered, his voice grating like claws on a chalkboard.

“Y-yes, sir!” he said, putting the car in gear.

The fear didn’t come. It didn’t have a chance. Nothing but the image of his sister laying in that hospital bed was in his mind and memory as they left Boston and then exited the interstate, going down familiar roads that Kit could walk with a blindfold, roads that, long ago and in a different life, were the roads down which he used to ride his bicycle. They turned onto Stonebrook Drive, and there was no fear, there were no ghosts. They came up to the gates of the manor, where a uniformed guard stepped out of the small house to challenge them, but he never had the chance. The limo driver had a remote to the gate, and when the gates started swinging open, bisecting the Vulpan family crest, the guard still held up his paw to stop them. “I’ve been instructed to call in any visitor to the manor,” he said apologetically.

Kit rolled down the window and stared him in the eyes. “You will not call ahead,” Kit stated adamantly. The guard started, then stepped back and waved them through without another word.

The house was lit and abuzz with activity. The limo pulled around the house and into the garage, and a young fox hurried in, wearing a tee shirt and a pair of flannel night pants. Kit identified him as Weathers, Jim Weathers, the son of Carrie Weathers, one of the cooks. He was a second generation servant, who worked in the garage as a driver and mechanic when he wasn't working out on the grounds as a groundskeeper. The limo pulled to a stop and Kit opened the door before Jim or Will could reach it, and he stepped out. Jim gasped and almost took a step back, then laughed. "Master Kit!" he said brightly. "Welcome! Nobody told us you were coming, sir!"

"They didn't know," he said. "Get Stanley out of bed and—"

"He's still up, sir, I think everyone is. We're all worried sick about Miss Vil."

"Call him and tell him to meet me in the foyer," Kit ordered as he took his overnight out of the limo, and he marched off as Jim used his cell phone to do just that.

The ghosts were afraid of him, now. He stalked through the halls of Stonebrook, and he could feel them out there. The ghost of his father, the spectre of his family, the shade of a life he had once despised. They were all lurking in the shadows, behind the walls, but they would not come out. Kit was too angry to be easy prey for them, and so they kept their distance. The halls of Stonebrook didn't seem foreboding right now, they only seemed *empty*. The ghosts were still here, oh yes they were, but right now they wanted nothing to do with Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan.

Stanley wasn't the only one that met him in the foyer. Several Stonebrook servants scurried in as he came in from the garage hall, and on

the second floor balcony to the west wing, Kitstrom Zachary Vulpan hurried out of the hallway leading to the wing where he lived, wearing a pair of dark slacks and a polo shirt, stomping along the elegant balcony with its burnished marble and cherrywood banister, then padded quickly down the marble staircase covered with red carpeting. Kit turned and pointed at him before he even got halfway down the stairs.

“Get out of *MY HOUSE!*” he screamed at Zach, then he clenched a fist and shook it at him. “I want you out by sunrise, you and your entire scummy family, Zach! I am moving back in, effective right now!”

“Lucas—”

Stanley was the only thing that stopped Kit from charging up those stairs at hearing that most hated of all names. “*DO NOT CALL ME BY HIS NAME!*” he shrieked so loudly that Zach nearly fell down trying to back up, as Stanley and Jim physically restrained him from going up there and beating his uncle to death with his bare paws. “You tried to kill my sister!” he screamed, foam flying from his mouth as a look of absolute rage invaded his features. “You will never set foot in Stonebrook again, not you, not your bitch wife, not your brat kids, not your entire diseased line! Get out! Get out! *GET OUT*, you *bastard!*”

He didn’t say another word. He couldn’t. Abject terror crept into his face as he saw Kit in such a state of rage that he’d never seen anything like it before, and he knew in that moment that if Kit wasn’t being held back, Kit would *kill* him. Zach did the only thing he could do in that situation, and that was turn and literally run back up the stairs, run back to the hallway and quickly out of sight.

“Let it go, Master Kit, let it go, let it go,” Stanley said calmly, soothingly, even as he kept a very tight hold around Kit’s chest and middle. “Marge, bring a glass of wine and a glass of tea to the parlor,” he ordered as Kit stopped struggling against Stanley, then wilted to his knees and covered his face with his paws, his shoulders shaking, as the rage exploded into fear and grief at nearly losing his sister, drowning him in a tidal wave of uncontrollable emotion. “Dee,” Stanley called, and a matronly vixen, Dee the head maid, hurried over and knelt by Kit, wrapping him in her arms.

“There there, dear, it’s all over,” she said gently, patting him on the back and pressing her cheek and muzzle against his damaged ear as he clutched at her, sobbing uncontrollably. “It’s all over, it’s all over, and you’ve come home, my young Master Kit. You’re home now, and everything will be just fine.”

Chapter 33

He felt a little dead inside.

He sat on the huge windowsill of the sun room, his tail laying in his lap like a blanket and his legs stretched out over the cushioned seating area, looking down over the front lawn with sloe eyes and an emotionless mask. The sun room had always been one of his favorite places in the manor, for it was off the beaten path, rarely used, and the south-facing window almost always had sunlight streaming into it at any time of the day. The room was on the third floor, filled with Napoleon-era furniture, elegant white furniture with flowing lines and gold filigree, with red satin upholstery in the chairs and sofas. But in his entire life, he had never sat in those chairs and sofas. He had always sat here, on the padded sill that was designed to be a seat itself, looking through the bay window over the roof over the front door. Some manors had a balcony on top of their entry porch, using the roof held up by those towering columns, but Stonebrook did not. It instead had two bay windows that framed the top of that columned roof, the two huge windows of the sun room. And the right window had always been Kit's special place when he was a kid, his favorite place to be alone in a manor filled with family and servants.

Zach, his wife, and their three teenage kids were gone. They piled into a limo at four in the morning and drove away, as Alicia and the kids whined; Alicia about leaving Stonebrook, and the kids at having to wake up and get dressed. But Zach knew not to tempt fate. Kit was absolutely *enraged*, and he knew that it was a threat to his own life and safety to be in

the same house with Kit. If they chanced to meet in a hallway, Kit would attack him, and he knew it, as much as he knew that he was no match for the much younger and much tougher young fox. Zach could not deny Kit his right to be in the manor, and so he decided that it was the wise course of action to retreat. So, Zach had probably returned to Swan Cove, the manor he owned and had lived in before invading Stonebrook, which was actually only about three miles and a little upriver from Stonebrook. It was just about a mile further down the road if one passed Stonebrook Lane, and it too was on the Charles River.

He leaned his head back against the velvet-covered wall behind him, watching a riding mower roll back and forth across the football field-sized front lawn, part of the meticulous grooming the entire manor underwent on a weekly basis. Even the woods behind the house and within the fence were carefully maintained, each tree watched over and the ground between them kept clean of branches. He watched the mower run from one edge to the other, turn around, and then come back.

God, how did he end up back here? Stonebrook. *Stonebrook*. But he was stuck here now. To drive out his uncle, to get that murderous bastard out of *their* house, the house that belonged to him and his sister, he would stick it out. The terms of the agreement were clear. Kit had to establish *reasonable residency*, which meant that he would have to live up here for a while, change his driver's license to Massachusetts, and change his official address to here. But it was worth it. It was worth anything to drive that disgusting bastard out of their house, someone that would try to kill his sister—

He blew out his breath. There was no use getting worked up over that again, he'd have plenty of time for vituperous accusations in about ninety

minutes. It was 9:32am, and he had to be in Boston for an 11:00am meeting, where he would come face to face with Uncle Jake...and resist the impulse to jump over the table and try to strangle him with his bare paws, or sink his teeth into Jake's throat.

He hadn't slept all night. Not long after Stanley and Dee calmed him down, he came up here, to his place, and had been sitting there ever since. He watched the limo carrying Zach leave Stonebrook, and Kit hoped he was looking back, because he would *never* set foot on the grounds again. Kit had already made that very clear. If Zach showed up and tried to get in, they would refuse him entry. If he decided to get cute and use a remote to the gate to get in, he'd be arrested for trespassing. And Kit made sure that Stanley let Zach know that in a phone call. Zach was *exiled* from Stonebrook, banished the same way Kit had been banished from the family, and it would be Zach's ass if he dared try to come back to the rightful home of Vilenne and Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan.

It certainly didn't feel like home to him. Home was in Austin, in his townhouse, where he lived with and loved his wonderful wife, where he had a job he enjoyed, fantastic friends, and plans for the future. He wanted the magazine to go statewide, maybe even national. He wanted to take advantage of several opportunities he saw there to build an aviation business on the side. He wanted to *live*...and he couldn't live here. There were too many ghosts, too many bad memories. All he could do up here was *exist*, return to that bleak, empty existence he had endured before he had met Jessie, go back to a life without joy, where there was only money.

Money. That was almost a joke. He had spent \$12,000 getting up here, six hours at \$2,000 an hour, which was more than half of the bonus Vil had sent him. He could have bought a car for what he spent getting up here, but

he'd spend it again in a heartbeat. He'd bet that most of the servants at Stonebrook earned more salary than he did every week, and had more money in the bank than him. Kit was destitute as Vulpans went, the poorest of them all, and the only reason he could come up here and take residence of the manor was because the manor had its own money, its own accounts. Without that, Kit would have had to lay everyone off. Right now, he couldn't even afford to pay the staff of Stonebrook a single week's salary. It was a good thing the manor had its own limo and driver, else he'd have to call a cab to take him anywhere, he didn't even have a car.

The door to the sunroom opened, and Clancy stepped in. Of course. Clancy would know where he was, the old fox knew him so well. He ambled in, his cane tapping on the carpeted floor as he crossed the room, and then he sat on the edge of the sill right at Kit's feet. "Kit," he said. "It's nearly time for you to go."

"I know," he sighed, watching the mower turn and go back across the lawn. "I feel..."

"I can imagine, my young male," Clancy said compassionately, patting him on the shin. "Have you slept at all?"

"No, not really," he answered. "Have my clothes got here yet?"

Clancy nodded. "Did you not see the truck come up the drive?" he asked with a chuckle, motioning towards the window.

"Around here, you never know what's in a Fed Ex truck, Clancy," he answered.

"True. My boy, we are *happy* you are home," he said honestly. "You belong here, Kit."

“No, I belong where I call home, Clancy. Austin is my home now,” he told him, looking at him soberly. “This is just a place I can’t stand, yet can’t let go. I don’t know why I feel this way. I hate this place, Clancy. I hate it. You of all foxes know what I went through here. And yet what do I do when I come up? I reclaim Stonebrook. Why can’t I let this place go, Clancy? Why?” he asked plaintively.

“Because this house belongs to you, Kit,” he answered. “You were *born* here, in a bedroom not two hundred feet from this room.”

“You mean it’s Vil’s. She’s the first born.”

“No, Kit. It is *yours*,” Clancy told him. “Vil knew when she was a child that this was not her place. That’s why she lives in Chelmsford, in a house that is *hers*, just as much as this house is *yours*. Stonebrook belongs to you, just as surely as you sit here. The hatred you feel for this house isn’t because of the house, my boy, it’s because of your father. Your father is dead, Kit. He is long gone. Don’t let his spirit haunt you, or this house. This house was here long before your father was born, and will be here long after he is gone.”

“That’s not easy, Clancy. You know what he did to me. I’m reminded of it every time I look down, or look in the mirror,” he said, his paw running over the crisscrossing white streaks in the fur on his right forearm.

“That is the past, my boy.”

“The past is looking me in the face, Clancy,” he sighed, looking out the window.

“I think you’ll find that the past doesn’t hold you as tightly as it once did, my boy,” he said with a knowing smile, patting him on the shin fondly.

“Now, we must get you ready for your first day at work!”

Kit laughed. “We? You’re retired, old male,” he teased.

“Not for this, I am not,” he said, standing up. “I am certainly aggravating my son by taking his rightful place as your butler, but he can’t deny me the privilege of serving my young master Kit one final time,” he said with a smile. “I’m coming out of retirement for this last service, my boy, and then I’ll go back into retirement once we have you dressed.”

“I can dress myself, Clancy,” Kit smiled wanly.

“Hold out your paw.” When Kit did so, he saw that it was trembling slightly. “Mmm-hmm. Let’s go, my boy.”

He didn’t have the heart to refuse. Clancy took him into the east wing, and he almost gaped in wonder when he opened the door to his old room and looked inside. It was unchanged. Everything was exactly as it was left when he left six years ago. A proper Vulpan didn’t have things like posters or silly toys in his room, but the room was definitely Kit’s own, for it had small models of airplanes and jets on many of the flat surfaces. “Where do you think you’re going, my boy?” Clancy chuckled.

“My room—”

“That is the room of a child, my boy. You are the master of this house, and so the master bedroom is now your rightful place.”

“No. I can’t—”

“It is not the same room, Kit,” he said gently. “When your father died, we had it remodeled. I think you will...appreciate the room as it is now.”

It was indeed nothing like the royal room it had been, back when it was filled with antique 18th century English furniture and a four-poster bed. The master bedroom was *palatial*, as befitted the master of a house the size of Stonebrook, on the third and top floor of the manor. It used to be full of expensive antique furniture, but now it was spartanly decorated. Kit had to laugh; the furniture was slightly more upscale versions of the bedroom set he had back home! It was almost like walking into his own bedroom, if that bedroom was ten times the size of his own, with a bathroom the size of his master bedroom back home and two walk in closets larger than the small bedroom in his townhouse. The bed was between the huge windows that looked out over the front lawn, and there was a writing desk, computer desk, four dressers, an armoire, a vanity table, chair, and mirror, a free-standing full length mirror near the closet door, and a backless cushioned divan commonly used for dressing. A sofa and two recliner chairs and an coffee table were arrayed in front of a sixty inch widescreen plasma TV and home theater system complete with component stereo system at the far end of the bedroom, something of an internal living area within the bedroom, and on the other end was a large desk that had three monitors where his father would run stock program displays and business channels on the wall facing it, and there was a second large TV on the wall facing the bed, so he could lay in bed and watch TV. There was a pair of French doors on the end that led to a small balcony with a wrought iron rail that looked out over the gardens, and had a pair of rather nice outdoor chairs with soft padding flanking a round glass table. A small waiting table near the door held a freshly brewed pot of tea and a plate of scones, as well as a *Wall Street Journal* newspaper.

“Miss Jessie sent those scones for you with your clothes,” Clancy told him. “And thank goodness she packed you nice clothes! Is it true you don’t

own a suit, my boy?”

Kit laughed. “I own *one*, and I don’t think I’ve ever worn it. I’ve never really needed one,” he answered. “I do my business visits for the magazine in a nice shirt and a pair of slacks.”

“Well, we’ll have to see about that!” he said in an offended tone. “Brookington’s will send over a tailor this afternoon, and you will have a proper suit by tomorrow morning!”

“I don’t need a suit, Clancy. I won’t be here long enough to need one.”

“A male always needs a suit,” he scoffed.

“I can’t afford a Brookington’s suit,” he protested.

“Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan!” Clancy said with a gasp. “You dare bring up *money*?”

“It kinda matters, Clancy,” he chuckled. “I’m not my dad, or Zach. I can’t just order whatever I want. I have to *pay* for it, and I can guarantee you you have more money than I do. The only reason your son and the others have a *job* right now is because the manor has its own money.”

“A Vulpan worrying about money,” Clancy scoffed, then he chuckled. “Well, we’ll see what we can do, my boy. Now let’s get you ready.”

Kit didn’t have the heart to make Clancy stop. He seemed to thoroughly enjoy helping Kit dress in his dark slacks and a simple white dress shirt, and then he had someone bring him a nice simple black tie to wear with his shirt. Clancy settled the tie into place, then patted him on his shoulders. “There, now you look presentable,” he said with a warm smile.

“Now, you eat some of the fine scones your wife made for you while I have Stanley bring the car around for you.”

Kit dragged the old fox into a warm embrace, which made him chuckle and pat Kit’s shoulders. “I love you too, my boy. Now try to relax a moment while I get you on your way.”

Kit could certainly tell that Jessie made the scones after the first bite. There was a certain something in her cooking that made it easy to identify, and always delicious. He stood by the table and poured himself a cup of tea, and a thousand memories flooded through him with the first taste. It was a special blend of custom tea blended from different tea leaves, made *only* for Stonebrook, by a local tea company. Stonebrook blend tea was unique, and one of the many vanities of the Vulpan family. Tasting it brought the old ghosts lurking around him, but he pushed them away with a wall of rising anger. He would be here for a while, long enough to ensure Zach could never come back, because no bastard who tried to kill his sister would *ever* set foot in their ancestral home. For now, he’d do as Vil wished and go fight for her on the board, but as soon as she was back at work, he wouldn’t go back. He would stay in Stonebrook, avoiding the family, avoiding the press, avoiding everyone, and hold the house if only to spite his uncle.

In some ways, Kit was *definitely* a Vulpan.

Stanley did get in on the act, coming in to get him, fussing with his tie, and promising to put the rest of his tea and some scones in the limo for him. A maid scurried in and took the platter ahead of them as Stanley told him what the audit had found. “They just sent over the report,” he explained. “All the money is where it’s supposed to be, thank goodness, but there *was* some unusual activity concerning the accounts.”

“He took the money out and put it back?”

Stanley shook his head. “The opposite. There was *more* money in the accounts than what was supposed to be, then all the excess was withdrawn, leaving the accounts to the penny where they should have been. It seems that your uncle was using the accounts to hide money.”

“Why that bastard,” Kit growled. “He *does* lose access to the accounts now that he’s kicked out, right?”

“I’m not sure, to be honest. But we did report the unusual activity, and I’ve told the accountants to put a flag on the accounts so any activity in them is automatically checked by an accountant. Anyone with access to the accounts can access them, but with that flagged oversight, I’m fairly sure nobody will use them improperly again.”

“Well, he won’t *ever* use them again,” Kit growled. “He doesn’t live here anymore, he has no business putting his paws into Stonebrook’s accounts. I want you to call them back and tell them to block Zach from access to the accounts.”

“Only Mistress Vil can issue an order like that. She’s the primary owner.”

“Then I’ll have her do it.”

“The inventory of Stonebrook is finished, and all the valuable items are accounted for,” he continued.

“Good. I guess even Zach is too afraid of my bastard father’s memory to violate Stonebrook,” he grunted.

Instead of taking him to the garage, the limo was sitting out in the back courtyard near the garage, letting them walk out into the warm, sunny Boston morning. Much to his surprise, the 27 employees of Stonebrook were all standing out in the courtyard, all the maids, butlers, cooks, drivers, groundskeepers, and maintenance furs waited for him. Kit found himself shaking paws and giving hugs almost everywhere, as each and every member of the staff made him feel welcome. “My, it feels like you’re glad Zach’s gone,” Kit laughed.

“We’re just happy you’re home, Master Kit,” Dee told him. “Or, I should say, Master Luke,” she chuckled, kissing him on the cheek. “You’ll have to forgive a few of us old femmes and males for calling you that from time to time. You always were our little Luke.”

“I guess I’ll have to let you slide, Dee, or you’ll have Carrie poison my tea,” he teased, kissing her on the cheek.

She laughed. “Oh, get to work, now,” she told him.

“I’m surprised all of you feel the same way,” he chuckled. “I know a few of you aren’t happy at my choice of wives.”

“We are the staff of the *manor*, not the Vulpans who live in it,” Stanley told him simply. “Vulpans come and go, but the manor will always remain.”

“Way to make me feel important there, Stan,” Kit laughed.

Stanley smiled. “Good luck in the city, Master Kit,” he said as he opened the door of the limo for him. Will was already in the limo with the driver, and he saw his thermos of tea and scones on a table in the car, waiting for him.

It was like living a past life, driving to Boston in the back of a limo, a life he gave up long ago. He was very tired, and drained, and that made it nearly surrealistic to him. He drank two more cups of tea just to try to wake up, and ate another of Jessie's cherry scones to be reminded a little of home. An image of her came into his mind, her standing in front of her new stove wearing an apron, her tail swishing back and forth in time to that horrible music she liked, turning her head and looking at him, her head tilted slightly, and a radiant smile on her face as she put her paw on her rounded belly—

“Mister Vulpan,” Will called. “We’re here.”

“Already?” he asked in surprise, looking at the ship on ship on ship logo of Vulpan Shipyards, the I-beam in front of a bold V of Vulpan Steel, and the blocky letters VC of the Vulpan Corporation, arranged triangularly on a sign by the entrance to the office building and its grounds.

“We let you take a little nap, sir. We thought you might need it,” Will told him with a slight smile.

“Huh. I don’t remember falling asleep,” he said with a yawn, showing off his impressive fangs.

Kit had been here enough when he was a child to remember where everything was. Will followed him as he walked down carpeted hallways, as foxes and others gaped at him, got out of his way, or offered him nervous greetings. The eyes showed him as a Vulpan, but the ear gave away exactly who he was. He only made one wrong turn, which Will quickly corrected, and then the large bear followed him into the boardroom.

He almost laughed when he saw Vil sitting at the chair at the head of the long table, facing the door, a pair of crutches leaning on the table beside

her, and Stav and Marcus standing behind her, Stav with his left arm in a sling.

“Vil!” he gasped, running down the table as she turned in her chair and opened her arms. He bent down and gave her a strong hug. “Why didn’t you call me?” he demanded.

“And have you beg off showing up here? Never!” she said with a grin. “They just released me about half an hour ago, and I thought I’d surprise Uncle Jake,” she winked.

“How’s your leg?”

“It hurts like a bitch,” she answered honestly. “They casted it this morning and let me out as soon as they felt it was dry.” She held up her left arm, showing a bandage extending out of her sleeve. “This is worse, though. It *itches*.”

Kit laughed and kissed her on the side of her muzzle. “I’m just glad you’re okay, sis.”

“I hurt like hell, but I’m okay otherwise,” she answered. “I’m starting to get an appreciation of your little brush with the family,” she told him, reaching up and pinching the ragged edge of his half-missing ear. “And why you hate them.”

“Did you ever doubt why I hate them?” he asked, a little tersely.

“I always thought your hatred of them was a little unreasonable,” she told him, taking his paw. “I always hoped that you’d see that the elders weren’t all your enemies, that they were as much victims of our father as you were. I thought that with time, you could reconcile and if not come back home, at least return to the fold, so I’ve tried to moderate things on

both sides. Even after all this started, I thought we could just settle it and move on. I can see that I was wrong, brother,” she told him honestly. “I was very wrong. Now *I* have a reason to hate them, and I won’t try to moderate things anymore. I never honestly dreamed they’d actually try to kill me. I thought Stav and Marcus were being a little overprotective, and now I have a broken leg to prove them right. Oh, and Stav gets a big bonus,” she said, smiling in his direction. “So, it comes down to this, little brother. You and me against them. Until they beg for mercy.” She held out his paw to him, bandaged from the wrist up.

“Amen,” he said, clasping her paw with his own, which had jagged white streaks through the fur of his forearm.

“Now, I’ve heard that you kicked Zach out of Stonebrook,” she smiled. “Are you going to keep him out?”

“I’m going to go change my license to Massachusetts after this meeting,” he declared. “And I told Stanley that he will *never* be allowed to set foot in Stonebrook again.”

“Good.”

“Sis, I need you to block Zach from the manor’s accounts, too,” he said. “He was using them to hide money.”

“Oh really?” she asked with sudden interest. “We’ll talk about it later, bro,” she said, looking at the door. A few other furs, two foxes and a rabbit, filed into the room, and stopped with a start to see Vil sitting in her chair, and Kit standing beside her. “Well? Come in and sit down,” Vil said, a touch harshly.

“We hadn’t heard you were back, Vil,” the rabbit said as they reached the table.

“I just got out of the hospital,” she answered. “Kit, this is Don Roberts, Jane Sanderson, and Irwin Lange. They were just elected to the board a few days ago, along with you,” she smiled. “Where is everyone else?”

“They’re coming,” the rabbit said.

“Where do I sit, sis?” he asked uncertainly.

“Right here,” she said, pointing at the seat behind him. “For the one and only time you’ll be here,” she said with a smile.

“Damn right,” he answered with a nod. “I’d walk out right now if not for the fact that I don’t want to leave you right now.”

She gave him a loving smile and took his paw, squeezing it gently. “I love you too, brother mine,” she told him.

Terry came in next, and gasped and immediately hurried over to Vil. “Cousin, thank God!” he said, hugging her in her chair. “When did you get out of the hospital?”

“About half an hour ago,” she said with a smile. “Just in time to get over here.”

The others in the room went suddenly quiet, and Kit looked up to see his uncle Jake standing in the doorway, his tail with a bandage around it near the end, the splint for his broken tail. Jake stood there a moment, his eyes wide, then he rather boldly hurried down the table and to her, limping slightly as he did so because of the stitches in his leg. “Vil, we *did not* do

this,” he said quietly and intensely. “We may be against your leadership of the family, but we would *never* try to hurt you!”

“I don’t know, *uncle*, your compassion towards my family has a certain track record,” Vil said coldly, reaching over and pinching Kit’s torn ear. “You once wanted *one* of us to die. I don’t think it’s a stretch that you might have tried to help me along. I guess Stav, Marcus, and the pilot were just afterthoughts.”

“Well, it wasn’t *me*,” he said in an intense whisper. “And if Zach or Maxy did it, then I’ll wash my paws of them. I’ll have no part of such *barbarism*.”

“And what you did to my brother wasn’t barbaric?” she asked with an icy stare. “It’s just business as usual, isn’t it? You try to kill him by refusing him medical care, but, well, your try on me was just a touch more direct.”

“I’m telling you, it was *not*,” he said strongly. “I don’t know what happened, Vil, but we had no part of it! Or at least I didn’t!”

“Why don’t I believe you, uncle Jake?” Vil asked in a barbed voice.

“I wouldn’t,” Terry said darkly. “By the way, *Uncle*, the next time you’re in New Orleans, I highly suggest you pick the cell block on the second floor. It has a lovely view of the alley through the six inch window that was in my holding cell.”

“What did you expect, Terry? You went against the family, and that made you a target.”

“I was *doing my job*,” he hissed, “and my private life is none of your damn business!”

“When your private life demeans the reputation of this family, then it becomes our business,” Jake answered calmly. “We may give the brainless children a longer leash, but you are one of the upstanding and promising Vulpans who will lead this family when we are gone, Terry, and we expected more from you than a Texas *whore*.”

“My whore is a better femme than half the blue-bloods in New England,” Terry said with a savage hiss. “At least she’s *honest*.”

The other board members filed in, slowly, seeing the four Vulpans clustered around the end of the table, glares flying all around. But then they broke up, Kit and Terry sat down at the chairs beside Vil, and Jake went down to the far end of the table, getting far away from the other three Vulpans. Eventually all fifteen were there, and several assistants, mostly foxes, scurried among them, setting cups of tea and coffee as well as small binders holding papers before each board member. There were six foxes aside from the Vulpans, a badger, a rabbit, a mink, and a raccoon on the board. “Now that we’re all here,” Vil said crisply, “as you can see, I’m fine. I’m a little less worse for wear, but I’m otherwise fine.” She picked up the papers that a young fox put in front of her. “So, since we’re all here, first allow me to introduce the two new members of the board you haven’t met yet. Terry I’m sure most of you know, but this is my brother, Kit Vulpan. Enjoy his visit, because this is the first and last time you’ll see him.” She gave Jake a penetrating stare. “So, let’s move on, shall we?”

“Are you sure you’re alright, Miss Vulpan?” one of the members asked.

“My leg’s killing me, I’m dying for a drink, and I need to sleep for about ten years, but I’ll make it,” she answered. “I can easily last the half

hour we're going to be here." She slapped her paws on the table. "So, what shall we argue about today?"

Jake cleared his throat. "Given your, ah, position, Vil, I move that we move quickly, but also that we agree to adjourn immediately if you feel unwell."

"My, how *considerate* of you, Uncle Jake," she said with a dark smile.

Kit had never been at a board meeting before, and though this one was charged with hidden tension, it was a curious experience. Despite her broken leg and bandaged arm, Vil was fully in control as she moved the board through four votes that made absolutely no sense to Kit. It was accounting stuff, then a five minute discussion about some acquisition, a steel mill in West Virginia that Vulpan Steel was considering buying, then there was talk about pursuing a new Navy contract to build some kind of experimental submarine. Kit was honestly lost through the whole thing. The other board members were a little hesitant to talk, but they did discuss the steel mill thing for a little bit before deciding to do a cost analysis. The last order of business was a real estate thing, buying land near one of their smaller facilities in Philadelphia to expand. Kit had no idea what any of it was about, and he was too busy watching Vil to make sure she was okay to do much other than vote in the same way she did each time.

After it was over, Kit stood up and Jake hurriedly rushed from the boardroom, but Kit wasn't too worried about him. He was more interested in Vil. He took up her crutches and both he and Terry helped her get up on her foot, then she shouldered her crutches. "I'll be by in a few hours and we'll talk," she told him. "Go get it done, bro."

“You’ll know where to find me, sis. Once I get in there, I won’t come back out until I go back to Texas.”

“No need to go that far, bro.”

“Yes, there is,” he said simply.

And he did exactly what he said he would do. He went to the Massachusetts DMV and had his license changed over, which took about two hours, mainly because the clerk wanted to fight with Kit over not having anything in writing or any bills to prove his Massachusetts residency. “I’m afraid I just can’t do it,” the vixen clerk said, chewing her gum aggressively. “You have to have proof that you actually live in the state, and you can’t produce it.”

“Lady, come here,” he said, leaning over the counter and crooking at finger at her. “Now, look at my eyes.”

“So?”

“You’re not from Boston, are you?”

“Gee, did my southern drawl clue you into that?” she asked caustically.

“Fine, I’ll give you that much. Does the name Vulpan mean anything to you?”

“Not particularly.”

“Mmm-hmm. Call your supervisor, and watch and learn,” he said with a grim face.

She frowned at him, but did call her supervisor, which was an older vixen. She gasped and almost took a step back when she came to the

counter where they were, and hurried up to him. “U-uh, is there a p-problem, Mister Vulpan sir?” she asked nervously.

“There won’t be one now,” he told her mildly. “I’m trying to change my driver’s license back to Massachusetts, but this young vixen here doesn’t seem to believe that I live in Boston.”

“Well, we’ll just take care of that!” she said quickly. “You can proceed without proof of residency, Darla.”

“But it won’t *let* me—“

“I’ll fix it later!” she said quickly. “Just put anything there!”

“I can’t falsify an official record, I’ll lose my job!”

“Hon, I can assure you, as long as you let me walk out of here with what I want, you won’t lose your job,” Kit told her calmly. “I’ll have my butler send you an affidavit that I’ve moved back to Boston if you like.”

“B-Butler?” she asked.

“He’s a *Vulpan*, Darla!” the supervisor said in a hissing tone. “Now change his license!”

“Uh, yes ma’am,” she said uncertainly.

So, after a little wrangling, Kit managed to walk out of the DMV with a new license. And true to his word, he went straight back to Stonebrook. Again, there was that feeling of foreboding as they went past the ornate gate, along the drive around the house, and again stopping out in the courtyard rather than going into the drive-through garage. He got out of the limo and sighed as he looked around, feeling very much like he was about to enter prison. And it *would* be a prison for him. He would not leave

Stonebrook until he went back home, maintaining a constant presence to prevent Zach from trying anything, and he certainly did not want to be here. Now that the anger had dimmed somewhat, he could almost feel baleful eyes glaring down at him from the windows, the wardens and guards that would keep him company inside this self-created prison.

“Kit!”

His tail almost broke from snapping straight out, and he whirled around to see Jessie in the doorway to the garage, wearing a white maternity blouse and a pair of slacks. He could only gape at her as she ran up to him, then he folded her into a powerful embrace.

“I won’t let them pull you away from me,” she said fiercely in his ear, almost creaking his ribs with her strong grip on him. “I will not let them win!”

“Oh, pretty kitty, you shouldn’t be here,” he protested.

“I will not be apart from you!” she declared. “I’ll just stay in the house all the time, love, safe behind the fence,” she promised. “But I’m here now, so just try and make me go home!”

He chuckled ruefully and swung her from side to side. “I spoil you too much, love,” he told her.

“You just know when to accede to the inevitable,” she teased, kissing him on the muzzle. “I couldn’t let you come and try to be here by yourself. How can I be your guardian angel when I’m in Texas and you’re up here?”

“You can be my guardian angel anywhere, my love,” he told her, kissing her. “All I have to do is think about you, and you chase the ghosts away.”

“Well, you’re going to have to settle for me in the flesh,” she winked. “I called Vil and she knows I’m here, Nick came with me, Lupe’s watching the house, and Rick wants you to call him later. But right now,” she said, taking his paw. “I want you to show me the house as *you* know it.”

“What do you mean?”

“You grew up here, Kit. I know you know *everything* about the house, even things the servants don’t know. Show me everything!”

“Everything, eh?” he asked.

“Everything!” she said with a smile.

“Well, there’s a lot of house here,” he said with a chuckle. “And Vil’s going to be coming over later, after she gets a little rest.”

“Then we’d better get started,” she winked.

“Well, first off, let’s introduce you to the staff, and we’ll see what we can see until Vil gets here.”

Jessie was an absolute Godsend. The idea of living in the house, day after day, seemed almost like a prison sentence, and then she shows up. He certainly wasn’t going to allow her to stay here, but he’d give her a couple of days, show her the house now that there was no one here to keep them out of it, and then send her home. He wanted her nowhere near his family, especially right now with his elders trying to get rid of everyone stopping them from taking control of the family and those who were rebelling against the family traditions. And Kit was both of those. But, for the few days he would let her stay, he’d enjoy her company.

But God, one thing was for sure. *Nobody* was setting foot in Stonebrook while she was here except for the staff, Vil, Terry, and Muffy. He wouldn't even let a delivery truck in while she was here.

Kit took care of that immediately. He told Stanley that only Vil, Terry, and Muffy would be allowed onto the grounds, and that all deliveries had to be handled at the main gate, that *no one* was setting foot in Stonebrook so long as his wife was there. Once that was done, and he released Nick, who had come up with Jessie, to inspect the grounds, Kit showed Jessie Stonebrook. He showed her every room, from the cellar to the attics and the three floors in between, and told her his own memories and stories about each room. He showed her the old secret passage that ran from the master bedroom to the conservatory on the first floor, passing through a dead space on the second floor, and the secret room in the master bedroom with the large safe meant for cash and small valuables and a single table and two padded chairs caked over with dust, which had been built into the house back when it was constructed. The secret room opened through one of the closets, and it had a peephole that looked through one of the wall light racks into the bedroom so one could make sure nobody was in the room when they came out. There was a second such secret vault as well, a larger one in the cellar, which was literally a vault holding several antiques and once held cases full of gold, hidden behind a false wine rack in the wine cellar. There were five other secret rooms in the house, hidden in various places, built because the house had been built during Prohibition and the Vulpans needed somewhere to keep their illegal wine and spirits hidden. There was a large one just off the kitchen, and small ones, little more than hidden closets, in the main parlor, the sitting room, the billiards room, and the very sun room to which Kit was attached, and Kit was one of the few who knew of them all. There was also a room that wasn't hidden or secret, but had been sealed

off during a remodel back in the 60's and had been recently reopened when they redid the ballroom, since it had been an anteroom off the ball room, a second coat room, which they'd sealed over because they felt they didn't need it anymore. He also showed her all the passages, both the main hallways and the smaller servants' passages, some of which were almost never used anymore. Jessie was right that Kit knew it all, because there was no way a child would not explore everything there was to know about a house. Kit had wandered the house as a child, and after he started fighting with his father, he learned three ways to get everywhere so he could avoid him, as well as the servants he'd send to find him. Kit knew every room, door, passage, window, and cubbyhole in the entire house, as well as virtually every building on the grounds and every tree in the woods. Stonebrook was a *huge* manor, and often he'd had to hide out on the grounds, out where he would be extremely hard to find. After he set fire to his father's Bentley, it took them nearly four hours to find him, and that was only because he came out of his hiding place to get food.

They were just about finished with the grand tour, going through the west wing and the rooms that had once held Zach's family, their things boxed and waiting to be moved out, which Kit solved by telling Stanley to put it all in the pool house. Kit wanted *nothing* from his uncle in the house. He almost wanted to disinfect and decontaminate the entire west wing to get rid of the every trace of them. It was as Kit was showing Jessie the terrace balcony that opened from the west wing master bedroom, which looked out over the courtyard and helicopter landing pad across from the drive, that Stanley came in. "Master Kit, Mistress Vil is at the gate and coming up," he said.

“Thank God,” Kit said, taking Jessie’s paw. “Come on, I’ll show you the fastest way to the garage from here!” he told her.

Vil wasn’t the only one who got out of her limo as Kit and Jessie hurried out to them. Bartholomew had brought out a wheelchair for Vil to use, and she was in the middle of transferring from the limo to the wheelchair. Kendall was helping Vil from the car to the chair. Terry was already out, and Muffy was getting out of the other side. She gasped when Kit and Jessie came out of the garage and laughed. “Jessie!” Muffy called happily running around the limo. The two hugged fondly, and Muffy was patting Jessie’s rounded belly and giggling as Terry came over and gave her a hug as well. “I thought Kit wouldn’t let you come up here, Jess,” Terry told her.

“He can forbid all he wants,” she said with a wink in his direction. “I promised not to leave Stonebrook, but other than that, he can tell me to go home all he wants. My place is wherever he is.”

“I see a fight coming,” Kendall laughed.

“A fight she’ll lose,” Kit warned.

Jessie flicked her tail at him insultingly as she bent down and hugged Vil. “Now, are you *really* okay, Vil?” she asked.

“My leg feels like a magician screwed up the saw me in half trick,” she said, “but I’m okay otherwise. After they set the bone and sewed my skin back together, they let me go. My break wasn’t half as bad as Rick’s was. Rick’s bone was sticking way out. Mine just barely broke the skin.”

“You should be at home resting!” Jessie protested.

“I can rest here,” she said. “I’m staying here tonight.”

“We all are!” Muffy said happily, putting her arm around Jessie. “I hope you have room for us here,” she winked.

“I think we can find you a couch somewhere, Muffy,” Kit told her dryly, but he did accept an embrace from her. “Thank you for showing me who my *real* family is, cousin,” he told her gently.

“The few, the proud, the rebels,” she grinned up at him. “Now, I’m hungry!” she said. “Let’s get something to eat!”

“Stanley,” Vil called. “Start dinner. Nothing fancy.”

“Hamburgers it is,” Stanley said with a smile at Kit. “Salad, fruit, and some wine.”

“Grape juice for me please!” Jessie said. “I feel soooo weird, not cooking!”

“I’ll feel weird not eating your cooking,” Kit chuckled. “Thanks for the scones, love, that was very thoughtful.”

“Well, I’m here now,” she smiled. “I’ll let them cook for us today, but they’ll have to surrender the kitchen to me tomorrow.”

Kit laughed. “I think Carrie may have something to say about that,” Kit told her. “She’s run that kitchen for twenty years. She’s very jealous of her kitchen.”

“Well, I like to cook, so she’s just gonna have to let me have it,” she laughed.

“She’ll banish you to the small kitchen, which is near the servant entrance,” Kit countered.

“I thought this was *your* house, Kit,” she grinned at him.

“It’s hers,” he countered, pointing at Vil as Bartholomew wheeled her towards the garage. “My only part of this was I’m the one who had the power to evict Zach.”

They all sat in the family dining room, an informal dining room just off the kitchen, and they talked mainly about what had happened. Vil described the crash again in complete detail as Nick quietly caught up with Stav and Marcus, and she showed them her bandaged arm. “The docs said my fur will grow back no problem, and the break on my leg was clean, so all they had to do was cast me up and stitch up my leg.”

“I can’t imagine how scary that would be,” Muffy breathed. “I’d be afraid to get on a chopper ever again!”

“It wasn’t fun, that’s for sure,” she said as two cooks brought in plates filled with hamburgers and a bowl of salad. “But I’m not afraid of choppers, Muffy. The only reason mine crashed is because it had help,” she grunted. “But my boys certainly made all that money I paid to them worth it,” she said, looking back at Stav and Marcus with a smile. “I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for them.”

“About time they did something right,” Nick teased with a laugh, accepting a hamburger from the cook with a smile.

“It’s our job, madam,” Marcus said, taking a hamburger with a nod.

“So, you kicked out Uncle Zach, cousin,” Muffy grinned. “How did that feel?”

“Like it was *long* overdue,” he answered, taking a bite of his hamburger. “After what that bastard did, he will never set foot in this house again.”

“So, you’re staying?”

“I’m staying long enough to fulfill the terms of the agreement so he can never return,” he answered. “I already changed my license to Massachusetts, and I’ll sit here until it’s official that I’ve taken up residency. After that, I’ll go home, and come up every once in a while just to make it plain that he’s not welcome here.”

“How long will that take?” Kendall asked.

“Three months,” Vil answered calmly. “He has to live here for three months to establish residency to satisfy the agreement.

“Three months?” Kit asked.

“Three months,” Vil nodded.

“Well, I wonder if Doctor Mac would make one hell of a house call,” Jessie mused.

“Jess!” Kit gasped. “No! You are *not* staying here! You are going back home!”

“You’re crazy if you think I’m staying in Texas when you’re here,” she declared. “You are my *husband*, Kit! I won’t leave you alone, and I won’t be alone! You have to stay here, so I will be here with you!”

“No! You’re insane if you think you’re staying in Boston!”

“And you’re crazy if you think I’ll live without you!”

“Guys, guys! Fight about this later,” Vil told them. “Right now, we have other things to worry about.”

“Your pain pill, madam,” Marcus said, taking a bottle out of his suit jacket. “It’s time.”

“Thank God,” she said, holding her paw out greedily. “Marcus won’t let me have the bottle,” she complained.

“He’s a smart panther,” Kendall said with a smile and a nod at Marcus. “Keeps you from getting too comfortable with the pills.”

“Trust me, that’s not something you want,” Kit said. “A little pain now is much better than four months of wanting another pill. That was almost as bad as the pain.”

“I think I’ll take your word for it, brother,” she said, swallowing the pill, then taking a drink of water. “They said I have to take them with meals.”

“So, now that we’re all here, and they tried to kill my fiancée, what are we going to do about it?” Kendall asked bluntly, then he took a bite of his hamburger.

“Plenty. Next time I see him, I’m gonna kick Uncle Zach in the nuts,” Muffy said savagely, which made Kit explode into laughter.

“I think we find out exactly who did it,” Vil said calmly. “Then we do to them what we did to Cybil.”

“I think I can agree with that plan,” Terry said with a nod. “What’s the word from the FAA?”

“Nothing yet, they just started the investigation,” Vil answered. “They told me it’ll be a couple of weeks before they have any news. Jake is swearing up and down he had no part of it, and I’m almost ready to believe

him,” she grunted. “I haven’t heard a peep out of Zach or Maxine. Tom is still too angry with Zach to say much, Sarah’s still sitting on the fence, but Brian...” she trailed off with a slight smile. “Brian is sincerely furious. He was never much inclined to the idea of pushing me out, and he was outraged. That might be useful. He may be the youngest of the elders, but he’s *still* an elder. In the meantime, I’ll call your Doctor Mac and arrange for her to come up here and give you your exams,” she said, looking to Jessie.

“Absolutely not!” Kit said adamantly. “Are you insane, Vil? Jessie can *not* stay in Boston!”

“She’s totally safe within Stonebrook, bro,” she said dismissively. “She can have the baby right here, in the same room where you were born,” she said with a smile.

“Oh *hell* no!” Kit said heatedly. “She needs to be in Austin, where it’s safe!”

“Do you think I’m afraid to be here, Kit?” Jessie flared.

“Jessie, you are *pregnant!*” he said hotly. “Does this register to you, love? Pregnant cat married to blue-blood fox whose family *funded the purist movement?*” he asked in a hiss. “Do you have any idea what Zach would do if he found out you’re here? He’d blow a head gasket! You and me represent everything he hates the most! Dear God, I think he’ll die of a stroke if you give birth to Laura in this house!”

“Then let him,” Jessie said calmly. “This has nothing to do with him. This has everything to do with me staying with my husband, and I don’t care what’s trying to get between us. If I have to stay in this house for three

months to stay with you, then that's exactly what I'll do. If that means that Laura is born in the house, well, then it just continues the tradition."

Kit laughed cynically. "Tradition? I've broken every tradition there is in this family, pretty kitty. It's not that I don't want you to be here with me, but I don't think it's *safe* here. Even here. All he has to do is row down here in a boat and get on the grounds. Swan Cove is just a mile upriver, and we have no fence at the boat dock."

"Beggin' your pardon, Kit, but I can secure this place," Nick said calmly. "I'll call in a few mates who wouldn't mind an easy job playin' defense in a swanky manor like this. If you're serious about not leaving this place for three months, I can make it safe as can be. I can turn it into a fortress."

"See? We'll be okay, handsome fox," Jessie told him, putting her paw on his arm. "I *will not* leave you, Kit. I don't care who's trying to stand between us. I told you before, you are *worth it*."

"But our baby—"

"Our baby will be safe here," she told him. "If Nick says he can make us safe, then he can make us safe. And it's a big place, love. I can spend three months here. We have cable, and a nice pool, and a gym, and I can catch up on my knitting and maybe learn some new recipes from your cook, and I'll have plenty of time to study for my commercial rating. You do have a skeet shooting range here, right?" she asked Vil with a smile.

"We can build one," she grinned in reply.

"I think we can bring in a trap launcher in the meantime," Nick said. "There's a lot of clear space around for us to set it up."

“Well, love, you can get in some practice,” she smiled at him.

“I think this is crazy,” he protested.

“Look at it this way, brother. Do you want to take every precaution you can and put Jessie in a fortress, or have to scramble to do so when she disobeys you and comes right back up here after you send her home?”

“I will, I swear I will,” she declared.

“Jessie,” he said, his heart in his eyes.

“I told you long ago, handsome fox, I *will not* let them scare me away,” she declared.

“I appreciate the notion, love, but I think one thing needs brought up. I can’t *pay* to hire security guards, or do anything else.”

“Kit,” Vil scoffed. “Do you *really* think we’ll just leave you here? That’s a pretty weak attempt to make Jessie go home.”

“Jessie, I love you, but you can’t stay here,” Kit told her. “You have to go home. You have to go home because I *love* you.”

“And I’m telling you, I have to stay here, because *I love you*, Kit,” she told him, gripping his paw. “You can fight about it all you want, but in the end I will be right here at your side, where I belong,” she declared. “You can’t make me stay away from you, and I will not leave you.”

He knew *that* tone. For right now, arguing about it would be pointless, and he knew it. Jessie could be extremely stubborn, and it seemed that she’d dug her claws in over this matter. They’d fight about it more later, but for now there was no reason to beat a dead horse. Hopefully after a couple of days of being trapped in the manor, she’d get restless and agree to go home.

“We’ll discuss it later,” he acceded.

“We can discuss it all you want, you won’t make me change my mind,” she declared.

“Has anyone actually tried to confront Zach over this yet?” Muffy asked.

“Not that I know of,” Vil answered. “He hasn’t left Swan Cove since yesterday. Maxine, on the other paw, has shuffled between Swan Cove and Oak Hill a few times.”

“Oak Hill?” Jessie asked.

“Maxine’s manor,” Kit answered. “Just about all the elders live in manors that have names. Uncle Jake lives in Still Waters, which is downriver from here.”

“That one was built about ten years after Stonebrook by our great uncle Lance,” Vil noted. “Our grandfather’s only brother.”

“Shame what happened,” Terry sighed.

“What?”

“My great uncle and his whole family died in a plane crash in Nineteen sixty,” Kit answered. “A whole branch of the Vulpan family died.”

“That’s terrible!” Jessie gasped.

“What was worse was the fight over Still Waters after they died,” Vil grunted. “It’s just as grand as Stonebrook, and everyone wanted it. That was when Grandfather set down the rules of conduct for the family, because the family disgraced themselves fighting over the manor. Grandfather claimed the manor, then gave it to Dad. Dad sold it to Jake after Zach started

building Swan Cove. It *should* have gone to Maxine, but Dad wouldn't give it to her. He felt that only a *male* Vulpan deserved it," she scoffed. "Our wonderful father, a bastard from the day he was born."

"What happened to Maxine?"

"She built Oak Hill," Vil answered. "It's on the south side of Boston. I think she built it down there to get away from the family. Maxine didn't speak to Dad for a couple of years after he gave Still Waters to Jake. Oak Hill is exactly the same as Still Waters, even down to the granite used, it's from the same quarry. She built an exact duplicate. Maxine's own Still Waters."

"After your father was so awful to her, she's siding against you?" Jessie said in surprise.

"Maxine is all about the family's prestige and reputation," Vil answered. "She'll do anything to keep the Vulpan family on the top rung of the social ladder. Even after how badly Dad screwed her out of what was rightfully hers, she'll struggle against what she sees as the family losing its social status. She sees what I'm doing as hurting the family's reputation, so she'll fight me over it."

"But this," Muffy said. "I never dreamed *Aunt Maxine* would be party to trying to kill you, cousin!" she said in disbelief.

"From what Jake said, I think this might have come from Zach, and without the knowledge of the other two," Vil said, tapping her chin thoughtfully. "Jake was pretty convincing after the meeting. I'm inclined to believe that he really had no idea of it."

“Then it sounds like we should eliminate Maxine and Jake as possible suspects, and then focus on Zach once they’re cleared,” Kendall said. “Now, how do we go about that?”

“Stav?” Vil asked.

“I’ll see to it,” he said with a nod. “Until my arm heals, I won’t be much use to you except to make phone calls.”

“In the meantime, we turn Stonebrook into a fortress,” Terry said. “Vil’s right about one thing. Zach will go nuclear when he finds out that Jessie is up here and in this house. But that’s his own fault. He should have known that Kit would rush up here.”

“Yes, he would,” Vil said, her eyes narrowing. “Drawing him out of the safety of Austin.”

“Which is another reason to lock down Stonebrook,” Terry said. “Outside of that, there’s still the fact that they’re trying to push Vil out, and we have to fight them.”

“Kit can do his fighting from in here,” Vil said. “He doesn’t take a single foot out of Stonebrook if we can help it. The threat of Kit being able to take everything if they screw up is too much. They’ll try to remove him from the game, because he can stop it all if they make even one mistake. Kit is the king in this chess game, and the piece we have to protect the most.”

“No argument from me,” Kit nodded.

“He can attend board meetings via conference.”

“Vil, I’m not going to be on the board,” he scoffed.

“You’re *on* the board, and you’re here,” she told him. “And your continued presence sends a message that we’re more than happy to up the ante. Terry will do the same, listening to the board meetings over the phone or whatever we set up. They will see that all they’ve done is united us against them, openly. And we make it open. I’m going to make it clear to the press that we don’t think this was an accident. In the meantime, we continue to fight them, and maybe take the fight to them,” she grunted. “Muffy.”

“Yes, Vil?”

“Call the other cousins and tell them to come back to Boston.”

“What? Why?”

“A show of force,” she answered. “If the cousins want the elders to give them room to live, they have to make it clear. Zach, Jake, and Maxine can ignore the four of us and continue on, but if they suddenly find themselves facing half the kids in open revolt, then they’ll have a lot more to worry about.”

“Why me? If you tell them to come, they’ll do it. You’re the family’s leader.”

“If I do it, the elders will just say I *made* them come back. If they come back on their own, they make a much bigger statement.” She took another bite of her hamburger. “I’d call Sheila back too, but she has school coming up, and she can’t miss another semester if she wants to open her restaurant soon.”

“Sheila can help just by staying in Austin. Holding down *our* fort while we’re up here,” Kit noted. “I need to call Rick and have him send me

up some work.”

“You’re going to be busy up here,” Vil winked. “You think you’re just gonna sit in here and watch TV? You’re gonna help,” she grinned at him.

“I fully intend to help,” he told her. “But the magazine needs us, Vil. I write articles and do a lot of work there. Jessie writes and works there too. We can’t leave the gang in the lurch. We can do our work from up here, but we still have to do our work. Besides, we’re heavily invested. If we don’t work, the magazine might go under, and we lose our money,” he chuckled.

“Money,” Vil snorted. “If I have my way, you’ll be leaving Boston with a very large piece of the Vulpan fortune.”

“And I’ll just give it back, Vil,” he said calmly. “Just because I’m up here, don’t for a minute think that I want to be a Vulpan again. I’m only here to kick Zach out of Stonebrook and get to the bottom of who tried to kill you, then punish them for it. When this is over, I go back home and back to the only life I want. *You’re* the one that’ll get the money, not me.”

“Hmph,” she grunted, taking a rather savage bite out of her hamburger.

They discussed it more after dinner, but basically talking in circles over wine and grape juice. They were all going to stay at Stonebrook for the night, so Stanley arranged rooms for them while Kit showed Jessie the one room he’d avoided during the tour, the bedroom. She laughed when she came in, looking around. “They copied our furniture!” she declared, touching the bed. “And it’s a Sleep Number bed, too!”

“Vil took the pictures we gave her of our room and she did this,” he said, sitting on the bed. “Pretty kitty—“

“No! Absolutely not!” she cut him off. “We’re not debating this, love. I *will not* leave you. They can keep us safe, so I’m staying with you!”

“But we’re going to be all but prisoners here, love. Three months locked inside this manor.”

“I can take it if you can,” she winked, putting her paws on his shoulders. She pushed him down until he was on his back, and she snuggled down atop him, rubbing her nose against his. “Hello there, Mister Vulpan. Whatever are you doing in such a strange place?”

“Trying to send you back home where you belong,” he answered.

“I think you’ll finally manage to convince me...in about three months,” she smiled, then she kissed him and began to purr against his lips. No matter what protests he had, there was *no way* he could withstand that kind of determined assault. Jessie knew him better than he knew himself, and she was more than capable of getting her own way. “Now,” she breathed in his ear, “I think you need to take a nap. You look very tired.”

“Don’t change the subject,” he warned. She answered him by purring and putting her throat against his as she nuzzled, which made him laugh ruefully even as he wrapped his arms around her. “Such blatant manipulation,” he accused. “I know you’re faking it!”

“Just try and prove it,” she hummed in his ear. “I will not live without you, my love,” she told him. “I couldn’t survive three months apart from you.”

“You’re not safe here.”

“I’m not safe anywhere, handsome fox. If I’m going to be in danger, it’s going to be at your side. Now relax,” she said soothingly, sliding down

against him, putting her head on his chest, and her arm over him, “and try to take a nap. You’ll feel better.”

“Jessie,” he said, almost plaintively.

“Shhh,” she sounded, then settled in against him, purring away.

He really was tired. Jessie was the ultimate teddy bear, and her purring just *destroyed* any attempt his brain made to ruin the moment, to make her stop purring for any reason. All he could do was put his arms around her and close his eyes. And not a minute after he closed his eyes, he was asleep.

Kit and Jessie had never *really* fought before...until now.

Sure, they’d had a few disagreements over small things, but those things tended to smooth themselves out of their own volition. After all, what they were fighting about wasn’t really important, it wasn’t like they were fighting over money or anything. But in this regard, they had a *real* fight. Kit just could not in good conscious allow Jessie to stay in Stonebrook, but Jessie absolutely refused to go home. And thus did the fight begin, when Kit told Jessie that he wanted her to go back to Austin.

And they *fought*. He’d never lay a paw on her, and she would never stripe him, but they shouted at each other, shook fingers in faces, and there was quite a bit of door slamming. Both of them had no inclination to listen to intelligent debate. Kit felt he was doing what was best for both of them, and Jessie felt he was utterly wrong. The moment Kit told her he wanted her to go back to Austin, the shouting began.

The only problem with having a fight in a place like Stonebrook was that nothing in the manor was truly private. The servants heard them

shouting at each other when they came to prepare the bedroom for the occupants' going to bed that evening, and if there was one universal truth when it came to a large manor, that was that servants gossiped. What they saw and heard *never* left the manor, but it flowed freely within the manor, and it didn't stay just with the servants. The three Vulpans staying in the manor quickly heard about the fight, but they had the sense to stay out of it until it was over.

And, as usual...what Jessie wanted, Jessie got.

Kit lost the fight. In the end, after all the shouting, it came down to one simple fact, and that was that he couldn't *make* her stay in Austin, and her threat to just keep coming up, and coming up, and coming up was a threat that destroyed any argument he made about how insane it was for her to be here. He couldn't make her stay away, and a part of him was overjoyed that she loved him so much that she would be willing to come up here, but he was desperately worried for her and Laura. His wife and unborn child being up here *so* raised the stakes, because now it wasn't just him.

God, Nick had *better* turn Stonebrook into a fortress, because the most precious treasures on Earth were here now...his wife and unborn child.

In the end, he ended up in the sun room, sitting in his favorite spot, his tail in his lap and looking out over the front lawn, still feeling a little foolish over the fight. He'd never had a leg to stand on, and all he did was shout at the femme he loved for no real reason. He hadn't made Jessie cry, but he did make her fairly angry, and she said some very choice and unpleasant things to him about not wanting her to be with him. He picked at the fur in his bushy tail absently as the sun lowered enough to shine right into his face, scratching through the three colors in his tail, the red, the white band,

and then the black tip; the white-banded Vulpan tail that was as much a signature of the family as the eyes.

The door opened, and Vil stepped in. She hobbled across the sun room on her crutches as he sighed and looked away, back to the window. She awkwardly sat down by his feet and put her crutches on the floor beside her, then leaned back on her paws and looked up at the ceiling. “So,” she hummed lightly.

“Vil,” he sighed.

“Don’t let it eat too much at you, bro,” she told him. “All couples fight sometimes. So, did you win or lose?”

He burst into rueful laughter. “What do you think?”

“That you wouldn’t be up here brooding if you won,” she smiled at him. “Don’t worry about it, bro. I know you won’t believe this, but Jessie means as much to me as she does to you.”

“Yeah, you’re right, I don’t believe it,” he said with a wry smile. “I never knew you had thoughts like that about my wife, sis.”

She laughed, then winced. “Don’t make me laugh, bro, it hurts,” she protested, then she reached down and patted his foot and ankle. “So, the rebel children of Lucas Vulpan are together again,” she mused. “What kind of mischief are we planning for tomorrow?”

“Trying to convince my wife to go home,” he answered, looking out the window. “Then I think I’ll invite Zach over here, shoot him in the head, and bury him out near the autumn cottage.”

“That sounds fun,” she laughed. “We should send it RSVP. Now, since that’s over, mind telling me what your problem is?”

“I don’t want her here, Vil!”

“I know you don’t. I’m not particularly happy with her being here either, but as far as I can see it, she’s safer here than anywhere else. At least here, she’s safe in the fold.”

“The fold,” he said, then he blurted it out. “Will I be taking home the same wife I married, Vil?” he asked. “Three months here, three months to find out what it’s like to be rich. How is it going to change her, sis? Every day, she’ll have maids to clean for her, butlers to wait on her, cooks to make her anything she wants. Will I take home the same femme that came here, Vil? Money changes furs. It’s a curse. Is it going to change my wife? Am I going to go home and hear *I wish* for the next year every time she does the laundry?”

“That’s a bit unfair, Kit,” Vil told him. “And you know better than that. That femme loves you, she loves you more than I’ve ever seen a femme love a male. You think a few months here is going to change her? Will it change *you*?”

“Of course not,” he told her. “I *left* all this, Vil. I know what to expect. Jessie doesn’t. She doesn’t know what it’s like to be waited on paw and foot. She doesn’t know what it’s like to be rich.”

“Do *you*? Will three months in here being waited on like the king of Siam change you? It’s been a long time since you’ve been rich, bro. Six years. Who’s to say that you don’t get really comfy in here and remember what it is you’ve been missing? I’ll help, of course,” she smiled at him. “I

want you and Jessie to get nice and acclimated to the life to which you *should* be accustomed, because you are a *Vulpan*.”

“Vil,” he said warningly.

“So, you’ll have me here trying to spoil you rotten,” she grinned. “But you know what I think? I think Jessie is far stronger than you’re giving her credit for. She’s easily as strong as you, and you have the disgusting strength to deny your birthright,” she snorted, which made Kit chuckle in spite of himself. “I think she’ll have fun up here, utterly charm the entire staff the way she charmed the Cessna furs right out of their socks, then go home with your new daughter and settle right back into the life she loves. She’ll see this is as a vacation. A vacation where she gives birth to her daughter, but a vacation nonetheless. And if you don’t believe that, then you don’t really know Jessie as well as you think you do.”

“Knowing and dreading are two different things,” he sighed, leaning the back of his head against the frame. “I don’t want my wife to be corrupted by the curse of money, Vil.”

“I think the only one that can decide if it’s a curse or not is Jessie, Kit,” she answered. “In the meantime, I’ll call Doctor MacNair and arrange a couple of house calls, then have what we’ll need for her to deliver Laura at the house and waiting. You’ll just have watch and see, bro. Jessie just might surprise you.”

“I *don’t* want her to surprise me,” he said quietly.

“Then she might not surprise you,” she said, patting his foot, then awkwardly getting up onto her crutches. “Now, I’m going to go make a few phone calls. Oh, and by the way, Jessie’s looking for you,” she told him, then she hobbled out and closed the door.

That statement told him that Vil would seek Jessie out and tell her where he was. He could move to some other spot and potentially make her mad, just sit there and wait for her to show up, or seek her out himself. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, and a different option forced itself upon him...he fell asleep.

“Kit,” a soft voice called, stirring him from his nap. “Wake up, handsome fox.”

He looked up to see Jessie leaning over him, or at least as much as her pregnancy would allow.

“Are you alright, love?” she asked, sitting down on the padded sill beside him.

“I...yeah, I guess. Are you still mad?”

“A little,” she admitted. “I talked to Vil.”

“And of course, she won’t keep her mouth shut,” he sighed.

She giggled. “You’re being silly, my handsome fox,” she told him.

“No, I don’t want to lose you, pretty kitty,” he said, taking her paw. “And I can lose you to *this* just as easily as everything else.” He motioned towards the window and the huge lawn outside. “What would you have said if I came out and said that one of the reasons I don’t want you here is so you don’t get used to being rich?”

“I’d say you were being ridiculous,” she answered. “Because we’re *not* rich, Kit. We have, what, about ten thousand dollars in the bank?”

“We have about a hundred thousand if you include our T bills and other investments.”

“Well, there you go. How can I get used to being rich when we’re not?”

“Because of this house,” he answered. “Where you’ll be treated like a queen. Money corrupts, Jessie. Half the reason I don’t want it is so *I* don’t get corrupted. I don’t even trust myself with the idea of being rich, for fear I’ll turn into my father. What we have is perfect, love, and I guess I don’t want to risk losing it.”

“I promise you, handsome fox, that you’re not going to lose me to a *house*,” she declared. “Now, Stanley on the other paw,” she noted, which made Kit look at her wildly. She just grinned and winked at him, and he burst into helpless laughter and pulled her into an embrace.

“I do love the boy foxes,” she purred, and her purring continued as she wrapped her arms around him, her paws dropping low and sliding under his shirt to seek out the scars on his back. “But I especially love the ones with only half a left ear and those darling white lines on his back for me to play with.”

“Well, what do you know, I think I meet your requirements,” he told her, holding her tightly. “I’m sorry I yelled at you, love, but I just hate the idea of you being here.”

“I love you too much to stay away for three months, Kit. And if you think I’ll give birth to Laura without you with us, you’re crazy.”

“I’m going to be terrified every minute,” he complained.

“And I’ll love you for it,” she replied gently. “But this is where I belong, my handsome fox. Not in this house, but by your side. I will never leave you.”

“I love you, Jessie,” he proclaimed, hugging her tightly.

“And I love you, Kit,” she answered, digging her claws into his back, almost painfully.

Jessie wasted no time claiming Stonebrook as her own...but certainly not as a *Vulpan*.

She proved to Kit after just one day that his fear was an irrational one, more a reflection of a fear in himself than one he held for his wife. For one, when they woke up that morning, Jessie made the bed. Then she quite happily rearranged the drawers of the dressers to mirror the arrangement they had at home, having to include some of their clothes that had arrived over the night, thanks to Nick. Nick had returned home to Austin, packed up his things, had Lupe watch over his apartment and gave him the keys to his Expedition, then he came back up also with a couple of boxes of things that Jessie wanted. Jessie’s commercial pilot materials, her knitting bag and books, and a couple of her favorite cookbooks came up with her clothes and their shotguns, and she was quite happy to settle them into the bedroom to make it feel more like home. Once she finished that, she stayed in the bedroom most of the morning, curled up on the couch with the stereo playing that annoying tweenie pop music she liked, her knitting bag beside her and one of her books open on the sofa, as she read up on how to make a new kind of sweater.

When the maid came in to make the bed and tidy up, she almost sulked to find out that Jessie had already done it all. She didn’t get out of the room without talking to Jessie first, though, which Kit heard about from the manor’s rumor mill. Jessie had made the maid, one of the younger ones that

Kit didn't know very well named Luann, help her set up her rings to start the sweater, and had quite effectively charmed the vixen into chattering away with her like they were old friends.

Kit had left her in the bedroom, to her own devices, because Vil was quite serious about him being involved in the operations of the board. He certainly didn't want to do it, but she was quite insistent. So, in his father's old office, Kit listened on a phone as the board discussed some matter involving transportation fees for steel to ship it from mills in Pennsylvania to the main yards in New Hampshire and Norfolk. Kit spent most of his time listening for the voice of his uncle Jake, but Jake never said a word until they voted to commission a cost benefit analysis to change their shipping procedures.

After the board meeting, Vil went home early, and called him from Hart's Crossing. Kendall was making himself at home, moving both into the house and into her bedroom, which was exactly what Vil wanted. Vil had had a taste of living with Kendall and she liked it, so Vil being Vil, she made sure to get what she wanted. She wanted Kendall in her house, *right now*, and that was exactly what she got, despite the fact that it was already a headline on every Boston tabloid that Vil had moved her fiancée into her house before the marriage. Kendall's things had already started arriving from England in discrete shipments, but he wouldn't be bringing a whole lot. He was the one moving into Vil's house, so all he really wanted to bring were clothes and some personal effects and knick-knacks to introduce a sense of his own style into Vil's home.

Kit moved from pretending to be some member of the board to doing his own work at his own company. Kit had arranged it with Rick to be sent projects, but Rick also demanded that he write a series of articles, complete

with pictures, about the history of Stonebrook, some of its architecture and décor, and the things that had happened in the house. Rick wanted him to more or less write a biography about the Vulpan family using the house as a central theme, talking about the males and females that had walked the halls of Stonebrook, as well as those who had labored to build it and worked even today to maintain it. That, Kit didn't mind, for some of the servants were far more interesting than the Vulpans they served.

After lunch, Jessie almost got herself in trouble, for she invaded the kitchen. The three cooks, Carrie, Francis, and Henri, were not used to anyone meddling with *their* kitchen, and Jessie got a little bit of what she dished out to Kit after they moved into the new house. Their hackles weren't up long, though, for the two foxes and the French wolf found Jessie to be sincerely curious about their kitchen and some of their recipes, and from there she learned that the kitchen didn't cook *just* for the Vulpans, but for everyone. The Vulpans' meals were prepared in the main kitchen, while there was a smaller servants' kitchen for anyone to use that was near the servant entrance in the back of the house. Most of the servant apartments on the first floor had their own kitchens, but sometimes a servant would use the main kitchen for something particularly large or challenging, or required the special appliances they kept in the main kitchen...which had *everything*. Kit came into the kitchen to scrounge up something to eat and found Jessie standing right in the middle of the chefs, an apron around her expanded belly and laughing as she kneaded a bowl full of what looked like bread dough.

"Henri is teaching me how to make French bread from scratch!" she told him with an excited grin.

“I think I have already taught you, madam,” Henri said in his slight French accent. “You have made that dough yourself, with no help from me!”

“Thank goodness my oven at home is big enough to bake a whole loaf,” she said in relief.

Kit went back to his work, finishing a small research project and then starting on the last of the main research projects for the election special, which was the historical nature of the election itself. It was historic in that an African-American mixed breed was a nominee, it was historic in the fact that the Republican nominee was the oldest nominee for first time, it was historic in the amount of money spent, and it was historic in that, if the rumors were true, McCain was going to select a femme to be his running mate...so, if that did in fact happen, they were guaranteed either a mixed breed or a femme in the executive, and both were firsts. Pat was finishing up the convention work, and he'd also done the work on the Electoral College, but Kit was going to do this work and leave Pat available to do the day to day research the writers needed, since he was there and could more easily talk to them. They were going to do two articles for each side, the first pointing out the historic nature of the election concerning that candidate, and then a second that would exhaustively go over the platform and beliefs of the candidate so the readers would have a better idea of where they stood on the issues.

When it was about time for dinner, Kit returned to the kitchen to find Jessie right there with the cooks, teaching *them* some of Kit's favorite recipes as she shook a dab of spice into a pan holding her special homemade spaghetti sauce. And what was probably more surprising, Muffy was standing nearby watching. Where Vil and Terry had left the manor to

go home and go back to New Orleans, Muffy had stayed over. She'd woken up around noon, went swimming, worked out in the gym, then she'd vanished for a while, but now she'd resurfaced in the kitchen, gabbing away happily with Jessie. It wasn't surprising that she'd vanished, since Stonebrook was a very large place and it was very easy to vanish from sight in a place so big, and Kit figured she'd gone home. "I thought you went home, cousin," Kit said as he came in.

"Nah, I took a nap," she answered. "Jessie's gonna teach me how to shoot skeet after dinner!"

"I will if I can," she answered. "Nick said he was going to track down a portable trap launcher and set it up out where we won't accidentally shoot anything. He brought our shotguns, love," she told Kit with a smile. "You can get in more practice!"

"Where is Nick anyway?"

"Well, he finished his inspection of the grounds, then he made a few phone calls and disappeared," Jessie answered. "He came into the kitchen right after lunch to tell me he was going out. He promised to look into a trap launcher while he was out."

"I guess that works. Spaghetti?"

"Mmm-hmm," she answered.

"I'm amazed they're letting you cook."

"She said she would cook for you, Master Kit, and we would cook for your guests," Carrie said, a touch annoyed.

“I said I’d cook so you could learn Kit’s favorite recipes,” Jessie said. “But you owe me recipes in return! I want to go home with a bigger cookbook!”

Carrie actually laughed. “We could let you copy some of our recipes,” Carrie mused, looking at Henri. “But not the secret ones.”

“*Oui*, there are special Stonebrook recipes we keep top secret,” the wolf agreed, smiling at Francis. “Recipes only the three of us know.”

“Well, we could train her to be a real chef,” Francis speculated. “She’s not that bad.”

Jessie laughed. “God, Sheila will kill me when she hears that you’ve been teaching me recipes!”

“We are very surprised Miss Sheila has such an interest in cooking,” Henri said.

“Interest? It’s almost an obsession,” Jessie laughed. “She owns nearly an entire bookshelf full of cookbooks, from pastries to barbecue, and just about every tradition. She even has a cookbook on *Turkish* recipes,” she said. “She just needs to be taught how to use those cookbooks the right way, and I think she’ll be a good chef. She certainly has the desire.”

“Sheila found her dream,” Muffy giggled. “She has her restaurant, I have my nightclub! Maybe we should open them side by side here in Boston,” she mused. “We could even connect them together! Fine dining, then a night of fun!”

“Why settle with just one?” Jessie asked her. “Build one here in Boston, then another someplace where it’s warm, like in Florida. That way you get the summer and the winter crowds.”

“I think just one will do to start out,” Muffy smiled. “Once I get the hang of running a business, then maybe I’ll think about building another one.”

“Well, you’ll have name recognition, cousin,” Kit told her. “I think you’d get a lot of business because everyone will want to come to the nightclub run by a Vulpan. After all, the whole city knows how Vulpans love to party.”

“So true,” she laughed in agreement.

They had a very un-Vulpan dinner of spaghetti, homemade Italian garlic bread, and salad in the kitchen, at the bay table, and what shocked the cooks even more was that Jessie had them join them. They looked very uncomfortable sitting with two Vulpans and a Vulpan by marriage, so they ate in silence and listened as Jessie and Muffy chattered away happily, talking about nothing in particular. Muffy liked his wife a great deal, and it was no surprise that she hadn’t left the manor yet. But Muffy was still a Vulpan in her behavior. She made the cooks get her everything she wanted, even had Francis spoon spaghetti onto her plate for her, and demanded fine wine from the cellar with her spaghetti. Jessie tolerated her behavior as understanding that Muffy felt like it was proper behavior here in Stonebrook.

Dinner broke up, and irked Muffy a bit, because Jessie gently chided her about not putting her plate in the sink. “That’s what the servants do!” she protested.

“I think it won’t kill you to carry your plate to the sink once in your life, Muffy,” Jessie grinned at her. “I’ll take you out and show you my shotgun if you do.”

“Okay!” she said immediately, jumping up with her plate in her paw.

Kit could only chuckle. What was it about the Williams clan that tamed the Vulpans?

Jessie took Muffy out to a far corner of the manicured lawn in an area she had Stanley proclaim as safe, out where the archery target used to be set up; archery was one of Dad’s hobbies. Stanley warned everyone to stay clear of that area as Jessie taught Muffy about safe gun usage, not even letting her hold it while empty until she fully understood the dangers involved. Kit didn’t go with them, for Vil called him to tell him about what had happened that day. Kit was up in the bedroom when she called, looking over the *huge* video library his father had amassed, some thousand or more DVD’s, which were all arrayed in neat shelves in the smaller closet, which had become a media storage room. There were no new movies in that collection, but hundreds and hundreds of older ones. “So, Zach finally came out of his hiding place?” he asked.

“Yup, he went to Oak Hill earlier today,” she answered. “From what I heard, Alicia is utterly pissed off that Zach gave up Stonebrook without a fight. That reminds me, what happened to all their stuff?”

“It’s boxed up in the pool house,” he answered. “I’m going to have Stanley get it out of here tomorrow.”

“Well, that’ll just pour salt all over Alicia’s wounds,” Vil said with an evil chuckle. “And, as expected, he knows Jessie is up here now, and he’s predictably pissed. But, the main thing is, I’ve invited all three of them to have little talk with me tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“To capitalize on their chagrin,” she answered. “Their plot to kill me failed, and they have to know that I’m pretty annoyed with them right now. I’m going to make it common knowledge, as well as your determination to hold Stonebrook. I might be able to wrestle a concession out of them,” she chuckled.

“What is that?”

“The one thing Zach does not want, no matter what, is for your daughter to be born in that house, bro,” she told him. “And you made it clear that you’re pretty pissed off and you have no intention of leaving Stonebrook until you’ve established your residency. And neither of us are too happy with Jessie being up here, because I don’t want her to see how nasty we get. So, I’ll offer Zach a deal. He signs away his stake in Stonebrook and agrees never to set foot on the grounds again, and in return you and Jessie will pack up and go back to Austin. He might jump on it, because he doesn’t relish the idea of you being up here either. Despite everything, Zach has to admit that you’ve gotta be tough and smart if you survived everything Dad threw at you, and he might not feel very safe with you only three miles away. And he certainly doesn’t want both of us up here together. So, he very well might go for it to get you out of the house and out of Boston.”

“I seriously doubt that, sis,” Kit said. “He won’t give up his claim on Stonebrook because he can’t pretend to be the head of the family from Swan Cove. If he relinquishes Stonebrook, he’s all but admitting the fact that he’s given up, and we win.”

“Possible, but I’m gonna offer him anyway. I want the idea of it floating out there.”

“Eh, I’d rather take a boat up to his manor and shoot him.”

She giggled. “I share that sentiment,” she said impishly. “Is Jessie becoming a debutante?”

Kit chuckled ruefully. “Last I saw, she was taking Muffy down to teach her how to shoot a shotgun. And no, she’s not becoming a debutante. *She* cooked dinner.”

“Wow, and Carrie didn’t try to shave the fur off her tail?”

“She gave her a few dirty looks,” Kit chuckled. “Jessie’s just being her usual sweet, charming self.”

“I told you not to worry.”

“We’ll see if that holds in a month,” he grunted. “After she gets used to the idea that they’ll cook and clean for her.”

“I’m telling you, bro, stop worrying,” she told him, a bit sternly.

“Meh. How’s your leg feeling?”

“It doesn’t hurt as much today as yesterday,” she answered. “But it still throbs all the time. I have an appointment with the doctor tomorrow morning. They’re going to inspect my leg and change the bandage on my arm. God it *itches*,” she complained. “They said it’s because my fur is growing back. They *shaved* my arm, from the elbow to the wrist!” she complained. “They even shaved off the unburned fur!”

“They needed to clear the fur out from under the bandage,” he told her. “And they didn’t want your fur matting into the burn.”

“It’s not even that bad!” she complained.

“Let them be the judge of that.”

“I’ll buy the hospital and fire the lot of them if they shaved my fur off for no good reason,” she fumed.

Kit chuckled. “How was your first night living with Kendall?”

“Almost insufferable,” she growled. “He wants to baby me. Between him, Stav and Marcus, and my servants, I can’t even settle into a chair without five pillows being shoved in my face, but he’s the worst of the lot. He’s almost as bad as Jessie was when you were hurt!”

“Well, that just proves he loves you,” Kit told her.

“That or his father will kill him if he goes home unmarried,” she said darkly. “It’s all about self preservation for him.”

“Just put him in bed, grab hold of him, and make him hold still until he falls asleep. That’s one of Jessie’s favorite tactics against me.”

“If I do that, I’ll be doing something that my doctors told me not to do,” she said with a wicked little tilt to her voice. “I could barely keep my paws off him last night.”

“Don’t,” Kit told her. “I’m sure you can find some way to keep your leg immobilized. Maybe strap it down, or maybe you can just keep that leg up in the air or something.”

There was an embarrassed silence from the phone that made Kit smirk. “Don’t start with me, young male,” she finally said. “I’m practically your mother!”

“Then stop saying things like that in the first place,” he teased in reply. “You forget, I’m a married male, sis. I have *experience*.”

“What Vulpan doesn’t?” she laughed in reply. “Except maybe your wife,” she teased.

“I’ve corrupted her in that regard,” he said dryly. “I may be the only partner she’s ever had, but she’s very...daring in bed.”

“Oh, do tell,” Vil said with amusement.

“I’ll leave that up to your imagination, sis, and you won’t be far from the mark,” he drawled, which made her laugh. “When are you coming over again?”

“Probably tomorrow night.” She was quiet a moment. “So, how is Stonebrook?”

“The same as it was yesterday, sis.”

“No, bro. How is it?”

He was quiet a moment. “I still don’t feel comfortable here, sis,” he answered. “I don’t think I ever will. I feel like an invader, and I almost feel like that bastard is watching me from the walls. Jessie made me show her everything there is in the manor, and for a little while it felt...I don’t know, fun to be here, showing her the secret rooms and the vault and such. But when she’s not here, this place presses in on me like I’m under a thousand blankets.”

“You showed her the secret rooms?”

“Yeah, all of them.”

“Even the vault?”

“Especially the vault,” he retorted. “I don’t feel that bad in the master bedroom since I guess you had them decorate it to resemble our room back

home, but I just don't feel...happy here."

"Just give it time, bro. That feeling will fade over time."

"I dunno. I don't think so."

The door opened, and Stanley looked in. "Master Kit, Miss Bess is at the front gate and wants to come in."

"Bess?" he said in surprise. "My cousin Bess?"

"Yes, Master Kit," he nodded. "She's at the front gate and wants to come in."

"Why?"

"To talk to you."

"Huh," he grunted. "Vil, Stanley says that Bess is here, and she wants to talk to me. Did you know about it?"

"No, but maybe Muffy got in touch with her," she answered. "Invite her in, bro, and see what she has to say."

"Is she here alone, Stanley?"

"Yes, Master Kit. She's in her personal car."

"Alright, let her in. I'm coming down."

Bess. Why would Bess be here? She was one of the most notorious Vulpans in Boston, the leader of the Party Pack. She was 25 years old, the oldest child of Uncle Tom, and ever since she graduated from Weston, with surprisingly good marks at that, not legacy grades, she'd descended into a frenzy of hedonism. There wasn't a drug Bess wouldn't try, or a male she wouldn't lay, and her entire life revolved around the next party she planned

to attend. Bess' outrageous behavior had been a staple in the Boston and even the national tabloids, on par with Paris Hilton and Britney Spears, and had often been the nexus of very angry fights within the family. The other elders had ridden Tom for years to do something about Bess, but Tom was reluctant to do so. Kit felt that ever since they'd discovered the truth about Dahlia's behavioral problems, that Dahlia was schizophrenic and manic depressive, Tom was afraid that Bess too was suffering from some kind of mental condition that she covered up with sex, drugs, booze. Tom would rather have a daughter that was intentionally broken than another daughter that had mental problems. But why was she here? Had Muffy got in touch with her and told her to come back to Boston? If so, why did she come here? He guessed he'd find out, but he wondered at it as he jogged down the servant stairs near the master bedroom, that put him in a side corridor that would take him to the main hallway that led to the garage.

Bess was...harmless, as things went. She was old enough to understand what happened to him when he was hit by the car, but Bess was Bess. If she was sober enough to comprehend what happened, it would have been a miracle.

He went out into the courtyard just as she pulled up. She was driving a 2002 Porsche, a surprisingly old car, but from the sound of it, it was well maintained. She looked at him through the windshield, her eyes wide, then she got out. Bess was like Vil, a bit petite and thin, a slender little vixen whose ability to drink was *legendary* in Boston. Bess could drink absolutely anyone under the table. Bess had a slightly shorter muzzle and long auburn hair she kept tied back in a pony tail, and she didn't look quite herself. She was almost always dressed to a tee and with her hair done and claws manicured, but this Bess almost looked...*normal*. She had her hair tied back

in a simple tail, and was wearing a very expensive sleeveless yellow silk blouse with a pair of designer blue jeans. “God, when did you get so tall, Luke?” she asked in surprise.

“You haven’t seen me since I was fifteen, Bess, and don’t call me Luke,” he answered. “My name is Kit.”

“I’m never going to remember that,” she said seriously. “May I come in?”

“As soon as you answer me one question. Where the hell were you, cousin?” he asked harshly. “I *needed* you, and you weren’t there! Nobody was there!”

“Where was I? The same place I am every day, cousin, trying to forget I’m in this family,” she answered seriously. “Now let’s go inside. I need a drink,” she complained, rubbing her muzzle.

He didn’t take her far. There was a small entertainment room near the garage mainly where one could wait for a limo to be brought around, but it doubled as a TV room. “Bring me something to drink,” Bess ordered of Stanley as he approached. “Wine, whiskey, I don’t care. Just make sure it has alcohol in it.”

“Go ahead. Bring me some tea, too, please.”

“At once, Master Kit,” Stanley replied with a short bow, then he scurried off.

Bess sat on the couch, and Kit sat on the other side of it, and they turned towards each other. “Uncle Zach is out of control,” she said. “He called me yesterday and made some *really* ugly threats if I didn’t openly support him taking over for Vil. He threatened to get me evicted, take my

car, make sure that no club in Boston would let me in, and said the next time I get pulled over, he'll make sure I get arrested and convicted of drunk driving and *go to jail*," she said, bristling slightly. "I've always tried to just stay the hell away from the family, kinda like you, Luke. The only family I really see often are my brothers and sister and Mary. But this is really just totally unfair," she fumed. "Us girls aren't *allowed* to have any say in the family, and now he wants us to try to pressure Vil to leave?"

That one sentence actually told Kit a great deal about Bess, since he didn't know her that well. Sheila had some similar attitudes, that since she was a femme why should she even care, since her voice meant almost nothing in the family. A lot of Sheila's partying was because she had nothing else to do, but some of it was because she felt as if no matter what she did, she'd never get any respect in the family...so why bother? It seemed that Bess shared a similar outlook, but unlike Sheila, Bess had never let go of her bitterness, so she drank away the pain. There was also that she was a member of Tom's family, and Tom's family had been the black sheep of the Vulpan clan until Kit rebelled against his father. Bess herself had been a part of that when she was growing up, since Tom's oddness started it, her wildness had perpetuated it, and Dahlia had cemented it. Bess had been as much a hellion as a child as she was an adult, but despite that, she'd gotten good grades, hinting that Bess was smarter than the family thought.

"What do you expect, Bess?" Kit asked. "One way he can exercise his control over the family is to make you do what he wants."

"But it's not *fair*!" she almost whined. "Why are they dragging me into this?"

“Because they can, I imagine,” he answered. “What you have to decide is what you want to do.”

“I want them to leave me alone,” she retorted. “I want to be left alone and go back to my own life.”

“Good luck with that,” Kit grunted. “That’s what I’ve been trying to do since I was sixteen, and where am I now? Back here. This family is a damn black hole. Nobody can get out.”

“I’ll agree to that much,” she said, and then her eyes brightened when the door opened and Stanley brought in a cup of tea and a glass of wine. She downed almost half of it with one swallow, then smiled in satisfaction. “Much better,” she sighed, leaning back and swirling the wine in the glass as Kit took a sip of tea. “So, what’s it like, cousin? Being married to a *cat*.”

“You’re treading on dangerous ground, Bess,” Kit warned in a dark tone. “I’ll boot your tail out of here so fast your fur will be left behind if you make even one comment about my wife.”

“Did you hear me insult you? I just asked what it was like,” she said. “I’d never marry anything but a fox myself, but I’ve had quite a few lovers who weren’t foxes. I was just wondering what it was like living with a cat.”

“The same as if she was a fox,” he answered. “But that’s beside the point. What you have to ask yourself is what you want the rest of your life to be like. Do you want to live the rest of your life under Uncle Zach’s foot, or live the rest of your life with Vil, who’ll just demand you keep the outrage restricted to private clubs?”

“I don’t want to take sides,” she said. “I just want to be left alone!”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen now, cousin,” he told her seriously. “Think about it. They tried to *kill* Vil. Do you think they’re going to let someone just stand on the sidelines right now? I rather doubt it.”

“Do you really think they did it?”

“I can’t say for absolute certain, but that’s just *way* too much of a coincidence to be a coincidence,” he said. “Vil’s chopper crashes just days after she suspends Zach from the company and starts getting rid of the yes-furs the elders had on the board? I’m convinced someone tried to kill her, cousin. That’s why I’m up here. I think Zach did it, so I’m here to push Zach out of Stonebrook. I’ll stay here until he can’t come back, no matter how long it takes. He will *never* set foot in Stonebrook again.”

“I don’t want to get involved in this, Luke!” she told him. “No matter what I do, it’s going to be the wrong choice, and *someone* is going to punish me! It’s not fair! If I do what Uncle Zach wants, Vil will skin me and hang my hide on her wall. If I don’t, Zach will make my life hell! It’s just not fair! I don’t have anything to do with anything! Why can’t they leave me alone? Why?”

“Why didn’t my father leave me alone after I left?” he asked bluntly. “You’re dealing with furs that don’t take no for an answer, Bess, on either side. You’re gonna have to pick a side and deal with the consequences.”

“Every time I pick a side, I get screwed,” she complained. “What should I do, Luke?”

“For one, stop calling me that,” he said. “Don’t call me by my father’s name.”

“I can’t help it,” she told him. “You were *always* Luke to me. Besides, they called your father Lucas, not Luke.”

“Well, get used to it,” he told her. “My name is *Kit*. Say it, Bess. Say my name.”

She laughed ruefully. “Kit,” she obeyed.

“Second, I’m not the one you should ask, because I’m obviously biased,” he continued. “I’m supporting Vil. Not because she’s my sister, but because she’s the only member of this family that has ever been on my side. I can’t just walk away from that commitment and not support her when she needs me.”

“God, I remember that,” she sighed, taking another sip of wine. “When your father warned that anyone that tried to see you would get disowned, I think I spent three straight days drunk out of my mind. I think that’s when I knew that this family had gone to hell. I was actually happy when your father died,” she admitted.

“You’re not the only one,” Kit agreed, taking another sip of tea. “I thought I was finally free of the family after he died...but nooooooooo,” he sighed. “They interfered with my life as soon as I settled down.”

“You were going out with a cat, cousin,” Bess told him. “It’s no wonder.”

“Yeah, well, I married her too,” he declared.

“Whatever makes you happy, cousin,” she shrugged. “I wouldn’t do it, but if it makes you happy, who am I to argue?”

“That’s another reason why I’m up here,” he said. “If Zach is running this family, you know he will never give me and Jessie a second’s peace. I’m up here fighting for my marriage as much anything else. If he takes control, he’ll start doing to me what dear old Dad did, ruining my life until I do what he wants.” He took another sip of tea. “That’s the fate waiting for all of us if he takes control, Bess. That’s why you’d better pick a side, because if he’s running things, he won’t leave you alone. He’ll make you marry some blue-blood and settle down.”

“Why would he? I made sure that no respectable male would want me,” she said, giving him a steady look.

Kit chuckled. “So, there was a method to your madness.”

“Damn right,” she nodded. “Do you think any male in New England will want to marry Bess Vulpan?”

“Actually, quite a few,” Kit told her. “Just for the tie to the family. But he’d never love you, and you’d probably never love him. And I’m sure Zach would find some male who could keep you under control.”

“Hmph,” she snorted, finishing her wine. “They forget, the money’s in *my* name, and I’m not dumb enough to open joint accounts without one hell of a prenup. What can my husband do? Use harsh language?”

“That or the unpadded side of his paw,” he answered.

“Oh, hell no would I let any male lay a paw on me!” she declared hotly.

“Mmm-hmm. I’m sure Maxine used to say that too,” he said, taking another sip of tea.

She blew out her breath. “It’s just not fucking fair!” she said, slamming her empty glass on the table, and almost breaking it. “What am I supposed to do? I’m damned if I do and damned if I don’t!”

“Well, you can always go with the third option,” he said.

“What is that?”

“Tell Zach to go to hell, then get out of Boston so he can’t retaliate.”

“There’s nowhere I can go to stop that!” she protested.

“I don’t think Zach can reach far into England, Bess,” he said. “Matty’s already over there, hiding out with her kids. You could always ask her if you can come visit.”

“Matty doesn’t like me, Luke. Kit,” she said before he could say something.

“Well...I guess there’s always Austin,” he said, with honest reluctance. “Vil controls Austin, and Zach can’t do much of anything there. Sheila’s already there, so she could show you around, help you get settled in.”

“Austin? Why would I want to live in Austin?”

“Would you rather live under Zach’s foot?” he asked pointedly. “It’s a huge college town, so there’s plenty of clubs and things for you to do, and as long as you’re there, Zach can’t touch you. I guess I could let you hide out down there, if you support Vil.”

She gave him a suspicious look. “What do you mean, *if* I support Vil?”

“Austin is *my* home, Bess,” he told her calmly. “Sheila’s only there because I allow it. I actually kinda like Sheila, she’s a lot of fun, but if you tell her that I’ll strangle you. But, if you want my protection, it’s gonna cost

ya in the form of rejecting Uncle Zach and supporting Vil openly.” He took another sip of tea. “And I think you’re not far from that already. You don’t *want* Zach to be in charge, and trying to run your life, do you?”

“No!”

“Then what’s so hard about it? Just pack up your stuff and move to Austin, flipping off Zach every step of the way. Let him just *try* to get revenge on you when you’re in the one place in this country where he has absolutely no influence or control. Once Vil has control of the family again, move back.”

She leaned back on the couch, pondering his words. “You’re absolutely sure he can’t do anything to me?”

“He never managed to do anything to me. And he tried to go after Terry’s girlfriend, but he didn’t get far at all. Vil *owns* Austin, cousin.”

“Is she *really* a prostitute?” she asked in a nearly conspiratorial voice.

“She used to be,” he said honestly. “She’s very beautiful, and she came from a broken home, so she realized she could make a *lot* of money doing it. She worked in a sex club basically to work her way through college, but she saved up so much money she didn’t really *need* college to make it. She finished college anyway because she likes what she was taking in school, and now she’s just having fun taking flying lessons while she decides whether or not she’s going to work...and she could do it easily. There’s a demand for chemists with Master’s degrees. She’s not rich, but she never has to work a day in her life if she doesn’t want to, even if she stops seeing Terry.”

“Huh. All I ever hear about her is that she’s a slut gold-digger trying to bilk Terry out of his money.”

“Allison has her own money,” Kit said simply. “She’s not dating Terry because he’s rich. She’s dating him because he wouldn’t stop chasing her. And watch what you say about her, because both me and Sheila are her friends. She’s not in any way what the elders are saying she is.”

The door opened, and both Muffy and Jessie were outside the door, Jessie holding her skeet shooting shotgun. “Bess!” Muffy said with a smile. “I thought that was your car in the courtyard!”

“Muffy!” she said with a smile, standing up and accepting a hug from the taller vixen. “How’s my favorite streaker?”

Muffy laughed. “Reformed,” she grinned. “Oh! Bess, this is Jessie, Kit’s wife. Jessie, this is Bess Vulpan. Revered leader of the Party Pack!” she said with a giggle.

“I don’t know about revered,” Bess laughed, offering her paw to Jessie. “It’s nice to meet you, Jessie.”

“You too,” she said, just a touch defensively. Jessie knew better than to accept a Vulpan’s friendship at its face. Kit had taught her well in that regard.

“What are you doing here, Bess? You know that Uncle Zach is gonna be pissed that you came here.”

“He’s why I’m here,” she answered. “He threatened to ruin my life if I don’t support him against Vil!”

“He didn’t!” Muffy gasped.

“Oh yes he did!” she answered. “But Kit made an offer.”

“What’s that?”

“Hide in Austin, where he can’t touch me,” she answered. “I don’t want to get involved in this, but if I don’t do *something*, Uncle Zach will come after me!”

“So, since he proved he’s a dick, don’t support *him*,” Muffy giggled. “Be on the winning side!”

“You’re taking sides, cousin?”

“Where am I right now, Bess?” she asked simply. “I’d be here anyway. I *adore* Jessie, and I can’t very well let her be up here by herself! She needs a girl with her. Males just don’t understand,” Muffy grinned at Kit. “She’s trapped inside the manor until they go home, so I’m gonna be here all the way up until school starts to keep her company!”

“And just who said you’re staying here, Muffy?”

“Why Kit, would you leave your wife with no company at all?” Muffy grinned at him.

“What am I, raw lobster?” he protested.

“You’re a *boy*,” she said dismissively. “Besides, I’ve taken sides. Do you think I’m *safe* out there? Uncle Zach would skin me alive if he could get his paws on me. I’m staying in here, where it’s safe.”

“I could stay here,” Bess said hopefully.

“No,” Kit said adamantly. “I’ll trust Muffy up to a point because she was one of the *few* who went out of her way to make contact with me. She came down to my wedding. I’ll trust her way more than I’ll trust the rest of

the family. If you want our protection, Bess, then you should look at taking a little vacation in Austin.”

“But I don’t *want* to leave,” she almost whined. “This is my home! I don’t know what I’d do if I lived somewhere else!”

“Well, then you’d better decide what you’re going to do, because if you’re staying up here, *someone* is going to make you pay for your decision.”

“This is so unfair!”

“Welcome to the real world, Bess,” Kit told her, and not very compassionately. “The simple fact of the matter is that they’re not going to let you just ride the fence on this one. You have to decide who you want running the family, Zach or Vil. Both choices have consequences. If you choose Zach, he runs your life until he dies. If you choose Vil, Zach might retaliate. What you want to do is up to you.”

“Why don’t you talk to Vil, cousin?” Muffy asked. “It won’t hurt, and maybe she’ll have a different idea.”

“I don’t know,” she said, actually wringing her paws.

“Look at it this way, Bess. What can it hurt?” Jessie asked in a gentle voice. “You’ve heard what your uncle has to offer you, from the sound of it. See what Vil has to offer you. And then, once you know what each side has to offer, make a choice.”

“You make it sound like I’m buying a new purse,” she laughed mockingly.

“No, you’re choosing who’s going to run your life for the next thirty or forty years,” Kit told her. “Find out what Vil intends to do, then decide where you want to stand. And there’s always Austin,” he reminded her.

“Sure, why not?” Jessie asked. “It’s a big city and there’s plenty to do, and Sheila is there to keep you company,” she urged.

“I don’t know,” she said nervously.

“Then go find out,” Kit told her. “Vil is at home. Go see her.”

“I...I guess,” she said. “But you promise to let me go to Austin if I decide to?”

“As long as you don’t cause any trouble,” he warned. “Unlike Boston, I actually have a *good* reputation in Austin, and I don’t want you to ruin it. If you go down there, you keep the debauchery to a minimum. Sheila can show you where you can go have fun without attracting attention.”

“Attention is the *last* thing I want right now,” she said with a morose expression. “I guess I’ll go talk to Vil,” she said. “Thanks for the wine, and your time, cousin.”

“I’m always here to listen,” he told her.

She actually hugged him. “I’m glad you’re home, Luke,” she said quietly to him.

“I don’t think you’re entirely happy I’m here,” he chuckled ruefully as he patted her on the back.

“You don’t understand,” she said. “We *know* you know what to do. You lived by yourself for six years! You know what’s going on, and you

know how to make it, how to deal with these things,” she declared. “So who better to come to ask for advice but someone who *knows*?”

“I don’t know about that,” Kit said. “But you’d better get moving. Vil has her fiancée there now, so you might want to get there early, before she gets...distracted.”

She giggled. “The Ice Queen is melting,” she said. “That’s a good sign. How’s her leg?”

“She’ll be fine,” Kit told her. “She’ll be getting married on crutches, but she’ll be alright.”

They saw Bess back to her car, and she waved to them as she turned in the courtyard and headed back down towards the gate. “Wow, did Zach really do that?” Muffy asked.

“She said he did,” Kit answered.

She laughed. “He’s making it easy for us!”

“He’s certainly not doing himself any favors,” Kit said, rubbing this finger along the edge of his jaw. “He’s acting the same way he acted towards me when we got married. He just can’t bring himself to *ask* when he’s used to *commanding*. And it seems he thinks the cousins will just fall all to pieces and get under his tent when he barks threateningly at them. And that might be the key to getting rid of him,” he said, turning quickly and taking his cell phone out of his pocket and speed-dialing Vil. “Sis,” he called when she answered.

“What’s up, bro?”

“I’m sending Bess over to you,” he said. “She showed up here, and she’s frightened. Uncle Zach threatened to ruin her life if she doesn’t side with him.”

“Well, that’s certainly his usual operating procedure,” she said with dark amusement.

“I told Bess if she sided with you, she could go to Austin where Zach can’t touch her,” he said. “And I think if you made similar promises to the other cousins, you’d garner some real support.”

“Of course,” she chuckled. “He wants to be the bad cop, I’ll be the good one. But sending Bess to Austin, that’s damn clever, bro,” she said with an appreciative catch in her voice. “I’ll just let Zach threaten each cousin, then tell them I’ll put them someplace nice and safe where Zach can’t touch them.”

“Woah, woah, you mean send *all* the cousins to Austin?”

“Those that want to go,” she said lightly. “Zach can’t touch them down there. That’s already been proved. I’ll offer them freedom and *safety*. I think I’ll get quite a few cousins,” she purred. “I think I’ll call Rick and have him do me a favor,” she said to herself.

“Vil, don’t get my friends involved in this,” he warned.

“Trust me, I wouldn’t do anything dangerous,” she said. “But Rick’s there, and he can make a few calls and a few visits for me to check some things out.”

“What things?”

“You’ll see,” she said teasingly. “We wanted the cousins back in Boston to show they want to make their voices heard. This is just gonna help us. Lemme call Rick, bro, I’ll talk to you later.”

“Alright, but don’t get too exotic,” he warned.

“Me? Never,” she laughed, then hung up.

“Well, Vil is waiting for Bess, and she’s talking about sending any cousin afraid to stay to Austin,” he told the femmes.

“Well, that’s good,” Muffy told him. “Now, Jessie, think I can actually *shoot* the gun now?”

“We’ll see,” she smiled at the shorter vixen. “Do you think Vil was serious about sending all the kids to Austin?”

“Fairly,” he answered her. “I don’t much like the idea of a bunch of cousins running around our city, though. They’ll cause all sorts of trouble.”

“Our city,” Jessie giggled.

“It *is* our city, Jess,” he told her. “Vil owns it, but she’s part of the family, so it also belongs to us. Austin is *our* city, the same way Boston belongs to my family. That’s what being a Vulpan is about,” he told her with a dark smile.

“It’s a good thing,” Muffy laughed.

Chapter 34

When Nick returned later that afternoon, he was both bearing gifts and he was also not alone.

He returned at the head of a procession of four rental cars, and from what Kit was told when they arrived, these were professional bodyguards and even a couple of mercenaries that had answered Nick's call for protection for Stonebrook. There were seven of them, and except for two of them, they were all very large, muscular, and very dangerous-looking, much like Stav and Marcus. The two exceptions to that rule were a small, wiry marten with a nick missing from his right ear and, much to Kit's surprise, a very slim, slender German Pinscher femme with her ears unbobbed and her tail undocked, which was unusual for any of the pinscher breeds. Nick had specifically went out of his way to track her down and hire her, and her primary mission was to protect Jessie, in ways that only a femme could when paired with a shy client. Sylvia was the only guard that could follow Jessie anywhere if it became needful, because Jessie would be far too shy and modest to allow a guard to follow her around or be in the room with her when she changed clothes.

Kit got an idea of how serious they were when, after Kit was introduced to them and they all conducted a inspecting sweep of the grounds and every building on the grounds, they armed themselves openly with weapons that were illegal in the United States. Each of them carried a different weapon, but they were all automatic weapons, submachine guns, compact weapons they could easily carry, yet also had considerable

stopping power. They also came with their own radios, which were quickly all synchronized to a common frequency. Additional radios were immediately ordered next-day air for the guards, who used the push to talk feature of their cell phones to communicate both with the other guards and with the staff. They even moved in and set up their own cameras around the manor, focusing on the unfenced boat dock where anyone could tie up on a boat and enter the grounds. These furs had come loaded for bear, and they meant business.

That made Kit feel safer almost immediately.

Nick had arranged a schedule of four hour shifts for the eight of them so there were always at least two on guard and ready at all times, yet no one guard worked so long that he got tired or inattentive, then he brought everyone together, both the normal Stonebrook guards and the new temporary security, and they had a meeting where they coordinated everything and established a chain of command that ended with Nick as the commander of the operation.

The gifts he brought were for Jessie. He had brought back a portable clay pigeon launcher and several boxes of both clay pigeons and shotgun shells, enough to last them quite a while, and he also brought his K80 over-under competition shotgun for her to inspect and play with. Supposedly one of the best competitive shotguns made, it was worth about \$8,000. It had replaceable barrels so the shotgun could fire different gauge shells, making it highly modular, where one K80 could be changed to fire 20 gauge, 12 gauge, or .410 shells. He had set it in front of her in a large black case, and when she opened it she found the weapon and all its different barrels, chokes, and extra parts in padded slots inside. He taught her all about the weapon that evening, how to put it together, how to change the choke, how

to take it apart and clean it, and promised to take her out and shoot trap with her in the morning so she could fire the gun and see if she liked it.

But Jessie was still Jessie. She interrupted Nick's lesson to make dinner, being true to her pledge to cook for them, and forcing the cooks to basically help her as she made beef stroganoff and steamed broccoli with homemade cheese sauce, with a peach cobbler for dessert. Muffy again joined them for dinner, but Clancy also came out of his apartment to eat with them as Nick and a very, very large black bear named Adolph took their first four hour shift. The two guards weren't going to sit with them or follow them around, but they would always be close by as well as helping the normal guards patrol the manor both via cameras out on the grounds and patrols of the fence and river made on golf carts. One guard would be either in the manor or nearby if they were outside, and the other would be actively patrolling or overseeing the guards. After dinner, as Kit worked on a project that Rick had sent him, Jessie finished her lesson with Nick on his K80, then sat down with him in the master bedroom to knit. Jessie was being a little quiet and a bit more considerate of him because she knew that while he wasn't mad at her, he could never stay angry with her, he was still very nervous about the idea of her being in Boston. She had her sweater about a third done, and was finished with the hard parts of the neck and shoulders and was simply knitting her way down to the tail. She would make the sleeves separately and attach them at the end.

He finished the project and sent it to Lilly's workstation from his laptop, then shut it down and closed it. "I'm going down to get some tea, do you want anything?" he asked her.

"I want to watch a movie in a little bit. Can you make some popcorn?" she asked.

“I think we have some around here,” he told her. “Though I’m not sure.”

Kit went down to the kitchen, where Francis was chopping vegetables in preparation for tomorrow’s breakfast. “We have any popcorn, Franny?” he asked as he reached for the pot of tea that was almost always kept available.

“We surely do, Master Kit,” she answered. “We have instant and old-fashioned. Which do you want?”

“Whatever,” he shrugged. “Show me where it is.”

“Aat, we’re having enough trouble keeping your wife out of our kitchen!” she said with a smile. “I’ll make it up for you and send it up as soon as it’s done. Want butter with it?”

“Please, and no salt,” he answered with a thankful nod. “Can I take this?”

“Such a silly question, Master Kit,” she smiled. “Of course! There should be a warmer plate up in your bedroom for a teapot.”

“I, yeah, I saw it. Thanks, Franny.”

He took the tea back upstairs with two cups, for him and Jessie, then put the pot on the warmer plate that was on a small table near the TV over in the living area. “Where’s the popcorn?” Jessie asked as she started a new row in her knitting.

“Franny chased me out of the kitchen, she said she’d make it,” he answered. “Butter and no salt.” He poured tea for both of them and set Jessie’s on the coffee table, then sat down beside her and pulled out his ATP

study book from the endtable, where he'd set it. "I should have brought my guitar," he sighed as he turned to the bookmark and settled in to read.

"I'm sure there's one around here somewhere. What movie do you want to watch?"

"You choose," he told her.

He didn't even get through the first paragraph when Jessie took the book, set it on the coffee table, then snuggled up against him. Kit put his arm around her and put his other paw on her very round belly, sliding it under her shirt to feel her warm, soft, furry tummy. "I'm sorry if you're still angry, my handsome fox, but I just can't be apart from you," she told him, settling her head against his shoulder. "Remember when I went home for Thanksgiving? I couldn't bear feeling that way for three months. I just couldn't."

"I'm not angry with you so much as I'm angry you're here," he told her, nuzzling the top of her head. "I love you, pretty kitty, and while I'm happy you're here, I'm not happy that you're in danger up here. I'm not joking about Uncle Zach, love. If he could find a way to do it, he would *kill* us. His hatred of our marriage is that intense. But, I can also say that if you weren't here, I'd be utterly miserable. Not only would I be apart from you, I'd be here, in this house, where I have nothing but bad memories. Sometimes I think this house hates me."

"It's not the house, love. When you showed me around, you knew *everything* about this place. I'll bet you know more about it than Clancy, and he's been here almost his whole life. And you seemed happy."

"I was happy I'm with you. We could be naked and penniless, and I'd be happy if I was with you, my pretty kitty."

She sighed in contentment and snuggled a little more into his arms. “What femme wouldn’t be happy being in the arms of the most wonderful male in the world?” she asked simply, putting her paw on his side and pulling him a little closer, and she began to purr.

Even after over six months of marriage and months of courtship before that, Kit was still utterly entranced and enthralled by her purring. In a way, it was a way she could control and manipulate him and he knew it, but he was just powerless against it. Anytime she purred, it induced a sense of peace and contentment into him that made everything seem alright with the world. He just sat there and held her, listening to the most beautiful music in the world...at least until the door opened and Stanley came in, carrying a good sized bowl of popcorn. “Your popcorn, Master Kit,” he said, setting it down on the table before them. “Will you need anything else tonight?”

“I don’t think so. Thank you, Stan,” Kit said without opening his eyes.

“Thanks, Stan,” Jessie mirrored, then went right back to purring.

She didn’t forget about the movie, however. She snuggled with him for maybe five more minutes, then she got up and picked a movie from his father’s large collection of older movies. She eventually chose *All The President’s Males*, and they had a nice evening munching popcorn while watching TV on a screen so large that it was almost a movie screen, and with Dolby surround sound supplied thanks to the stereo system. They finished almost all the popcorn, drank a final cup of tea, then went to bed around 10:00, which was almost sinfully early for a Vulpan. Except for those who worked at the shipyard, most Vulpan went to bed around dawn and got up some time after noon.

The next morning, they found a pot of tea and fresh baked scones sitting on a warming plate outside their door, on a table set up just for it. Kit was quietly thankful that the staff was going to respect their privacy, that he wasn't a Vulpan that wouldn't even wake up if a servant came into the room. "Mmm, do I smell tea?" Jessie asked as she stirred.

"Yup, it was outside the door," he answered, pouring a cup for himself. "Morning, pretty kitty. Sleep well?"

"Very well," she answered. "What are you going to do today?"

"First thing I'll talk to Rick. Then I'll pretend to be at the board meeting over the phone, then work on whatever they send me from the office, then just putter until Vil gets here. She said she's coming over tonight after work. Maybe I'll invite Suzy over as well, I'd like to see her."

"Ooh, I can make something nice for them!" she said with sudden excitement, jumping out of bed. Her belly was quite distended now, but wasn't near as big as it would get...but Jessie was *very* pregnant now. Despite that, she was still a sexy beast, and he would never get tired of seeing her without her clothes on. She giggled when he intercepted her on her way to her robe, wrapping his arms around her from behind sensually. "Now that I think of it, we haven't kissed and made up," he said huskily in her ear.

"Go lock the door," she said urgently.

Jessie made him about ten minutes late for the board meeting, getting his conference call set up. He again listened without comment as the board discussed the upcoming labor contract with Avondale, then he happily hung up when Vil called the meeting to an end. He called Rick immediately

afterward, sitting at the desk in the bedroom. “Sorry I’m late, boss, I got... detained,” he said with a chuckle.

“That sounds like a good kind of detainin’,” Rick chuckled.

“Me and Jess were making up after our fight.”

“Yeah, that’s the good kind,” Rick laughed. “First off, open the file I sent to your Blackberry.”

“Okay,” he said, reaching for his Blackberry. He found the file in his inbox and opened it, which turned out to be the spreadsheet of the magazine’s finances. “Hold a sec, I can never read it on this tiny screen,” he said, opening his laptop. He put the phone on speaker and transferred the file to his laptop, then opened it. “Okay, got it. Nice!” he said as he read the bottom line. “Where’d that extra sixteen thousand come from?”

“Actually, that came from Vil,” he said honestly. “She wired it to our account last night. I called her about it, and she said it was for yanking you out of the office for a while. She said sixteen thousand was a fair compensation for losing your services for a while.”

“Pft, you’re not losing my services, I just can’t do anything face to face.”

“Well, we lost a few,” he answered. “Besides, I’m not gonna give it back, Vil would be insulted. And we can use it. I’ve put out the ads for the new workers, son. I’m hiring three more, two writers and another combo writer researcher. When we get them settled in, we’ll do that small expansion plan you wrote up. We should have enough capital built up by mid August.”

“Right on schedule, then,” Kit said with a nod to himself as he perused the figures. “How’s the trip up looking?”

“We got our invites, and so far everyone’s going,” he answered. “We’ve all decided to go as a group, so I’m gonna make thirteen plane reservations today,” he chuckled. “The gang, Martha, and Nawa. Vil invited Sandy too, but Jeffrey said Sandy said she can’t go.”

“School will be back in,” Kit said with a nod. “Sheila shouldn’t be coming either, but she’ll only miss one day if you do it right.”

“She’s chartering a jet to take her up,” he grunted. “She’s bringing Lupe, Sam, and Kevin with her, though. Vil sent them invites as well. She said she’s going to stop in Cincinnati and pick up Jessie’s family on the way, which will make eight.”

“Seven. Ben has a football game the next day, he can’t go.”

“He’ll be there,” Rick told him. “Sheila was talking about it when she visited. Sheila’s leaving on Friday, and will pick up Jessie’s family already in good clothes. They’ll go straight from the airport to the church, then after the reception, she’s taking them right back to Ohio. That way Ben won’t miss his game.”

“Clever girl,” Kit mused. “It also minimizes exposure to the family. How does this week’s issue look?”

“Pretty good,” he answered. “We themed the issue about the upcoming semester, so a lot of that research you did was used. Lilly and Marty did articles about the changing social scene, Barry did an article about how the police are cracking down this semester, and Lilly did a pretty damn good piece about the burgeoning club scene going on down in San An. We have a

couple of election articles and a piece Barry did about the economy and how it's impacting the younger furs. Oh, and our interns for the fall semester have been picked, and one of them has already showed up at the magazine," he chuckled. "A very eager young ferret named Trish. She's cute, too."

"If Martha hears you calling a nubile young college coed cute, she'll neuter you," Kit warned.

Rick laughed. "She showed up like three weeks early, but she's local, so I put her to work. She's born and raised in Austin, lives out in Lakewood. She's still not getting paid and nothing she does until the first day of school counts towards her internship, but she understands that. She just showed up and said she was bored and asked to start her internship now, so I said what the hell. We need a gopher around here."

"Evil dingo, making her work for free," Kit laughed.

"It's called smart business," he answered. "Jeffrey wants Jessie to send her scripts, and tell her I'm waiting for that article she promised me. And where are my pictures?"

"I haven't taken them yet," Kit admitted. "I'll take care of it today. You want pictures of every room?"

"Every one you're willing to show to the world," he answered.

"Well, I guess I can leave out the torture chamber and the satanic cult room that's painted in blood," he mused, which made Rick sputter, then laugh helplessly.

"Remember, you need to write the articles. Make it good, son, this is a chance to show off your manor to the common furs, and also show them

something they've never seen before."

"They've seen a rich mansion on TV before, Rick."

"No, son, they'll see *your* house. You always say that everyone has a story. Well, every *thing* also has a story. I don't just want the stories of the furs in the house, son, I want the story of the house itself. So pick your articles based on the house. Remember, they all have to relate back to the house."

Kit sighed. "I was hoping you didn't mean it quite like that. Me and this house have something of a bad relationship, Rick."

"Think of it as your chance at therapy," Rick told him. "Besides, all that goth angst crap is always a popular storyline."

Kit laughed. "You're an evil dingo, Rick."

"Yeah, I know. Remember to tell Jessie."

"Will do. You have the number to the manor?"

"I do. If you don't answer your cell, call that number, right?"

"Yup. They'll be able to track me down, cause I won't be out the gate until I either come home or it's time for Vil's wedding."

"Okay then. Call if you need anythin'."

"I will. Later Rick."

Kit leaned back after he ended the call, thinking. He could do what Rick wanted, and it would probably be best to start with a history of the manor itself. And a picture of the front gates, with the Vulpan crest on them, that would be a nice photo to lead off the article. *Stonebrook Manor*;

A House of Secrets he could title it. He could even take pictures of a couple of the secret rooms and tell the readers what they were, but not *where* they were...introduce an aire of mystery into the house to go along with the stories of power, betrayal, heartbreak, and discord that had infused into the very walls of the place.

He picked up one of the manor phones and clicked the push to talk. "Jessie," he called.

"Yes, love?" she answered almost immediately.

"I'm glad you're carrying your phone. Did you pack our cameras?"

"I brought the good one and our video camera. It's in the closet, left shelf just inside the door."

"Thanks. By the way, Jeffrey wants that script you promised him, and Rick's still waiting for your article."

"I sent the scripts," she said in irritation. "Oh, bother. Is my phone up there?"

"Just use the one you're holding, silly kitty," he chuckled.

"I have too many phones!" she protested with a giggle. "Oh! Nick said he'll have the trap launcher set up by lunch! Want to come shoot trap with us, handsome fox? We're gonna give Muffy a try, and I'm going to try out Nick's K eighty!"

"Sure, but remember that you *do* have work to do," he told her.

She laughed. "My article just needs a conclusion and you to edit it and it's ready to go, Jeffrey should *have* the scripts I sent, and we're not going

to be out there all afternoon! Besides, I have to cook dinner for Vil and Suzy!”

“Oh, okay then. You may have fun.”

“Thank you for your permission, silly fox,” she giggled. “You gonna take pictures for the articles?”

“Yeah. I’m gonna start with the main gate and work my way in. How many blank memory cards did you bring?”

“Whatever you put in the camera bag. Two plus the one in the camera, I think. That should be enough, cause you can just upload them to the laptop when you fill them up and keep going.”

Kit took care of the other errand, having to get Suzy’s work and personal cell numbers from Vil, and he called her using her work number. “Susan Jenkins,” she said absently after her secretary transferred him.

“Is that any way to talk to an old friend?” Kit asked.

She gasped over the phone. “Kit!” she squealed in delight. “I was hoping you’d call!”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“Vil warned me not to, at least for a few days,” she answered. “So what’s up, cutie?”

“Want to come to dinner tonight?”

“Sure! Corey’s still in town, mind if he comes along? Or is this a *private* dinner?” she teased.

Kit laughed. "Jessie is here, Suzy," he warned. "So get that out of your head."

"She is?" Suzy asked, then she laughed. "Darn! And here I was hoping you wanted to lure me away from Corey."

"I wouldn't live long if I tried," he said dryly, which made her laugh. "How's the job?"

"Right now? Bleh," she grunted. "The economy's turning down. We've put our expansion plans on hold and we're shoring up. We crunched the numbers and we're pretty sure Yankee Bytes will survive even a depression, because we serve both the common fur and the upscale. Our upscale business will cover for our drop in low-end merchandise sales, since the upscales take advantage of the lower prices in a recession economy. I guess it helps to be in the right social circles, I can pitch the store to our friends," she giggled. "So, how's the war?"

"It's getting dirty," he answered. "Uncle Zach has started threatening the cousins with ruin if they don't support him."

"That's...stupid," she said.

"Actually, it's typical Zach," he answered. "He's too arrogant to ask for anything from someone he believes is under him. He won't try to win over the cousins with promises, he'll do it with threats."

"He's just making it easier for Vil."

"He seems to be utterly incapable of being *nice* to anyone beneath his station, Sue-Sue," he grunted as he got up and started for the closet. "I'm not sure when Jessie's gonna finish dinner, so just show up after work. I'm sure we'll eat eventually."

“That works for me. I get a chance to get to know your Jessie a little better.”

“Such a liar, I know you talk to her at least once a week.”

She laughed. “Talking to someone over the phone is different than face to face. Why is she up here, anyway? Isn’t that a bad idea?”

“She came up on her own and she won’t go home, no matter how much I ask, demand, beg, order, plead, or insist,” he answered with a grunt. “I can’t *make* her leave outside of physically tossing her out of Stonebrook, and I’m not that stupid.”

She laughed. “Yeah, there would be snow in Austin when you came home.”

“No doubt. So, see you this afternoon?”

“You bet! I’ll call Corey and tell him about it. What are we having?”

“No idea,” he answered. “Any requests?”

“Cincinnati style chili, I’ve never had that before.”

“Jessie,” he called over push to talk, “Suzy wants Cincinnati style chili. That sound good?”

“Cincinnati chili it is,” she answered.

“Request granted, Sue-Sue,” he answered, which made her laugh.

“I’ll be sure to thank Her Majesty when I get there.”

“So, around six?”

“I get off at four, so around five-thirty,” she corrected. “Traffic between here and Stonebrook is a beast in afternoon rush hour.”

“I’ll tell Jessie.”

“Sure thing, cutie. Bye now.”

“Bye.”

He told Jessie about when Suzy planned to get there, then got to work on what Rick wanted. He went down to the main gate and they opened it for him, then he stepped off the grounds of Stonebrook and waited for the gates to close. “Taking pictures, Master Kit?” Oscar asked, who was one of the regular security guards for the manor...such as it was. Their only real function was to keep the press and other unwanted visitors from lurking around the front gate, and they checked the outside walls and the back gate once a day to make sure no damage was done. That was all they really did, and they were something of a new feature. The little guard house by the main gate had only been put in two years ago, at the death of his father, and it was only manned from sunrise to sunset. At least it used to be. Now there would be a guard at that gate 24 hours a day. There was also a guard from the local security company, Valiant Security, with a car sitting at the entrance to Stonebrook Drive. The drive was still considered a public road and therefore the car couldn’t stop anyone from coming down the road, but their job was to call the manor and warn them that someone was coming. Oscar was a tall, rather meaty possum who had been a driver and groundskeeper in the manor before taking up a position at the main gate, where he worked three days a week one week and two days a week the next, from sunrise to sunset. In the winter that was easy, but in the summer that made for very long days. In the summer, the guards usually switched off after about 12 hours and covered each other so they didn’t spend 14 to

16 hours out here. In mid-June, the sun rose at 5:00 and set nearly at 10:00, because they were so far north. They had it set up, though, so they never worked the gate two days in a row, so the guards didn't have to go to bed and get up and come right back out for another 14-15 hours.

"For my magazine, my boss wants to see where I grew up."

"Well, I guess we can't stop the press when the press is the owner," Oscar laughed.

"Yeah well, these pictures are going to show up in a small city magazine," he said, centering the camera on the gates of Stonebrook, focusing on the Vulpan family crest. He took a picture, then stepped back a bit. "Move in, Oscar. The articles are about the furs who live and work here as much as it is about the house."

"Sure thing, Master Kit," he said, edging in beside the Vulpan crest and giving a salute, which made Kit laugh.

"Hold that pose," he said, then he took the picture. "Thanks, Oscar. Enjoying the new gig as a security guard?"

He laughed. "I actually don't mind it," he answered. "I still work in the garage on weekends. Sitting here watching TV, sitting in there waiting on when you need a driver, it's all the same. I'd rather *do* something than just sit around."

"This is doing something?" Kit asked.

"I'm keeping the press away from your front door," he grinned. "And I guess that means I have to chase you off!"

Kit laughed. “Open the gate and you can chase me off so you can go back to watching your soaps.”

Oscar opened the gate for him, and Kit hurried back inside.

Using a golf cart, Kit decided to use both the video camera and the regular one to first document the grounds, and he had company. The femme pinscher rode with him. Kit found out her name was Sylvia, and she was originally from Germany. She’d gotten into the security business because she’d always been more than a little bit of a tomboy as a young girl, had competed in the Olympics as a shooter and had won a gold medal with rifles and a silver medal using pistols, had been a cop after that, and there was a niche for femme bodyguards to serve certain femme clients who didn’t want male guards. Like many Europeans, she spoke multiple languages, English, German, French, and Russian, and she had been in the bodyguard business for five years since quitting the Berlin police. He did have one question he couldn’t resist asking as he took pictures and video of the garden. “Why didn’t you dock your tail?” he asked as he took a picture of the rose trellis, which framed the fountain almost perfectly. “The Pinschers I’ve known all have had their tails docked.”

“My tail’s not that long, and in Germany only boys dock their tails,” she answered in a German accent. “Girls who dock their tails are not German. Boys often bob their ears too, but I rather like my ears this way. They make me look less *butch*. That’s always a problem with Pinschers, you know.”

“Good reason,” Kit nodded as he got back onto the cart. “I don’t see how anyone that looks at you would think you’re butch. You’re cute,” he said, giving her a sidelong glance.

“I think your wife might be interested in your opinion, *Herr* Kit.”

“Go ahead and tell her, she knows it’s about time for me to misbehave.”

“Eh?”

“I misbehave fairly frequently so she has a reason to punish me,” he said with a wolfish grin.

“*Mein gott*, one of *those*,” she sighed, which made Kit laugh.

They took pictures and video of the grounds, the many cottages on the grounds, the boat dock and the river, and the large outdoor pool behind the house, and Sylvia helped by taking video as he took pictures. After they were done, Sylvia dropped Kit off at the garage and parked the cart, and he went in and transferred the pictures and the video to his laptop. He then went through the house as Jessie cooked lunch and took pictures of many of the rooms, using a digital voice recorder to make comments about each one. He took a picture of the ballroom with its checkered floor and fluted columns near the walls, the main kitchen, several of the museum-like rooms which were almost never entered except to clean, and then took a pictures of one of the secret rooms. “Doesn’t look like a secret, does it? Looks like a closet. This room was designed to hold alcohol back during Prohibition, it’s one of several secret rooms in the manor. But Prohibition ended during construction. However, nobody told the builders to change anything, so they built it with the secret rooms just like on the plans, and I think one of them was used to hold wine for a while. My great-Grandfather kept the rooms secret, even after Prohibition ended, because a family like mine almost always needs a secret room to hide things.”

He finished up the photo tour with pictures of the staff, both at work and posing for the camera, then sat down and went through them with Nick over his shoulder. “Can’t send that one,” he said, pointing at the dock. “Can’t show folks that there’s a hole in the fence.”

“Alright. I’ll just mention that we’re on the river and use this close-up of the dock itself, so they can’t see anything behind it.”

“Good. I’ll make a security guru out of you yet,” he smiled.

“I hope not,” he grunted.

“So, you rode with Sylvie, eh? Ain’t she something?”

“Sounds like a male pining there, Nick.”

He laughed. “We all pine after Sylvie,” he admitted. “Nice little gal, and she can put a bullet between your eyes from three hundred meters. In our circle, that’s an attractive aspect of a gal. Some guys like models, we like Olympic sharpshooters. Besides, in our profession, cute girls are few and far between.” He laughed. “She makes a lot of money to boot, almost as much as me.”

“Why is that?”

“Some femmes who want protection don’t want *males*, and that’s where she fits in. She also doesn’t look like a bodyguard. She’s the best there is at what she does, which is wear a party dress while armed with three pistols and a bowie knife.”

“Where does she hide it all?”

“Males have died trying to find out,” he said gravely, which made Kit erupt into laughter.

With Nick screening the photos, they finished the layout, and Kit wrote up a quick description of each one, then bundled it all into a single file and sent it to the office with the promise that articles were coming. Jessie called him down for lunch, which Muffy woke up in time to attend. Jessie made them tuna salad sandwiches and homemade potato chips, baked rather than deep fried. “Tuna?” Muffy asked.

“She’s a cat, expect seafood,” Kit shrugged as he took a bite.

After lunch, with Nick and Sylvia in attendance, they went down to the corner of the manicured grounds, where Nick had set up the trap launcher. He had put it on a flat area just at the top of a gentle rise, but what was more important, there was literally a mile of forest between their downrange and the nearest inhabitation. Birdshot of the kind used for sport shooting didn’t even go a quarter of that distance, which made it safe. They first assured that nobody was out in the woods downrange of them by getting a headcount of the staff, then they started first by stressing to Muffy the basics of safe gun use. Jessie had Nick’s K80 broken and in the crook of her arm, Kit was carrying the Wingmaster, and Muffy was carrying Jessie’s shotgun, also broken. For nearly a half hour, Nick and Sylvia taught Muffy about the safe use of the shotgun, then Nick loaded the clay target launcher as Kit loaded a shell into his shotgun. Muffy would go last so she could see how it was done. Kit had never done this either, but at least he’d been skeet shooting before. “Okay, how do I make the launcher work?”

“Foot switch, I’ll put it down for you,” Nick told him. Kit helped Nick set out the foot switch, then load the trap launcher with 25 targets. “It’s a two second delay from press to launch. Mind that it randomly changes the trajectory of the target after each round, and after the second launch, it can randomly throw out two targets about a second apart.”

Kit nodded and pumped the shotgun to load the shell, then shouldered it. He stepped on the foot switch and set his feet, and he heard the launcher's motor rev. The launcher threw out a clay target, and Kit tracked it with the shotgun and pulled the trigger. The shotgun bucked and reported loudly, but to Kit's delight, the clay target shattered. "Woo, first try!" he laughed. "You're right, this is easier than skeet."

"You're only saying that because you hit the target," Jessie teased with a giggle.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll show you," he said as he loaded another shell into the shotgun and pumped it. "I'll miss this one just to spite you."

Kit was too competitive to miss on purpose, but he missed anyway, or at least partially. The majority of the clay target was undamaged, but a small piece of it sailed off away from the clay, and the main clay wobbled down to the ground. "Nicked it," Jessie told him. "But that counts as a hit."

"*Ja*, any visible clay breakage counts as a hit," Sylvia agreed. "At least by Olympic rules."

"So, not much spite left in you, is there cousin?" Muffy grinned.

"Oh, I have lots of spite for you, Muffy," Kit said as he loaded two shells into his shotgun.

In all, the trap shooting was easier than skeet shooting to him. He kind of liked not knowing if one or two were coming, but since he didn't have to quickly turn his whole body or shotgun to aim at a second target, he did fairly well...for a beginner. Out of 25 targets, he hit 12, which was almost 50%. For his second ever day shooting at a moving target, he didn't think that was bad.

Jessie, naturally, put him to shame. She was using Nick's ultra-elite competition shotgun, and she loaded it confidently and closed it. And she used it effectively. She didn't miss a single target through her whole 25 target game. "So, you like that shotgun, dove?" Nick asked as she opened it and the two shells ejected.

"It feels nice," she said. "I've never used a thirty-four inch barrel before, but it didn't feel front heavy at all."

"I don't really like that one too much, just doesn't fit me well," Nick said. "That's why I have it up for sale."

"How much is a gun like that, Nick?" Muffy asked.

"The K eighty? Retail for about eighty-five hundred American dollars."

"You bought a gun you didn't like?"

"I bought it off a mate who was selling off his collection," he answered. "I figured if I didn't like it, I could resell it at a profit. Turns out that's what I'm gonna do." He and Kit began reloading the trap launcher. "Alright, dove, your turn. Remember, never point the barrel in any direction but down range," he reminded Muffy.

Kit felt just a little vindicated. Muffy missed the first 19 targets, then finally scored a hit on the 20th one, and then got her second hit a second later because it was a double throw. When she finished, she hit only 3 out of 25, which was better than his first ever attempt, but still made him feel like he didn't totally suck at sport shooting.

"Well, did you like it, cousin?" Kit asked.

“That was fun!” she said with an honest smile. “I’ve never done anything like this before. I never knew girls shot guns!”

Sylvia coughed lightly, which made Kit laugh. “They have femme’s divisions of Olympic shooting and archery events, dove,” Nick told her. “Sylvie here has a gold medal from the two thousand four games.”

“Really?” Muffy asked in surprise.

“*Ja*, in fifty meter rifles,” she nodded. “One of only fourteen gold medals for Germany.”

“That’s so cool!” Muffy said excitedly.

“It makes all the mercs swoon at her feet,” Nick grinned. “We love a girl that can drop a hostile from fifty meters!”

“*Mein gott*,” she sighed, slapping Nick on the upper arm lightly, which made the ebony wolf laugh.

After their target shooting, Jessie went to finish her article, and Kit sat down to write the first article about the manor for Rick. He didn’t have to do much research for it, since the staff could tell him almost anything he wanted to know. He wrote about the general history of the manor, from its construction from 1933 to 1936, during the height of the Great Depression and during Prohibition, but Prohibition ended after the manor construction began. He wrote about the expansions, such as the garage in 1942, the pool expansion in 1943, the maintenance shop in 1954, the gym and second indoor pool in 1964, the external garage for antique cars in 1975, the helipad in 1981, the systematic construction of the seven houses out on the grounds from 1989 to 2001, the second pool expansion and renovation of the entire pool area in 2003, and the gym renovation and indoor pool

expansion in 2004. After he went through the dusty facts and figures, he wrote about the *essence* of the place. He pulled no punches as he described his unease in the house, describing several of the bigger fights he'd had with his father to set the tone that had been the norm in the house when he was a teenager, and then describing the oppressive weight he felt around him when he was in the house, as if the ghosts of the past Vulpan were staring at him from the walls, and they were *angry* with him. He wrote about his fear for his wife, and though he wasn't specific about why, he did explain that he brought his mixed breed wife into a nest of rabid purists. "You don't know what it's like," he wrote, sitting in the master bedroom with the windows open and a glorious breeze blowing through the room. "To be married to not just a different breed, but to a *mixed* breed, in a family of rabid purists. My wife Jessica represents everything my family detests, because not only is she a mixed breed, but she is a beautiful, intelligent, charming femme that gives no one any reason to hate her, and exposes the irrational and senseless hate my family harbors deep inside. They cannot look at her and hate without seeing the hatred within themselves and realizing that it is hate for the sake of hate.

"That hate isn't just a recent development. The Vulpan family has a proud tradition of bankrolling the purist movement, and though I can't prove it, I'm fairly certain they were part of the original PPC. Whether they were or not isn't as important as the fact that hatred of mixed breeds, or the *mongrelization* as they call it, is a cornerstone of the family's history. Not only did I marry a *mongrel*, I'm having a *mongrel* child, which will forever stain the purity of the family line.

"That was the magnitude of my crime against the family, that I committed the one unforgivable sin in their eyes. I didn't just go against the

family, I went against the entire history and tradition upon which my family is built and have permanently damaged the purity of the Vulpan line and the Vulpan name. Will my daughter have my eyes? Who can say. But the eyes of the Vulpan family are a sign of our breed purity, my father would always say. They have bred true from our great-great Grandfather, Arthur Vulpan, through every single Vulpan descendent. When my daughter is born, she will be the first ever mixed breed in the Vulpan family, and I know that my family will hate both her and her parents for what I have done. And if she has my eyes, they will hate her even more, because they will see the one thing that defines a Vulpan in a mixed breed. One thing is for sure, me, my wife, and my daughter will never be welcome in the family, or in Boston, for I have committed the one unforgivable sin. I fell in love outside my breed.”

He finished up the article then sent it off, then leaned back in his chair and pondered. It was no wonder Zach was so evisceral in his anger at Kit, but it said a hell of a lot that the entire family *wasn't* so fanatical. For Kit, the reason why was the kindness of a mixed breed when he ran away, who showed him in the flesh that everything his family had taught him was a lie, that mixed breeds were nothing what they said. That male had *listened* to him when no one else ever had, had bought him a meal at McDonalds, sat down with him, and listened. He wondered why Sheila and Muffy too weren't purist, despite the purist mentalities of their immediate families. Brian, well, Brian wasn't quite so vehement in anything he did, but Sarah was a purist to the roots of her fur. All of Sheila's brothers and sisters were purist, so she said, but Sheila herself was not.

He didn't get long to ponder, however, for the door opened, and Kendall poked his head in. “Kit!” he called. “We're here!”

“You’re early, it’s not even four,” he mused.

“Vil finished work early and had me come to the office, and here we are,” he smiled. “We’re down in the TV room on the first floor.”

The TV room was just that. It had been the same as a living room of a normal family’s house when Kit was a kid, where he spent a great deal of his time. It was between the kitchen and the ballroom, and had no windows. But it had no windows for a reason, for there was a widescreen 72 inch plasma TV dominating the far side of the room, with a smaller 42 inch television in the far corner that was dedicated solely to console game systems. There had been a 60 inch projection TV in that main TV spot when Kit was a kid, which had been replaced by a 54 inch plasma TV when he was a teen. There were three couches and four chairs arrayed near the big TV so everyone could see it, with tables scattered among them so they had room for snacks, tea, and other things. The one thing the room had that was different from many others, though, was the wet bar and refrigerator against the left wall, stocked with wines, liquors, and other drinks. Vil was already there, sitting on the near couch with her crutches leaning against the wall, and to Kit’s shock, Sheila’s older brother, Kitstrom Samuel Vulpan, as well as Kitstrom Travis, who was Zach’s third child, both wearing suits and obviously having just come from work. Zach had seven children, and while Bridgette had been his first, his pride was satisfied because the next five of his kids were all boys. The three that still lived with Zach were two boys and a girl, who was his youngest. Zach’s kids were all boys except the bookends, which were girls. Jake was almost a reverse. Jake had had five kids, and his first and last were boys, with three girls in the middle. Jake also had the dubious honor of having three children in the Party Pack, Lynn, Angela, and Joy.

“Hey bro,” Vil said. “I brought some cousins with me. Have room at the dinner table?”

Kit gave the two older males a dark, penetrating look. “That’s going to depend.”

“I sure as hell didn’t come here because I’m happy with my father,” Travis told him immediately. “You should have heard what he said to me this morning.”

“What about you, Sam?” Kit asked bluntly.

“Same. I got a very ugly phone call this morning. Uncle Zach threatened to fire me from the shipyards if I didn’t support him.”

“So, I’m reassigning Travis and Sam to Avondale,” Vil said with a slight smile. “They’re going to be working under Terry.”

“Working under someone younger than me,” Sam sighed. Both Sam and Travis worked at the shipyard, as did many of the male cousins. Unlike some of the cousins, Sam and Travis actually did real work, unlike the other old males, Steven and Patrick, who basically had *do-nothing* jobs where they collected a paycheck without any real responsibility. Sam and Travis, however, wanted real responsibility, real jobs, so Vil had given them their chances.

“Well, Terry’s pretty smart, Sam,” Travis said, a bit defensively. “He proved himself when he whipped the safety department into shape, and I’ve seen the reports coming out of Avondale. He’s doing a good job down there.”

“So, you’re going against your own father?” Kit asked.

“Hell yes,” Travis snorted. “If he really tried to kill Vil, then he went way too far. He denies it up and down, but the facts speak for themselves. Vil offered to send me to New Orleans so he can’t harass me,” he sighed. “I’m loyal to the *family*, Luke, and I don’t think the family is better served with my father running it. He’s too entrenched in the past, and the past is not the path to our future. I love him, but he’s wrong. He’s furious with me right now, but what else can I do? If he takes control of the family, he’ll shatter us. The cousins will openly rebel against him, and the family will fly apart.” He took a sip of tea. “I wish I could say I had company. Steve is supporting Dad, and Louis, I dunno. He sent Matty to England to get her and his kids out of any fighting, but I dunno if he has the balls to openly disobey Dad.”

“What about Chris?” Kit has to ask.

“Who knows? Chris never talks to any of us,” he answered.

Kendall came in behind them, and with him were Muffy and Jessie. Kit tensed up when he saw his wife come in and stop suddenly, looking at the two male Vulpans. “You must be Jessie,” Sam said, standing up. “My sister Sheila goes on and on about you. Hi, I’m Sam,” he said, offering his paw to her.

“Nice to meet you,” she said with a slightly defensive smile, shaking his paw.

“This ugly guy here is my cousin Travis,” he said, motioning at the taller male.

“Jessie,” he said with a calm nod.

“You have to forgive him, he has an unreasoning belief that the world will explode when you deliver,” Sam said lightly.

“Sam!” Travis said in surprise. “I can object to their marriage and still be polite! I’m sure Jessie’s a wonderful femme. She has to be to capture a Vulpan.”

“Kit wasn’t hard to catch,” Jessie laughed.

“I made myself very available to be captured,” he agreed dryly.

“I’m making Cincinnati style chili for dinner. Would you like to stay?”

“You’re *cooking*? You’re living in Stonebrook, and you’re *cooking*?” Sam asked in surprise.

“I love to cook,” she said with a smile. “I’m about to start, so if you want to stay, let me know now. Suzy is coming with Corey, so I have to make sure there’s enough for everyone.”

“Sure, I’ll stay. I don’t think I’ve ever had this dish before,” Sam nodded.

“I think I’d enjoy it,” Travis agreed.

“Come on, Muffy, I’ll show you how to cook,” Jessie said.

“I’ll never use it,” she laughed.

“Everyone should know how to cook,” she said as the two of them left.

“Well, she’s very pretty,” Sam noted, giving Travis a sly look.

“She has fox markings,” Travis noted.

“She’s part fox,” Kit told him bluntly.

“She is? Wow,” Travis said with a curious look to the door.

“I should warn Jessie to make some extra,” Vil said as Kendall sat down beside her. “I invited a few other cousins to come over tonight.”

“Who?”

“All of them in Boston,” she answered simply. “Bess, Mary, Steve, Louis, Pat, Chris, Will, Randy, and Duncan.”

“Mary’s still here?” Sam asked in surprise.

“She came back this afternoon,” Vil answered.

“You invited all the cousins over?” Kit asked in surprise.

“Just about,” she smiled. “And I’m going to have Sylvia escort Jessie everywhere she goes,” she added.

“You’d better,” Kit answered. “With her machine gun in open view.”

“Oh, come now, Kit, there’s no need for such drama,” Sam snorted.

“She’s not your wife,” Kit answered immediately.

While Kendall got to know his cousins, Kit tuned out to consider what Vil had done. She had invited all the cousins in Boston to Stonebrook, and while that was in her right, he felt a little violated that she would so casually invite them in when he was so adamant when he told everyone that no Vulpan would set foot in Stonebrook while Jessie was here. And yet, despite that declaration, Vil just invites the family into Stonebrook without telling him. He didn’t much appreciate that. And because he was angry, he stayed almost completely silent as Kendall chatted amiably with Sam and Travis, until he excused himself quietly while Kendall told them about his moving to America...but he didn’t get very far before being interrupted. His

manor phone rang, and he opened it to hear Stanley's voice. "Master Kit, Miss Bess is here again and wishes to come in."

"Is she alone?"

There was a pause. "No, Master Kit. Your cousins Mary and Lynn are with her."

"Naturally," he grunted. A good piece of the Party Pack right there. He debated for a long moment as to whether he should let them in, then sighed and answered. "Let them in," he said, cursing himself for his own weakness. He went down to the kitchen, and saw that Jessie was actually teaching the cooks a new recipe. They'd never cooked Cincinnati style chili before, and Jessie was explaining the recipe to them as she chopped onions, Sylvia stood nearby, and the cooks listened. "You might want to make more," he said, in a growl. "Vil invited every cousin in Boston to Stonebrook tonight. There might be like twelve foxes here."

"She did?" Muffy asked in surprise.

"That's what she said. Sylvia, do me a favor. Go get your submachine gun, and keep it *prominent*. I want my family to have no illusions about how I feel about them being here. Oh, and after you get back, don't let Jessie out of your sight, even if she has to go to the bathroom."

"Kit!" Jessie protested, her cheeks threatening to ruffle.

"*Ja, Herr* Kit. I'll be right back," she said, then she turned and headed towards the second floor, where all the guards had rooms.

"Is that necessary?" Jessie asked him, a bit sharply, as she brushed her chopped onions into a nearby pot, and the other chefs began preparing to cook as well.

“I think it is,” he told her bluntly. “You forget, pretty kitty, my family isn’t like Sheila and Muffy. Most of the cousins object to our marriage. Travis does, but at least he’s being civil about it. Some others may not be quite so kindly. I want Sylvia standing right beside you carrying her gun and making it very clear that you’re the most precious thing in this house, so they’d better not even *think* about trying anything.”

“Well, you’re being a bit silly, handsome fox,” she told him as she reached for another onion.

“You can call me silly after they all leave,” Kit told her. “Until then, I’m just being safe.”

Sylvia returned, much faster than he expected, and she was carrying her submachine gun on a strap around her shoulder, the strap falling down between her breasts. The weapon she carried, he’d found out, was a Heckler and Koch MP-5SD-N, a compact automatic submachine gun with a retractable buttstock and sights, capable of both semi and fully automatic firing, which was also built with an integrated suppressor to help muffle the sound of the weapon firing. Her version, the N version, was also capable of firing with water in the barrel, making it very rugged and versatile. It had been built for and was used by the U.S. Navy, but how Sylvia had gotten her paws on one was beyond him. Kit had researched it and the other weapons the guards carried out of curiosity, and had discovered that the H&K MP-5 was a very popular weapon, had a lot of variants, and was both powerful and dependable. Heckler and Koch was a German firearms company. Another of the hired guards, a nearly seven foot tall, burly Siberian tiger named Krichek, also carried an MP-5, but he carried the MP-5K, which was smaller, had no buttstock, but fired faster than other MP-5 variants. “Thanks, Sylvia,” Kit said gratefully.

“I’ll keep her very safe, *Herr* Kit,” she said with a nod. “It’s why that crazy wolf brought me here.”

Bess came into the kitchen, and behind her were two more of Kit’s cousins, Mary Grant Vulpan and Lynn Kennedy Vulpan. Mary was very tall for a femme, even taller than Jessie and Sylvia, with a very attractive figure and very thick, lustrous fur. Mary was the most attractive of all the female cousins, and she knew it. Lynn was about the same size as Jessie, almost waifishly thin and with surgically enhanced breasts to go with her wide hips. Lynn had battled bulimia when she was a teenager, and though she had recovered, she was still very thin and obsessed with her figure. The three of them looked at him for a second, then Bess came over and held her paws out. Almost instinctively, he took them, but then his scowl at her stopped her from kissing him on both cheeks. “Hello, Luke,” she greeted. “I brought Mary and Lynn like Vil wanted.”

“They’re in the TV room,” Kit said, giving his other cousins a strong stare.

“Don’t look at me that way, Luke,” Mary protested. “And before you ride me about what happened to you, what was I supposed to do? Get disowned just like you? We’re not like you, Luke, I know I’d have died out on the streets.”

“Don’t call me Luke,” Kit demanded. “My name is Kit.”

“Well, at least let me say I’m sorry for not being there,” Lynn said, coming up and putting her paw on his shoulder. “We hated what they did to you, but...we’re just the kids. I was too afraid to say anything. Your dad was a heartless bastard, and we were terrified of him.”

“I’ll agree with that much, Lynn,” Kit said. Jessie came over, wiping her paws on her apron, and Kit put his arm around her. “Jessie, this is Lynn Kennedy Vulpan, and this is Mary Grant Vulpan. They’re my older cousins.”

“Hi,” she said, a bit warily, offering her paw. To Kit’s surprise, Lynn took it.

“I see why he likes you,” she said with a slight smile. “You have fox markings.”

“My grandfather was a fox, I got my markings from him,” she answered simply.

“You’re mixed? Wow, it doesn’t show at all,” Mary said.

“Maybe it’s the fox in her that attracted him,” Lynn noted to Mary.

“Girls, you’re on dangerous ground,” Kit warned with a dark look. “One word against my wife and I’ll have the guards drag you out by your whiskers.”

“I don’t have *whiskers*!” Mary protested indignantly, which made Bess laugh.

Muffy came up and hugged Lynn fondly, then kissed Mary on each cheek. “I’m glad to see you guys here,” she said. “You joining the Rebel Alliance against the evil Empire?”

Kit laughed suddenly, but the femmes gave him a curious look. “I never knew you liked Star Wars, Muffy,” Kit told her.

Stanley came in quickly. “Master Kit, uh, there’s someone else at the gate who wants in.”

“Who?” he asked.

“It’s Brian and Ruth Vulpan,” he said in an uncertain voice.

“What?” Kit gasped.

“He wants to come in, he said it’s urgent.”

“Absolutely *not!*” he declared. “There is no way in *hell* I’ll allow an elder into Stonebrook!”

“T-Then maybe you should tell him, Master Kit,” Stanley said, holding out his manor phone.

Kit snatched it away and put it to his ear. “Now listen—“

“Wait, Kit, wait,” Brian called suddenly. “I’m here to talk. That’s all. I even brought Ruthie and Misty,” he said in a mollifying tone. “Just hear us out, then you can throw us out if you want.”

Kit’s emotions raged for a long moment between his fury at his uncle and his curiosity as to why he had come. Was he here to side against his elder siblings? Was he here to try to talk them down? Or was he here to finally show he was no different from his older brother?

“Kit, he’s my dad,” Muffy said in a gentle, pleading voice. “Trust me. Let him in.”

Kit closed his eyes and his fist, so tightly that his paw trembled, a pained and angry look on his face. Then he finally nodded, almost in defeat.

Jessie was there. Her gentle paws slid around him, and he found himself clutching to her, feeling the new life inside her pressing against his stomach. “It’s alright,” she told him. “Come, let’s go sit down for a minute.”

She pulled him over to the table and sat down in his lap, just staying near him for a few minutes until he could get control of himself. When he finally felt better, he saw his four femme cousins looking on with strange expressions on their faces. “After you put everything you hold dear at risk, you can laugh at me for being a coward,” Kit growled at them as he stood up, taking Jessie’s paw.

“Kit, you’re the bravest fox I’ve ever known,” Muffy told him quietly.

Brian entered the kitchen, and Jessie gave a squeak when Kit’s grip on her paw became almost crushing. Along with him were his wife, Ruth Astor Vulpan, the last female of the Astor line, with only her and her two brothers left from that legendary family. Beside Brian was their youngest daughter, Misty, who at 13 was just starting to grow and fill out, and was wearing a pair of shorts and a surprisingly skimpy tee shirt that ended above her belly button. She looked at Kit with curiosity. “Mom, Dad!” Muffy said, folding her slim, handsome mother into a hug.

“Hey, baby,” Ruth said, kissing her on the muzzle.

Muffy hugged her father, tickled Misty, making her giggle. “Hey, squirt!” she greeted.

“I’m just here to talk, Kit,” Brian said calmly. “To you, Vil, and any other Vulpan who shows up. I’m on your side, Kit,” he declared. “I don’t want Vil off the chair. I’m against my older siblings in this matter.”

“You’re serious, Uncle Brian?” Mary asked in surprise.

“Of course I am,” he said calmly.

“The company has never done better under Vilenne,” Ruth agreed. “And if they try to control the kids the way Lucas did, they’re just going to

drive them away. I for one do not want my daughter and sons to be afraid the rest of their lives, or under the control of a ruthless bastard,” she said, stroking her daughter’s face lightly, which made Muffy giggle. “Have you been alright here with Kit and Jessica, little kit?”

“They taught me how to shoot a shotgun!” she said with a grin.

“That’s not very ladylike,” Ruth laughed. “But as long as you had fun, I guess it’s okay.”

“It was very fun,” Muffy nodded. “I sucked at it, but it was fun!”

“You must be Jessica!” Ruth said, stepping towards Jessie. But she stopped fearfully when Kit quickly got between them, and Sylvia took hold of her MP-5.

“It’s okay, handsome fox,” Jessie said soothingly, patting him on the shoulder. “It’s okay. Yes, I’m Jessie. You’re Brian’s wife?”

“Ruth,” she said, taking Jessie’s paw and shaking it. “I’ve heard a lot about you, dear. I’ve heard you’re quite a good cook.”

She laughed. “My handsome fox likes my cooking, so I guess that’s all I need,” she said with a charming smile. “And who is this pretty young girl?” she asked, bending over slightly to look down at Misty.

“I’m Misty,” she answered. “Are you really married to my cousin?”

“Yes, I am,” she smiled at him. “We’ve been married since December.”

“But you’re not a fox.”

“No, I’m not,” she agreed seriously.

“Baby girl,” Brian said warningly.

“You’re kinda pretty, though,” she said boldly. “You have dark paws and a tip on your tail just like a fox.”

“My grandfather was a fox,” she told him. “I got my fox markings from him.”

“Oh, that’s why he likes you.”

Jessie giggled. “I hope he married me for more than this,” she said, holding up her dark-mittened paw.

“Vil is in the TV room with Travis and Sam,” Kit told them. “You can go in there and wait for dinner.”

“It should be about an hour,” Jessie said, kissing Kit on the muzzle and patting him on the shoulder before going back to the counter.

“You’re *cooking*?” Brian asked in surprise.

“I love to cook,” Jessie answered as she took another onion. “We’re having Cincinnati chili and garlic bread.”

“Well, I look forward to trying it, Jessie,” Brian told her. “Come on, Ruthie, let’s go see Vil and talk to the boys.”

“Can I stay here? Talks are boring,” Misty complained.

“I have an X-Box upstairs if you want to play it,” Kit told him. “And we have a few laptops. Didn’t you bring your Game Boy?” Misty was a gamer girl, much like Jenny.

“I brought my PSP,” she said, “but I’d rather stay here.”

“She can stay with me,” Jessie offered.

His relatives left the kitchen, bound for the TV room, except for Kit and Muffy. Misty sat down at the kitchen table and pulled out her PSP, but Jessie just gave Kit a calm look. “They need you in the TV room, handsome fox,” she told him. “You too, Muffy. I’m sure they’re going to make a plan, and both of you should be there.”

“I don’t want to be in there,” he told her. “I want to be right here.”

“I’ll be right here,” she said, giving him a reassuring smile. “Besides, you’ve made sure that I have plenty of help to keep me safe,” she said, looking at Sylvia, who simply smiled.

“She’s right,” Muffy said. “Though I don’t know what help I’ll be.”

“Well, come on then,” he sighed.

There weren’t only Vulpans in the TV room. Bartholomew, Dee, and Luann were attending quietly, since a Vulpan wouldn’t get up and walk five feet to get something on a counter, and Suzy and Corey arrived not long after Angela and Joy, who gladly joined the congregation. Muffy sat down with the other members of the Party Pack, and Kit sat beside Vil. She patted him on the knee, and just as Jessie predicted, they started talking about what was going to happen, and what they should do. Surprisingly to Kit, Brian didn’t try to take control of the conversation. He seemed to be serious about keeping Vil as the head of the family, and acceded to her in front of the other children. Vil, on the other paw, wasn’t picky. She actively engaged Mary, Lynn, Muffy, and Bess into the conversation, asked their opinions, which startled them quite badly. They’d never had their opinions count for *anything* in the family before, and here was the head of the family, asking *them* what they thought, asked *them* what they thought the best thing to do was. That seemed to surprise more than the girls. Sam and Travis seemed

honestly surprised that anyone would bother asking someone like Bess for her opinion, but what was more shocking to them was that Bess was actually a very smart young lady, who knew almost everything that was going on.

Their numbers also increased. Sam's younger brothers, Randy and Will, arrived at the manor about half an hour after Brian did, and Muffy's two younger brothers, Daniel and Jonathon, arrived about five minutes later, Daniel driving his 16 year old brother in. About five minutes after that, Angela and Joy arrived, and they had their luggage with them; they had just flown back to Boston. The TV room was completely filled with Vulpans, but there were a few notable absences. Christopher, Patrick, and Steven, the eldest sons of Zach, Maxine, and Jake, were absent, as were Louis, Victor, George, Bridgette and Duncan, who was Sheila's immediate older brother, and who had not come back to Boston when Muffy made the round of calls.

Kit felt...odd. He wasn't enjoying being in a room filled with his cousins and his uncle and aunt, for all he could see were Vulpans who were nowhere to be seen when he was in a body cast and in so much pain it made him shudder to even think about it. He could feel the stares when he wasn't looking, stares that were both accusing and insulted. They disapproved of his marriage, and though he didn't care what they thought, it made it a very uncomfortable time for Kit to be surrounded by family members who objected to his decisions. But, confusingly, every time he spoke, everyone listened quietly, even Brian. Why would they listen to him when they hated what he had done?

It seemed that after only a few minutes, Jessie opened the door and came in. The conversation stopped when she came in, and Jessie found herself confronted by a dozen Vulpan eyes. Vil held her paw out to her,

though, and kissed her on the cheek when she took it, pulling her down.
“What’s up, sis?” she asked.

“Dinner should be ready in about ten minutes,” she announced. “I’ll let you know.”

“Why didn’t you send a servant to tell us?” Randy asked in curiosity.

“Why should I make someone else do what I can do myself?” she asked simply, then she kissed Kit on the muzzle, patted his shoulder, then scurried out.

“She’s *cooking*?” Joy asked in amazement.

“Jessie loves to cook,” Vil answered before Kit could. “Her cooking for us is a way she’s welcoming us into her home.”

“Is that why Sheila wants to be a cook?” Will asked. “She watched Luke’s wife cook?”

“Sheila wants to be a *chef*,” Muffy said distinctly. “There’s a big difference. She wants to open her own restaurant.”

“It’s demeaning,” Will said.

“Not if she truly enjoys what she does,” Brian said simply. “If she can make a career out of it, and she’s successful, how can that be demeaning?”

“She’s doing, *manual labor*,” Will bristled.

“If her customers enjoy her meals, she’ll make them happy, and she’ll earn money,” Muffy said defensively. “Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Vulpans shouldn’t *serve* anyone,” Will said arrogantly.

“You serve this family, Will,” Vil told him sharply. “And I serve the family too. Don’t ever forget that. The only Vulpan in this family that doesn’t owe this family a thing is Kit, and that’s because this family failed him just as surely as our father did. When we failed to live up to our obligations to him, he became free of his obligations to us.”

“Then why are you here, Luke?” Sam asked.

“Because I still have *one* Vulpan I consider family. My sister needs me, so I’m here for her. And for God’s sake, stop calling me Luke! My name is *Kit*.”

“It’s going to take a long time to remember that,” Sam chuckled.

“Well, there’s too many of us to eat anywhere but the formal dining room,” Vil announced. “Help me up, Ken.”

“Sure thing, love,” he answered, standing up.

The group moved to the formal dining room, which held a table long enough to seat 34. Ken settled Vil down at the head of the table as maids and the cooks scurried in, setting wine glasses and pouring wine and tea. Frannie brought out baskets of garlic bread, then Jessie, Carrie, and Henri came in carrying large bowls. Jessie set hers down and took her seat by Kit, then the maids and chefs began serving, bringing out plates already prepared with Cincinnati chili served from Jessie’s own family recipe. Cincinnati chili was chili served over spaghetti pasta and with cheese liberally coating the top, and Jessie’s family recipe made the chili rich and flavorful and just a hint spicy, but not hot. It was not a *rich fur* food, but that didn’t mean that it wasn’t excellent.

“You made this, Jessie?”

“I made about half of it, they helped with the rest, it was too much to cook too fast,” she smiled.

“So what is this?” Brian asked as a plate was set before him.

“I’ve had this before,” Ruth told him. “When I went to that symposium in Louisville. It’s actually pretty good.”

He mixed it a little with his fork, took a cautious bite, then his eyes widened. “This *is* good!” he declared.

“It’s an old family recipe,” Jessie told him demurely. “My mother makes it much better than me.”

Either they liked it, or they were like Kit and had learned to pretend to like something while they ate it anyway. That was a required skill in the Vulpan family, when one ate things like cow’s tongue or sheep pancreas. They ate dinner more or less in silence, as the maids and cooks attended them, but Kit felt distinctly unsettled, and he could tell that Jessie was a little nervous. After dinner, after the plates were cleared and they sat the table enjoying mousse and ice cream for dessert, Vil finally breached the subject. “Alright, so, here’s what we’re going to do,” she began, taking a bite. “Tomorrow, we tell Zach, Jake, and Maxine to back off, and we also tell them that *all* of us oppose what they’re doing. Meanwhile, boys, I’m going to assign you to Avondale tomorrow, so be ready to head out tomorrow around noon. Girls, you’re going to Austin, so you’re in a sheltered area where they can’t get at you. I’ll call Sheila tomorrow morning and tell her you’re coming, and I’ll make some arrangements for you so you’re put up at the nicest hotel in Austin, the Armitage. Sheila’s lived there for quite a while, so she can show you where you can go and what there is to do...and there’s *lots* to do in Austin. I think you’ll actually

enjoy it. Brian, you and me are going to have fun at work tomorrow,” she said with a grim smile. “And will Zach be pissed.”

“What’s going to happen?” Jessie asked curiously.

“I’m going to move to have Zach removed from the board and replaced with Brian. And when this is all over, Brian will have it. Loyalty to the family is rewarded,” she said simply. “And so will yours, girls. When you come home, if you want, I’ll find you places in the company where you do *real* work, and have *real* responsibility. One of Sheila’s biggest complaints was that nobody in the family would take her seriously. Well, *I’ll* take you seriously. You’ll suffer the consequences of getting fired if you fail, but if you want to *try*, I’ll give you the chance. Kit and Jessie will go back home to Austin, and everything will settle down and get back to normal.”

“What will the elders do?” Randy asked.

“Fight back, of course,” Vil said. “But they can’t get to any of *you*. Leave this work to me and Brian. We’ll take care of it. What I basically want is all of you is to openly take sides, then get out of Boston and let me and Brian deal with the elders.”

“You want us to hide?” Travis asked, a bit harshly.

“I want you out of the way so *this* doesn’t happen to you,” she said, holding up her bandaged arm. “The more who are against him means the more targets he has to go after. I want to minimize his options to where the only ones he can go after are the most heavily defended. Let us take care of it, Travis.”

“But I want to help!”

“You can help by getting Avondale whipped into shape. We need the shipyard up and running up to Vulpan standards. Terry can get it done faster when he has three assistants down there who know our system and can get the place up and running. You want to prove yourself? Here’s your chance.”

Travis nodded.

“Mind, boys, I don’t have New Orleans quite as locked down as Austin, but I’m working on it. So take some protection with you, and keep alert. Terry’s in a gated apartment and condo combo building, I suggest you live in the same building. If you’re all together, your security can work together with the building.”

“What about us?” Will asked.

“Just go back to school, and keep your eyes open.”

“What about the ones that side with Uncle Zach? I don’t see Louis here, and he’s in some of my classes next semester.”

“Don’t say anything. What’s family business is family business. Be polite to Louis while you’re there.”

“But…” he said, glancing at Suzy.

“Don’t worry about Suzy, guys,” Vil smiled. “She’s my best friend, as has basically known what’s going on in the family since I was fifteen. She keeps her mouth shut.”

“I’m not stupid,” Suzy laughed. “Besides, I’m also here to help. Vil’s my best friend, think I’m not in her corner when she needs me?”

“I guess I could make a propaganda film against your uncles,” Corey offered, which made Vil laugh.

“I’ll keep that in mind, Corey,” she grinned at him. “The other thing we need is communication. So, once a day, I want all of you to call in here, and check in with Kit. This is our headquarters, and Kit’s job is to make sure everyone’s okay, and if you need help, to make sure I know about it. He’s not leaving this manor until he goes home, so he’ll always be here and always be available.”

“More or less. Except for Vil’s wedding, I won’t set foot out of Stonebrook until Zach is permanently banished from here and I can go home,” Kit said.

“And I’ll be here right beside him,” Jessie declared.

“That can cause almost as many problems as it solves, Jessie,” Brian said. “Zach is utterly livid that you’re living in this house. He sees it as the ultimate insult, that Kit would bring his cat wife into this house, which he sees as the bastion of the family’s honor.”

“Well, it’s *his* fault I’m here,” she said simply. “He’s the one that started this, so it’s his fault. And when our daughter is born here, I hope he chokes on the news.”

“Jessie has almost a Vulpan’s sense of vindictiveness,” Vil chuckled.

“You’re having your baby here?” Joy asked.

“Right here,” Vil nodded. “In the same room where Kit was born. Unless they surrender early,” Vil smiled at Kit. “If so, they’ll go home and have the baby there.”

“I hope so. I hate being up here,” Kit growled.

“Well, I don’t hate it,” Vil smiled, patting him on the forearm.

“You’re biased.”

“So?” she asked with a grin, then pointed her fork down the table.
“When can you be ready to go, girls?” she asked.

“I guess I can pack a bag and leave in the morning,” Angela said.

“Can I stay with you, sis?” Joy asked.

“Sure, Joygirl,” Lynn answered, nudging her sister.

“I’ll call Sheila and warn her that you’re coming, but be warned, guys. She has school coming up, and she’ll be busy with that. So give her the space she needs.”

“Sheila, being serious about school?” Lynn asked with a giggle.

“Yeah, she’s serious,” Muffy answered.

“Very serious,” Jessie agreed. “She has her pilot’s license now, too.”

“Yeah, we heard about that,” Angela said. “Hard to imagine, *two* Vulpans in the family with pilot’s licenses.”

“Jessie’s also got hers,” Kit corrected.

“Wow, really?” Joy asked.

Jessie nodded. “When you bought Kit his plane, I loved it so much I learned how to fly it. Thank you for that, by the way. It was a wonderful gift, and we love it.”

“No problem, Jessie,” Brian told her. “I’m glad you two like it.”

“We get a lot of use out of it,” Kit chuckled.

“I’m sure Zach, Jake, and Maxy would love to take it back now,” Brian laughed.

“They probably would,” Vil nodded.

“I can be ready to go tomorrow morning,” Sam announced.

“I’ll call Terry and tell him he’s getting three executive assistants. Pack your whips, you may need them,” Vil chuckled.

“I can be a bad cop, no problem,” Travis assured her.

“I wish I wouldn’t have taken that semester off now,” Will fretted. “I’d be graduated already and headed for New Orleans.”

“Well, think of it as your last hurrah at Harvard, little brother,” Randy told him.

“And I have three classes with Louis,” he sighed. “Oh, that’s gonna be fun.”

“Maybe I’ll transfer to Yale,” Angela noted.

“Hey, it’s in Connecticut at least,” Muffy told her.

After dinner, they started to file out. Randy took his brothers home, and Travis and Sam left with Lynn, Bess, and Mary. Angela took Joy home, and Daniel, who had been totally silent the whole time, took Jonathon and Misty back to Brian’s house. After everyone else left, Suzy and Corey sat with Vil, Kendall, Kit, Jessie, Brian, and Ruth in the TV room. “When’s your due date, dear?” Ruth asked as Dee handed Brian a glass of wine.

“September thirtieth,” she answered, putting her paw on her belly. “I’ll be glad to see my feet again!” she laughed.

“They’re definitely more fun outside than inside,” Ruth told her.

“I wouldn’t know that. I hope to soon, though,” Vil said, giving Kendall a sultry look.

“Now now, we’re not even married yet, and you need to heal.”

“I’ll be healed enough soon,” she told him archly, which made nearly everyone else laugh. “I don’t want Kit’s daughter not to have a cousin of her own for very long.”

“It’s not a race, sis, cause you’ve already lost it,” Kit teased.

“I’m not sure I like where this conversation is going,” Corey noted, which made Suzy slap him on the arm.

“I’d better be getting a little piece of hardware soon, or I’ll just have to become Kit’s mistress,” Suzy told him.

“He’d better never let me catch him with a mistress,” Jessie warned, unsheathing her small yet sharp claws and holding them in Kit’s face. “Or I’ll peel off your hide in strips.”

“One of the dangers of marrying a cat,” Kendall noted. “All the sharp pointy things on the ends of them.”

“How are you holding up in here, Kit?” Brian asked.

Kit fixed Brian with an icy stare at first, then he sighed and closed his eyes, shaking his head. “It’s like living in my own private nightmare, but I’ll be alright,” he said. “This place is nothing but bad memories for me.”

“Well, that’s sure to change after a while, once you’ve been here a bit,” he answered.

“It’ll be worth it to evict Zach,” Vil said. “If he can never set foot in Stonebrook, it’ll be a big blow to his effort to take over the family. This house has always been seen as the throne.”

“I just want to get this done and go home,” Kit grunted.

“What are you doing here to pass the time, Jessica?” Ruth asked Jessie.

“Oh, there’s plenty for me to do here,” she answered. “I’m still working, writing articles and comic scripts for our magazine. I’m also learning new recipes from the cooks, and Nick set up a little trap shooting range in the corner of the grounds, and there’s a pool and gym, and lots of books and movies, and I have my knitting, and I have my books to study for my commercial pilot’s license, and Muffy’s staying with me to keep me company.”

“Yes, we know, she told us she was,” Brian told her.

“Now much trouble will you get into with your siblings over siding against them, Brian?” Kendall asked.

“Oh, they’ll be pissed off, I’m sure,” he answered. “I might even find myself fired and more or less banished from the family if Zach wins. But if he takes over the family, I’ll leave regardless. This family will disintegrate if he runs it, because he still thinks it’s the fifties and he can rule us like a dictator. The kids all have their trust funds, and they don’t rely on the family to get by anymore.”

“That one of his own sons is siding against him should tell him something,” Ruth added. “And Maxy and Jake’s girls should tell them something.”

“As if they’d listen,” Vil snorted darkly. “The one who’d better listen to her kids is Sarah. *All* of them are against Zach except maybe Duncan, and Jacob, but he’s too young to really have an opinion. She needs to come down off the fence.”

“That’ll happen when she knows someone’s going to win,” Brian noted dryly. “But, if we had Tom and Sarah on our side, it would definitely help.”

“What has Tom had to say about it?”

“He’s more interested in how Zach pushed Terry down, then tried to get him arrested to care about anything else,” Brian answered. “You know how he feels about his kids. Bess may not believe it, but Tom would go to the mat for her as much as Terry. That’s why he lets her run wild, because he just wants her to be happy.”

“Tom loves his kids nearly as much as we love ours,” Ruth said, putting her arm around Muffy and kissing her on the muzzle.

“Mooom,” Muffy protested, which made them laugh.

“Well, we should get going,” Brian noted, looking up at the clock. “No telling what Dan’s letting Jon and Misty do.” They stood up, and the others stood up as well.

“It was nice to meet you, Jessie,” Ruth said, giving her a hug. “If you stay here to have the baby, I’d love to come to your shower.”

“Umm, sure,” Jessie said, a bit uncertainly.

“Keep her company, sweetie,” Ruth said as she hugged Muffy. “A girl needs company, especially when she’s pregnant.”

“I will, I promise.”

“Kit,” Brian said soberly, standing before him and offering his paw. “I’ve told you before, but I’ll tell you again. I’m sorry for what you went through, and I was wrong not to try to help.”

“Keep your apologies,” Kit said coldly. “Just sticking your paw out and saying *I’m sorry* doesn’t come anywhere near far enough to make up for *this*,” he said, pointing at his half-missing ear.

“Well, then I guess I’ll just have to go far enough, Kit,” Brian told him with surprising calm and candor. “You’ll find out that not everyone in this family is your enemy, and if I have to prove myself to you, then that’s exactly what I’ll do.”

“You’re gonna be doing it a long time,” Kit told him.

“We’re both young, Kit. I’m sure we have time,” he said with a surprising smile.

Brian and Ruth left after kissing and hugging their way out of the room, then Kit blew out his breath and sat down. “Way to keep them on our side there, bro,” Vil told him as Kendall sat back down beside her.

“Just because we’re on the same side doesn’t mean I’m just gonna pretend what they did to me never happened,” he said. “I tolerated the family here and near Jessie because we need them, but I’m not going to walk paw in paw with them into the sunset. When this is over, I’m going back home, and if I never see any of the elders again, I won’t shed a single damned tear.”

“So, you’re willing to bend a little on the cousins, eh?” Vil asked with a sly smile.

“Maybe, but you said it yourself, Vil. I have a *reason* to hate them. And so do you.”

“The ones who tried to kill me, you bet your ass I do,” she said. “But the difference between us, bro, is I don’t blame the *entire* family for the acts of *some*. You’re starting to see that for yourself, cause you don’t blame the younger cousins. I think soon you’ll see that there’s only *some* in the family you can really blame for what happened to you.”

“As long as you don’t blame *me*, I’m happy,” Suzy winked at him.

Kit laughed. “How could I blame you, Suzy? The one vixen that came to visit me day after day?”

After Brian left, they had a very nice time just *talking*, for nearly three hours. Jessie got to know Suzy and Corey better, and vice versa. It turned out that Kendall already knew Suzy and Corey very well, since they’d come over quite a bit when he’d come over for weekends to see Vil. They traded stories, Jessie told Suzy and Vil in detail what it was like to be pregnant, and Kendall tried to get them to talk about basketball, and promptly had pillows thrown at him. Kit told stories about the magazine and what it was like to work with more of a family than an office, and Kendall told them about working in Brighton Industries as a PR executive, which basically meant he ran around the world telling everyone how great Brighton ships were and they should buy them. Corey told them about the documentary he was going to shoot in Maine next month about the coastal life, how life was different in a place where there were hundreds of inhabited islands, and the coastline was such that a one hundred yard trip in a boat could take an hour by car. “We used to spend a few weeks every summer in Maine, and it’s totally different up there,” he said. “So we’re gonna go do a movie about

the lifestyle on the islands and along the coast. We think it'll be pretty good."

"Sounds nice," Jessie said. "I've never been to Maine before."

"It's nice up there in the summer. In the winter, it's about like Boston," Corey chuckled. "Cold."

"Cold isn't our problem," Jessie giggled. "In the winter, it's in the fifties and sixties during the day, but sometimes it can get pretty cold at night in the winter."

"Sixties? That's like summer around here," Corey chuckled.

"We are definitely visiting them this winter," Suzy laughed.

"You're always welcome down in Austin, Suzy," Kit told her.

She yawned. "I think it's time to go home, Corey," she told him. "I have to be at work in the morning."

"I think I'd better go buy her something nice or I'm in trouble," Corey said with a smile at her.

"You better, buster," she winked at him.

"We should be heading home as well," Vil said. "Help me up, love."

Kit and Jessie walked them back to the garage as Stanley got their cars ready for them, Vil on her crutches and the others following her. When they got to the garage, Kit gave her a strong hug. "Be good, sis," he told her. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Sure thing. Later, sis," she said, hugging Vil as Kit hugged Suzy.

"Call anytime, Sue-Sue," he told her.

“Oh, you’re using a pet name for my girl, are ya?” Corey laughed.

“He’s called me that since I was fifteen,” Suzy said, grinning at him impishly.

“Watch her, Corey, she’s a bad girl.”

“You like us bad,” she giggled.

“I’m trying to make Jessie bad, but no luck yet,” he said, smiling at her.

“I’ll make you respectable yet, handsome fox,” Jessie said, blowing him a kiss.

“See, that’s why you should never get married. It just sucks all the fun out of life,” he sighed mournfully, then he winced and laughed when Jessie grabbed him by his good ear.

“I think someone needs to be punished,” she threatened.

“Oh baby, you know what I like,” Kit said while hunched over, which made the others erupt into helpless laughter.

The next day, it was all carried out.

Bess, Lynn, Mary, Angela, and Joy left Boston at noon, and boarded a commercial jet—first class of course—bound for Austin. Angela and Joy were attending Harvard, so they’d be leaving Austin and coming back the day before the first day of their semester started, but the other three were there until it was over. By 2:30, Sam, Travis, and Randy were on one of the brand new Vulpan Cessna business jets, one of three they bought and were delivered the month before, aboard a Citation CJ3 en route to their

temporary duty assignment in New Orleans. But before they left, all of them signed a letter to Uncle Zach telling them that he was wrong, that they supported Vil, and they wanted him, Jake, and Maxine to accept Vil as the family head. Vil delivered it to Zach by means of courier, and followed that up at the board meeting by moving to remove Zach from the board permanently, demote him, and replace him with Kitstrom Brian Vulpan. It failed, of course, because any Vulpan could veto any board proposal with just a no vote. But it also sent the message, mainly because Vil declared that she'd be bringing the same proposal up for vote tomorrow, and the next day, and the next day, for as long as it took until it passed.

But the bigger message, by far, was the open revolt of quite a few children, and what was more damning, some of Zach, Jake, and Maxine's own children were openly siding against them, one each from Zach and Maxine and three from Jake. That wasn't just them against the rest of the family, that was elements of their own immediate families siding against them. This one fact, Vil confided to them the next afternoon, both infuriated and worried the three of them, for while they still believed they were right, they saw that their actions had divided their own families. Travis had called his father and endured a five minute episode of being screamed at, threatened with being disowned, and even a threat to fire him from the company, to which Travis answered by hanging up on his father.

And then there was Brian. Kit found out later the next day that Brian had gone to see Zach, Jake, and Maxine at Swan Cove and told them, flat out, that they were wrong, and he was opposing them. For his trouble, he was nearly punched in the face, and raced through the door of the manor about five seconds ahead of an incensed Zach, who had chased him out of the house with a golf club.

Sheila and Terry were ready. They picked up their family members at the airports and took care of them. Terry took his male cousins first to the shipyard, and then to his condo building, where they rented furnished apartments on a short term basis. Sheila picked up the Party Pack at Bergstrom and rode with them in a limo to the Armitage, where they checked in for an extended stay. They expected to be in Austin for about three weeks or so, for that was how long Vil expected it to take to finally wear the three elders down.

They weren't alone, of course. Patrick, Christopher, Steven, Victor, George, and Louis all openly supported their parents, but that was it, and there was a good chance they were supporting their parents because they were too afraid of them to rebel. Far more youngers were siding with Vil, and there was one that was remaining silent. Bridgette wasn't answering any phone calls from anyone, and had vanished with her husband and children to parts unknown.

What Kit could see, sitting at the desk in the bedroom the next afternoon, that this wasn't shaping up to just be all of them against the three elders. Not all of the youngers were siding with Vil, either out of fear of their parents or because of honest desire to see Zach ruling the family. He could see that Vil had to be very, very careful here, or the family would be torn apart. If she was too rough with the elders and their kids, then the family really would shatter the way Brian feared, at least if they weren't responsible for the attack on Vil. If they were, though, no amount of consideration was necessary, and the family would know it. Whoever tried to kill Vil was basically disowned, and everyone knew it. As soon as she found out who it was, they were toast.

He should care less about it...but he couldn't do that. Even if he hated most of them, they were his *family*. Besides, if the family was at war with itself, then nobody would be safe. Not him, not Jessie, not his sister, not anyone. The family had to be at peace with itself, it had to have a single ruler, and what was more important, Vil could *not* exact the punishments she had in mind if she came out on top, because that would alienate the rest of the family. She could punish Zach, but couldn't drive him out and destroy him, else his kids would want revenge on Vil, and it would start all over again.

She'd be walking a fine line, he could see. But if anyone could do it, it was Vil. She'd know when to use a feather, and when to use a sledgehammer.

God, did he love that wife of his. She'd given him extra-special attention last night, which prevented him from brooding or worrying. Then again, his family had shocked him with their behavior last night. Not one of them made one comment about his marriage or his wife, either in his face or in private so far as he knew. They'd been amazingly well-behaved, and a few of them had even engaged Jessie in conversation. He'd dreaded the idea of his family being around his wife, but it seemed that he'd gotten off lucky. No doubt it was because of Vil. Vil's approval of his marriage was common knowledge in the family, and her fondness for Jessie was also well known. No doubt they were afraid to say anything about Kit's marriage with Vil right there.

What was more disturbing, though, was how they acted towards him. They...*listened* to him, even Brian. It was almost the way they treated Vil, like they thought he was in a ruling position in the family. That was ludicrous, because he wasn't even a part of the family anymore. He was up

here for two reasons and two reasons only, to evict Zach from Stonebrook and to help Vil find out who tried to kill her. When this was over, he would leave the family and go back to Austin, back to his own life, back to where he was happy. He could never be happy up here.

Austin. By now, his femme cousins were settling into their hotel rooms, in *his* city. Why on earth did he ever suggest that they go to Austin? Five wanton, wild Vulpans running wild through the city with large bank accounts and few inhibitions. Well, it was a good thing that Vil owned the police, he supposed. He had no doubt that she'd have to use her power to bail one of his cousins out of trouble within three days.

The phone rang, and when he answered it he realized he was about to find out, for it was Bess. "Hey Luke," she called, "we're here and settled in. I'm calling in for all the girls."

"Any trouble?"

"None at all. Sheila was here waiting for us when we got here, and she hired a limo to take us to the hotel. This place isn't bad. We've rented the whole top floor. That leaves one extra empty penthouse, but we rented that too to keep everyone out and keep our privacy. My suite's a bit small for my taste, but at least there's enough room to feel comfy."

"It's a hotel, Bess," he told her.

"Well, we'll see. Sheila's taking us out tonight, and I'm going to meet *her*."

"You must mean Allison."

"Yeah, she's coming with us."

“Just be nice, cousin,” Kit warned. “Sheila will kick your ass if you say anything to Ally. Then I’ll kick it when you come back up here.”

“I’ll reserve judgment until I meet her, Luke.”

“Don’t call me that,” he said wearily.

She laughed. “Kit. I told you, it’s gonna take me a long time to call you Kit. Just keep hounding me until I change.”

“I’ll do that, trust me.”

“Did the boys call yet?”

“Yeah. They’re in New Orleans and have already rented some apartments in Terry’s building.”

“Sounds better than this.”

“At least you have room service.”

“Yeah, but they can bring down servants.”

“I doubt that. Sheila tried to get Higgins to go down to Austin for months.”

“Still, I’m not used to having to *get* things or *do* things.”

“It’s good for you,” he said dryly. “Remember, Bess, no outrage,” he warned. “If you get me in trouble down there, I’ll whip your tail.”

“Don’t worry, cousin, we’ll keep it quiet,” she said. “I’m fully aware that this is your home, and we’re just visitors.”

“Remember that,” Kit said bluntly.

“Kit!” Sheila’s voice called. “How you doing, cousin?”

“Keep them out of trouble, Sheila.”

“Oh, *sure* I will,” she said teasingly.

“I’ll kick your ass, Sheila,” he threatened. “I know where you live.”

She laughed. “And I can talk Lupe into giving me the key to your house.”

“That’s a quick way to end up back in Boston, little girl,” he retorted, which made her giggle.

“We’ll keep Sheila from getting too fancy when she tries to show off your home city, cousin,” Bess said lightly.

“You’d better, or I’ll have to come down there and send all of you home with your butts shaved and raw from the spanking.”

“Why Luke, I never knew you loved me,” Bess teased.

“You’ll find out how much I love you if I go back home to a mess I have to clean up.”

“We’ll be careful, cousin,” Bess assured him.

“Just make sure you do,” Kit told her.

“Alright, talk to you later, cousin. Be good.”

“You’d better do the same.”

She laughed. “Bye Luke.”

“Kit,” he corrected.

She giggled. “Kit,” she amended.

“Bye Bess and everyone else listening,” he said dryly, then hung up.

He leaned back and sighed. The very faint sound of a shotgun told him that Jessie had to be shooting trap again. She was doing pretty well here so far, keeping her head and keeping herself busy, and she also did so well facing his family with both strength and kindness, and though she was a bit shy, that was just Jessie. But she wasn't as shy as she used to be, he realized. Six months ago, she would have been quiet as a church when faced with his family, but instead she had been calm and gentle in interacting with his family, especially with Misty.

Jessie was growing stronger, he realized. But as far as he was concerned, that was a good thing. She'd been so shy when he first met her, but since getting married, she'd been growing more confident, more sure of herself. It was nice to see, and in his family, it was something of a requirement. If she was afraid of his family, they'd come after her like sharks.

He wanted to be with her. He stood up and hurried out of the bedroom, heading outside to shoot trap with his wife and whoever was with her. All these other problems could wait until tomorrow.

Chapter 35

There was only so much that they could do trapped inside Stonebrook, but they did the best they could.

Things stalled after the family divided up into the battle lines, and July faded into August as they simply waited for both the FAA and Vil's own investigations to track down exactly who had tried to kill her. They were more or less waiting for that, because nothing else was really happening or changing.

Every day settled into a routine for Kit and Jessie. They would wake up, eat breakfast, then Kit would listen in on the boring board meeting while Jessie either knitted or went down to the gym and pool for a low-intensity workout. Kit would work out himself after the meeting, they would eat lunch, then they would do something with Muffy, who was awake by then. More often than not, they were shooting trap. It was something all three of them could do, it was new to Kit and Muffy, and it was actually rather enjoyable and relaxing for them. And they were getting good. Kit could consistently hit 20 or more targets out of 25 now, and Muffy could hit 15 to 20 out of every 25. After they did something with Muffy, both Kit and Jessie would retire to the master bedroom to study their pilot materials while Muffy either did her own thing or sat with them reading or watching TV, and it was usually during this time that Kit would start getting the calls. Every day, all his cousins in New Orleans and Austin would call him to check in, just to make sure they were okay and also to receive any news that Vil wanted passed down, but wasn't so important that

she would have them all called and told immediately. The calls usually lasted less than a minute, since some of his cousins weren't exactly on speaking terms with him or there really wasn't anything to say. After they studied, Jessie would drag Muffy down to the kitchen and cook dinner, also teaching Muffy how to cook. After dinner, they would watch TV, study, or watch a movie, sometimes with Muffy and sometimes not. Then they would go to bed while Muffy stayed up, since she was much more of a night owl. And in the morning, they did it all again.

It was far from routine for Vil, though. She kept him up to speed on what was going on with daily calls or visits, and every day she was fighting off some new attack from her elders. It was a new lawsuit, or a new rumor, or a new accusation or even an attempt to get Vil in trouble with some law agency. They attacked her any and every way they could. She was still basically playing defense, holding out until she was safely married and until she found out who sabotaged her chopper. Maxine and Jake visited Vil at work almost every day to either demand or cajole her into giving up her position, but she would not budge. And though she was playing defense, she did strike back in her own ways, with subtle moves that aggravated their elders.

What she did to Zach was a classic example of her very subtle maneuvers. She had any number of ways to attack her uncle directly, but Vil was a manipulator at heart, and so it was her preferred method to simply be the femme holding the strings of a puppet that did the attacking for her. It was her way, and she was very good at it. Vil had taken Stanley's discovery that Zach was using the Stonebrook accounts to hide money, compiled a pretty detailed history of the activity, and had it FedExed to the auditing departments of the Internal Revenue Service and the Massachusetts

Department of Taxes and Revenues. The Vulpans had control of a great many state and federal agencies, but nobody...*nobody*...screwed with the IRS. The IRS took Vil's little tidbit, immediately decided that there was an issue of unpaid taxes involved with this mystery money, and they started digging. A week after she sent the tip, the IRS pulled an audit on Zach, which distracted him because his accountants had to quickly come up with some trick to hide the money he'd been hiding in Stonebrook's accounts.

Vil had a knack for doing tremendous damage with the smallest pieces of information.

She focused her attacks on Zach, but Jake and Maxine didn't entirely avoid her attention. Her attacks on them were as petty as they were amusing, and were done more or less just to annoy them. For Jake, she convinced the county that it was time to "pave" the road to Jake's manor, so they then proceeded to tear up the road leading to Still Waters, which forced Jake to call a car from his manor to come out and get him, then have his car go to Swan Cove to wait. Sure, it did little and it was petty, but for a Vulcan used to everything being their way, a closed road between them and home was an intolerable situation. Maxine found her electricity shut off when she got home one hot August day, and thanks to Vil's meddling, it took her nearly a full day to get it back on. The house ran on its backup generators the whole time. Again, it did nothing serious, but it did aggravate Maxine.

Kit's discomfort in Stonebrook didn't really fade all that much. When Jessie was with him, he was happy and content, but whenever she wasn't near, if he was out of the master bedroom, he felt like all his ancestors were scowling at him from the walls. For some reason, the master bedroom felt comfortable to him, probably because Vil had had it decorated to where it resembled a much larger version of their room back home.

Just like he was in Kansas, Kit was able to get things done for the magazine. He called Rick at least three times a day, called Pat about six times a day, continued to do the books, and even interviewed the applicants for the new writer/researcher job over the phone. But what was more important to Rick, Kit had been writing his articles about Stonebrook, and they were *smashingly* popular. His first article had been about the manor itself, its history and appearance, and later articles had described daily life in the manor, both for him and also for a “real” Vulpan, the lives of the servants, and the rich history of the furs who had lived there, both Vulpan and servant. His most popular article yet hadn’t been about the Vulpan or the lifestyles of the filthy rich, it had been the article about Clancy, who was the quintessential Vulpan servant; educated, refined, intelligent, and most importantly, loyal. Clancy had lived in the manor since he was five, the longest living resident of the manor, and Clancy had described his life serving the Vulpan family in a way that made it incredibly compelling. Clancy had served four generations of Vulpan, describing how he used to play with Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan when they were kids, then served the adult Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan when Kitstrom Daniel Vulpan passed away. But he also described the hereditary post of chief butler, and how a MacArren had held that post since Stonebrook was built and became inhabited. Stonebrook would not be Stonebrook without a MacArren standing at the door to welcome family and guests and running the manor to keep it in perfect operation. He described the sense of pride he had in serving the Vulpan family, and also quite effectively described the nearly symbiotic relationship the rich had with their servants.

The life of a servant wasn’t actually all that hard, his articles revealed. The average servant worked about six hours a day officially, but was “on call” to be used almost any time of the day or night. Clancy described the

shift system and the pairing system, where servants worked set shifts to do the daily work, but certain servants were paired with certain house members to provide a sense of normalcy for the resident. The servant would learn the quirks and needs of that Vulpan, and would become effective servants for them. Stanley and Luann, for example, were Kit and Jessie's servants. Stanley as the chief butler had the honor of being the personal servant of the master of the house, and Luann had been chosen to be the maid that would serve Jessie because she was young and friendly. A Vulpan servant worked "on the clock" about six hours a day, cleaning, polishing, mowing, gardening, whatever it was they did. The rest of the day was spent in a state of leisurely readiness, where they enjoyed their time in their own way, but stayed on the manor's grounds in case they were called to work. They would stay that way until the manor's master declared that they were done for the night, and then they were considered "off" except for the two servants who were scheduled to work the nightshift, and their only job was to be awake and available in case they were needed. Two days a week they were considered "off" and could leave the grounds to shop or whatever it was they wished. A curious deal with Stonebrook was that the servants had no cars of their own. If they needed to go out, or they were off for the day, the manor owned four Chevy Cavaliers that were kept in the exterior garage for their use, and they could also use the limo if they got prior permission.

Many common furs didn't know that when they saw a limo riding down the street, it might contain the *servants* of the rich family instead of the family itself.

In many ways, the servants of a rich family enjoyed many of the perks and luxuries the family did itself. Since they lived inside the manor, they had access to the manor's amenities, and though it was different from

family to family, in the Vulpan family the servants had always been allowed access to the entertainment features of the manor on certain days or at certain times during the day, known as “servant’s hours.” They were allowed to use the gym, the pools, the archery range his father had built near the wall, the home theater on the second floor, and had free access to the manor’s phones and internet service provider. They were paid well, but they didn’t have to use their own pay to buy furniture or food, since those were provided by the manor. The only things the servants had to buy were “luxury items” like home electronics, personal items, and personal clothing. Their apartments were rather nicely furnished, their groceries were delivered to the house, and there was plenty for them to do, even if their “normal” jobs weren’t actually all that strenuous.

The hardest worker in the manor was undoubtedly the chief butler. He didn’t work six hours a day, he worked more like ten hours a day, since he was responsible for all servant scheduling, the appearance and upkeep of the grounds, managing all matters of discipline among the servants, and he was also the one that managed the manor’s finances. And all that was on top of being the personal servant of the master of the house. But, Kit didn’t give him much to do. Jessie refused to allow Luann to clean their bedroom, and Kit didn’t need a butler to help him get dressed or fetch and carry for him.

Their focus was changing, however. Vil’s wedding was only two weeks away, and because many of their friends were coming up for the wedding, Jessie decided to have her baby shower the day before the wedding. Kit had decided that it was silly for his friends to be spending money to stay in hotels when he had plenty of room right here, so he called Rick and told him that everyone who came up from Austin would be staying at the manor.

Stonebrook would be hosting as many as they could pack into the grounds, so as to help assuage the cost of coming up and eliminate food and lodging from the expenses of his friends. He could easily house everyone here in Stonebrook. There were 25 available bedrooms in the manor outside of the master bedroom, including the master bedroom in the west wing that had once housed Zach, but would house Rick and Martha. There were eight bedrooms and one master bedroom in each wing, three bedrooms on each floor, and there were six special guest “master bedrooms” on the second floor in the main part of the house, in addition to four currently unoccupied servant apartments that were one bedroom affairs on the first and third floors of the main house, where most of the servant apartments were located. Muffy was occupying one bedroom, Vil’s old bedroom just down the hall, and the guards were occupying the six bedrooms on the second floor and two of the empty servant apartments. Between those 17 available bedrooms, one apartment, and the 7 cottages, three of which were multiple bedroom affairs, he was confident he could house every single friend or family member who was coming from Austin, as well as perhaps a dignitary or two. He knew for a fact that Vil had invited Governor Rick Perry, and it was only polite to offer him a cottage at Stonebrook for his stay.

That news had caused a change in plans. Rick had rescheduled their flight so they arrived on Wednesday instead of Thursday, so they had an extra day to explore the manor and the city and enjoy a little Vulpan hospitality, as well as giving the femmes the chance to attend Jessie’s baby shower on the day before the wedding.

Not everyone would have their own bedroom, though. Sam had quite delicately told them that she and Kevin would be in the same bedroom,

which cut their bedroom needs by one. Rick and Martha would share a bedroom, and Savid would be given the largest cottage on the grounds, which had room for him and his children as long as two of them shared a bedroom. Jeffrey and Sandy would share a bedroom if Sandy decided to come as well, but so far, Sandy still had said she wasn't coming.

And if worse came to worst, they could bring in rollaway beds or air mattresses and double up furs in the bedrooms.

Stonebrook was a *huge* manor, one of the largest in New England, easily as large as some hotels, and when he looked at it like that, its true size became apparent. He could house every single wedding attendee from Austin in Stonebrook, and probably have room left over.

But for the staff, it was both a very exciting and very busy time, and the manor had exploded into a frenzy of preparation. They hadn't hosted a large number of guests since Kit's father's funeral, and they wanted the manor to put its best foot forward and be what everyone thought it to be, the jewel of Boston and the most exquisite manor in New England. They were already hard at work getting the manor ready for visitors by giving the bedrooms an extra-special cleaning and inspection, bringing in enough food to feed approximately 30 guests in addition to the residents and staff, the cooks were preparing a menu for the visitors, and Stanley was even having the exterior walls, drive, and courtyard pressure washed to make the old tan granite, pavement, bricks and cobblestones all shine to present the best image. He was having flowers planted along the drive, and was pulling some staff from other manors and hiring a few temporaries to help fully staff the manor for the large number of guests.

That irked the other members of the family. It was an old standing arrangement that when the chief butler of Stonebrook needed more help, he

could commandeer one or two servants from the other family manors and houses to fill the holes on a temporary basis, and he had made that call. But, as Kit expected, Zach, Jake, and Maxine refused to allow their servants to go to Stonebrook, though Tom and Sarah did. Stanley called one servant in from each manor and also appropriated all the servants of the cousins who were in New Orleans and Austin, as was his right as the chief of all staff for Stonebrook, and by proxy, the entire Vulpan family. The exterior garage was prepared so the extra servants had somewhere to park—they would continue to live in their current homes and commute—and they had already begun working in the manor, cleaning absolutely everything to make it suitable for royalty to stay at the manor, redecorating, fixing anything that even looked broken, and getting the grounds to immaculate condition.

Stanley had never been happier, Kit mused as he came down to see him rushing by, talking sternly into his phone, scolding the groundskeepers for not having the floral pattern planted near the front gate, a floral version of the Vulpan crest on a small slope that would be the first thing a visitor saw when the gates opened and they passed through the trees and reached the first curve, preparing to come up the hill to the manor house. Stanley loved hosting guests so they could gawk at the perfection in which he kept the manor, and he wanted everything to be just right for the first visitors, who would be Sam and Kevin. Sam was planning Jessie's shower, so she and Kevin decided to come a week early and stay the week, almost like a pre-honeymoon vacation, which Kit and Jessie considered a good thing. Sam was one of their best friends, and he'd love to have her and Kevin at the manor. Kit moved through several scurrying servants, one carrying new sheets just bought and delivered to one of the bedrooms, as Nick ambled over to him. "Hey Kit," he called, carrying a clipboard and his small yet bulldog-looking black submachine gun that Kit had discovered was a

Heckler and Koch MP7A1, a new submachine gun that was as small as any other submachine gun, but fired a round that was more like a rifle round, which gave it much more stopping power. The gun was quickly becoming very popular among the military and police forces around the world, and Nick was trying to sell the other mercs on the superiority of his gun. Nick had never fired it in his presence, but he boasted that he could fire the weapon with just one paw, that its recoil was so low that he could aim and control it like a pistol even when firing it fully automatic. Given how strong Nick was, Kit did not consider this an idle boast. “I’ve got the security schedules set up for the expansion. I’m not hiring other mates for the increased security, we’re going with Valiant Security. They’re gonna put guards on the grounds and me and my mates will be commanding them like officers.”

“Sounds good,” Kit answered, looking at the clipboard and the estimated staffing numbers. They were increasing security for the wedding, since there would be so many furs in the manor.

Kit’s phone rang, his Stonebrook phone, and he picked it up with a paw out to Nick. “Hello,” he called.

“Hey bro,” Vil called. “Got a moment?”

“That’s a silly question, sis,” he snorted.

She laughed. “Well, I have a favor to ask.”

“Go ahead.”

“Kendall’s asked for you to be his best male,” she said. He offered it to his father, but his father doesn’t want to participate in a Catholic wedding. Ken tried to argue for a protestant wedding.”

“He did, eh?”

“Yeah, but it’s going to be a Catholic wedding, bro, I won that little argument with that Anglican heathen,” she told him, which made him laugh. “We’ve decided to trim it down and not make it ridiculous, so we’re going with one best male, a maid of honor, three grooms, and three bridesmaids. You’ll be the best male and also the ringbearer. Ken’s brothers Harry and Michael and his friend Charlie are going to be the grooms, and Suzy will be my maid of honor. I thought about making Jessie the maiden of honor, but that’s a role traditionally held by a single femme, so I’m giving it to Suzy. Jessie, Muffy, and another friend of mine named Sonya will be the other maids. I woulda offered it to Sheila, but she won’t be here to practice.”

“Well, that’ll depend on what Jessie has to say.”

“Silly boy, she already agreed. I called her first to add more pressure on you,” she told him, which made him laugh.

“Evil femme,” he teased. “I guess I can do it.”

“Good. We have four rehearsals, but they’re on the days leading up to the wedding, and before you say it I’ll make sure the Thursday rehearsal doesn’t interfere with Jessie’s shower. So, you’ll be coming out of the manor four times, and I’ll talk to Nick tonight to arrange security for your excursions. I’ll send some tailors out there tomorrow to fit you for your tux and Jessie her dress.”

“As long as we don’t have to pay for it,” he chuckled.

“Such a silly question. You’re certainly being goofy today, bro,” she teased.

“You still coming over tonight?”

“Yeah. Tell Jessie I want some of that killer tuna casserole she makes for dinner.”

“I’ll tell her,” he promised. “So, does this mean the wedding’s all planned out?”

“Yup,” she answered. “I wanted to have our reception there at Stonebrook.”

“Well...why don’t you talk to Stanley about it, sis? I think I can tolerate the family being around me, and I doubt anyone we don’t want here is going to attend your wedding anyway. This place doesn’t mean much if you can’t use it when you want to. It’s *yours*, after all.”

“Oh, Jake and Maxine already said they’d be there,” she said. “But I seriously doubt they’ll come to the reception. So, you’re *officially* giving your blessing to hold the reception there?”

“I guess I am.”

“It’s a deal,” she said with a bright voice. “I’ll call Stanley right now and give him the bad news.”

“Bad? Do you have any idea how happy he is at the idea of hosting the Austin guests? If you tell him you’re having the reception here, he’ll swoon in delight. He might scold you for giving him such short notice, but I’m sure he’ll be ecstatic.”

“The reception is going to be simple, bro, just some music, some food, a little dancing, cut the cake, and that’s about it.”

“Well, call Stanley.”

“I will. Later bro.”

“Later sis.” Kit closed the phone and looked at Nick. “It just got a little more complicated, Nick,” he said.

“I heard. You’re going to be in the wedding procession, and the reception will be here.”

Kit nodded. “Sorry for the short notice.”

“No worries, Kit,” he smiled. “I can arrange security for the reception no problem.”

“I don’t think you can carry that with you, though,” he noted, pointing at the submachine gun.

Nick laughed. “I don’t think so. I do think we’ll need suits though. I’d better talk about that with Miss Vil,” he said, scribbling on the clipboard. “Maybe Sylvie will torture us with a sexy dress that has a neckline all the way down to here,” he sighed, putting his paw at his belt.

“I’m sure she could fix you, Nick,” he noted, which made the black-furred wolf laugh. But his smile faded when he put a finger to his earpiece, then barked a quick command into the mic at his shoulder. “There’s an unauthorized boat approaching the dock. Stay in the house!” he ordered, then he took hold of his MP7 and rushed towards the garage, where a golf cart would hurry him to the dock. “Sylvie! Stay with the PFs!” Kit heard him shout.

“*Herr* Kit, come to the kitchen!” Sylvia shouted. Kit hurried into the kitchen in time to see Sylvia load and cock her MP-5, which showed that she meant business. Jessie was in the kitchen with Henri, making lunch, but both of them had stopped what they were doing, watching fearfully as

Sylvia pulled her earpiece jack from her radio and allowed them to listen to the chatter. Two other hired mercenaries, Nick, and five Valiant units were converging on the dock, and then they heard one of the Valiant guards call out.

“It’s filled with photographers!” he barked.

“Shoo ‘em off while we get there, Tommy!” Nick called, using the guard’s name. “ETA twenty seconds! Krichek, Grizz, keep your PDWs outta sight!”

“PDW?” Kit asked Sylvia curiously.

“Personal Defense Weapon,” she answered, holding up her MP-5, which she was now uncocking. “Term for any weapon we might use on the manor that’s illegal to American law.” She removed the magazine, removed the round from the chamber, replaced it in the magazine, then put the magazine back in her belt. “I don’t think we want those photographers to take pictures of guards on the grounds carrying illegal weapons. It might cause you problems.”

“Well, that was scary,” Jessie laughed. “Alright, Henri, what’s the next step?”

“What are you making, love?”

“Duck l’orange,” she answered. “Henri’s teaching me!”

“We’re having duck for lunch?”

She shook her head. *We’re* having bratwurst and sauerkraut,” she answered. “I’m making this for Nick and the other guards, cause I know you don’t like duck,” she smiled. “Carrie and Frannie’s making some

sandwiches for the Valiant males. They're so polite!" she said appreciatively.

"Sounds like they're on the ball, too," Kit said as he heard more chatter, as Nick coordinated them driving the boat filled with photographers away from the manor's dock.

"They're not bad for amateurs," Sylvia said simply.

"You know, I've always wondered what it's like to shoot a gun like that."

"We can show you," she answered. "With Stanley's permission, Nick has been converting the archery range down by the back gate to a shooting area. It has an earthen embankment behind it, so it's perfect for it. He bought some targets but hasn't installed them yet."

"Yeah, that's why they put the archery range there," he remembered. "Because it's a flat area with the base of the hill behind it. Dad used to spend hours down there practicing, at least until Mom died," he said in a distant tone. "He gave it up after that. It hasn't been used since."

"And yet they keep it up?"

"It's part of the grounds," Kit shrugged. "They maintain it just as it was until told different."

"You mean you'll let us shoot your machine guns?" Jessie asked.

"If you'd like, *Fraulein* Jessie," she answered with a nod. "I'd be happy to teach you."

"Sounds interesting," Kit noted to Jessie, who nodded.

“I’ve never shot an automatic before. It should be really neat!” she agreed.

Sylvia keyed her mic and rattled off something in German. Nick’s voice replied, also in German, and she nodded. “Nick says he’ll get it set up by three.”

“I didn’t know Nick spoke German,” Kit laughed.

“Most furs in our line of work speak English and Spanish, and quite a few also speak French, German, or both, because they are useful languages in our line of work just because so many of us speak it. Russian used to be a very useful language to know, but not so much anymore, and Chinese is starting to become an important language for us, too.”

“French? Why French, and why German?”

“There are a lot of French and Germans in our line of work, Germans like me,” she answered with a demure smile. “There are a lot of Russians too, but they tend to hire out to be combat mercenaries more than bodyguards, so Russian isn’t as important in the line of work we do. If you do mercenary work, though, Russian is a very useful language to know. A lot of our clients speak Spanish, and if you speak English and German, you can function in most of Europe.” The radio chattered again, Nick sounding the all clear, and Sylvia acknowledged and plugged her radio earpiece back in. “Chinese is becoming important if we work in Asia, many there speak Mandarin even if they’re not Chinese. I learned French and English while growing up, and I was taught Russian when I was in the Berlin police, because there are a surprising number of furs who live there who speak Russian, a leftover from the days when Germany was divided.”

“Wow, and all we speak here in America is English,” Jessie mused.

“Many of us think that’s actually a bad thing,” Sylvia said. “If I only spoke German, I wouldn’t be able to function unless I didn’t want to earn any money or do anything with my life. Knowing only one language isolates you. If you live in Europe and you have contact with furs outside of your home village, knowing English and German at a bare minimum is a must. Knowing Russian, French, or Italian is very useful. For a German, learning Polish or Czech can also be useful, depending on where you live in Germany.”

“Learn something new every day,” Kit chuckled.

“Guess we’re luckier than most, German is spoken in several countries in Europe. That’s why it’s such an important language.”

“Anyway, pretty kitty, Vil just called about the wedding and reception,” he said, looking at her.

“Did she ask you?”

He nodded. “I accepted, so she said there will be tailors here tomorrow to fit us. I also gave her permission to have the reception here.”

“Oh, that’s nice!” Jessie said with a smile. “I hope she has it catered!” she laughed. “That would drive the poor chefs crazy trying to cater a reception!”

“I would consider it a professional challenge,” Henri told her with a roguish smile.

Later that afternoon, Nick did just as he promised. Around 2:30, he called Kit and Jessie down to the back gate, nearby which was located the old archery range, and Sylvia, Krichek, and Grizz went with them down to the range. It was an area about 50 yards long and 15 yards wide that was

cleared of trees, the far side the base of the hill upon the top of which the manor house was built. The hill had been excavated slightly to form an embankment with about a 40 degree slope, a safety bank covered with ivy to ensure no arrows went flying off and hurt someone by accident. It was hidden from the rest of the manor by the forest, and the only way to reach the range was by a cart path that turned off the drive to the back gate. On the range, the old archery targets had been pushed far to one side and lined up neatly, and in their place were wood-framed targets that stood about five feet high at the bull's-eye. Nick had placed a table holding several boxes of ammunition and a cleaning kit behind a line he'd laid out using a piece of white nylon rope. There were also a few chairs further behind the line for spectators.

“As promised, your very own shooting range,” Nick smiled. “Stanley told me to leave the archery targets here and make the firearm targets portable so the place could be converted back and forth.”

“Pretty clever,” Kit nodded in agreement.

“Alright, very first thing, the safety briefing. We'll explain the safety rules, teach you about the weapons, then we'll let you fire them.”

Jessie decided to try Sylvia's MP-5, and Kit wanted to try Nick's MP7. The two of them gave them a thorough safety briefing, explaining the different dynamics involved in using an automatic weapon, then they were extensively trained in the operation of the weapons. They wouldn't let them try firing until they could immediately point out every feature of the weapons, and also explain in detail exactly how to load the weapon, chamber a round, where the safety was, what the selectors on the safety meant, how to aim the weapons using their sights, and then how to unchamber a round safely and unload the weapon.

“Alright, I think we’re ready for a few test fires,” he said. “We’ll start on semi, so you get a feel for the recoil of the weapons. Once you’ve fired off a clip, we’ll let you try them on auto.”

“This should be really cool,” Jessie said as Sylvia offered her a clip of live ammunition.

“Attention, live fire at the range is about to commence, live fire at the range is about to commence,” Nick warned into his radio. “Keep away from the downrange side of the range, and that includes no patrols of the wall until I give the all clear.” He gave Kit the clip from the weapon. “Alright, load ‘em up,” he ordered.

“Can we play too?” Grizz asked, smiling toothily. Grizz was just that, a grizzly bear, and he was even bigger and more burly than Barry. He carried a futuristic-looking FN P90, a weapon almost encased in a solid piece of aluminum.

“Semi only for now, guys,” Nick said as he put on his ear protection and gave Kit a pair of safety glasses. “And only two on the line at a time, let’s not crowd Kit and Jessie on their first time,” he added as he pulled out his Glock and checked it, then put it back in its holster. “We can take turns while they reload.”

“Sounds good,” Krichek nodded, pulling out his own MP-5, which was smaller than Sylvia’s and had no integral suppressor or retractable buttstock. In the huge Siberian tiger’s paw, it almost looked like a pistol.

Kit and Jessie loaded the weapons, extended their retractable buttstocks, then shouldered them and prepared to fire. His first shot with Nick’s gun showed him that it had even less recoil than the shotgun he used for trap shooting. The sights of his gun were a little odd, nothing like on the

shotgun or the pistol that Nick had taught him to fire, but he understood how they worked and was able to hit the target. Jessie fired her first shot, which was considerably quieter because of the suppressor, and she seemed a little surprised. “It doesn’t kick as much as my shotgun,” she remarked.

“No, they’re designed to minimize recoil,” Krichek said in his Russian accent, “because they’re designed to fire in automatic. Imagine that same recoil hitting you twice a second or more, and that’s what it’s like to shoot them in full auto.”

“Oh, I get it,” Jessie nodded as she shouldered the MP-5 again.

After Kit and Jessie emptied their clips, which took longer for Kit because it had a 20 round clip where Jessie had an 16 round clip, Sylvia and Nick stepped up to the line with their pistols. Nick had his Glock, but Sylvia carried a Beretta 92. “Five bucks a point?” Nick offered as he chambered a round.

“You’re on,” she answered. “Five seconds, ten shots.”

“Deal.”

Clearly understanding what they meant, Krichek stepped up and raised a paw as he looked at his watch on his other wrist. “Three. Two. One. Fire!” he barked, jerking his paw down quickly.

Kit understood after they started shooting. Each of them fired off rounds in rapid succession from their semi-automatic pistols, and he realized they had to fire ten shots in five seconds or less. They were firing at the other two targets, and as Kit watched, small holes appeared in both of them as the two professionals more or less emptied their clips into the

targets in about four seconds. “Time!” Krichek barked, waving his paw, but that was moot. Both of them were finished before he made the call.

“No shooting guys, we have to go check our targets,” Nick called.

“What’s five bucks a point?” Jessie asked Grizz.

“They’ll add up the points, and whoever wins gets five dollars for every point over the loser. So, if Sylvia scored a fifteen, and Nick a twenty, she owes him twenty-five dollars.”

“Gambling on shooting. Now I’ve heard of everything!” Jessie laughed.

“That’ll probably be the other way around,” Krichek chuckled. “Sylvie is *good* with pistols. She even has Olympic medal.”

From what Kit saw, it was probably about even, and the bullets weren’t centered in the middle. Shooting so fast made the recoil spread their shots around the target, but Kit did see that each target had ten holes in it. At least they didn’t miss. Sylvia laughed, and Nick reached into his pocket.

“I think you’re right, Krichek,” Jessie giggled.

Nick surrendered money to Sylvia, then the two of them replaced the two outside targets with fresh ones. When they came back up, they both attended Kit and Jessie. “Alright, auto this time,” Nick said. “Sylvie, load five rounds in the clip. We’ll give you five rounds so you can feel what it’s like in auto. But we don’t want you to shoot *all* of them at once. The trick to shooting auto is short controlled bursts. Just squeeze the trigger, and as soon as you feel the gun buck, let go. You should fire three rounds by the time you take the pressure off the trigger. We load you up with five rounds so if you forget to let go of the trigger, the gun isn’t up here by the time it’s

empty,” he said, holding his arm at a high angle. “Now remember, the gun will recoil with *every* bullet you shoot, so the muzzle of the weapon is going to climb. Your job is to keep it level, to keep it from bucking higher. It’s going to surprise you the first time, it always does. That’s another reason we only start off with five rounds.”

“Okay,” Kit nodded, adjusting his glasses as Nick loaded five surprisingly slender rounds into the clip for the MP7. Kit loaded the magazine and chambered the round, then shouldered the weapon. “Am I good to go?”

“Fire when ready,” Nick nodded as Jessie chambered a round in the weapon she was using.

He tried to do as Nick said, press the trigger, then let it go when he felt the recoil. He felt the gun buck, and he tried to let go of the trigger, but then it bucked again almost immediately, which surprised him, and delayed him from letting go of the trigger. By the third recoil, the muzzle was indeed significantly higher, and Kit finally reacted by quickly taking his finger off the trigger and pulling the weapon back down. It fired again before his finger came off, but his increased pull on the muzzle kept the weapon from getting any higher. By the time it stopped firing, he’d fired four rounds, and had one left in the clip.

“Not bad,” Nick nodded as Jessie fired. She gave a surprised look as the gun chattered in her paws, but she did a much better job of keeping it level. However, she too fired off four rounds instead of three. “Very good, dove,” Nick said appreciatively.

“That is *so* different from a shotgun!” she exclaimed with a surprised smile.

“Yes, it is, isn’t it?” Nick nodded. “Let’s try eight rounds this time. And let’s let the boys play while we load up.”

Kit and Jessie moved off of the line, and Krichek and Grizz replaced them. “Five bucks a point?”

“Don’t be pansy, ten,” Krichek challenged. “How many rounds in that toy?”

“Thirteen, yours?”

“Fifteen.”

“Thirteen in eight seconds,” he offered.

“Bet,” Krichek grinned. He chattered at Sylvia in Russian.

“*Da*,” she answered, then looked at her watch as she stepped up beside them at the line. “Three. Two. One. Fire!” she called.

As Nick supervised them loading rounds into the magazines, the two big bodyguards all but emptied their pistols into the targets down range. They both finished before Sylvia called time, then they holstered the weapons and hurried down to their targets. “Change only the outside targets while you’re down there!” Nick shouted. “And keep the old ones, we’ll reuse them for Kit and Jessie!”

“*Da*, boss!” Krichek called.

“Alright, just wait here until they’re back up here,” Nick told Kit as he gave him the loaded magazine. Kit slotted the magazine in place, but did not chamber a round, to which Nick nodded in appreciation.

For nearly an hour, Kit and Jessie were given the privilege to learn how to fire automatic weapons. Kit learned how to minimize the muzzle

climb with some tricks Nick taught him, and after an hour, he could fire the desired three round burst and keep the muzzle level. Nick had let him shoot as many as nine rounds at a time, letting him shoot as many as he could before he felt he was losing aim with the weapon, which was nine shots. Kit had to admit, he *liked* Nick's weapon. It really didn't have much recoil, it wasn't that heavy, and it was easy to aim, shoot, and to reload. Kit and Jessie weren't the only ones to fire at the targets on automatic. Krichek and Grizz also used their submachine guns on the range, Krichek showing how he fired his MP-5K with one paw like a pistol, the weapon rock solid in his paw as he emptied the entire clip at the target without the gun's muzzle climbing. Grizz showed off his P90, which looked almost like a laser gun from a Sci-fi flick, but it looked solid, and the bear could fire the weapon confidently. Kit and Jessie also got to test fire the assorted pistols they used, from Sylvia's Beretta 92 to Grizz's Walther P99 to Krichek's Kel-Tec P11, and right before they ended, they traded weapons and fired them, then Grizz allowed them to test fire his P90 on automatic after he loaded it for them and showed them where the safety was, letting them fire the weapon without as much training because they were literally just firing it with him right there to observe to make sure they did it safely. They picked up their shell casings as they went, and they kept them separate, since certain brass belonged to certain weapons, and all four of them knew how to make their own bullets, re-using the shell casings for new rounds. That made the brass casings ejected from the weapons valuable.

When they were done, Nick keyed up his radio. "Firing at the range is now complete, repeat, firing at the range is now complete. Wall patrols may recommence."

"That was *fun*!" Jessie said brightly.

“*Da*, the shooting is always fun, but now comes the not fun part. Cleaning,” he grinned as he moved towards the table.

“You shot ‘em, you clean ‘em,” Nick smiled slyly at Kit.

“No sweat, Nick, show me how to take this apart.”

All of them bent to the task of cleaning the weapons, and Grizz laughed. “This is why private ranges rock. We’d never be allowed to use our machine guns at a public range.”

“We could, but would get very unfriendly visit from ATF if we did,” Krichek chuckled as he broke down his MP-5K with professional speed.

Another cart rolled into the cleared area, holding Vil and Kendall. “So here’s where you’re hiding!” Vil called.

“Hey Vil!” Jessie said with a bright smile. “They converted this to a shooting range and let us try out some of their guns!”

“I heard some of it when I was driving up,” she grinned. “Have fun?”

“It was a lot of fun!” she said with a nod.

“Well, we have planning to do guys, get a move on,” she commanded.

“We’ll be done in a little bit,” Kit told her. “Just go up to the house and we’ll be up when we finish. We can’t leave until we clean up the mess we made.”

“Sure, if you don’t want me here,” Vil grinned.

“You can sit in that cart and wait or you can go up to the air conditioned house and wait in a comfortable chair and a cup of tea,” Kit noted.

She laughed. “Good point. I’ll be in the ballroom with Stanley when you’re finished playing with your toys.”

With their help, Kit and Jessie learned how to take apart and clean the weapons, then they reassembled them under the watchful eyes and step by step instructions of their owners. Once they were done, Nick boxed up all the ammunition they didn’t fire and drove Kit and Jessie back up to the house while Sylvia, Krichek, and Grizz rode in the cart behind them. “So, did you like shooting a real gun?” he asked.

“Yes, and thanks for the lesson, Nick, it was fun,” Kit answered.

“So, tell me. You shot all four autos...which did you like the best?” he asked with a grin.

“I’d be inclined to say yours, since I used it the most, but I think that’s what you want to hear,” he answered, which made Nick explode into laughter.

Stanley was almost trembling with excitement when they went to the main ballroom, a cavernous room just off the main dining room with a checkered floor and fluted columns near the walls along both sides, behind which chairs were placed in rows along the walls. The far corner of the ballroom had a raised platform large enough for a nine piece musical ensemble, and there were professional speakers along the columns high up, near the ceiling. That ceiling was nearly twenty feet high; there were no rooms on the second floor over the ballroom, it took up that area. The ceiling above was painted with radial designs around the three chandeliers that hung from the ceiling, and that ceiling was about four feet lower than the floor of the third floor. Up on the second floor, the six guest bedrooms flanked the void space created by the ballroom’s walls and ceiling. Stanley

and Dee were talking excitedly with Vil and Kendall, as Vil, in a wheelchair with Bartholomew behind her diligently, made sweeping motions with her paws as she explained something to the butler. “So, you heard the happy news, Stanley?” Jessie asked.

“She just told me, Mistress Jessie,” he said with a beatific smile. “I was so hoping she would have her reception here. Where else would be proper? But I’m not entirely appreciative of the short notice, Miss Vilenne,” he said, slightly accusingly.

“We weren’t entirely sure if we should have it here, because of the security precautions, but Stav and Marcus assured me that we can keep Kit and Jessie safe and still have my reception here. Besides, you can handle it, you’re a tough fox.”

“I’ll prove to you just how good we are, Miss Vilenne,” he smiled. “We will give you a reception worthy of a Vulpan!”

Kit and Jessie listened as Vil explained what she wanted, which was something almost akin to a formal ball. She wanted the ballroom decorated in white and red silk buntings and white and red roses, a live band, and a dinner that would be served on tables in both the formal dining room and the ballroom that would be spaced evenly, with Vil and Kendall sitting at the head table near the dais. The first few rows of tables could be moved after dinner to make room for dancing, and they could use the space between the columns and the walls for chairs, champagne tables, appetizers, and tables for dishes and glasses.

“What kind of meal do you want, Miss Vilenne?”

“Offer three main courses, lamb chops, lobster, and filet mignon,” she answered. “As far as the side dishes, appetizers, and desserts go, let the

cooks decide on the menu.”

Both Stanley and Dee were writing furiously on clipboards. “How many guests are you expecting?”

“Around a hundred will be invited to the reception,” she answered. “That’s why we’re going to have the spillover in the formal dining room. I don’t think we can pack that many in here without making it too crowded.”

“Actually, I can fit a hundred in here, Miss Vilenne, I’ll use round tables that seat fourteen each. I’ll line them up in two rows of four, that will give us some extra seating just in case, and that should just about perfectly fill the room with just enough space between the tables so they don’t seem jammed together. We can remove the four near tables for dancing after dinner and direct the guests to chairs along the walls if they wish to sit, yet leave some table space for those who wish to sit at a table. I’ll still prepare the formal dining room for possible spillover, however, just in case.”

Vil and Stanley continued discussing the reception as Nick arrived, grinning at Kit and Jessie. “Miss Vil,” he said, shaking her paw. “Now, we need to talk about security for the reception.”

“You’re next on the list, Nick,” she told him, patting him on the wrist. “Just listen for now so you know what’s going to happen.”

Kit and Jessie listened in relative silence as Vil described how she wanted her reception to go. “It’s not going to be traditional,” she told them. “I want it to be fairly simple. We come in after the ceremony, we greet the guests at the head table because I have this little problem,” she noted, pointing at her casted leg. “We eat, then after we eat, the band comes in and we dance a while, then we cut the cake. After we cut the cake, we kick everyone out. I want it to run about three hours total.”

“That’s fairly simple,” Stanley chuckled. “So, to go over the decorations, you want red and white silk buntings, red and white trim and tablecloths, roses, did you want candles on the tables?”

“I’ll leave the exact details of the décor up to you, Stanley, that way I can be a little surprised.”

He smiled brightly. “Certainly, Miss Vil,” he said, making a note. “And you just gave us the schedule. I’ll have to convert the helipad to a parking lot,” he grunted, making another note.

“We’re leaving by chopper, Stanley.”

“Can the chopper land on the lawn, Miss Vil? It will be much easier to repair to chopper strut divots in the lawn than dozens of tire marks. If you’re expecting a hundred guests, that will be fifty to seventy cars limousines.”

“We can park the limos out on the county road and arrange the valet system so we can call them back in,” Vil told them. “Just worry about where to park the cars that come. You can always park them out on the back roads. Keep the helipad clear.”

“I’ll talk to the county and get special permission to park cars on the roadway,” he said with a nod, making a note.

“Alright, Nick, let’s talk,” Vil told him.

“I’d like a force of at least fifty hired from Valiant, Miss Vil.”

“That’s reasonable,” she nodded. “You want them as soon as possible?”

He nodded. “I have to train them. We’ll need radios for them.”

“Stanley, take care of it,” she said.

“I’ll have them here by tomorrow morning.”

“What I intend to do is set up three lines of security,” Nick said, borrowing Stanley’s clipboard, getting a clean sheet, and making very rough drawing of the house. “We’ll have static security checkpoints at the gates, at the docks, in the house stopping visitors from entering unauthorized areas, and also at strategic points on the grounds so nobody can slip off into the woods without being seen,” he began, making a series of X marks on the paper at certain locations. “We’ll use two fur teams except here in the ballroom, where I’ll have ten furs stationed in discreet locations. The second line of security will be roving patrols that will rotate through the entire manor grounds as well as through the manor itself. Inside the manor, I want to use furs I hire from my mates, because there’s no telling how tempting some of the things laying around inside the house might be to a fur making eight dollars an hour. I can trust my mates not to touch *anything*. They’re professionals. It also places more than just the eight of us in the manor in case something drastic happens.”

“Reasonable,” Vil nodded.

“The third line of security will be surveillance. We need to buy some portable cameras and install them and set up a command post where we can keep an eye on things. We can make them pretty obvious, just cameras on stands, and cameras in the manor on critical points, like the doors to the wings. It’ll also keep the point guards honest,” he chuckled.

“Do it. But coordinate with Stanley when you start trying to drill holes in his walls.”

“I’m gonna use a microwave transmission system so there’s no cords. This kinda job is right up Barnett’s alley, he specializes in setting up camera surveillance.”

“One of your guards?”

He nodded. “The mate that looks like a big jackal, but that’s because his dad was a wolf,” he said. “Good mate, knows his business.” He glanced to the side. “I’m going to have Sylvie escort Jessie everywhere during the reception. She should not be left alone, even for a second.”

“Amen,” Kit said with a strong nod. “I guess we’ll find out if Sylvia *can* look good in a party dress while carrying three pistols and a bowie knife.”

Nick laughed. “She’s a stunner, alright,” he grinned.

“I don’t need that,” Jessie said, a bit modestly.

“You’re the most important thing in the world, love, you *do* need it. I won’t take even one chance with your safety,” Kit told her. “What’s the problem, anyway? You *like* Sylvia.”

“Well, sure, she’s really nice, but I think it’s kinda silly you’re treating me like the Queen of England.”

“You’re more important than that,” Kit smiled.

“Alright, I’ll call Valiant and have them dig up fifty guards and have them here as soon as they can get them here,” Vil said. “And I’ll let you two chew on the details, I want to spend some time with my brother and sister-in-law,” she said, smiling at them. “Barty, mush!” she called cheekily, pointing towards the side door to the TV room.

Bartholomew laughed and took hold of her wheelchair. "I'll let you get away with that, Miss Vil, if only because you used to let me win when we played Trouble."

Vil laughed. "Just warn me before you dump me out of the chair, okay?"

"Will do."

Kit, Vil, Jessie, and Kendall sat in the TV room and just talked a while, as Bartholomew poured them each cups of tea and retreated quietly to the bar. Kit and Vil explained a Catholic wedding to Kendall in detail, and also to Jessie, since she would be part of the bridal party. "Kit's going to be the best male and the ring bearer," Vil explained. "He'll be right beside you when the ceremony starts, Ken. Suzy will be my maid of honor, she'll be the last one in the procession. Jessie, you'll be a bridesmaid, you'll be escorted down the aisle by one of Ken's grooms. Since Dad is dead, tradition demands that I come down the aisle alone. However, to make a statement to the family, I'm going to ask Ken's dad to give me away."

"He'd do it in a heartbeat, Vil," Ken assured her.

"Good. You two will have the whole week before the wedding to learn how a traditional Catholic wedding works. We'll do the whole thing, communion and all."

"God, I haven't taken communion since I was sixteen," Kit grunted.

"Well, what about us? I'm not about to take communion from a Catholic priest," Ken grinned.

"You just nod at the priest and step aside," Vil told him. "After the ceremony, we'll come back here for the reception, then it's all done. We live

happily ever after.”

“Where are you going for your honeymoon?” Jessie asked.

“Well, Saturday I have a promise to keep,” she said. “So we’ll be staying at Hart’s Crossing overnight. Saturday morning we go to Columbus to watch Ben play. I promised him I’d be there, and I don’t break my word.”

“He’ll understand, Vil. It’s your honeymoon!” Jessie protested.

“He may understand, but *I’ll* know I broke my promise,” she said adamantly. “After his game, we’re going to my vacation condo in the keys for a week, then Ken’s taking me to Monaco for a week on the Riviera. If I’m lucky, I’ll come home pregnant, and we settle in at Hart’s Crossing.”

“I’m going to have to find a job,” Ken laughed. “The old male fired me!”

“Why did he do that?” Jessie asked.

“He doesn’t want me to travel, he wants me to stay close to home, and my job required me to run all over the globe. I can’t give him a grandson if I’m in Bahrain or Thailand and Vil’s here.”

“Oh,” Jessie said, then she giggled girlishly. “It sounds like he’s serious.”

“If I don’t present him with a grandson in a year, he’ll probably disown me,” he said, giving Vil a smile.

“A grandson, eh?” Vil asked. “And if we have a girl?”

“We’d better not. My life is at stake here,” he said with insincere fear, which made Kit laugh.

“I’m hoping that I’ll be walking down the aisle by the time we have the ceremony. I don’t relish the idea of trying to come down the aisle on crutches or a cane,” Vil said with a sober look.

“When do they say you’ll get out of the cast?”

“A week after the ceremony,” she sighed. “That’s part of why we’re going to the keys for the first week. Tomorrow they’re supposed to take off the bandage,” she said, patting her arm. “But, my fur is starting to grow back where I was burned,” she said with a relieved sigh. “And it’s not white! They said there’s always a risk that fur growing over a former burn may come in white, but my fur’s perfectly normal.”

“So, it’ll be long sleeve shirts for a while?” Jessie asked.

She nodded. “They wanted the bandage to stay in place until my fur started growing back in, to prevent some condition where the sun burns the skin from exposure.”

“Never heard of that.”

“It’s a condition that affects some boars and pigs,” Ken said. “They call it sunburn.”

“Weird,” Jessie mused.

“Like I’d go around with my arm uncovered,” Vil laughed.

“How’s your leg?” Kit asked.

“On the mend, faster than expected,” she answered. “The doctors are hopeful that I’ll be walking by the wedding. They’re going to recast my leg tomorrow with a rubber pad on the bottom, a cast that will let me walk on it. I’m supposed to stay on my crutches for a few days, then we’ll see how

well I do on a cane. They said that my break is almost exactly like a classic ski boot break, and ski boot breaks can walk on their casts. So, after I mend enough, I should be ambulatory. At worst, I'll be using a cane. If I'm lucky, I'll be walking."

"Well, here's hoping," Kit said, patting her on the shoulder. "You'll look silly coming down the aisle on crutches."

"I'll feel silly," she agreed.

"Well, I promise not to laugh until after I see our wedding video, Vil," Kendall said.

"You'd better not," she warned, but she was smiling.

"I'll make sure to laugh, just for you," he winked, then he stood up. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to visit the exiled male's room," he said, scurrying out.

Jessie giggled. "He's so silly," she said, "just like my handsome fox."

"I am not silly," Kit corrected airily. "So, when's the important part?"

"What important part?"

"The lawyer," he said.

She chuckled. "We already took care of that," she answered. "Typical rich fox prenup. Our assets remain separate, the only communal property will be that gained after marriage, my salary, dividends, and stock are not considered communal property ever, one recognized joint account, ability to gift money and property back and forth, so on and so on, but there's also a penalty clause in there."

"What's that?" Jessie asked.

“I’m Catholic, Jessie, and we don’t divorce,” she answered. “Ken isn’t. There’s a penalty clause in our prenup that states that if he tries to divorce me, he loses all right to try to sue for half the amassed value we accrued while married. My side of it flatly states that there will be no divorce,” she said. “That I am forbidden from seeking a divorce. It doesn’t stop me from seeking an annulment, but I can’t file for divorce.”

“Keep that in mind, love,” Kit said lightly. “Catholics never divorce. You will never get rid of me.”

“Like I’d want to,” she winked at him. “What happens if you two sour?”

“I’ll banish him from my house,” she said simply. “He’ll probably move back to England. But I still won’t divorce him, even if I hate him. If he wants to be free of me, he’ll have to divorce me, and if he does he leaves with nothing more than what he was married with, which really isn’t that big of a deal, since he’s actually much richer than I am. Oh, and I have automatic custody of the kids if we divorce,” she added. “That’s also part of our prenup.”

Kit’s phone rang, and he saw that it was a call from Austin. “A cousin,” he said, opening the phone. “Hello?”

“Checking in for all the girls, cousin,” Angela called. “We’re about to go to the movies.”

“The movies? That’s rather tame,” Kit noted.

She giggled. “Sheila took us to a *very* interesting place last night.”

“Oh, let me guess,” he said blandly. “The Top Hat.”

Jessie started giggling. “Yup yup,” Angela said in a trilling voice. “Who knew such a fun place existed in this cattle town?”

Over the two weeks they’d been down there, his femme cousins had settled in and settled down somewhat. When they called, they always seemed cheerful and upbeat, which was a good sign, and Sheila had certainly shown them all around town so they always had something interesting to do. They’d certainly gone to their share of nightclubs, but they were also doing other things, amusing themselves when Sheila was busy with her flight school. What was more interesting, however, was how every single one of his femme cousins had accepted Allison into the fold. Once they got their preconception of her out of their minds that she was a gold-digging whore, they found out that Allison was much, much more than that, that she was intelligent, educated, observant, and very interesting. Bess had noted absently that she understood *exactly* what Terry saw in her after she’d gotten to know Allison. Allison had been absorbed into the Vulpan Party Pack, as did Sam, Danielle, and Lisa, whom had been introduced to the cousins by Sheila, and had quickly been subverted to the dark side. They were a strong core of relatives and friends who liked to go out together and have fun together, and much to Kit’s relief, they were doing more than partying, drinking, and chasing males. Sheila and Allison had taken the cousins flying in rental planes, they’d gone and done things like golf, horseback riding, and water skiing, Sheila had convinced Rick to give his cousins a tour of the magazine office, where Barry interviewed them for an article in the magazine and quite a few pictures of them appeared in the magazine and on the website. They did a fair share of shopping, and they did go clubbing almost every night, but so far Kit hadn’t heard of Vil having to bail them out of jail, so they’d been behaving themselves up to a point. But the important thing was, Bess, Lynn, Mary, and the younger girls

weren't *only* partying the way they did in Boston. They were actually *doing* things. But in a week, Angela and Joy would be leaving Austin and returning to Boston so they could go back to school.

"Why does that not surprise me."

"We bought Joy a guy," she added lightly. "We had to make sure she goes home with a smile on her face, you know."

"I did not need to hear that," he told her.

"What fun is doing it if nobody knows about it?" she asked with a laugh. "Talk to you later, cousin."

"Later Angie." He closed the phone, and the look on his face made Jessie explode into laughter. "They bought Joy time with one of the males at the club," he grunted.

Vil laughed. "Well, I hope she enjoyed it," she said boldly.

"I hope her Jake doesn't hear about it."

"He has three Party Pack daughters, he's probably numb by now," Vil laughed.

Ken returned, kissed Vil on the cheek, and sat down beside her. "So, what slanderous rumors did you make up about me while I was gone?"

"Not you, our cousins called in from Texas," Vil told him. "Sheila took them to the Top Hat last night."

"What's that?"

"A private and somewhat illegal sex club. Seems our cousins bought a male prostitute for Joy, who's eighteen."

“Well, that’s adult age here in the states,” he said with a slight smile. “Besides, if Joy is a proper rich girl, she hasn’t been a virgin since she was thirteen.”

“Fourteen,” Vil corrected lightly, which made Kendall gasp in mock astonishment.

“Dear lord, you mean to tell me I wasn’t your first?” he cried.

“Not even close,” she said with an arch little smile, taking a sip of tea. “You’re somewhere in the teens. *High* teens.”

“My world is crumbling!” he declared, putting his paw over his eyes. “My bride to be can’t wear white at the wedding!” He fell back onto the couch, which made Jessie giggle, then put both paws to his chest. “Shoot me now, put me out of my misery! I can’t go on!”

“You’d better go on,” Vil said. “Or I’ll nail you to a board and stand you up at the altar if I have to. Besides, tonight we have to *celebrate* me getting a smaller cast. One that allows me a little more *movement*,” she said pointedly, which made him sit back up so far that Jessie almost fell on her side on the couch laughing.

Ken stood up. “Was so good to visit, Kit, Jessie,” he said quickly, shaking Kit’s paw as Kit tried hard not to laugh. “But I feel this pressing need to return home. Right now.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Vil grunted with a simple nod. “We’re staying for dinner, Ken.”

“Might I borrow your shower, Kit?” he asked, which was too much for Jessie. Her head crashed into Kit’s lap as she laughed uncontrollably.

They had dinner with Muffy and Suzy, stuffed peppers and au gratin potatoes. “Where have you been all day, Muffy?” Jessie asked as she set down the platter.

“I got a little drunk last night,” she admitted. “I had a hangover this morning, so I slept it off.”

“You went out?”

She nodded. “I finally decided to risk it. I went to a club I like, danced a little, and drank a little too much. I got up around one, then I went out to do some shopping. I had to look for a wedding present and a baby shower present, after all,” she smiled.

“Well, stop that. I won’t have my bridesmaid sloshing into the church lit up like a Christmas tree.”

“Bridesmaid? Me?” she asked suddenly.

“If you want the job,” she said dryly in reply.

“Yes! Sure! Thanks, Vil!” she gushed.

“You need rewards for at least *trying* to stick it out with Kit and Jessie.”

Muffy laughed. “Sorry, but I was feeling a little cabin fever last night, and today was kinda a shopping requirement.”

“Be here tomorrow at eleven, the tailors are coming to fit you guys for your wedding clothes.”

“Okay Vil.”

“You missed the fun, Muffy, Nick and the guards let us shoot their machine guns,” Jessie told her as she sat down at the kitchen table. “It was really interesting!”

“I bet it was,” Muffy nodded. “Was it hard?”

“It took a little getting used to at first, but there at the end I could keep the gun aimed at the target,” she answered.

“Where’s Corey, Sue?” Kit asked.

“Maine,” she answered. “They’re starting that documentary. He’ll be back for the wedding.” She laughed. “Vil tried to hire him to do the wedding!”

“Well, he’s a filmmaker,” she said defensively.

“Not that kind of film,” Suzy winked. “Besides, he has a contract, he has to honor it.”

“Who did you hire to do the photos and video for the wedding?” Muffy asked.

“Patriot Productions,” she answered. “Will has been dealing with most of that stuff for me, and he’s doing a great job. I tell him what I want, and he gets it done.”

“That’s what a chief butler does, gets it done,” Kendall nodded. “I rather like Will. Nice chap, but very professional. When you ask him to do something, it gets done quick and right.”

“That’s why I took him from Stonebrook,” Vil nodded. “He may be young, but he’s *good*.”

“I need to get a wedding present too,” Kit mused.

Vil laughed. "My wedding present is right here," she said, pointing at him and Jessie. "But I need to get Jessie a shower gift," she noted to herself.

"Don't go crazy," Kit warned.

"I was *only* going to buy her Rhode Island," she said flippantly. "It's the smallest state, after all."

Jessie broke out into laughter. "I don't need a state, Vil. Wanna make me happy? Buy me a baby seat that'll fit in our plane."

"Done," Vil nodded. "I'll get you an airplane baby seat on top of Rhode Island."

Jessie giggled. "Eat your dinner," she commanded.

"Yes, ma'am," Vil smiled, taking a bite of her stuffed pepper.

They talked about the upcoming wedding with Suzy during and after dinner, as Vil described the upcoming ceremony in greater detail, which was easy for them to follow. Suzy was Catholic too, and she knew the Catholic wedding ceremony. Vil explained the ceremony in detail for Kendall and Jessie, who learned all about the marriage sacrament and also how Vil was going to slightly deviate from the accepted tradition. Having Winston Brighton give her away was one way she was going to alter the ceremony. Dee and Stanley served wine around the room except for Jessie and Kit, who took grape juice. "We'll have daily practices at one o'clock starting on Monday," Vil said. "Sue, come to Stonebrook tomorrow around ten thirty, the tailors are going to be here fitting for the clothes. May as well put you here too. I'll have Sonya show up too."

Sonya was the rarity among Vil's circle of friends. She was Sonya Cooper, a rich kid to be sure, but she wasn't a fox, she wasn't "old money,"

and she wasn't from Boston. Sonya was a coyote from Omaha, Nebraska, "new money," whose family had made it in the laser, munitions, and GPS businesses. Cooper Arms and Technologies was a relatively new company as a Vulpan would reckon things that manufactured military electronics and technologies. It had literally started as a garage company run by her father, who was an engineering genius, who invented the first laser system that was used in laser guided bombs. He borrowed money up to his ears and started a small manufacturing company, made prototypes, and with those prototypes he won a contract to build the systems, which were adopted into most laser-guided bombs used even today. They'd won several defense contracts for other laser-based systems like sights for light arms, rangefinders, "paint" lasers that ground-based troops used to guide munitions fired from aircraft, and offensive "blinding" lasers that were designed to jam enemy systems. After they became successful building laser guided bombs and laser systems, they then branched out to help develop the current Global Positioning System. Cooper was one of the main companies that developed the technology and software used in GPS satellites, which they then adapted into their munitions to build "GPS bombs" that used GPS to strike static targets. Recently, the company was dabbling in light arms by buying out Kel-Tec, who made pistols and was currently developing an assault weapon to try to sell to the military, and had also bought out a company known as Dragon Defense, which made military grade body armor, bullet proof vests, armored glass, metal and polymer armors, and other protective systems. What had started as a garage business was now a solid and impressive member of the defense industrial complex, with 12 factories in five states in the midwest and Washington state, two brand names bought out and under the company umbrella, and worth nearly \$2 billion. The Coopers themselves weren't billionaires, but they were pretty damn close, with

Sonya's father worth an estimated \$850 million in non-company assets and cash. Cooper Technologies earned a tiny royalty for every GPS system made, which in the last few years had turned into *massive* royalties because of the explosion in popularity of GPS systems, showing that Sonya's father truly was a visionary businessman. Every Garmin Nouveau and Tom-Tom, every Onstar system installed in GMC cars, every LoJack, every child or pet locator system, every hiker's handheld GPS map and emergency beacon, every single GPS system produced by civilian companies had to pay a small royalty to Cooper Technologies for the privilege of using the GPS satellite system for every unit they produced. They'd met by chance at one of the country clubs in Boston, one of the four clubs where Vil played golf, and had been friends ever since. Kit actually had never met Sonya. She'd been Vil's friend for only about a year. She was 24 years old and in her final semester at Harvard, getting her MBA. After she graduated, she would join her family company as an executive.

What started purely as a business move had turned into a friendship, Vil had confided to him during one of their talks. Vil had known who Sonya was when they chanced to meet at the club, which was just luck, and had gone out of her way to talk to her and get to know her, so as to get a connection with her father and her company. But she sincerely liked Sonya, and so a genuine friendship had blossomed from what Vil had meant to be a calculated business move. But that didn't stop Vil from using her friendship with Sonya to the company's advantage, as much as it didn't stop Sonya from doing the same. Because of that chance meeting, Vulpan Shipyards had signed a contract with Cooper Technologies a few months ago to supply GPS systems for the non-military ships the shipyards produced.

"I'd like to finally meet Sonya."

“Well, she’s been in Nebraska,” Vil told him. “She went back home for summer vacation. She’s coming back to Boston, and should be in the air now and on the way. She’s coming early because she agreed to be my bridesmaid, so she has to be here for the rehearsals.”

“Sonya’s nice,” Suzy said with a nod. “Kinda plain, but nice.”

“Here, I have a picture of her,” Vil said, pointing at her purse. “Barty.” Bartholomew retrieved her purse for her, and she dug a picture out of it, showing her and a shockingly tall coyote out on a golf course, a coyote that was actually rather cute...in a coyote kind of way. She had strong features rather than feminine ones, short brown hair done in a pixie style through which her ears poked out, but she wasn’t ugly. She was no knockout like Allison, but she was definitely worth a second look. Handsome. That was a good word for Sonya, handsome.

“Woah,” Muffy breathed. “She’s like a flagpole!”

“Wow, is she really that tall?” Jessie gasped.

“Six foot four, and as strong as a bull,” Vil sighed, which made Suzy laugh. “She played center on Harvard’s basketball team when she was an undergrad. She’s not a bad ball player.”

“Wow, she’s taller than *me*,” Kit laughed.

“By five inches,” Vil teased.

“And I always thought I was tall,” Jessie giggled. “She makes me look like a little girl!”

“God, we’ll have to keep her away from Nick,” Kit said with a snort, then he laughed helplessly.

“Nick? He has to get in line. Marcus has a *huge* crush on Sonya,” Vil said with a grin. “I can hear his heart speed up every time she’s around him.”

“Where is he anyway?”

“They’re out talking with Nick and the other mercs,” Vil said. “They all know each other.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll have Sonya show up here around ten thirty too.”

“I can pick her up and bring her,” Suzy offered.

“Sure, that works,” Vil nodded. “That way the tailors can get four of you out the way. Ken, you need to get your brothers and your friend over here, as well as your father.”

“It’s a little late to call right now. I can call around one in the morning, and they’ll be here by eleven.”

“Can your friend Charlie drop everything and come over?”

“He’s one of the idle rich aristocrats, has his own title and everything,” Kendall smiled. “He’ll see it as an adventure, he’ll be here.” Kendall laughed. “Baron Charles William Duke, Knight of the Realm. Goes around and calls himself Baron Duke, which makes everyone give him a double take.”

“He was knighted?” Kit asked curiously.

Kendall nodded. “Like most aristocrats, he was in the military. He served six years in the Royal Marines as an officer, earned a knighthood due to valorous action when the Royal Marines occupied Basra. His unit was

ambushed and he led them while they held off their attackers for three hours until reinforcements arrived. He even has a scar he loves to show off,” Kendall laughed. “But don’t ask to see it.”

“Why?” Suzy asked.

“It’s on his bum,” he answered with a grin. “He got shot in the bum while in Iraq.”

They all laughed, but Vil said “well, at least he proved he’s a brave male to go into combat.”

“Oh, Charlie’s fearless, no doubt about that,” Kendall agreed. “I just giggle at the idea of him in military gear shooting at someone. He doesn’t look like a Marine.”

“Short?”

“Well, he’s a British hare for one, and it’s very hard to take a male seriously with those big bunny ears and that bunny tail. How could the Iraqis concentrate on the fight with Lieutenant Cute and Fuzzy Bunny barking orders at his males on the other side?” he said seriously, which made Kit explode into laughter.

“He sounds *cute*!” Muffy gushed.

“He’s a cute devil, that’s for sure, but watch out. He’s one of the most notorious feminizers in England,” Kendall winked at her. “And he *loves* the vixens. Says it’s a case of the prey hunting the predator,” he grinned.

“Sounds like we need to take him down a peg, Vil,” Suzy smiled at her.

“Sounds so,” Vil nodded with a smile. “So, sounds like all the bridal party will be here tomorrow by eleven. Good, that’ll make it easy for the

tailors.”

After about another hour, Suzy, Vil, and Kendall went home, Kit and Jessie retired to the bedroom to watch a movie, and Muffy decided to stay in as well, enjoying a glass of wine down in the TV room. They arranged it with Nick that the tailors and all the wedding party would be arriving at the manor the next day, around eleven, so they were all set up. “We’ll meet Ken’s dad tomorrow,” Kit noted. “Winston Brighton.”

“That should be nice,” Jessie said with a yawn. “Let’s go take a bath, love, and go to bed. We can finish this movie tomorrow.”

“Getting you naked is always a good thing,” he said with a smile as he stood, and offered his paw to her.

“There’s getting to be a lot of me to see,” she laughed, patting her belly. “If I get any bigger, I’m afraid I’ll pop like a balloon!”

“Five weeks, five days,” he said with a smile. “You know, when Doctor Mac comes up next week, we need to ask her how long we can have sex until it’s not safe,” he mused.

Jessie’s cheeks ruffled slightly, and she laughed. “Like you’ll want me when I’m like *this*,” she said, holding her paw way out in front of her.

“You’re not far from that already,” he noted dryly. “I told you, silly girl, you’re not fat, you’re *pregnant*,” he told her lightly. “You’re still a sexy beast.”

The first ones to arrive the next day were Suzy and Vil’s friend Sonya.

She *really* was that tall. She was taller than Kit, sleek and athletic, wearing a *Harvard Basketball* tee shirt and a pair of knickers that could be worn as full-length pants by Suzy or Vil. She was taller than Kit by nearly a half a foot, and taller than Jessie by about eight inches. At 5'9", Jessie was considered tall for a girl, yet she *looked* like a little girl standing beside the towering coyote. "Nice to meet ya," Kit said, shaking her long-fingered paw as they met out in the courtyard.

"A pleasure," she said in an alto voice, which was quite melodic. "I've heard quite a bit about both of you from Vil."

"I hope nothing bad," Jessie giggled as she shook Sonya's paw.

"The bad parts are the best parts," she said with a warm smile, which made Jessie and Suzy laugh.

"Vil said you're from Nebraska?" Kit asked as he ushered them into the house.

"Yah," she answered. "Just outside Omaha."

"What's it like there?" Jessie asked.

"Flat," she answered. "But I love it. I wouldn't live anywhere else. Besides, we're not all that welcome here in blue-blood territory," she laughed.

"New money," Kit chuckled. "The old money doesn't respect new money. You don't know the rules."

"They can keep their damn rules," she grunted. "I was born and raised in a three bedroom tract house in Nebraska, not a place like *this*."

"Hey watch it, I was *born* in this house," Kit challenged lightly.

“Well, you don’t act like you fart rainbows,” she noted, which made Jessie explode into laughter.

“I think we’re gonna get along just fine, Sonya,” Kit said seriously as they went into the garage.

Sonya was *earthy*. She was polite and friendly, but she was very practical, and she *was* a middle-class femme in a rich femme’s world. She didn’t have a debutante’s manners. She had the manners of a girl born and raised in the middle class and who went to public school all her life, even after her father got rich. He’d insisted that his three kids continue to feel *normal*, and instilled a work ethic into them. All three of his kids had to work, and if they didn’t work, they wouldn’t get a dime from him. Her very normal upbringing despite money gave her a practical mindset and an honesty rarely encountered in the circle of the rich.

He could see why Vil liked her. Vil wasn’t against her own class, but her position as CEO meant that she appreciated strength and honesty in her friends, furs tough enough to be her friend, furs she could depend on when the chips were down. Sonya was both strong and honest, and that was the perfect combination. Vil had “old money” friends as well, but they tended to be much more deceptive and less courageous. Vil rewarded those she felt would be there for her when she needed them, and most old money wasn’t quite that dependable. They had their own reputations and fortunes to worry about. That was why Vil decided to give Sonya a spot on her bridal party, because she knew she could trust Sonya.

Right now, being able to trust someone was *important*.

They barely had time to have a cup of tea with Sonya and Suzy—coffee in Sonya’s case—when Stanley warned them that the Brightons had

arrived. They all got up and went to the courtyard in time to see a stretch limo pull in around the curve and into the paved courtyard, the driver bringing the car right up to them. The driver got out, as did a rabbit dressed in a dark suit, who opened the back door for the occupants.

The first one out just had to be Winston Brighton. He was a middle aged male, tall and thin, with wise amber eyes, wearing a smart gray suit and carrying a silver-topped cane. He even wore a bowler hat, which had holes cut in the top to make room for his ears. And like Kendall, he had the same dark patch of fur in the white under his chin, the “Brighton spot” that was as much a distinguishing feature for the Brightons that the eyes were for the Vulpans...just not as obvious. He offered his paw to Kit as a tall, broad-shouldered young fox piled out of the limo behind him, wearing a dark suit. “Winston Brighton,” he introduced himself. “You must be Vilenne’s brother, Kit. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Kit said politely as Nick hovered nearby, and a third fox climbed out of the limo, who was wearing a dark suit as well and was about a head shorter than the first one. “My wife, Jessie, and friends of the family and two of the bridesmaids, Suzy Jenkins and Sonya Cooper.”

“My, they make them big in America,” a brown-furred hare said as he stepped out of the limo, looking at Sonya. He was shorter than Jessie by about an inch, and was roguishly handsome on top of filling out the shoulders and arms of his suit impressively.

“Looks like they make them small in England,” Sonya retorted, which made Suzy and Jessie giggle.

Winston chuckled. “My sons, Harry and Michael, and a friend of the family, Charlie Duke.

Kit shook paws as Winston kissed Jessie and Suzy on the cheek, then stepped up to Sonya, laughed, and pulled her down so he could do the same. “We’ve heard quite a lot about you, Kit,” the taller Harry said as he shook Kit’s paw.

“No doubt,” he chuckled. “You certainly look like your brother.”

“The old male made sure to stamp his face on us,” Michael chuckled as he shook Kit’s paw. “So, you run a magazine?”

“I partly own one,” he answered. “Do you work for your Dad?”

“I do, Mike’s still in college,” Harry answered. “He goes to Leeds.”

“One more year,” Michael chuckled.

“Thanks for the invite,” the hare said with a crooked smile. “This should be fun! A wedding in the middle of a war, complete with soldiers,” he grinned, looking over at the huge wolf.

“Well, welcome to the headquarters of the rebellion,” Kit said with a dry smile as Winston gave Jessie a second hug, and put a paw boldly on her belly.

“Why, you’re absolutely radiant, Jessica!” he said with a bright smile. “There’s nothing lovelier than a pretty young lady expecting. When are you due?”

“September thirtieth, Mister Brighton.”

“Please, call me Winston, my dear,” he said with a smile. “After all, we’re going to be family in just two weeks!”

“Why don’t we go in?” Kit called. “We have tea waiting, Jessie made some scones for us, and the tailors should be here in about fifteen minutes.”

“You cook, my dear? A hobby?”

“A necessity,” she laughed, allowing Winston to take her paw and lead her towards the door. “I’m sure Ken told you about us.”

“Naturally, but that doesn’t mean that you can’t enjoy what you must do. If you do, then it’s a hobby rather than a chore.”

“Well, I love to cook, so I guess it is a hobby,” she said with a smile.

Kit learned after sitting with his future in-laws that they were quite interesting. Harry and Michael were very vocal and teasing of their father, who was just as teasing with them, which was diametrically opposed to his own family. If anyone had ever made a joke about his father, his father would have destroyed them. *Nobody* showed disrespect to his father, not even his own siblings...nobody except Kit. Harry and Michael were warm, friendly, and funny young males, but the true rooster in the room was Charlie Duke. He was swaggering, boastful, boisterous, and quite funny, and Kit felt that Kendall was right...how could a combatant take the hare seriously in a fight? The idea of him dressed in a military uniform and barking commands at soldiers was a little funny. Kit could also see why Kendall liked him, since Kendall had similar personality aspects to Charlie, just a bit more muted. Kendall was a lighthearted yet intelligent fox who enjoyed a good joke, liked to make furs laugh, yet was very smart and was capable of playing the game. This Charlie Duke seemed much the same kind of male as Kendall, as were his brothers, and to a lesser extent, his father.

After about twenty minutes of honestly enjoyable conversation, the tailors arrived, and there were a *lot* of them. Nick cleared them first, and then they broke into two teams. One team, half males and half females,

fitted the males, while a team of femmes fitted Jessie, Suzy, and Sonya. It was the same tailors who had fitted him and Jessie with their wedding clothes, and they had come prepared. They still had Kit's measurements, and they showed up with his best male's tuxedo already made for him. It even fit. "Now that's service," Charlie noted as a vixen put him up on a stepstool and started measuring him.

"We have Mister Vulpan's measurements on file," the vixen helping him answered as she tied his tie. "And it seems you're still the same size, sir."

"Almost," he chuckled, patting his stomach. "I'm a touch thicker down here."

"It doesn't show," she told him.

"Well, they know how to flatter," Harry laughed as a fox measured his arm.

They did have to make a couple of tiny alterations to his tuxedo, so Kit took it off and gave it back to them as the others continued to get measured. He was about to pour himself a cup of tea when his manor phone rang, and he saw it was Vil. "Hey sis," he called. "Mister Brighton and the others are all here and getting measured."

"Well, that's good, but that's not why I called. Me and Brian are on our way over right now."

"What's wrong?"

"They know what happened to my chopper," she answered, a bit ruefully. "Turns out it was a *real* accident, bro."

“You’re serious!” he gasped.

“As a heart attack,” she answered. “Another Sikorsky chopper the same model as mine crashed in Utah two days ago, and they linked them. Both choppers had their tail rotors basically explode on takeoff. They’ve grounded the whole model while they figure out how what’s wrong with them and how to fix them.”

“Well, I’ll be shaved bald and thrown on a stage,” Kit breathed in shock. An accident. A *real* accident! And after he’d all but threatened to kill Zach for trying to kill his sister, it turned out that he was actually innocent of that particular crime...but Kit wasn’t feeling contrite enough to budge an inch. They were still fighting against his sister, trying to push her out of her hard-won and rightful place, and he would do everything in his power to help her fight back. That included holding firm in Stonebrook to keep Zach out, to deny him the ancestral base of power of the family.

An accident. This was going to change things, but not all that much. Vil wouldn’t be able to destroy Zach in the way she might want to now that it was apparent that he *hadn’t* tried to kill her, and in a strange way, he was actually glad of it. The idea that Zach had tried to kill Vil would have been a dark stain on the family, that they had truly plunged into a dark pit that would make the family almost irrevocably tainted. But it didn’t change the fact that Zach, Jake, and Maxine were trying to evict Vil, and they had to be opposed.

But he could still give a small sigh of relief. His uncle was a bastard, but at least so far, he wasn’t a murderer...though Kit felt that he was fully capable of it. He had once supported his father’s attempt to kill him by denying him medical treatment. If that didn’t define a bastard, Kit didn’t know what did.

“Why is Brian coming?” Kit asked.

“We have to talk this through and decide what to do,” she answered. “If any of the cousins check in before we get there, let them know what happened.”

“I will. When will you be here?”

“I’m going to go pick up Ken right now, so we’ll be there in about an hour.”

“Alright. I’ll have lunch ready about that time.”

“Good deal, bro. See you in an hour.”

“See you then.” He closed the phone, lost in thought. How were they going to proceed from here? Now that they knew that they really hadn’t tried to kill Vil, how was that going to change their plan? He stood there a moment, tapping the phone on his chin, pondering. Actually, it wouldn’t change it much. The plan was basically playing defense, stalling until Vil was married, which would introduce a new level into the game and make it virtually impossible for them to unseat her from the chair, and therefore would make it almost impossible for them to remove her as the head of the family. Once Vil was that deeply entrenched, with two friendly Vulpans on the board and Ken and the Brighton family backing her up, the elders would be forced to realize that they would *never* take Vil out of the chair, and thus would probably try to negotiate for some kind of favorable terms to reconcile the family. Vil would probably make a couple of concessions about reining in the wilder kids, by offering them jobs and responsibility, Kit realized, and then the family would return to an uneasy peace.

Damn, was his sister one clever, clever little vixen. That was what that whole offering jobs to the Party Pack was about, it was a means to get them under control by putting them in the company and under her direct supervision. And the femmes, so starved for attention and a need for being respected in the family, would probably jump on it. He could admit it so easily, that Vil was the true chessmaster between him and her, and she was *so* much more suited for the big chair than he was.

God, was he proud of his sister.

“What are you smiling about, young Kit?” Winston asked as the tailor finished measuring him.

“My sister. She’s the most cunning femme I have ever known in my life,” he said lavishly. “She’s on her way over here, and there’s some important news.”

“Oh?”

“Turns out that my uncle did *not* try to kill her. Her chopper crashed because of some kind of design flaw, another one crashed a couple of days ago the same way hers did. So she’s coming over with my uncle Brian and your son and we’re going to talk about what happens next.”

“Next? Why, she gets married,” he said simply. “With my son as her husband, your uncles wouldn’t *dare* try to forcibly remove her from the board.”

Kit chuckled. “And also opens Vulpan Shipyards up wide open for Brighton Industries.”

“And vice versa,” he smiled. “We already have some mutually beneficial agreements in writing and waiting to be reviewed by the board,

we we've decided to hold off on that until after Vil and Kenny get back from their honeymoon." He chuckled. "Besides, for us, the true gem is Vulpan Steel," he said with a light smile. "Vil will sell us ship-grade steel cheaper than we can get anywhere else, and Vulpan Steel will still turn a profit."

Kit laughed. "I was right about that," he grinned. "I figured that was what you were after the most."

"That and a solid connection between our families. Together we are a much more powerful force than we are separate. Your family controls most of the shipbuilding in America. Mine controls most of the commercial shipbuilding in the former British empire. Together, our families control nearly half the commercial large-scale shipyards in the industrialized world, and we can strangle our competitors with our alliance. That is a *dynasty*, my young male. When I pass on, the shipyard goes to Kenny. He's married to Vil. Their son will control it *all*. Vulpan Shipyards and Brighton Industries will merge in all ways but on paper to be controlled by a single family, and our united family will have a stranglehold on shipbuilding in the industrialized world for the next century. The Vulpan-Brighton family will be one of the most powerful families on this planet."

"You do think ahead, Winston Brighton," Kit said appreciatively. "I thought Vil was devious. You, sir, are a *master*, and I bow to you."

"It's why I'm where I am today," he said seriously.

Kit used his manor phone to call Jessie. He could go see her, but Suzy or Sonya might not be decent. "You could have walked, we're in the next room," she giggled.

“And get slapped for seeing something I’m not supposed to see? No thank you,” he answered dryly. “Vil just called, and she had big news.”

“What is it?”

“Vil just got word that her chopper crash really was an accident,” he told her. “Another chopper the same model as hers crashed in Utah two days ago the same way hers did, so they think it’s a design flaw. She’s on her way over here right now with Ken and Uncle Brian, and we’re going to talk about what to do next.”

“Oh, okay. I doubt you’ll need me for that,” she chuckled. “They had my measurements already, but they have to alter the dress because I seem to have this little problem, as they put it,” she laughed.

“Alright, I just wanted you to know what’s going on, love.”

“I’ll call Rick for you and let him know.”

“Go for it, pretty kitty.”

The Brightons and Duke continued with their fitting while Kit tried to make lunch, but promptly got chased out of the kitchen by the chefs, who were already preparing a lunch fit for Winston Brighton and his sons and guests. Having nothing else to do, Kit decided to call the cousins, Rick, and Sam and spread the news. He called Rick last and chatted with him and random members of the gang until Vil arrived with Kendall and Brian.

Kit kissed his sister on the muzzle when they came into the TV room, and gave Brian a cool, distant stare which put him off. Winston and his sons and Charlie Duke came in almost immediately afterward, and Kit watched Kendall interact with his brothers and father. He saw that they were a very close family, the smiles and kind words very honest and sincere among

them. Charlie, he saw, was almost a brother in the family from the way Ken greeted him, and the way Winston patted him on the back and held his arm around his shoulder. The Brightons were old money, and Kit was happy to see that at least *one* old money family was close and happy.

“You’re looking well, you old meddler,” Vil laughed as Winston gave her a gentle hug, mindful of the new smaller cast on her leg, still gleaming white, with only Kendall’s signature scrawled across the shin.

“I’m glad you succumbed to my meddling, or I’d have had to send Harry and Mike over too,” he grinned. “*One* of the Brighton boys was going to marry you, Vil. And if they failed, well, I’d marry you myself.”

She laughed. “I’m too smart to marry someone like *you*, Winston,” she winked at him. “My uncle Brian,” she introduced, stepping aside and motioning to him.

“Nice to see the reinforcements arrive,” Brian laughed. “It’s been quite a campaign so far.”

“Vil keeps me up to date,” Winston nodded as he shook Brian’s paw. “I’m just glad at least one of Vil’s elders is on her side.”

“I’m the youngest, I have this radical idea that Vil is actually better suited for the position due to these little things called ability and leadership,” he chuckled. “The fact that she managed to lure her brother back into the family tells me everything I need to know about her ability to get things done.”

“Yes, Vil is quite a femme,” Winston smiled. “I was so impressed with her when she was at Oxford. I knew she was special. And I knew she had to be in my family.”

“You’re in *my* family, you old meddler,” Vil laughed. “I’m a Vulpan before I’m a Brighton.”

“I see we’re going to have one fight,” Winston smiled. “The last name of your son.”

“Brighton Vulpan,” Vil, Brian, and Kit said in unison, which made Winston laugh.

“Kenny *is* the male, his son should carry his name.”

“Now you know why they call us those *damn* Americans, Winston,” Vil told him, patting him on the cheek.

Once the jokes were over, though, the discussion began. They all sat down, Stanley, a terrier butler named Virgil, Dee, and Sally served them tea and Jessie’s homemade scones, and they discussed the revelation and how it would impact their campaign. As Kit expected, the main thing Vil stressed was that this information wouldn’t change their primary goal, and that was to hold out until Vil was married, play defense with just enough offense to keep the elders wary and honest and force them to invest some resources into protecting themselves. The fact that the elders really didn’t try to kill Vil was good news all around, though, since it showed that at least so far the elders weren’t willing to take it to that level. Either they wanted to keep it civil or they hadn’t had an opportunity to take a shot at Vil yet, but it was considered a good thing that Vil’s accident was just that, an accident.

“Really, the only thing we have to do is just keep going the way we’re going,” Vil declared after about an hour of debate. She was about to say something else, but the door opened, and Suzy led Sonya and Vil in. “Hey girls, you all finished?”

“Just finished,” Suzy answered as Jessie sat down beside Kit, and he put his arm around her and kissed her on the muzzle. “It took them a while, they had to get the measurements just right for our circus clown costumes.”

“They’re not *that bad*,” Vil protested, which made everyone laugh. “I think sapphire blue is a lovely color!”

“Oh, the dresses are lovely, Vil, but they fitted us for our circus outfits for the reception,” Suzy winked.

“You’ll be in a clown suit now, Sue,” Vil teased. “Brian, this is Sonya Cooper.”

“Ah, a Cooper!” Brian said, standing and shaking her paw. “I’m impressed at how fast your family rose, my dear. Your father is a *genius*, both in tech and business.”

“We’re proud of him, Mister Vulpan,” she smiled, looking down at the shorter male.

“Please, call me Brian,” he said, then they all sat back down, reviewed for the new arrivals, and continued the discussion.

Kit listened without injecting much as Vil laid out her strategy of stalling for the next two weeks, which would basically entail laying low and harassing the elders using outside agencies while giving them no means of getting at her either in a business sense or a personal sense, and by extension those allied with her. Vil now had full and complete control of New Orleans as well as Austin, and that meant that the youngers who were openly rebelling against Zach’s clique were untouchable. Kit excused himself to go to the bathroom, but Nick stopped him when he came back. “We have a little problem,” he said in a low voice.

“What is it?”

“Let’s go up to your bedroom,” he said. Kit nodded, and he followed Nick up to his room. When they were inside and the door was locked, Nick pulled a picture out of his pocket showing a jackal of middle age wearing a Valiant Security uniform. “This is one of the new hires for the reception,” he said. “But he’s no security guard. His name is Jahal Mevas, he’s an Israeli Arab who used to work in the merc circles about twenty years ago, but he retired. He worked in Mossad as an infiltrator, since he’s a loyal Israeli yet he’s also obviously Arab.”

“Maybe he’s working for Valiant just part time?”

“I doubt it. He’s old and hasn’t played the game for a while, but that doesn’t mean he’s not capable of playing. None of us would have recognized him, he quit the game before we got into it, except Donny’s dad was also in the game and worked with someone who worked with Jahal. Infiltration is his specialty...and now he shows up here at Stonebrook posing as a security guard. It can’t be a coincidence.”

“Well, shouldn’t we throw him out?”

“I think we need to talk to Vil,” he said. “If your uncles hired him, then he’s here for a reason. If we can figure out what that reason is, we can maybe score some major intel.”

“But Jessie—“

“I have an idea for that, Kit, don’t worry. Barnett’s a surveillance expert, and he also has access to some intelligence-grade bugs. I think if we take the proper precautions, we can find out why he’s here without him doing any damage, because *we know about him*. We’ll make sure he’s

shadowed every second, I'll assign him to a post where we have complete cover on him, and Barnett will plant some bugs on and around him. So, call Vil and have her come up here, *just* her. The more furs know about Jahal, the more chance he finds out about it."

Kit felt a little uncertain about this, but he did take out his manor phone and call Vil. "Sis, can you come up to my room real quick?" he asked.

"Why?"

"Let's just say I need your opinion on something," he answered.

"Bro, we're kinda in the middle of something important."

"Trust me, sis."

There was a brief pause. "Alright, be right up."

When Vil got up to the room, Nick again showed the picture and explained who he was. Vil started grinning almost immediately. "And you're sure he doesn't know you know?"

"I had no idea until Donny came up and told me about him after I sent them home," he answered. "Today was just a four hour briefing and general training day. They'll all be back tomorrow for a full eight hours."

"And you think he was hired by my uncles?"

"Why else would he be here? A retired merc wouldn't be working as a security guard. He'd be doing freelance security consulting."

"And you're sure you can ferret him out without putting anyone in danger?"

“Absolutely.”

“Do it,” she said immediately. “But I want Jessie and Kit escorted twenty-four seven.”

“Sylvie and Donny will take care of it,” Nick nodded. “Kit, I want you to start carrying a pistol.”

“What? But—“

“I trained you myself how to safely use and carry a gun, Kit, I know you’ll manage it safely. I’m going to give you a Glock twenty-nine, they’re specifically made for concealed carry and are pretty powerful to boot. I want *you* to be armed, because that’s the last thing anyone would ever expect. A Vulpan wouldn’t be walking around in his own house carrying a gun. If a disaster happens, I want you to be able to defend yourself and Jessie.”

That was all he had to say. Kit nodded grimly, which caused Nick to pat him on the back. “Good mate,” he smiled. “I’m also going to put a little present in here. I have an extra MP seven, and I know you know how to use it. We’ll hide it here in your room, that way you have some serious firepower if you ever feel threatened.”

“Alright.”

“Remember, both of you, the key to making this work is *silence*,” Nick told them. “Kit, you can tell Jessie, but don’t tell the staff, don’t tell Muffy, don’t tell anyone else. The more furs who know, the more chance Jahal finds out we know about him. I’m going to assign Jahal to a static post on the drive, out in plain sight and a hundred meters from anything, and we’ll go from there.”

“I’m not too happy about this,” Kit said. “We’re letting a dangerous male inside the walls.”

“We know about him, that makes him much less dangerous,” Nick said calmly. “I’ll talk to Barnett and the others, and we’ll work out exactly how to keep you safe while we give Jahal a chance to lead us to whoever hired him.”

“Then I’ll leave it in your paws, Nick,” Vil told him. “I’ll get back down there before they wonder what we’re doing up here. Keep me informed.”

“Will do, Miss Vil,” he nodded.

Kit blew out his breath. Maybe his elders weren’t being as gentle as he first thought, if they’d gone out and hired a professional mercenary to infiltrate the manor...for whatever reason. Now there would be a potentially hostile force inside the walls of Stonebrook...and two weeks of starting to feel a little relaxed and secure in this place of old ghosts and bad memories went right out the window.

Chapter 36

There was an enemy lurking in Stonebrook, and Kit was looking right at him.

He certainly didn't *look* all that dangerous. Jahal Mevas was a middle aged jackal with no hair, just fur on his head, which wasn't unusual for jackals. He wore round wire-framed glasses and looked quite mild and unassuming, and his white shirt and blue pants that were his Valiant Security uniform were pressed and neat, and he had a silver chain going from his epaulet to his right pocket, where a whistle was attached to it and hung from his pocket by a small hook. He looked quite *normal*, and didn't seem the slightest bit ruffled or out of sorts sitting on a folding chair and under a portable beach umbrella with a partner about halfway down the front drive, which gave them a full and commanding view of the front lawn. Their job, as Nick told them, was to ensure that guests did not wander the front lawn, and to act as a presence for those both entering in and leaving so they knew that the grounds were actively being watched.

The reality was, that post had three cameras on it. Barnett had set it up, pointing one camera at the site from the house, one from the woods, and an obvious patrol camera just behind the post that also kept the post covered. Jahal was only going to be on the manor grounds for one more day, after Nick completed training the Valiant guards in their duties, then they'd come back for two hours the day before for a "dress rehearsal" for the reception, then the reception itself.

In the one day since Nick had ferreted out Jahal, the panthers had really gone to work. They had his alias, John Richards, his address, his telephone number, and now *he* was the one being watched. The mercs had put a camera on his apartment, they'd tapped his phone, and the panthers had dug up his entire life history, all in one day. While Jahal was here sitting at his post, Barnett and Donny had gone to his house to bug it, and they'd already called in and reported they were on their way back.

"Donny said he kept his apartment pretty well defended," Nick chuckled as he closed the phone. "It took them nearly four hours to get in and set it up. He's definitely who we think he is."

"I wonder why he's here," Kit said grimly, looking at him on the monitor.

"We'll find out soon enough," Nick said calmly, leaning back in his chair. They'd set up the surveillance in one of the secret rooms on the first floor. Nobody could know about Jahal, so they put the surveillance equipment in a secret room on the first floor near the kitchen, one of the old wine rooms. It had ventilation and opened into a rarely-used hallway which itself had a camera on it to make sure nobody saw anyone come in or go out. There would be someone in here at all times while they ferreted out Jahal's intentions, as well as more working to find out who hired him. "We have him wired six ways to Sunday, Kit. Barnett's good, he'll have that apartment where Jahal can't fart without us knowing."

"I don't think I want to know about *that*," Kit said with a slight smile. "I'll leave you to it, Nick, I have something more important to do."

"What is that?"

“Taste Jessie’s sweet and sour pork,” he answered. “I can smell it from here.”

“Another new recipe?”

“Carrie’s been teaching her how to make some Chinese dishes,” he nodded.

“Well, she makes good duck,” Nick grinned.

Kit stood up, and he felt the holster for the Glock 29 pull a little on his shoulder. It was a special concealed holster that put the gun under his shirt and low on his left side, almost invisible under his baggy tee shirt. Nick had taken him down to the archery range that morning and thoroughly trained him in the use of the weapon, how to load it, how to use it, how to disassemble and clean it, and the tenets of safe gun ownership. It was a powerful weapon, firing a 10 millimeter round that was strong enough to stop just about anyone on the first shot, but the pistol was compact and easy to carry...but using, not so much. The small pistol had a strong recoil, and Nick worked with him all morning to teach him how to control that recoil. Kit was especially impressed with the Glock’s safety trigger, which made it almost impossible for the weapon to discharge without a finger being on the trigger. Nick had him fire nearly two hundred rounds that morning, giving Kit a thorough feel for the weapon and its recoil, to where he was used to it bucking in his paw when firing and using Nick’s teachings to smoothly and quickly return the pistol to aim. Nick even went so far as to have Kit unload an entire 10 round clip into a target quickly without missing the target, learning how to control the pistol and fire quickly despite its recoil. Kit was in good shape, but the gun had made his arm sore from trying to control its recoil. He rubbed his shoulder and rotated it, which made Nick chuckle.

“Trust me, if you ever have to use it, you’ll kiss my feet for choosing that one for you,” he said. “It has more recoil than the twenty, but the twenty’s a big pistol and hard to hide. You shoot someone with that, they’re not gonna get up.”

“I feel like I did a thousand one-armed push-ups,” he complained.

Nick laughed. “You won’t have to do that again,” he assured him. “You know exactly what to expect now.”

“It feels...weird. I don’t like it,” he said.

“I know, but you’re carrying that thing for a reason. To protect Jessie.”

“That’s the only reason I’m carrying it,” he said seriously, remembering how Rick had saved his life because he had a concealed carry permit. He hated the idea of carrying a pistol, but he’d do it to protect his wife. She and their unborn daughter were the most precious things on this planet.

“At least you didn’t shoot yourself in the foot,” he grinned.

“I’ll shoot you in the foot next time,” Kit said with mock seriousness.

“Oh, go on with ya,” he laughed.

Jessie was in the kitchen with all three chefs, and they were cooking sweet and sour pork. Jessie was humming to herself pleasantly, an apron tied over her large stomach as she put on a pot of rice. “Hey, pretty kitty,” he cooed as he put his arms around her.

“Hey, handsome fox,” she giggled as he nuzzled playfully at her neck. “Lunch will be ready in about twenty minutes.”

“So you’ll be up in the bedroom in twenty minutes?” he breathed huskily in her ear.

He felt her shiver. “Stop being mean, handsome fox,” he told him. “Go finish your article while I cook.”

“Meanie,” he protested, putting his paws on her swollen stomach. “I’m sure Laura wouldn’t run me out of the kitchen. I should ask her for permission.”

Jessie laughed. “She knows who feeds her,” he told him archly. “Don’t look for her to let you get around proper discipline.”

“Well, will you at least massage my shoulders?” he asked sweetly.

“After lunch,” she told him.

“But I want a massage *now*,” he whined, sounding almost exactly like Victor.

She laughed. “I’m gonna do more than give you a massage, you brat! Now let me finish cooking!”

“You heard her promise, you heard it!” Kit said triumphantly as he let go of her and started on his way out of the kitchen. Jessie threw the chopped-off top of an onion at him, which he evaded and caused him to beat a hasty retreat before he was assaulted with more decapitated vegetables. He did as she ordered, went up to the master bedroom and started editing the next article, which was an interview and detailed article about the MacArren family. Kit had interviewed all three MacArrens about what it was like to work in Stonebrook, from Clancy’s almost encyclopedic knowledge of the Vulpan family and the manor to Stanley’s perfectionist approach to keeping the manor running smoothly, to Bartholomew’s more

mellow yet no less meticulous approach to his duties. Kit wrote about what it meant to be a MacArren, the hereditary duty they felt to Stonebrook, which was as much their home as it was the Vulpans, the level of training and education they pursued to fulfill that duty, and the fierce sense of pride the family had in making sure everything in the lives of the Vulpans was smooth and predictable, and Kit ensured that the readers understood that the Vulpans would not be the Vulpans were it not for the MacArrens. Most of the readers would probably be surprised to know that Clancy had a Doctorate in English literature, Stanley had a Doctorate in economics, and Bartholomew had two Master's degrees, one in political science and one in economics, and was working on his dissertation for his Doctorate in economics. Kit knew that even his arrogant bastard father had often asked advice from Clancy, and then from Stanley when Clancy retired, and that advice was good advice. The MacArrens were highly educated, very capable, and the Vulpans would not be where they were today were it not for servant families like the MacArrens and the Higgins and the Smiths and the Longbridges there to both serve them and support them. "It's a communal effort," Kit wrote to summarize the article. "The MacArrens have worked both for and with the Vulpan family since 1907, when Clancy's father, James MacArren, was first employed by my great-great grandfather, Arthur Vulpan. That's over a century of service, but it's more than that. It's a century of the Vulpans and the MacArrens working together for success. Stonebrook was finished in 1936, and since the first day it was completed and the Vulpans moved in, a MacArren was here to greet them, since the MacArrens moved in *before* the Vulpans. This house, Stonebrook, is as much the home of servant families like the MacArrens as it is us Vulpans.

“You might think that most rich furs treat their servants like servants. Well, some do, and some in the Vulpan family do, like my uncle Zachary. He’s one of those males who sees a servant as little more than a piece of furniture, a useful tool that’s little more than background scenery unless he needs it. But here in Stonebrook, it’s different, a difference so dramatic that not even my uncle Zachary would dare to change it. While he lived here, he had the ability to hire and fire any staff member, yet he made not a single staff change. That’s because here, service to the family and to the house isn’t just a job, it’s a family tradition, a tradition the Vulpans are more than comfortable with continuing. The Vulpans continue it because it’s always easier to hire the son or daughter of a servant, since they already know exactly what to expect and exactly what’s expected of them. But the servant families continue it because Stonebrook is their *home*, they are paid well, they are treated well, and passing on the family tradition is almost the same as them passing on Stonebrook to their children.

“In the 72 years that Stonebrook has been here, there has been a Vulpan in the master bedroom, but it has been the MacArren down in the apartment right beside the kitchen, a four bedroom affair with its own patio, that truly owns this manor. Stanley runs this place like a general, not because it’s his job or what he’s paid to do, he does it because this is his home, and he has tremendous pride in his home. And at least one Vulpan appreciates all his hard work, and would feel totally lost without him. We could sell Stonebrook and it would still be Stonebrook, but if the MacArrens were to leave their employment and leave Stonebrook, then it wouldn’t be Stonebrook anymore. It would be just another big mansion. A manor is just a building and a lawn. It is those inside it, both family and servants, that truly make a manor a unique place. The servants who work in the manor are the true essence of what I call *Stonebrook*, and no servant

family represents that truth better than the four generations of MacArrens who have worked within this manor. Without them, this is just a building.”

He finished it up and sent it to work along with several pictures he took of the servants, documenting the family lines in Stonebrook in pictures. Carrie’s family, the Longbridges, would be the next article, for all three of her children also worked on the grounds. He then called Rick for the second time that day. “Article and some pictures are in your inbox, boss,” Kit told him.

“Good, son, good,” he answered. “I’ve made the new hires. And the assistant you wanted is hired,” he added. “Julie Gardner, right?”

“That’s her,” he answered. “She was the best of the bunch. She’ll work well with me and Pat.”

“The two writers are the ones I told you about, and you should know one of them,” he chuckled. “I hired Paula back as a writer.”

“The twitchy cougar?”

He laughed. “That’s her. But she’s a good journalist, much better than the other intern. The other one I hired is RJ Childers. Turns out he goes by RJ because his parents named him Renault Jefferson.”

Kit laughed. “And I thought I had a bad name,” he said. “Is he as friendly in real life as he is on the phone?”

“So far, you bet,” he answered. “But he’s a *tenacious* reporter. He’ll be good for investigative reporting.”

“Sounds good. What time are you guys getting here on Wednesday?”

“Our flight arrives at one at Logan,” he answered. “Vil already called to ask the same thing, she said she’ll take care of getting us there. I can’t wait to see the inside of your house live,” he said eagerly. “The pool house was nice and all, but I want to see if the pictures do it justice.”

“You’ll find out in about nine days,” Kit answered. “I’ll let you guys run the house.”

“I want to see that vault room in your bedroom,” he said slyly.

“Why? There’s another one just like it in the bedroom where you’ll be staying,” Kit said. “The two wing master bedrooms are exactly alike except for one thing, which I won’t reveal because it’s a secret. Your bedroom has its own vault room.”

“Ah, so that’s where you’re keeping all those special toys you and Jessie own,” he said lightly.

“Rick, don’t be a Mike,” Kit warned, which made him laugh. “Though I’m surprised Jessie still wants to be intimate so late in her pregnancy.”

“That’s not unusual, Kit,” he said. “Martha got even more affectionate as she got closer to her date. In her case, she said she was having her fun before the couple of weeks afterward when she wouldn’t be able to. Our doctor even told us that it’s safe to make love almost right up to the delivery date.”

Kit chuckled. “I hope Jessie feels the same way,” he said. “The belly gets in the way a little, but working around that little problem is half the fun.”

“I think we’ll stop here before you assault my youthful impressionism,” Rick said dryly.

Kit chuckled. “Yah, Jessie should be calling me down to lunch any minute.”

“She still cookin’?”

“Cooking, cleaning our bedroom, and yesterday she completely scrubbed every inch of the bathroom. And that’s a *big* bathroom,” Kit grunted. “She’s making sure she doesn’t get used to being waited on paw and foot by doing for herself. I’m pretty proud of her for that. She’ll let them bring her something from time to time or fetch something she forgot, but she cooks every meal we eat. I rather like it that way. I love her cooking.”

“And I’m sure you’re saying that because you heard me come in,” Jessie said playfully from the door. “Lunchtime, handsome fox.”

“Speak of the sexy little devil, and she saunters in through your door,” Kit laughed into the phone. “I’ll talk to you later, Rick.”

“You’ll call in about four hours,” Rick chuckled.

“About that,” he agreed.

Kit found that Jessie’s sweet and sour pork was just as good as he’d get at a restaurant, and so did Muffy, who’d woke up just before lunch. After lunch, they decided to split up for their afternoon exercise, because Kit felt like swimming to rest his sore arm, and Jessie and Muffy wanted to practice driving. Both of them loved golf, and they were frittering away the prime Boston golf season stuck in Stonebrook. While that was a problem for Muffy, for Jessie it wasn’t quite so bad. There were a couple of golf courses in Austin that stayed open until December, and there was one that was open all year round, they’d discovered. The front lawn was perfect for doubling

as a driving range, since if they went to the edge of the woods near the helipad and drove them across the lawn towards the trap launcher, that was nearly 200 yards. Sally, Luann, Bartholomew, and Oliver, the youngest son of Carrie, both helped them by shagging balls and also did some driving themselves. Jessie's clubs were down in Austin, so she used Muffy's spare set brought from her house, the set she kept at her father's manor for when she was in Boston. While the girls were slicing balls towards the front wall, Kit was relaxing in a floating chair in the pool, enjoying the quintessential lazy day with a ginger ale in his paw, sunglasses over his eyes, and the water lapping pleasantly against his legs. Though he never felt very comfortable in the house, at least in the pool he could relax. It wasn't much smaller than the pool at the complex, twelve feet deep at the deep end and with both a diving board and a slide, but here he didn't have to share the pool with screaming kids or overly enthusiastic splashers jumping off the diving board. He did, however, have to share the pool at one, when servant's hours started, and Sally and the most junior butler, a 27 year old fox male named Walter, came padding out in their swim suits and towels.

“Oh, we didn't know you were here, Master Kit,” Walter said apologetically. “We'll use the gym's pool.”

“There's plenty of pool, Walt,” Kit chuckled. “And I never mind sharing it. Pull up a piece of water.” He noted Sally's slightly worried expression, then he chuckled. “Unless *I'm* bothering *you*, that is.”

Walt laughed, and Sally's cheeks ruffled quite attractively. “I think we can stay here,” Sally said, almost primly, claiming a lounge chair.

That was another feature of the servants that Kit had already written about in a prior article, his third one...the availability of the staff to certain attentions. Servants were nearly as available as their Vulpan employers, and

there was also quite a bit of Vulpan-servant naughtiness that went on in most Vulpan households. Though his father had been unswervingly faithful to his mother when she was alive, after she died, his father partook of the servant femmes quite liberally. In the other houses, it was much the same story. Sarah was almost notorious for her aggressive attentions on her male servants, from her chief butler to the groundskeepers, and her husband, Harland Vance, was just as bandy with the femmes. Kit also knew for a fact that Zach's family had a rite of passage at thirteen where he ordered one of the house maids to spend the night with the birthday boy, for his first taste of true adulthood. Sheila had something of an ongoing casual sexual relationship with Higgins, turning to him for satisfaction when she failed to get it from her most recent conquest. And Vil was no angel in that regard either. She'd enjoyed several secretive dalliances with males on the staff when they were growing up, which were frowned upon by the elders because girls were supposed to at least *pretend* to save themselves for marriage, and he knew for a fact that she'd also had sex with her chief butler at least once. That, too, was considered part of the job description for a Vulpan servant, and it went for both the males and the females. They worked for the Vulpans fully knowing that a Vulpan may demand favors from them, and acceding to those demands was literally in the contract they signed to work for the family, though it was couched in fancy words that didn't make it sound quite so blatant. Kit knew for a fact that Muffy had already seduced Walter, sating herself with a male in the manor and available since she was seriously curtailing her usual clubbing activities, and those activities included taking some guy home with her and having sex with him. For the servants, dalliances were a part of the job and also part of the fun for both the males and the females, between the staff and the Vulpans and among the staff itself, and more than one marriage had resulted

from a little inter-staff hanky-panky. And not just because of an unexpected pregnancy. Walter and Sally were clearly interested in each other, their trip to the pool was literally a date, Kit could see it as they talked and joked as they spread their towels on lounge chairs. Sally most likely knew that Muffy had seduced her boyfriend, but she had to accept that as just one of the complications of working for the Vulpans, that her boyfriend might be hijacked from her, but she would also know that the femme Vulpan who did it would have literally no interest in him afterwards. Sally would have to live with allowing a Vulpan to borrow her boyfriend's body, but she never had to worry about a Vulpan competing with her for her boyfriend's affection.

It was an interesting paradox in the family, and also in many other "old money" idle rich families, he had written in that article. The Vulpans were almost lavish with their servants when it came to salary and benefits, they opened their houses to the servants for them to use as the Vulpans used them, and the Vulpans were sincerely interested in the welfare and well being of their servants. The Vulpans took a great deal of pride in their servant staffs, which were the best in New England, paws down. But on the other side of that was what many would consider to be both illegal and immoral, the expectation that anyone who worked in the house had to submit to their sexual demands. But that was one of the aspects of the idle rich that "regular" furs just wouldn't be able to understand. Vulpans, and other rich families, saw servants as there to cater to their *every* need, and one of those needs was physical. In return for that very serious and considerable demand, the servants were very well paid and given exceptionally good benefits. It was just one of the ways that rich furs were different from normal ones, how they lived by a different set of rules and saw the world much differently than normal furs did.

Kit had been quite different. Kit didn't lose his virginity to a maid on the staff as most of his male cousins did, he lost it to Suzy. And he'd always been too angry with his father, and the maids too afraid of the wrath of his father, for him to "enjoy" the girls on the staff the way his male cousins did. That certainly didn't mean that he didn't have the occasional fling, but he'd done most of his oat sowing outside of the manor with the daughters of other families of the idle rich. That too was a form of rebellion, for both him and the girl, doing what they weren't supposed to be doing just to spite their parents. Suzy was the first, but she certainly wasn't the last. Kit had never touched a single servant femme in the manor, but he'd sampled five of the debutantes of Boston aristocracy before he was disowned, and had a few pretty fun affairs after he got into college with girls who didn't mind a one night stand. Then there was that farewell that Suzy gave him right before he graduated and left the apartment she'd arranged for him....

He shivered a little. That had been *wild*. Suzy had been the last femme he'd had in bed before he met Jessie, and in a way, that seemed...right. It was almost as if Suzy had given him away, set him down the road that led him to the love of his life. In a way, he felt almost embarrassed about his past exploits when compared to a paragon of purity like Jessie, who remained chaste even after she left home, waiting for *the one* with which she would share the rest of her life. But, they were from different backgrounds, and at least she wasn't anywhere near a paragon of purity now. She'd only shared her bed with him, but Jessie *was not* timid, shy, or passive when the bedroom door was closed.

Not that she was really like that now. A year of knowing Kit and her pregnancy had put steel in her backbone and made her much more confident and resilient, which he rather fancied. Then again, he'd fancy Jessie if she

weighed two hundred pounds and had her ears surgically removed, because the mind and personality he so dearly loved would still be the same.

“So, Sally,” Kit called, taking a sip of his drink. “What do you think of Jessie now?”

She laughed. “I can see why you married her, Master Kit,” she admitted. “I thought you were very wrong to marry a cat, but she’s just so adorable,” she said wryly.

“She’s a total sweetheart,” Walter agreed as he slipped into the pool. “I’ve never had a Vulpan offer to bring *me* something before.”

“Well, that totally vindicates me,” he chuckled. “And Walt, go get me another glass of ginger ale, this one doesn’t have a proper number of ice cubes in it!” he said in a thoroughly insincere haughty and arrogant voice, which made Walter laugh. “There must be exactly *four* ice cubes in this glass! I’m going to fire the entire staff for this!”

“Master Kit. Bite me,” Walter said, which nearly made Kit fall out of his lounge chair laughing.

Kit felt *much* better once Jahal was off the manor. They had their short day the next day as Nick finalized training the guards in their duties, and then they were released around lunchtime, and they wouldn’t be back until the day before the wedding, the day of Jessie’s shower. Nick, however, didn’t give Kit a chance to rest. After he again listened in on the board meeting that morning, which lasted only fifteen minutes, Nick dragged him out to the range to practice with his pistol. This time, however, Muffy wasn’t about to be left out, specifically getting up early just so she could

catch them at the range. As Kit practiced with his Glock, she badgered Nick and Donny into letting her try to shoot a machine gun. She got an extensive safety lesson with Nick's MP7A1, and then Nick let her try with a five round clip. She fired all five rounds, and the gun ended up almost straight up in the air as Muffy panicked feeling the gun try to buck up and up and up, and she laughed ruefully about not doing a single thing Nick told her to do when he taught her. However, she got better as she practiced, and by the end of their shooting session she could keep the gun from rising too high. The Valiant guards were all gone by lunch, and after lunch, and Kit was about to remove his holster harness before Nick stopped him, warning him that the fact that Jahal was here in Boston at all was reason enough for him to continue wearing it.

Two days had shown nothing about Jahal's reason for being here, though. The night before, he'd gone home, made dinner, watched TV for a while, then went to bed. He received no calls, and he said not a single word in his apartment, clearly not the kind who talks to himself. He cooked in silence, ate in silence, laughed a couple of times watching a sitcom on TV, then turned in at 10:24, after catching enough of the 10:00 news to see the weather. As soon as the weather was over, he went to bed.

He repeated that pattern the next night, going home early with bags of groceries from the local Wal-Mart at 1:19. He watched TV for an hour, then stopped to read a book. He ate a snack, then partook in what was clearly his hobby, playing six games of chess against a computer opponent that took nearly four hours. After that, he cooked dinner, ate, watched TV until the weather came on the 10:00 news, then went to bed.

What was even more curious was the panthers' bio on Jahal since he came to Boston. He wasn't a new arrival, it turned out. He'd been in Boston

for four years, and had worked at Vanguard for two of them, according to the records, where he worked as a floater. A floater was someone who would work this post, then that post, on an on-call basis. When they needed someone to fill in for someone, they called Jahal. He had never failed to show up for a scheduled shift, and he had never turned down a call to work, no matter what time of the day or night. While working for Vanguard, he had been a model employee, and had even won an award for foiling an attempt to rob a barge facility, catching the thieves as they tried to cut through the fence and scaring them away.

“Very odd,” Nick said with a frown as he read the information in the secret room, with Kit and Sylvia with him. Jessie was taking a nap upstairs, so Sylvia felt it was safe to leave her alone. Nick and Sylvia were very serious about Jessie not being unescorted for a single second until after the wedding. Anywhere Jessie went, Sylvia went with her. “It’s almost like he’s really who he pretends to be.”

“Records are easy to fake,” Kit noted.

“True, and that’s something those nutty panthers are checking right now. It’s almost creepy, this guy is. He never makes a sound in his own house unless he’s laughing at the TV. He didn’t even curse at the computer when it beat him in chess. Have you ever known anyone who does that?”

“Not really,” Kit admitted. “Can he talk?”

“Of course he can,” Nick answered. “Well, there’s not much we can do about it until we learn more, so may as well worry about something else. Has Stanley even taken a breath today?”

Kit laughed. “I don’t think he’s slept since Vil told him we’re having the reception here. I’m amazed he’s letting anyone take any time off. He’s

having the staff thoroughly scrub and clean rooms that nobody's even going to use."

"But he'll know they're not clean, and that'll shame him," Nick chuckled.

"Even the attic?"

Nick exploded into laughter.

Despite the sore arm, Jessie invited him to shoot trap after lunch, and he could never deny his pretty kitty anything she wanted. "Well, this isn't as hard on my stomach and back as golf," she giggled as she loaded two shells into Nick's K80. "Laura did *not* like being twisted on the backswing."

"Who would?" Kit asked as he loaded the clays in the launcher. "So, you're done with golf?"

"For now, yeah, until this little pain in my butt gets out of here," she said, patting her stomach fondly. "I hope she has lots of time for hobbies," Jessie giggled. "The poor girl, she'll be run ragged keeping us with all the things we do. Golf, skeet, knitting, cooking, flying, all the toys Vil will undoubtedly throw at her as soon as she's born, she's gonna be one busy little girl."

"She's a Vulpan, she can multitask," Kit said as he laid out the foot switch. "Where's Muffy?"

"Not sure," she answered. "She said she was gonna lay down after lunch. Guess she's napping."

Kit was interrupted during his round by the phone. He saw that it was Austin and opened it. "Hello."

“Hey cousin,” Bess called. “I’m checking in for all the girls.”

“Okay, Bess. Do you have your flight set up for coming back for the wedding?”

“Yup, we do,” she answered. “And after the wedding, I’ll be leaving again.”

“Back to Austin?”

“Nope. Vil gave me a job!” she said excitedly. “But, we both agreed that I just can’t work in Boston for now, both because of what’s going on and because I’m too notorious, so I’m going to go to work in New Orleans. I’ll be working in Avondale as an assistant to Terry. He’s going to teach me all about what the family does, and after I’m trained, Vil offered to let me run a division of one of the Boston repair docks if I want to come home, or run one of the small facilities we have all over if I want to try my paw on my own.”

“Finally putting that business degree to good use, eh?” Kit chuckled.

“I hope I remember it all, college is kind of a haze,” she said distantly, which made Kit laugh.

“What are the others going to do?”

“Mary and Lynn are coming back to Austin until everything settles up there. They’re not interested in working, at least not right now,” she said. “I think Mary’s about ready to give up the party girl life and look for a husband. Lynn, well, I hate to say she’ll be a party animal for life.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that, cousin,” Kit told her. “When do Angie and Joy go back to school?”

“They leave here on Friday,” she answered. “Their first day is Monday. I wanted to say thanks, cousin.”

“For what?”

“For letting us come here,” she answered. “Sheila’s been awesome, and we really love your city and your friends. I’m glad I’ll be in New Orleans, that way I can see you when you come over to see Terry.”

“You’re welcome, cousin. I’m gonna go ahead and go, you kinda interrupted something.”

“Oh, and what did I interrupt? Is Little Lukey being a bad boy?”

“I’m about to take my shotgun and murder innocent little clay targets,” he replied blandly.

“What?”

“Jessie got me into target shooting as a hobby,” he told her. “That’s what we’re doing right now.”

“Jessie’s shooting a gun as pregnant as she is?”

“She was driving golf balls yesterday,” he chuckled. “Jessie’s very... energetic,” he said, giving her a sly smile, which made her cheeks ruffle appealingly.

“Did Bess get the sweater I made for her?” Jessie asked.

“You made Bess a sweater?” Kit asked.

“She made me a sweater?” Bess repeated, then she laughed. “No, I haven’t got anything yet.”

“She didn’t get it,” Kit relayed.

“Well, it should be there any time, I sent it to Sheila so she could give it to Bess.”

“Knowing Sheila, she kept it herself,” Kit noted, which made Bess laugh. “Anyway, I’ll talk to you later, cousin.”

“Okay. Bye Luke. Kit,” she said quickly.

“You’re learning,” Kit chuckled, then he hung up the phone.”

“Well, Vil’s already on the move,” Kit said as he put up the phone. “Vil gave Bess a job.”

“Really? That’s great!” Jessie said with a smile.

“She’ll go to work in New Orleans first and train with Terry,” he told her. “That’s only smart, because Bess slept and partied through her college. Technically she has a Bachelor’s in business, but I doubt she remembers any of it. After that, she said Vil was gonna put her in a small facility off the beaten path and let her try to run it.”

“Well, good for her!” Jessie said approvingly. “When does she start?”

“After the wedding,” he answered. “She’ll be in New Orleans I guess Friday night, and odds are Terry’ll start her on Monday.”

“Well, that’s wonderful,” Jessie smiled.

Kit laughed suddenly. “God, Uncle Zach is gonna blow a fuse. Vil hired *Bess*. But Maxine won’t be able to complain about Bess being an embarrassment to the family. Vil has her claws in Bess now, and she’ll make her behave by threatening her through her job.”

“You know, I don’t think that’s gonna be a problem,” Jessie said. “Bess reminded me a lot of Sheila, and all Sheila wanted was respect. She feels

like she gets it back home, so she stayed instead of going back to Austin. We treat her kindly, Rick and Martha treat her with respect, and the guys love her. I think Bess is gonna be the same way. She'll find out that she suddenly has duties and responsibilities, but she'll also be respected and furs will listen to her, and that'll make her try hard to succeed. As long as Terry treats her fairly, I think Bess will be alright. What about your other cousins? Lynn, and, and...."

"Mary. Bess had the biggest reputation, but Lynn's the hardest of the hardcore party girls, Jessie. Bess said she doesn't want a job, she just wants to keep partying. Mary, well, Bess said that Mary's actually thinking about getting married, which should make Maxine overjoyed. It burns the fur off her ears that there are Vulpan girls who are unmarried past the age of eighteen, and Mary's a particular burr in her tail because Mary is her own daughter. She's thrown like ten different males at Mary, and Mary just blows them off. The one time she tried to put her foot down and threatened Mary to marry or else, Mary just moved to her parents' vacation house in Barbados for a month. Maxine coddles her kids, and she broke before Mary did, which really amuses me. Maxine bitches about the other girls being unmarried and nags her brothers and sister to make their daughters settle down, yet she can't even make her own daughter get married. Bridgette's the only married femme cousin, and that's because Bridgette is Zach's oldest. Bridgette was more or less forced to get married back when my father and the elders had absolute control of the family, just before I started fighting with my father."

"Well, your aunt needs to learn that if its not her own child, it's none of her business," Jessie said simply.

"Amen, pretty kitty, amen."

The mystery of Jahal remained as the days marched closer and closer to the wedding. Stanley was both almost psychotic with his preparations and had never been happier in his life. Under his almost tyrannical direction, the manor gleamed more than it had in years. Every room was immaculately clean, new drapes were present in many rooms, several rooms had been repainted, and the lawn looked absolutely spectacular. It was being mowed daily now to keep it perfect, and to mollify Stanley and keep him from having a nervous breakdown, Kit and Jessie allowed him to take down the trap launcher, because that corner of the lawn was starting to show some worn grass from them trampling it. Stanley would never ask for such a thing, but Kit knew that he wished the trap machine wasn't on the front lawn, and he spent nearly an hour over there with Brandon, the head groundskeeper, discussing how to repair the damage the day before the reception. When Kit got wind of that through the rumormill, he had Brandon and Nick pull the launcher and store it in the storage building until after the reception. They could live with not shooting trap for a few days, and besides, Nick still had him practice shooting the pistol every morning after his phone calls to Rick and to listen in on the board meeting. For him, that was enough shooting to last him the whole day. Besides, he had to admit, he was getting good with a pistol. After a week of practice, he was starting to develop decent aim, and Nick had even had him practice quick-draws from the holster, first with the gun empty, then with it loaded, taking it from holster and firing at the target.

They were at the range on the Wednesday before the wedding, basically staying out of the way while the staff ran around like maniacs getting the manor ready for Vil's reception. Stanley was decorating the

ballroom and main dining room today, and after lunch, Nick was picking up twelve more mercenaries that would patrol the off-limits sections of the manor during the reception to keep everyone out, two guards for each floor in the two wings. They would need very little formal training, not like the Valiant guards, so Nick was going to pick them up, give them a tour, give them assignments, then bunk them at a nearby hotel because there wasn't enough room for everyone at the manor...and since they couldn't house everyone at the manor, it was only fair that they house none of the newcomers.

The gang from Austin would be arriving today at 4:15pm at Logan. They had to reschedule their flight this morning because their original flight was canceled due to some maintenance problem with the plane, so they got a later flight. Kit wouldn't be meeting them at the airport, but Vil and Kendall would, then bring them here. Stanley had already assigned everyone to a room or cottage, and they were pretty much well filling the place up. Rick and Martha would get the west wing master bedroom, Savid and Nawa would take the pool house with their kids, and everyone else would be in bedrooms in the manor.

Jahal had yielded absolutely no information. The panthers couldn't tell if his records were fake, and he was almost boring in his off-duty life. He did nothing, almost never spoke, just ate, watched TV, played chess on a computer, and watched the 10:00 news until the weather came on before going to bed. He didn't receive a single phone call from anyone, he called no one, he got nothing but bills and junk mail in the mail, and so far as they could tell, he did absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. The only unusual part of the entire surveillance against him was the day he paid his bills, filling out six checks, putting stamps on the envelopes, and mailing them

out the next morning. He confounded Nick, who was sure he was hired to be here, but for the life of them they couldn't figure out who hired him, or even why.

Things would be moving nice and smoothly from here. Tomorrow was the day of the baby shower, and also the day that Vil would be coming to Stonebrook to spend the night. She'd agreed not to evict Rick and Martha from the west wing master bedroom, and would instead be taking one of the guest master bedrooms on the second floor. She'd be getting ready for her wedding here at Stonebrook, getting dressed, and then they'd leave for the Cathedral of the Holy Cross at 11:00 and meet the Brightons there. The Brightons and Charlie were all staying over at Hart's Crossing, giving Kendall's brothers a chance to get to know Vil better, and they'd been coming over for dinner about every other day since they'd arrived.

Kit *liked* Kendall's family and friend. His father and brothers were intelligent but also very funny and engaging, and they were all very close, the way a family really should be. They joked with each other, pulled pranks on each other, even their father, and all of them loved to play golf, so Vil had taken them to some of the choice golf courses in Boston while she stayed in the golf cart. Charlie was, in a word, *outrageous*. He was bombastic, talkative, boastful, and fearless, but he was also intelligent and very amiable. What he lacked in size he more than made for with raw charisma, and he certainly never made any visit boring.

After firing nearly two hundred rounds, Kit and Nick decided to call it a day on the range. They stacked the targets in a line in front of the archery targets along the side, then released the patrols to resume around the range. Nick drove them back up to the house in a golf cart, and he went into the

kitchen expecting to see Jessie there cooking lunch for them. But she wasn't there.

"Where's Jessie?"

"She was cleaning your room last I heard," Frannie answered, a bit unapprovingly.

Kit pulled his phone out and hit push to talk. "Jessie? Where are you?"

"I'm checking something out. You done?" she asked.

"Yeah, we're finished."

"Good. Come to the conservatory."

Nick tagged along as he ambled in that direction. The conservatory was the furthest room from the central house on the first floor in the east wing, where proper Vulpan children were supposed to practice playing piano or other musical instruments...but neither Kit nor Vil had ever done so. Vil had taken up the violin after leaving the house, and Kit had taken up the guitar after as well, because their father felt that frivolous pursuits like music were a waste of time and energy. Inside the conservatory was a grand piano and several musical instrument cases on a shelf near the back, filled with instruments that hadn't been opened for years. Kit closed the door and went over to what looked like an unassuming stretch of wall, then touched the corner of a large painting near it. Nick laughed when the wall swung inward, revealing the secret passage.

"Bonzer," Nick said as he looked in. "This house has everything, doesn't it?"

“Just about,” Kit said with a chuckle. “I didn’t show you *all* the secrets, Nick. Jessie!”

“Around the corner!” she called.

Kit went around the corner and saw her standing there, a kerchief holding her hair back and a broom in her paws, which made Kit laugh helplessly. “You’re *cleaning*?” he asked in surprise.

“Well, it’s all dusty,” she told him. “And that’s why I called you here. Look at this,” she said, kneeling down and pointing at the floor.

Kit came over and bent down, and after his eyes adjusted to the gloom of the single naked light bulb in the short passage before it opened to the stairs, he saw a curious mar in the dust of the stone floor, that was almost perfectly three feet square, offset in the floor so one edge was on the edge of the wall. The dust was striated and disturbed in straight lines...almost as if something brushed over it. But *only* on that one section of the floor. “Did you sweep it?”

“No, it was like that when I got here,” she said. “Look down. Remember when you showed me the passage, how it was all dusty? Well, where are our footprints on the floor? Nobody else has been in here since we were, else there would be prints in here from them.”

“She’s right,” Nick said, looking around. “The only prints on this side are ours. Did you come all the way down?”

“Yeah, we came out through the conservatory when I showed her,” Kit answered. “There wouldn’t be so much dust it would cover our tracks after just a few weeks, would it?”

“Not without the tracks themselves being visible. Someone must have swept away both your tracks and theirs,” he said seriously, then he keyed his radio. “Sylvia, Donny, come to the conservatory. Bring flashlights and come ready for business,” he ordered. “If Jessie didn’t sweep the floor, then the only reason this part of the floor is like this is because someone screwed up trying to cover their tracks. Or,” he said, taking his pistol out, kneeling down, and striking the stone floor with the butt of his Glock.

There was a distinctly hollow sound.

“Or there’s something under the floor,” he said with a satisfied nod. “Is this another secret passage?”

“Not one I know,” Kit said. “But it’s possible that it is.”

“Who else knows about this passage we’re in?”

“Just me, Jessie, Vil, Clancy, Stan, and Bart. The other servants don’t know about this passage. We don’t advertise that there’s a shortcut to the master bedroom from the first floor.”

“Well, someone does know about it,” Nick said, feeling around the edges of the disturbed section of floor. “Help me find the seams, we gotta get this open.”

Donny and Sylvia arrived moments later, looking around in the secret passage with curious eyes, then they saw Kit and Nick feeling around on the floor. “What’s up, boss?” Donny asked.

“We have a trap door here even Kit didn’t know about,” Nick told him. “Let’s find how to open it and see where it goes.”

They felt around the floor to find the seams, but they were so tight that Nick could barely get his knife blade between them. After about fifteen minutes of fiddling with it, it was Jessie that finally figured out how to open it. The stone was flat and level everywhere except for up against one wall, and she puzzled out that by stepping hard on that side, it lifted the other like a lever. Nick stomped it with his seven foot frame and got it up high enough for Kit and Donny to get their fingers under it, then the two of them lifted it up and lifted it to discover that the heavy stone slab was nearly a foot thick and was hinged, opening like a trapdoor. Sylvia shined her flashlight into the hole, and they saw a six foot ladder, a small landing, and another ladder leading down.

“Hello, nurse,” Nick mused. “I do believe we found something interesting. Jessie, dove, can you be an absolute doll and run up to your room and get my spare MP seven? Oh, and make sure it’s loaded.”

“Uh, sure, hold on,” she said, turning and hurrying up the stairs.

“It’s been used recently,” Sylvia noted, shining her flashlight. “Boot prints and the cobwebs are all cleared out.”

“Yah, and it was used by someone getting *in*, not someone coming *out*. Soon as Jessie gets back with my PDW, we’ll go see where it goes.” He keyed his radio. “Barnett, Kricher, come to the conservatory. Bring your headcam, Barnett, we need it.” He looked to Kit. “Barnett has a head-mounted minicam he uses to take video when he needs his paws free. It takes video of wherever his head’s turned. He’ll use that to give us some video of the place so we can refer to it.”

“Well, let me get a head start,” Donny said, slinging his mini-Uzi and climbing down onto the ladder. “I’m the smallest anyway, I’m best suited

for point.” He climbed down to the landing holding the flashlight, then dropped down, knelt by the second ladder, and shined his light down. “Looks like it goes down about ten meters,” he reported. “Goes *really* deep.”

“Sylvie, spotlight for him so he can go down with both paws,” Nick ordered as Jessie ambled down the stairs carrying Nick’s spare MP7A1 in her paws, carefully. Nick took it with a nod and slung it over his shoulder as Sylvia started down the ladder. Nick gave Kit a wild look when he started to climb down as well.

“What, you think I’m not curious enough to go with you?” Kit asked with a smile.

“I wish I could, but I don’t think I want to try to climb a ladder with this,” Jessie laughed, touching her stomach.

“Jessie, dove, be a dear and go to the kitchen.” He keyed his radio again. “Grizz, meet Jessie in the kitchen and stay with her while Sylvie’s busy helping us in the conservatory.”

“On the way, boss,” Grizz answered.

“You can always make lunch for us,” Kit winked at her.

“Be careful down there,” Jessie told him. “You fall off that ladder and break your arm, and I’ll spank you.”

“Don’t tempt me,” he winked, which made her cheeks ruffle as he climbed down to the landing with Sylvia and looked down as Donny climbed down the second ladder.

“It’s all stone down here, and looks fairly old,” Donny called from the ladder when he reached the bottom. “I’m in a small room, and there’s a tunnel heading off, umm, I think to the north. It slopes down.”

“Goes downhill inside the hill to maintain depth,” Nick noted as he climbed down. “What’s the roof like, Donny?”

“Reinforced, buttressed and arched,” he called back. “It’s about two meters high, Nick. You’re gonna be hunched over.”

“Won’t be the first time,” he called back as Krichek and Barnett arrived. Barnett was a curious mixed breed. Both of his parents were big cats, so he was all feline, but one of his parents was a lion and his other parent was a cheetah. He was tall and sleek, with tawny fur run through with black spots. His tail was tufted and had bands on it, and he had no mane. Barnett was also something of an oddity among the mercs in that he had a Master’s degree in electrical engineering. He was a gadget male, the male they called when they needed tech, but Nick had been in actual combat with Barnett, some place in the middle east, and Nick praised Barnett’s fighting skills. Barnett was a male who could set up your sophisticated electronic surveillance equipment, repair it, modify it, and also fight off the bad guys, all rolled up into one.

“Woo, so we’re exploring the secrets of Stonebrook, are we?” Barnett asked.

“This one’s even a secret to Kit,” Nick answered. “And it’s been used recently.”

“Ooh, well, let’s see where it goes.”

Kit found himself solidly in the center of the formation as they climbed down the ladder, then started down the narrow, cramped tunnel that sloped downhill. It was narrow enough to where Kit would have trouble trading places with someone, and Nick, Krichek, and Barnett had to hunch over to keep from banging their heads on the ceiling. Kit could feel the ceiling against his one good ear, the tip of it brushing the arched top, which forced him to walk right down the center. The walls around him were clearly old, dusty, damp, and eroded; it looked like this passage had been built at the same time as the house because the walls were lined with tan granite the same as the house, irregular blocks and pieces that were clearly the leftovers from the construction of the manor, but that tan granite yielded to what looked like gray stone blocks about a hundred feet in, where they must have used up the leftover granite and started using other materials. It had to be a secret escape tunnel, but it had been unused for so long that everyone forgot it was there. There were even some tiny limestone stalactites forming on the arched ceiling, arched for strength and probably the only reason the tunnel hadn't collapsed over the years. Clancy didn't even know about this tunnel, and Clancy knew *everything* about Stonebrook. Donny was in the lead with Barnett right behind him, and Kit was flanked by Sylvia in front and Nick behind, with Krichek bringing up the rear. The passage both sloped downhill and curved to the left, and while it was very dusty, it was also free of cobwebs and there were bootprints disturbing the dust and dirt that had caked on the floor over the decades. Not footprints, bootprints, which said something in and of itself. Few wore shoes in the summer, and there weren't many others who would wear boots.

It took them nearly five minutes to reach the end of the tunnel. It opened to a round pipe that was about two feet wide that was grated, looking like a long-abandoned water drainage pipe near the river. The

grating was rusty and looked solid, but Kit could see the single hinge on the right side, and a very clever bolt lock that would be all but invisible from the outside, hidden behind the frame and crossbar of the grating. “Well, what have we here,” Nick said as he unbolted the grating and crawled out first, his MP7 in paw.

“I think we’re outside the wall,” Sylvia said as she climbed out with him.

“Stay in there, Kit. Krichek, Donny, stay with him. Barnett, let’s find out where we are, and look for cameras.”

Kit waited in the small chamber just on the far side of the pipe for about ten minutes, waiting in almost tense anticipation until Nick’s face appeared in the opening. “We’re about twenty meters away from the wall, and the river’s right over there,” he pointed to the side. “We’re on the northwest side of the manor, and about fifty meters from the back gate. What’s out past here, Kit?”

“Umm, a bunch of forest. The closest building is my uncle’s manor, Swan Cove, it’s about a mile upriver. The family owns all the land for about a mile in every direction from Stonebrook, and Zach owns most of the land around his manor. That keeps anyone from building around here.”

“Well, well,” Nick said with a slow smile. “I do believe we just found out why Jahal is here. Barnett, I want two hidden cameras on the gate at different angles, and two cameras in the passage up in the house. One on the trap door, the other on the door leading into the master bedroom. After he sets that up, we’ll just put everything back the way we found it except for one thing and see who wanders into the tunnel.”

“And we keep strike team at back gate, *da?*” Krichek asked.

“I was thinking the very same thing,” he said with an evil little smile. “If we can catch our little moles, we might find out who gave them their orders. Donny, when we get back, I want you to go into town and buy me two hydraulic jacks, the little potbelly ones. And we’re gonna need some four by fours.”

“What are those for?”

“That’s how we’re gonna seal off the entrance,” Nick answered. “A jack at each load bearing corner, across from the hinges and we put posts on top of them that reach to the ceiling. We jack them just enough to hold the posts securely. That way, whoever comes along and tries to get in using that tunnel finds out they can’t get in, and no amount of pushing is going to budge *two* jacks. We’ll have Stanley rearrange the conservatory to put some heavy piece of furniture in front of the door to the passage, and we’ll take care of the door up in your room by keeping your room locked and with someone at the door when you’re not in it.”

“Clever,” Kit said approvingly.

“I *am* a professional,” he grinned.

“After we catch our little tunnel rats, I suggest you have your maintenance furs come over here and seal off the gate, and maybe even brick off the tunnel,” Nick suggested. “I wouldn’t feel comfortable with something like this in my house. I’m sure it was built to be an escape tunnel back in the day, but as you noticed, someone’s using it to get *in* now.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Kit nodded.

When they got back, Kit explained everything to Jessie, who was standing at the opening with Stanley, staring down into it with fascination.

“They’re going to seal off the trap door with jacks to keep anyone from opening it, put cameras on the entrance, and wait and see who tries to use it.”

“Stanley, think you could put something nice and heavy in front of the door to the conservatory?” Nick asked as he climbed up and out.

“Yes, I have a nice shelf I can have brought in here and loaded with books,” he answered.

“Sounds good. Sylvie, set up a sentry rotation for the master bedroom. Four hour shifts should do it.”

“What about when they’re sleeping?” Sylvia asked.

“Hmm. That’s a point. Alright, instead we’ll do this. We put the guard in the passage watching the trap door and the door to the conservatory,” he said. “We can put a nice comfy chair in there. That way we keep both critical points covered, and we have camera backup just in case something happens.”

“Do you still want me to block off the conservatory door?”

“No, we’ll need to get in from there,” he shook his head. “Sylvia. Someone’s snooped in the house uninvited. I’d like you and Barnett to organize the mates to sweep the house from top to bottom and make sure they didn’t leave anything behind. Barnett, check for microwave transmitters or broadbands, if they put cameras in the house they’ll be remotes or they’ll be piggybacking the manor’s wireless network. Stanley, I think you should make sure all the valuable things are where they’re supposed to be. Oh, and keep this quiet. Don’t tell anyone else.”

“I’ll put Bart on it, and he’ll get started immediately,” Stanley said with a sober nod.

“I wonder how they built an arched ceiling underground,” Kit said curiously. “That could not have been easy.”

“Excavated over the arch, built the arch, filled in the gap,” Nick answered brusquely. “Let’s get moving. I want this house cleared by two.”

Kit and Jessie stayed in the kitchen, and after she cooked lunch, they read in their bedroom as Muffy watched a movie, and Nick went to work. After they were all done around two, Nick explained what they’d done. They’d thoroughly checked the house and found nothing left behind or out of place, and Batholomew’s check of the house found everything where it was supposed to be. Whoever had infiltrated the house had only looked around, maybe gone no further than the conservatory just to make sure they *could* get in, and then had left. There were no cameras, no bugs, no nasty little surprises anywhere, at least that they could find. Kit decided to check the secret room in their bedroom just to make sure, and found that was also empty and undisturbed. While they’d been doing that, Barnett had set up the remote cameras, putting two on the grate entrance and one in the passage focused on the trap door, and Krichek and Donny had sealed the trap door using two hydraulic jacks and 4x4 posts that were braced against the ceiling...and they got some funny looks from the staff trudging through the manor carrying them. By 4:00, the place was completely swept clean, the trap door blocked off, and they now had cameras watching the entrance and four mercs near the back gate ready to rush in and capture anyone who tried to use the tunnel.

But the excitement of the tunnel faded around 5:00 when the front gates opened and a procession of limousines rolled in, carrying everyone

from Austin. Kit and Jessie met them out in the courtyard, shaking paws and hugging their way down the line of limos as their friends and family filed out of them. Kit shook Pat's paw and chuckled when he gawked at the house, the courtyard nestled in behind the west wing and with the main house bordering it on two sides and the pool, pool house, exterior garage, gym, and helipad all visible from the paved area. "Welcome to Stonebrook," Kit told him with a slight smile.

"Duuuude," he breathed, looking around. "The pictures don't do this place justice, Kit, they just don't," he proclaimed in a reverent voice.

"You want it? I'll sell it to you," Kit offered.

"Master Kit!" Stanley barked in protest, which made Kit laugh.

Kit shook Rick's paw and then hugged Martha as they got out of the last limo with Allison and Marty, then he dared give Allison a hug. "God, I've missed you guys," he said as he shook Lupe's paw.

"Austin ain't the same without you, honey," Marty told him. "Jessie! Holy crap, you're pregnant!" he declared, which made Jessie laugh helplessly as Martha hugged her.

"How have you been, dear?" Martha asked.

"I've been fine, Martha," she answered. "Doctor Mac came up and gave me a checkup just two days ago, and she said that I'm right on schedule."

"That's good, dear. Are you coming home to have your baby?"

"We're still not sure," she answered. "It's all going to depend on what happens up here. Odds are, I'll have the baby here, though. Kit can't leave

Boston for another month and a half to keep Zach out of the house.”

“A month and twelve days to be exact,” he answered. “After that, Zach is permanently evicted from Stonebrook. And we’ll be flying home the day afterward,” he said fervently. “This is a nice place to visit, but I hate living here.”

“Yah, who could live in such squalor,” Mike teased as he waved towards the swimming pool.

“It’s not the house, it’s the baggage,” Kit said seriously.

“Hey bro, I brought ‘em,” Vil said as she hobbled up without any kind of assistance. Kit could tell that walking on her cast wasn’t without pain for her, but she wasn’t about to go back to the cane or crutches. She was bound and determined to *walk* down the aisle in two days, and she’d do exactly what she meant to do. “Now let’s get them all settled in. Stan!” she shouted.

Suddenly, Stonebrook seemed...*welcoming*. The old ghosts hiding in the walls seemed to be too afraid of the laughter and smiles within the house to lurk behind the paint and wallpaper as Kit and Jessie gave the gang and some friends from Austin the grand tour of the house. They showed them every room in the house, and got the expected *oohs* and *ahhs* when they showed them the billiards room, the home theater, and Stanley showed off the lavishly decorated ballroom, done in white and red roses, white silk buntings and tablecloths, and the manor’s best china was laid out on the head table while some of the manor’s formal china was laid out carefully on the eight 14 seat round tables set in perfect rows of two along the black and white checkerboard marble tiled floor, which had been polished to the point where it was almost mirrorlike. It had taken four furs nearly six hours with buffers to get the floor like that, and Stanley made sure nobody had shoes

on before entering his gorgeous ballroom. They all wanted to see secret rooms, so Kit showed them the ones it was safe to show them, avoiding the room holding the surveillance equipment and the conservatory, but they *did* show the gang the secret vault room similar to the one in Kit's room that was in the west wing master bedroom. "Back in its heyday, this room would have had money, art, stocks, and the really valuable family jewelry in it," Kit told them. "The manor has two identical master bedrooms because my great-grandfather wanted someplace for his brother, but it turned out that my great uncle built another manor instead of living here. He built Still Waters, which is a couple of miles downriver, which is where my uncle Jake lives. My uncle Zach lives in a manor named Swan Cove, which is just a couple of miles from here in the other direction. In a way, I'm kinda surrounded here," he laughed.

"That's why there's nothing but forest out here," Allison realized. "There's houses and apartments and stores everywhere, then bang, nothing but forest."

"That's the boundary of what my family owns," Kit nodded. "Which is about four miles up and down the river, and about two miles wide, centered around Stonebrook. There used to be houses and a couple of farms out here near the house, and some along Stonebrook Drive, but my father decided he didn't want anyone around the manor, so he bought everyone out and had their houses torn down. He even bought out the houses on the other side of the river, since he didn't want to go down to the dock and see someone else's house on the far side. There were some houses upriver of us too, but when Zach bought the land to build Swan Cove, he bought everyone around him out too to make his manor private, just like ours."

"Wow, he convinced everyone to sell their houses?"

“This is Boston, Pat,” Kit said bluntly. “The Vulpans *rule* this city, and this state, for that matter. If Zach wanted that land, he’d get it. If they didn’t sell, he’d just pull strings to have the county seize the land through eminent domain and sell it to him, or cause the holdouts so much grief they’d give up and sell just to make it stop. And if anyone complained about it, Zach would crush them like a bug, destroy their lives, and chase them to the west side of the Mississippi river. That’s the extent that my family controls this area, and the regard many in my family have with normal furs, Pat.”

“Nobody who’s been here any amount of time would be insane enough to refuse to sell,” Vil said simply.

“The land downriver of us was never developed. It’s been part of Still Waters since my great uncle built it. You can still see some of the driveways out there on Stonebrook Drive, when you come in. They’re overgrown, but they’re there. There’s nearly a square mile around Stonebrook that my uncles don’t own.”

“Do you own all that land?” Emmy asked.

He shook his head. “The land is deeded to Stonebrook, so that means it’s owned by Vil primarily. I’m on the deed, but as a co-owner, but as far as the law’s concerned, Vil owns it all.”

“I always wondered what it’d be like to live in a place like this,” Jeffrey mused, looking around the bedroom.”

“For you guys, great. It’s all the perks but none of the responsibilities. For me, it was great until my mom died, then this place was my own private hell,” Kit said grimly. “Since some of you have never been here before, let me show you around out on the grounds.”

Pat and Emmy were impressed by the pool, but they were awed by the gym and indoor pool that was just behind and beside the pool house, on the far side of the exterior garage. “It’s a full gym, with free weights, weight machines, a rowing machine, stationary bikes, treadmills, and a stair climber. The indoor pool is heated, but it’s not really used during the summer. The golf carts in the garage can take you all over the grounds so you can tour the cottages and houses that are scattered around out there. If it’s locked, that means that it’s in use, so don’t go in it. The entire compound is walled in, so as long as you don’t jump in the river, you can’t leave the grounds without coming across a wall or the back gate. Just to warn you guys. Just before you get to the back gate, on the left, there’s a track that leads to an outdoor shooting range. If you hear shooting, stay out of the woods on that side of the grounds. We usually make an announcement over the ground’s radios and push to talk when the range is in use, so if you’re in doubt, just ask. Don’t blunder around in the woods without a manor phone, and make sure you’re listening in case we open the range.”

“We’re getting manor phones?” Mike asked.

“Yeah, as long as you’re here. We have plenty for everyone,” Kit answered. “Stanley will give them out just before we let you guys go to trash the place,” he grinned at Stanley.

“I’m making spaghetti for dinner,” Jessie called. “It should be ready around seven.”

“You’re cooking? Don’t you have chefs to do that?” Lilly teased.

“They help,” Jessie giggled.

“Tomorrow morning we’ll arrange a shopping trip for those slackers who haven’t bought Jessie her shower gifts,” Vil announced. “But the shower’s gonna be held promptly at four, so we need to be done and be back by then.”

“Just please remember two things,” Stanley said, stepping forward. “First, the staff here at Stonebrook considers you guests. If you need anything, just ask for it. But more than that, if you want to do something and you’re not quite sure how, say, to work the home theater system, just ask, and we’ll be glad to show you. But also remember that the manor has been set up, decorated, and is prepared for Mistress Vil’s wedding reception, so I ask you to please be careful in the rooms. Please don’t rearrange or move anything without asking, and please minimize your visits to the ballroom and the main dining room, so we may preserve it in its prepared state.”

“You’re going to leave the dishes out for two days?” Martha asked, a bit sharply.

“We have sheer covers we place over the tables to keep the dishes from collecting dust,” he answered calmly. “All we have to do is remove the glasses and floral arrangements. But given that it takes nearly two hours to set or clear the tables, and I wanted to set them early to make sure they looked proper, we decided to set them now and cover them until the reception.”

“Clever,” Savid said as he reined in one of his sons.

A golf cart rolled up holding Sally and Bartholomew. “Master Savid, if you’d follow my son Bartholomew, he’ll take you to the pool house and help you settle in. Everyone else is in the house, your rooms are already

assigned, and your luggage is in your rooms waiting for you. If you'll come back to the manor with me, the staff will escort you to your rooms. Dinner will be in the small dining room at seven."

"What he means is until then, have fun," Kit smiled.

Having the gang in the house almost made it feel like a home. Kit and Jessie weren't alone as they sat in the TV room, chatting with Lilly, Marty, and Jeffrey, then Martha went with Jessie when she went to go help make dinner. Allison and Lilly joined Muffy at the pool, Jeffrey took a golf cart and roamed the grounds, Barry, Emmy, Marty, Denise, Savid and his family explored the manor on their own, as Kit, Rick, Mike, and Pat went up to the billiards room, which held a regulation pool table and also a billiards table. Mike and Pat played on the pool table while Kit explained to Rick how to play billiards, which was an entirely different game, which gave them a chance to talk, catch up, and have a good time.

Dinner was a large affair, and Stanley decided to make a real big deal out of it. It was fully served by the staff, with six of them serving, attending, and ferrying basically what amounted to spaghetti with two types of sauce, meat sauce and marinara sauce with meatballs and home made garlic bread on the side. Muffy had surrounded herself with Kit's friends, chatting animatedly with them, getting to know them much better, and it seemed like Muffy had really hit it off with Lilly. The two of them were giggling together like little girls. Allison was sitting with Kit and Jessie, telling them all about what Sheila and his other cousins had been up to back home, but using selective language so they didn't upset Savid or Savid's kids. She also showed off her brand new IFR rating, her temporary license. "How did you do on your check ride?" he asked.

“The examiner said I aced it,” she said with a grin. “Sheila’s already looking at planes,” she laughed. “We were thinking of a used King Air or a Cessna four hundred like yours. Both of them are pretty fast and are a comfortable flight. I wanted something cheaper, but Sheila has it in her head that she has to have the best.”

“You rode in one?”

She nodded. “The salesmale took us on a flight in the King Air,” she answered. “If we go for the King Air we have to get our multi first, so we’re leaning towards the four hundred. We could be in the air with that faster.”

“You could always get a Mooney,” Kit urged. “It’s just as fast and has retractable landing gear.”

“I’d like something with a pressurized cabin,” she said.

“Oxygen isn’t that bad,” Jessie told her. “We’ve used our oxygen a bunch of times. We use noseclamp style masks. The oxygen in the four hundred lasts six hours, and that’s almost longer than the plane can fly before it has to refuel. The only part I hate about it is the popping ears,” she giggled as she twirled pasta around her fork.

“Well, get what you feel best with, Ally, and don’t let Sheila browbeat you into it,” Kit told her. “Besides, to get to New Orleans, you don’t really need to pressurize,” he added with a smile. “You can do that at twelve thousand easy.”

“We flew it in about ninety minutes in our plane from runway to runway,” Jessie said. “That’s not bad at all.”

“Not bad at all for what, four hundred miles,” Allison agreed as she took a bite of spaghetti.

“I don’t really remember how far it is, I’d have to look it up,” Kit admitted.

After dinner, they had a wonderful time. They decided to go watch a movie up in the home theater, which had a projection screen that took up most of the wall, a DVD to projection system, Dolby 5.1 sound, and stadium style seating for 16. There were also couches and chairs along the edges of the stadium seats, and a bar in the back where a servant could make drinks, popcorn, or other snacks and serve the family as it watched the movie. Walter served popcorn and drinks as everyone watched *Iron Male*, which just *rocked* on the big screen. After the movie, they all sat around in the TV room downstairs and talked until nearly midnight, as Kit, Jessie, and Muffy told them all about everything that had happened in Boston while the gang told them all about everything that had been happening down in Austin.

At about 1:00 in the morning, Kit and Jessie finally went to bed. They undressed and slid into bed, and Jessie snuggled up to him contentedly. “It’s so nice to have all our friends here,” she said.

“I know. This place feels more like a home when it’s full of smiles and laughter. Those things were in very short supply around here when I was a kid. So, tomorrow’s the shower,” he noted. “I wonder why Sam decided not to come, since she’s coming up with Sheila and Sheila won’t be here til Friday.”

“She will be up here tomorrow,” Jessie corrected. “Sheila and the others are flying up tomorrow so they can be at the baby shower, and she volunteered to fly with the plane when it goes to Cincinnati to pick up my family on Friday. I guess so she has extra time with Ben,” she giggled.

“She’s still doing that all wrong, isn’t she?”

“Totally,” she answered with a giggle as he started to caress her back, which caused her to purr. “Ben said she calls almost every other day, and he likes her, but he just can’t trust her.”

“Well, we told her what she has to do. It’s her fault if she can’t do it.”

“Mmm,” she hummed, then her purring lulled him to sleep.

They slept in later than usual because they were awake longer than usual, and they awoke to a hurricane of activity.

As soon as they opened the door to the master bedroom, they found Sylvia standing outside with her MP-5 in her paws and loaded. She didn’t even say good morning, she simply called Nick on the radio, and Nick responded that he was on his way up.

“What’s going on, Sylvia?” Kit asked curiously as Jessie tied the waist of her sweatpants and came towards the door.

“Our trap caught a few rats last night,” she answered with a slight smile.

“Really?” he gasped.

She nodded. “Nick will explain everything, *Herr* Kit.”

Nick ran up the hallway from the central stairs and almost skidded to a halt in front of them. “Back in the room,” he said, ushering Kit, Jessie, and Sylvia into the room. He then shut the door, turned, and smiled beatifically. “We got ‘em,” he announced.

“Details, male, details!” Kit pressed.

“It’s a bit complicated,” he said, ushering them over to the living area, and they sat down as Sylvia went back to the door and brought in a pot of tea and a plate of scones which had been left for them. “Alright, here’s what happened. At about four this morning, the cameras caught four males enter the pipe. Donny was pulling camera duty, so he called it out. We scrambled a team to the entrance and took up a position to keep them from getting out alive and allowed them to advance up to the trap door. They tried it, naturally, and when they found it blocked off, they panicked. They ran back to the entrance, but then they found out they were pinned inside by six heavily armed males carrying automatic weapons, so they surrendered.”

“That’s the dusty report part of it,” Sylvia said quietly.

“Yah. We’re still questioning them, but we’ve already got more or less what we wanted. We used...direct methods to get them to talk.”

“You beat them up?”

“Oh please, furs expect that,” he snorted. “Sometimes the *threat* is far better than the *act*. We told them that if they didn’t talk, we’d kill them one by one. They didn’t believe us and stonewalled, so Sylvie and Krichek dragged one of them out and they pulled the old fake murder gag. Krichek splattered Sylvie with blood drained from the meat in the refrigerator, she fired a few shots of her pistol into the ground, and Krichek dragged the muffled prisoner away as Sylvie came back, sprayed with blood, and pointed to another prisoner and said he was next. The other three started talking *real* fast about then,” he noted dryly. “Sylvie’s such a good actress.”

“All Germans are good at acting,” she murmured.

“What were they going to do?”

Nick looked right at him. “Kill you,” he answered flatly. “You *and* Jessica. Their plan was actually pretty clever,” he said with a grim nod. “They waited until you had all your friends and guests in the house, and what they were going to do was sneak up here through the secret passage and murder both of you in your bed. Then they just sneak right back out, clear their tracks, close the trap door, and nobody knows they were ever here. The next morning, they find you dead, all our cameras show that nobody came on or off the grounds all night, and the police spend the next five years trying to figure out which of the thirty-some furs in this house was the one that killed you, because they’d be convinced that it would *have* to be someone that was in the house the night of the murders.”

Jessie’s face became horrified, and she put both paws protectively around her stomach. Kit immediately put his arm around her, and she leaned against him and held onto him, almost painfully tight.

“Now here’s where it gets interesting, mate,” Nick told him. “They aren’t mercs. They’re PPC. They’re Paladins.”

The PPC. The Protect Purity Crusade, the original terrorist organization against not just mixed breeds, but also “inferior” breeds which weren’t European in origin. They’d been around since the late 1800’s, and they’d started right here in Boston. Kit couldn’t prove it, but he was fairly certain that his family had helped start the PPC, and it was Vulpan money that funded many of their operations over the years. He knew for a fact that his father was a member of the PPC, he’d grown up listening to his father spew purist diatribe...but there was no public record anywhere that any Vulpan was in any way connected to a radical and unpopular organization like the PPC. The Paladins were a radical wing of the PPC, and they were

the ones most responsible for the lynchings and murders of mixed breeds, sympathizers, and inferiors. They believed that there was a war coming against the pure by the mongrels, so many of them had paramilitary training. An operation like this, infiltrating the Vulpan house and murdering a breed traitor and his mongrel wife, would be something most of them would drool over.

“Paladins,” Kit growled. “Did you find out who ordered it?”

“They won’t say. The one thing they do say is that it wasn’t the Paladins that sent them, they all say that they were hired by someone else. Some guy paid them ten thousand each, told them about the tunnel, and told them when and how to do it. Their screw-up was coming early to make sure the information was good, which left evidence that Jessie discovered. But, since they’d get to kill a breed traitor and a mixed, they were all for it.”

“I thought the Paladins were all thrown in jail twenty years ago,” Jessie said fearfully.

“Oh, they’re still around, but now they’re all militia wingnuts, training out in the woods for the Breed Wars they say are coming.”

“I don’t believe they tried to kill us. They tried to kill my baby,” Jessie said weakly, then she burst into tears.

Kit held her close and rocked her gently, but his eyes were cold and ominous when he stared at Nick over Jessie’s head. “Call Vil.”

“I already did. She’s on her way. I didn’t give her specifics, I just told her that something serious happened and she needed to come right away.”

“I want to know who did this. And I want their heads hanging on my wall by dinnertime,” he said in a deadly voice.

“We’re working on it, mate, we’re working on it.”

“Are those Paladins still here?”

He nodded. “We have ‘em handcuffed to the back gate with six guards on them,” he answered. “Now that we’ve milked all the information we could get out of them, we were about to call the police and have them come arrest them.”

“Don’t do that until Vil gets here,” he said. “Who else knows what happened?”

“Nobody I know of,” Nick answered. “We’ve kept them all back at the back gate, and nobody’s been down there.” He looked down. “Think we’ll give you two a few minutes,” he said, nodding towards Sylvia. The two of them left the room and closed the door, and that allowed Kit to comfort Jessie as only he knew how.

So close. It was almost frightening how close they came, and how close that scheme came to working. If it hadn’t been for Jessie’s compulsive neatness, that secret tunnel would have been undiscovered, and odds were they’d both be dead. They would have never known what hit them, and whoever came up with the scheme was right. With the cameras locking down the entrances, the police would have been absolutely convinced that the murderer was someone in the manor overnight, and right now that was some 40 or so when one added up the staff, the guards, and the guests. It would have been like some twisted real-life game of *Clue*, the police scouring one of the largest manors in New England to try to discover who killed the Vulpans and how it was done. They’d spend *years* trying to figure out who killed Kit and Jessie Vulpan, and would either abandon the case or

railroad an innocent fur to save face. And it was all stopped because of dumb luck, because Jessie decided to sweep the floor of the secret passage.

Kit let Jessie cry it out for a little bit, rocking her and stroking her hair, then he held her close and kissed her on the top of her head, between her ears. “You saved us, baby,” he told her quietly. “You saved our lives, and you saved Laura. *Thank you.*”

She laughed wryly, then sniffed. “I certainly didn’t mean to do it,” she told him.

“That doesn’t make me any less thankful. You saved my life by getting me off the streets, and now you save us all. You truly are my guardian angel, Jessica Desdemona Vulpan, and I love you.”

“I love you too Kit, and I won’t leave you, no matter how scared I am,” she told him.

“It’ll never happen again, Jessie. That is my solemn promise to you. I’m about tired of my family. It’s about time to do something about this, once and for all.”

“I won’t say no, Kit,” she said quaveringly, still clutching to him with her claws dug into his back and side.

Just about when she got back most of her composure, Vil stormed into the room awkwardly on her casted leg. “Dear God, are you two okay?” she asked as they stood up and folded her into a group hug.

“We’re alright, sis,” Kit answered, holding both her and Jessie tightly. “I’m glad you’re here. It’s time to put a stop to this.”

“Oh, that’s *exactly* what’s going to happen,” Vil said darkly. “I was mildly amused when I thought they took a shot at me, but they *undeniably* tried to kill you, brother. And that’s the one thing they *never* should have done!” she declared hotly. “I think it’s time to stop playing games and go right for the throat. I was hoping we could work this out and return the family to normal after we punished the elders, but no way now. There’s no chance in hell the family can stay unified after this, so the gloves are off.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Kit agreed. “Have your lawyers draw up the papers, and also draw me up a will that gives everything to Jessie and stipulates that Jessie has the right to assume all the privileges I have in our agreement. That means that *Jessie* can take the family fortune if I die. The sheer threat of that should be too much for them.”

“I have a different idea, brother,” she told him. “I guarantee you, they’ll never bother you again. I’m afraid me and Kit are going to be out for a while, sis. We have to go out and do a few things, and unfortunately they have to be done right now. We can’t wait. I promise I’ll have him home as quick as I can.”

“That’s alright,” Jessie said, taking in a deep, cleansing breath. “I think I’ll go sit with Rick and Martha for a while. They always make me feel safe.”

“Nick,” Vil barked.

“Yah, Miss Vil?”

“Take those four down to the sheriff’s office and explain what happened,” she ordered. “I’m not going to need them. *But*, if they’re Paladins, that means they have the shield. Take them from them and bring them to me. I’m going to need them.”

“I already took ‘em. I’ll bring ‘em to you right now.”

“Good. Make it very *public*, Nick. I want everyone in the world to know that someone tried to kill my brother’s family.”

“I can do that,” he said with a nod.

“What about that Jahal fur?” Jessie asked suddenly. “Maybe that’s why he’s here, to find out what happened after those, those males tried to kill us.”

“That’s entirely possible,” Nick nodded. “Sylvie, stay with Jessie at all times.”

“*Ja*,” she nodded.

Nick brought the shields to them, which were four very small silver shields with a *PC* etched in the face on two sides of a sword, which stood for the Paladins of the Crusade. Vil clutched them in her paw with a dark expression, then stood up. “Excuse us for a while, Jessie dear, we’re going to go kick our uncle’s ass.”

“Let me get dressed,” Kit said. “I don’t think I want to show up wearing a bathrobe.”

“You have five minutes,” she said tersely.

Kit threw on jeans and a tee shirt, and Vil hustled him out of the manor and into her limo. Stav and Marcus were with them, Stav out of his cast already and driving as they pulled out. “Where are we going?” Kit asked curiously.

“Swan Cove,” she answered shortly, her face still pinched with barely contained fury.

“I had a feeling you were going to say that,” he breathed.

It took them about five minutes to get to Swan Cove from Stonebrook, even though the two manors were only about a mile apart. Swan Cove, unlike Stonebrook, was only about a quarter mile from the main road, but there was nothing else on that road, just like Stonebrook Drive. They reached the gates of Swan Cove, which were almost identical to the gates of Stonebrook instead they were made of black metal, and the guard stopped them outside. “I’m afraid nobody’s being permitted inside right now, madam,” he said apologetically.

“If you don’t open that gate *right now*, I’ll have one of my panthers open it for you,” Vil said in a tone so cold that it even made Kit shiver.

“Miss Vulpan!” the guard gasped in shock.

“Marcus, open the gate. If Danvers tries to stop you, break his arms,” Vil commanded.

The guard Danvers was honestly at a loss, standing there in confusion as Marcus got out of the car, came around it, and bodily took the remote for the gate from the guard’s belt. He pressed the button, and the gates of Swan Cove began to open smoothly.

“We’ll keep the remote for now, Danvers, because I don’t want anyone disturbing us. We’ll give it back to you when we leave.”

“C-Can I at least warn the house you’re coming?”

“Oh, you do that,” she said in a dangerous hiss. “I want them to know I’m coming.”

Kit had never been to Swan Cove before, and he hoped he never would again. It was a large mansion comprised of a single three story house without wings that had about fifteen bedrooms in it, as well as many of the perks and luxuries one would expect on a manor of a male worth hundreds of millions of dollars. The manor had a grand front entrance and a smaller side entrance with a drive-through garage, much like Stonebrook's, built on the west side of the house. That was where Stav drove them, into the garage, where a black-suited fox was running up from the door to the house as he stopped the limo. Vil didn't even wait for Stav to get out and open the door for her, she opened it herself and swung her legs out, then stood up. "Mistress Vil, we had no idea you were coming!" the male said, who was the chief butler of Swan Cove whose name Kit couldn't recall. He used to work at Stonebrook, though, Kit remembered his face from his childhood.

"I'd be surprised if you did," Vil growled. "Get my uncle. If he's not awake, wake him up. I want to see him in the parlor *right now*."

"Master Vulpan is in the sun room eating breakfast," the butler said uncertainly.

"That's fine, I'll go there," she said, hobbling towards the door as Kit got out of the limo, and he and the panthers hurried after the surprisingly fast vixen.

The sun room was an extension built into the back of the house, facing south, that was three walls of glass. It held a table and a sitting area for eating or relaxing, and Uncle Zach was there eating dinner with his wife, Alicia, and their three teenage children, David, Joshua, and Crystal. Zach looked quite shocked to see Vil, then he took on a dark scowl when he saw Kit come in behind her, throwing down his fork and moving to stand. But Vil got to the table before he managed it, and as he put both paws down on

the table to stand up, Vil tossed the four shields down onto the table, a vicious look on her face.

“They *failed*,” she hissed. “And now you have pissed me off beyond any form or measure, *uncle*. I was willing to give you the benefit of the doubt when my chopper crashed, I waited to see what the investigation said before pinning any blame to you, but there is *no doubt* about this one.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about!” he said indignantly.

“It’s just too bad for you that Kit knows Stonebrook even better than you do, *Uncle*, he set a trap for your little Paladin assassins and he *caught* them. They’re being shipped off to the sheriff’s office right now. We interrogated them, they confessed, and as soon as I track them back to you, you can kiss every penny you have goodbye.”

“Now see here, Vil, I have no idea what you’re talking about!” he said in outrage, jumping to his feet.

“I’m sure you don’t,” Vil hissed. “I’ll make this very short and very plain, because every second I look at you, I have to resist the urge to order Marcus take his gun out and shoot you like a dog. Before I go on my honeymoon, I expect your resignation on my desk and a notarized deed showing that you have signed over your share of Stonebrook to Kit,” she grated coldly. “If you fail to do that, when I get back from my honeymoon, I will *destroy* you. I’ll take every penny you have and throw you out the front gate of Swan Cove *naked*, you and your entire family,” she promised with burning eyes. “I’ll enjoy every minute of it, too. Kit was too soft-hearted when he gave you back your money after the trial, but I’m going to rectify that little problem. When you’re flipping burgers at McDonald’s to scrape up enough money to pay for a one room hovel down in the projects, you

won't cause us any more problems." She crossed her arms beneath her breasts and glared at Zach. "And if you *do* obey me, I might be inclined to be merciful and leave you with ten million dollars. I figure if you invest it right, you can live without any needs for the rest of your life and not have to work, but you won't have enough money to cause any mischief. But the rest of your hundred million, uncle? Your houses, your cars, your private jet, your yacht? *Gone*. I will break you over my knee, and when this is over, you'll regret trying to kill my brother, sister-in-law, and their unborn daughter every day for the rest of your life."

She collected up the four shields from the table and gripped them in her closed fist. "Your reckoning is here, *Uncle*. Take a good look around, because you won't be in this house by this time next month."

She then turned and did as good as job as she could to storm out of the room, given she was hobbling on her walking cast. Kit gave Zach and his family, who were all staring with open-mouthed shock, a cold glare, then he turned and swept from the room with the panthers following him.

"Well, that was brief," Kit said quietly to her.

"I wasn't joking. I almost ordered Marcus to shoot Zach."

"We can go back in there," he urged.

She laughed darkly. "No, I need answers, and now Zach will be a good boy and help get them for me," she told him. "If he did it, he'll clear out his bank accounts and run like hell, which just means I get to entertain myself with tracking him down and ruining him the way I'm ruining Cybil. If he really *didn't* do it, which is always a possibility given he didn't sabotage my chopper either, he'll be hell-bound and determined to find out who did, to clear his name and prevent me from coming down on him like the sword of

Damocles. But when I find out who did this,” she said, still clutching the shields in her paw, so tightly that her paw was trembling. “I may do to them what they tried to do to you.”

When they were back in the limo, Marcus looked back at them. “Where to, Miss Vil?” he asked.

“Take us to the office,” she declared, picking up her Blackberry from the tray in the back of the car. “I’m going to have the legal team there to meet us.”

“Let’s not stay out too long, Vil, I don’t want to leave Jessie alone,” Kit reminded her.

“Well, we’ll do what you need to do and I’ll send you back,” she said. “You’re going to sign a few papers and let me get busy.” She dialed the phone and put it up to her face. “Uncle Brian. Someone tried to kill Kit and Jessie,” she declared bluntly. “No, they didn’t manage anything. Are you in the office? Good. Call the legal department and have them send Smith and Jensen up to my office. Alright, see you there.” She killed the call and looked up. “Marcus, when we get to the office, I want you to take pictures of the shields, then take them down to the sheriff’s office and turn them in. If they ask why, just tell them that I needed them and that’s the end of it. He won’t dare gainsay me.”

“I’ll handle it, Miss Vil,” he nodded. “I take it you want me to look into these would-be assassins?”

“I want to know what their grandmothers made them for breakfast when they visited them,” she said darkly.

“I’ll have it ready for you by tomorrow morning,” he promised.

Inside the Vulpan compound, it was both busy and standing still. Kit could see from the shocked and fearful expressions of those around them as they moved through the building that the attack had become public knowledge, and Vil's dark scowl kept anyone from approaching or doing anything except look very, very busy. They went to Vil's office, which was a large and warmly decorated suite with an office with a glass desk overlooking the bay, and a kind of one room apartment off from it where Vil could take a nap, rest, watch TV, or whatever she wanted to do. A male fox and a gray fox vixen were standing by the office door when they arrived, and the two followed them in when Vil's secretary opened the door for her. "Alright, let's get down to business," Vil said curtly as she hobbled towards her desk. "I want you two to draw up a deed transfer and courier it to my uncle Zach, which signs over his part of Stonebrook. Make simple, but iron-clad," she told them as she got around her desk and eased down into her chair. While you're at it, draft a letter of resignation for Zach and deliver it with the deed."

"Then it's true?" the vixen said in surprise and a little fear.

"I'm not sure what you heard, but someone tried to kill Kit," she told them. "They hired purist Paladin bastards to try to invade Stonebrook and murder them. I *will* find out who did it, and when I do, they'll regret it," she growled.

"Are, are you going through with your plans for the wedding?" the male asked.

She nodded. "I'm still going on my honeymoon as well. I can take care of everything over the phone. Which is why we're here. I want you two to draw up a memo stating that while I'm gone, *Kit* will serve as the temporary chairman. I want to give him proxy to vote for me, and the ability to call

meetings. Uncle Zach's suspension is over next week, while I'm on my honeymoon, and if he doesn't resign I want him to be so afraid to show up he won't even bother. Putting Kit in my chair while I'm on my honeymoon will do that nicely."

"But I'm not leaving Stonebrook," he protested.

"You don't have to leave Stonebrook. There are no board meetings scheduled while I'm on my honeymoon, hell, four board members are going on vacation at the same time, and as long as you're sitting in the chair, nobody *else* can call them either. Only you will have that power. But, you'll have that option if I think it's necessary. You can call a meeting and just listen in over the phone." She looked at the two foxes. "I want that proxy statement on my desk in ten minutes," she demanded. "Kit needs to go back to Stonebrook, and he can't leave until he signs that proxy."

"Give us fifteen minutes," the male said.

Kit could do nothing but pace back and forth across her Oriental carpet, still trying to calm down. It hadn't quite sunk in yet that someone had tried to kill him, but he wasn't worried about himself. All his worry was for Jessie. She was upset and distraught over this, and he wanted to be at home, caring for her, tending her, comforting her. She was his life, and he couldn't stand the idea that she was unhappy. But, this also had to be done. If Vil really was going to go on with her plans, which he knew was necessary and he didn't blame her, then she had to have someone she could trust completely with the proxy power of CEO.

"Relax, bro," she told him, then she grunted. "Though you certainly have every reason to be upset."

“I knew this would happen,” he blurted. “The second I came up here, I knew this would happen. I knew someone would take a shot at me, and I feel sick that Jessie had to see it. See my family at its worst. God, why wouldn’t she go home!”

“Because she can’t live without you, bro,” Vil said calmly. “She loves you. Now sit down.”

He sighed and did as she asked, sitting in the chair in front of her desk. “I hope she’s not too upset.”

“She’ll feel much better when you get home. And tell her that the baby shower will be held right on schedule. We’re not letting those bastards scare us into doing anything differently. We’re having the shower, and tomorrow, I’m getting married.”

The door opened, and Kendall’s entire family rushed in, as well as their friend Charlie. Instead of coming to Vil, however, they all came to Kit and offered him paws, patted him on the back. “Are you and your wife alright, son?” Winston asked in sincere concern.

“Shaken, but alright,” he answered. “Thank you.”

“We Brightons don’t take kindly to someone taking a swipe at our family. And you *are* our family now, son. What are you doing about this, Vil?”

“I have furs working on it now,” she answered. “I’m going to find out who did this, and when I do,” she said, trailing off ominously.

“If you need any help, dovey, we’re here,” Winston told her seriously. “We have some furs here in America, and they’re at your disposal.”

“I might take you up on that, old male,” she answered. “There is one thing you can do for me.”

“What is that?”

“When my lawyers get back with some papers Kit’s gonna sign, he needs to go home. Can you take him? I don’t want him to be alone.”

“Harry, Mike, you two and Charlie take care of it. Assure little Jessie that she’s well cared for, and while you’re at Stonebrook, talk to the guards and get an idea of what happened.”

“Sure thing, old male,” Harry nodded.

“No problem, Mister B,” Charlie nodded, his ears bobbing in a slightly funny manner. “I like being where the femmes are anyway, and there are a few lookers at Stonebrook.”

“Don’t make me send you home, Charlie.”

“I’ll behave. Mostly,” he grinned.

The two lawyers hurried back in with a folder. “We have it all, Miss Vulpan,” the male said.

“Alright, bro, let’s get you back home.”

“Back to Stonebrook, at any rate,” he grunted.

Chapter 37

Kit *liked* the Brightons.

They had escorted him home in a company limousine, and he'd had a much better chance to talk to them than he'd had before. Their initial meeting was busy, and the wedding rehearsals didn't really give him a chance to talk to them because he and Jessie arrived literally right as they started, they practiced the ceremony two or three times, then they were immediately taken home so as to minimize their vulnerability. They hadn't had much of a chance to really talk, but when the two younger Brightons and Charlie Duke went home with him, they had a chance to talk in the limo, and he liked what he heard.

For one, all three of the Brighton boys had similar personality traits that Kit felt were admirable. All three were intelligent, a little playful, didn't panic, and what impressed him the most, they were tight-knit. Kendall, Harry, and Michael enjoyed a good joke, enjoyed a fine glass of wine, and enjoyed the company of friends and family. Their family wasn't that large, with just one uncle on their father's side and an uncle and an aunt on their mother's side, which was a strange concept to Kit. His mother had been an only child, and her parents had died before she did, her father of a heart attack and her mother of cancer. Kit had no family on the Stockton side that wasn't two or three places removed, a few distant cousins and a great uncle, but they had little to do with the Vulpans. The Stocktons were as distant with each other as the Vulpans were, so his great uncle and third cousins on the Stockton side really didn't care all that much about Vil and

Kit. But it wasn't like that in the Brighton family. Their mother, Abigail Mallory, and her family were very involved in the Brighton family, many of the Mallorys employed by Brighton Industries. They had grown up in a tightly knit family, and that induced into them a powerful family loyalty that had nothing to do with money and everything to do with love.

Kit could be a little jealous of that.

The attack on Kit and Jessie had outraged the Brightons, who considered Vil and her family to be part of the Brighton clan, and their initial response was to fold around them, rally around them, and both reassure them that everything was going to be alright and also protect them. Their smiles were earnest, their pats on his shoulder were sincere, and they made him feel much better by the time they got home.

Thank God that Jessie felt better too. She met him in the courtyard and gave him a crushing hug, but she looked much more composed now. She also hugged the Brighton boys and Charlie. "Dad sent us to keep you company and make you feel better, Jessica," Harry told her.

"So, Mike will get the electric razor, I'll get the silk, and Harry will get the handcuffs," Charlie said with a roguish smile.

"He said make *her* feel better," Michael said calmly when Jessie gave him a surprised look.

"Oh. Oh, right then," he said lightly, which made Jessie giggle. "So, let's go inside and see the decorations for your baby shower, Jessie. By the by, where are those smashingly lovely bridesmaids?"

"Suzy's at home, Sonya's at her apartment, and Muffy's in the TV room," she answered.

“Oh, good, at least there’s one girl here I can hit on without running from an angry husband,” Charlie said brightly, which made Jessie erupt into glorious laughter.

Kit felt *much* better about the Brightons being there now.

They went to the TV room and joined Muffy, who crushed Kit in a fierce hug when he came in, as well as Rick, Martha, Allison, and Pat. “God was I worried!” she told him. “Nobody woke me up! I heard about it all just a few minutes ago!”

“So did we,” Rick said, standing up.

“Guys, this is Rick, my boss at the magazine, his wife Martha, Terry’s girlfriend Allison, and Pat, one of the researchers from the magazine,” Kit introduced.

The Brightons and Charlie introduced themselves around, Charlie spending an inordinate amount of time trying to charm Allison, without much success, then Stanley and Dee brought them all tea, scones, and coffee for Rick and Martha. “Thanks, Stan. Is the staff okay?”

“A bit shaken, Master Kit, but otherwise alright,” he answered. “We’re just happy you and Mistress Jessie are safe.”

“We’re okay,” Jessie told him.

“I’ve already called a contractor to come and look into sealing off that tunnel,” Stanley informed him. “I was of a mind to seal it at the pipe side but leave the passage itself intact.”

“It would be too hard to do it any other way,” Kit agreed. “We can just seal the pipe and the little room beyond with a few tons of cement, and

nothing else will need to be done. We can just leave the trap door as is, because it won't matter. I'm sure we'll notice someone with a jackhammer trying to get in."

"Truly," Stanley nodded.

"Well, son, you promised us excitement when we got here. I'm not sure this is the kind of excitement I had in mind," Rick said dryly.

"Us either," Jessie nodded.

"Vil said to warn you that the baby shower is still on schedule," Kit remembered. "She didn't mention the last wedding rehearsal, but I get the feeling we'll do that too."

"You sure you're up to it, Jessie dear?" Martha asked.

"If we change our plans, they win," she said with a raised chin. "I won't let them scare me away, Martha. We'll have the shower at four just like we planned, and I'm sure Vil still plans on getting married tomorrow."

"That she does, dove," Harry nodded. "One o'clock in that ungodly Catholic cathedral," he said with a shudder. "Why Kenny caved in on an Anglican wedding is beyond me."

"Vil pretty much well owns Kenny, I noticed," Charlie said with a wicked little smile. "I'm going to have so much fun rubbing his nose in it for the next ten years." He looked lightly at Allison. "I'm going to have plenty of reasons to come to America, I see."

"Down, boy," Michael chided.

"You can let him dream," Allison murmured, which made Kit splutter and Jessie giggle.

Though Kit and Jessie both were a little out of sorts, the gang and the Brightons calmed them down a great deal with friendly talk and stories traded between the Brightons and the Austin gang about daily life. The Brightons explained what they did in the company and Charlie told them about his years as a Royal Marine, then he winked at Allison and offered to show them all his scar. More and more of the gang joined them as the morning wore on, until every seat was taken and a few were standing around. Savid and Nawa were absent, with their kids at the pool. Kit could feel Jessie relax as she was surrounded by friends and family, until her smiles were sincere and her manner was again kind and gentle. He could feel the underlying tension in her shoulders when he touched her, but he could also tell that the Brightons had accomplished their mission and had made Jessie relax quite a bit.

Vil returned about two hours after they did, hobbling in with Winston Brighton, Kendall, and Brian and Ruth Vulpan. “Alright, everyone!” she boomed. “It’s our last wedding rehearsal, then we come back and have Jessie’s shower! So, wedding party, let’s go!”

“Brusque, isn’t she?” Charlie noted.

“Usually,” Kit nodded. “Feel up to a trip to the Holy Cross, pretty kitty?”

“I’ll be alright. I just hope Sam and Sheila get here before the shower,” she fretted.

“They’re in the air right now and on the way,” Vil assured her. “So is the Party Pack.”

Brian stopped them long enough to let Ruth give Jessie a reassuring hug. “We hope you’re okay, honey,” she said in a sincere voice. “When

Brian told me what happened, I couldn't believe it!"

"I'm alright," she said. "I'm just a little shocked, that's all. I thought all this kind of stuff wasn't supposed to happen anymore."

"Well, it'll never happen to you again," Ruth declared. "You go do your rehearsal, and we'll talk when you get home, dear."

"Umm...alright," she said, a bit uncertainly.

After they got loaded up in the limos, Kit and Jessie were seated with Vil, Kendall, and Winston, while the other sons rode in the other limo with Muffy. That limo was going to detour to pick up Sonya, and their limo was going straight to the church. Two cars would escort them, holding Nick, Sylvia, Krichek, and Donny, who would make sure everyone was safe.

Vil was on her phone, and she had a strange look on her face. "You're sure?" she asked intently. "You're absolutely sure?" She frowned. "Alright. Find him. Right now." She took the phone and put it on the little armrest beside her, then sighed. "Steve didn't show up for work this morning."

"Steve? Who's Steve?" Jessie asked.

"Zach's eldest son," Vil replied. "He wasn't at work today, and if he's not at work, I want him found *now*. Either he's skipping work and has no idea what's going on or he knows what's going on and he doesn't want to come in."

"Have I met him?"

"No, sis, you haven't," she answered. "He's supporting his father."

"Could he..." Jessie trailed off.

“It’s possible, I suppose,” Vil shrugged. “He’s as rabid a purist as his father, but he’s a lemming. He works a black hole job just so he can claim he works in the shipyard without doing any real work, but he just does what he’s told. He’s never done a single thing I can remember.”

“What do you mean?”

“He just drifts,” she answered. “Doesn’t take any initiative, doesn’t do anything. He just sits behind a desk and plays World of Warcraft all day, then goes home and cheats on his wife on a daily basis. Then again, she cheats on him because he cheats on her,” Vil mused. “He avoids his wife so completely that he still doesn’t have any kids.”

“That’s almost sad,” Jessie noted. “Who’s he married to?”

“I understand why he does it,” Vil said darkly. “His wife is a total bitch.”

“God, is she,” Kit affirmed.

“She’s related to Alicia through marriage, so that’s probably why,” Vil chuckled humorlessly. “Gloria Morgan of the venerable Morgan family. As in JP Morgan and Morgan Chase. They got rich in banking and stocks. Her sister is married to Alicia’s cousin.”

“That was a real fur?”

Vil nodded. “JP was a real fox,” she answered.

“Aye, he was a nasty brute,” Winston chimed in. “I met him once, when I was but a tyke and he was already sliding into his dotage.”

“Was that before or after you invented the wheel, old male?” Michael asked with aplomb.

“Just before we discovered fire, lad,” he answered with a cheeky grin. “Back when dirt was new.”

Understandably, the wedding rehearsal was a bit tense. The Archbishop had heard about the attack, and he looked honestly surprised when they arrived, and hurried out to the limos. “Are you sure you want to do this today, Miss Vulpan?” he asked her with honest concern. “I would completely understand if you wish to cancel today, maybe even postpone the wedding.”

“Nothing changes,” she said bluntly.

“Very well then. And Kit, Jessica, I thank God you are unhurt. When we heard about it on the news, we were shocked. Just shocked!”

“Thank you, Father,” Kit said, shaking his paw.

“It’s very kind of you, Father,” Jessie said as he patted her on the arm.

“Now, for my own nerves’ sake, let us go inside and get the rehearsal under way. I’m sure that you would much rather be tracking down the criminal who perpetrated this outrage.”

“I have furs working on it right now, Father,” Vil told him as she allowed him to help her towards the side door of the cathedral. “So if we’re interrupted during the rehearsal, I’d like a little leeway.”

“Of course, my child,” he smiled. “I certainly understand. Where is the rest of the wedding party?”

“On the way, the other limo had to detour to pick up Sonya.”

“What an interesting young femme,” the Archbishop noted. “I’ve never seen a lady quite so tall as her.”

“Don’t get on the basketball court with her, Father,” Vil warned.
“Priest or no priest, she’ll run you over if you try to block the lane.”

The Archbishop laughed lightly. “I’m afraid my basketball days are over, Miss Vil. But I still play a mean game of backgammon.”

“She’d probably run you over anyway.”

Archbishop O’Malley laughed delightedly.

The rehearsal went smoothly, because after four days, everyone knew what to do. The ceremony would be a mixture of Catholic tradition and a few Protestant tweaks. They would greet the guests at the door as was proper, and follow the Archbishop down the aisle, but Vil would be on Winston’s arm rather than with Kendall. Winston would give her away at the dais and then take his seat, and then it would be more or less completely Catholic up to the end. Instead of the wedding party proceeding in reverse order, since they didn’t enter in Catholic tradition, Vil and Kendall would go first with the wedding party behind them in pairs. Kit and Suzy would be immediately behind Vil and Kendall, then Jessie with Michael, Sonya with Harry, and Muffy with Charlie would bring up the rear. They practiced it three times as the wedding workers worked in a frenzy to install the floral arrangements and other decorations for the wedding, but they were nearly done. The chapel too was decorated in Vil’s favorite, white and yellow roses, with white and red buntings and ribbons decorating the walls and pews, and the workers only had the copious amounts of floral arrangements to put up before they were finished.

By the end of the rehearsal, the news was now completely out that there was an attempt on the life of a Vulpan, and the news crews were out in force and trying to hunt down any Vulpan they could find. One news van,

probably working a hunch, showed up at the church and was turned away at the door while they were doing their second run through the ceremony. The church workers stalled the news crew while the Archbishop escorted them out to their limos after the rehearsal. “Remember, try to be here at least an hour before the ceremony,” O’Malley called as he shook Vil’s paw. “And try not to be too nervous,” he added with a smile.

“Why would we be nervous?” Kendall asked airily, then he held up a paw that was shaking violently, which made most of them giggle and chortle.

“We’re all going to the same place, so just follow us,” Vil told the second limo driver and Suzy, who had come in her own car. “It’s about time for Jessie’s shower.”

Nick and Sylvia led them out in their car, and they were on their way back. Kit saw the news crew rushing towards the side lot as the limos pulled out onto the street, and the cameramale swung his camera up and took a shot of the two limos and two escorting cars pass by.

“Well, Vil, you have less than a day to make your peace,” Kendall told her with a smile. “Cause you’re gonna be my property.”

“Oh really,” Vil said mildly.

“Yah. We’ll have you pregnant and in the kitchen where a femme belongs in no time.”

Jessie erupted into laughter when Winston gave Kendall a cool look. “You’re not supposed to tell her that until *after* the ceremony, Kenny,” he said with a straight face.

“Eh, she already said it’s gonna happen no matter what, so why not give her the truth now?”

“Jessie, do you still have that frilly pink apron?” Vil asked.

“Umm, yeah, but it’s at home. Why?”

“Send it up here. I’m going to educate Ken on a few things. We’ll see who’s wearing it after a month.”

Jessie giggled, and Kit put an arm around her. He was so grateful to them all for making her feel better, helping her get over the trauma of the morning. Everyone was doing their damndest to make Jessie feel comfortable, and he was very happy that she was getting back to normal.

“When you get him in that apron, snap a pic, Vil,” Charlie said, “and send it to me. I know quite a few males who would love to see Kendall Brighton in an apron.”

Sam, Kevin, and Sheila were indeed there when they got back to Stonebrook, since they met them in the courtyard. Sam crushed Jessie in a powerful hug, and blurted “we didn’t know what happened until we got up here, it was on the news on the radio. Are you alright?”

“I’m okay. Feeling a lot better now than I did this morning,” she answered. “Everyone’s being so wonderful!”

“Well, don’t worry too much, Jessie,” Sheila said as she hugged her. “We’re gonna find whoever did it and rip his tail off and stuff it down his throat.”

“Too tame,” Charlie said. “Besides, some of us don’t have enough tail for that to be much of a threat.”

“Sam, Sheila, this is the Brighton family and their family friend. Ken you know. This is his father Winston, his brothers Harry and Michael, and Charlie Duke.”

“That’s *sir* Charlie Duke,” he grinned, sidling up to Sheila. “I must say, the Vulpan family has its share of lookers. You’re Sheila, right?”

“That’s right. And you’re cute,” she said in a light manner.

Charlie smiled brightly. “Well, why don’t we go talk about that after the shower?”

“Sheila,” Kit called warningly.

“What? It’s not like he’s a relative or anything,” she protested. “I’ve never done an English bunny before,” she said, fixing a predatory look at Charlie.

Charlie actually looked a little uncertain of himself as he stepped back to allow Harry and Michael to greet Sheila.

Kit took Charlie aside as they walked towards the house. “I’d be careful with Sheila.”

“I’m just bantering.”

“She’s not,” he said bluntly. “So tread lightly, and say nothing you won’t back up.”

“She’s not, eh?” he said, glancing back at her.

“I warned you,” Kit said simply, then went back to his wife.

Sheila didn’t just bring Sam and Kevin and Jessie’s family. Lupe came with her, and Janet came on a commercial flight scheduled to arrive at the

same time, so she caught a ride with Sheila.

Rather quickly, the femmes swept Jessie up and spirited her away to the sun room, Kit's favorite room in the manor, for her shower, while the males gathered in the TV room and talked, mainly about the attack that morning. Mike, Barry, Pat, Rick, and Kevin looked a little uncomfortable being surrounded by powerful males like the Vulpans and the Brightons, so they were mostly silent and just listened. They discussed it seriously and at some length, then discussed what should be done to find out who did it. Brian was with them, and he pointed out the one glaring truth that made it plain what whoever did it was a Vulpan. "Whoever organized this knew about something that *nobody* else in this manor knew about," he said simply. "So that leaves just a pawful of furs who could have done this. That fur has an understanding of the manor far beyond even furs who have lived here their entire lives, like Stanley, Clancy, and Dee."

"That brings up a point," Winston said. "From what Vil told me, the Vulpans aren't the only ones who have lived in this manor for long periods. It's possible it could be a servant. Have you done anything to anger any of your staff, Kit?"

"Not that I know of," he answered. "But if there's anyone in the PPC on the staff, then me marrying Jessie was all it took."

"The servants would certainly have enough money to pay forty thousand dollars for a hit," Brian grunted. "We pay our servants handsomely for their work and for their silence. I think the most junior member of my staff makes thirty thousand a year. My chief butler makes a hundred thousand."

"As do we. They deserve it for putting up with us," Kendall chuckled.

“We’ve already thought of that,” Nick said. “I’ve got some mates digging through both the Vulpan family and through anyone who either lived or worked here at Stonebrook for more than five weeks, looking for anything that might connect them to the attack. That’s a lot of blokes, but I have a lot of mates.”

“Being thorough means you don’t have to go back and do it again,” Winston nodded in appreciation.

“What did the attackers have to say?” Brian asked Nick.

“Typical chaff, Mister Vulpan,” he answered. “They didn’t know the name of the fur who hired them, got their money through a wire transfer and instructions emailed over the internet. We’ve already tracked that down,” he noted, taking a paper out of his pocket. “The money was wired from a front bank in the Azores receiving an internet order to do so that originated from Denver, Colorado, and the instructions were emailed from an internet café in France. Nice and spread out, making it hard to track it down.”

“Front bank?” Harry asked.

“A bank that only exists on the internet,” Nick answered. “Like PayPal. They’re used by quite a few criminal organizations. They have official licensing and such, but since they only operate over the internet, they’re hard to track down business done through them. The Azores is famous for these things, since their licensing requirements and regulation is basically nil. Using internet front banks is the new way to launder money.”

A light went on in Kit’s head. “I wonder if that extra money that was in the Stonebrook accounts found its way to the Azores,” he said suddenly.

“We already thought of that, Kit,” Nick told him. “My mates are digging as we speak. It was more than forty thousand that was in the accounts, though. According to what Stan told me, there was excess of two million dollars extra in the Stonebrook accounts.”

“Well, that could still have something to do with it,” Winston noted. “I know a few furs in France. I think I’ll have that café checked out and find out who sent that email.”

“I have a few friends on the net in my line of work,” Mike said tentatively. “A couple of them are hackers. They’re fairly good at tracking things down online. I could ask them for a few favors.”

“Go for it, mate,” Nick chuckled. “This isn’t about a turf war. The more we have looking for the answers, the better chance we have of finding them.”

“Let me go jump online and send a few messages.”

“Here, come with me, I’ll give you the details they’ll need to start lookin’,” Nick said, and the two left the room.

They continued the discussion, but without much more progress, as they basically just rehashed the details over and over. About two hours after they started, the femmes returned, and they all looked quite happy. “It must have been a good shower,” Winston noted as Jessie gave Kit a hug and a nuzzle.

“It was wonderful!” Jessie said. “And the girls didn’t go crazy with presents!” she laughed.

All the girls were there, he saw. Bess, Mary, Lynn, Angela, and Joy had arrived and attended the shower, along with Lilly, Denise, Elly, Allison,

Sam, Sheila, and Martha.

“Well, Jessie certainly won’t need to *buy* anything for Laura,” Vil chuckled as she hobbled in. “And she got the baby seat for the plane too, just like she wanted.”

“We got *four* baby seats,” Jessie laughed ruefully. “One for each car and one for the plane.”

“And just about everything else she needs for Laura,” Sheila added.

“Well, that’s what baby showers are all about,” Winston nodded.

“It was great!” Jessie said. “I even got a surprise!”

“What surprise?”

“I think she means us,” a voice came behind them.

Kit looked and saw the Williams family, John, Hannah, Jenny, and Ben, standing there.

Kit laughed. “I thought you weren’t coming until tomorrow!” he said, hugging Jenny.

“It was all cloak and dagger so Jessie didn’t know we were coming,” Jenny winked. “Vil was even lying to *you* to keep the secret from her.”

“Mean sister!” Kit laughed, pointing at her.

“It worked, didn’t it?” she smiled in reply.

“Do you really think I’d miss my daughter’s first baby shower, Kit?” Hannah said archly as he hugged her in greeting. “Now that the shower is over, you can explain what happened this morning.”

“You deserve that much,” Vil told her as Kit shook paws with John and Ben. “But first, let’s introduce everyone. Ken, Winston, guys, this is Jessie’s family. John and Hannah Williams, and their children Jenny and Ben. Guys, these are the Brightons. Winston, my fiancée Kendall, Harry, Michael, and the shady-looking bunny over there is a friend of their family, Charlie Duke.”

“I’m not shady, I’m dashing,” Charlie said with an outrageous smile.

“He will be soon,” Mike murmured to Pat, who nodded.

It was a bit cramped in the room after that, but they made due. Vil then explained what happened to Jessie’s family in detail, and she was sure to mention that the four attackers were Paladins. Vil knew Hannah’s history, and she knew that that would incite Hannah in a way few other things could. Hannah had fought purists her entire life, had been one of the Columbus Twenty, and her brothers had been killed by a purist mob. Hannah Williams did *not* shy away from a fight when it came to opposing the PPC. “Luckily, though, Jessie found the secret tunnel before the plan could be carried out, and Nick set a trap for the attackers. They’re in jail now, and I’m turning Boston over and shaking it to find who set it up.”

“We’re fairly certain it has to be a Vulpan or someone very close to them, for few would know about that tunnel,” Winston told them. “Not even Kit or the chief butler knew about that tunnel, so it has to be someone that knows the manor even better than them. There can’t be more than one or two others with that kind of knowledge.”

“And you’re certain that Jessica will be safe?” John asked.

“That’s why I’m here, Mister Williams,” Nick said simply. “Miss Vil hired me to keep your daughter and her husband safe, and I take my job

very seriously.”

“I absolutely guarantee you, John, Hannah, this will *never* happen again,” Vil said adamantly. “I’m going to make such an object lesson out of whoever did this that everyone else will wet themselves at the very *thought* of trying something like this.” She looked to Kit and Jessie. “My brother and your daughter are two of the most important furs in my life, and I can’t even begin to tell you how furious I am right now.”

“She’s not the only one,” Brian said grimly. “If this came from someone in the family, then they have no business *being* in the family. Fighting Vil over her control of the family is one thing, but trying to murder a member of the family goes about fifty miles too far.”

“Aye,” Winston nodded. “We Brightons protect our own, and the Vulpans and the Williams are now part of us,” he declared. “You need us? We’re here.”

“Here here,” Harry agreed.

“But, we’re only here for those who deserve it,” Kendall added. “We’ll find the rotten parts of the Vulpan family and excise them like cutting the bruise out of an apple.”

“I hope I’m not in that bruise,” Lynn giggled.

“But Ken makes an important point,” Vil said. “If this is what this family has come to, then trying to keep the family united is pointless. So, since keeping the family together is no longer an option, we destroy those who oppose us. We find the undesirable Vulpans and we run them out of Boston. And that starts tomorrow,” she said grimly. “Tomorrow, I put every Vulpan against us on probation at work, and by the time I’m back from my

honeymoon, they'll be gone. We will sweep the company clean of everyone not loyal to me, then we get Zach and Jake off the board, then we drive them out of Boston. When this is over, only the *true* Vulpans will be left here."

"Isn't that a touch drastic, Vil?" Ruth asked.

"Wasn't what nearly happened here fairly drastic, Ruthie?" Vil asked immediately in reply. "This isn't about being careful and maintaining family unity when this is over, about using kid gloves to keep someone from getting too angry so I can herd everyone back under the tent once the dust settles. This is now *war*. They tried to *kill* my brother and sister!" she said hotly. "And I'm a firm believer that a destroyed enemy doesn't come back to bite you in the ass five years from now."

"Now I see why you love her, brother," Michael said with a slight smile. "She's cute when she's plotting mayhem."

Quite a few blurted out laughter at that unexpected remark, and Kit saw that Michael was quite prone to those out-of-the-blue zingers. They *were* funny, though.

Kit felt much better as they all sat around and talked as his friends from the magazine slowly got accustomed to being around rich furs and dignitaries. John and Hannah sat and talked with Kit, Jessie, Winston, and Vil. Jenny and Ben got into a lively chat with the other youngsters, Jessie's friends from Austin, Harry and Michael and the Party Pack, and Charlie spent a lot of time flirting, as well as having his advances bluntly accepted by the Vulpan girls, which startled him a bit. They weren't behaving the way they were supposed to, with playful flirting and remarks, but Charlie had never encountered the Party Pack before. There wasn't a single girl in

the Party Pack that would blink even once over dragging Charlie into some unused room and taking tremendous advantage of him, and their bold forward behavior had put him off his usual game. He was used to *chasing* girls, not having girls basically chase *him*. Kit had the feeling that before the night was over, Charlie was going to be educated by one of his cousins about putting his money where his mouth was. Bess was going on and on about New Orleans and working, having a *real* job with *real* responsibility, and how Terry, who hadn't arrived yet, had been both very kind to her and also teaching her about being a boss, about how to run a division or an office or a section and be both efficient and fair to the employees. Jenny and Sam, who were both in pre-med, struck up an immediate friendship and were talking about things that made no sense to anyone else, and Ben found himself all but surrounded by both Brightons and the guys from work as he described being on the football team at Ohio State and their first game, which was on Saturday.

After a while, dinner was served. Stanley didn't want to use the formal dining room but had too many to fit in any other room, so what he did was have the staff place tables in the main parlor and move the furniture out. Despite being temporary tables, they were covered with satin tablecloths and were set with fine Vulpan china, and the chairs had been pulled from the main dining room, which were lustrously dark wood polished to a shine, and with cushioned seats. Jessie, for the first time, had no paw in the meal served to her and Kit, and the cooks had gone the distance to lay out a meal of veal and Portobello mushrooms in a truffle sauce, shrimp bisque, lobster tails, steamed artichoke hearts, steamed asparagus, baby potatoes in a butter and garlic sauce, and with cheesecake for desert. Stanley had even delved deeply into Stonebrook's wine cellar to serve some very good wine. He looked positively enraptured, Stanley did, for he lived for this kind of thing.

He got to show off Stonebrook and prove that it was the best manor in New England, and the Brightons, the Williams, the visiting Vulpans, and the gang from Austin had nothing but praise for the staff for the wonderful dinner.

After dinner, things settled down...almost. The large group broke up somewhat. The elders, Kit, and Jessie returned to the TV room to talk and give Jessie's parents more time to get to know Brian and Ruth and the Brightons, while the youngsters and the Austin gang all scattered through the manor to do things. Sylvia took a few with her to the range to let them try target shooting, Savid and Nawa took their kids to the pool and were joined by a couple of Vulpans and Harry Brighton. Charlie and Ben went to the theatre to watch a movie with a couple of his cousins and Lilly. Sam, Jenny, Kevin, Janet and Lupe went out on a tour of the manor with Muffy. Everyone was just enjoying the evening, the day before the wedding, relaxing and trying to calm down after the anxiety of the morning.

They were also joined not long afterward. Kit had carried through on his intent to invite the Governor to stay at Stonebrook the night before the wedding, and the Governor accepted. The Governor's limo arrived at about 8:30pm, and Kit, Jessie, Vil, and Winston greeted him in the courtyard. Kit welcomed him to Stonebrook and gave him free run of the place, and not long afterward Stanley escorted the Governor to the garden cottage, a nice and roomy cottage where he and his two Texas Ranger escorts could relax and unwind before going to bed. Stanley dispatched Sally and Benson to serve the Governor, and the Governor left the cottage after changing into a pair of sweats and a tee shirt and joined them in the main house, joining the conversation, and also adding his concern to the others; he too had heard about the attack on Kit and Jessie.

“It’s all over the news,” he said, taking a glass of wine from Dee with a nod of thanks. “They’re calling it the Foiled Wedding Massacre. Any leads yet, Vilenne?”

“I’m still working on it, or more to the point, my furs are,” she answered. “It’s not changing the fact that I’m getting married tomorrow.”

“That did surprise me a little.”

“We have very good reasons for going through with it,” Winston said simply.

“We’re not going on our honeymoon until Saturday afternoon, so I’ll have tomorrow here in Boston. Saturday I’m going to Columbus to watch my brother-in-law play football, then we go on our honeymoon.”

“Ah, yes, Ohio State?”

She nodded. “My brother Ben plays for them,” Jessie told him.

“We have an extra ticket,” Vil said enticingly.

Rick Perry laughed. “Attend a non-Texas football game? I’d be lynched! Besides, I really do need to be back in Austin tomorrow afternoon. I have a formal dinner Saturday.” He turned to Jessie. “I’m very glad you’re alright, you two. You’re not just citizens of Texas, I like to think of you as friends. I did attend your wedding, after all,” he smiled.

“Thanks, Governor,” Kit said, accepting his pawshake.

“Please, call me Rick. When are you coming home?”

“I’ll be here until I legally force my uncle out of Stonebrook,” Kit answered. “We’ll be back in early October.”

“I *do* hope you’re returning to Texas to have your baby, Jessie,” he grinned. “That way she’s a native Texan.”

Jessie giggled. “Unless something serious happens, I hate to say that I’ll be delivering right here in Stonebrook.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what. We’ll keep the birth a secret until you get home, then we’ll present the baby down there and we’ll issue you a Texas birth certificate.”

“Why would they want to do that? Laura is a Vulpan, and a Vulpan should be born in Massachusetts,” Vil said lightly.

“But, she’ll be a *yankee* if she’s born up here,” Rick Perry said seriously, which made Jessie laugh.

When the Brightons were about ready to return to Hart’s Crossing, Charlie turned up missing. Kit knew almost immediately what was going on, but he just kept quiet and allowed the staff to hunt him down. All Kit really had to do was count his femme cousins and see who was missing. Much to his surprise, it wasn’t Sheila that had lured Charlie into some deserted room for a little fun, it was Lynn. The two of them turned up about twenty minutes later, Lynn with a smug little smile and Charlie looking quite out of sorts, his shirt buttoned up wrong and his slacks only halfway zipped up. His other cousins immediately drew her off for all the juicy gossip while the Brighton boys couldn’t look at him without laughing.

After the Brightons left, Vil, Kit, and Jessie all decided to go to bed. Vil had a big day ahead of her tomorrow, and Kit and Jessie were both tired, and Kit was a little drained. He was especially considerate to Jessie up in the bedroom, and when he had her snuggled in his arms in bed, he finally dared breach the subject. “I hope you’re alright.”

“I’m a lot better than I was this morning,” she said ruefully. “I feel *safe*, my handsome fox. I feel protected and secure. I’m a little freaked out, but it’ll pass. I told you, I will not let them drive me away from you, no matter what. You were afraid that they’d be capable of something horrible, and you were right. But that won’t chase me away. I am your wife, Kit, and I will stand beside you through both the good and the bad.

“God, I love you, Jessie.”

“You’d better, because there will be no divorce,” she said impishly, which made him laugh. And then she started to purr, and everything was suddenly right with the world.

Kit figured that someone would wake them up in the morning, and he was proved entirely correct. He figured that it would be Stanley or one of the staff, but he was honestly surprised when it was Vil who woke them up at six in the morning, shaking Kit awake. “Mmph, what?” he asked blearily as Jessie burrowed a little deeper into his arms, or as far as her swollen belly would allow.

“Get up!” she told them in an almost hyper voice. “Get up, sleepyhead, it’s my wedding day!”

He glanced at the clock on the nightstand. “In seven hours,” he answered. “Go back to bed.”

“Only seven hours? Oh my God, I’ll never get ready in time!” she gasped. “Get up, we have a lot to do and no time!”

“Oh God, she’s one of them,” Jessie complained as Vil rushed towards the door as fast as her casted leg would allow.

“One of what?”

“ADHD bride,” she grunted, which made Kit explode into laughter.

Luann, bless her heart, had woke up early enough to put tea and scones by the door for them. He brought them into the room as Jessie yawned and sat up as much as she could with Laura taking up most of her lap. At eight months pregnant, Jessie couldn’t seem to get any bigger, yet she did indeed get a little bigger every week, it seemed. Already her belly was very, very round, and she had another month to go! She slid her feet out of bed and picked up her robe from the foot of the bed and slid it on as she stood up. “Well, we may as well get up, because odds are she’ll be back,” Jessie complained. “Pour me a cup of tea, handsome fox?”

“Certainly, love,” he nodded as she padded across the large room and into the huge bathroom.

Just as Jessie predicted, Vil stormed back into their bedroom not three minutes after leaving. Kit gave her a cup of tea wordlessly and she walked right by him, then turned, laughed, and took it. “Sorry,” she apologized. “But I’m *really* excited.”

“I can’t tell,” he said blandly. “Go finish up all your paperwork before the wedding, I’m sure there’s something you missed,” he told her. “Work off some of that nervous energy. That’s what I did on my wedding day.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” she said.

Vil scurried out, and Kit carried Jessie’s tea to her nightstand and set it down. She came out of the bathroom and picked up the cup with a smile and a nod, then sat down daintily on the bed and took a sip. “I’m going to

need this to wake up,” she said wearily. “I never pegged Vil to be the hyper type. She’s always so calm.”

“I guess everyone has the right to be giddy about something sometime,” Kit chuckled as he took a sip of his tea. “She really does love Kendall. She doesn’t show it, but she does.”

“She has a good reason to like him. He’s a wonderful male, and he has a great family. Speaking of family,” she said, picking up the phone by her nightstand, which was a holdover from the old system. Though all the staff and the residents used the cell phones, the original landline phones were still there, and each room had its own phone with its own extension. Jessie dialed the extension for the bedroom where her parents were sleeping. “I know they’re up,” she smiled. “Hi Mom, is Dad up? Good. Want to come up to our bedroom and have a cup of tea, and talk a while? Okay, remember where it is? That’s right. Okay, see you in a minute.”

“I’ll have them send up more tea, and some coffee for your dad,” he said, picking up his cell phone and hitting push to talk. “Who’s in the kitchen?”

“I am, Master Kit, what do you need?” Stanley answered.

“Could you please bring another pot of tea and some coffee up to our room? Jessie’s parents are coming up.”

“I’ll have it sent up immediately.”

“Thanks, Stan,” Kit answered.

“You’d better put on some undies, love,” Jessie winked at him. “As much as I love the chance your robe might untie, I don’t think my mom will appreciate it as much as I do.”

Kit laughed. "I'll bring yours too."

Jessie's parents arrived wearing what Kit felt was typical for them. John was wearing a Bengals tee shirt and tiger-striped sweatpants, and Hannah was wearing a simple yet full length blue robe. Jessie hugged them in turn, and Kit shook John's paw and kissed Hannah on the cheek fondly as Luann scurried in carrying a large tray holding a second pot of tea and a smaller pot filled with coffee. She blushed furiously when Jessie introduced her to her parents as if she were one of her friends and not her maid, then she served them with quiet efficiency as they sat down on the couches over by the TV. "Did you like your room, Mom?" Jessie asked.

"It's...large," she said, then she laughed. "This place is so grand!"

"I think our entire house can fit into this wing," John said sagely. "And God, what would it be like to watch Bengal games on that home theatre screen?" he asked with a laugh. "I thought the Bengal Den had a good TV in it!"

"That's not a TV, it's a projector," Kit told him.

"I still get lost here," Jessie admitted with a slightly rueful smile.

"This is the dirty little secret," Kit chuckled. "This is where I grew up. Right here in this house."

"What's it like to live here, Jessica?" Hannah asked.

"Well, it's a little weird," she answered. "I'm still not used to the servants waiting on me. Thanks Luann," she said with a smile as Luann offered her a new cup of tea. Luann nodded and poured a cup of coffee. "I still cook our own meals and clean our room, so I can feel, well, normal."

Luann hates that,” Jessie giggled. “This room is her responsibility, and I always do all her work.”

“It’s not proper for you to *clean*, Mistress Jessie,” Luann said demurely. “You’re a *Vulpan*. Vulpans do not clean.”

“Well, I’ll be cleaning when I go home, so there’s no reason for me to change things,” Jessie said simply. “We’re not really allowed to leave the manor’s grounds because it’s not safe, so I’ve been keeping busy. I’ve learned a few new knitting patterns, we have lunch with Clancy every day he feels up to it, the chefs here have been teaching me new recipes, Vil comes by about every other day to visit, Muffy’s been here to keep us company, and the staff has been so wonderful keeping me busy. Things have been really crazy since everyone got here, there’s been furs everywhere, I’ve been tripping over someone almost every time I turn around. Then there was yesterday,” she sighed.

“Yes, let’s discuss that,” Hannah said seriously. “Tell us again, and don’t leave anything out.”

Kit was the only that mainly described what happened yesterday, with the discovery of the trap door and tunnel to the capture of the attackers. “Though you can’t see it, Boston is in chaos right now,” Kit told them. “Vil is utterly furious, and she’s turning Boston inside out looking for whoever hired those PPC goons.”

“PPC?” John gasped. “I didn’t catch that!”

“They were Paladins,” Jessie said in a slightly quavering voice.

“Paladins,” Hannah said with a sudden growl.

“Whoever hired them had to be someone in the family,” Kit said. “They both knew about that secret tunnel and they knew where to find four furs who were willing to kill us. They could have hired contract killers, but that would have left a trail that Vil could track down. They hired Paladins, so whoever it is has to be involved with the PPC. Given the history of my family, there’s quite a few possibilities. Uncle Zach is the prime suspect, but something tells me that it wasn’t him.”

“What?”

“I dunno, just the way he acted when me and Vil went over and told him what happened. He seemed genuinely surprised. And no doubt right now he’s tearing Boston apart looking for whoever did it.”

“He’s helping?”

“Not on purpose,” Kit chuckled grimly. “Vil threatened to strip him of every penny and ruin him, saying that she was blaming *him* until proven otherwise, and the only way he can avoid being turned out of his house naked is to find out who did it. So right now, he’s looking for the attacker to avoid losing everything.”

“That girl is one of the most clever furs I’ve ever met,” John said appreciatively.

“Why thank you, John,” Vil said from the door. She was holding a small folder, which she put under her arm as she hobbled in on her walking cast and sat down beside Jessie, and Luann immediately served her a cup of tea. She nodded to the girl and took a sip. “I just got a courier,” she said with a light smile. She held out the folder to Kit, reaching it past Jessie. “And it’s for you.”

“Me? What is it?” he asked, opening the folder. Inside was a stapled trio of pages, and after quickly perusing the front page, he realized that it was the contract which dealt with Zach’s share of Stonebrook. “He signed it away,” she said with a very satisfied little smile. “He gave up Stonebrook to you, brother.”

“You’re serious!” Kit gasped.

“Very,” she answered, taking another sip. “Stonebrook is now yours.”

“No, it’s yours,” Kit told her. “You’re the primary owner.”

“Not anymore,” she told him with a sly smile. “Or I won’t be at nine o’clock this morning. I’m taking this and that other little agreement you and me signed and I’m filing them. By noon, Stonebrook will be in *your* name. I’ll still be on the deed, but as the co-owner. Now that Zach’s part ownership of the house isn’t mucking things up, I can put things the way they were meant to be.”

“Vil!” Kit said, flabbergasted.

“Kit, this is, was, and always shall be *your home*,” she told him intensely. “This was never my home. Never. I knew that as soon as I could comprehend things. I moved out and built Hart’s Crossing, and I’m very happy there. That is my home, it’s where I was meant to be. Stonebrook belongs to you, it was always meant to belong to you. You are the true master of this house, brother. Everyone before you was just a caretaker. You may have never been destined to sit in the big chair, but this house was always meant to be yours. And by God in heaven above, if there is any Vulpan who *deserves* to own Stonebrook, it’s you.”

“Vil, Texas is my home,” he protested vociferously. “I still don’t feel comfortable here. I don’t want to live in Boston!”

“Who said you have to?” she asked with a smile. “Stanley and the staff will maintain the manor to its usual impeccable standards, and they’ll be happy to host you when you come up to visit. The manor has more than enough money in its own accounts to literally be self sufficient. You never have to spend a dime for Stonebrook, Kit, the manor pays for itself, pays all the salaries and taxes, pays for everything. The interest the accounts earn on their investments pays for everything without ever touching the capital, just the way it was set up to make Stonebrook eternally self-sustaining. Consider this to be your vacation house. Or move someone in,” she shrugged. “I think Brian and Ruthie could do well living in the west wing, Hunter would love living here, and Muffy’s already all but moved in. Brian could keep an eye on things for you, I’ll maintain my watch over the accounts to ensure Zach doesn’t try to tamper with them again, the staff would have Vulpanes to serve, and what’s most important, you have control of the house. You don’t have to live here to own Stonebrook, Kit. But now that you own Stonebrook, you have control over it. That means that you don’t have to worry about what the past thinks about you anymore. This is *your* house, and right now I’m sure Dad just sat up in his grave. We’re probably close enough to go outside and hear him scream.”

Kit chuckled without much humor at that thought. Yes, his father was probably rolling in his grave at the idea of his hated son now having possession of the icon of the Vulpan dynasty, Stonebrook.

“Look at it this way, brother. Stonebrook will now pass to *your* first child, not mine. Doesn’t Laura *deserve* to own this house?”

“That’s a cheap shot,” he complained, which made Jessie giggle. There was literally nothing he wouldn’t do for his unborn daughter, and Vil knew it. “Wait a minute. If Zach’s signed over his share of Stonebrook, that means we don’t have to stay here anymore. We were only here to force Zach out. If he gave away his share, then we can go home. We can go home, pretty kitty!” he said with sudden excitement.

“Not quite yet,” Vil said. “You’re not leaving this house until I know who tried to kill you and punish them for it. You are *much* safer here than you are in Austin, because Stonebrook is closed and controlled. I may own Austin, but I can’t stop another group from flying into Bergstrom and driving to your townhouse. And besides, you agreed to sit in the chair while I’m on my honeymoon. You have to be here to do that. But yes, after we get everything straightened out, you’ll be free to go home.”

“Did he resign too?”

“No, he didn’t,” she answered. “I think he caved on Stonebrook because he could see the inevitability of it, and it would mollify me somewhat. I think he realized that Stonebrook was gone, and he’d never outlive us. His only hope was to outlive you and me and both of us remain childless, but his problem was that once he died, the house would *not* go to Steve. The agreement specifically stated that my children and your children would have priority rights over his. With Laura’s birth imminent and me getting married today,” she said with an excited trill in her voice, “he could see that he’d never get it back. So he surrendered it to soothe me.”

“I don’t believe it, Uncle Zach did something that wasn’t greedy,” Kit breathed, almost in disbelief.

“He’s saving his own ass, and don’t think for a second that it’s anything but,” she said sternly.

“Any word on who attacked my daughter, Vil?” Hannah asked.

Vil shook her head. “Not yet. I’ve got about everyone I could get my paws on working on it, and so far we only have one hint.”

“What’s that?”

“Nobody can find Steve. Zach’s oldest son,” she said, looking at John and Hannah. “He’s disappeared. He didn’t show up for work, he’s not in any of his houses or his dad’s houses, hell, his wife’s even looking for him. However, his bank accounts are still there, there haven’t been any withdrawals we can’t attribute to his wife, and it looks like he just fell off the face of the world. He vanished for only one of two possible reasons. Either he’s involved in the attack, or he wrongfully thinks we’re going to come after Zach’s entire family for it and he went to ground. Either way, I’ve got furs hunting him down as we speak.”

“Or he knows something,” John said impulsively. “And he doesn’t want to get involved.”

“That’s also a possibility,” Vil agreed. “But, that’s enough of that. How is your summer vacation going, John?”

Vil steered them to much tamer conversation, but Kit didn’t listen for a little bit as he stewed over Vil’s announcement. She was taking that agreement he signed to scare Zach into backing off and she was going to file it, along with Zach’s giving up his share of the manor, to redraw the deed so Kit was the primary owner. He...didn’t know how to feel about that. He didn’t want this house, didn’t want the deed, didn’t want the

responsibility of it. But, on the other paw, it was just a piece of paper. Stonebrook was not his home, but it would be his. He would return to Texas and let Stanley run things, use the manor when he came up to visit Vil, maybe allow Vil or friends to use the manor when they needed it, offer it as a permanent guest house for whenever any of the Brightons came to visit. He wasn't sure about moving Brian in here, because no matter what, Brian was still an elder, and Kit had not lost his hatred or distrust of his elders. There was no telling if Brian would pick up right where Zach left off after he got into the manor and got a taste of living in the big house, then wanted it for himself.

He couldn't stand the idea of Brian being in here. But Terry....

That was an idea. When Terry returned from New Orleans, he could live in Stonebrook. He and Allison, when they married, could live in the west wing. They were foxes he trusted, foxes that could care for Stonebrook when he wasn't there, and he'd be utterly confident that everything would be perfectly fine. But, the downside of that was that Terry may never return to Boston. He was absolutely furious with the family, and especially enraged with the elders for their attempt to attack Allison. Kit knew exactly how he felt, and that kind of fury may preclude him from ever returning to Boston to stay. Terry very well may stay in New Orleans and run Avondale, staying away from the family that dared attack him and his girlfriend.

If not Terry, who? *Someone* had to be here. Someone had to be in Stonebrook, because the house served no purpose if there was no Vulpan inside it.

Jessie elbowed him lightly in the ribs, and Kit started. "What?"

"I said, how much does it cost for this place to run?" Hannah repeated.

“Oh. I’m not sure,” he answered, waving a paw.

“About three quarters of a million a year,” Vil answered for him. “Adding up salaries, maintenance, supplies, taxes, and utilities, it’s three quarters of a million. But, the manor’s accounts earn about a million a year in interest and dividends, so the manor earns more money than it spends every year. Yesterday when I checked, there was about thirteen million dollars in the manor’s accounts.”

“And that’s yours now?” John asked.

Kit shook his head. “It belongs to the *manor*, John. This house isn’t just a house. It’s what you might call a corporate entity. It has its own bank accounts and investments, and no Vulpan owns that money. It belongs to Stonebrook.”

“Wait. This manor gets a return of ten percent?”

“About that,” Vil nodded. “Closer to nine, but more than nine. I know that sounds high, but that’s because of how it’s set up. Some of the best financial planners in America planned out Stonebrook’s investment strategy, and they did it in low or zero risk investments. Hell, John, if the money was just in bonds or something, it’d earn five percent. I could get four percent just out of a money market bank account. The more money you have to invest, the higher the return with less risk.”

“I’ve never heard of anything like that.”

“That’s because you’re not familiar with large value investments and options, John,” she told him calmly. “There’s a different set of rules and opportunities when you’re looking to invest ten million instead of ten thousand.”

“I would imagine so,” John chuckled, sipping his coffee. “So, if worse comes to worst and Kit and Jessie lose their jobs or their house or something—“

“They could live here without owning a dime and never worry,” Vil nodded. “The manor would provide.” She glanced at Kit. “And now that Kit owns Stonebrook, Kit and Jessie never have to worry. They can always come home and be treated in a manner more proper for a Vulpan.”

“The proper manner is to be home with our daughter,” Kit declared. “Away from here. Back in *our* home.”

“Hovel,” Vil teased lightly.

“Call it what you want, I feel a million times more at home there than here.”

“That can change, brother mine,” she smiled. “Now that all this is yours, it might make you come home.”

“Not unless I come back with bombs,” Kit retorted, which made Jessie giggle.

The conversation drifted to a less momentous but no less important subject...the wedding. Vil described the upcoming ceremony, and then talked about her dress for ten solid minutes. “It’s just *perfect*,” she surmised. “It cost me forty thousand dollars, but it was worth every penny!”

“Why so expensive?” Hannah asked.

“Designer, maker, materials,” she ticked off her fingers. “And don’t you *dare* harp on my dress, Hannah! A bride has every right to wear her perfect dress! Mine was just a little expensive, that’s all.”

“I wouldn’t do that, dear,” she answered mildly. “I certainly hope it’s as beautiful as you described.”

“It’s *gorgeous*!” Jessie beamed.

“She won’t let me see it,” Kit chuckled. “You’d think she was marrying me.”

“I want it to be a surprise!” Vil barked at him. “The only ones who have seen my dress are my bridesmaids.”

“Well, it’s just too bad for you that Jessie took a couple of pictures of you in your dress,” Kit mused lightly.

“Don’t you *dare*,” she hissed threateningly.

“Sometimes you act married,” John chuckled.

“It’s because we’re close,” Vil said primly. “After Dad died, all we had were Clancy and each other.”

“And now, thank God, Ken is taking her off my paws,” Kit said in relief, which caused the others to laugh.

Vil swatted him on the shoulder.

“It’s just no fun to get henpecked on *both* sides, John,” he added.

Jessie swatted him on the other shoulder, which made John explode into laughter.

“See what I have to put up with? An abusive wife and a nosy sister. And you wonder why I stay hidden in Austin?”

“Kit. Brother.”

“Yes, sister dear?”

“Don’t make me spank you.”

“When you’re all growed up enough to spank *me*, Vil, you can be my guest.”

“Brave words, little brother.”

“Naturally. That cast slows you down, I can be as annoying as I wanna be,” he retorted. “And when you come home from your honeymoon you’ll be too giddy to care what I said today.”

“Brother dear,” she said sweetly, “whoever said *I* would be the one spanking you? I have two big, strong males to take care of those dreadful chores for me.”

“Curses, foiled again!” Kit declared.

Vil’s phone rang, and her face lit up when she read the screen. She accepted the call and put it to her ear quickly. “Ken? Morning, love,” she cooed.

“I think we just lost Vil, and I need to take a shower,” Kit prompted, then he chuckled when she stuck her tongue out at him, stood up, and scurried from the room.

“Yes, so do we,” Hannah agreed. “What time is breakfast?”

“Anytime you call the kitchen and tell them what you want, when you want it, and where you want it delivered,” he answered. “This place is like a hotel, Hannah. They do room service.”

“But they must be busy with the reception,” Hannah protested.

“They’re professionals, Hannah,” Kit assured her. “They can do it. Besides, the last thing I want is for you to come here and have to do *anything*.”

“Now if only I could get you to do the same thing, Master Kit, Mistress Jessie,” Luann piped in from the side, where she was standing just behind and beside the couch where Kit and Jessie were sitting. “The only thing you let us do for you is put tea out for you in the morning!”

“We’re different,” he winked at her. “I don’t want my *guests* to feel anything but pampered.”

“Well, in that case, let’s go down to the dining room, dear, and see if they can’t whip us up some eggs.”

“Just tell me what you want, sir, and I’ll make sure it’s there as soon as it’s done,” Luann announced.

“Scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, and some coffee,” John said.

“Same. Oh, and half a grapefruit and some strawberry preserves,” Hannah added.

“I’ll see to it,” she nodded, taking her phone. “Kitchen, Master and Mistress Williams would like scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, grapefruit halves, and strawberry preserves on the side,” she called. “They are en route to the small dining room.”

“It should be ready in a few minutes,” came the reply.

“What about the coffee?” John asked.

“They already know you drink coffee, sir, and it will be waiting for you,” Luann said simply.

“Those are rather useful devices,” Hannah noted.

“The size of the house requires them, madam,” Luann smiled. “There’s always the phones if these don’t work or it’s busy, but these are the fastest way to get in touch. Every room has a phone, and each room has a number. I could have dialed the kitchen using the phone,” she added, pointing to the phones on the nightstands flanking the bed, across the cavernous room.

“Clever,” John chuckled.

“Why don’t you take them down to the dining room, Lou?” Kit asked. “We have to take a shower.”

“Certainly, Master Kit,” Luann nodded, coming around and picking up the tray. “Do you want me to call down breakfast for you?”

“Not for me, thank you.”

“Me either,” Jessie added. “I’m a little full after the tea and scones,” she admitted. “I’ll eat after I shower.”

They broke up. Jessie’s parents went down to eat, and Kit and Jessie took a shower. Their shower was huge, and more than large enough for both of them at once. It was an alcove with showerheads on three sides that sprayed the body while two showerheads overhead sprayed down their hair. It even had a soft rubber-topped bench where a fur could sit and have shower jets massage the back and legs, which was Jessie’s favorite place in the shower. She partook of the massage jet bench while Kit washed his hair. “I’m glad your folks didn’t freak out,” he confided. “I was afraid that Hannah might grab you by the ear and drag you home after she found out someone tried to kill us.”

“Mom hates the PPC, love,” she answered. “They’re the ones that whipped up that mob that lynched my uncles. And she understands that defiance is the only answer. She knows I’m standing my ground, and she’ll respect me for it.”

“Spoken like the daughter of one of the Columbus Twenty,” Kit chuckled, stepping under the nozzle and rinsing his hair, his ears twitching constantly from the spray. “You think things will go smoothly today?”

“Nick has everything under control, and Vil has everything planned. Yeah, I think everything will be alright. Did you see some of those guys he brought in? Wow, are they serious looking!” she declared. “I wonder when they’re going to start closing off the manor and bring in those Valiant furs.”

“Around eight I believe,” he answered. “That Jahal guy is still going to be here, they decided to leave him alone so he doesn’t know they know about him. That’s got me a little worried, but Nick told me that since the attack, they’re going to search everyone who comes in for guns, even the guests. So that Jahal guy can’t bring any weapons, and they’re going to have a camera on him at all times. So I guess it’ll be safe enough.” When Jessie stood up and moved to stand under the other nozzle to wet down her hair, Kit wrapped his arms around her from behind and put his paws on her belly. “Four weeks, pretty kitty,” he hummed as his paws caressed her belly. “Just four more weeks, and I’ll be able to hold both my baby daughter and my pretty kitty.”

“I can’t wait to get my tummy back,” Jessie laughed, then began to purr.

“You know, we’ve never *used* that massage bench before,” he said huskily in her ear.

“Lead on, love,” she breathed in reply.

The good part about making love in the shower was that they didn’t have to go anywhere to clean up afterward. Jessie was purring in contentment as they dressed, then they went down to the dining room. John and Hannah were long gone, it was more than an hour since they ate breakfast, but the dining room wasn’t empty. Ben, Jenny, Sheila, Janet, and Rick and Martha were there, each of them eating a different breakfast. John and Hannah were eating scrambled eggs, Jenny fried eggs, Ben french toast, Rick and Martha were enjoying pancakes, and Sheila and Janet were eating quiche. “You should see the banquet they have in the kitchen,” Jenny said brightly. “They made all kinds of things for us, just go in and pick what you want!”

“Welcome to living, Vulpan style, cousin-in-law,” Sheila grinned. “What you want, when you want it.”

“I think I like being related to a Vulpan,” Jenny laughed, taking a bite of her eggs.

“I thought you two would be up early,” Sheila noted. “*Vil woke me up,*” she complained.

“Us too, but we just got out of the shower,” Jessie said.

“Well, we eventually took a shower,” Kit said with a slight smile.

“Kit!” Jessie gasped, her cheeks ruffling, which made Jessie laugh.

“Jess, why are you complaining?” Sheila told her. “If Kit’s still jumping your bones when you’re *that* pregnant, then he certainly doesn’t love you just for your body.”

“I’d be thankful,” Janet chuckled. “If I had a boyfriend, I’d be overjoyed if he still loved me when I was fat.”

“Janet!” Jessie protested, which made her laugh.

“So, tomorrow’s the big game,” Kit told Ben. “Are you starting?”

He shook his head. Chris Wells is, but I’ll be the reserve back that goes in and plays when he’s resting,” he answered. “I wish you guys could be there.”

“I wish we could too, but with Vil out of Boston, she wants me here in case the uncles try something,” Kit said regretfully. “But we’re going to watch the game.”

“It’s showing up here?”

“It’ll be on College Direct, and we have that,” Jessie told him. “So we’ll be with you in spirit, little brother. We’re even going to be wearing your jersey!”

“I hope I do well. I’m nervous. I’ve never played in front of a big crowd before.”

“There’s nothing but the game, Ben,” Sheila told him.

Vil hobbled in, wearing a dressing robe. “Hey guys,” she called. “Why aren’t you getting ready?”

“Because the wedding isn’t for five hours?” Sheila returned. “All we do is sit there and wait for it to finish, cousin,” she grinned. “You’re the one that has to do all the work!”

“I should make you my flower girl, Sheila.”

“Me? You need a virgin for that,” she snorted, which made Janet almost spit out a mouthful of orange juice.

“Well, everyone needs to be ready to go at ten,” Vil announced. “So you have two hours to get ready.”

“Ten?” Sheila spluttered. “That’s way too early!”

“With as many furs as there are here, it’ll take us an hour to get organized and on the move,” Vil barked in return. “So be ready at *ten*.”

Governor Rick Perry entered the dining room with Stanley, who was carrying a tray holding a dish popular in Austin, called Texas Mash. It was scrambled eggs made with onions, peppers, potatoes, and ham stirred in while the eggs were cooking, which was served in many diners and restaurants around Austin. “So there you are,” the Governor smiled. “I’m glad I found someone. I got lost this morning!”

“That’s easy to do in this house, Governor,” Kit chuckled. “Please, have a seat.”

“I was just telling them, Rick, be ready to go at ten,” Vil said. “There’s like twenty-five furs here going to the wedding, and it’ll take us a while to get everyone settled in and on the move.”

“That’s fine with me, Vil. I’ll be going straight to the airport after the ceremony, they called me. I have to go back.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Rick,” she said honestly. “I’ll make sure a limo is available whenever you need to leave.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“Stanley, make sure everyone knows, be out in the courtyard and ready to go at ten.”

“I’ll make sure of it,” he said with a nod, then hurried from the room after seating and serving the Governor.

“That’s one overworked fox,” Sheila laughed. “He hasn’t slept at all.”

“It doesn’t show,” Janet noted as she took another bite.

“He’s a perfectionist, he wants everything to be absolutely perfect for the reception,” Kit told her. “I’d almost bet that he went out and measured the grass this morning to make sure it was *exactly* one and a half inches tall, and uniform throughout the lawn.”

“That’s the kind of dedication you expect from a chief butler. Will’s the same way,” Vil said.

“So, you talk to Ken yet?” Sheila asked.

She nodded. “He called me as soon as he woke up.”

“That sounds familiar,” Martha said, looking at Jessie.

Jessie laughed. “I couldn’t stand not hearing his voice,” she protested.

The manor was *jumping*. There were guests absolutely everywhere, and Kit and Jessie stopped and chatted with someone almost every twenty feet. Barry was coming down to eat. Jeffrey was going to the pool to swim before getting ready. Elly and Lilly were taking a walk after breakfast. Marty was playing with one of the manor phones, singing like Mariah Carey. Savid and Nawa showed their kids off proudly, and their kids had been amazingly well behaved during their stay, having broken not even a single glass while here. Mike had invaded the server room for the manor,

which was the computer that both served as the internet gateway and also controlled the telephone system. Mike, being who he was, had went through the house looking for a way to upgrade the wireless network present, but finding out that the network in the manor was both cutting edge technology and utterly secure. Lupe flirted with Allison, Allison ignored him, and then she lit up like a Christmas tree when Terry arrived at Stonebrook, already dressed for the wedding, and gave her a deep, passionate kiss out on the courtyard. Muffy was suspiciously absent, as was Pat, but both of them turned up about twenty minutes to ten already dressed for the wedding, Pat with a stupid grin on his face, and Muffy strutting around her most recent conquest like a victorious general. His friends and family were virtually *everywhere*, and in a way, Kit was very happy to see it. Their voices and laughter seemed to drown out the ghosts, replaced the foreboding feeling in the manor with a feeling of happiness and inclusion, which the ghosts of his father and ancestors couldn't stand. They didn't like *happiness* in Stonebrook. They wanted the house to be like a museum...cold, beautiful, inviolate, and the domain of proper British-descended foxes, not a pack of American species, mixed breeds, and others invading the sanctity of this bastion of fox superiority and the dynastic throne of the powerful Vulpan family.

Stanley and Luann did get in on the act. Somehow, Stanley found time to help Kit dress in his tuxedo while Luann helped Jessie dress on the far side of a blind that they'd brought in, so the two of them could talk and be near each other without Stanley violating Jessie's modesty. Kit was wearing an ultra-formal tux, complete with tails which were split by his tail, spats on actual shoes, and diamond-studded cufflinks. Jessie was wearing her bridesmaid's dress, which was cut perfectly for her pregnant figure yet still framed her loveliness and made her seem absolutely radiant. Stanley tied

his bow tie as Jessie was fussed over by Luann, having come out from behind the blind now that she was dressed and the young vixen adjusting her dress until it was *just so*, when the door opened and Clancy ambled in, his cane leading the way. “Clancy!” Jessie gushed, “isn’t my dress *gorgeous*?”

“I dare say it’s the femme in it that makes it so lovely, my dear,” he smiled. “I see my son beat me to the punch,” he laughed.

“Old age can do that to a male, Dad,” Stanley said with a chuckle. “You got to dress him for his wedding. It was my turn.”

“Indeed, indeed,” he agreed. “So, are you about ready to go see our Vil give herself to another male?”

“Maybe Ken will keep her nose out of my business,” Kit grunted, which made Jessie giggle. “What did you think of Ken’s family?”

“Quite a bunch of males, aren’t they,” Clancy chuckled. “I was enjoying a cup of tea in the parlor when Lynn barged in, dragging that hare with her. I do believe they were looking for some quiet place to be alone.”

“You can stop being delicate,” Kit laughed.

“It’s certainly a good match, both for Vil and for the family,” he continued. “Vil is honestly taken with Kendall, and the merging of the Vulpan and Brighton families forms an alliance that will strengthen both families, both socially and financially.”

“Winston intends for Vil and Ken’s child to own both companies.”

“Yes, that did seem to be the ultimate result. That will be quite a dynasty. I believe that the Vulpans and the Brightons control a very large

portion of shipbuilding facilities in the civilized world.”

“About that.”

Stanley appeared in the doorway again, and he looked a little out of sorts. “Master Kit, Miss--” he began, but he was pushed out of the way, and Kit started when he saw by whom.

It was Bridgette.

The eldest of all the Vulpan cousins, the first born of Zach and Alicia, Bridgette was still a very fine vixen. She was both handsome and pretty at the same time, not quite as beautiful as Mary, but definitely a very attractive young lady, with a mature bearing and an elegant demeanor. She was thirty now and had three kids of her own with her husband, Jeff Hart, and it was the first time he’d seen her in nearly ten years. Bridgette was very much a recluse, staying away from everyone and only appearing for important family functions, quietly living her life and not bothering anybody. After the family drew up on two sides, Bridgette had remained stoically silent and on the fence, declaring for no one yet not leaving Boston. Kit was honestly surprised to see her here, surprised she would dare to come to see him given how things were between her siblings and her father.

“Bridgette,” Kit said in amazement. “What are you doing here?”

“Saving my family,” she said bluntly. “Where’s Vil?”

“I don’t know, probably around here somewhere,” he answered.

“Find her. She needs to hear me out.”

“Stanley,” Kit prompted.

“I’ll call her and bring her here at once,” he nodded, stepping out and closing the door.

“Bridgette, this is my wife Jessie. Jessie, this is my eldest cousin, Bridgette,” Kit introduced as Jessie came over to them.

“I still can’t believe you married a *cat*, cousin,” Bridgette said testily, which made Jessie flare up and prepare to let her have it.

“That’s my business, Bridgette,” Kit said coolly, putting a calming paw over Jessie’s. “And if wasn’t for your father, I’d be in Austin right now instead of being stuck up here.”

“My father,” she said, then she laughed cynically. “God, did he screw the pooch this time.”

Vil hobbled in quickly, wearing nothing but a robe that was hastily belted in the front. Clearly, she had been interrupted while putting on her wedding gown. “Sally said that--Bridge,” Vil said with a nod to her. “What are you doing here?”

“Saving my father,” she answered. “Even though he deserves what’s coming to him for starting this mess in the first place.”

“What’s going on?”

“I know who attacked you, Luke,” she declared. “It was Steve.”

“Steve?” Kit said in surprise. “*Steve?*”

She nodded. “Steve is the Grand Knight Templar of the Paladins, Kit,” she told him. “That’s supposed to be a secret, but I don’t think it would take you very long to dig it up. If the males that attacked you were Paladins, then Steve was the one that gave the order. Last night he called me and told me

that he was leaving Boston for a while. I didn't have to ask why, and I didn't ask where. But if he's running, then it had to be him."

"You're sure it was Steve?" Vil pressed.

"I can't prove it, he didn't confess, but I can put two and two together, Vil," she said shortly. "Steve is the leader of the Paladins, four Paladins attacked Stonebrook, and now Steve's gone to ground since it failed. I was just going to ignore this like I ignore everything else, at least until Dad called me last night and told me you were going to come after *him* for the attack. It wasn't him, Vil. I can't say if he knew about it, but I'm positive that he wasn't the one that gave the order."

"But how could Steve know about that tunnel?" Jessie asked.

"Probably learned about it from my father," Bridgette said acidly.

"Does Zach know that Steve is involved with the PPC?" Vil asked.

"Vil, both my parents are involved with the PPC," she retorted. "Do they know Stevie is the Knight Templar? I can't tell you. But they both know he's in the PPC. They inducted him."

"So your parents may have been involved," Vil pressed.

"*Please*," Bridgette snorted. "You should have heard Dad sniveling on the phone, Vil. He wouldn't have raised a paw against Luke, he was too afraid of losing everything."

"And you're sure about that?"

"As sure as I need to be," she answered. "Go talk to Gloria. She knows Steve's in the PPC, and she hates it. That's why she's always screwing around and avoiding him. Gloria's a mongrel lover," she said harshly.

“Say that one more time, Bridgette,” Kit said in a sudden dangerous voice, taking an aggressive step forward. “My wife is *mixed*, and if you use that word in this house one more time, I’ll make sure you leave here with fewer teeth than you had when you came in.”

“It’s pretty clear you hate me and hate Kit, so why are you here?” Jessie demanded.

“I’m saving what I can,” she answered flatly, glaring at Jessie. “When Vil rampages through my family in revenge for the attempt on you, I want to be left out of it. I’m here to save my husband and kids from it, Save Louis and Matty, and save my Dad. I’m positive he didn’t have a paw in the attack. He may have found out about it after the fact, but he’d have never allowed it if he knew about it before it happened. If he knows about it now, can you blame him for keeping his mouth shut to save his son?”

“I’ll find a way,” Vil said harshly. “If he knows something and doesn’t tell me, then that’s called an accessory after the fact, and I’ll strip him of every single penny! So you go back and tell him that if I find out he knows who tried to kill my brother and it doesn’t come from him, then I’ll bounce him out of Swan Cove so fast he won’t know what happened.”

Bridgette sighed deeply, then nodded. “Just...just don’t tell them I said anything. Despite everything, I love my brother, and I don’t want him to know where it came from. And I don’t want Dad to know either. It’s his fault all this happened. He’s the one that talked Uncle Jake and Aunt Maxy into trying to take the company from Vil, and when you had your accident, Dad made the mistake of not aggressively declaring his innocence. He thought you’d blame him no matter what, so there was no reason for him to say he didn’t do it and just let the facts come out and vindicate him, which they did. If they wouldn’t have started all this, Luke wouldn’t have come

back up, Mom wouldn't be pissed off at being kicked out of Stonebrook and harping the fact at Dad every ten seconds since it happened, and Stevie would never have tried anything. All this mess is on his head, but I still love him. He's my father."

"Alright, I'll give you that much for being honest, Bridge," Vil said. "Consider your family immune from anything that happens after today, and I'll give Uncle Zach a chance to come clean before I lower the boom on him. If he doesn't take it, then it's not your fault. You bought your dad a chance, cousin. Go on home, or even better, go get dressed and come to my wedding."

"If you'll have me, I'll come," she said, giving Kit and Jessie a grudging look.

"Of course I will!" she said brightly. "You're still a Vulpan, Bridge. As long as you don't think coming to the wedding is taking sides, you're welcome."

"It probably will be, but that's alright. Maybe if Dad sees me at the wedding, he'll come to his senses. If he doesn't stop this, his pride is going to get him disowned."

"How will he know you're there?" Jessie asked.

"He's going to the wedding," Bridgette said tartly, glancing at Jessie with barely concealed scorn. "Everyone is, no matter who they're supporting. It would be a scandal if the family doesn't turn out for the wedding, and we're not going to have a scandal. I usually avoid things like this, but maybe if Dad sees me there, he'll realize I'm putting my paw in. Given what I just told you, it might scare him into being honest."

“Why don’t you go to family functions?”

“That’s none of your damn business, *cat*,” she said stiffly, then she turned and stormed from the room without another word.

“Touchy subject there, sis,” Vil said, then she chuckled. “Bridgette absolutely *hates* Aunt Sarah. And I mean she’d bury a lobster fork in her eye if she had the chance. Bridgette almost never comes anywhere near her. It *is* a statement if Bridgette is going to show up at the wedding and come within throwing distance of Sarah.” She looked around. “But that *was* a fairly illuminating little chat, wasn’t it? Let me go talk to Stav, Marcus, and Nick. They have some things to do before the wedding.”

“Don’t forget to get dressed, Vil,” Kit teased.

Vil flicked her tail insultingly as she hobbled out of the room.

“I dare say, I think that Miss Bridgette was telling the truth,” Clancy said mildly. “Master Zach’s family has had certain sympathies in that direction, and Alicia is vindictive and shallow enough to risk the ruination of her family in order to settle a score. But then again, Alicia isn’t broke. If I recall, she entered marriage with Zach with a sizable fortune of her own.”

“Yes, and maybe Zach felt that Alicia could support Steve after the attack, so he said nothing,” Kit grunted. “By separating things, Zach *might* just be able to sneak through the clauses in the agreement, if he has no knowledge of what’s going on, makes no attempt to aid or stop Alicia, and his wife is the one doing all the dirty work. And like you said, Alicia *does* have her own money. It’s entirely possible that he told Alicia to take care of it and not tell him a single thing, so he could maintain his plausible deniability.”

“I think you’re reading too much into it,” Jessie said. “If your uncle is really that afraid, do you think he’d really try to hurt us? Zach is a bully, and like all bullies, as soon as someone cows him, he’s too afraid to try anything else. I think your cousin’s right, and your uncle really had no idea what his son did. If he did it.”

“Actually, it does fit,” Clancy mused. “Your father and Zach grew up in this house as well, and it’s possible they stumbled across the passage. Maybe not the same way Jessica did, but it’s entirely possible. Zach may have told his wife or son about the passage in idle talk, and they used that information. He might be keeping quiet now because he may suspect that someone from his family was responsible, and he’s trying to save them from prison. If Vil can’t prove he knows something, then he only needs to remain silent.”

“Well, I think we can put this on the shelf for now,” Jessie prompted, looking at herself in the mirror. “The last thing I want to do on Vil’s special day is talk about this stuff. Vil’s getting *married*. We need to celebrate!”

“I guess we can let Vil worry about it,” Kit chuckled.

Kit didn’t say any more, but he did think about it as they padded downstairs, where friends and family were gathering, all dressed in their best clothes. Clancy had something of a point. All Zach had to do was say nothing, insist on being told nothing, and not get curious, and he could convincingly state that he had no idea, he’s just as shocked as everyone else, and Vil can’t come after him because he had no part in it. Vil could go after *Steven*, but couldn’t go after Zach. If Alicia was the one pulling the strings, well, there wasn’t a whole lot that Vil could really do in that regard. Alicia had her own money, and if Zach and Alicia were smart, they would have kept their fortunes separate for their entire marriage. Some of their

marital assets were Alicia's, and Vil couldn't really go after those through the agreement...though she could go after them the same way she crushed Cybil. Last he heard, Cybil was ostracized from British society, she was under criminal investigation, and her fortune had dwindled considerably from the multiple fines she'd had to pay, legal fees from the platoon of lawyers she had to hire to protect her from Vil, and back taxes when Vil had instigated the British government going after her. Any rich fur had a lot of things to hide, a lot of money hidden in both legal and illegal tax shelters, and once those secrets started coming out, there were a lot of questions to answer and a lot of fines to pay for skirting the law and hiding money from taxation. Vil could certainly strip Zach and Alicia of their money, but it would take her longer to drain Alicia's coffers than it would Zach's. Vil could threaten to put Zach in the projects and working minimum wage, but the simple truth of that matter was that she'd also have to contend with the ten or so million dollars that Alicia Guggenheim Vulpan had in her own trusts and accounts, money that was hers before the marriage and as such were not marital assets Vil could attack, as well as the fact that her family would probably bail her out if Vil crushed her. Unlike the Vulpans, the Guggenheims were a bit closer as a family. But the threat was still a viable one. Vil *could* strip Zach of every penny, and then go after Alicia and leech her using Zach's own former money against her, since Zach's money would go to *Vil* as per the agreement they all signed.

Alicia wasn't the only one that was like that, but she was one of the richer ones. The daughters of rich families tended to not inherit or be granted as much as males, because they married rich males who would then take care of them. Ruth Astor had come to Brian with only a million dollar trust, and the Astors were worth over a hundred million dollars. Then again, when Maxine married Graham Grant, the Grants all but cut him out of the

will because he married a *Vulpan*, and that was just more money for the other Grants. Graham would be all but destitute if Maxine ever divorced him, because God did she have enough ammunition to use against him in divorce proceedings to ensure he got *nothing*. The other femme married into the family on the other side that had enough money to cause Vil problems would be Tessa Kennedy Vulpan, Jake's wife, who had her inheritance from the Kennedy fortune of about five million dollars. But the richest Vulpan wife of them all was Justine Leeks Vulpan, who was from a very rich British family and had a fortune of about thirty million pounds in banks in England and Scotland, as well as a share in their family business, which was oil. The Leeks were one of the families that had a major stake in British Petroleum, and Justine's brother and cousin were on the board of directors. However, Tom's family had shown no inkling of being against Vil. They hadn't sided openly with her, but they certainly weren't supporting Zach, Jake, and Maxine.

Most of the guys were already dressed and ready when Kit and Jessie joined them down in the TV room, which was where they'd agreed to meet. Lupe looked just as dashing as he did at their wedding in his zoot suit, and Elly looked absolutely smashing in a gorgeous cream colored dress that went well with her fur and eyes. The Vulpan girls had come to Stonebrook rather than go straight to the cathedral, and they were mingling with his friends from Austin and the Governor, who was chatting amiably with Rick and Martha. Muffy was down, and Sonya and Suzy had arrived, as they were all going together, and Sonya and Suzy looked a bit comical in identical dresses, but such a large differences in heights. Now that Kit thought of it, Sonya was taller than all the Brightons as well. She'd be the tallest one on the dais during the ceremony.

“Hey, guys!” Mike called, waving them into the standing throng. “Is Vil about ready to go?”

“I’d give her about a half an hour,” Kit said. “She got interrupted putting on her dress, so she’s running a tiny bit behind. We might want to help her a little by getting all the seating arrangements ironed out, so we can just get in the cars and go when she’s ready.”

“That sounds like a reasonable idea,” John nodded.

“Stanley, get the limos lined up and ready,” Kit called over push to talk. “We’ll get ourselves sorted out so we’re ready to go when Vil gets her gown on.”

“They’re already arrayed out in the courtyard, Master Kit,” he answered. “The white limo in the garage is the bridal party’s car, and there are ten more behind it lined up and ready to move. The police are already in position to escort you to the cathedral, Valiant is working to secure Stonebrook Drive to prepare it to park the cars of visitors, and some gentlemens from the government are on the grounds inspecting Nick’s security precautions in preparation for us hosting several important politicians. The reception preparations are on schedule, and we’ll be more than ready to receive the guests after the wedding.”

“Sounds good, Stan, thanks,” Kit answered.

Sylvia arrived quietly, and Kit had to admit, she *did* look quite good in a dress. She was wearing a demure dark blue dress with crossed bands at the neckline that went between and under her breasts and then wrapped around her slender waist to form a bow at the small of her back, just over her tail, and the skirts were ankle length and pleated. Her dress had no sleeves, just straps that attached at the sides and looped over her shoulders, which

had blue lace frills on them, and she wore a very stylish beret that almost looked like it didn't belong with a dress, but somehow it just looked *right* on Sylvia. And somewhere in that form-fitting dress, he would bet, there was at least one concealed pistol. Nick had joked that men had died trying to figure out where she hid them, and seeing her in that dress, he could appreciate the joke. About the only place she could hide a gun in that dress was under the skirts, and any male that reached under those skirts was putting his life in his paws. Nick came in behind her, dressed in a very snazzy tuxedo. "We've got everything ready," he said. "The mates will seal off the house when we leave, and Valiant teams will take up their positions. I have an eight male team going to the wedding, and the rest of the mates will be here on the grounds and in the manor, keeping an eye on everything. I got two mates doing camera duty and Barnett's playing striker."

"Huh?" Jessie asked.

"Barnett will be in command until we get back," Sylvia explained. "Not everyone understands your football terms, Nick."

"Alright, well, let's move out into the courtyard," he called.

It was a beautiful warm late August morning, not a cloud in the sky, with just a faint breeze, and it was a wonderful morning to stand out near the line of limos and chat happily with friends and family as they waited for Vil to get her gown on. Kit and Jessie were surrounded by friends and family, and Kit almost wished that Vil would never get her dress on. He laughed with Muffy, who hung onto his shoulder as they talked with Ben and Jenny, then joked a while with Barry and Mike, both of whom were armed with cameras, and Janet had two hanging around her neck and a third mini-digital camera hanging from a thong around her wrist. Pat and Elly were talking with the Governor, and Marty had somehow submerged

himself in with his cousins, and the pack of them were whispering and giggling. Savid and Nawa's kids were laughing and running around, and the two mongooses were both keeping a close eye on their brood and also talking happily with John and Hannah. Sheila and Allison were talking about planes with Jeffrey, who seemed to have no idea what they were talking about, and Lilly was snapping one of her bra straps under her dark dress with a rueful laugh as she complained about it to Suzy and Sonya, who had asked her about her earrings. Stanley appeared momentarily to check the limos and look around, then hurried off with his phone in his paw, overseeing the final preparations for the upcoming reception, and Clancy stood quietly near one of the limos, dressed perfectly, not looking very comfortable at the idea of being a guest rather than a member of the staff. Clancy wasn't the only one going. Sally, Oscar, Bartholomew, and Luann were also going to the wedding, but as servants instead of guests, each of them wearing either a black suit or a sober formal black dress, who would wait on the wedding party and run errands for them before the ceremony.

Then Vil made her triumphant appearance in her wedding gown, and it was *gorgeous*. It was made of silk and satin, white of course, smooth and shimmering in the morning sun. She had opted for long sleeves, even had pawwraps on the ends with a single silk loop that went over her middle finger to hold them in place, and the neckline of her gown was surprisingly daring for a wedding dress, showing off just a faint hint of white-furred cleavage. The skirts of the gown dragged the ground, but only just, so it could hide her cast, and he could tell that the gown was as is, that there was no detachable train. That only made sense, since she was in a cast. The weight and drag of a train might make her unsteady as she walked, and falling down in the chapel was the last thing Vil wanted to do. The hem was just long enough to hide her cast, but not so long that she could step on her

hem. In other words, both beautiful and practical for the stylish bride with her leg in a cast. She had a dainty little tiara on just in front of her ears, with a poof of her lacy veil bunched up around it, ready to be pulled down over her face for the ceremony. Everyone applauded when she appeared, and she looked almost girlish and demure as she smiled shyly for them and let them admire her gown, but then the Ice Queen made her appearance. “What are we waiting around for?” she barked. “We’re behind schedule! Bridal party in the garage, everyone else pick a limo and get in, we need to get to the Holy Cross!”

It took them about ten minutes to get everyone in a limo and settled in. Kit and Vil rode with Jessie, Muffy, Sonya, and Suzy, and the chatter in the limo was under stably girlish and focused on the upcoming ceremony. Vil was calm but happy, anxious to be married but also looking forward to both the honeymoon, and Vil being Vil, the slow but inevitable merging of Vulpan Shipyards with Brighton Industries. “The boys are already at the cathedral,” Vil told them as they passed the fur Jahal, who was sitting under an umbrella with a partner out in the middle of the drive between the house and the gate, out where he was totally visible and couldn’t possibly do anything, then pulled out onto Stonebrook Drive, where the road had been converted to a long parking strip with Valiant guards stationed about every tenth of a mile, two furs in a Stonebrook golf cart, to watch over the cars and also be available to give someone a ride in a cart if they needed it. There were three police cruisers and two motorcycle units waiting for them at the end of the drive, and a fourth unit with its doors open sat by the road, where one of the officers jumped out and into the road and stopped traffic. The cars and motorcycles took up a position in front, and then the bridal party was on the way, a procession of eleven stretch limos holding over 40 family, guests, servants, and guards.

The ride to the church was almost like the victory parade of a conquering army. The police guiding the limos kept them together and also allowed them to ignore all the traffic lights, as a cruiser would pull into an intersection and stop traffic while the limos went through, then race back to the front after they went by, usually passing one or two of the other units who had done the same thing, while the two motorcycle units formed the vanguard of the procession. Because of the police escort, they got into downtown Boston and to the Cathedral of the Holy Cross pretty quickly, with nearly 90 minutes until the ceremony was slated to begin. But Kit knew from his own wedding that getting here that early was almost necessary, to make sure everything was ready and also to take care of the little last minute details that tended to pop up. Besides, Vil needed to preen herself to be ready for the ceremony, and that was best done at the chapel.

Kendall, Winston, the Brighton boys, and Charlie were waiting for them at the side entrance, but they weren't the only ones here. There were five news vans out on the street, and the reporters were already set up and ready to go; two looked to be broadcasting live. There was even a CNN van out there, and more than one camera swung towards the limos as they reached the side parking lot and pulled in, one by one, until the entire parking lot was filled with limousines. This wasn't going to be a Protestant wedding like Kit and Jessie's, and Vil and Kendall wouldn't be staying out of each other's sight until the ceremony began. They'd be greeting guests at the door starting about 45 minutes before the ceremony, a Catholic tradition, so it was only proper that Kendall greet Vil as soon as she arrived. Kendall was the one that opened the door of the limo, and his eyes just lit up and his jaw dropped when he looked inside and saw Vil. She just grinned wolfishly and held her paw out, and he blinked and took it and helped her

from the limo. “God, you’re gorgeous, Vil,” he breathed, looking at her with something approaching awe.

“I’d better be on my wedding day,” she answered with a sly smile. “Well, old male, your dream is about to come true,” she chuckled as she gave Winston a kiss on the cheek.

“It’s about time,” he answered. “Finally, the Vulpan family will be under the Brighton banner, where it belongs!”

Vil laughed. “Get your epee out, old male, you and me are gonna be fencing over that statement.”

“Oi, no kissing just the lucky groom!” Charlie protested as Sonya was helped out of the limo by Harry, and Kit got out from the other side and then helped Jessie and Suzy out. Vil laughed and pushed Kendall towards Charlie, as if to kiss him, and Kendall played along, puckering and making exaggerated kissing sounds as he leaned towards Charlie. “Good God, Kenny, mouthwash, mouthwash!” he called, dancing back to a round of laughter.

“I’m glad to see you all,” Winston said, kissing Jessie on the cheek as she reached them. “Are you well, Jessica?”

“I’m alright, Winston, thank you,” she answered. “Did you sleep much last night?”

“Like a baby. A certain son of mine, on the other paw,” he chuckled, looking at Kendall.

“It’s the excitement! In just two hours, my dastardly plan will be complete, and I’ll be able to begin my torment and torture of Villy!”

“If I have to tell you one more time not to call me that, Kendall, there *really* won’t have to be a divorce,” she threatened.

“You can’t back out now! We’re literally on the church steps!”

“Who said I had to back out? Marry you, take you back home, and they never see you again,” she threatened with a slight smile, which made Kendall laugh.

“I reserve the right to call you Villy up to the beginning of the ceremony. Then it’ll be *Vilenne* for the rest of our lives.”

“You’re only gonna call me Vilenne *once*, male,” she warned, pointing at him. “At the altar. Kit doesn’t call Jessie Jessica, you’re not gonna call me Vilenne.”

“Your name is Jessica? Who knew,” Kit said, looking at Jessie, which made her giggle.

“It is when I’m in trouble,” she answered with a wink.

To get a head start on the tradition, Vil and Kendall did greet all the guests from the manor at the side door, as kisses and pawshakes were happily exchanged. Priests and attendants escorted the guests into the main cathedral, which now had its floral arrangements and was fully decked out in roses and silk, which had to cost Vil quite a lot of money. Archbishop O’Malley was at the altar, talking with one of his monsignors and motioning towards the pews, where very soon the entire main cathedral would be *packed* with guests at one of the biggest social events of the decade in Boston, a marriage that had truly international implications. “Ah, so the entire wedding party is here now?” he asked as Kit and Jessie greeted him.

“All present and accounted for,” he nodded.

“We’re all dressed and ready, Father,” Jessie agreed.

“Good, good,” he smiled. “There’s some refreshments for you in the anteroom back there,” he told them, pointing to the side of the altar. “Where is Vilenne?”

“Outside teasing the Brightons and greeting the guests,” Jessie giggled.

“They’re a very nice family, for Anglicans,” O’Malley noted dryly, which made Jessie laugh.

Kit was right that getting there so early didn’t really mean anything. He found himself being quietly shadowed by a very dapperly dressed Nick while Sylvia stayed close to Jessie, and they found themselves chatting with guests who had arrived early, not long after the Stonebrook party. The first ones to arrive were Brian and Ruth, with their son Jonathon wearing a very nice suit and their daughter Misty, wearing a bronze-colored dress and her ever-present pawheld game system in her paws. Their oldest son, Daniel, was just behind them, wearing a black suit with a silver chain hanging between the pockets of his vest and a fedora; Daniel had a thing for the big band era and he dressed like a 40’s swinger. He even played the saxophone. Kit felt that he and Lupe would probably look perfect together, Daniel in his 40’s cut suit and fedora and Lupe in his zoot suit. Ruth hugged Jessie fondly, then over Kit’s quiet objections, put her paw behind his neck and pulled him down to kiss him on the cheek. “We’re happy to see you,” Ruth told them. “Isn’t Vil just stunning in her gown?”

“She’s beautiful,” Jessie agreed.

“Kit, we’re going to need to talk with Vil at the reception,” Brian told him in a serious voice. “But it can wait until then. Right now, the only thing that matters is this wedding.”

“Amen,” Kit agreed.

More of his family arrived, getting there earlier than the other guests, and to his surprise, Maxine was the next to get there. She was there with Graham Grant, her youngest son Leonard, and her daughters, Wendy and Kate, who were all still teenagers. Graham looked bored, and Kit’s paw clenched into a fist at the sight of him. Kit’s dislike of Graham was a fact that went long before his being disowned, for Graham had hit him when he was seven, and Kit had neither forgotten nor forgiven. It had also gotten Graham permanently banned from Stonebrook, for his mother had seen Graham do it. Graham was very liberal with his open palm, and how Maxine put up with him and his abusive behavior was far beyond him. Just as Bridgette couldn’t stand Sarah, Kit hated Graham, a hate established long before his hatred of his family came to be.

Victor didn’t fall far from Graham’s family tree, for both of them were petulant, spoiled, and cruel.

Kit didn’t exactly greet Maxine’s family, but Maxine did pull him aside as Graham and their young children sat down on the bride’s side of the chapel. “Luke, we *did not* do it,” she said earnestly. “In fact, I’m starting to doubt what we’re doing. Vil actually *put Bess to work!*” she said in a wondrous voice. “You were right, Luke, you were right. She really was trying to bring the youngers to heel. I just needed to be a bit more patient. I should have talked it out with her instead of letting Zach talk me into trying to unseat her. I’ve been trying to protect the family honor, and I may have helped damage it beyond repair,” she sighed.

“I’m glad you feel that way,” Kit said honestly. “And don’t call me by his name.”

Maxine chuckled. “I don’t want to intrude on Vil’s day, Lu-Kit. Could you tell her that when she gets back from her honeymoon, she and I are going to sit down and have a long, honest talk?”

“I can tell her.”

“Good. Have you heard anything from Vil about who might have done it?”

“She has a couple of leads, but I’ll let her reveal them,” he answered.

“Alright. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” she said honestly. “I’m sorry we got into this mess, and I’m both shocked and furious that someone actually tried to kill you. You may have done something of which I do not approve, but you are still a *Vulpan*, and you deserved more than that. Despite Vil’s paranoia, we would *never* have stooped to that level. Trying to take over the family by such brutish force would have just split the family apart.”

“It wasn’t aimed at her, Aunt Max, it was aimed at *me*,” he told her. “The attackers were *Paladins*.”

Maxine’s eyes widened. “Is that so?” she asked, an edge to her voice.

“Didn’t Zach tell you? We dropped their shields on his table the morning it happened.”

“Oh, no, he didn’t tell me,” she said, her eyes narrowing. “And I do believe I have a good idea *why* he didn’t tell me. Excuse me for a minute, nephew,” she said, padding off and digging her phone from her purse.

It sounded like Aunt Maxine was waving the white flag and was ready to surrender. Score one more for Vil.

The next family to arrive was Tom's. To Kit's delight, Dahlia came in with her parents, looking very thin and vulnerable in her black dress, her eyes nervous and a little frightened as she stayed very close to her mother, Tessa. Hunter was with them, who immediately peeled off to go sit with Jonathon, Leonard, Misty, Kate, and Wendy, for they were all around his age, the youngest of the cousins. Kit had nothing against Dahlia at all, for she had been an object of wrath in the family as much as him, the *insane* Vulpan they wanted to bury in an institution and forget was ever born, but Tom's dogged protection of his daughter had kept her out of the insane asylum and safely with her parents, who loved her and took care of her. Kit greeted Tom and Tessa, and Jessie came up behind him. "Uncle Tom, Aunt Tessa," Kit said with a nod, his voice cool, voicing his underlying anger with his elders. "Jessie, this is Tom and Tessa, and this is Dahlia. Hello Dahlia," Kit said with an honest smile.

"Lucas," she said with a thin smile in return. "This is the cat you married?"

"Yes, I'm Jessie," she said, offering her paw.

Dahlia looked at it a little warily, and Jessie lowered it gracefully. "I can't touch you, I'm sorry," Dahlia said. "I don't want to get needles in my fingers."

Jessie gave her a fleeting look, then nodded quite seriously. "I understand," she said calmly. "Come walk with me a minute, we'll check your seat and make sure it's safe."

“Sure,” Dahlia said with sudden energy, and the two padded down the aisle.

Tessa gave Jessie’s back a profoundly grateful look. “I see you married a good girl, Kit,” she said.

“I married a very *smart* girl who knows about Dahlia’s condition,” he answered soberly.

“Dahlia didn’t want to take her medicine so she wouldn’t be zonked out for the ceremony,” Tom said, watching them. “So she’s not very good today.”

“I’m just glad to see her out and about,” Kit said honestly.

“She’s really been looking forward to this,” Tessa said. “Are you alright, Luke?”

“We’re alright. A little scared, but alright,” he answered knowingly. “And don’t call me that. My name is Kit.”

Tessa gave him a wry smile. “You’re asking a lot,” she told him, putting her paw on his shoulder. “We just wanted you to know, Luke, we’re with you. We know you hate us because of what happened in the past, but that’s not going to stop us from standing with you now. Whoever it was tried to tear the family apart, but all they’ve managed to do is unify us behind you and Vil. Everyone’s outraged at what happened. Even Zachary,” she said in a slightly disbelieving tone, as if she could barely believe it.

“That might be true,” Kit said ruefully. “Maxine pulled me aside and told me pretty much the same thing. She even hinted that she’s willing to break from her brothers and make peace with Vil.”

“As well she should,” Tom declared. “What they did to you was way, way, *way* beyond the mast,” he said indignantly. “I sure as hell don’t approve of your marriage, despite the fact that I think Jessie is a wonderful girl, but that’s no reason for what they tried to do,” he bristled.

“We’ll see what Jake and Zach have to say when they get here,” Kit grunted.

Tessa kissed him on the muzzle fondly, and they went to go find their reserved seats.

Kit never got the chance to talk to Zach or Jake, for they slipped in quietly with their families and took their seats, and got quite a frosty reception from Tom and Maxine when they did so. Kit got waylaid by Sarah and her husband, Harland Vance, escorting their youngest daughter Christine into the church. Sarah put her paws on Kit’s shoulders and almost seemed to want to hug him, then she coughed and just patted him gently. “I’m glad to see you, Kit,” she told him. “When I heard what happened, I almost scorched some ears. There’s just no room in this family for something so *barbaric*,” she said flatly. “Are you and *her* alright?”

Sarah...had a few issues with Jessie, Kit realized. No doubt she remembered the blistering recriminations that Jessie had unleashed at her over how she treated Sheila and how Jessie had took his entire family over her knee and spanked them when they married in the very chapel in which they stood. Sarah was a very proud femme, and being lambasted by a little slip of a girl, not even out of college, had no doubt stung her pride. And if anything, Sarah was proud.

“We’re alright. A little shaken, but alright,” he answered.

“I think we need to sit down and talk as a family after the reception,” she said seriously. “All of us, even the kids. This proves that things have gone far out of control, and we need to sit down and talk this out so something like this never happens again.”

“You need to talk to Vil about that.”

“I will. But you need to be there, too, Kit,” she told him. “The youngers look up to you. They’ll respect your decisions and obey you, probably more than they would Vil. Sheila all but thinks you walk on water,” she chuckled ruefully.

“I don’t know about that.”

“I do. I’ll talk to you later, Kit,” she said, then she actually kissed him on the cheek, like what she and the others had done to him didn’t even matter. Kit’s eyes turned flat, but she didn’t even notice, hurrying past to quickly sit with Maxine, who had moved over to sit with Tom and Brian, and the four Vulpan elders had their heads together, talking in hushed tones, with Zach and Jake nearby but clearly not invited into their little group.

“You should listen to her, Luke,” Harland said calmly. If Tom was odd and Maxine was intense, Harland was mellow. He was very laid back, and basically allowed Sarah to manage everything. He was just along for the ride, more than happy to allow Sarah to wear the pants in their family. “She was *very* upset when she heard what happened. I don’t think she ever dreamed something like that could happen, and the only reason she didn’t call to make sure you were okay was because she was afraid you’d think she was up to something, or you’d yell at her. She didn’t want to give you even more stress, so she just left it be, and saved it for today.”

“Upset that it failed more than likely,” Kit said acidly, crossing his arms.

“I know you have no reason to trust any of them after what they did to you, and you have every reason to be angry, son,” Harland said quietly, “but remember one thing. Your father let his hate consume him, and you’re more than aware of what was the result. Don’t walk down Lucas’ path, son. You’ve seen where it goes. You can forgive but not forget, but if you never forgive, some day we’ll bury you beside your father and remark at how much like *him* you turned out to be,” he said calmly. Before Kit could turn on him angrily, Harland just put his paws in his pockets and strolled down the aisle, like he didn’t have a care in the world.

Harland’s words were casual, but they were devastating. Kit leaned back against the pew’s side and realized, in a moment of clear epiphany, that Harland was a lot smarter than he expected, and he was right up to a point. He could never turn into his father, have that much hate and let it ruin his life, but Harland did have a point. If he let his hatred of his elders poison the family, then he could very well see everything fly apart again, speaking in a moment of anger and turning the elders that did support Vil against her. He couldn’t forget. He couldn’t forgive. Not after what they did to him. They didn’t know what it was like, they couldn’t even fathom what it was like to lay in that hospital bed, his entire body feeling like it was on fire, and be so alone...so *alone*, then find out that his bastard father had tried to have the hospital literally wheel him out into the back alley and abandon him, leave him to die, it was like someone had reached inside him and ripped his heart out. That had been hell, absolute hell, the pain and the fear and the isolation and the horror of a terrified child finding out his father wanted him dead, and to feel so completely and utterly *alone*, was like a white-hot

needle through his soul. Until they experienced pain like that, until they *knew* what it had been like for him, knew that what they did to him had scarred him both physically and emotionally, they could never understand, and he could never forgive them. But he *could* be civil...and keep his mouth shut. He just had to hold out until he could go back home, then he could live his life, they could live up here with their cursed money, and everyone would be happy.

Or at least convinced themselves they were.

His paws were shaking, and almost on cue, Jessie was there. She always seemed to sense when his emotions were getting away from him, and her paw on his side soothed him immediately, soothed him in ways he couldn't even understand. He let her burrow her arms around him and put her head on his shoulder, and he held her close and let her comfort him as raw wounds just under the surface of his soul were torn open again. She understood. She couldn't imagine what it was like for him, but at least she understood why he couldn't let it go, couldn't forgive them, she understood that the scars on his arm and back went all the way down into his soul. She understood that he had lost more than just a piece of his ear, he had lost his innocence, had lost his family, and had lost a part of himself that could never be recovered, and she loved him despite those wounds, wounds that made him both less than other males and more than them at the same time.

"It's alright, handsome fox," she whispered, her fingers tracing the scars on his back over his coat, and they never once wandered off those frosted pathways, she knew them so well. "Just a little longer."

"I love you, Jessie," he breathed, burying his muzzle in her hair.

"I love you too, Kit," she returned, kissing him on the cheek. "Better?"

“Good enough to get through this,” he said wearily.

Fortunately, there were no more family confrontations. The only Vulpan that he greeted after that was Terry, who rushed into the church about twenty minutes before the ceremony was going to start. “Sorry, traffic was a nightmare,” he said. “It took me an *hour* to get here from Logan. It’s a zoo out there. The streets around the chapel are closed off to traffic, and there’s gotta be ten thousand furs out there.”

“That many?” Jessie gasped.

He nodded. “They all want to see Vil come out of the church after the ceremony. If she doesn’t come out the front door and present herself to Boston as a married femme, there might be a riot,” he said grimly.

“There wasn’t anyone out there when we got here!” Jessie said incredulously.

“They probably had everything blocked off to keep them back while you two got in,” Terry told her. “And after what happened to you two, the police weren’t taking any chances that the Paladins might try again. There are police barricades at every intersection in a two block radius and snipers on every rooftop around the chapel,” he told them. “I saw them when we came in.”

“Woah,” she breathed.

“Welcome to the royal family of New England, Jessie,” he grinned. “This is the biggest social event to happen in Boston since Kit’s father got married. It’s not every day that the ruler of the Vulpan family gets married. This is a once in a generation event.”

“I need to watch TV more I think,” she fretted, which made both Kit and Terry explode into laughter.

It certainly looked like the event of the year, Kit mused as he looked out over the rapidly filling chapel. The main chapel of the Cathedral of the Holy Cross could easily hold a thousand, and it was almost filled to capacity with family, friends, in-laws, and notable furs from New England and beyond. Governor Perry wasn't the only high-ranking politician in those seats. Senator Ted Kennedy had taken time from his brain tumor treatment to attend the ceremony and was sitting with a large contingent of the Kennedy clan, who were also in-laws, as did the Governors of every state that made up New England, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Maryland. Governor Crist of Florida had even come, and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger of California was sitting with the Kennedy clan, mainly since he was married to Maria Shriver. Every Congressfur representing New England was also in attendance, and a very large contingent of British aristocracy was sitting on Kendall's side of the aisle. The crown jewel had to be the wiry yet handsome Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, a slender meerkat sitting with a few other powerful Washington politicians near the front on Vil's side. Not only were current powerful politicians here, but hopefuls as well. Kit saw the Democratic nominee for President, Barack Obama, near the front row with his wife Michelle Obama and their two daughters, which surprised Kit since the Democratic convention was just this week, and he'd given his big speech just last night in that stadium in Denver. The tall, lanky cheetah-looking mixed breed was smiling and laughing lightly at something his daughter said, and Kit had to chuckle at the sight of him. If the PPC and the Paladins hated Kit and Jessie, they had to be absolutely going up in flames at the idea that a mixed breed actually had a viable chance to become President. They were surrounded by secret

service agents, talking in hushed tones. A casual glance showed that every in-law family was in attendance as well, the Stocktons who were his own relatives through his mother, the Astors, the Guggenheims, the Vances, the Grants, and the Leeks.

Kit did meet one new face before the ceremony. Winston came up with a matronly looking, slightly plump older vixen whose long curly hair was held back by a hat, hair stranded through with gray. “Kit, Jessie, this is your new mother-in-law, Abby. Abby, this is Kit and Jessie.”

“My, what a pretty young thing!” Abigail Brighton said fondly, touching Jessie on the cheek. “And when will you be delivering, love?”

“The end of September, Misses Brighton.”

“Oh, please, call my Abby, dear!” she laughed. “Everyone does!”

“Did you just get here, Abby?” Kit asked.

She nodded. “My plane was a little late getting here, and traffic was a *beast* getting in from the airport,” she answered. “I tried to get here yesterday, but things were so busy at the company.”

“You work there?”

She nodded. “When Winston’s away, I keep an eye on things for him,” she answered. “He knows he’ll get the truth when I’m watching the board,” she chuckled. “I must say, I’m quite happy we’re about to all be one big family,” she said with a bright smile. “Such a strapping tall, handsome young male and such a pretty little femme! I’ll certainly love looking at *your* pictures in the album. Much better than some of the Brightons,” she said, elbowing Winston lightly. “Sometimes I think I’m looking at pictures

of the Loch Ness monster's back end when paging through the Brighton albums."

Jessie giggled uncontrollably, and Kit only had to smile. Their kids certainly didn't get their sense of humor *just* from their father. It seemed that Abigail Brighton was just as playful and impish as her brood.

"Well, I don't think it'll be boring having you as in-laws," Kit laughed.

"Now, after the wedding, we'll have to sit down and chat," Abigail announced. "I need to learn all about you!"

An altar boy approached them. "The Archbishop wants you to come to the nave so you can be ready," he announced. "We'll be starting in about ten minutes."

"Alright," Kit nodded.

"Guess that's my cue to go sit down. Now don't trip Vil on the way down the aisle, Winston," she winked at him.

"I'll do my best, dovey," he drawled in reply.

Winston, Kit and Jessie ghosted up to the entrance nave and saw Vil and Kendall greeting the last attendees at the door, with the Archbishop beside them, and across the street was the crowd that Terry had described. The police were keeping them on the far side of the street, with what was now ten news crews being allowed on this side of the street but not allowed to leave the sidewalk, and all the cameras were pointed at the front steps, where Vilenne Vulpan and her groom, Kendall Brighton, were resplendent in their wedding clothes, following the Catholic tradition of greeting the guests at the door. Kit found himself shaking a few paws himself as guests

greeted him and Jessie after they came into the door, at least until the last few hurried in.

“Five minutes,” O’Malley said quietly as the last guests were greeted and ushered inside by altar boys. “Let’s go ahead and close up the doors,” he told his monsignor aides. “Everyone get into position in the nave, and let’s do it just as we rehearsed!” he said with growing excitement. “Father Abbot, if you’d kindly go warn the organ player to begin at exactly one o’clock on the dot?”

“Of course, Archbishop,” he nodded, then he herded a flock of altar boys to get in position along the aisle, which would be the overt warning to the congregation that the ceremony was about to begin.

“Well, here we go,” Suzy giggled as they fell into place at the very beginning of the line. As best man and maid of honor, they had the honor to lead the procession. They would enter in order in relation to where they would stand at the altar. Jessie and Michael would go in first after Kit and Suzy, since they’d be standing on the inside, then Sonya and Harry, which was a slight change from the way Vil had originally planned it. Harry was the tallest Brighton, so it was decided he’d be best paired with Sonya, so as not to make it look too silly. Muffy and Michael would be the last of the wedding party to enter before the bride and groom, who would wait with O’Malley at the end of the aisle until the wedding party was in place. The honor of coming down the aisle without anyone else stealing their thunder would be reserved for them alone, without anyone in the way. Usually Vil and Kendall would come down arm in arm, but Winston would be filling that role, and Kendall would be walking by himself just behind the Archbishop and off to the side, as if Vil was with him. Winston would give Vil away to him at the base of the dais, and then they would ascend to the

altar as a couple. They would leave the altar in reverse order after the ceremony, with the newlyweds leaving first and Kit and Suzy bringing up the rear. “You know, I sometimes thought we’d be arm in arm going to the altar under different circumstances,” she winked.

“Yeah, when I was fourteen,” Kit replied lightly.

“Too bad we’re not Mormons,” she grinned.

“Back off, vixen,” Jessie trilled behind them. “Don’t make me show you the business end of my claws.”

Suzy laughed, and Archbishop O’Malley gave them a cool look behind them. “Be serious, children, or Vil will spank you right in front of half the civilized world.”

“Damn right I will,” Vil warned from the back of the procession. “Sorry, Father.”

At exactly one, the organ’s deep, sonorous tones reverberated through the chapel, and that was the sign to begin. Kit and Suzy led the wedding party towards the altar, Suzy with her paw on Kit’s forearm, and every face in the packed cathedral was on them, as well as three cameras being held by the video production team that Vil had hired to record the ceremony. They walked at a steady and measured pace down the long, red-carpeted aisle in front of an altar boy who was carrying a cross on a pole, the ceremonial cross-bearer. Kit and Suzy reached the altar and took their places, then looked back to see the rest of the party arrive and take their places as well, then all eyes turned to the back as the organ broke into a joyful hymn; the wedding march was not played at a Catholic wedding.

Vil acquitted herself in spectacular fashion, mainly with Winston's help. By leaning on Winston, she was able to make the stately march down the aisle without a limp, almost looking like she wasn't wearing a cast on her leg. She walked behind Kendall and the Archbishop, and Winston looked so proud Kit thought he could die right there in the aisle and die a happy male. Kendall looked equal measures of excited and terrified at having to perform the long and complicated ceremony in front of a huge audience, but Vil was as serene as a summer hammock swaying in the breeze. Only at the base of the dais did Vil's leg become apparent. Her genuflection to the altar was a bit stiff because of her cast, and after Winston kissed her on the cheek and gave her to Kendall, her movements were slightly awkward as she navigated the step using a leg whose ankle was in a cast. Kendall helped her mount the dais as best he could, having her lean on his arm as they got into position as Archbishop O'Malley stepped to his place behind the altar and raised his paws.

The ceremony was long, and it was in the Catholic tradition. There was a homily, there was liturgy, there were periods when they would stand or kneel as the congregation stood or sat, and then, after hymns, the recitation from the Bible, and the sermon, did the meat of the ceremony begin. Kit as the ring bearer moved into action, producing the ancestral wedding rings of the Brighton family and had them at the ready as Vil and Kendall prepared to take their vows. Instead of reciting their own vows, they had elected to use the standard vows, which weren't too different from the ones Kit and Jessie had taken during their marriage. O'Malley recited the vows first to Kendall, who looked deeply into Vil's eyes, paused for a melodramatic second that was *not* in the rehearsals, then smiled and said "I do." Vil gave him a slightly stern look, but that melted into a glorious smile as O'Malley recited her vows, and she wasted not an instant saying "I do," barely

waiting for him to finish. After that came the exchange of the rings. Kit offered Vil's ring to Kendall, and he slipped it onto her slender finger with a gentle smile as he recited the phrase "with this ring, I thee wed." Kit then passed Kendall's ring across him and to Vil, who repeated the rite. Then they kissed, and it was pretty boring as kisses went, since Kendall was too self-conscious to really put much into it.

After that, it would have been over in a Protestant ceremony, but there was still the Benediction to go. Fortunately, though, O'Malley made his benediction short and to the point with only the Lord's Prayer, which echoed through the chapel for a few seconds after it was chanted back by the congregation. O'Malley then raised his paws again, out wide, and smiled. "I have the matchless honor to present to you, faithful parishioners and welcome guests, Kendall William Brighton and Vilenne Amelia Brighton Vulpan. May God bless their union."

Flashbulbs exploded from the chapel as a roar of applause probably audible to those waiting across the street thundered through the cathedral. Vil and Kendall stood with Vil's paw on Kendall's arm there at the altar and gave everyone their photo op, standing for nearly a minute as the applause continued, and then, at Vil's gentle signal, they started down the dais. Vil moved carefully on her casted leg, but managed it with a certain amount of dignity. Kit watched them go, and he could only smile both outside and inside. His sister was now married, wasn't entirely his and his alone anymore, and he could only feel happy for her. She had truly found her match in Kendall, and he was certain that this was the beginning of a long, satisfying, and loving marriage. Vil would understand the unique joy and contentment that came with having a spouse, of being part of a family rather than single, of sharing her life with a male she loved, cherished, and

respected. He was sure there were going to be some barnburners between them, because Vil was headstrong and Kendall wasn't afraid of her, but those arguments would only bring them closer together. Where it counted, in their hearts, they loved each other, and that could overcome the wrinkles that would pop up due to Vil's stubborn streak. Vil and Kendall marched as gracefully down the aisle as a femme could in a cast, leading the procession to a cacophony of applause and a blinding array of flashbulbs, and Kit was sure that from this day forward, life both for him and the Vulpan family would never be the same again.

It would be better.

As they led the procession, now Kit and Suzy brought up the end, walking behind Jessie and Michael. They all gathered in the nave for pictures of the entire bridal party, and they all lined up as they'd stood at the altar, with Kit between Kendall and Michael. Then there were pictures of each couple starting with the bride and groom, then pictures of Kit and Suzy, and so on and so on, then pictures of Kit and Vil, then pictures of them and Jessie, then Muffy was added. While the production crew were fussing with pictures of Winston and the Brighton boys, Vil gave Kit a crushing hug. He literally picked her up off the ground and swung her from side to side, which made her laugh. "We did it, bro," she told him. "We're both married, and now they can't touch me. We won, brother. We *won!*"

"I'll believe that when we're back home in Austin," he told her, then he kissed her on the cheek. "But I think we're almost there."

Vil gave Jessie a fond hug. "Now we can gossip about our husbands, sis," she said with an uncharacteristic giggle. Vil was not a *giggler*.

"You need to have a baby, Vil," Jessie told her. "*Then* we can gossip."

“Already working on it, sister dear, already working on it,” Vil chuckled.

“I think it’s about time for you two to go,” Winston said. “Nobody else will leave before you, and we’ve held them up in there for nearly a half hour. Besides, I’m hungry, and it’s hard to plot world domination on an empty stomach.”

“Always thinking with your stomach, old male,” Harry laughed.

Kit and Harry did the honors. They opened the doors of the cathedral with Vil and Kendall standing behind them, literally unveiling the new couple to the city of Boston. The white limo was sitting out on the street waiting for them, with Bartholomew standing by the door waiting and Oscar driving, but it was hard to see them in the swarm of flashbulbs that exploded from across the street and the almost deafening roar of the crowd. Vil and Kendall stood there for a moment, unmoving, giving the Bostonians their chance to get a picture, then Kendall carefully helped Vil down the stairs. The rest of them watched from the front doors as Vil and Kendall strolled down the carpet as if they owned the world, and then when they reached the limo, both Kendall and Bartholomew helped Vil into the limo. It started off as police cruisers moved to escort it, and then it was out of sight.

“Well, we’d better go if we want a spot in a limo, given our ride just left without us,” Muffy said lightly, which made Sonya splutter.

Fortunately, Nick was thinking ahead. As soon as Vil and Kendall were on their way, he collected up Kit and Jessie and the rest of the wedding party and hustled them through the side door ahead of everyone else and got them into a waiting limo, which had Donny behind the wheel. “The

armored tank special,” Nick winked as he closed the door behind Muffy, who was last in, and then the huge wolf and Sylvia got in the front seat with Donny. Other limos were now pulling into the side lot to pick up guests, and there was certainly now going to be a large and constant stream of limos and cars going from the cathedral to Stonebrook, for the wedding was over and now the reception awaited them. Kit was fairly sure the police probably just made it easy on everyone and blocked off the route to give them easy movement, which would clear them all out of the city much faster and let them get things back to normal. And when they got going, he saw that his hunch was right. Every intersection through Boston was blocked off, allowing the limos and cars to proceed quickly and effortlessly from the cathedral to Stonebrook.

Odds were, he realized, the precaution might have less to do with Vil and more to do with the fact that there were a good couple dozen very high-ranking politicians behind them, from Congressfurs to Senators to Governors to cabinet-level Secretaries to candidates for President. It was easier from a security standpoint just to block off the route and allow them to pass through Boston. Sure, it would snarl traffic, but that was going to happen no matter what with a constant stream of limos running from downtown out to I-90. The county sheriffs and the Massachusetts State Police had made similar moves on the other end of the trip down Interstate, clearing a path for them all the way to Stonebrook Drive, where a *platoon* of police and federal agents were stationed. But the police presence ended at the gates of the manor, though Kit did see several FBI agents roaming the grounds, their **FBI** emblazoned vests glaringly out of place on the grounds.

“You didn’t say anything about the feds being on the grounds, Nick,” Kit called.

“Didn’t really seem important to tell you, Kit,” he answered. “I think you had enough on your mind. Besides, Stanley *did* tell you there were government males on the grounds this morning, inspecting the security, I think you just missed it.”

“Yeah, he did,” Kit realized.

“They called early yesterday morning and said that some politician had requested the feds check the security at the reception all the sudden, so they had to rush in here and establish security. They got here and realized they didn’t have to do much,” he grinned back at them. “I got everything under control, and the site commander liked my security plan, so they just slid into our plan nice and easy. They got feds and a few Secret Service guys on the grounds to reinforce my own mates and Valiant, which just makes it easier for me, and I’m still in command of the security with Commander Blake backing me up. The only concession we had to make is *only* the feds are carrying pistols. My mates are all patrolling naked, and they don’t like it one bit,” he noted with a smile. “I had to have everyone stow their guns in the command post, and there’s an FBI agent there guarding them. The PWDs are hidden in one of the secret rooms, cause they’d arrest the lot of us if they saw what we’re carrying,” he laughed. “That Obama bloke wanted to come to the reception, but the Secret Service guys here wouldn’t let him.”

“Why not?” Muffy asked.

“Cause they needed more time to sweep the house, and there’s too much outside security for them to have control,” Nick answered. “They don’t like us mercs too much, dove. They *know* we have assault weapons hidden somewhere on the grounds, and they wouldn’t let Obama anywhere

near us,” he winked. “After what happened with the Paladins, they’d want this place completely under their control before they let Obama in here.”

“Then it’s just as good he’s not coming,” Kit said. “I wouldn’t tolerate the feds coming in here and taking over Stonebrook.”

Vil and Kendall were already inside when they piled out of the limo, and they found them in the ballroom, Vil showing Kendall the decorations anew as they walked paw in paw around, and as Stanley barked frenzied commands to the staff as they rushed about, making last minute preparations and setting out the first of the food, which were trays of bread placed on each table. The musicians were in the corner, warming up, and Kit saw ten Valiant guards and four of Nick’s merc friends already in the room, the guards standing at the doors leading out of the ballroom that led to out of bounds areas and the mercs patrolling. Vil folded Kit into a hug when they reached the pair, and she grinned up at him brightly. “Anything to say before there’s a few hundred furs in here?” she asked.

“I’ve changed my mind, you can’t have the reception here,” he said dryly.

Vil exploded into laughter. “I think Stan would kill you if you did that,” she winked. “I’ve never seen him so happy,” she added, looking the side, where Stanley had stopped in his journey to the kitchen to dress down one of the servants from Brian’s manor about the angle of the folded napkins being laid out over the plates.

“That’s happy?” Kendall asked.

“Yes,” Kit and Vil said in unison.

Kit and Jessie sat at the main table with Kendall as Vil went over to talk to Brian, who had just arrived. Vil and Kendall wouldn't be greeting guests at the door as Kit and Jessie had for their reception, because they'd already done so at the church. Stav and Marcus came over and whispered to Vil, and Kit saw her visibly start. Bartholomew brought a pot of tea out for them, but Kit almost spilled it when he saw Zach come in on the far side of the ballroom. The very sight of Zach standing in the halls of Stonebrook after Kit vowed he would never so much as come inside the gates again sent him into an almost instant fury. He very nearly jumped over the table and charged down there to beat the everliving stuffing out of him, but Jessie's paw on his forearm stalled him. "Don't cause a scene, handsome fox," she said calmly. "Go over and *ask nicely*, and if he doesn't leave, then you can have Nick tie him in a knot and toss him into the river."

Vil came to the rescue. She swooped in on Zach, with Brian in tow, and a hasty and fierce conversation ensued, done in harsh whispers from the look of it. As Kit, Jessie, Kendall, and Bartholomew watched on, Zach seemed to tense up, his eyes wide, then he turned and rushed from the ballroom. She hobbled back over to them as Brian went out after him, and seeing all of them staring, she gave a dark, sober look. "Maxine *invited* him," she grunted. "It seems Maxine's decided to call a family-wide conference without discussing the matter with us first, and feels that holding it here after the reception is the best way to go about it. That's going to be on hold, though," she said with a frown. "They found Stevie."

"Did they arrest him?" Jessie asked.

"If he survives they might," she said grimly. "He's in the hospital."

Kit gasped.

“They just found him at the bottom of a hill in Pennsylvania, in what was left of his car. From what Marcus told me, he was speeding up a mountain road leading to a some compound down in the Poconos, probably a Paladin training compound. Either he tried to kill himself, or he was in so much of a hurry to get there that he lost control of his car and went right over the hillside. And on those kinds of roads, you don’t get a second chance if you lose control. Marcus said his car flipped right over the guardrail and went down a sixty foot hill, bouncing off trees like a pinball, and he was down there for almost four hours before anyone found him. Marcus said he’s in bad shape, and they’re airlifting him to a hospital right now. Zach’s on his way to Pennsylvania to see him.”

“Holy God,” Kit breathed, not sure how to feel. Steven had tried to kill him, but to hear that, that he’d spent a few hours laying in the twisted wreckage of a car, waiting to die...God. Kit could sympathize with how that felt, to be in so much pain, and to be so *alone*...he wouldn’t even wish that on Steven. That was a hell no fur deserved, no matter what they’d done. But it didn’t make him *too* compassionate. If Bridgette was right, then Steven was the one that tried to kill them, tried to murder his wife and unborn daughter, and for no reason other than the fact that Jessie wasn’t a fox. Jessie had managed to charm so many of his relatives, even ones that hated the fact that she was a cat, like Tom and Travis. Steven refused to see her for the beautiful and special femme she was, all he could see was the shape of her muzzle and the color of her fur. Kit almost felt sorry for him, to be so blinded by unreasonable hate, but his pity ended at the thought that Steven had tried to murder him and his wife.

“Is he going to be alright, love?” Kendall asked.

“Marcus didn’t say, but from the sound of it, he might not make it,” she said grimly. “Which is a pity. I wanted to strangle him myself, not him take the easy way out and die before I get my paws on him.”

“Vil!” Jessie gasped.

“I told you, sis, I’m not nice,” she said in a dark manner, flexing her fingers ominously. “I hold little pity for a cousin who tried to murder the most important male in my life.”

“Well, so much for the marriage,” Kendall said flippantly, which made Vil chuckle.

“Alright, *one* of the most important males in my life,” she corrected, touching Kendall on the arm fondly.

The news of Steven swept through the family quickly after Vil’s declaration. They too had their ways of getting information, though they weren’t as effective and efficient as the panthers. Most of them knew by the time they got to Stonebrook, and as more and more guests arrived, it was the hot topic of the moment, even over the wedding. Winston Brighton seemed nonplussed when he was told when he arrived, more satisfied than angry that they had a suspect and that suspect had been found. More and more arrived, until the entire ballroom was filled with furs who were sitting, standing, talking, and Kit saw that except for Zach, Alicia, and their youngest, all the Vulpans were present, from Misty to Bridgette and from Brian to Jake. Kit lost track of things for a bit, and even forgot about Steven, when Vil returned and they had a good time talking, pointedly ignoring the news as Vil engaged Kit and Jessie in happier topics, like Laura’s impending birth, their honeymoon plans, and a light curiosity about what gifts the guests were bringing, which were being quietly collected out

in the main entry and stored in a side room. Kit had wanted to get Vil and wedding present, but she'd squashed that idea, telling him that him being home was all the present she needed, and besides, rather cheekily informed him that he couldn't afford to get her what she deserved for her wedding anyway.

When the last of the guests arrived, they sat down to dinner. Franny and the cooks, some from other manors, had done a *spectacular* job, for the busy staff rolled out a five course meal that left everyone's mouth watering from the smells and gave them a meal worth remembering. Kit saw his own staff interspersed with servants from other manors, rushing about, placing plates, filling wine glasses from bottles pulled from deep inside the Stonebrook wine cellar, and the chatter in the room muted as everyone enjoyed the wonderful meal that Stonebrook had provided the guests.

Kit had the traditional honor to present the first toast in his role as the best male, so when the desserts were almost gone, he decided to get it overwith. He stood up and rapped his fork on his wine glass, and the murmuring in the ballroom quieted.

"I'm not very good at toasts," he said in a clear voice, looking down at his sister. "But I'm supposed to make the first one, so here goes. Vil. You've been more than a sister to me. After Mom died, you were like my mom, and now that you're finally married, I'm feeling like I'm being cut from your apron strings," he said with a slight smile. "So, here's to hoping that you're so happy with Kendall that you stop meddling in my life."

Vil and most at the table laughed, and she pointed at him. "Guess again, boy," she taunted, then she took a sip of her wine.

Winston stood up next, and he smiled down at Vil and Kendall. “Here’s to two years of plotting coming to fruition,” he chuckled. “I knew if I threw enough of my sons at you, you’d find one you could love, Vil.”

“Well, I have two others to try out before I make a final decision,” she murmured, which made Jessie explode into laughter and made Harry and Michael grin.

And so it went. The toasts went on for nearly half an hour, as Vil was toasted by virtually the entire Brighton family, the elder Vulpans, and a couple of Governors. After the toasts, the two near tables were removed and seats placed along the walls behind the columns, and Vil and Kendall had the first dance. It wasn’t entirely graceful because of Vil’s cast, but Kendall made up for that by putting Vil’s feet on top of his own and dancing for them, which made her laugh and hold him close. Kit and Jessie watched on with gentle smiles, and Jessie leaned her head against his shoulder. Both couples were feeling quite close and affectionate at that moment, because it gave Kit the most curious sense of peace and happiness to see his sister so happy.

They had reason to be happy. Vil was right about one thing, and that was with her now solidly married to Kendall Brighton, the elders *would not dare* try to usurp her from the company. Winston Brighton was a powerful fox, and if they angered him, he could reach all the way across the Atlantic and put a paw in that Kit’s family *would not* like, not at all. The merger of the two families made sense politically, financially, and the fact that Vil and Kendall loved each other was just that much more icing on the cake. Jake couldn’t deny that Vulpan Shipyards would reap tremendous profit from the deal, Maxine couldn’t deny that the merger made the two families, now one, created one of the most powerful, prominent, respected, and feared families

on the entire planet, and Zach couldn't deny that now one family controlled nearly half of all large-scale ship production in the Western world. From the Vulpan warships and tankers to the Brighton warships, freighters, and ferries, the Vulpan-Brighton family now literally controlled the seas, just as Winston had envisaged. And when Vil and Kendall had their first child, that child would eventually inherit *both* companies, and probably be one of the most powerful single furs on the planet. There was so much in it for the Vulpan that they they'd be insane to try to screw it up, and that made Vil absolutely untouchable.

But there was hope in that regard. From the way Maxine talked, she was ready to switch sides. Maxine had been all about the respect of the family, and Vil's single act of reining in Bess had done more to soothe Maxine than anything possibly could. From Maxine's point of view, Vil had pulled off a miracle, and that was get Bess out of the nightclubs and into a business suit, made her respectable and responsible. Maxine would have preferred that Bess marry instead of enter the company, but the results were more or less the same, and that was that Bess would vanish off the tabloids and make something out of herself. With the alliance on the other side broken, Jake would probably concede, which would leave only Zach. Zach might be arrogant or angry enough to continue to fight, but Vil had him dead to rights, with him alone and his son doing the unthinkable, trying to murder a fellow family member. Vil could swat him like a fly now, because she was ruthless enough to use Zach's son against him in the mother of all blackmails. She would force Zach to give in to her every demand, or she would reveal the fact that Kitstrom Zachary Vulpan was heavily involved in the PPC, and that his son was the leader of the Paladins, which were considered a terrorist group. That wouldn't do much to hamstring him in the Boston social circles, since so many of them were purists anyway, but it

would be devastating to him if he ever tried to do anything outside of Boston...and if he was the CEO of Vulpan Shipyards, that would destroy any chance that he'd be an effective CEO. Vil dealt with all kinds in her job, including the leaders of nations, and many of them would take an exceptionally dim view of dealing with a PPC member, given that the PPC was banned in almost every European country. Vil could destroy any chance Zach could maintain the chair if he was ever CEO, and that more or less defeated him. Kicked out of Stonebrook and unable to take control of the company, Zach was now effectively neutralized. To continue to fight would be pointless, but Zach was a very arrogant and stubborn male. He might continue to fight just for the sake of fighting.

After the first dance, others joined. Kit danced with Jessie, who laughed when her stomach got in the way, and they glided across the dance floor with eyes only for each other. The orchestra was exceptional, and they played classical to swing to country to more modern music. After that, Kit danced with Vil, whom he made dance by not carrying her, then Suzy, then Sheila, but he was a bit startled when Ruth pulled him out onto the floor during a waltz. "Now that I have you where you can't run away," she said with a smile, "I wanted to thank you for being such a good friend to Muffy. She adores you, Kit."

"That's alright, Ruthie," he answered. "I kinda like her."

"Now, I'd like for you to talk to Brian," she told him. "And I don't mean just glare at him and make snide comments. *Talk* to him, Kit. I think you'll find that he's not what you think."

"I can't do that," he said seriously. "I will never forgive them for what they did to me. Never, Ruthie. Never."

“Never is a long time, Kit.”

“I’m a very patient fox,” he said simply. “No matter what he might feel about me or might have felt when it happened, nothing changes the fact that he chose his money over helping me in my greatest hour of need, and I can’t ever forgive them for that.”

“Oh, Kit,” she sighed as they turned, “I think if you looked into it, used that marvelous mind of yours, you’d see that Brian was just as trapped as you were. They all were. You remember your father as a tyrant, Kit, and that’s exactly what he was. Everyone was so afraid of him, Kit, so afraid that they were even afraid to go against him after he was dead. He drove your mother’s family away to the point where they completely divorced themselves of you and Vil, and he terrorized all of us in ways I don’t think you know about. I don’t think you understand.”

“I was too busy laying in a hospital bed, *alone*, trying not to die,” he said flatly.

“You’re not being fair, Kit,” she said gently.

“No, Aunt Ruthie, I’m not,” he admitted bluntly. “There’s no way you can understand what it was like. And if you could, then you wouldn’t be saying these things to me now. Luke Vulpan the child who desperately needed his family, needed *anyone* when he laid in that hospital bed and nobody came, that Vulpan died that night, Ruthie. The family killed him with their neglect. Kit Vulpan the adult walked out of that hospital six months later. I’m not the same fox, and I have no reason to ever forgive those who killed the boy I used to be. I have every reason to never forgive my family for abandoning me.”

“But you’re not being fair, Kit. Vil didn’t come to see you either.”

“Vil had the *only* good excuse, because she used Suzy to send her messages, and she took care of me both before and after the accident. Brian had his chance, Ruthie. They all did. They’ll never get another one. I don’t blame Muffy and the youngers because they had no voice or were too young to understand what was going on, but anyone older than me *knew* what was going on, and they made their choice. They didn’t want me then, and I don’t want them now. I’ll tolerate them being in my house for the reception, I’ll be civil because Vil doesn’t need me disrupting things right now, but when this is all over, I’ll return to Austin and hope that I never see any of them ever again. There is nothing any of them can ever say or anything that they can ever do to change my mind, Ruthie. Even if Brian pulled me out of a burning car, I still wouldn’t forgive him.”

“And that means you won’t forgive me either?” she asked.

“No,” he said in a steely tone. “I like you, Ruthie, but I can’t do it. You abandoned me too. I’ll give you a great deal of leeway because Jessie seems to like you and you seem very sincere, but I can’t forgive you.”

She sighed sadly, looking up at him. “Well, can I at least give you a hug, nephew?”

“If it makes you feel better,” he answered. She slid her arms around him and held him gently as they danced, but Kit didn’t feel too much emotion over the act.

“I know it won’t mean anything, but I am very sorry about what happened to you, Kit,” she said with her head against his chest. “You may not accept my apology, but I feel you deserve one nevertheless. We were very cruel to you, and you showed how strong you are by making it, and how kind you are not to do to us what we did to you. Even Zach respects

you because of that, Kit. They may not like you for the choices you've made, but they can't deny that you are probably the strongest of us all."

"It's appreciated, but you're right, I won't accept it," he said gently yet adamantly.

"Well, you may not like it, but I love you, nephew," she told him, patting on the back gently. "And I'm glad you're here."

He couldn't say anything to that without sounding like a total ass, so he finished the dance with Ruth in silence. She pulled him down and kissed him on the muzzle fondly, then she returned to the table where the other Vulpan elders and their spouses were sitting. And all of them had been watching Kit and Ruth. Kit returned to the main table and sat down between Jessie and Vil, who was resting her leg after dancing with Winston. The main table was reserved for the select family of the bride and groom, and was populated by the newlyweds, the wedding party, Abigail Brighton, and John and Hannah Williams. "Well, what was that all about?" Vil asked him.

"Same old same old," Kit answered. "Ruthie trying to sweet talk me back into the family."

"Did she get anywhere?"

Kit gave her a flat look.

"Question answered," she said impishly, then laughed suddenly when Kendall tickled her side.

"Wot, pay attention to me, you silly femme! I'm your husband!" Kendall protested.

"Back in your corner, slave," she said, giving him a wolfish smile.

“Oi, don’t treat him like that in public!” Charlie called. “But when you *do* do it, have a video camera handy.”

“Aye, we wanna watch our big brother being henpecked,” Harry grinned.

“When you get married, God will there be revenge,” Kendall threatened with a smile.

“It’s not being henpecked, you silly boys, it’s Kendall acceding to the proper order of the universe,” Abigail put in.

“I believe we’re going to get along, Abby,” Hannah said in an unruffled manner, which made the entire table explode into laughter.

“The world knows that a male is only as good as the femme that tells him what to do,” Vil said lightly.

“I can see some interesting discussions in *your* bedroom,” Charlie laughed.

Abigail looked to John and Hannah. “I must say, you two certainly did a *wonderful* job raising Jessica,” she complemented. “Jessica is just a little angel. I do hope you boys are paying attention,” she said sharply to her sons. “When you have daughters, they’d better turn out just like this,” she finished, pointing at Jessie.

Jessie’s cheeks ruffled appealingly.

“Thank you. We’re very proud of all our kids.”

“Oh yes, I need to meet the other Williams. Where are they?”

“Over there with the Vulpans,” Hannah said, motioning. Ben was literally *surrounded* by Vulpan femmes, who seemed to be just as attracted

to him as Sheila was, and Jenny was laughing and chatting with Randolph and Duncan with Sam and Kevin beside her. Ben looked a trifle uncomfortable with Lynn hanging onto his shoulder and Joy trying to all but sit in his lap, while Angela was playing with Ben's tail.

"They certainly seem to like your kids," Winston chuckled.

"Perhaps a little *too* much," Hannah said frostily. "Sheila is, ah, *infatuated* with Ben, and it seems that the other Vulpan girls share her taste."

"Those girls? The only taste they require is a pulse," Kit noted, which made Charlie squirt wine out of his nose.

"Well, time to go mingle," Abigail said with a smile, then she got up and went over to the table holding the youngers.

Charlie put his fingers to his wrist. "Pulse, check. Excuse me, gents, I have some conquering to do," he said roguishly, then he got up and followed after Abigail.

Kit chuckled. "That boy just does not learn his lesson," he said to Kendall, who nodded in agreement. "By the end of the night, he certainly won't be the one conquering."

Things came to a stop when Stanley, Bartholomew, and Dee rolled out the cake. It was a five tier monstrosity that would easily feed the entire reception and not even touch the top tier, with two little fox figures on top under a trestle made of gingerbread and frosted with sugar. "Alright, it's time to smear icing all over Vil's face," Kendall said, clapping his paws together expectantly.

"Try it, male," Vil teased.

Despite his threat, Kendall actually behaved himself. After they cut the first pieces of the cake, he fed Vil a piece of cake daintily, to a tidal wave of flashing cameras. Vil returned the favor, having to hold the fork up since Kendall was nearly half a foot taller than she was, and then they turned over the cutting to Bartholomew while the guests lined up for cake. Vil sat down beside Kit, giving him and Jessie slices of cake, and Kit took her paw and held it beside his own, their wedding rings visible there on their paws. “My, that looks weird,” he said with a smile.

“It feels weird, but I’ll love getting used to it,” she smiled in reply. “I’m so happy, brother. Now I know how you feel.”

“I’m glad,” he told her with a gentle smile. “Who’d have thunk it, both the Vulpan kids married. Isn’t this the first sign of the apocalypse?”

She laughed. “I hope not, we haven’t taken over the world yet,” she winked.

Because of the length of the ceremony, Vil had opted for a much shorter reception. Almost immediately after the cutting of the cake, they had the last set of dance music, and then the ceremonial bouquet and garter throwing would take place out on the front steps. Vil and Kendall would normally then get in a limo and drive off, but they were instead staying at Stonebrook so Vil could talk to Maxine and the others. The large reception crowd moved through the entry foyer and out onto the lawn facing the large columns and tan granite stairs leading to the almost never-used front door, and Vil made quite a show out of throwing the bouquet. She turned around and faked throwing it over her head several times, until the femmes started to protest, then she hurled it suddenly, catching many of them off guard. There was a scramble for the bouquet, and eventually one of the young Kennedy girls came out of the scrum, jumping up and down with it held

high over her head, squealing in delight. Because Vil's casted leg would make it very hard for her to stay stable and allow Kendall to take off her garter, he had carried it out. He apologized to the males for not taking it off in front of them and showing off Vil's sexy legs, which got him bopped, then he hurled the garter like he was shooting a hook shot. Kit had to laugh when Mike came up with the garter, which was something of a streak for him. Mike had caught Jessie's garter as well.

With the throwing of the bouquet and garter, that was officially the end of the reception. Vil and Kendall said goodbye to everyone and posed for several pictures, and then the guests began to file out of Stonebrook under the careful eyes of the guards and Nick's mercenaries. Instead of going to a limo, Vil gathered up Kit, Jessie, Jessie's family, and the Brightons in the entry foyer. "Alright, most of the Vulpan's are here, and Maxine has told them all that we're going to have some kind of conference," she explained. "We may as well take advantage of it. So I hope that all of you excuse me and Kit, and Ken and Jessie while we go talk to the family and straighten some things out."

"I think the time for a talk is long overdue, Vil," Winston told her.

"Probably. I'm sorry to cut you guys out, but this is a Vulpan matter, and the others will get really snippy if we air our dirty laundry to in-laws. Ken and Jessie have every right to be there because they're spouses, but my elders will have a cow if I bring anyone else, I know they will."

"That's alright, dear," Hannah assured her. "I think we can spend our time getting to know your new in-laws."

"I think that's a smashing idea, Hannah," Abigail smiled.

Vil took Kit's phone and pressed the push to talk. "Stan, collect up every Vulpan you can find and send them to the sun room," she ordered. "It's time for a little family conference."

"At once, Mistress Vil," he answered. "I will have extra chairs sent into the room, and tea sent up for you."

"Good enough," she said, then she gave Kit the phone back. "Well, let's go, Vulpans," she said, her voice hardening as she prepared to face down the family. "Let's go put our family in its place."

"That sounds good to me," Kit agreed, taking Jessie's paw and leading her towards the stairs.

Chapter 38

There hadn't been a gathering like since the funeral.

Except for Zach and Alicia, the *entire* Vulpan family was present in the large sun room, which was quickly being filled with chairs so everyone would have a place to sit. When Vil and Kit entered, they were the last to come in, and Vil was still wearing her wedding dress. That was a statement, a blaring indication to the family that the rules had changed, and Vil was now invulnerable. Then again, everything told them that. Vil was married. She had Kit and Terry on the board, and Jessie was an executive with proxy power. She had Winston Brighton backing her up, and not only that, the merger of the two families had created something that not even the most rabid Vulpan would want to destroy, the chance to create a shipbuilding dynasty unrivalled in the world. Vil had absolute control now, and they knew it. Kendall and Jessie came in behind them, and a few dark looks at Jessie threatened to break the tense silence. But Jessie kept her head high, taking Kit's offered paw and being escorted up to the area between the windows. Kit seated Jessie in his favorite spot in the manor, on the right windowsill, and Vil seated Kendall on the left as servants scurried in with chairs and seated the family, and Stanley, Dee, Weathers, Marge, Sally, and Luann served tea and wine through the room, then stood quietly by the walls.

It wasn't Vil that got things started, it was Maxine. She took a glass of wine from Dee without so much as a nod to her, then stood up. "It's far past

time we did this,” she declared. “Things are getting out of control, and it has to stop.”

“Maxy,” Jake protested, but she cut him off with an icy glare.

“Do *you* think that trying to murder one of our own was an acceptable move, Jake?” she demanded.

“Well, no, but we have to restore the family to its rightful reputation.”

“That can never happen now,” Louis barked. “Not so long as we have a *cat* among us!”

“You will put a muzzle on that mouth, young male!” Maxine snapped loudly, pointing at him. “What is done is done, and we *allowed* it! If you have an issue with Jessica, don’t blame Kit. Blame *us*. We permitted the marriage!”

“How could you!” Louis gasped.

“Because Kit *earned* the right to marry whoever he pleased!” she called in reply, an answer which honestly surprised him. “And so long as he stayed in Austin, there was little for us to object to!”

“Let’s get to the point,” Vil commanded, standing before them all. “The point is, we think Steve was the one that tried to kill Kit, and right now, they’re not sure if he’ll make it. I’m sure everyone in this room heard what happened,” she said, then paused a moment. When only silence greeted her, she continued. “I always expected that it might get to this point, but I was hoping beyond hope it wouldn’t. Well, here we are. And we’re here to get some things straight.

“The first thing we get straight right here, right now, is *I control this family*. I have the company, so I have the responsibility. Is there anyone in this room that has a problem with that?” she demanded, sending a withering glare through the room. She locked eyes with Jake, but he just looked away. “Good,” she declared. “So, I’m waiting to hear the words.”

“You’ll hear them from me,” Maxine said, sitting down. “We were hasty in trying to unseat you, Vil. I thought you were letting the family fly apart, I thought you didn’t care about our family’s honor and reputation, but I was wrong. If you can get Bess out of the nightclubs, then you’re clearly suited for the job.”

“She gave me something *you* never did, Maxy! She gave me a *chance!*” Bess said hotly.

“If you’d have behaved with a little more—“

“You treat us like little kids!” Lynn shouted in reply. “We’re *not* ten years old, Aunt Maxy! The last I checked, I’m an adult!”

“If you’d show some *responsibility*, we would have treated you with respect!” Jake shouted in reply. “Travis, Patrick, Chris, and Terry don’t act like a sinful harlots!”

“No, he just dates one!” Duncan snapped.

“They’re *boys*,” Mary retorted. “They can do no wrong! You guys have *always* given them everything, and all we get is the cold shoulder! They get to have *real* jobs, do *real* work! What do we get, huh? *Get married, Mary, you’re useless, Mary, only the males should work, Mary, just have babies because that’s what femmes are supposed to do, Mary.* Why do you think

there's a Party Pack, Uncle Jake! This isn't the eighteen hundreds! Girls actually *do things* now!"

"The responsibilities of the femmes in this family is to secure the family line and anchor us both to our past and to our future," Jake said stiffly. "You don't think we understand it's a sacrifice for you, Mary? We do. Maxine is just as brilliant and gifted as Lucas was, but her role in the family was clear, and she accepted it. We knew it was a terrible sacrifice for her, but she accepted that sacrifice for the good of the family, and we appreciate that sacrifice every day. But this is the way things work in proper society, and we must retain our reputation and our respect."

"Well, I've got news for you, Dad," Angela said icily. "I'm *not* going to spend my life crawling in bed with a husband I hate and cranking out babies so *you* can feel like we're anchoring you."

"And you're not," Vil called calmly. "Effective today, the arranged marriages *stop*. Things are going to change, and they have to, Jake. This isn't the Victorian age. The idea that the femmes have to marry and have children is no longer a viable family tradition. If the girls want jobs, they'll get them in the company. *Real* jobs. If they want responsibility, they got it. If they want to do what Kit, Sheila and Muffy plan to do, open their own businesses, try their paws at building their own companies, they'll get all the support they need. The Vulpan Corporation has plenty of room in it for new satellite companies. And I think they'll surprise you a little bit," she said with a smile. "The simple fact of the matter is that Kit's been right ever since he was old enough to see the *real* family. He left us because we're not a family, and God did we prove that when he was hit by that car. We *will* be a family again, and part and parcel of that is to relax things a little bit. There will be no more arranged marriages. There will be no more forcing cousins

to either work or not work. Every Vulpan will get to make his or her own choices about what they want to do with their lives, and so long as you don't publicly embarrass the family, you'll be given latitude."

"But what will foxes say if we go against tradition!" Maxine protested.

"Maxy, I think the only family left that follows those obsolete traditions is *us*," Vil retorted.

"They'll say it's about damn time we got out of the dark ages," Kit answered immediately. "Do you *really* think the other families are being as stubborn as the Vulpans? I've been out there in the *real* world, Maxy, and I can tell you that trying to hold the family in the past is only ruining it. It drove me away. It's driving the youngers away, and if you don't stop it, there won't *be* a Vulpan family."

"But you can't go that far," Jake protested. "There have to be rules."

"Of course there will be, but not nearly as strict as before," she answered. "There will really only be one rule. *Be discreet*. If you want to do something that makes you happy, then be discreet. If you're not sure if it's out of bounds, come talk to me and we'll see what we can do. Terry and Allison are the perfect example of that," she said, nodding at Terry. "I'm fully aware of Allison's past. I interviewed her personally before they went on their first date, and I'm willing to overlook her past indiscretions because I'm convinced she's not a gold-digger and she's sincerely attracted to Terry, and Terry is sincerely attracted to her. As long as they keep their relationship private and quiet, as long as Allison's past stays in the past, as long as I don't see a big headline in the Enquirer some day saying 'Vulpan heir in secret affair with ex-prostitute,' I'm willing to allow them to date. But if they cross the line," she said, snapping her fingers. "It's over. They

both know the rules I've put down on them. And I'm watching them *carefully*." She leaned a little on her casted leg. "But as long as they obey my rules, as long as their relationship stays quiet and low-key, then Terry is more than allowed to go out with Allison. That's the new order," she declared. "Be happy, but be discreet. Hopefully, that will preempt the kind of insanity that happened the last few days. The inflexibility and the dysfunctional condition of this family drove one of our own to attack another, and that's just too far. That's why we're here now, because it has to stop. We *are* a family, and it's about damn time we started *acting* like one."

"What are you going to do to Stevie?" Joy asked, a bit fearfully.

"If I prove he did it, he's disowned," Vil answered bluntly. "He'll also be in jail if I have my say, and if he's convicted, he loses his share of the family money. There is no room in this family for those who want to control it by killing others. I know the vast majority of you object to Kit and Jessie, but that's *tough*. Kit paid his dues to this family ten times over, and he's earned the right to be completely free of us."

"Then why is he here now?" Louis demanded.

"Because *they* forced me back up here," Kit answered, pointing at Maxine and Jake. "I was perfectly happy back home in Austin, and the *last* thing I wanted to do was come back up here and get involved in this hellhole of a family. Vil's accident really was an accident, but we didn't know that at the time, and I sure as hell believed that one of you was capable of trying to kill Vil, so I came home to help her. And when this is all over and I feel comfortable leaving, I'll resign my seat on the board and go right back home and pretend the lot of you don't exist, just as I'm sure you pretend I don't."

“Taking Stonebrook is hardly divorcing yourself from the family,” Jake declared.

“Blame *her* for that, I certainly didn’t want it,” Kit replied, pointing at Vil.

“Stonebrook is Kit’s,” Vil said simply. “It’s the way it should have been from the beginning. This is, was, and always will be *his house*. I was just putting things right.”

“So you’re *not* moving back in?” Sarah asked pointedly.

He shook his head. “When I go home, I’ll leave Stonebrook in Vil’s paws for her to manage. She’ll watch over it for me, and she’ll have both control and discretion over the manor. She’s the one that’ll decide who’s allowed in and so on. I’ll use it when I come up to visit, but we don’t intend to live here. More likely than not, I’ll open Stonebrook to the family for hosting special events and giving guests of the family a place to stay when they come visit, like the Brightons and other in-laws. The last thing we want to do is be up here. I’m sure one of you might get the cute idea to try something when Laura’s born, when there’s a *mixed breed* in the Vulpan line.”

Half the room bristled at that declaration, and Jake nearly stood up in anger, but Vil’s withering stare put him right back in his chair.

“So, if you think I’m coming back to the family, think again. I came up here to deal with a crisis, and that’s *it*. The crisis is more or less over, there’s nothing holding me here. I’ve agreed to stay at Stonebrook until Vil comes back from her honeymoon, but when she comes back, we go home.”

“Not alone,” Sheila chuckled. “I’m an Austin Vulpan now too.”

“I have you potty trained, Sheila, so that’s fine,” Kit noted, which made her laugh. “But as far as most of the rest of you are concerned, there’s no such place as Austin. It doesn’t exist. So you have no reason to show up there. The ones who are welcome there already know who they are.”

“I think we can dispense with the veiled threats, Luke,” Maxine said shortly.

“It’s no way veiled, Maxine, and don’t call me by his name,” he answered. “I want nothing to do with this family outside of my sister and a few of my cousins. The rest of you can go to hell, and I pray to God I never see you again when I go home.”

“Way to keep it civil there, bro,” Vil said darkly under her breath as several Vulpans stood up or made angry comments. “SIT!” Vil barked harshly, which caused the family to quickly return to their seats. “To put it a bit more tactfully, we’re going to go right back to the way things were before this started. Kit will go home and return to being his own fox, and we *will let him*,” she said distinctly. “We’ll leave him alone, and outside of an occasional visit to Boston to see me, Clancy, and Suzy, he will stay in Austin. Up here, we will close ranks. For now, we leave Zach and Alicia outside until I ascertain if they were involved in the attack on Kit. Oh. Yes. Let me say this right now, and make it absolutely clear. If *anyone* in this room is in *any* way tied to, connected with, or otherwise engaged with the PPC or any of its satellite organizations, like the Paladins, *you will leave it*. There is no longer any place for the PPC in this family, and if I catch *any* of you either in the PPC or contacting them or any other purist or supremacist group in any way, I will run you out of this family, out of Boston, and maybe even out of America. And that is *not* a threat. That is an absolute one hundred percent guarantee,” she said, looking directly at Louis when she

did so. “You can live your life and be what you want, but I will not tolerate anyone in this family belonging to the PPC or any other purist group. You can feel however you want, but you *will not* make those feelings in any way public. And belonging to the PPC advertises your sympathies.”

“You have no right to tell us what we can do in our lives!” Louis protested.

“Oh, don’t I?” she asked immediately. “This is about family unity, Louis. How does it look for you to be in the PPC when your cousin is married to a mixed breed, and the PPC tried to kill him and his wife?”

Louis glared. “He’s going back to Austin!” he finally declared.

“That’s right. But that doesn’t change the fact that there’s just a *little* conflict of interest if you’re in the PPC and Kit is married to Jessie. That will start rumors, and so long as it remains, the family’s reputation will be stained.”

“Stained? *That* is the stain on the Vulpan family!” Louis screamed, jumping to his feet and pointing at Jessie and Kit.

Vil looked right at him. “Louis. I’ll say this only once. You will obey me, or you will *be disowned*. Do I make myself clear?”

He said nothing, glaring daggers at her.

“I said do I make myself clear, Louis. You will say yes or no. Right now.”

He remained stonily silent.

“Alright then,” she said, brushing a paw in his direction. “You’re fired.”

“*WHAT?*” he gasped.

“I said you’re *fired*,” she said in a flat tone, staring at him. “And since you sent Matty to her family manor in England, why don’t you just go live there for a while? So long as you insist on remaining in the PPC, you are not welcome in Boston. So *get out*.”

Louis made several strangling noises, and Jake and Maxine were gaping at Vil in shock.

“Why are you still here, Louis?” Vil called. “I told you to get out. That means *GET OUT!*” she ended with a sudden scream, which nearly startled several Vulpans out of their chairs. “And stay out until I tell you you can come home, which won’t be until after you’re out of the PPC, and I *know* you are! So get out of Boston, Louis. NOW!” Louis just stood there, in shock, and Vil blew out her breath. “Stanley, call Nick and tell him to drag Louis out of here and throw him out the front gate,” she commanded. “If he resists, Nick is allowed to knock a few of his teeth out.”

Louis turned and fled from the room.

“Vil, you can’t be serious,” Maxine said pleadingly. “You can’t exile Louis for being cheeky!”

“I can, I will, and I *did*,” she answered. “If he’s that adamant about staying in the PPC, then how long will it take for him to become the next Steve, Maxy?” she asked simply.

“And how quickly will he *want* to be if you come down on him?”

“That’s entirely up to him, isn’t it? All he has to do is quit the PPC, and he can come home. I made that fairly clear to him.”

“You’re making a mistake, young lady.”

“It’s my prerogative, Maxine,” she answered calmly. “You’ve heard the new rules, and you just saw that I’m going to enforce them,” she called. “Be happy, be discreet, my door is always open for you if you need to talk, but don’t you dare put a toe out of line in the public venue. This family moves forward united, and I damn well expect to hear all of you marching behind me in lock-step. If you can’t obey the simple and very liberal rules I’ve placed on you, then you really don’t belong in this family.” She swept her gaze across the room. “Any questions?”

There was nothing but silence.

“Then we’re done here,” she declared. “Everyone go on home, and remember I’ll be on my honeymoon starting tomorrow. If you want to talk to me about something, you need help, you have some ideas about starting your own side businesses, or you want a job, come talk to me after I get home. I’m going to be a little busy,” she said, glancing back at Kendall, which made the girls in the Party Pack laugh lightly. “While I’m gone, I’ve bullied Kit into sitting in my chair. And I’m sure he’ll make sure nothing changes or nothing happens while he’s in charge,” she winked. “Oh, you stay, Maxine. I want to have a little chat with you. Graham, you stay as well. This concerns you.”

“Stay, guys,” Vil said when Jessie moved to stand up. She and Kendall both had been completely silent during the entire conference, but for that matter, none of the spouses had said anything either. Even though they were Vulpans, Kit figured they felt that they didn’t want to get involved in this one. When the other Vulpans filed out, only them and the servants remained, who stayed near the door to keep what was obviously meant to be a private conference private.

Vil didn't waste a second. "It's time to right the second greatest wrong ever perpetrated by this family. Graham, I want you out of Boston," she declared. "Consider yourself divorced in everything but name, until I can get an annulment for Maxy."

Maxine was stunned. Graham gave Vil a look of consternation, then rose up to his full height and glared down at the small vixen before him. At that moment, Kit was again taken with how petite his sister was. She was only five feet tall, yet she stood and comported herself like a vixen Sonya's height, and she looked up at Graham with eyes that were both steady and fearless. "How *dare* you!" he growled.

"I dare a lot of things, and the one thing I will not tolerate a second longer is an abusive prick putting one more paw on my aunt," she said coldly. "You've worn out your welcome in the Vulpan family, *Uncle* Graham," she said icily. "I want you out of Boston by tomorrow. If you're still in Boston when I leave for my honeymoon, I will have you thrown out. I don't care where you go, I don't care what you do, but understand one thing. Maxine is now forever *off limits*. You will never see her face to face again, and the kids are *Vulpans*. They stay with Maxine. Oh, and I'll make sure that no bank in America will allow you to touch a single penny of Aunt Maxine's money before you get out the front gate," she said with a narrow-eyed hiss. "And I *will* dare take it to that level if you try to steal it. You touch a single penny of Aunt Maxine's money, and you won't live to be arrested for embezzlement. Do you understand me?"

"You *bitch!*" Graham screamed. "You have no right!"

"I have every right to protect my aunt," she answered in a frosty voice. "So pick one of your vacation houses and go there, and consider it your new home. That's the only gift you're going to get from the Vulpans. Vulpans

don't divorce, but you can be as sure as the sun rises that you are now permanently exiled from this family, and I'll do my damndest to get your marriage annulled. Beating your wife *is* grounds for annulment, Graham, and God knows I have enough proof to take to the Archbishop. Take your little family trust the Grants gave you and live in your new house and don't come within a thousand miles of Maxine or *her* children, not *your* children, or I'll make sure they never find your body. Is that abundantly clear?"

Graham answered in a way he usually saved for his wife. He balled up his fist and moved to deck Vil, but to Kit's shock, Kendall moved like absolute lightning. One second he was sitting on the windowsill, the next Graham was on the floor, squealing in pain and holding his muzzle, and Kendall was standing between him and Vil, a look of absolute outrage on his face. Kit blinked and stepped back in surprise. He never dreamed Kendall could move that fast! "You bloody coward, tryin ta' hit a wee lady!" he screamed, his speech turning much more accented, almost Scottish, in his anger. "Get him out of here before I skin him alive!"

Stanley and Bartholomew picked Graham up off the floor, and with eminently approving looks at Vil and Kendall, they all but dragged him from the room. Maxine just stood there, a stunned look on her face, her mind unable to wrap around it. "Now *you* don't have to worry about sending him away, Aunt Maxine," Vil told her calmly. "If he wants to be mad, he can be mad at me." Maxine stared at her woodenly, then she buried her face in her paws and began to sob.

"The only good he ever was was giving Maxine children she loved," Vil snorted as the door closed behind Graham, but Kit was watching in surprise as Jessie, unable to turn away from someone in need, got up and put her arms around Maxine, saying soothing words to her, patting her on

the shoulder. Maxine buried her face in Jessie's shoulder and clutched onto her tightly, maybe not even knowing to whom she was clinging. Jessie urged her over to a sofa, and sat with her, patting her and stroking her hair, as Kendall checked Vil with gentle paws to make sure she was alright. "I'm fine, my knight in shining armor," she grinned at him. "I'll go raid the kitchen for tin foil," he grinned in reply.

Maxine seemed to get control of herself again, sniffing and looking at Jessie with a mixture of surprise and curiosity. Jessie just smiled at her gently, leaned forward, and kissed her on the cheek before getting up and returning to Kit. "All right, Maxine?" Kendall asked.

"Yes, thank you," she said, composing herself, then standing up. "Vil, there was no need for that."

"Oh, there was definitely a need," she said strongly. "I meant it when I said that this family will be a *family*, Maxy, and that means we take care of each other. This family suffered that ass for long enough, and it was almost a crime that Dad made you marry him."

"Too right," Kendall nodded.

"I doubt you're going to cry over his exile," Vil told her with a surprising smile. "I know you hated that asshole."

"Well, my feelings don't matter when the family--"

"Don't you dare finish that," Jessie flared. "If you don't care about *you*, no one else will!"

"Jessica, I may object to you marrying Luke, but I certainly can't say that I don't see why he loves you," she said with surprising candor, giving her a slight smile.

“It’s about damn time,” Vil snorted. “Now you’d better go make sure Graham doesn’t burn Oak Hill down out of spite, and I’m going to call around and make sure he’s locked out of your bank accounts. Don’t give him a damn thing, Maxy. He leaves with the clothes on his back, and *nothing* else. The house you’re going to let him have is all he should ever get from this family.”

Maxine nodded. “I’ll send him to our house in San Francisco. He always did love that place, and I hate it. That way I lose nothing I care about.”

Vil nodded. “I’ll send a couple of the guards here with you, and their big guns will keep Graham on the line,” she winked. “Give me your phone, bro.” Kit laughed when he gave her his house phone, and she hit push to talk. “Stanley, bring a car around for Maxine immediately, and do *not* allow Graham to leave before she does. Nick, I want the two biggest, scariest looking mercs working in the manor to meet Maxine in the garage, with their pistols in very visible outer holsters. They’re going to be her bodyguards for a while.”

“I’ll send Barnett and Krichek, they’re good at looming,” Nick chuckled in reply.

“Krichek? He’s a teddy bear,” Jessie giggled.

“I’ll call Misses Vulpan’s car immediately,” Stanley answered. “But I don’t think Master Grant will be going anywhere but to hospital. It seems that he has a broken jaw. I believe it may need to be wired.”

“Good,” Vil said vindictively. “You send him there, and make sure he understands this. He leaves the hospital and goes straight to Logan and boards a plane for San Francisco. That is where Maxine said he can go, and

that's where he'd better be six hours after he's released. Maxine will pack him a suitcase and have it sent to the hospital." She lowered the phone and grinned at Maxine. "Have your staff fill it with old canvas," she winked.

Maxine laughed ruefully. "I, I don't know what to say, Vilenne," she said.

"You can be happy," Vil told her. "That's the new motto of this family. I'll send the guards with you so you feel safe and you don't have to go in there alone. You want to leave Lenny, Wendy and Kate here at Stonebrook until Graham's out?"

"That is kind of you, Vil, yes, please," she nodded. "I think it's best. I'll explain things to them when I get back."

"Alright. I'll have Stanley settle them in...somewhere," she chuckled. "This place is kinda full right now with all the guests here, but I'm sure we can settle them in if they need to stay overnight." She raised the phone to her maw again. "Dee, could you round up Lenny, Wendy, and Kate and take them down to the TV room? They'll be staying here at Stonebrook while their parents are out. Settle them in. There's a very small chance they may be staying overnight, so prepare rooms for them, just in case."

"Certainly, Mistress Vil," Dee answered.

"There we go. Go get it done, Maxine," Vil told her. "And if there's anything else I can do for you, you know where I am."

"I...I'm, well, grateful, Vilenne," Maxine told her. "I'm a little overwhelmed, but grateful."

"We'll talk when I get back from my honeymoon," she nodded.

Maxine ventured forward and gave Vil a short but sincere hug, kissed her on the cheek, smiled in Kit and Jessie's direction, then hurried from the room.

"I can't believe you let a slime like that in your family, Vil," Kendall fumed.

"Graham? Thank our father for him," she grunted. "He'd just taken over the family after our grandfather died, and his first act was to make Maxy marry that prick, over her objections. He slapped her on one of their dates, and she wanted to break it off, but Dad wouldn't hear of it." She looked over at Jessie. "And you, sis, are an absolute *angel*. After everything she did to you and Kit, you comforted her. It was more than she deserved."

"From the sound of it, she needs *someone* to show her some love," she said simply.

The family was all abuzz about what happened, in both senses.

Vil's pronouncements were met with absolute joy by the cousins, but a little trepidation from Sarah and Jake. They were a little worried that Vil might have given the youngers too much leash, but given that the Party Pack was already talking about either working somewhere in the company or starting their own businesses, it was a baseless fear. Joy was even looking forward to starting Harvard now, instead of trying to talk her parents out of making her go. The only one that talked of holding completely to her life of parties and wildness was Lynn, who, like Sheila, was a dedicated, lifelong member of the Party Pack.

The other big news was Vil's banishing of Graham. This was seen as an overall good thing, even by Graham's own children, who were afraid of him. All of them had seen him slap their mother at least once, all of them had admitted that they'd been slapped or hit by their father at least once, and the news that Vil had banished him from Boston made them happy that their mother would be alright more than sad that their father had been sent away. They no doubtedly loved their father, but with Graham and Maxine separated, there wouldn't be any more fights, and no more chances that their father might hit their mother.

But, the aftermath of the Vulpan summit for Kit and Jessie was getting the family out of Stonebrook and leaving them with their wedding guests, and also with three accidental Vulpan kids who were stuck in Stonebrook until Maxine came back for them...but that wasn't a problem. The Vulpan kids found themselves invited out to the pool by Savid's kids, and after the staff scrambled to find swimsuits for them--they kept quite a few bathing suits of various sizes for guests--Leonard, Wendy, and Kate were laughing and splashing with Brua, Gin, Shava, and Avam. Kit and Jessie returned to their friends and Jessie's family, and they sat around the TV room talking about the wedding after seeing Vil and Kendall off to return to Hart's Crossing for a night before starting their honeymoon tomorrow. The Brightons had had their things moved to Stonebrook and were going to stay there so Vil and Kendall had the mansion to themselves, to feel like they were alone despite the size of the place, the family and Charlie taking over four of the available cottages on the grounds. They wanted to stay in Stonebrook for another reason, and that was so Abigail could get to know Kit and Jessie better.

Kit felt...relieved. They had gotten through the wedding and the short yet enlightening conference after the reception more or less unscathed. Kit had only been short once, maybe twice, but he'd stated his case and made it clear he was only here temporarily, and he very much wanted to take him and his wife back home, their real home, Austin. They'd already been gone for months, and he felt keenly homesick and ready to go back to his beloved city, back to their apartment and their friends, his job, Sunday poker, weekend trips in their plane, which no doubt looked like a neglected hulk after so many weeks sitting out at that tiedown spot, and their impending daughter. He was only up here for two more weeks, pretending to be the CEO while Vil was on her honeymoon, but basically just staying up here so someone she explicitly trusted had the power to keep the board from doing anything behind her back while she was gone. With Kit having proxy power, he *would be* the CEO while Vil was gone, and as such he had the power to call board meetings. There were no meetings on the schedule during Vil's honeymoon, and since Kit was there, nobody except him could call one. That kept everything all nice and controlled, giving Vil peace of mind. Kit would spend his last two weeks in Boston the way he'd spent the rest of it, at Stonebrook. The immediate sense of danger was gone with the discovery of Steven's perfidy, but there was still an open question about what would happen with Steven gravely injured and his parents rushing to Pennsylvania to be with him. Kit felt that it might be safe to allow Jessie out of the manor. He knew she wasn't complaining, but he had the feeling that she was feeling just a little cabin fever. Muffy had been an absolute doll to stick with them, giving Jessie a friend by her side to keep her company, but Kit felt that maybe a short trip here or there might make Jessie feel better. It certainly wouldn't be in Boston, but a little weekend trip to Maine might be nice, take Suzy up to see Corey, who was shooting a movie up there, or

maybe a trip up to Canada, since Jessie had never been out of the country before, that should be relatively safe. They could go spend a day or two in New York or Washington D.C., maybe go out to the beach down in New Jersey or Maryland. There were any number of things they could do that didn't involve Boston, all it would take would be money get there, money they didn't really have.

He was glad to see that Jessie's family and the Brightons seemed to be hitting it off. John was explaining American football to Winston as only a rabid fan could while Abigail and Hannah were chatting over in the corner. Jenny was all brightness and sunshine as she and Ben talked with the Brighton boys and Charlie, but she was competing with Lilly for Charlie's eye, which made the hare all but strut for their benefit. The rest of the gang was here, more or less, filling the TV room with sounds of chatter and laughter as the staff scurried among them, offering drinks or taking glasses. Kit left Jessie to talk with her mother and Abigail as he sat down with Rick and Mike, who were listening to Muffy's description of her future "perfect nightclub" for probably the tenth time.

"Well, I can't say the Vulpans don't put on a good wedding," Mike chuckled, twirling Vil's garter around a finger. "Another garter to add to the collection. Now I just need Sam's and Allison's I'll have the whole set."

"You're making some assumptions there," Kit chuckled.

"Nah," he answered. "Sam's already engaged, and I'll put money on the table that Allison is engaged within a year."

"I won't take that bet," Kit chuckled. "And I won't mind either. I'd love to have Ally in the family. She's something special."

"A very smart young lady," Rick said with a nod of agreement.

Suzy sat down by Kit and leaned against him. “Hey guys. Rick and Mike, isn’t it?”

“That’s us,” Mike chuckled. “Susan?”

“Suzy,” she corrected with a smile.

“Or Sue-Sue or Zee,” Kit grinned at her.

“You don’t have the right to call me those anymore,” she said haughtily, though she was smiling. “You lost that right when you married someone else.”

“Pet names last forever, and are always embarrassing,” he winked in reply.

“Oh hush, Luke-daroo.”

Kit burst out laughing. “I was thinking of breaking our imprisonment and escaping to Maine next weekend, before we go home. Want to come with us? We can drop in on Corey.”

“That’s a wonderful idea!” she said with a bright smile. “He’s in pre-production right now, running between some of the coastal towns. He started in Castine, and is moving south down the coast and along the islands, hunting for shooting scenes and interviewing the residents surrounding his four main characters, seeing which ones would like to be in the movie.”

“What’s the movie about?” Rick asked.

“It’s a documentary about the coastal lifestyle of the Down Easters, and the island furs,” she answered. “It’s a very different and unique culture up there, and Corey wants to show the rest of America a tiny little slice of

New England. Down Easters are the British foxes and Acadian wolves along the coast, the famous lobsterfurs and fisherfurs, and the island furs are the ones that live out on the islands off the coast, where each island is its own little community. He wants to capture the essence of the cultures and bring it to the viewer. Corey *loves* to do documentaries about everyday furs and interesting cultures. His last movie was about the lifestyles of the Mexican Baja communities, and not the tourist towns. He spent five months moving from little village to little village, documenting the life and culture of furs who work for a living. It was *really* good. He wants to break into the big time doing studio movies, and establishing himself as an indie is a good path to that. His last movie was shown at the Sundance festival and got good reviews, and he's putting in his dues until a studio calls him and offers him a film deal." She gave Kit a sly look. "You're his next project," she told him. "He's almost drooling over the idea of documenting the life of the famous Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan the Third."

"Pft," Kit snorted, slapping her lightly on the knee.

"He even had a title for it, *From Riches to Rags*," she pressed, putting her paws out as if to frame an imaginary billboard.

"He can keep dreaming," Kit grunted.

"He wanted to use your journal title, but it's taken," she grinned at him. "*Through My Eyes* has a ring to it."

"I don't think the Vulpans would let him do that," Rick noted.

"I doubt it, but it'd be a great movie," Suzy declared.

The party, inevitably, began to wind down. Everyone was tired from the wedding and reception, and they broke up to change, rest, or play

around. Kit and Jessie retired to their bedroom for a little cuddling and a short rest, then came back down to have a light dinner with the Williams, the Brightons, and Rick and Martha. Kit felt distinctly out of place among the three older couples, but they accepted the two of them warmly. “I think your friend Savid is going to steal your cousins, Kit,” Abigail grinned when they joined them in the small dining room. “They’ve been with them all day. And I wanted to talk to them.”

“Then go talk to them, Abby,” Winston said calmly as he accepted a glass of wine from Sally with a smile and a nod of thanks.

“So, what do you think of marrying into the Vulpan family, Abby?” Kit asked in a calm yet serious tone.

“I think we got here just in time to save you from them,” she winked in reply. “No offense, ducky, but your family needs therapy.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Kit grunted in reply.

“They’re not *that* bad,” Jessie protested. “I think some of your family is very nice, Kit.”

“Love, you’ve got to be the most kind-hearted femme I’ve ever met,” Kit said with a smile at her. “Half of them want to stick a dagger in your back at the first available opportunity. And if you don’t recall, one of them *did* try to kill us.”

“Well, he’ll get what’s coming to him,” she declared. “But I love Vil and Sheila and Muffy, and Terry’s a great male, and I kinda like your uncle Brian and aunt Ruthie. They’ve been very nice to me.”

“I think Vil has it all under control now,” Winston said. “Kenny told me about what happened up in that room, and it sounds like Vil has a very

tight leash on them.”

“I think it’ll be alright,” Kit said. “Some things that have needed to be said were said, Vil laid down the law and made it clear the family’s coming out of the dark ages, and it’s clear now that if Zach wants to continue to fight, he’ll do it alone. Maxine gave up, and Jake was completely silent the entire time. The fact that he never said a word actually said quite a bit. I think he’s regretting it now.”

“No, he talked, but only once or twice,” Jessie corrected.

“He did? I didn’t think he did,” he noted. “When Vil gets back from her honeymoon, odds are she’ll have just about the entire Party Pack banging on her door asking for jobs.”

“Not Mary. She told me that she’s going to go to Britain and look for a husband,” Jessie told him.

“Really? Well, I wish her good luck,” Kit said honestly.

“She said there has to be another Kendall in England,” Jessie giggled.

“I can understand her attraction. You raised a very good boy, you two,” Hannah said approvingly.

“Well, we think you did an equally smashing job with your children,” Abigail smiled in return. “Your children are all wonderful cats.”

“That reminds me,” Winston said, looking at Kit and Jessie. “Where do you plan to deliver?”

“Currently, it looks like it’ll be home in Austin,” he answered. “The day after Vil gets back from her honeymoon, we’re leaving, going back home. That’ll be about two weeks before the delivery day.”

“I need to call Doctor Mac and let her know,” Jessie reminded herself.

“Alright. When you have your plans made, let us know, son,” Winston continued. “We fully intend to be there. You’re family now, and the birth of a child should be a family event.”

“Besides, a day or two just isn’t long enough to get to know you,” Abigail added. “We intend to spend a couple of weeks with you to help you settle in with your new baby and get to know you much better.”

“We?” Kit asked.

“All of us, even Charlie, though I won’t be there quite as long,” Winston nodded. “Charlie’s all but a member of the family as it is, he’s been as close as our own sons since he was six. I can manage a week, but not much more, since I do have a fairly large company to run, and we’ve been here in Boston for a while to boot. I’ve already arranged a week off to spend down in Austin, and I have a broker searching for nice houses in Cincinnati and in Austin to buy so we have vacation homes near our new in-laws.”

Kit laughed. “Terry did the very same thing,” he said. “Bought a house just so he has a place to stay when he comes to Austin to see Allison.”

“You should have no problem finding one,” Jessie added. “There’s a whole lot of houses for sale in Austin right now. There are like four or five signs on every block.”

“The ranch on the other side of Bill’s spread is up for sale,” Martha noted. “About a hundred acres of good ranchland with a watering pond. Bill’s been looking into buying it and expanding his own ranch.”

“Yes, well, this is certainly a buyer’s market,” Winston said sagely. “I’ve been quietly making preparations to expand our holdings into real estate. Just waiting for the market to bottom out over in Britain.”

“I’ve had similar ideas,” Kit agreed. “There are a lot of interesting opportunities right now, and not just in real estate. I’ve taken note of several potential business ventures around Austin that I think will make some good money.”

Abigail laughed. “Your sister said you had the soul of a businessfur, Kit, and all the instincts a businessfur needs to be successful,” she told him. “I see she was right.”

“I’m a Vulpan, Abby,” he admitted. “It’s in our blood. I have just enough capital in the bank left over from the money my mother left me to be tempted to do a few of the things I’ve been thinking about.”

“Well, when the time comes, give me a ring, son,” Winston said. “I doubt I’ll lose a shilling if I’m backing your business venture.”

“No thanks, Winston. I kinda like to succeed or fail on my own,” he said with an honest smile. “After what happened between me and my family, I don’t want any help.”

“Yes, well, I’m not a Vulpan, son,” he said with a wolfish smile. “And I’m certainly not *giving* you anything. I expect results from my investments.”

“There’s more than just you here, ducky,” Abigail clucked, looking at Jessie.

She laughed lightly. “When it comes to this, I agree with Kit,” she declared.

“Being backed by a rich in-law sorta defeats the purpose,” he explained. “I left the family when I was sixteen, but I would have never made it without my sister and Suzy helping me. All my life others had to help me. Well, I want to see if we can make it on our own, Winston, without my family name or the money, just with what my mother left me, which was a hundred thousand dollars. I want to see if me and Jessie can make it.”

“Ah, well, in that case, I certainly understand, son,” he said with an approving nod.

“*We* might talk about a few of your ideas, son,” Rick said. “We’re already partners in the magazine. I think I could be persuaded to be a partner in some other things.”

“Sure, Rick. I would have invited you into it no matter what.”

“Now, let’s get back to what’s important,” Abigail said. “The baby!”

“Yes, I’d say that that’s quite important,” Winston smiled. “Vil said that you’re naming her Laura?”

“Laura Beth Vulpan,” Jessie said with a glowing smile, putting her paw on her very pregnant belly. “She’s going to be in so much danger of being spoiled!”

“Oh, she will be,” Winston laughed. “I do so love to dote on grandkids. If only we had some!”

“Three fully grown boys, and not a single baby yet,” Abigail sighed. “You’d think we’d at least have one child by now, even an unplanned child out of wedlock! But no, I had to raise my boys with manners and decency. It’s biting my tail now. I should have raised three lascivious boors, like Charlie.”

Kit wasn't the only one that laughed.

"Dovey, Charlie hasn't managed a child yet either."

"At least he *tries*," Abigail declared, which made Jessie almost choke on her grape juice.

"Are you going to be present at the birth, Hannah, John?" Abigail asked.

"I'm not sure if I can manage it," John answered. "I'm the English department chair, and that makes me a very busy male when school's in session. I used up my vacation time in the spring to go on a cruise Vil gave us for Christmas. Hannah will certainly be there."

"We have a spare bedroom ready for you, Hannah," Kit told her.

"I'll certainly come down on weekends, and if Jessica's labor falls the right way, I might be able to call off for one day and rush down before she delivers."

"We'll make sure that happens, John," Winston declared. "I'll have our jet sent to Cincinnati and standing by at all times. You just run straight to the airport and jump on and it'll bring you to Austin in a jif."

"That's very kind of you, but you don't need to go to that trouble."

"One can never go to any trouble when helping family," Winston declared immediately. "We certainly won't be using it, so why not put it where it can do the most good?"

"Well, when you say it like that, I'd look awfully ungrateful to say no," John chuckled.

"Good, good!" Winston beamed.

Winston's declaration seemed to say a great deal about the Brightons. They were as unlike the Vulpans as possible, it seemed. No Vulpan would offer a private jet to an in-law, whose contribution to the Vulpan family began and ended with the son or daughter they provided to the Vulpans for marriage. The concept of helping one another didn't really exist in their family. Each family was an individual cell, an internal, private domain, and those domains rarely crossed each other. Oh, they saw each other at work, visited each other in social calls from time to time, but there was no intimacy, no feeling of togetherness. The Brightons were diametrically opposed to that concept. They saw the entire family as *their* family, even the in-laws, and were quick to offer help as much as they were quick to intertwine themselves into the lives of their new in-laws. Kit had no doubt that Abigail would spend some time with *all* the Vulpans, not just Kit, working her way through the family to get to know them and make it clear that the Vulpans were now part of the Brightons, just as the Brightons were part of the Vulpans.

Kit saw some potential issues there. The elder Vulpans would not take kindly to Abigail's attempt to get to know them. Some in-laws in his family had never even met members of the Vulpan family, because they weren't directly involved. The Leeks had never met many of the children of the other elders, and Kit knew for a fact that the Gugenheims kept their distance from the entire Vulpan family except for Zach and his kids. His mother's family, the Stocktons, had complete divorced themselves from the entire Vulpan family, abandoning Kit and Vil to their father after their mother died. The Vulpans weren't accustomed to friendliness or generosity, would see an in-law's attempt to get to know the family to be a hostile act, an invasion of privacy or an attempt to schmooze their way into Vulpan money, and Abigail's very generous and sincere attempt to get to know her

new in-laws would be seen as nosiness or downright rudeness. Abigail needed to be ready for it, to understand that the Vulpans were like no family she had ever encountered before, and he made a note to himself to pull her aside and have a very frank talk with her before she started doing that. He didn't want to see her get hurt because his family mistook her honest curiosity about the family and her desire to get to know them, be friends with them, was treated with a cold shoulder and an icy stare by his family.

Kit was somewhat amazed that the Brightons, who were considered one of the ten richest families in Britain and like the Vulpans measured their total wealth in the billions, were so *untouched* by the curse of their money. They were tight-knit, kind, and generous to each other, they *cared* about their family members. Had Kit not known who they were, he'd never have guessed that they were billionaires. True, they wore elegant and custom tailored clothes, Winston wore a Rolex watch and Abigail wore diamond earrings that had to be worth at least fifty thousand dollars, but their manner was much, much different from their appearance. As the conversation between the three older couples and Jessie continued, Kit observed Winston and Abigail Brighton with a calculating eye and a careful ear, listening not just to their words, but to their inflection, their demeanor, listening for any hint that they were something other than what they appeared to be...but he found nothing. Abigail had quite effectively charmed Jessie to the point where she started calling Abigail "Mum," and she had to be one of the kindest vixens he'd met, as well as being shockingly earthy and easy to like. She was a rich femme, but she didn't act rich, she acted like a middle-class housewife, all chatty and with a wickedly funny sense of humor. She told bawdy jokes that made Hannah's cheeks threaten to ruffle, then mortified Jessie by mentioning that she should have a camera there recording the birth, and she meant *recording* the birth.

Kit erupted into laughter at the mention of that. Shy, modest Jessie, allowing a camera to record parts of her body that only Kit and her parents had ever seen?

“What’s the matter, dear?” Abigail asked in sincere confusion when Jessie’s entire face and even her tail frizzed.

“Abby, Jessica is a very modest young lady,” Hannah said delicately.

“Oh, is that all? I can tell just by looking at you that you’re quite a dish when not pregnant, ducky, and sexy girls shouldn’t be afraid to show why they’re so sexy!”

“I could never do that,” Jessie said, the fur on her neck threatening to stand up.

“Well, I hope you’re not quite so modest when alone with your husband,” she winked.

Jessie laughed ruefully, and Kit patted her on the leg. “Oh, no, that’s not a problem,” he assured her. “Once I get her alone, she’s *very* bold. She just doesn’t like being bold for an audience, that’s all. Now, if I was the one doing the taping, and I was the only one who’d ever see the tape, she’d let me tape the birth.”

“Kiiiiit!” she protested, elbowing him.

“Well, that’s only healthy,” Abigail smiled, then she suddenly yawned. “I think it’s about time for us to retire, dear,” she told Winston. “We’ve had a very long and eventful day.”

Winston glanced at his watch. “Is that the time? Dear me,” he said in surprise. “It’s nearly ten! We’ve been sitting here whiling away three hours!

And I've been up since four. Yes, I think it's about time for bed, dovey."

"We should be turnin' in ourselves, we have to be up in the mornin' to head back."

"It's a private jet, so at least there's no schedule," Jessie consoled them.

"We're on enough of a schedule. Vil's bought all of us tickets to watch Ben play, and we're gonna go," Rick answered. "She chartered an outside company to get a jet big enough for everyone. She rented an airliner," Rick said with a chuckle. "We're all goin' to lay over to watch Ben play tomorrow, then we'll be headin' home on the jet while Vil and Kendall fly off to Florida in Vil's private jet. She said she and Ken are leavin' much earlier. They're takin' Ben to Columbus, cause he has to be there by nine."

"I feel rotten that I won't be there," Jessie complained.

"Well, we'll be watching it on the big TV, and we'll be there in spirit," Kit consoled. "Are you going with Vil or going later?" he asked John and Hannah.

"We're going with them," Hannah answered. "Vil said a car will be taking us to the airport at six, so we'll be up and gone before you wake up."

"I feel out of the loop. So many here, all these plans and I don't know about them," Kit laughed.

Quite a few kisses and pawshakes were spread through the room as the four couples said their goodnights, and Kit and Jessie retired to the master bedroom. Kit spent quite a long time massaging Jessie's shoulders and back, which had begun to start aching because of all the extra weight she was carrying, before they slipped into bed with the alarm set so they could

be up to see everyone off, including Jessie's family. "Well, this has certainly been exciting," Jessie giggled as she snuggled up with him. "Vil married, your family coming together, and it looks like we'll be home before I deliver."

"Thank God," Kit breathed. "I really, *really* didn't want Laura born in this house. I didn't want her starting out with a black mark on her."

"Tosh, you were born here. Right here in this very room," she giggled, giving him a gentle squeeze.

"Exactly," Kit said seriously.

"Well, I wouldn't have minded. As long as she's healthy and happy, she can be born in the back seat of a taxi in Mexico."

"I can arrange that."

"Don't you dare!" she giggled. "I'll have to punish you."

"Oooh, let's talk about that. Maybe I can negotiate a fun punishment."

"Then it wouldn't be a punishment!" she laughed, kissing him playfully on the muzzle.

They were up at 5:30, and they were all but running from the moment Darla, the night maid, called them to wake them up.

Jessie's family was already up and eating a light breakfast in the small dining room while the staff packed their belongings in the limo. Vil and Kendall were already at Stonebrook, and they had joined the Williams at the breakfast table. Kendall and Jenny almost looked hung over, but Ben was

energetic and anxious, more than ready for his first college football game, unable to sit still and picking at his omelet rather than eating it.

“Well, this is it, your last taste of being waited on paw and foot,” Kit teased as he sat down, and Sally put a plate filled with scrambled eggs, sausage, and wheat toast in front of him. “Thanks, Sal,” he nodded.

“I know where I’m coming when I want to visit,” John chuckled.

“Stonebrook will always be open to you, guys,” Kit said seriously. “Even if we’re not here. You show up at the gates, they’ll let you in and treat you right.”

“Well, now I know where to hide once I become a wanted felon,” Jenny said, yawning.

“At least until they put a reward on you. When your hide is worth more to someone else than it is to you, you have problems,” Kit teased.

“I hope I can sleep on the plane.”

“I have a bed in my plane, Jen,” Vil assured her. “I think I can rent it to you for, say, twenty dollars an hour.”

“What?” she gasped, and when she saw the sly look on Vil’s face, she laughed. “Can I pay you in pennies? I’ll mail you a penny a year until the bill is paid.”

“I’ll take it out of your next allowance,” Vil grinned. “With fifty thousand percent interest, compounded hourly.”

“No fair using imaginary numbers!” Jenny protested, which made Kit laugh.

“Big numbers aren’t imaginary,” Kendall piled on.

“I’ll sell you a naked picture of me instead,” Jenny retorted. “That way if you and Vil don’t work out, I can snag myself a rich husband!”

“Jennifer,” Hannah warned over Kendall’s bright laughter.

“Well, if you want a husband, I think I can find you one,” Kendall grinned, putting his chin on his paw on the table and regarding her with slightly malevolently amused eyes. “I happen to know a couple of rather well-off young chaps that would be overjoyed to have a pretty little thing like you on their arms.”

“And what’s the catch?”

“One is ugly as sin, one has a fair number of rather offensive habits, and the other one thinks that cereal boxes talk to him and tell him to wash his paws, which he does so often he’s rubbed the fur off his paws.”

“Well, which one is best in bed?” she asked.

“Jennifer Ophelia Williams!” Hannah barked, which made Jenny laugh.

“I couldn’t tell you that, but one of them is, ah, rather generously imparted.”

“I hope he’s not the ugly one.”

“It was his compensation for his face,” Kendall said gravely, which made Jessie’s face frizz even as she started to giggle. “I’m sure if you just close your eyes or do it with the lights off, you could always pretend.”

“Kendall Brighton!” Hannah said, shocked.

“What? If she’s old enough to ask, she’s old enough to hear the answer,” he said grandly.

“I knew it was a mistake to marry into this family,” Hannah said crossly, which made Vil and Kit grin at her.

“We love you too, Hannah,” Vil told her.

“Is it time to go yet?” Ben asked impatiently.

“As soon as you finish eating,” John told him. “You need your energy today, son.”

Ben looked at his plate and sighed. “I just can’t eat. I’m too nervous.”

“You’ll feel much better if you do,” Vil told him. “Eat, Ben.”

Winston and Abigail entered the dining room with Frannie and Bartholomew behind them, carrying breakfast trays for them. “Morning Mum, morning old male,” Kendall greeted.

“Morning, morning,” Winston smiled as he sat down beside John. “Did you sleep well, Ben?”

“Not really,” he said with a rueful chuckle. “I’m too excited and nervous.”

“Just the first game butterflies, son,” Abigail told him. “Harry played football too. Soccer I think you call it,” she corrected. “He didn’t sleep at all the night before his first game.”

“He any good?” John asked.

“Harry? Yeah, he was a damn fine goalie,” Kendall answered. “Had a knack for guessing where they’d shoot and was always there to make the save, said he could tell which way they’d shoot from the set of their knees and the curl of their tails just before they kicked. He was the last goalie

anyone wanted to try a penalty shot against. He could have easily gone pro.”

“He almost did, but decided to work for the company instead,” Winston chuckled. “I’d have loved to see him in Manchester United.”

“He hates Manchester,” Kendall snorted. “Maybe that’s why he backed out and went into the business.”

“This is why you should never have a split family,” Abigail sighed to Hannah. “Winston, Harry, and Michael all support different teams. It’s like a civil war when they play each other.”

“The only failing in my sons,” Winston grunted. “I don’t know where I went wrong.”

“They think you’re daft,” Kendall chuckled.

“Oh, I could understand that,” Hannah said, giving John a sly look. “Had Kit been a Pittsburgh or Cleveland fan, there might have been more than one cat in this family opposing the marriage.”

“I would *not* have objected if he was a Browns fan!” John protested. “I’d have doubted his intelligence and character, but I wouldn’t have prevented the wedding.”

“I wouldn’t have felt very welcome in your house,” Kit laughed.

Ben finally began to eat, and Vil was true to her word. As soon as he was done, she announced that it was time for them to go. “We have to get Ben to the stadium before nine,” she explained once again to Winston and Abigail. “And it’s about two hours or so to Columbus from here.”

“Yes! Let’s go!” Ben said with uncharacteristic enthusiasm, his voice almost trembling in excitement.

“Yes, that’s why we got up early, so we could see you off, ducky,” Abigail told him.

“Everything ready, Bart?” Vil asked.

“Everything is packed and ready to go, Mistress Vil,” he answered immediately. “I have tea and scones in the limo and the jet is standing by at Logan.”

“Alright, let’s get this show on the road,” Vil declared.

Kit and Jessie walked with them down to the garage, and they hugged and shook paws all around. “We’ll tell you as soon as we know when we’ll be back home, Hannah, and we’ll have a room ready for you.”

“Good,” she said. “It’s not that I don’t trust Jessica, but I’d like to be there both for the birth and for a couple of weeks afterward, to help her settle into the routine of caring for an infant. It’s not as easy as she thinks it will be.”

“I’m sure she’ll be overjoyed to have you helping,” Kit chuckled. “So will I at two in the morning.”

“I certainly would have loved my mother to be there to help me when I had Jessica. I *thought* I was ready to care for a baby, at least until I had one.”

Kit laughed. “Like I said, we’ll be overjoyed to have you there to help us get the hang of it.” He smiled at her. “And we’ll put you in the furthest bedroom from ours, so you don’t hear anything.”

She gave him a look, then laughed ruefully. “Such a silly boy,” she teased. “I’m all but consigned to the fact that you’re *married*, Kit. I’m certain that you’ve figured that part of your life out, else you wouldn’t be having a baby.”

He laughed and kissed her on the cheek.

Kit and Jessie didn’t go with them to the airport. They instead stood in the courtyard in the warm summer dawn and waved as the limo pulled away, carrying the first wave of what would be an invasion of Columbus by the extended family and friends of the Vulpans. Stanley came out to them just as it pulled out, yawning and looking drawn and exhausted, but smiling a warm, glowing smile. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t up to see them off,” he apologized. “But after the reception....”

“I’m glad you finally slept,” Kit chuckled. “How long were you up?”

“About fifty hours. But I had to make sure everything was *perfect* for Mistress Vil’s reception.

“Well, it was perfect, Stanley,” Jessie assured him. “It was beautiful, and everything was just right.”

“I’m so glad,” he sighed sincerely. “But now comes putting the manor back together, so the staff has a couple of very busy days ahead. I’m taking this opportunity to do a little minor work about the manor. I’ll have a couple of rooms repainted, and the curtains in the west wing master bedroom need replacing. I about died of embarrassment when Master Rick and Mistress Martha took the room before I could get them replaced.”

“I don’t think they even noticed that they’re old, Stan,” Jessie giggled.

“Well, *I* know, and that’s enough,” he said simply.

“What’s the word on them filling in that tunnel?”

“They will be here today to begin work on it,” he answered immediately. “They will fill in the room and pipe leading out of the tunnel with cement, leaving the rest of the tunnel intact and unreachable from anywhere but the inside. I’ll also have them survey the tunnel and mark it above ground so I know where it is. If there’s any sagging or unusual ground movement over the tunnel, I might have to have the grounds excavated and the tunnel either filled in or repaired.”

“I’d rather just leave it as is unless it collapses,” Kit said. “This may sound weird, but it’s part of the manor, and I’d like to leave it be.”

“I certainly understand that sentiment, Master Kit,” he nodded. “I’ll have a buffet style breakfast prepared for our guests and laid out in the small dining room. According to the day’s schedule, they’re due to be up in about half an hour, so they can prepare to leave.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” he agreed.

Kit ran into Nick and Sylvia as they went back into the house. “Mornin’,” Nick smiled.

“How did it go with the guards?”

“Smooth as silk,” he answered. “The Valiant furs did their jobs well, and we had no incidents except for one fender bender out on the road. One limo backed into another,” he chuckled. “I’ve paid up my mates who came to help with the reception, and most of them left yesterday afternoon to go on to other jobs.”

“I hope they had a good time,” Jessie said.

“They had a ball,” Nick laughed. “They got to more or less showcase themselves to some very rich furs, who just might give them a call when *they* need some extra security. A merc never passes up the chance to make contacts, and yesterday was a gold mine of contacts, both with clients and with each other.”

“Good, I like to see friends get along in the world,” Kit declared. “Sylvia, where did you get that dress you had on yesterday?”

“I’ve had it a while, *Herr* Kit,” she answered.

“It was very lovely. I’m still wondering where you were hiding the pistols,” he winked.

Sylvia laughed, Jessie elbowed him lightly in the ribs, and Nick just grinned. “If I told you, I’d have to kill you, *Herr* Kit,” she said seriously. “And if I showed you, then I’m certain that *Fraulein* Jessie would kill us both.”

Jessie giggled at that, but dug her claws just a little into his arm, as if to support that observation, which made the two mercs laugh richly. “We do need to talk a little business, Nick,” Kit said as they walked along the halls. “Now that it looks like things are going to settle down, I’d like to break our imprisonment and take Jessie out before we go home, show her a little New England.”

“No worries, mate, we can arrange it,” Nick nodded. “Just tell us where we’re going and when, and I’ll make sure it’s a safe journey.”

“Well, we were talking about going to Maine next weekend with Suzy, to go up and see Corey,” Jessie ventured.

“We’ll talk to Suzy and set it up,” Nick assured them. “We’ll make sure you’re safe as can be, yet still get to see everything and have fun.”

“Sounds good to me, Nick,” Jessie said. “Umm, can you do me a favor and put the trap launcher back up? I think I’d like to shoot some trap this afternoon, after the game. Everyone will be gone by then, and it’ll be back to the routine.”

“I’ll take care of it, dove,” he nodded in reply. “You still have my K eighty, right?”

“Up in our room,” she answered. “Your, um, *other* one is up there too.”

“And it’s going to stay there,” he said simply. “And Kit, after your guests all leave, I’d like to see you back in the holster.”

“Aww, I hate that thing,” he protested.

“We’re *safer*, but not *safe*,” he said seriously. “When things look better is when too many make the mistake of relaxing, and that gets furs dead. You’ll be wearing that holster until the day you go back to Texas, and if I have my way, you’ll be carrying it there too.”

“I can’t, I don’t have a license, and Texas isn’t Massachusetts. The cops up here wouldn’t dare arrest me for carrying a concealed weapon, but Texas cops aren’t owned by my family.”

“Kit, Kit, Kit,” Nick sighed with a chuckle. “You’re thinking like a *normal* fox. I talked to Miss Vil, and she made some calls. I already have both yours and Jessie’s Texas concealed carry licenses, as well as a special federal exemption for any illegal weaponry you two may own. You’re now officially licensed firearms *collectors* with a special government exemption,” he said, dittoing with his fingers. “And with that special

exemption, you have the legal right to buy and own certain weapons that are considered illegal to everyone else, because you only collect them, you don't actually *use* them," he winked. "You being a collector even lets you buy illegal weapons from makers legally at list price, not what *we* pay for them under the table," he chuckled. "But a collector can only legally buy *one*, and only once in your life. At least legally."

"Gun companies sell guns illegally?" Jessie asked.

"They do," Sylvia nodded. "They charge twice what the gun is worth, but I can buy nearly any weapon from any maker, and you will never find any paperwork that shows that I did. It just comes down to knowing who to contact within the companies, *Fraulein* Jessie. Know the right number to call, and you can buy anything."

"Wow," she breathed.

"I've told you many times, pretty kitty, the rules are different for the rich," Kit told her. "You don't think that Vil couldn't buy military grade weapons if she wanted them? Hell, if she really wanted to, she could build her own private navy. She *does* run a shipyard," he chuckled.

"That's a scary thought," Jessie said. "Steve could have bought machine guns for the Paladins, because he's a Vulpan and would be able to do it."

"He could have," Nick agreed honestly. "And I'd bet that he has, though they didn't bring them here. Guess they didn't think they'd need them. But take it from me, dove, buying one machine gun is easy, but buying a *crate* of machine guns is an entirely different animal. The gun makers tend to look the other way until you start to order larger numbers of weapons, *then* they start getting curious. And when they get curious, the

governments get wind of it and they start looking into why someone is amassing an arsenal within their borders. If Steve was arming the Paladins, he had to be very careful about it and do it very slowly. Not even being a Vulpan would have hidden what he was doing for long if he moved too fast. That's how gangbangers out in the big cities can get their paws on Mac tens and Uzis, a single disgruntled male can track down a used submachine gun, but you don't see the separatist militias all sporting around assault weapons. It's all about numbers."

"One at a time," Sylvia nodded. "Never buy more than one at a time."

Allison was the first one they met. She came down the back stairs and into the kitchen as they entered it, yawning while wearing a rather skimpy pair of panties and a tank top shirt that only went to her ribcage that read *Bad Girl*. Nick stopped to admire Allison's very svelte form. "Oh, sorry, I just came down for some coffee," she said, seeing them.

"Love, come down like that *anytime*," Nick grinned, looking her up and down boldly.

"Ally, the phones up in your room are there for a reason," Kit chuckled. "Call and have it brought up next time. That will save you from being drooled over by certain wolves."

"Look all you want. Never touch," she said dismissively as a slightly disapproving-looking Frannie handed Allison a cup of coffee, who obviously knew how she liked it. "Thank you. I'll go back to my room now and get dressed."

"That might be a good idea, dear," Frannie said in a slightly stern tone.

Allison padded back into the hall leading to the back stairs, which led more or less right to her door. Hers was the closest bedroom to those stairs. Nick couldn't resist watching her pad out, and his eyes were locked on her very shapely backside and her thick-furred, luxuriantly bushy tail that swayed from side to side as she walked. "I do love the perks of this assignment," he said, which earned him a jab from Sylvia.

"I'm about to give you an assignment, wolf," she grated.

"Why Sylvie, dove, are you jealous?" he teased.

"Disappointed. You spend all that time chasing me, then drop me like a cold fish? Now you have to start all over again."

"But it's the chase that's fun. After I catch you, then what? You're a bit too dangerous to keep."

She gave him a cool stare which made Jessie burst into a fit of giggling.

Allison was the first up, but she wasn't alone long. Rick and Martha came down a few minutes later, and others quickly filed suit. They'd all been awakened by the staff so they could eat before leaving. Kit and Jessie stayed with them and had their last visit, because the limos were being loaded and everyone was going to leave as soon as they finished breakfast. Kit and Jessie stayed as close to them as possible, mainly because both of them had felt like they were *home* with the gang there, and Lupe and the neighbors, and Sheila and Allison, and now they were all going back home, and they'd be more or less alone again, with nothing but the house, the staff, and Muffy. Not that the staff and Muffy weren't good company, but they weren't *home* the way the Austin furs were. Rick and Martha and the others were a tactile sense of what they'd left behind, lazy afternoons sitting

on the deck, Sunday poker, date night, the sorority girls over to cook and gossip, the occasional trip in the plane, all the things that made Austin their home. All that was leaving in just a little while, and both of them wanted to cling to it as long as possible before it was gone.

But, they could only make it last so long before everyone had eaten, and it was time. They escorted them out to the courtyard, where five limousines were arrayed and waiting to take them to Logan, where a privately chartered Boeing airliner would take them first to Columbus to see Ben play, and then take them on home to Austin. Jessie was hugged almost every time she turned around, and Kit shook quite a few paws and kissed several cheeks. “Be good now, dear,” Martha told him as she kissed his cheek, and then he shook Rick’s paw, then was surprised by a hug from Allison. Terry was going to meet them at the airport and attend the game, then fly back to New Orleans with Bess and the boys to get back to work.

“We miss you two very much,” she said in her usual calm manner. “I hope you’ll be home before Jessie delivers.”

“Believe me, I do too,” he said fervently. “The last thing I want is for Laura to be born in this house.”

“Aww, come on, don’t you want half the family to die of outrage?” Sheila grinned, nudging him.

“Your mother would be one of them.”

“She needs more excitement in her life anyway. Me and Ally took care of some of that. We left a DVD in her limo that had some pictures on it.”

“Pictures?”

“Oh yes, I forgot about those,” Allison hummed. “Charlie was very happy to do us a favor, and Janet lent me here camera with no questions asked.”

“Like I said, *pictures*,” Sheila winked, which made Kit laugh helplessly.

“You’re awful!”

“Thank you. I try.”

“We’ll be back here tomorrow to see you, then we’ll be returning to Britain so we can arrange to come back for your delivery, dear,” Abigail told them as she hugged Jessie and kissed her on the cheek.

“You’re going to go watch the game?”

“Yes, Vil talked us into it,” Harry said, shaking Kit’s paw. “We’ll see how well your brother plays, Jess, then we’ll be stopping by here tomorrow afternoon for dinner before we head back home the next morning. We’ll be staying over at Hart’s Crossing, I think your staff could use a break.”

Kit chuckled. “I’m sure all of them but Stanley would agree with you,” he nodded.

“Vil even bought us replicas of your brother’s jersey to wear, dove,” Winston proclaimed as he hugged and kissed Jessie.

“We’re getting the old male into jeans and a jersey,” Michael grinned.

“It’s not like I haven’t worn them before,” he harrumphed in reply. “I’ll just need someone to explain the rules of American football during the game, so I don’t look like an idiot jumping up and cheering the wrong team or something.”

“You’ll be sitting smack dab in the middle of Ohio State fans, Winston,” Jessie giggled. “When you see the ones in red cheer, you cheer too. It’s that easy!”

“See, she sums up in five seconds what you lot tried to explain in two hours, and poorly!” Winston declared, pointing at Michael and Charlie. “And mind you, boy, that I was onto your little game about throwing beer cups!”

“I guess he really isn’t as gullible as he looks,” Charlie noted to Michael, who laughed.

And before he knew it, they were gone. Kit and Jessie stood in the courtyard with a hastily awakened Muffy and waved to the limos as they drove around the house and out of sight, and then it was back to the bizarre circumstances that approached normal for them since coming to Boston almost in the blink of an eye. “Well, there they go,” Jessie sighed. “And we’re alone again.”

“What am I? Thumbelina?” Muffy protested.

“You’re alone with us, Muffy,” Jessie told her, putting her arm around her shoulders. “Back to our own private little world, I suppose.”

“Not so much now,” Kit said. “We’re going to Maine next weekend, and we *will* go out now,” he declared. “I’m not hiding in the manor anymore. Nick and the others will have plenty of time to make the arrangements so we’re safe, but we *will* go out, and we *will* have a life again.”

“Easily done, mate,” Nick assured them, as he and Sylvia stood behind them. “Just say where and when, and it’ll happen.”

“How about tomorrow, and to the mall?” Jessie asked. “I want to buy a wedding present for Vil.”

“Doable,” he nodded. “How about after lunch?”

“Sounds good to me,” Jessie nodded to him. “You know, I barely had a chance to talk to Sam or Kevin. It was almost like they were avoiding everyone.”

“I know, they did seem to stay to themselves,” Kit said with a nod. “I hope everything’s okay with them.”

“I’ll call Sam tonight,” Jessie noted to herself.

“Stan,” Kit called over the phone, “They’re gone, and everyone did fantastic. Everyone take the rest of the day off.”

“But Master Kit!” Stanley objected. “There are things to do! Things to put back to normal!”

“They can wait until tomorrow,” he said firmly. “Everyone worked very hard, and they deserve a little rest. So everyone take the rest of the day off, and *that includes you*, Stan,” he said adamantly, which made Jessie giggle. “And we’ll have none of that servant’s hours crap, either. The manor is on holiday. If anyone’s going out, you can buzz in and out from the manor, so that means you take the day off too, Oscar.”

It was almost something of a let down to have everyone in the manor, and then have it empty, even empty of the servants since most of the staff vacated to take advantage of the surprise time off. The place felt empty and foreboding again, nothing but silence and the occasional distant sound of a servant that didn’t go out and was partaking of the amenities the manor offered. The mass departure of friends and family had returned Stonebrook

to the feel of a cold, uninviting hotel where they were only barely tolerated by the old ghosts that called the manor home. But, they had things to do to occupy themselves. While Nick put the trap launcher back up, Jessie sat down for a while to take the stress off her back and Muffy got ready to go back to school. She'd already missed two weeks of the start of the semester at Yale, and had been doing her homework and getting notes from the professors of the classes where she intended to show up, and after Kit and Jessie went home, she'd be returning to Connecticut to attend classes. She was honoring her word to stay with Jessie until she went home, and she wasn't about to go back on it. Kit wrote quite a few thank-you emails to friends and family and sent them off, then he started making a few discreet calls around Austin, looking at a few potential business opportunities he'd been noticing around town.

Since the staff had been released for the day and Jessie was resting her back, Kit did the cooking for both lunch, and intended to also cook dinner. It felt rather nice to have the big kitchen to himself as he broiled up some salmon for his hungry wife and cousin, and made some of Jessie's specialty spiced potatoes and sirloin tips, and set out the makings for pork chops, cheese-baked potato chunks which was another Williams recipe he'd learned, vegetable medley, salad, and he was even going to bake a German chocolate cake for dessert. Muffy was rather surprised that Kit could cook, her eyes widening as she tried each course and amazed to find that it tasted good.

"I knew how to cook before I met Jess, but she trained me up to where she likes my cooking," Kit grinned at her.

"It didn't take much," she smiled in reply.

After lunch, it was time. They retired to the theatre room along with Clancy, Stanley, Bartholomew, Dee, Luann, and Maxine's children, Leonard, Wendy, and Kate, and they all watched *the game*. Ohio State against West Virginia University, at 3:30pm, piped in off DirecTV using the College Game Day package which Stanley had ordered specifically for them, for this one game. One of the advantages of a huge manor like Stonebrook was that it had cable *and* DirecTV, and each one had absolutely everything that each had to offer outside of pay per view. Kit and Jessie settled in wearing Ben's jerseys, with a big bowl of popcorn on the stand between their stadium seats.

Leonard, Wendy, and Kate were a bit quiet as they sat with the others, but Jessie did her best to make them open up a little. Muffy helped her, engaging her cousins in conversation and then smoothly involving Jessie into it. Jessie wanted to be a school teacher, and Kit knew that she *knew* how to talk to kids, and she more than proved it. Within 15 minutes, Kate and Wendy were babbling away with her, but Leonard, the oldest of the minors still living with Maxine, was much more distant and reserved.

And the game was momentous in ways that Kit saw would impact the rest of their lives, for early in the first quarter, after only his fifth play from scrimmage, Chris Wells, all-star running back for Ohio State, went down with a very broken leg. The replay was *grisly*, the leg could literally be seen snapping, and flopping wildly as he went down. Just like that, Ben Williams, true freshman, was suddenly the starting running back.

And Ben was *amazing*! The sudden injury to Wells seemed to bring out the very best in Ben. Ben was tall, lithe, and sleek, but he was also as strong as a bull ox, and that combination of power, speed, and agility was just devastating. Kit saw Ben run absolutely wild all over West Virginia's

defense, not once being tackled for a loss, moving like a dancer behind the line, then exploding into the linebackers and knocking them literally on their butts on his way to the secondary, where the smaller, faster cornerbacks and safeties had to find a way to tackle someone bigger, stronger, and just as fast as they were. The only way they could bring him down was to cheat, to grab his armored tail sheath, which all football players wore to protect their tails in the rugged game, which was a 15 yard penalty in college football. The tail sheath was a sleeve that went over the tail made of kevlar and aluminum ribbing and stiff joints to provide stiff resistance if they landed on their tails, else a football player would be breaking his tail almost every game...and even with the sheath, tail fractures were the most common injury in football. Some football players had their tails wrapped around their waists and tied down like a belt under their uniforms, and others went to the extreme of having their tails amputated to rob defenders of a potential pawhold, but Ben's long tail flowed behind him almost defiantly in its armored sheath, a taunting symbol to the defense that he was long past them and on his way to a big gain.

Thanks to Ben's domination of the ground, it was a rout. Ohio State beat West Virginia 35-7 because Ohio State absolutely dominated time of possession, keeping Pat White and the West Virginia offense off the field. Ben gained a very impressive 163 yards in 28 carries, his longest a 56 yard race down the sideline only to be tackled at the three yard line, and included two rushing touchdowns, four pass receptions, and he even recovered a fumble by his quarterback when he fumbled the snap. If Ben ever needed to have a breakout, look-at-me kind of game, it was that game, and he'd played his best at exactly the right time. Kit had no doubt that Ben's name would be all over ESPN tonight, and there were going to be highlights all over sports all week.

“Wow, your brother Ben is *good*, Jessie!” Wendy gushed after the game was over.

“I thought he was cute,” Kate said girlishly, “even though he’s not a fox!”

“I think he just became their permanent starter,” Kit chuckled. “I don’t think Wells will win the job back after his leg heals. Not if Ben keeps playing like *that* every week. They’d be insane to take him out of the starter spot.”

“Yeah!” Jessie giggled. “We gotta call him and congratulate him!”

She did just that. She put the phone on speaker so all of them could hear, and she congratulated him in glowing praise after getting him on the phone, hearing him in his locker room with his teammates whooping and calling in the background, and then it became suddenly quiet. “Vil’s in the locker room!” Ben said with a nervous laugh. “There were guys in the shower, and they walked out naked to look her in the face!”

“Well, she’s married now, so I think she can manage it,” Kit laughed.

“Tell her to get some pictures of those hunky football players out of their jockstraps!” Muffy called, which made Jessie break out into fits of giggling.

Kit could barely hear her in the background. “You played a fantastic game, Ben,” she told him. “I’m glad I could be here to see it!”

“I’m talkin’ to sis and Kit right now, they watched me on TV,” he told her.

“I hope they got it on Tivo!” she said.

“We did!” Jessie called. “We got it all, and we’ll make a few DVDs if she wants them.”

When Ben repeated that, she laughed. “I had Will record the game for me, but thanks for the offer. We’ll be on our way now, Ben. A week in Florida, a week in Europe. I’m looking forward to it,” she chuckled. “So you be good, and keep playing hard.”

“I will. Thanks for coming, Vil.”

“For my brother-in-law? Any time,” she answered.

“Okay, she’s gone,” Ben said almost conspiratorially into the phone, which made all three of them laugh.

“You played really good, Ben!” Kate gushed.

“Who’s that there?”

“Ben, that’s Kate, my youngest cousin,” Kit introduced.

“Oh. Hi Kate! I’m sorry I didn’t meet you at the wedding, but there were so many furs everywhere!”

“That’s okay, Mom kept us away from you and Jessie,” Wendy laughed. “I’m Wendy.”

“And I’m Lenny,” Leonard introduced.

“Nice to meet all of you, and thank you for watching!” Ben said modestly. “I hope you liked the game.”

“Liked it? I loved it!” Wendy beamed. “Vulpan girls like football, Ben, and you’re good!”

“I’ve noticed that Vulpan girls like football,” Ben laughed. “Your cousins Sheila, Muffy, Bess, and Mary like football too. We talked about it during the wedding,” he continued.

“Just another sign of our superiority over other femmes,” Muffy said loftily.

“Suuuure,” Ben drawled.

“When’s your next game, Ben?” Muffy asked.

“Next Saturday, but it’s on the road. We play Pitt at one o’clock, then we play Michigan State at home the week after. Then we start conference play after that.”

“Isn’t that the big rivalry?”

“No, that’s the last game of the season, and it’s Michigan, not Michigan State. We’re already preparing for it,” he laughed. “A bowl, heck, even the national championship isn’t as important as beating Michigan. Coach said if we only won one game all year, as long as that one win was against Michigan, then it was a winning season.”

“Sounds like Harvard and Yale,” Muffy giggled.

“Or Army and Navy,” Kit agreed.

“Ooh, I hope I can get Mom to get the game on TV for us!” Wendy said excitedly.

“I’m pretty sure you could, Wendy,” Jessie nodded.

“Umm, can you send me a copy of the game? I want to see it without an audience, to make sure I didn’t look like an idiot out there,” he said nervously.

Jessie laughed. "Brother, you were *amazing*! You're gonna play in the NFL, Ben, mark my words!"

"I have to get there first," he said ruefully. "But thanks sis. Uh oh, Coach is calling us, I gotta go."

"Good luck, cousin-in-law!" Muffy called.

"Great game, Ben, talk to you later," Kit added.

"I'll call you tonight," Jessie promised.

"Thanks guys. Talk to you later, gotta go. Bye-bye."

"That's the most modest male I've ever met," Muffy laughed. "He thought he looked like an idiot out there? He ran the other team into the ground!"

"He's cute!" Kate repeated.

"That's why he's so special," Jessie said simply. "My brother's the sweetest male you've ever met, Muffy. He's gonna make some girl deliriously happy someday."

"Sheila's still trying to be that girl," Kit laughed.

"She'll never pull that off. Ben's a sweetheart, but he's not dumb," Jessie declared. "He'll never fall for her so long as she's, well, Sheila."

"You know, it's weird. The big burly ones are often the ones who are sweet. I guess they can afford to be. They can clobber anyone who calls them a sissy," Muffy noted clinically.

Kit and Jessie erupted into a fit of laughter.

After Jessie rested a bit, she went out to shoot trap with Muffy as Kit cooked dinner. Pork chops weren't something he made often, but he knew enough not to give them food poisoning. He got them browned and in a skillet to boil off the water, then got the cheese-baked potato chunks and the German chocolate cake into the ovens. He was cutting up the veggies for the salad when, to his surprise, his aunt Maxine padded into the kitchen. She looked at him with shock for a moment, as he was paws deep in food and he chopped up a cucumber with practiced ease. "Kit," she said with a nod. "I've come for the children."

"I think they're out with Jessie," he answered. "She's shooting trap out on the corner of the lawn."

"I heard the gunshots but didn't see where they were coming from."

"West side, front lawn, down at the edge of the hill." He brushed the cucumbers into a bowl. "How did it go with Graham?"

"He's gone," she said shortly. "His jaw is wired shut, which made it a blessedly quiet affair. He's in San Francisco now, and he's already threatening to sue."

"Sue for what? With what?" Kit snorted.

"He threatened to sue for custody, and is threatening to file for divorce."

"Didn't he even *read* his prenup?" Kit snorted. "Right there in the first paragraph, *there will be no divorce*. Let him file, Aunt Maxine. It'll just seal his own fate."

She gave him a curious look. "You are surprisingly...civil, nephew."

“I’m in a good mood,” he shrugged. “By the way, your daughters want to watch Ohio State football games for the rest of the year. I suggest you arrange it or they’ll nag you for half of forever. I think Kate already has a crush on Ben.”

“He played a very good game, and clearly earned the right to start next week,” she said almost automatically, and then her cheeks actually ruffled a bit when Kit gave her a penetrating look. “I watched the game as well,” she admitted. “After hearing so much about Jessica’s brother, I wanted to watch him play. He’s very talented.”

“We’ll agree on that, Maxy,” he nodded as he started chopping up a tomato.

“Why on earth are you doing that?” she asked.

“I gave the staff the day off because they worked so hard on the reception,” he answered. “They deserved it. And I’m not afraid to do for myself, Aunt Maxy.”

“So I see.” Her phone rang, and she quickly took it out. “Hello? Yes.” Kit watched as her eyes seemed to turn haunted for a second, and then she closed them and bowed her head. She closed the phone without another word, then she sighed. “Kit. Steven just died.”

Kit gave her a steady look. “Don’t expect any sorrow from me, Maxine, but thank you for telling me,” he said simply as he brushed the chopped tomato into the bowl. “Was that Uncle Zach?”

“His chief butler,” she answered. “At least he and Alicia reached the hospital with enough time to see him and say goodbye,” she said mournfully. “I should go to him, Kit. Even though you have no reason to

love Steven, it's a terrible thing for a parent to lose a child. Imagine how you would feel if you lost Laura. That is what Zach is feeling right now."

That was a fairly good description. Kit would be devastated if Laura somehow died during childbirth or some other tragedy befell them, and in that context, he could understand a portion of what Zach must be feeling. Even though Zach was a rotten fox and his son was just as rotten, Steven was still his *son*, and Zach had loved him, loved him far more than he'd loved his daughters. Steven was his first born son, his pride and joy, the favored son of his family, and now he was gone. "Then you should go," he told her. "But you can leave the kids here. We'll be glad to have them."

"I...thank you, Kit. If it wouldn't be a burden, can you keep them overnight?"

"I'd be happy to," he said with a nod, putting a bell pepper on the chopping block. "But you really should go see them and break the news, so they don't find out you came and went without even seeing them."

"Yes, of course. Thank you, nephew," she said. And then, to his surprise, she came around the counter, put a paw on his shoulder, and kissed him on the cheek. "I hope we can be *civil* to each other more in the future."

"Catch me in a good mood, and maybe," he said with a steady look. "But don't ever mistake it for forgiveness."

"Fair enough, nephew. Fair enough."

Chapter 39

The news of the death of Kitstrom Steven Vulpan swept through both the family and the nation like a firestorm.

It was on the cable news channels before it could reach the entire family. Someone in the hospital out in Pennsylvania leaked word to the press that Steven had died against hospital policy, and that worker was quickly looking for another job after Zachary found out that the sad news had hit the press before it even got to Aunt Sarah, that Sarah had heard it over the radio. Stonebrook again, oddly enough, became something of a nexus for the Vulpan family, as calls poured in from the family. With Vil gone on her honeymoon and pointedly keeping herself unavailable to the family, the family turned to Kit to act as the primary figure, and much to his own distaste and annoyance. Steve had tried to *kill* him and Jessie, and now the cousins, even the elders, were calling him to find out what was going on, where they needed to go, what was going to happen next. The only one that didn't call him was Zachary, and it wasn't like Kit really expected him to do so. Steven had died in a car accident, but he was out there on the road because he tried and failed to assassinate Kit and Jessie. Had Zachary had the nerve to call Kit, odds were he'd have blistered Zach's ear with a vituperous recrimination and gotten himself in very hot water. It was best for Kit to stay very separate from Zach's family right now, even though Travis and Bridgette did call to tell him the grim news.

It was Travis that seemed the most introspective about it. "I don't really know how to feel, cousin," he said over the phone in a strange voice.

“Steve was my brother, but we were never really that close. I was the second son.”

“Always the first to be passed over,” Kit grunted. “Bridgette said much the same thing. Zach never really treated her like anything but a placeholder until Steven was born. Then she was the afterthought.”

“Isn’t that God’s own truth,” Travis said darkly. “Listen. I don’t know if anyone told you this, but I’m sorry. Sorry about Steve, and what happened. I hate that he died, but it wasn’t really your fault. It was just a stupid accident.”

“Thanks, Trav,” Kit said as he took the cup of tea that Jessie offered with a nod. “Are you coming up?”

“No, not yet,” he answered. “I’ll come for the wake, but Dad is...I dunno. He sounded, sounded, I dunno. Weird. It wasn’t like him. Kit, I’d be careful. I think Dad’s about two steps from the cliff.”

Kit did not laugh. Zachary was a very, very dangerous fox, and what Travis was suggesting wasn’t something that Kit thought was impossible. After all, he’d thought that Zach had tried to kill his sister. It turned out that he hadn’t, but now that his precious son was dead, and Kit was fairly sure that he’d find a way to blame Kit for it, Travis’ warning was a viable one. “I’ll warn Nick, and Vil if I can,” he said.

“I can’t get through to her.”

“Neither can I. She’s making it clear that she’s not leaving her honeymoon. She’s sending Zach a message by washing her paws of Steve.”

“He won’t like that.”

“That’s his problem, Trav. This is all his fault.”

“That’s a stretch, Kit.”

“Is it? Zach’s probably the one that brought Steve into the PPC. Bridgette told us Zach’s a member, and so is Alicia. Zach inducts Steve into the PPC, Steve becomes a Paladin, he tries to kill me by ordering the Paladins to do the deed and providing them with information that would have made it very easy for them to do it, then he crashes his car while on the run from Vil after he gets exposed. This traces back to the fact that Zach brought Steve into the PPC. If not for that, none of this would have happened.”

“If you want to paint with that brush, if you’d not have married Jessie, none of this would have happened.”

“True, but the difference there is I acted out of love, while Steve acted out of hate,” he said simply. “Which is the more noble sentiment, Travis?”

Travis was silent a long moment. “I don’t think there’s an answer to that I want to accept,” he said quietly.

“The truth is often hard to accept,” Kit said calmly. “Purism makes no sense if you sit down and look at it with impassive eyes, Travis. Hate rarely makes any sense if you look at it impartially, from the outside rather than the inside. I figured that out when I was twelve, when I was presented with the facts, and didn’t just listen to the sermon.”

“I didn’t call for a philosophical discussion, cousin,” Travis said, a bit stiffly.

“Maybe not, but it’s something for you to think about,” he answered. “Do the others down there know?”

“Yeah. Terry heard it on the *television*,” Travis said with honest outrage. “Who the hell told the press?”

“It wasn’t any of us, that’s for sure,” Kit said. “Someone at the hospital had to do it.”

“I hope they nail his tail to the wall,” he growled. “Damned vultures.”

“I’ll agree with you there,” Kit hummed. “I’m going to have to go, Trav. Keep in touch.”

“I will.”

Kit hung up the phone and tossed it on the table of the TV room with a grunt. Maxine’s kids were watching TV, and they knew. Maxine had broken the news to them, but it hadn’t had much impact. Being the youngest of the cousins, they didn’t really know some of the older cousins very well. The Vulpans weren’t the only family where cousins separated by large age differences weren’t really too close, since they didn’t have as much in common with each other as cousins their own age. Zach’s family especially had been more pompous than the rest, because after Kit was disowned, Zach was almost certain that he could take control of the family from Kit’s father by taking over the company, and then passing the company to his own son, Steven, after he passed away. Zach had been grooming his kids to be “the royal family” among the Vulpans, the same way Kit’s own family had been, but then all that came crashing down when Dad passed the company to Vil instead of giving it to Zachary.

He could also tell that in the two days that they’d been in Stonebrook, Maxine’s youngest kids were put in an unusual position of having to live around Jessie, who did *not* simply ignore them. She talked to them, seemed to be very interested in them, and that confused them to no end. Jessie was a

mixed breed and they knew it, and he could see the confusion in their eyes when they regarded her. Jessie was not the *mixed mongrel* that they'd heard about from their parents and their friends, who was supposed to be dumb, belligerent, crude, rude, and inferior. Instead they found themselves dealing with an intelligent, kind, gentle, sweet femme who was virtually impossible not to like, because she was just so nice. She was as much unlike what they expected a mixed to be that it made them uncertain, because, to be simple about it, they had never really *met* a mixed before, not in an uncontrolled situation where they could say whatever they wanted, and they interacted with the mixed breed in a social situation. The kids were very sheltered, all their friends carefully controlled, and taught to be pompously silent and condescending when in a public setting, like shopping down in Macy's or Nordstrom or some other upscale rich-fur boutique. Kit doubted any of them had ever so much as set foot in a Wal-Mart or a McDonald's before. Just as Kit had had his moment of epiphany in a Burger King, being fed by a kindly mixed who stopped and *listened* to him, Jessie was, in her own away, assaulting the image of a mixed breed that the kids had in their minds. He couldn't tell if they were changing their minds, but they were certainly facing nothing like what they thought a mixed would be.

“Why do they keep calling *me*?” he protested.

“Because Vil put you in charge,” Jessie said mildly as Stanley brought in a tray holding tea and three small glasses of wine. Jessie gave Stanley a hard look when he served it to the Vulpan children, but said nothing. She knew that Vulpans started drinking wine before puberty, it was a family tradition, and Maxine's kids weren't hers. She hadn't said much when Sheila or Muffy drank, but Kit could see that it rubbed her fur the wrong way to see 12 year old Kate drinking wine. “When bad things happen, furs

are looking for someone to reassure them or tell them what to do. With Vil gone on her honeymoon, that's you now, handsome fox."

"Leading a family I hate. What a world," he grunted, which made Wendy giggle. "Don't start, young lady, or I'll sell you to a Russian circus."

She laughed. "Such a liar."

"Alright, I'll sell you to a Texas rodeo," he amended. "They'll make you clean out horse stables all day."

"I ride a lot," Kate told Jessie. "Mom let me do riding lessons, and she even built a stable on the manor so we can keep our horses there."

"Really? Are you like Muffy and just take lessons because you like it, or do you want to be an equestrian when you're older?"

"Just because I like it," she answered. She looked at Jessie a little strangely, then blurted something out. "Are you *really*, well, you know... mixed?" she asked.

Jessie nodded with a slight smile. "All my relatives are cats except my grandfather. He was a fox," she answered. "He's why I have these," she winked, holding up her dark-mittened paws.

"That's going to make all the difference," Kit noted lightly as he took a cup of tea from Stanley with a nod of thanks. "Laura has fox on both sides of her line."

"I still say you're wrong," she challenged, pointing at him.

"About what?" Kate asked.

"Well, we're not entirely sure what our baby is going to look like," she said, putting a gentle paw on her very pregnant belly. "Well, we already

know that she'll have a fox muzzle from the ultrasound, but outside of that, we just don't know. She might have fox markings, or have my fur, or if she'll have claws or what. She might come out looking completely like a fox, or like a cat with a long muzzle. But we'll find out in a couple of weeks," she said with a dreamy smile. "Then I'll be a mommy. I can't wait!"

"I wonder if she'll have Vulpan eyes," Wendy speculated.

"Another thing we've been wondering about," Jessie chuckled. "Kit's convinced she will. I'm not so sure."

"If she's even a tenth of a Vulpan, she will," Kit snorted. "She'd *better*, or I'll think you were cheating on me."

"Kit!" Jessie gasped, then laughed ruefully when she saw his slight smile.

"What's wrong with that?" Leonard broke his silence. "Dad says that marriage is for having kids, but other girls are for having a good time."

"Why can't you have a good time with your wife?" Jessie asked simply. "You heard Vil, you get to marry who you *want* now. So pick the kind of girl you like, not who your mom wants you to marry."

"I certainly have a good time," Kit winked at Jessie.

Her cheeks ruffled. "Not in front of the kids," she said primly, motioning at Kate.

"That's okay, we had sex ed," Kate said, which made Jessie's entire face frizz, and Kit to laugh raucously.

“You’re dealing with *Vulpans*, Jess,” he reminded her. “I’ll bet money that the only virgin in this room is Kate.”

To her intense pique, Wendy blushed, which made Leonard burst out laughing.

“Oh, go on with you!” Jessie said, shaking a finger at Kit. “Teasing your cousins like that. Shame on you!”

“I’m relatively shameless. I thought you knew that by now,” he said lightly.

“Kate,” Jessie said, snapping her fingers and pointing. Kit saw where she was pointing, and burst out laughing even as he quickly scrambled off the couch and ran for the door. Kate, giggling, passed over the throw pillow to Jessie, who then launched it at the door in his wake.

Travis and his warning didn’t change their plans.

The next day, they still went to the mall. Nick and Sylvia escorted them, and several other mercs had disbursed themselves through the River Gardens mall innocuously to keep an eye on things as Kit, Jessie, and Maxine’s kids were escorted by Nick, Sylvia, and were attended by Bartholomew, who had driven them down. Maxine’s children had been more than happy to accept Jessie’s invitation to go to the mall, and they just as quickly separated themselves from the adults to go shopping. Kit and Jessie, however, had a quandary on their paws...what do you buy for the femme who has everything?

It was a tricky proposition, that was for sure. Vil was rich, successful, and her life was full. She really wanted for nothing. Her hobbies were fairly

straightforward as well. She played golf, enjoyed opera, loved football and hockey, enjoyed yachting and sailing, was learning how to play the violin--though she was more or less competent now and was just learning the advanced nuances of the instrument--and she had a guilty love for tactical and strategic games that allowed her mind to shine. She enjoyed games like *Civilization* and *SimCity*, when she had the time to play them, and she was probably the only Fortune 500 CEO that had an X-Box in her office.

It was a problem. Kit knew Vil probably better than anyone, but that wasn't a help when it came to getting her something that both wouldn't bankrupt them and also would be something that she would enjoy. Vil would dress to impress, but she really had no love of gaudy jewelry or stylish clothes. Business suits and tasteful yet elegant jewelry were her motif, so buying her clothes and jewelry didn't really send the right message. She'd get plenty of those. A real gift had to be from the heart, something that *meant something* to her. Sure, they could buy her something meaningless and she'd enjoy it because they sent it, but that didn't mean that it would matter. It had to be something she would both enjoy and use, not something that would warm her heart, then end up on a shelf in a room she never visited.

Kit and Jessie both wracked their brains for nearly an hour, wandering the mall aimlessly looking in shops to try to get some ideas or inspiration... and then it came, when they looked at a picture of a spa tub. They looked at it, then looked at each other, then they both smiled as they thought the same thing. The one thing that would make Vil happy, and also mean something to her, would be to bend just a *little* bit when it came to her meddling. What if their gift to her was to allow her to do something for them they wouldn't otherwise allow?

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Kit asked.

She giggled. “We give her a present by letting her give us one?”

“The very thing,” he nodded, which made her laugh. “We can either allow her to buy us a vacation house somewhere, or we can let her buy us a house in Austin, which we can then more or less set aside for your folks for when they visit. But we make it clear we’re not *living* there.”

“You think she’d do that?”

“In a heartbeat,” he answered.

“How about we allow her to pick what she does, but it can’t cost too much,” Jessie offered.

“A one free meddle card, eh?” he asked, which made Jessie giggle and nod. “Well, we’ll have to do it right, I suppose,” he said, scratching his muzzle. “Nick, track down the kids. We’re going to the office.”

“Bart’s with them. I’ll have them meet us at the car,” he said with a nod, taking out his phone.

They needed to go to the office because Kit needed the resources there. He led Jessie and the kids into the cavernous building and up to what Vil had said was his and Jessie’s adjoining offices...and they were. Vil had given him one of the old board member’s offices, which had a lovely view of the back bay, and was literally next door to Vil’s own corner office. Jessie’s office, as it were, was the office leading into his own, for he was in a suite of offices. The outer office held the secretaries and the executive assistant, the office partitioned between the two, and Kit’s board office was beyond theirs, which forced anyone who came to see him to go through the secretaries and the assistant first. Vil’s suite was much the same, but she had

no executive assistant. Instead, she had three secretaries that assisted her, which consisted of a receptionist and two general secretaries, who did everything from fetch her tea to make her reservations. Kit had Bart give the kids a tour of the building while he and Jessie used the computer in his office to do the thing right. Using Photoshop and the instruction he'd gotten at work, he designed an "official" card, nice and fancy, that read *The bearer of this card is entitled to one (1) act of intrusive meddling, and of a nature of which is determined by the bearer of this card, a value of which shall be indeterminate but not exceeding the outrage level of the beneficiary of the meddling, and is redeemable at any time.* Under that, in fine print, it read *Offer good only in the continuous United States. Certain conditions may apply. Void where prohibited. Violation of the terms of this offer will get you slapped.* After designing the card, with a flowing font and lots of embellishing flourishes and designs, he printed it out on a nice printer, laminated it, then wrapped it in a box and gift wrap they'd bought before coming to the office. After they were done, he then called on a service that Vil had used for him many times. He called up one of the company's couriers, gave him the box, and told him to deliver it to Vil at her vacation condo in Florida. They knew where that was, and though he knew that Vil wasn't taking any calls, he also knew that she *would* accept a courier's package.

"I'll have it in her paws before sunset," the courier said with a nod.

"Well, that takes care of Vil's gift," Kit said as the courier left. "Let's round up the kids and go see a movie or something."

That "or something" was unplanned, but was actually rather nice. Nick and Sylvia were conspicuous, but the others with them were inconspicuous as they watched over the five Vulpans. They didn't just see a movie,

though, they stopped at Burger King and had something to eat, which mystified the kids. None of them had ever been in a Burger King before. Kate didn't seem to like it very much, but Leonard and Wendy discovered that they rather liked Whopper Juniors.

Things weren't nearly as fun when they got back to Stonebrook. Maxine was there waiting for them, and she gave Kit and Jessie a rather cold look when her three youngest jabbered at her about their day of shopping, a movie, and eating at a fast food restaurant. "Zachary should be back tonight," she told them in a slightly affronted tone. "They're bringing Steven back, and the arrangements have been made. The wake is Tuesday at Swan Cove, and the funeral is the day after."

"We won't be there, Maxine," Kit said bluntly.

"They *are* family, maybe we should, Kit," Jessie said.

Maxine fixed her with a cold stare. "Steven's wake and funeral are *not* places for you," she announced. "And at this moment, it is not the place for you either, Luke. Zach is quite distraught over the death of his son, and it is no surprise that he blames you for it."

"Steven got *himself* killed," Kit growled. "I certainly didn't yank the steering wheel of his car and make him crash."

"Be that as it may, for now, I would avoid Zachary and his wife. I'm sure their minds will clear after time and they see that it truly was just an accident, but right now you should give them a wide berth."

"I wasn't planning on having tea with them, Maxy," Kit grunted dismissively. "We have certain differences of opinion."

Maxine glanced at Jessie, but said nothing. “Let’s go, children,” she called. “I’ll have Wordsworth make anything you want for dinner as a reward for being so well behaved while you stayed with your cousin.”

“Kit took us to Burger King!” Wendy said excitedly. “And it wasn’t bad!”

“I didn’t like it,” Kate sniffed. “Their chicken tasted terrible.”

“You took them to eat in a fast food restaurant?” Maxine gasped.

“I was hungry and it was there,” Kit shrugged.

“Well, I think I’d best take all three of you to the doctor so make sure you didn’t catch any *diseases*,” Maxine sniffed as she herded her kids out of the entry room off the garage. “I’ll send a servant for their things!” Maxine called as an afterthought as she guided them into the garage.

“Diseases!” Jessie huffed, crossing her arms over her pregnant belly.

“The only disease they have is mom-itis,” Kit grunted, which made Jessie burst into a fit of giggling.

Muffy was still out, so they were on their own, but Kit didn’t mind that at all. He made more calls down to Austin to friends to arrange for their return in two weeks, called Alice to make sure their plane was alright, and then he and Jessie both had a long conference call with Doctor Mac as they arranged a hospital room down in Austin General and had Doctor Mac prepare for Jessie to deliver in Texas. She also told them that she’d be up early Tuesday, that Vil had arranged the appointment and had already paid for her travel, and Jessie would have her last exam in Stonebrook. Doctor Mac would examine her again almost as soon as they got home, her last exam before the delivery. After that, they just enjoyed a quiet evening,

winding down from the chaos and events of the weekend, cuddling in the bedroom with a pot of tea on the warmer by the TV and *Hope Floats* playing in the DVD player, which was one of Jessie's favorite movies. Kit was enjoying the fact that the family stopped calling, most likely after Zach had made the plans and had probably spread the word himself, but the phone just had to ring one more time. Kit was very disgruntled about being pried away from Jessie, but he had to chuckle when he saw it was Vil. "It's Vil," he announced as he answered it by putting it on speaker and holding out so they could both hear it. "You shouldn't be calling here," he announced. "You should be busy!"

"I am busy!" she answered. "I got your wedding present, guys, and do I have *plans* for you!" she laughed.

"You'd better read the fine print, Vil," Jessie giggled.

"He wouldn't dare slap me with Stav and Marcus around," she answered pugnaciously, which made Kit laugh. "But, really, thank you! You certainly know how to give gifts! Who thought of it?"

"We kinda thought of it at the same time," Jessie answered. "How is Ken?"

"Exhausted," she said with a wicked little tilt to her voice that made Jessie giggle again. "He's taking a little nap right now. We just got back from a Broadway show they had down in the theatre, it was a nice diversion."

"Your cast causing problems?"

"Not in any way that matters," she chuckled. "I should be out of it in a week. They'll take it off of me just in time for us to hit the beaches in

Monaco. I take it you've already heard the news?"

"Maxine told us, when she came to get her kids," Kit answered.

"I've already been bombarded with calls," Vil grunted. "I think I've pretty much well burned my bridge with Zach, because I refused to come to the wake. I'll not honor Steve in any way, not after what he did."

"And you harp on me not to cause problems, sis."

"I meant it, Kit. As far as I'm concerned, Steve is disowned. I'm even going to move to posthumously prove he tried to kill you, which will force his estate to surrender Steve's share of the fortune."

"That's being vindictive, sis."

"I *am* vindictive," she said honestly. "Him dying won't change the fact that he's guilty of trying to kill you, and he'll pay for it. Even from the grave, he'll pay."

"But what about Gloria?"

"What about her?" she challenged. "Little Miss Morgan is a rich girl without Steve's money. I wouldn't throw her out in the cold, that's a given, but she's out of luck as far as Steve's share of the fortune goes. The agreement was explicit and set in stone, and she doesn't have even a whisper of a chance to challenge it in court if she tries to sue for Steve's share of the money."

"Won't attacking his son's memory really make Zach angry?" Jessie asked.

"Oh, it certainly will, but there's nothing he can do about it," Vil said calmly. "His son broke the agreement, and the agreement is very clear. I can

have the matter brought before a judge, and if the judge determines that Steve violated the terms of the agreement, he'll be all but convicted of the attempt to kill you. He'll be tried and convicted posthumously by the judge, and then his estate has to surrender his share of the family fortune. Besides, Zach will have other things to worry about, mainly the firestorm that's coming. As soon as the tabloids get wind of this, God, there'll be headlines for *years*."

"We haven't seen anything like that around here," Jessie said.

"That's because I'm putting my foot on some necks in the press to keep it quiet, at least up until now. But with Steve dead, now I *want* the truth to come out, so Steve can't be martyred. I want the public to know that he died in a rather stupid and pointless car accident, but he died while running after trying to arrange a cold-blooded murder. Steve will be the *infamous* Vulpan, which is more than appropriate given what he tried to do. Zach will be besieged by the press and paparazzi, and any hope he ever had of continuing his affiliation with the PPC will be destroyed by the scrutiny. For the next year, Zach won't be able to so much as sneeze without it making a headline in the *Sun* or the *Inquirer*. The only way he could continue it is to do it in the open, and that's something he'd never do. No matter how proud he is of being in the PPC, it's not *proper*, and Zach will hang himself before he loses face in our social circles. Which is nothing but hypocritical bullcrap, since the vast majority of furs in the upper crust are purists as it is. But publicly being in a group like the PPC isn't socially acceptable. That's why the Vulpans have always kept their involvement a secret. It's all about *appearances*," she snorted.

"You know, I've always wondered why you're so different from your family," Jessie said impulsively. "I know why Kit has a different viewpoint,

but what changed your mind?”

“Logic,” she said simply. “When I was a girl, I heard all the rhetoric and believed it for a while, but then, when I got older, I sat down and analyzed what I’d heard and compared it to what I knew, and it just didn’t match up. I’m not as liberal as my brother, Jessie. I’m a purist in that I have absolutely no attraction at all to any male but a fox.”

“That’s not being a purist,” Jessie discounted.

“Call it what you want, only a fox can make my motor run,” she said, then she laughed. “Though I’ve worn my male out,” she said slyly. “That’s right, worn out! You let a little vixen in a cast run you into the ground, you lightweight! Exercise more! Oh, you should hear the excuses,” she said scathingly as Kendall’s voice called plaintively in the background.

“He’s young, he’ll bounce back quickly,” Kit said dryly. “If he doesn’t, well, who’s next in line? Harry?”

Vil laughed brightly. “Kit said if you can’t live up to my expectations, I should try out the next oldest Brighton brother,” she told him, and Kit clearly heard the call of sudden indignation, which made him laugh. “Just keep that in mind, male, I have two more Brightons to choose from if you can’t make the grade!”

There was a sudden commotion, and a great deal of laughter, and Kendall’s voice came over the phone. “Stop giving her ideas!” he protested. “I won her fair and square, and I’m not sharing her with any of my brothers!”

“That’s up to you, isn’t it, Ken?” Jessie teased. “She’s yours to lose, so you’d better treat her right!”

“I’m trying, but she’s practically an old maid. Years of pent up sexual tension has just exploded on me here, and it’s not easy to weather the--ow!” he squeaked, then Vil was back on the phone again.

“I think it’s time to take a certain male somewhere and teach him some manners,” she said in a frosty tone which made Jessie explode into laughter.

“Have fun with him, sis,” Kit chuckled.

“Oh, we’ll have fun after he’s punished,” she declared. “Talk to you two later.”

“Be good!” Jessie giggled, and Kit turned off the phone. “Those two are something else,” she laughed.

“They’re definitely a good match,” Kit nodded. “But we’ve been saying that for a while.”

“Yeah, we have,” she agreed as she nuzzled against him. “Two more weeks, my handsome fox, and we go home. Then just ten days after that, and I’ll be holding my baby instead of her making me fat.”

“You’ll never forgive her,” he said sagely, which made her laugh.

“I miss seeing my toes!”

“You couldn’t see your toes to begin with,” he scoffed. “There’s a lot of something else in the way,” he teased, prodding her breast brazenly with a finger.

“Well, I could if I looked down the middle,” she corrected coquettishly, then giggled. “I wonder when Muffy will get back in.”

“Probably just before she leaves for Yale tomorrow,” he answered. “But she’ll be right back on Tuesday for the wake. I don’t see why she’s

leaving, really.”

“We should really thank her for giving up the start of her semester to stay with us. She’s been a very good friend.”

“She likes you, Jess. She has good taste,” he told her easily. She erupted into surprised laughter when he leaned over and licked her cheek. “You do taste good,” he noted.

“Ewww!” she protested, rubbing her cheek with the back of her paw. “Stop giving me fox germs!”

“It’s a little too late for that. You’ve been infected!” he laughed, pulling her into his arms and giving her a deep kiss. “You have this little parasite in here that’s all fox,” he teased, putting his paw on her stomach.

“You’re wrong,” she protested with a smile.

“I won the muzzle. And when a Vulpan wins the battle, he wins the war!”

“Well, we’ve proved that the one thing a Vulpan can’t stand up to is a Williams cat,” she winked. “I’ll prove it to you when Laura shows you her crème fur, claws, and blue eyes.”

“Then I’ll know you were cheating on me,” he teased.

She laughed. “As if!” she protested. “There’s only one male on this earth that has ever been in my bed, and he’s in this room!”

“So, you’re hiding them in the secret room now, eh?” he said seriously. “I guess I’ll have to prove I’m better than him!”

She laughed helplessly and surrendered to his attention. “I love you, Mister Vulpan.”

“Not as much as I love you, Misses Vulpan, future mother of my daughter.”

“And more to come,” she said, then started purring.

Vil was right about the press attention. The news about the death of Steven Vulpan was already all over the news, but the more sinister nature of his death erupted into the news the next morning. Kit guessed that Vil had either leaked it herself or allowed the story to move forward, for the *Boston Sun*, a local gossip newspaper, had for a blaring headline *Steven Vulpan Behind Attempt on Luke Vulpan III*, and the first paragraph was to the point and damning:

The news of the death of Kitstrom Steven Vulpan was released yesterday, but further investigation has revealed that it was in fact Steven Vulpan who was the mastermind behind the attempt on the life of Kitstrom “Kit” Lucas Vulpan III, rebel of the Vulpan family and brother to the CEO of the family business, Vilenne Vulpan. Independently verified sources reveal that Steven died in an auto accident in Pennsylvania while in fact fleeing from Boston because his duplicity in the plot to kill his cousin had been discovered. The details of the attempt on the life of Kit Vulpan and his wife Jessica, who is a cat, cast a dark and ominous shadow over the Royal Family of Boston, for Kitstrom Steven Vulpan was in fact the leader of the Paladins, a violent splinter group of the PPC that has been listed as a terrorist organization by the Department of Homeland Security.

Verification of this fact has been supplied by Gloria Morgan Vulpan, widow of Steven Vulpan, whose distance from her husband had been a well known fact within the social circles of Boston. “Of course I knew he was a Paladin,” she admitted in a phone interview. “Why do you think I stayed as far away from him as possible? I hated it, and I hated him. If I’d have known he was a purist psycho, I wouldn’t have married him, Vulpan or no Vulpan. I’m relieved that everyone knows, because now I don’t have to pretend anymore.” When pressed, she elaborated on her statement. “I was threatened by his father to keep my mouth shut,” she confided, referring to Kitstrom Zachary Vulpan. “He said if I left Steve, or if I said a word about his activities, he’d destroy me and my family. What else could I do?”

The article went on to give details about Steve and again described the plot to kill Kit and Jessie, which was leaked from the police, no doubt with Vil’s blessing. Now the whole world knew that Steven had tried to kill them, and he had no doubt that Zachary was almost insane with rage over this exploding into the limelight not two days after Steven died.

But he had little sympathy. Zachary had made this bed, and now it was time to lay down in it.

The only thing that worried him, as he read the article, was Travis’ warning. Vil was pushing Zachary to the brink, piling this on top of the grief he was feeling from the death of his son, and if she wasn’t careful, she was going to make Zachary snap. If Zach snapped, then there was no telling what he might do, or what might happen. He might retreat from the world and turn into a recluse, or he might hire an army to storm Stonebrook and kill everyone.

But there was little he could do about that right now. All he could do was talk to Nick about it, who promised to keep an eye on things.

But Kit also refused to let that keep them trapped in Stonebrook. They'd been stuck in the manor for nearly two months, and with going home in sight, he was determined to take Jessie out. Now that Muffy was gone, having left that morning for Connecticut, Jessie needed activity, she needed to be treated like a lady and a Vulpan, and not a prisoner. She would never complain, but he knew that she was running out of things to do. She'd learned nearly all the recipes the cooks could teach, she had gone through her knitting book twice, and shooting trap and surfing the internet and watching movies and reading books could only go so far until a change was needed. Kit himself was feeling a touch of cabin fever. Though he had the work the guys sent him and he wrote articles for the magazine, he too felt the need to go out and *do* something in the short time they had left in Boston, make it feel more like a vacation and less like being in a gilded cage. But, in the interest of safety, he definitely agreed with Nick that from now on, Boston itself was more or less off limits. Boston was the playground of the Vulpans, and it wouldn't be safe to roam the streets with an angry Zachary lurking. But areas outside Boston, on the other paw, were accessible to them. As long as they didn't say where they were going and went far enough away from Boston, they could go out and have a good time.

So, they piled into a limousine with Stanley and Clancy and hit the road. Oscar drove them all the way down to Portland, Maine, and they spent the day sightseeing with Stanley waiting on them, Clancy puttering around in a rented scooter, and Nick and Sylvia keeping a close eye on things for them. They visited antique shops, took a sightseeing cruise on a boat that

ran them out to some rocky islands where seals basked in the sun, and they saw a whale on the way back. After that, they went to a mall south of the city and puttered around until Jessie's feet got tired, then they got into the limo and drove about twenty miles north to Freeport, home of the famous L.L. Bean retail store. They spent nearly two hours in and around the store, looking at their merchandise, watching the trout swimming in the indoor pond under the stairs, doing a little shopping, then they milled around the city of Freeport to take in the unique architecture and eat Ben and Jerry's ice cream from a stand outside L.L. Bean. When both Clancy and Jessie got too tired to go on, they got back into the limo and drove back to Stonebrook. Kit hadn't seen Jessie that happy in a while, and he knew that despite the danger, they had done the right thing.

The next day started off with an exam. Doctor Mac had arrived the night before and stayed in the manor, and they welcomed her as a guest. But in the morning, she went from being a guest to being a doctor, and Jessie was given a thorough examination by Doctor Mac, who had access to all the medical equipment Vil had brought into the manor when they thought that Jessie was going to be delivering in Stonebrook. "Well," the gray vixen hummed, feeling Jessie's stomach. "Any back pain, Jessie?"

"A little," she said. "I feel like my tummy's going to pop any minute now," she laughed ruefully. "And I still have over three weeks to go!"

"Welcome to your last month," Doctor Mac chuckled. "Your baby is going through her last bits of developing right now. She could be born right now and have no trouble surviving, but she'll stay safely in your womb until she's finally ready to face the world," she smiled. "You'll get maybe just a tiny bit bigger, but not much."

"I hope not!" Jessie laughed. "I can barely get out of a chair now!"

“You won’t have much longer to go,” she said clinically. “I’d say you’re right on schedule, or maybe even a couple of days ahead. I’m going to open up your delivery window by a couple of days forward. I’d say now that you could deliver anywhere from the twenty-third to the thirtieth.”

“I thought you were infallible, Doc,” Kit teased.

“Predicting a birth isn’t an exact science, because there’s a lot of factors that can alter development at this stage,” she answered with a smile. “Physical or emotional stress in the mother, changes in diet, changes in surroundings or environment, those can affect the development of the baby. But in this case, I think those circumstances have actually *accelerated* Laura’s development a little bit. This seems to be an ideal environment for a pregnant femme,” she chuckled. “So I’m going to move your window up a few days. Once you get back to Texas and I give you your final exam, I’ll know for certain when to have you keep your suitcase packed.”

“The sooner the better,” Jessie giggled. “I love being pregnant, but I’d like to see my toes again!” She pointed a quick finger at Kit. “And not a word, you!” she threatened, which made him explode into laughter.

“Say, Doc, you have a pressing need to get back to Austin?” he asked.

“I don’t have any appointments today, why?”

“Well, we were going to go out today, and there’s plenty of room in the limo. We were thinking of going to Niagara Falls.”

“How far is that from here?”

“About four hours,” he answered. “It’s a nice drive through some pretty country, and we can arrange it so you fly out from there instead of here. That way you don’t have to drive back with us.”

“Well, I think I could manage that,” she said, tapping her muzzle. “And I’ve always wanted to see the falls.”

And so, after the exam, they were again on the road. Clancy didn’t feel like going, and Stanley wanted to stay at Stonebrook, so it was Kit, Jessie, and Doctor MacNair attended by Bartholomew and Luann, with Nick, Sylvia, Krichek, and Barnett escorting them. There were too many for the limo, and Nick wanted some extra security and mobility, so Krichek and Barnett rode in two Ford Expeditions in front of and behind the limo as Bartholomew drove them to Niagara Falls. They left the manor around ten, and after several pit stops so Jessie could relieve herself and a lunch at a turnpike rest stop McDonald’s they reached Niagara Falls around three. And once they reached the falls, they had a great time. They got on a boat that went out to the edge, getting them soaked by spray from the falls as the sound thundered in their ears, then they went up to scenic overlooks at the tops of the falls, on both the American and Canadian sides of the river. It was the first time that Jessie had ever been out of America, and Kit had to celebrate the event by buying her a little pewter bookmark at a gift shop on the Canadian side. After they took plenty of pictures, they had an excellent dinner in a nice restaurant that had a spectacular view of the falls. Around eight, they took Doctor MacNair to the regional airport and got her on her way home, and then it was a long drive through the late summer night back to Stonebrook, arriving back around one in the morning.

Kit had made sure to make it a day-long excursion, because he didn’t want to be anywhere near Boston. They had the wake today, and he wanted to not only be unavailable, but out of Massachusetts.

The next day, they did the same thing. He got Jessie up early, and after a nice breakfast made by Frannie, he pulled out the atlas and started looking

at where they could go. “Hmm, how about another trip to Canada?” he offered. “We could make Toronto in six hours.”

“We could stay here, too,” Jessie laughed. “Two straight days of running around. I’m getting a little tired.”

“We can rest tomorrow, love,” he said seriously. “Today’s the funeral. I don’t want to be anywhere near Boston today.”

“Oh. Oh, that’s right,” she said, giving him a compassionate look. “Well, maybe not Toronto, but how about we go to Cape Cod? I’ve always wanted to see it.”

“Cape Cod it is,” he said with a smile and a nod. “Feel up to another trip, Nick?”

“Surely,” he grinned. “But only if we get Sylvie in a bikini on the beach.”

Sylvia gave him a cool look. “*Mein Gott*, didn’t we go over this already?”

He gave her a sly look. “You said I had to start over again. Well, I have to start somewhere, don’t I?”

Sylvia grumbled something in German that Kit didn’t quite hear, but he didn’t need to understand the words to understand the meaning in her voice.

Kit got something of a surprise when, after they again piled into the limousine with Bartholomew driving, Luann attending, and Nick and Sylvia escorting them, they stopped over at an ATM so Kit could withdraw cash. He’d used up the last of the cash reserves he’d brought from Austin at Niagara Falls, and though he didn’t have to pay for the gas for the limo, that

was paid for by Stonebrook, he wanted money for a ride on a boat, or maybe the ferry to Nantucket, and things like that preferred cash over a debit card. He withdrew \$200, and when the receipt printed out, he was a bit startled to see a balance of \$33,407.77, when the balance was supposed to be \$5,701.98. He immediately suspected Vil was meddling, so he got back into the car and called the bank and had them email a copy of his transaction record to his Blackberry. He went through it as they left Boston and headed for Cape Cod, and found that Vulpan Shipyards had deposited nearly \$14,000 into the account, divided up into deposits every Friday, and there was a lump sum deposit for \$12,157.70 that was deposited into the account two weeks after he got to Boston. That number looked pretty familiar, because there was that exact same figure, \$12,157.70, withdrawn from the account when he flew up to Boston by charter. Clearly, Vil had refunded him that money, and done it without telling him she was giving it back.

That, Kit honestly didn't mind. He'd spent his own money to get up to Boston to see her, and she seemed to take offense to that. Her giving him that money back, that he didn't mind, mainly because Laura was on the way and he wanted a nice fat bank account just in case there was some kind of emergency. The other money deposited by Vulpan Shipyards, that it took him a little bit to figure out. It was deposited in *Jessie's* name, and that let him puzzle out that it was that salary that Vil had talked about, the salary she drew as an executive assistant to him. She *was* an official employee of the shipyards. Kit had honestly forgotten about that, but again, he would say nothing. What went on between Vil and Jessie was their affair, and he wouldn't say a word. Jessie knew how he felt, and again, deep down, he didn't mind seeing that money in the account right now, not with their daughter three weeks away from coming into the world. He wanted a nice

healthy bank account built up to take care of any unforeseen problems that might arise. The excess, after he felt comfortable, would be going into investments for their children, both Laura and those to come, so they would have quality educations and be financially stable should some sort of disaster befall Kit and Jessie and left their children without parents.

After he got that figured out, they had a very good day, a day staying far away from Boston. They toured Cape Cod, looking at many of the old houses and villages, then they took a ride in a sloop, a vessel with no engines at all, only sails. Yachting was one of Vil's hobbies, and he had to admit, it was rather interesting to watch the crew propel and guide the ship using nothing but sails and a rudder. After that, they had dinner at a seaside restaurant before returning home after dark with lots of pictures and a very sleepy wife. They also returned to a house that wasn't empty. Sheila, Muffy, and Bess were in Stonebrook and met them at the garage when they pulled in, Sheila wearing a bikini, Bess wearing a one-piece, and Muffy wearing a sports halter and boy-style shorts. All three had clearly been swimming, for their hair and fur were wet and matted from the water. "Hey cousin, hope you don't mind," Sheila said. "But I didn't feel like staying at Mom's."

"Not at all," Kit said as he helped Jessie from the limo. "I take it you were at the wake?"

Bess snorted. "What passed for it," she said. "Alicia spent most of the time cursing you and Vil, and Zach didn't say a single word the entire time. He just kept staring at his wine glass. You'd think that you had held Steve down while Vil poured acid into his eyes, from the way that bitch was railing about how you killed Steve."

"Bullshit," Sheila grunted. "Steve was driving too fast and ran off the road, which is a rather stupid way to die if you ask me."

“It’s not a good time to be around the parents right now,” Bess said darkly, pulling at the shoulder strap of her swimsuit. “That’s why I’m here instead of over at my parents’ estate. They’re all in a pretty bad mood.”

“Why?”

“Because of how Alicia was acting,” she answered. “It was almost embarrassing, and I left the wake after about half an hour. We all know what happened, but Alicia just yelled and screamed that her son was murdered, and conveniently forgot that it was Steve that tried to kill you and Jessie.” Bess looked at Jessie. “You look tired, Jess.”

“We were in Cape Cod,” she answered. “Staying far away from Boston.”

“Which I see was a good idea,” Kit grunted.

“Well, I’m going to go up and have a rest,” Jessie announced.

“Guess we’ll go back to the pool,” Sheila said.

“Why are you swimming in the dark?” Jessie asked.

“The gym pool is indoor, plenty of light,” Muffy reminded her.

“Oh yeah, I forget about that. I don’t like to use that pool, I always smell like chlorine when I’m done, no matter how long I spend in the shower,” she noted.

“We’re about done anyway,” Sheila said. “You guys eaten yet?”

“At a nice restaurant in a little village,” Jessie nodded. “They had lobster taken right from the dock and straight to the table!”

“I hope they cooked it along the way,” Bess giggled. “I don’t think I’d like to arm wrestle a lobster before I eat it.”

“Of course they cooked it, silly,” Jessie laughed. “We got some nice pictures, too.”

“Ooh, pictures! Lemme see!” Muffy said excitedly.

Jessie’s rest was delayed as they transferred the pictures they took off the video card in the camera and into a laptop, then showed them. “I’ve never seen anything like this out there,” Bess said, looking at a picture of an old fox sitting on a porch of an old, weather-beaten house.

“We saw the *real* Cape Cod, not the area around the Kennedy compound, Bess,” Kit chuckled. “There are quite a few little villages out there, and even some farms. Here, I need to send these to the office. I have an article, comic scripts, and some research to send as well.”

“I keep forgetting you work,” Bess laughed.

“We’re part owners at the magazine,” Jessie said proudly.

“You know, I read those comics you write, Jess, and they’re *great*!” Bess told her.

“What, *School Daze*? That’s Kit’s.”

“I read both his and yours. Kit’s is good, but I really like yours. You have *so* pegged that relationship between Missy and Cutler. It’s both funny and entertaining to watch those two.”

“Well, before you ask, no, it’s not based on me and Kit,” she grinned.

“It should, then you’d have a lot more fun,” Sheila laughed.

“I think that would take a miracle,” Kit said.

“No, it’d just take Jo-Jo,” Sheila retorted.

“You earn money from the comics?”

“Oh dear yes, we do,” she answered. “How much are the royalties now, love?”

“I think we’re up to about fifteen hundred dollars a week,” he answered. “*School Daze* is running in fifty-nine other publications all over the southwest and southeast, and *Missy and Cutler* runs in ten papers and two magazines in Texas, Louisiana, and New Mexico on top of ours. We could be making more, but with the recent economic downturn, we lowered our royalties to attract more papers, and it worked. Since Jessie’s comic is only weekly, it hasn’t picked up quite as fast, but at least Jeffrey does them the same size and length any other Sunday comic, to try to get papers to pick it up.”

“He hates coloring them,” Jessie laughed. “He makes Elly do it.”

“You make fifteen hundred a week?”

“No, the *comics* do,” Kit answered. “That money gets split three ways, between Jeffrey, us, and the magazine. We make about five hundred dollars a week off it, and we keep it all. We were very smart not to go through a distributor like King, who would have taken most of the royalties as their fee. We do the distribution ourselves, so the entire royalty goes in our bank.”

“That’s not bad,” Sheila mused. “If you could go national, you’d make a lot of money.”

“That’s the idea,” Kit chuckled. “But the strips are catching on. I think we sign on a new paper or magazine every week. Not to sound boastful, but both strips are pretty good. We work hard on the scripts, and Jeffrey is an *awesome* artist.”

“You should sell stuff from the strip on the magazine website,” Sheila said. “I’d *love* a tee shirt with Razz on it, wearing her little Chinese outfit. She’s my favorite.”

A little light turned on in Kit’s brain. “You know, cousin, that’s a *damn* good idea,” he said. “I wonder if Jeffrey would do a nice artistic drawing of Razz, and we could silkscreen it. Produce the units at six dollars, sell them at twelve.”

“Not just Razz,” Sheila said. “There should be a shot of Jo-Jo standing there with her face fur all blackened, and ‘Oops!’ scrawled across the top in jittery, bold letters. Or a picture of Missy and Cutler standing back to back all huffy, but their tails wrapped around each other’s, or a picture of Oxnard in his football uniform, and one of his Shakespeare sayings along the bottom just under a pair of shoes hovering in midair.”

“Or a picture of Buck. He’s so cute!” Muffy interjected.

“Why don’t we sit down and talk about this,” Kit offered.

“Well, I’m going to go take a nice relaxing bath,” Jessie laughed.

With Sheila and Muffy as knowing consultants and Bess as a neutral subject to test their ideas, they sat around his laptop and went through the archives of the strip looking for some of the most classic images, like the Oxnard-shaped hole in the side of the dorm with Jo-Jo standing there holding her smoking invention, a confused look on her face as she called for

him. Or a picture of Zeffier on his beloved bike, chomping a cigar, saying “What’s your #%&\$@*% problem?” They found the perfect image of Razz, the introductory strip with Buck and Oxnard standing there looking at her, in her cute little white silk tunic, her hair done up in two buns just to the sides of her ears and wrapped in white silk cloth, holding a basket and looking utterly adorable. They found a panel that made Bess literally fall over on the couch laughing, with Buck sitting in a chair, a metal colander on his head, staring wild-eyed at a foot-long probe in Jo-Jo’s paw, whose shape subtly hinted that it was some kind of invasive body probe. Sheila also suggested that Jeffrey draw a beer can with the label “Jo-Jo’s Explosive Beer,” and under that the tag line “It’ll Blow Your Socks Off!” And they found the *perfect* panel of Jo-Jo, her face blackened as the smoldering wreckage of an experiment gone wrong rested in her outstretched paw, a look of befuddled surprise on her face, and the infamous “Oops!” in a text bubble over her head. They even found a panel with Jo-Jo pointing a laser cannon the size of a bazooka at Cutler with the angry shout “NEVER CALL ME JOSEPHINA!” scratched over their heads. Another good panel, and also another one of the running jokes in the strip, showing vapor trails scattering from Jo-Jo as she held up some weird device, on the verge of pressing a big red button on the side, and called absently, “I wonder what this does.” Then Sheila pointed out several other panels that would look good on a tee shirt, more mundane panels, like a panel of Jo-Jo, Razz, Missy, Rose, Cherry, and Linda all standing around, a similar picture of Oxnard, Buck, Cutler, Dan, Frank, and Grady, or a picture of Oxnard holding the gazelle skull of his hated college Algebra teacher and arch-nemesis, Ms. Vilkenstein, lamenting “2B, or not 2B, that is the equation,” or even an image of Jo-Jo’s eternally malfunctioning and often rebuilt robot, JON-JON Version 19.1 with the title (you don’t want to know what

happened to numbers 1 through 18) under it. When Jessie finished her bath, she joined them, and pointed out several more good ones, until they had quite a portfolio of ideas for tee shirts built up. After nearly two hours of both finding panels and fleshing out ideas for unique scenes, he bundled them all together and sent them to Jeffrey's laptop at work. But he also called Rick as his femme cousins went to the kitchen to have the cooks make them dinner, and Jessie tagged along to grab a light snack before bed. He told Rick about their ideas, which made Rick chuckle.

"I think it's a good idea," he said. "We can produce a first run of only like a couple dozen each and see if they're popular, and if they are, we can order more. We won't make much money off the first run, but if they're popular, we can order in bulk to knock down our unit costs and then sell at a profit."

"That's what I was thinking," Kit answered. "We already have the strip page on the magazine's website, we can just have Mike add a new page to that, and the magazine can advertise the tee shirts once they're ready."

"I'll call Jeffrey and see what he thinks," Rick said. "If I can pry him away from Sandy, that is."

"Ah, yes, she's back now, isn't she?" Kit laughed.

"And making up for lost time," Rick chuckled in reply.

"I'll send you my next article, both me and Jessie have new scripts to send to Jeffrey, and we have some pictures we took around New England," he added.

"What's the article about?"

"What else?" he asked. "The wedding."

“Nice, it’ll be interestin’ to read about it from the inside,” he noted. “You haven’t done anythin’ about what we heard about? About your cousin dyin’?”

“No, I’m leaving that alone for right now,” he answered. “Vil’s being kinda pushy about it, and the last thing I want to do right now is look like I’m piling on. I just want to get through the next ten days and come back home quietly.”

“Ah. Well, guess there’s no fault in that, son,” he surmised.

“I just hope that Vil doesn’t go too far. I’ve been warned that things are getting kinda volatile, and what I heard about what happened at the wake today didn’t give me much confidence.”

“Mind explainin’ it?”

“Well, the short of it is that Vil is going after Steve, regardless of the fact that he died,” he answered. “She intends to have him disowned posthumously so she can strip his estate of his share of the family fortune, but more so because she wants the world to know what he did and that Vil won’t tolerate behavior like that in the family. She also refused to leave her honeymoon to come back for the wake and funeral, which is a *huge* slap in the face to Uncle Zach. From what Travis told me, Uncle Zach is not entirely stable at the moment, and Vil pushing him isn’t going to help. His favorite son just died, and before he’s even in the ground, Vil is already setting up to attack his memory. That’s not a very smart idea in my opinion, but I learned long ago that you just can’t tell Vil what to do. She’s going to use Steven as a very ugly and graphic object lesson about what happens to Vulpans who don’t toe the line, and her going after him even after he’s dead gives you an idea of how ruthless Vil can be.”

“Is there ever a quiet day in your family, son?” Rick asked.

Kit laughed richly. “Nope. What you see is just about normal around here,” he answered cheekily. “But I’d appreciate it if you keep that to yourself.”

“Surely will,” he affirmed.

The day of the funeral was again a day where Kit and Jessie stayed far, far away from Boston. They were in New York City taking in the museums with their eternal chaperones, Bartholomew, Luann, Nick, and Sylvia. They left before dawn and caught a train down in the city, and instead of a limo, they rode around in taxis and the subway as they went from museum to museum, then they went out to visit the Statue of Liberty, then Ground Zero, then they swung by Broadway and Times Square before Kit took them to the New York Stock Exchange, where the Vulpans owned a box suite that overlooked the trading floor, which was something of a tradition for the oldest, richest families. The Vulpans, the Kennedys, the Astors, the Grants, and several others owned similar box suites along the upper floor that overlooked the main trading floor, a vantage from which network news often shot scenes of floor activity for broadcasts. Those suites weren’t all owned by news networks; in fact, a minority of them were. The Vulpan suite was literally next door to the “open” suite which was available to any news team to set up and shoot within, and they *literally* owned the suite. Arthur Vulpan had bought them literally at the opening of the original Wall Street exchange building, just as his shipyard had started making real money, back when it only cost him a one time fee of five hundred dollars to permanently own what Vil could now probably sell for over a million. The building had been remodeled and even replaced over the years, the

exchange had moved, but that initial investment had endured for over a hundred years, for Arthur Vulpan had wisely drawn up the contract that stated that the Vulpans would own *that suite* or a similar suite in relation to the trading floor in the event the exchange was moved, for perpetuity. The Vulpans did have to pay an annual fee and some taxes on the suite, but that suite was like a condo or a house, it was permanently owned property. Jessie had never seen the exchange in action live before, and she was mystified by it, staring down with the window open and listening to the machines and the voices calling over them.

“It used to be way louder, back before computers,” Kit said as he looked out with them. “I remember coming here once with my parents, before the place was really computerized. There were like three times as many traders down there, all yelling and screaming and waving pieces of paper and using sign language to send messages around. It was pretty weird,” he chuckled.

“It’s like chaos down there,” Jessie giggled. “I wonder how they even know what’s going on.”

“Practice,” Kit said sagely, looking at his watch. “About ready for lunch, pretty kitty?”

“Don’t you mean dinner?”

“Late lunch, early dinner, whatever,” he grinned. “Our train leaves at five, and we’ll be back in time for Frannie to make us a real dinner.”

“Frannie, eh? And what happened to not getting used to being waited on?”

“That went out the window the second you said you were getting tired,” he said simply. “When we go home, I’ll be cooking for you until Laura’s born.”

“I can still cook!”

“Not when bending over to get pans and hunching over cutting boards makes your back hurt, you won’t,” he told her adamantly. “Doctor Mac warned you that it might happen.”

“Well, yeah, but I’ll feel helpless if I can’t cook.”

“You’ll be treated like the queen you are,” he told her. “Now, given this is New York and you can buy any kind of food you want, what are you feeling like today, pretty kitty?”

“Seafood,” she grinned.

“I know just the place, Mistress Jessie. Let me warn Martin we’re coming ,” Bartholomew declared, opening his cell phone.

Instead of some fancy bistro or restaurant, Bartholomew took them to a little diner in lower Manhattan, a little corner diner that didn’t even have a sign outside, yet was jam-packed busy within. It was truly a diner, and was in desperate need of remodeling. The tables were old and worn and chipped, the padding on the booth seats was cracked, and the napkin holders were battered and were about ten years past needing to be replaced. Jessie and Kit both looked a little uncertain about the place, at least until they caught whiffs of the smells of the food around them, and it was *heavenly*. “An old friend opened this diner,” Bartholomew explained. “Martin Fischer. He was a five star chef who grew tired of the snooty restaurant scene and opened this deplorable-looking establishment where he could cook food that furs

would enjoy, not fuss because one shaving of a carrot was a centimeter out of position on the plate. The funny thing is, he says he makes more money here running the place as a short-order cook than he ever did running the kitchen at one of the most expensive restaurants in town.”

“A male after my own heart,” Kit laughed.

The place looked like a seedy dive, but the crowd and the smells hinted that it was just a front, for the sake of appearances, and Bartholomew did not steer them wrong. The food was about four times as expensive than one would expect from a corner diner, obviously how the chef made his money, but his food was worth more than what they paid for it. Jessie ordered grilled tuna and Kit a hamburger, and the food was *outstanding*. The hamburger was lightly, almost delicately seasoned with mesquite and smoky spices that gave it a “home grilled” taste, and Jessie’s eyes closed almost reflexively when she took her first bite of her tuna. “Wow,” she breathed.

“I see Martin’s quality hasn’t diminished since working as a greasy spoon,” Bartholomew chuckled.

They lingered maybe too long relishing the excellent food, so much so they were almost late for the train back to Boston. Bartholomew called the manor from the train so the limo would be waiting for them as Jessie reclined in their stateroom to rest her back from another busy day on the move. “I need to sleep for at least a week,” she laughed.

“You have two days. Suzy’s already made the reservations for our trip to Maine.”

“Really? Where?”

“At a bed and breakfast in Castine,” Nick answered. “Krichek and Donny are up there already getting it ready for us. You’ll be going up Saturday morning and returning Sunday night.”

“Sounds fun. I hope Corey will be there the whole time.”

“Probably. We’re coming up to see him, he’d *better* be there,” Kit chuckled.

When they got back to the manor, though, there was a bit of serious business, and that was the funeral. Muffy had already returned to Connecticut, but Sheila was still in Boston, and she was at the manor waiting for them. “Hey guys,” she said as she helped Jessie out of the limo.

“How did it go?” Kit asked immediately.

“Tense,” she answered. “Given Alicia’s explosion at the wake, we were almost expecting it. But, the wake was private, where they allowed one news team’s cameras in for the funeral, so she was very quiet. God forbid she cause a scene in public,” Sheila grunted. “After the funeral is another story.”

“What happened?”

“Well, I’m still trying to get the entire story,” she answered as they headed in. “Travis and Dave gave me pieces of it, but from what I’ve heard, Alicia and Zach came to blows when they got back to Swan Cove.”

“What?” Kit asked in surprise.

She nodded. “That much both of them supplied. Alicia is furious and wants revenge, but Zach won’t do it. Davey said they’ve been fighting about it since the minute they got back from Pennsylvania. Travis said that

Alicia literally slapped Zach and called him a weakling in front of Josh and Crystal, and she's sleeping in the north wing of their manor tonight."

"Doesn't Alicia realize that Vil's already beaten them?" Kit asked with a sigh.

"Evidently not. I guess Vil's going to have to step on her neck before it's over."

"Well, I'll warn Vil. That's not something she should ignore."

He wasn't sure if she'd answer her phone, but he tried anyway as Jessie told Frannie, rather sheepishly, that she wouldn't mind a little light supper, and if it wouldn't be too much bother, if Frannie wouldn't mind cooking for her just this once...that almost got Jessie laughed out of the kitchen.

"Hey bro, what's up?"

Kit went over what Sheila told him rather curtly. "I think you'd better put a paw in, Jessie. If Alicia is *that* angry, she might do something stupid."

"No argument there, bro," she said seriously. "Leave it to me."

"Thanks, sis. You pregnant yet?"

She laughed richly. "We're seriously trying," she answered. "We'll be leaving for Monaco tomorrow night, so we can get there Friday morning without losing a day. A week in a private villa on the beach. It sounds heavenly," she said lingeringly.

"Florida's not good enough for you?"

"This is a condo. Ken says that what's down there is completely private. It's one of the Brighton holdings." She clicked her teeth. "Speaking

of Brighton holdings, Ken told me that his parents have bought a house in Austin,” she noted to him. “They closed on it this morning. It’s just down the street from the house Terry bought. Five bedrooms, four baths, fenced compound, four car garage. That skinflint, he had his broker buy it at auction, it was a foreclosure,” she chuckled.

“Terry did the same thing. I guess that cleaned out the suckers.”

“Just about,” Vil chuckled. “Austin is a rich town, bro, with quite a few millionaires. A few rather overenthusiastic land developers were cranking out luxury houses, and then the credit crisis slammed them against the wall. I looked into some of those houses myself looking for a house I can use when I come visit. The house Terry bought had only been occupied for a few months. The one Winston bought was never occupied at all. Some Dallas magnate bought it as part of a land investment scheme, and then the property values crashed,” she said simply.

“And he’s not a magnate anymore.”

“I would think not,” she said in a slightly predatory manner.

“So you were looking into houses?”

“Of course. I need someplace nice to stay when I’m there.”

“And what did you find?” he asked.

“That none of them were up to my standards,” she said loftily. “So I bought a nice little five hundred acre ranch about ten miles down seventy-one from Bergstrom towards Bastrop, had them raze the house, and build something more suitable. They promise to have it done in two months, given I hired a small army of contractors to make it happen.”

“More suitable, eh?”

“Naturally. A nice eight bedroom vacation house built on a smaller model as Hart’s Crossing, with a tennis court, racquetball court and gym, pool, helicopter pad, stables for horses, and I’m having a private skeet shooting range installed just for Jessie when she comes to visit. There’s plenty of room behind the house for her to practice driving golf balls, too. It even came with five horses and twenty head of longhorn cattle that had been at the ranch before I bought it. I convinced Janice to take up the position of head of household down there, and she’ll be hiring and managing the staff and the estate. I’ve decided to name it the Double V Ranch.”

“You actually convinced a Boston servant to move to Austin?”

“She liked the promotion and the pay raise,” she laughed. “I gave her carte blanche. She’ll do all the decorating and designing and make all landscaping decisions inside my requirements, and I’ve given her authority to hire a butler who’ll double as my chauffeur, two maids, three groundskeepers, a wrangler for the horses, and a cook. I like her taste, so I’m sure she’ll create me a wonderful vacation house that I’ll enjoy using when I’m there.”

“And when were you going to tell me about this?”

“When I was going to force you to move into it,” she said shamelessly. “But, I think I’m not going to get you out of that hovel condo, so I’m just going to claim it for my own.”

“Vil!”

“What? Did you *really* think I was just going to let it go, brother mine?” she asked impishly. “Besides, I rather like the location, and I won’t mind keeping it for myself. I’ll just find some other place for you and Jessie and force you to move into it.”

“You’re terrible!”

“Yes, I know,” she said gravely, which made him laugh despite himself.

Kit had no idea what Vil said, but one thing was abundantly clear, and that was the message was received.

Kit heard it from Sheila, who heard it from David, which was the oldest of the three children of Zach and Alicia that still lived with them. From what Kit had picked up, Vil had called at exactly 9:00 the morning after Kit warned her, and instead of talking to Zach, she instead talked to Alicia. David was in the room when the call was received. It lasted less than three minutes, and Alicia was barely able to put a single word in. David had no idea what Vil said, but when Alicia hung up the phone, she looked so spooked that her fur could have turned bone white. Not an hour after taking that phone call, Zachary and Alicia had shipped their three youngers off to Weston a day earlier than planned, boarded Zach’s private jet, and flew out of Boston without a single word to anyone.

That said something. Weston was a boarding school, to be sure, the most elite private school east of the Mississippi. It was only thirty miles outside of Boston, and the Vulpans had always lived at home and commuted to school, ferried by chauffeurs in nice cars. Kit had made that trip many times from Stonebrook, an actually pleasant thirty minute ride

along winding country roads to the tree-covered grounds of that venerable old school. Zach and Alicia, however, preferred to board their children at Weston rather than allow them to live at home and commute, though they returned home every weekend.

Clearly, Vil had put the fear of God into Alicia Vulpan. Few femmes on earth could say so much in such a short time, and then scare someone into literally fleeing the city. But that seemed to be exactly what happened.

That was just fine with Kit. He just wanted all of this *over*, so he could go home with his wife and be in Austin for the birth of their daughter. If it took Vil calling and threatening Alicia with something so dire that it would make her flee Boston, that was just fine with him. It wasn't his fault that Steven died, it was Steven's own fault. Steven had tried to *kill* him and Jessie, so he had no love for his late cousin. But Kit had learned over the years that hate, especially unreasoning hate, was an emotion that could only be trumped by one thing, and that was fear. Vil had made Alicia more afraid than hateful.

They spent the next two days resting and preparing for Maine, as Jessie recovered from their gallivanting around New England and Kit continued to make calls to Austin. He was working on a new business idea, and that required research, research, research. Fortunately, though, researching was something with which he had a little experience. There was money to be made in Austin, and that money was in real estate.

Certainly not anytime soon, but with the severely depressed real estate market and the rash of foreclosures, there was definitely a huge business opportunity there for him, or anyone that had cash reserves at a time like this. The Vulpans had actually become *filthy* rich during the Great Depression, because in an economic climate like that, those that *had* money

had the ability to buy up deflated assets and simply wait for their value to mature, among other things. There was a time, in the late 1930s, when the Vulpans literally owned half of Boston, but had sold off a majority of the real estate over the years, when it became profitable to sell. There were also opportunities to start businesses and make money during economic downturns, if one knew what businesses to open.

Kit's idea was a relatively simple one that would both make him money and also do some good in his adopted home city. What Kit was doing was researching the idea of becoming a real estate magnate, buying foreclosed property, but not selling it off. Kit's idea was to find the right houses and approach the distressed owners with a proposition; allow the house to go into foreclosure and Kit to buy it, then stay in the house as a renter. The rent would be cheaper than their mortgage, but structured in such a way that Kit would earn a profit on the property. He would also give the furs the chance to buy the house from *him* for a reasonable price that would allow him to earn a profit, but also would be less than their original mortgage. The profit on a single house wouldn't be all that much, but if he did that enough, he could generate some real income through sheer numbers. The trick of it would be to allow the houses to foreclose, which would allow him to buy them on the cheap and also drive *down* the property value of the house, which would reduce the taxes on the property. The scheme would be a short-term loss at least on paper, for the value of the house would go down in the short term, but then it would rise again over time. And this wasn't about making a quick buck. Any time one dabbled in real estate, one had to have their eyes on the horizon, not the road.

His idea would do three things. It would make him money, it would prevent families from being thrown out of their houses, and it would also

prevent urban blight by putting furs in those empty houses, preferably the same ones that had been there before. By investing a little money now, he could see Laura coming into quite a handsome sum of money when she graduated from college, for she'd own dozens of houses and properties all over Austin and have a stable and reliable income rolling in through rent.

His research had shown him that the idea was feasible. Austin was being hit hard by the credit crisis and the housing collapse, and there were *plenty* of target properties out there to choose from, properties that would sell at auction for a greatly reduced price, but whose former mortgage holders would have the resources to pay the reduced rent Kit planned to charge. Much like Lupe, Kit would become a landlord, but instead of an apartment building, Kit would own a series of houses all over the city. The profit projections were 14%, which was a small yet consistent profit margin that would appreciate over time. The cost of the initial buying of the house at auction added to maintenance and taxes would be covered by charging a pro-rated rent of about 50-55% of the original mortgage payment. The trick would be choosing the *right* houses, houses that the big real estate companies might overlook. The big houses like the ones that Terry and the Brightons bought would be fought over by the holding companies and wouldn't be profitable for what he had in mind, but Kit was looking at the lower middle class houses, the working family houses he could buy for \$25,000-\$45,000 at auction, then rent out and make that money back. Kit would himself be mortgaging that property, but so long as the rent charged exceeded the 30 year mortgage payments at the current mortgage rate of 5.5%, he calculated that he only had to charge about \$300 in monthly rent in order to turn a very modest profit, or \$400 a month for a reasonable one. For middle class houses, which would auction from \$60,000-\$80,000, he'd have to charge a monthly rent of about \$550 to turn a profit, but would

probably set the rent at about \$700, depending on the value of the house and how much he had to pay for it at auction.

What really, really made his idea work was the simple fact that the housing market in Austin was inflated right now. The average rent for a cheap two bedroom apartment was \$500. When Kit made the offers to the families in distressed houses, they'd see that the rent they'd pay to Kit would be far cheaper than what they'd get elsewhere, and they'd jump all over it.

But, he also had to admit, that the idea would be tricky to initiate. For him to be able to compete with holding companies that might be after the same property, he'd have to pay cash on the spot for the houses, which always beat out any bid that relied on financing, even if it was higher. That was how it worked in Texas. Someone could outbid him by \$20,000, but if Kit could write a check on the spot for the house, he'd get it. This was why most holding companies that made a business out of foreclosed properties always had an agent on the courthouse steps with a checkbook ready. He'd have to gamble his nest egg on those first couple of houses, buy them, *then* turn around and mortgage them at the deflated property value in order to recoup his cash payment, which he would then use to buy the next house. In order for it to work, he had to have agreements in place with the families before the houses came up to auction to ensure he'd have rent-paying tenants *immediately*, which would allow him to quickly flip the house into a mortgage and then recoup his capital for the next transaction. He'd also have to be able to mortgage the property for at *least* the money he paid for it, or he'd lose his operating capital and wouldn't be able to continue. This, Kit felt, wouldn't be a problem. So long as he was sure not to spend more on a house than he could successfully mortgage it to recover his cash, his

plan would work. And he could accomplish that by being very careful about which houses he bought and what kinds of agreements he could reach with the prior owners before the auction. Holding companies went for *value*, what they could see getting for that house on a resale. That was their business plan. Kit was going to be operating in a different manner, and that meant that he'd be going after houses that the holding companies wouldn't want. They wanted the yuppie houses, the nice and modern houses yuppies bought at inflated prices and then lost when their ARMs reset to a payment too high for them to pay, then they would immediately turn around and try to sell the house at a profit. Kit would be after the *real* houses, lower and middle class family homes that he could buy cheaply then simply rent out and make a steady and reliable income over years.

It certainly looked feasible on paper...but that was on paper. When he got back home and investigated the idea further, he'd know if it would be *practical*.

That and fooling around with Jessie took up the rest of the week, and helped pass the time until the weekend. When Saturday did roll around, Suzy was at Stonebrook at seven, almost waking them up, wearing a tee shirt with the Canadian maple leaf on it and a pair of khaki shorts, and anxious to go. "Good lord, femme, you saw him just three days ago," Kit scoffed as she tried to rush them through breakfast.

"So?" she challenged as she wolfed down her breakfast at Jessie-like speed.

Suzy was hosting, so it was Suzy's travel plans...which were exotic. She'd spent a lot of money by hiring a jet to take them to Portland, and from there they would ride in a limo to Castine along U.S. 1, which would be a very scenic drive through the forests which would be starting to turn

colors in just a week or two before the early Maine winter. But they'd still be green now, maybe one or two trees just starting to hint at golden leaves, but that'd be just about it. Suzy could spend her money any way she wanted, and if she wanted to hire a helicopter to take them, then that was her business. She'd made sure to plan for more than just the three of them, for though none of the Stonebrook staff was going, Nick and Sylvia were certainly going, but thankfully Suzy wasn't the type that needed servants around with her all the time. They'd taken Bartholomew and Luann along on their trips out of Boston mainly at Nick's request, and the two had barely done any work at all, along more as passengers and friends than as servants. Bartholomew had done some driving for them, but Luann had spent most of the trips sightseeing along with the Vulpans.

It was a nice flight in a clear, warm morning, accented by Jessie running to the nearest bathroom as soon as they landed at the airport in Portland. "It's the baby, she's pressing up against my bladder," she laughed in apology when she came out. Jessie managed to hold out for the lovely 90 minute drive to Castine in Suzy's father's limo, which she'd had sent up early to be waiting for them when they arrived. Suzy's family was rich, but they were by no means anywhere near close to being as rich as the Vulpans, and the limo showed it. It was basically a stretched Lincoln Town Car, just big enough to be a limo, but without many of the perks or toys that a Vulpan limo would carry. It did have a small TV screen and a DVD player in it, which were always lifesavers on long trips.

Castine was like a postcard come to life. It was situated at the very edge of a peninsula that jutted out into the Penobscot Bay and situated at the mouth of the Penobscot River, several blocks of typical New England architecture mixed with a few more modern buildings, but it had land on

both sides, land that was separated from Castine by fjord-like channels that reached miles and miles inland. They could get in a boat and cross a hundred yards of water in minutes, but if they drove a car, it would take over an hour to get to the other side. The small village was much more than it appeared, however, for it had a Merchant Marine training center there as well as a small oceanographic institute, and it was the mainland side of a small ferry service that went out to one of the populated islands where Corey was going to be shooting some of his documentary. The bed and breakfast that Suzy had booked was literally on an island, and they took a boat over to it. It was across from the ferry landing, about fifty yards out, on a small grassy island dominated by a very large house. A dock with five boats tied up to it jutted out from a rocky coastline, and there were gravel pathways along the small island, benches and chairs in strategic places, and there was a small group of seals sunning themselves on rocks at the very tip of the island, which was fenced off to keep furs from bothering the seals. Corey was waiting for them on the dock along with a smaller, wiry badger and a femme prairie dog. He gave Suzy a healthy kiss when she bounded out of the boat and into his arms, then he kissed Jessie on the cheek in greeting. “Did you have a good trip?”

“It was nice and smooth,” Jessie answered. “Thank you so much for inviting us!”

“Hey, for you guys? Any time,” he smiled. “Guys, this is Dewey Martin and Iris Marshall, they’re my film crew. Dewey runs the camera, and Iris does about everything else,” he chuckled. “Guys, this is Kit and Jessie Vulpan. They’re friends of ours.”

“Well, I finally get to meet a legendary Vulpan,” the prairie dog grinned at him, shaking Kit’s paw. “Isn’t this place cool? A hotel on an

island!”

“I was surprised to have to get in the boat,” Kit laughed. “How big is this island?”

“It’s like having a very large and very private yard,” Dewey said as he shook Kit’s paw. “This used to be some rich guy’s private summer house, but he sold it and they converted it to a B and B.”

“Let’s get you guys checked in and then hit the boat,” Corey said. “We’re going out to Islesboro Island so you can see one of the populated islands and meet some of the residents.”

“That sounds interesting,” Jessie nodded as one of the hotel workers started unloading their luggage from the water taxi.

“Well, it’s not exactly typical of the year-round island communities. Islesboro is more like Nantucket,” Corey noted. “There are a lot of rich fur summer houses there, but there are about three hundred permanent residents. Places like Long Island are more typical of the island communities. Long Island is one of the last year-round island communities that isn’t dominated by rich fur summer houses. We’ll be going out there after we visit Islesboro. I had my cousin send up his boat,” he chuckled.

“Boat?” Kit asked.

“Yeah, my cousin lent me one of his boats,” Corey said. “It’s moored on the other side of the island. It’s perfect for island hopping.”

That *boat* was more than just some little boat. It was a fifty foot long, sleek waverunner style speedboat, almost looking like a smuggler’s boat given it was built for speed and was large enough to carry passengers or cargo. It had a very nicely appointed deck with seating for eight, a raised

steering deck above and behind it with seating for two that served as a shade for the back half of the sitting area on the deck, but it also had a small and comfortable combination galley/cabin below, with two futons built into the walls that served as couches during the day and beds during the night. There was a gruff looking mutt of a dog with wiry tan fur sitting up at the wheel already when they dropped off their luggage after checking in and went back out, and there was a mate standing by the quay waiting for them, a thin, whip-like ferret. “Are you ready to go, Mister Reeves?” the ferret asked.

“We certainly are, Vick,” he nodded. “Let’s board up and head out.”

“Where to, Mister Reeves?” the dog asked.

“Islesboro, Shocksley,” he called back as Nick helped Jessie over the gulf between boat and dock and settled her in.

“I’ve never been on a boat like this before,” Jessie said in both excitement and trepidation as she settled in, and Suzy sat beside her. Nick helped Iris over, then he and Sylvia stood under the steering deck as Dewey pulled out a camcorder and swept it across the deck, getting shots of them settling in as the ferret untied the boat from the dock.

“It’s been a Godsend,” Corey laughed. “There’s a lot of islands out here, and this boat is anything if not fast. It saves us a ton of time.”

“It’ll do seventy knots on calm seas,” the ferret said grandly as the boat pulled away from the dock.

“Damn,” Kit said in surprise as Jessie gave a similar start. As a pilot, she knew how fast that was.

“We don’t take it that fast all the time, since it’s a bit dangerous,” the ferret chuckled. “We’ll do a nice forty knots to Islesboro. Maybe fifty if it stays this calm once we get out of sheltered water.”

“How long will it take to get there?”

“At forty knots? About half an hour, given we have to circle the island to get to the dock we’re using,” the ferret answered.”

“It’ll take us about an hour to get out to Long Island,” Corey added. “But that’s because it’s up the coast a ways.”

It was a very nice trip out. Despite being mid-September, it was still surprisingly warm in Maine, and it was a very smooth trip on calm seas to Islesboro, with the wind in their hair and fur and good conversation taking up the spaces when they weren’t looking out at the coast, or out to sea. Several puffins flew by the boat, heading for a small rocky island about half a mile off the starboard bow, and the captain pointed out some dolphins to them. Jessie had enough time behind a plane’s yoke not to get seasick on the boat as they sailed to the large island not far from Castine, but the seas were too calm for seasickness to really be an issue.

Islesboro was a curious place. Corey took them around in a Jeep that looked to be surplus from the Korean War, but still ran well, as Iris and Dewey stayed behind at the dock to go take some shots of the airport on the island. Corey showed them the new, “modern” houses built and owned by the rich, then took them to the north side of the island, where much less grand houses stood along narrow streets in need of paving, typical New England houses with minimal windows that all faced south and a weathered appearance, houses whose paint had seen better years. Kit noticed that the streets were indeed paved everywhere, but then again, Islesboro was a big

island and had rich furs living on it, but what he didn't see anywhere were traffic signs of any kind. There weren't even stripes on the asphalt. Kids were playing in the yards and the street, and he also saw that very few houses actually had a car in the driveway. Certainly some had them in the garages, since garages were very popular in the bitter New England winters, but in the late summer those cars would be parked out in the driveway.

"How do they get power out here?" Jessie asked as they passed by a house that had its porch light on.

"Underwater cables," Corey answered. "They come ashore at the airport and branch out from there. That's one reason why they built the airport there."

"Do they have gas?"

He shook his head. "The gas company never laid pipe out here, and that's fairly common in Maine. Much of the state is rural, and it's just too expensive for them to lay pipes that go for miles and miles just to service like ten customers. The gas companies are generally local to the bigger cities. Look around, Jessie, see that every house has a chimney? Well, wood stoves are a big here. But most houses don't rely just on a wood stove, they usually have a furnace or stove heated by heating oil, propane, or electricity."

"Propane?"

He nodded. "Propane is big around here, folks use it for heating and cooking and hot water heaters. It's Maine's form of natural gas," he said, pointing at a large gray tank by the side of one of the houses. "Propane tank. Tankers come out here and supply propane and heating oil, and a fuel service company brings it to the houses. It can be expensive, but then again,

it's a lot cheaper than some alternatives. Wood's about the cheapest fuel, that's why wood stoves are so popular, with the other furnace just supplementing the wood stove. You can buy a cord of wood for about a hundred bucks and that lasts for quite a while."

"That's pretty cool," Jessie said. "In Cincinnati and Austin, everyone just uses gas or electric. I'd never heard of propane being used like natural gas before."

"Just one of the many ways New England is superior to the rest of the country," Corey said with a slight smile.

She laughed. "Hush, you."

Corey introduced them to several families from Islesboro as well. Kit wasn't surprised that every single fur that lived permanently on the island was a fox, while the "summer doves" were many different species. The foxes were all surprisingly friendly, inviting them into their houses for tea or coffee, houses that were all unlocked even when they weren't home. The summer doves, on the other paw, were more distant and aloof, and many of their houses were surrounded by fences, and were locked. A very striking difference in the cultures between the visitors and the permanent residents, and one that Corey went out of his way to demonstrate both to them and in his upcoming movie.

After about two hours touring Islesboro, they met up with Dewey and Iris again, piled into the boat, and took an hour-long trip to Long Island, home of one of the oldest permanent island communities, and home to the annual Lobster Festival that attracted furs from all over New England. It was a surprisingly hilly little island filled with old houses, streets that were poorly paved or gravel, and filled with cars that looked about ready to fall

apart at any moment. “There are no inspection requirements for cars that stay on the islands, so they don’t care as long as they run,” Corey chuckled as a beaten, battered old Chevy Nova pattered by uncertainly, then backfired twice as the car slowed to make a turn at the corner as they came up from the pier, where a much newer Ford Escape was waiting for them.

Corey took them on a tour of Long Island, from the small, old lighthouse to the chapel at the top of the hill, and again took them to many different houses to meet the residents, many of which would be in his documentary. Just like on Islesboro, they were all foxes, and they were all exceptionally friendly and generous. They received dinner invitation at every house, and just about every femme fussed over the very pregnant Jessie and made her both very happy and a little embarrassed. Corey had something of a plan, though, for when they visited a large, worn-looking saltbox at the end of a street and paid a call to an elderly couple, Kit realized that the elderly vixen was cooking, and Corey accepted the old male’s invitation to stay for lunch immediately.

Corey had introduced them as Woody and Rebecca Sawyer, and they had the look of foxes who had lived in their old saltbox for so long that the house had all but conformed to them rather than them conforming to the house, and if their accents were any more Down Easter, they wouldn’t be speaking English. As they sat down in the living room with Woody and Rebecca as the lobsters boiled, they found out that Woody was a fisher, one of the venerable and celebrated lobstermales, who had plied his trade for forty years out in the Atlantic. Rebecca had been born and raised on the island, and was a schoolteacher her entire career, teaching on the island, until she retired two years ago. Woody had also been born and raised on the island, taking over the lobster boat from his father, but their sons hadn’t

exactly gone into the family business. Their sons, all three of them, were fishers, but they weren't lobstermen. They jointly owned a fishing boat that sailed from Long Island, and were currently out swordfishing off Labrador. "Just like *A Perfect Storm*, but without the sinking," Woody had chuckled. "That's the kind of boat they own, a commercial fishing boat. They make a good living at it, too. My boys can smell a fish from twenty miles away," he said proudly.

"Is it as dangerous as they say?" Jessie asked.

"It can be dangerous, honey, but we're a tough breed Down East," he winked. "Takes a special breed to live out here, where the work is hard and the weather unforgiving. But I wouldn't live anywhere else in the world. If I were to die tomorrow and go to heaven, why, I'd still be on Long Island. Just with streets paved in gold," he chuckled.

"I can identify with that kind of loyalty to home," Kit said honestly. "We love where we live too."

"You're a Vulpan from your eyes, but I don't think you're talking about Boston."

"Austin, Texas," he said with a nod.

"Ah, you must be Kit Vulpan then?"

He nodded again with a chuckle. "In the nefarious flesh. What, this didn't give me away?" he asked, pointing at his half-missing left ear.

"We don't keep up much with mainland gossip," Rebecca smiled. "If it doesn't concern the island, it doesn't really concern us. But, I don't think there's a fox in New England that doesn't know about the Vulpans."

They stayed for lobster and talked about the island, and Kit found out that Corey had specifically picked this couple because they knew *everything* about Long Island. Woody knew the history of the island with such incredible detail that he could recall on what day of the week and what kind of weather it had been some events happened. Rebecca was the hub of the island's gossip machine, and she knew absolutely everything about the current events on the island, an island where everyone knew everyone, but Rebecca Sawyer knew *everything* about everyone. Woody and Rebecca were the royal family of Long Island, the longest-lived residents and as much a foundation of the island as the bedrock upon which it rested. Both of them had been born on the island, had never lived a single day off of the island, and their families were still here, all three of their sons and their daughter, who was a school teacher just like her mother had been. Woody was amiable and chatty, but Rebecca was very intent, asking very involved questions that dragged everything she wanted to know about Kit, Jessie, and Suzy out of them with amazing efficiency. After their rather amiable interrogation, Rebecca seemed to warm to them considerably, and announced that Corey was a fool if he didn't propose to Suzy before sunset.

Kit was honestly surprised when they left the couple's house and it was sunset. "Dear Lord, we were there for hours!" Suzy laughed as they returned to the car.

"Every time I go in there, I lose track of most of my day," Corey agreed with a chuckle. "Let's go back to the bed and breakfast."

"What's on the agenda for tomorrow?" Suzy asked.

"I didn't really plan tomorrow. Whatever you guys wanna do," he answered.

After a late dinner, Kit and Jessie talked with Suzy and Corey down in the common room for most of the night, then they retired to the nicely appointed room with a large, quilted bed that looked entirely too soft for him. He tested it gingerly as Jessie got ready for bed, then she gasped and put a paw on her belly. “Pretty kitty?”

“One of those false contractions,” she said with a laugh. “Laura’s been really energetic today.”

“Guess she likes going out,” Kit chuckled. “Back okay?”

“A little achy, but I’m not surprised,” she answered. “Just two weeks, handsome fox.”

“Actually, any time,” Kit corrected. “Remember what Doctor Mac said? We’re now officially in the window.”

“And here we are on an isolated island far from a hospital,” she laughed. “She seems pretty convinced I won’t deliver early, though.”

“She did say that Laura’s more developed than she expected,” Kit warned. “I think she’ll be early.”

“I think she’ll be on time,” Jessie countered.

“Oh-ho, that sounds like a bet,” he said challengingly. “I say she’ll be born before the due date.”

“You’re too broad,” she shot back as she climbed into bed. “Name a day or give up!”

“The twenty-fifth,” he declared immediately.

“And I still say she’ll be born on the thirtieth,” she retorted.

“So, loser does all crying baby calls after midnight for a week,” Kit offered.

“That’s not fair! I still have to get up to feed!”

“Well, there’s not much I can do about that. If I could, I don’t think you’d have wanted to marry me in the first place.”

She gave him a look, then laughed brightly. “I think you’re right about that. But if I win, you have to wake up and stay up whenever I’m up,” she challenged.

“I think that’s fair terms,” he said, “mainly because I’m gonna win.”

“You always lose against me, Kit Vulpan,” she teased. “And I’m the one that’s pregnant, you know. I think I can predict things better than you.”

“Pft, Laura’s gonna be a daddy’s girl.”

“Oh really?” Jessie challenged with a playful smile, flicking him on the nose. “Trying to steal my daughter from me before she’s even born, are we? Well, I’ll have to do something about that!”

Kit laughed as she hooked her little claws in him and pulled him down and wrapped her arms around him. “All you have to do is love me, pretty kitty, and I’m yours forever,” he told her.

“Well, at least you’re easy to please,” she purred as she kissed him. “I guess I’ll keep you. You’re my ticket to the big money, you know.”

Kit laughed. “So *now* you’re a gold-digger,” he declared.

“What can I say, living for months in the biggest manor in New England has made me see the light,” she said with utterly insincere haughtiness. “I am old money now!”

He gave her a look, then laughed so hard he almost broke his own ribs.

They had no plans for Sunday, but that was what made it so good. They spent the entire day with Corey and Suzy, and they started it on, of all things, Woody Sawyer's sons' fishing boat. Woody called and told Corey that the boat was back in, and they invited them onto it for a tour and a quick trip out. Jessie sat in the wheelhouse with Jack Sawyer as Kevin and George Sawyer and their crew of two foxes and an Acadian wolf showed them what it was like to be a commercial fisher. Their boat was a modular one that could adapt to fishing different types of fish, from net-fishing smaller fish like cod to the hook-fishing done with long strings for larger fish like marlin and swordfish. Jessie actually steered the boat for a while as the crew went through a mock fishing run with them, showing Kit just how hard the work they did was. They had lunch on the dock at Long Island with the Sawyer family and several others from the island, an impromptu fish fry and barbecue with lots of good food and some good conversation and companionship. Kit saw that Corey had worked very hard to be accepted by this small, tight-knit community, and seeing them together on the dock as lobsters boiled and fish and steaks were grilled. It also showed Kit what Corey was looking for with his documentary, the feeling of *community* that existed here, and was unique and strong.

After leaving Long Island, they became complete tourists. They took a water-borne tour of the lighthouses and sight-seeing points of Maine visible from a boat, spending most of the afternoon on the water as the captain took them from interesting point to interesting point. The ship took them from Portland to Acadian National Park, a trip that was *much* faster on a boat than it would have been in a car, because the seas were again calm and Corey's family's boat was able to run at 40 to 50 knots between the points

of interest, all but flying over the surface of the sea...and pulling in several times so Jessie could run to the nearest bathroom. Kit spent much of the day watching Suzy and Corey, and what he saw pleased him. Corey was very attentive to Suzy, and she always wanted to be close to him, near him. Suzy honestly loved Corey, and thankfully, Corey seemed to be in love with her. They would be a good couple, once Corey finally proposed to her.

They returned to Castine after sunset, a sunset enjoyed on the trip back from Acadian National Park as the sun slipped behind the rugged shoreline of Maine, but they wouldn't be staying. The proprietors had checked them out but allowed them to store their luggage there to pick up later, and after they recovered their luggage, they were on their way back to Portland for a fifteen minute flight back to Boston. Corey said goodbye to them at the airport, and Nick carried their luggage into the Lear for them. "We had a wonderful time, Corey," Suzy told him, giving him a long kiss. "Thank you so much for the tour!"

"So, did Rebecca make you give her your phone number?" he asked with a slight smile.

Jessie laughed. "She did!" she admitted.

"She'll use it, trust me," he chuckled. "But she won't be annoying about it. I actually look forward to her calls."

"Yeah, she was really nice."

Suzy spent a very long moment saying goodbye to Corey, then she hurried up into the plane. "Well, I hope you guys enjoyed it."

"It was a great weekend, thanks Suzy," Kit said as she sat down across from him in the back of the Lear, and the pilot closed the hatch behind

Sylvia.

“So, you’re going home this week?”

“Saturday,” Jessie answered. “Vil gets back on Friday, and we’re going home the day after. I’m going to miss Stonebrook a little bit.”

“Oh dear,” Kit said grimly, which made her burst out laughing.

“Not because of the house, but because I’ll miss Clancy and Stan and Luann and Bart and everyone,” she answered.

“Well, you won’t miss me,” Sylvia said simply.

“Huh?”

“*Fraulein* Vil hired me to go back to Austin,” she told them. “She texted me about an hour ago finalizing things.”

“Krichek, Barnett, and Donny say anything?”

“Krichek is going to accept. I don’t know about Barnett and Donny.”

“Wait a minute, accept what?”

“*Fraulein* Vil feels that Nick needs help in Austin, so she hired a few of us to go back and be there to discourage anyone from getting any ideas,” Sylvia told them. “We’ll be operating as Nick does, behind the scenes. You should never see us except when you want to, and you will be safe.”

Nick nodded. “It should be fun,” he grinned, which made Sylvia snort and sit down by the hatch.

“Wow, guess we can’t get rid of you guys,” Jessie laughed.

“Not unless you pay us more to leave than Vil did to stay,” Nick said with a sly smile.

“Get into a bidding war with a Vulpan! *Please*,” Jessie said, which made Nick laugh.

Chapter 40

It was their last week at Stonebrook, and everyone seemed to sense it.

For one, Clancy was much more active. Usually the old fox would have lunch with them and tea about every other day, but in the two days since they returned from Maine, he was a virtual fixture. He had all three meals with them and would often walk with him or Jessie, or come out of his apartment to spend quiet time with them in the TV room in the evenings before he went to bed. Kit was happy that he was willing to ignore that invisible line he himself had put up between “Vulpans and servants” and acted much more like what he really was, an old, old friend and someone whom Kit saw as a father figure.

Clancy wasn't the only member of the staff that was reacting to the impending departure of their young master. Luann seemed quite despondent over the idea of Jessie leaving, having become a friend to the young cat in addition to being her maid. Bartholomew and Stanley as well looked unhappy in those two days, but for different reasons, Kit figured. Stanley was going to feel like Stonebrook had no purpose if there was no Vulpan to serve, even one like Zach, while Bartholomew, like Luann, had become much more than just a servant to the young couple, had become a friend as well as an employee, so much so that it was to him that Kit took his mortgaging idea for a neutral second opinion. The MacArrens were more than just head butlers, they also were masters of accounting and had keen business sense, and Bartholomew was a solid fox to approach with his idea. Frannie and the other cooks were already complaining that they were going

to miss their daily cooking lessons as they taught Jessie their recipes, including some Stonebrook exclusives, and some of the other mercs on the manor were quietly getting ready to move on to their next assignment with a little bit of reluctance. Nick had confided that all of them had enjoyed Stonebrook, but they also *liked* Kit and Jessie.

They really must, because every guard that Vil offered a position in Austin had taken it. There would be three guards moving to Texas on Saturday along with them. Sylvia, Krichek, and Barnett had all accepted Vil's contract to move to Austin and act as quiet background security for Kit, Jessie, and their coming daughter. Krichek had already left to arrange things, prepare Austin for Kit and Jessie's return while Nick and Sylvia stayed with them, and also while Barnett was transitioning all the increased security over to Stanley's control so the head butler could keep the security measures and know how to use them. All of them would be moving into the complex, scattered through the complex to provide complete coverage, and their job would generally be to keep Austin under strict Vulpan control and ensure that nobody with any hostile intent got within ten miles of the Vulpans. Kit wasn't sure he liked the idea of how much it must be costing Vil to hire four very professional and very expensive security guards, but on the other paw, he wanted absolute security for his daughter. Nick and the others would keep them safe, and Kit wasn't so naïve as to think that it was all over. Zach and Alicia were still a threat, and they wouldn't stay cowed forever. They had lost their eldest son, and he had no doubt that they blamed Kit for it. No, they would need help to be protected and safe in Austin, so Kit was not going to say a single word if Vil hired an entire *army* of guards. So long as they didn't feel like prisoners in Austin, he would welcome Sylvia and the other guards with open arms.

There were other plans to make as well. Jessie wouldn't be attending the fall semester because of Laura, but she *would* be back in school in January. When that time came, Kit would be the one caring for Laura, most likely taking her to work with him. He had a nice office that was more than large enough for a crib and a changing table. They also had an appointment in Kansas that Amanda wasn't letting them forget, given the package that arrived today with more stuff in it for their flight training. Amanda had literally already penned them in for two weeks in November where Jessie would get her commercial and Kit would get his ATP. He wasn't sure if they were going to make it, but he did still study his ATP material every night, and Jessie still picked up her commercial manuals with almost daily regularity. She wasn't as adamant about her flight training as he was, but she *did* enjoy it enough to want to improve herself...and if she was going to fly, then there was no earthly reason for her to *not* get a commercial. A commercial rating was the gold standard of sorts among pilots, opening a large number of doors for a pilot. Thankfully, she was also rather taken with the idea of getting her flight instructor's license, mainly because of the idea of being able to officially train friends and family in flying. Both Ben and Jenny had professed interest in learning to fly, Sandy, Danielle, and Lisa also seemed quite taken with flying now that Jessie, Sheila, and Allison had licenses, and if they had a couple of instructor-rated friends, they could literally learn to fly for free.

The other package he'd received that morning made him laugh. Vil had been in Monaco since Saturday, but she'd also been to the doctor the day before she left, and had had her cast removed. She was fully healthy again, but she'd had her cast very carefully taken off, put back together, and she'd shipped it to him. She'd had it mounted on a walnut stand, and it had a little brass plate on it that read *My leg, your arm. We've paid the piper.* Kit

laughed when he read it, and vowed to hang his sling off of it to complete the adage *pay an arm and a leg*. She also sent a little gift box with a little crystal bell with the coat of arms of the ruling family of Monaco, which only remained separate from France so long as it continued to produce male heirs to the noble house, a little vial of sand taken from the beach, and a DVD filled with pictures of the Brighton villa, Vil, Kendall, and one picture at a dinner party with them and Kendall's brothers and Charlie Duke. It was small as villas went, but it was richly appointed and right on the beach, a very *private* beach where, in Vil's little scribbled letter and later a picture on the DVD supported, bathing suits were entirely optional. Kit had a rather scandalous picture of his sister and Kendall sunbathing in the nude on the beach, but the picture was taken from the rear at an angle, so all Kit saw was Vil's bare shoulders, an arm, a peek of the outside slope of her breast, the lounge chair, then her now uncasted leg...and the gaps in the lounge chair made it blatantly obvious that Vil was wearing nothing, while also not revealing anything to the camera that she wouldn't show on an American beach. All he could see of Kendall was his shoulders and tail, but Kit didn't have to go far to guess that he too was sunbathing nude.

The rash of socializing wasn't limited to the manor. Suzy had come over after work both days since the trip to Maine, and she showed them pictures yesterday of a house in Austin she fully intended to buy as a vacation house for her visits to Austin. Kit had to chuckle at that when he realized that he and Jessie were supporting a sudden boom in rich New England and British foxes buying vacation houses in Austin. Terry had bought one, the Brightons had bought one, Suzy was going to buy one, and Vil was having one built.

That was about halfway done. Kit told Rick about it, and the clever dingo, who knew the ranch country east of Austin very well, was able to track down the ranch and take some pictures of it. It was about five miles off 71 and about ten miles east of Bergstrom, out on the ranch roads and very well hidden if one didn't know the area very well. The house's frame was already up, covered in wallboard, the roof was up and shingled, and three other buildings were being erected behind and beside it...the gym, exterior garage and storage shop for the landscaping equipment, and pool house, Kit reasoned, with the horse stable and two barns visible behind the construction that Vil obviously intended to keep. Vil wouldn't build a manor without a poolhouse or some other outside dwelling, since it was all but a fixture on any manor. Judging from the pictures, Vil had a couple of *hundred* workers out there building her vacation house, and Rick noted that they'd be done with the major construction in about two weeks, going by the progress he could see. If they had the exterior wallboard up, then they were almost done with the exterior and were working on the interior. When they had the interior finished up to a certain point, they'd finish the exterior. The other pictures showed that the pool was already done, covered with a tarp and planking to protect the concrete from the construction of the pool house on the far side of it from the main house. Kit was surprised at how fast they'd done so much work, but then again, it shouldn't have been too much of a shock. Vil had a small army there, and Rick told him that a good crew could build a house from foundation to finish in three weeks if they had the foundation ready and had all the materials available.

The biggest surprise visit of them all was Sonya. She was back in Boston and attending Harvard for her final semester, which would be the semester she completed her Master's thesis and got her MBA. She called that morning and asked if it would be alright to come see them after class,

and Jessie all but fell over herself inviting Sonya to dinner. That dinner was very warm and intimate, for Clancy and Suzy were also there, and it was a chance to remind himself just how tall Sonya was, and for the earthy coyote to get to know Kit and Jessie much better...and Kit liked what he saw, even if he did have to look up to see it. Sonya was new money, but she was very smart and had a great deal of common sense. She was like him, a common fur in the rich fur's world, and like him she didn't give a flip what proper society thought about her. She would be going back to Nebraska when she graduated, so she couldn't care less about her reputation among Boston blue-bloods. They showed her all the pictures Vil sent them and the cast, which made her laugh, and they spent a very pleasant evening with friends and family.

Wednesday started real work for them. They would be on Vil's private jet and on the way home on Saturday morning, and there was plenty to do. They had to pack up everything Lupe had sent up to them and everything they'd accumulated since coming to Boston, but they also had to go through it and decide what they wanted to keep, and what they wanted to leave behind. The manor was his as was everything in it, so he had some serious choices to make. The *huge* private DVD collection was a perfect example. Kit rather liked having a few thousand movies at his fingertips and he could easily take it home with him, but the serious issue of just where he'd put the four shelf units that held the DVDs at home reared its ugly head. But, in the end, Kit and Jessie decided to go through it and select about 100 DVDs to take home with them, taking the movies they liked the most and leaving the rest at Stonebrook. There were a few other instances of them taking a small part of Stonebrook home with them. The cooks went through the kitchen and picked out a few things that Jessie didn't have back home, then Stanley went out and bought them and had them shipped straight to Lupe. Luann

had the bedspread and mattress apron on the bed, which Jessie adored, boxed up and sent to Austin, along with four of the warming tea plates and two tea stands, which Kit found rather useful and knew exactly where he'd put them at home. They also had to pack up the gifts Jessie received during her shower, which had been stored in the manor until such time Jessie either had the baby or went home.

They spent all of Wednesday both packing up their own things, and having the staff secretly or openly add things to it, to the point where their townhouse was going to be cluttered with stuff until they could get rid of some of their old things...which would all be shipped to Stonebrook for storage or given to the sorority, depending on how much they wanted to keep it. The only thing that Kit didn't mind going home with him was a healthy supply of Stonebrook blend tea, and a promise from Stanley that replacement boxes of the custom blended tea would arrive in Austin every Friday to replace what he used the week before. If Kit was going to own Stonebrook, then he may as well take advantage of it by getting an unlimited supply of *real* tea, loose-leaf custom blended tea, not Lipton in teabags. There were a few oddities thrown in there, that was for sure.

The first was Nick's K-80 competition shotgun, which was worth a *hell* of a lot of money. When Jessie put it back in its case and took it to him, he just laughed and waggled his paw at her. "Keep using it, dove," he told her. "You like it, you'll actually use it, and I can always sell it later. So consider it to be on loan to you, because I live just twenty meters from you, you know," he grinned. "I know where it is."

"That's true," Jessie admitted. "And you know where to come get it when you finally sell it."

Nick's shotgun wasn't the only gun that was going home with them *officially* rather than with Nick. The wolf hadn't been joking when he said that there would be some serious firepower in the Vulpan townhouse, because Nick told him, rather casually, that Vil had bought the MP7 currently sitting in the secret room from him, and Vil had bought the Glock that Kit had been forced to carry around and had bought a Beretta 92 exactly like Sylvia's for Jessie to carry back in Austin, and they were now theirs. Vil had set up that collector's permit along with Kit's and Jessie's concealed carry licenses--under the table of course--which would allow Kit to own that gun *legally*, even though submachine guns were illegal and Heckler and Koch assault weapons were illegal to buy, sell, or possess in the United States. But Vil had set it up with the ATF that Kit was a collector, and that weapon was part of a collection, which gave him the ability to possess it legally, even buy other illegal weapons legally under the condition that he could only buy one, and could never buy another of that make and model again in his lifetime. The ATF wouldn't have made that special exception for just anyone, even established and avid collectors. Vil's name and connections made it happen, and so long as Kit didn't take it down to the range and use it, he was within his legal rights to own it, and even allowed him to buy more *legally* so long as he only bought one. He could never buy another MP7A1, but there was nothing stopping him from buying a MP7A2, or one of every model there was of the MP-5, because his collector's license allowed him to buy one and only one of any make and model of firearm.

The rules were *much* different for the rich.

Another oddity going home with them wasn't so much an oddity as it was a guilty pleasure. They didn't own any TV as nice as some of the

“junk” TVs scattered through the manor, so Kit arranged to have one of the 52 inch plasma TVs in the manor sent home with them, but Stanley, feeling that *just* a TV wasn’t good enough, threw in a Dolby 5.1 Surround Sound system that doubled as a component audio system along with it, which was paw over fist better than the stereo system they had at home. Jessie found it amusing that a fox that didn’t watch much TV wanted to steal one of the home theater systems from Stonebrook, until she realized that watching the movies they were taking home and Ben’s football games on that TV would be *much* better than the 34 inch LCD TV they had now. He’d move the TV they were using now to the bedroom, move the stereo to the bedroom or give it to the sorority, and then they’d have a home theatre nice enough to make Lupe *unbelievably* jealous.

So, Kit and Jessie were going home with a machine gun, a Glock pistol which was his, a Beretta 92 for Jessie, Nick’s K-80 which would make Jessie the envy of every skeet shooter down at the range, an unlimited supply of Stonebrook tea, and one home theatre system complete with a substantial expansion to the DVD collection they had at home. And concerning the guns, Kit wouldn’t say a word. He was already resigned to the idea that he’d be carrying his Glock even at home, and he sure as hell didn’t want Jessie going anywhere without her Beretta in her purse, even on top of the protection that Nick and Sylvia provided. Back in Austin, the guards wouldn’t be escorting them everywhere, so they would need some means to protect themselves if the unthinkable happened and they were attacked. Kit had not forgotten and would never forget that it was Rick’s concealed carry pistol that had literally saved his life. If ever put in that position again, he wanted the ability to protect himself, and for Jessie to be able to protect herself and their daughter, from attack. So, when he got

home, Kit was going to look into a concealed belt holster for when the shoulder holster wouldn't be hidden.

It took them almost all day to finish packing up that which they wouldn't use for the next couple of days...which was only their toiletries and enough clothes to last until Saturday. The manor provided duplicates of everything they packed away immediately, so they wouldn't be sacrificing anything. Stanley would have it all shipped to Austin in the morning, where it would be waiting for them when they got home.

Suzy and Sonya both came over for dinner again on Wednesday, and Clancy again came out of his apartment to join them, so they had another enjoyable night.

Thursday, the sense of impending change was heavy in the air, for Barnett left that morning along with the packed boxes. Barnett was going to go join Krichek in Austin, and thanks to a call to Lupe, all of them already had their apartments. They were unfurnished, but Krichek was taking care of that. Instead of buying furniture when they got to Austin, Krichek had sent pictures of different furniture sets up to Stonebrook, and Barnett and Sylvia used them to pick out the furniture they wanted, which Krichek then bought. The apartments would have all the furniture they'd need before they even set foot in them, leaving them only to buy the little things that would make the apartments more like homes. Sylvia was having some things sent from Germany, for unlike Nick, she had a permanent house just outside of Berlin. Nick lived out of his plane. Kit rather thought he'd like to see what kind of things Sylvia had, what kind of taste she had in home decor. Sylvia was a soldier and a mercenary, but she was also a femme, and she had a femme's tastes if her taste in dresses was any kind of indication. She definitely had a very elegant sense of style.

Thursday evening, they had another pleasant surprise, for Muffy had come up from Yale to stay overnight. “I’m blowing off class tomorrow,” she told them. “Besides, I kinda promised to stay til you leave.”

“And I made you go to school!” Jessie said imperiously even as she hugged the shorter vixen.

“Yeah, well, I’m not missing anything tomorrow,” she grinned. “I’d much rather be here. Tomorrow’s your last day here, you know. Back to the slums!”

“I can’t wait to go back to my slum,” Kit said fervently, to which Jessie laughed and nodded.

“This has been almost surreal, and I’ll be glad to be home,” she mirrored. “There must be an inch of dust all over everything!”

“Lupe promised to take care of everything,” Kit protested.

“Have you *seen* his house?” she countered. “He has no idea what Pledge is!”

“Point,” he admitted.

“And Mom will be there next Friday!” she said, almost worriedly. “I only have a week to get the house clean!”

“Your mom is going to Austin?”

Jessie nodded. “She wants to be there when I deliver. Mister and Misses Brighton said they were coming too.”

“And I seriously doubt that Vil’s going to miss it,” Kit added. “She won’t come down early, but the instant you go into labor, she’ll be on her jet and have it go full throttle to get here.”

Muffy settled into the same room she'd been using, but she had barely managed to come out before Suzy and Sonya arrived again, looking for another free meal. They took them in and promised them dinner, but the real motive was revealed when Bartholomew brought in a few boxes. "What is this?" Jessie demanded, pointing.

"Oh, we're throwing you a farewell party tomorrow, as soon as Vil gets home," Suzy told them. "Those are the decorations."

"We're doing it all ourselves, no servants," Sonya added.

"Well, I'll certainly help, and not as a servant," Bartholomew snorted. "So will just about anyone in the manor. Master Kit and Mistress Jessie are more to us than employers."

"Pick a nice room for the party, Bart, and put them in there. We'll put them up tomorrow morning. And keep those two out of it!" Suzy barked, pointing at Kit and Jessie.

"I'll put them in the sun room. That room has locks on the doors, and naturally, me and my father are the only ones with keys to the locks," he said with a slight smile.

"I pay your salary, you know!" Kit threatened with utterly insincere outrage in his voice.

Bartholomew wagged his tail at Kit as he and Oscar carried the boxes towards the back stairs, which made Jessie giggle.

"We'll have the party as soon as Vil feels up to it," Suzy announced. "Has she changed her plans?"

“Not that I know of,” Kit answered. “She’s supposed to get in tomorrow around ten or so, give or take.”

“That’s what she told me, too,” she nodded. “To think she’ll be in the air for six hours and it’ll only be three hours after she left,” she laughed.

“The perils of jet travel,” Kit shrugged. “At least they’ll be traveling west, and the pilots won’t have the sun in their faces the entire trip. I wonder why she’s flying in in the morning rather than the evening.”

“Probably so she has a long weekend to get settled in before going back to work,” Suzy guessed.

Jessie put her foot down that evening, and refused to allow the cooks to make dinner for them. She did it herself, making goulash, broccoli, and salad, which surprised Suzy a little bit. “What is this stuff?”

“Just try it,” Kit said mildly as he spooned a large helping onto his plate.

“I haven’t had goulash in years!” Sonya said brightly, taking her turn with the ladle.

“It sounds like a moldy boot,” Suzy declared, which made Jessie laugh.

“Well, I did use leather in the recipe,” she winked.

“Hush, mean kitty,” Suzy said, then she took a testing bite. Her eyes lit up. “This is good!”

“Then eat,” Kit told her. “Just mind the shoestrings.”

Suzy elbowed him. And she wasn’t gentle.

The combination of Muffy, Suzy, and Sonya made it a late night for them, and they managed to make it to bed around midnight. Kit settled in with Jessie and sighed. "Tomorrow's our last day here," he noted. "Full day, that is. What do you think?"

"I think I'll miss the furs here, but I won't miss Boston," she answered. "I want to go *home*, my handsome fox."

"That's the second best thing I've ever heard you say," he said with relief, nuzzling her.

"*Second* best?" she challenged. "And just which is better than that, 'I love you' or 'Yes?'"

"Well, I don't really care if you love me now that we're married," he said flippantly, "so I'd have to put 'I love you' at number three. You saying yes ensured I have a free maid for the rest of my life. That was what was *really* important, you know."

She laughed so hard that she missed when she tried to bop him with the pillow. He wrapped her up in his arms and pulled her down to the bed, then put his head on her upper chest and a paw on her distended belly. "I know what'll knock those out of the top three," he said gently, feeling a little thrill when he felt Laura kick against his paw. "The sound of our baby."

"Amen, handsome fox," she agreed, putting her paw over his and her chin on the top of his head, just over his damaged ear. "I love you."

"I love you too, pretty kitty," he returned immediately and with utter honesty in his voice.

Vil was nothing if not punctual. For a femme who took her commitments seriously, the promise to be at a certain place at a certain time was a serious matter, and it reflected bad on her when she was late, even as it annoyed her that she had failed to keep her word.

However, two complications to her rigidly scheduled life had intruded themselves into her ordered and highly structured domain; a somewhat irreverent husband and the fact that she was coming home from her honeymoon.

In that respect, Kendall was the best thing that ever happened to his sister. She was so orderly and organized that he wouldn't be surprised if she put bathroom time in her Blackberry's daily planner. Kendall would disrupt that scheduled life, introduce elements of pure randomness, even some silliness, that she desperately needed to help decompress her from the stresses of running a multi-billion dollar conglomerate of companies, two of which were multi-billion dollar companies all by themselves, Vulpan Shipyards and Vulpan Steel. She *needed* someone that would take her Blackberry and throw it out the window and make her live a little, someone that would surprise her, challenge her, even make her a little angry from time to time. Kendall was the perfect male for Vil, because he was an intelligent young fox with a mischievous streak, and he'd urge Vil to not just bring home the bacon, but enjoy it in ways far more than simply enjoying the perks of being rich. He'd make her *appreciate* life, make her look forward to coming home from work every day because she would be going home to a loving husband who would both make her laugh and make her feel wanted and cherished.

So, when they were late, Kit suspected that reluctance to leave Monaco had something to do with it. Vil called them from the jet at 8:30, as they

were having breakfast with Muffy, a breakfast of scrambled eggs and sausage made by Jessie. “Hey bro,” she called over the faint hum of the jet’s engines. “We’re running a little late.”

“Late? Vil? Late? Look outside, pretty kitty, and make sure the sky isn’t falling,” he said, which made both femmes laugh.

“Oh hush you,” Vil snorted. “We’re only about an hour behind schedule. I just wanted to call and warn you, so you don’t get all ready to go and then have to wait.”

“Who said we’re coming to pick you up, femme?” he teased. “I think you know the way from the airport all by yourself.”

“You’d *better* be standing on that tarmac when we get there,” she said darkly, which made him laugh. “Besides, we have to go to the office as soon as I get back.”

“That’s true,” he realized. “I have to file a letter of resignation.”

“Well, I’m not accepting it,” she said bluntly. “I want to keep you on the board for a while longer, brother.”

“We had a deal!”

“No, you had a plan, I never agreed to it,” she countered. “Besides, to be very blunt about it, I want you on the board because I want one Vulpan on the board that I absolutely know beyond any shadow of a doubt will never backstab me. I trust Terry and Brian, but I don’t know if I can trust them in ten years. You, I *never* have to worry about, brother mine.”

He couldn’t refute her logic, but he also saw that it was recent events that were influencing her position. He knew better to argue the point for

now, but in five or six months, when things were much calmer, he felt he could talk her into letting him quit. But right now, that was a brick wall just waiting for him to try to ram his head against it.

“That’s one reason why we’re going to the office. With Steven dead, things have changed a little bit. He had stock, and if you recall, stocks revert back to the company on the death of the owner, so I have to deal with them. I have to schedule a Monday meeting to have the stocks held by the board redistributed equally among the seats, minus myself, and I’m going to give back the stocks I took from them to sell to you, which should make them happy. Since the dividends were disbursed just a couple of weeks ago, this is the perfect time for it.”

“You know, I didn’t get my dividends this quarter. I checked my bank account last week, and it’s not there.”

“What? They damn well have better paid your dividends!” she barked. “Ken! Get the office on the other phone right now! You should have received your dividends on the sixth!”

“Kit, love, you checked the *checking* account. Did you have them send you the records on the money market account too, or just the checking account?” Jessie asked.

Kit laughed suddenly. “You’re right, pretty kitty!” he realized. “Don’t declare war yet, sis,” he warned. “Jessie pointed out that I didn’t check the *money market* account, and that’s where the dividends are deposited.”

“That could be it,” Vil said. “Did you get your money back from the charter?”

“I did, that’s why I had to have them send my transaction records in the first place,” he answered. “Too much money in the bank. They’re depositing Jessie’s salary into the checking account, but the dividends should be going to the money market account.”

“That’s what they should be doing, I wanted Jessie’s pay going to the checking account. Let me call and make absolutely sure your dividends were disbursed. And you call your bank and make sure it’s there. I don’t want this hanging over my head the rest of the flight home. I want to make sure it was done right.”

“Alright. Call you back in a few minutes.”

A call to the bank confirmed Jessie’s suspicion. The dividends were indeed paid on the 6th of September for the third quarter, but what startled him, and what he forgot, was that he had more stock right now because he was on the board. His one dollar a year salary didn’t encompass stock dividends, and Vil warned him that he’d be earning dividends off the board stock in addition to his own so long as he was on the board. So, instead of the usual approximate \$31,000 he was expecting, his dividend payment for all the shares of the three companies he currently controlled came to \$122,947.39.

Over a *hundred twenty thousand dollars* for just one quarter! He earned triple from the board stocks than he did from his personal stocks!

“Holy hairballs,” Kit gasped when he hung up the phone, which made Muffy burst into laughter.

“What’s wrong, love?”

“Vil is what’s wrong,” he said. “I completely forgot about how she set up my board membership. She found a way to sneak us extra money,” he said as he speed-dialed Vil. “Sis. I got the dividends, and if I wouldn’t have signed that contract, I’d be waiting for you to get off the plane so I could slap you.”

She laughed brightly. “Finally figured it out, didn’t ya?” she teased. “I *told* you you’d get a bigger dividend!”

“I was expecting a few thousand dollars more, not *triple* my usual dividend *on top* of my dividend!”

“That’s because you’re earning board rate on all your stocks,” she said dismissively. “You are on the board, Kit, and not just on paper. Just throw it in a T-bill or something, bro. You need that money for Laura.”

“Well, I can’t argue with that right now. It’s hard to argue about money when my daughter is only days from being born. I want a nice big bank account on paw just in case we need it,” he declared, to which Jessie nodded emphatically.

“Good. You just saved yourself getting chewed out in front of your wife.”

“Suuuure,” he drawled, which made her laugh.

“We should be there in about four hours. I’ll call right about an hour out, so you can get here.”

“Alright. Talk to you later, sis.”

“See you soon, bro.”

Kit hung up the phone and blew out his breath. “I am *so* glad I hired that accounting firm,” he grunted. “Our taxes are going to be *murder* next year.”

“That’s a good thing,” Muffy chuckled.

“You’ve never done your taxes before, Muffy,” he said accusingly.

“Well, you’re not doing yours either,” she retorted.

“No, but unlike you, I have to *keep track* of everything. Who do you think keeps all the paperwork in order?”

“Oh. Well, sucks to be you then,” she said flippantly, then she squealed with laughter and rushed from the room when Kit lunged at her.

They didn’t spend the time waiting for Vil idly. They were leaving tomorrow, and despite everything being packed, there was plenty to do. Both Kit and Jessie spent a lot of time on the phone calling down to Austin, getting everything ready. Jessie called Doctor Mac and reaffirmed her appointment on Tuesday, Kit called about half the gang but focused on Rick and Pat to organize his return to the office, and Jessie also called through most of the sorority to arrange her return to the fold...in a matronly sense. In some ways, Jessie was almost like the sorority mom now, cooking for them, being the shoulder they could cry on when they needed it, and just generally always being there for them, which was one reason why every femme in the sorority loved Jessie. She had been their little sister when she arrived, always looking out for her, but now she was their mom, and she was the one looking out for them. Jessie’s compassionate, kind nature was one of the most endearing things about her, and to Kit, it marked the inner strength he had always seen in her. It takes a strong femme to care as much about others as she does herself.

Jessie also spent an inordinate amount of time on the phone with Sheila and Allison, and she looked a bit miffed when she got off the phone. “Your cousin is a sneaky rat!” she declared.

“What’s the matter?”

“She had our townhouse cleaned by her maid service!” she cried.

“So? I think that was very sweet of her, and now we don’t have to do it,” Kit said. “We won’t kick up a dust storm when we open the door.”

“But, strangers were in our house, love! Looking through all our stuff! What if they found the *box*?” she asked with a gasp, mentioning the box in the closet that had the DVD with the pictures they took on their honeymoon.

“I think that you feel you were cheated out of doing a whole lot of unpleasant work you felt you had to do because you haven’t been doing it lately,” he said sagely. “Luann *has* cleaned the room a couple of times this week.”

Her cheeks ruffled almost immediately, then she laughed helplessly. “We’ve been so busy,” she said defensively.

“And you forgot to do it, so Luann just came in behind you and tidied up,” he finished. “Besides, you shouldn’t be doing any heavy work right now, in your condition.”

She laughed again. “Don’t get all protective on me now, Kitstrom Lucas Vulpan!”

“Who said I was being protective? Cute girls should do housework naked. I’ve told you that over and over again. Strip off those clothes and

wiggle that cute little butt of yours as you bend down to make the bed, and you'll be in proper condition to clean."

He ducked to avoid the pillow that was launched at him.

Because they had so many plans to make and so many friends to call, they were busy right up until Vil called to give them about an hour's warning. "We're somewhere over the Atlantic, but Avery says we're about an hour out," she told him. "So, come get us, bro. We need a ride home."

"Liar," he laughed.

Two limos pulled out of Stonebrook about fifteen minutes later. One of them was empty, but the other had Kit, Jessie, Muffy, Sonya, and Suzy inside. Kit and Jessie were still making calls to Austin as they finalized everything, and Lupe was the last one he called. "So, what time you pullin' in, brah?"

"We're not sure yet, because we don't have a set departure time," he answered. "Just whenever we get up and get to the airport."

"Need me to come get ya?"

"Nah, Rick's gonna take care of it. He has my truck, after all," Kit chuckled. "How is the car?"

"I've been drivin' it about once a week to keep it good, brah," he answered. Rick had Kit's truck and Martha had been using Jessie's van, but Lupe had Jessie's car. "Ain't good for a car to just sit."

"True enough," he agreed. "Do me a favor and go into the house and turn down our air conditioning."

“Already taken care of, brah,” he said. “We got your house all set up for ya, and all that stuff that got shipped down from Boston is in boxes in the living room waitin’ for ya to go through it. Sheila had her maid service go in there and clean it yesterday.”

“Yeah, she told us. That was nice of her to think about it. We weren’t looking forward to battling the dust bunnies.”

Lupe laughed. “They can get vicious if you give them time to grow,” he agreed. “And I put back all your stuff I borrowed while you were gone, brah,” he added.

Kit chuckled. “Well, as long as nothing’s broken.”

“If it’s broke, you’ll never notice.”

“Oh, can you smell the lawsuit,” Kit taunted.

Lupe laughed suddenly. “Brah, don’t be mean to your best bud!” he protested.

“That’s what friends are for. To use and then throw away.”

Lupe laughed helplessly.

Vil’s jet landed about ten minutes after they arrived at Signature’s hangar, and they were all standing out on the tarmac as it taxied up and came to a stop. The ground crew ran out and chocked the wheels and opened the cargo hatch after the engines were powered down, and then the hatch opened and the stairs extended. Avery stepped back, and Vil appeared in the hatchway, wearing a tee shirt and a pair of shorts of all things, and she was not in a cast. Her fur was a tiny bit lighter than usual, bleached by the Riviera sun. She walked maybe a tiny bit less certain than usual as she

came down the steps with Kendall right behind her, in a tank top and a baggy pair of Bermuda shorts, but Kit didn't think that was unusual for a femme who had had her leg broken and had only been out of the cast for a week. Her leg had to get its strength back, and that wasn't something that happened the day after the cast came off. It had taken Kit's arm and shoulder over a month to fully recover after he was out of the sling, and that was with weekly physical therapy. He had no doubt that Vil's doctors had her on a physical therapy regimen to get her leg back up to par, or they would start one now that she was home from her honeymoon.

Kit folded her into a big hug when she got off the stairs. "You look like a beach bum!" he laughed as he greeted her.

"I was enjoying being one," she laughed in reply, patting him on the back. "I'm glad to be home, though."

"We had a great time," Kendall said as he shook Kit's paw after Vil moved on to hug and greet Jessie.

"You'd better, or we'd be attending Vil's wedding to Harry next month," Kit told him, which made him laugh brightly.

"We had a great time *outside* the bedroom as well as inside," he corrected with a wolfish smile. "Vil even came home richer."

"Eh?"

"We visited Monaco's casino," he laughed. "She won fifteen thousand dollars in there. *Never* play that femme in poker, Kit. Never ever ever."

"So, she cleaned out the suckers?"

“More like scared them into folding repeatedly,” he said as he hugged Jessie. “There you are, you beautiful girl! Ready to throw over the Vulpans and run off together?”

Jessie grinned at him. “Sorry, you’re not fox enough to make me give up my Kit.”

“Rejected again,” he sighed, which made Jessie burst into a fit of girlish giggling.

“I’ll show you some rejection, you femmanizer,” Vil said, slapping him lightly on the shoulder after hugging Sonya in greeting. “Well, let’s not spend all day out here on the tarmac. I heard there’s a farewell party in the works back at Stonebrook.”

“Just waiting for you, Vil,” Suzy told her.

“We’re getting rid of Vil already? Why don’t you guys tell me these things?” Kendall demanded. “I haven’t even made her meow like a cat yet!”

“That’s *your* fault, not mine,” Vil said in a voice that made just about everyone crack up.

Suzy and Sonya rode in the second limo with Stav and Marcus, giving the Vulpans a chance for a little private conversation on the way back to Stonebrook. Vil and Kendall fell over themselves describing their honeymoon, from their week in Florida spent mainly in the bedroom and on sloops and yachts on the water, to the week at the villa in Monaco, lazy days spent lounging on the beach and nights spent club-hopping or staying in the villa. Vil had her camera with her, and she showed them quite a few pictures of Monaco that she didn’t send on the DVD, its beaches, its

architecture, and the swimsuit optional public beaches that made Jessie's cheeks ruffle.

"Who took that picture of the two of you without suits?" Kit asked with a chuckle.

"One of the servants in the villa," she answered. "Unfortunately, someone got a much better picture of us that ran in a French tabloid," she grunted. "It was taken from a boat offshore with a telephoto lens. They had to use some black bars, though. And a pretty good-sized one," she said, giving Kendall a sidelong look that made him laugh. "We were walking along on the beach."

"They took naked pictures of you? That's awful!"

"It also pissed off the old male," Kendall said. "He took steps."

"He's going after the tabloid," Vil said with a nod. "He intends to run them out of business. They broke French law when they printed the picture without our permission, part of the paparazzi reforms after Princess Di was killed. The paper is claiming that since it was taken in Monaco the law doesn't apply, but it'll be a moot point. Winston will simply put a legal team on them with orders to litigate them into the ground. You *do not* cross the Brightons if you're in Europe."

"Too right, love," Kendall nodded. "The old male will have that tabloid out of business by Wednesday, you mark my words. And the photographer that took it will never work in photography again."

"I just hope that the tabloids over here don't print the picture," Jessie said.

“The French put a legal injunction on it,” she answered. “The tabloid can’t sell or redistribute it, and the French confiscated every copy of it they could get their paws on. They even somehow managed to prevent the tabloid from putting the picture on the internet, but I have no idea how they pulled that off. I certainly don’t mind that.”

“I wouldn’t,” Jessie agreed with a nod. “Did you have much trouble after getting your cast off?”

“I limped a little the first couple of days,” she chuckled. “The doctors are going to start me on physical therapy on Monday so I can get my leg rehabilitated. They wanted to start it the day after I got my cast off, but I was on my *honeymoon*,” she said, bristling slightly. “Besides, I didn’t spend all that much time on my feet,” she added, giving Kendall a slight look that made him clear his throat, and made both Kit and Jessie explode into laughter.

“I’m going to need some physical therapy for my back,” the British fox complained. “I wasn’t kidding when I was talking about all that repressed sexual tension.”

“Well, you’ll have to keep working on me so I can let it all out, Kenny,” she told him. “Because until I’m pregnant, you get no rest.”

“Oh trust me, I’ve already been told that by the old male,” he retorted. “I’m being dragged to the bedroom by both sides of the family!”

“Oh, keep talking like it’s a chore,” she said in a frosty tone.

“Well, it can be,” he said with utterly insincere sobriety in his voice. “All you do is lay there, femme. I do all the work. You reap the rewards of all my labor!”

Jessie spluttered, then almost fell sideways on the seat in laughter at the cold stare Vil leveled on her husband. He winked at her, and she laughed despite herself as he put his arm around her and kissed her fondly on the side of her muzzle. “But it’s a labor of love,” he said in a gentle voice. Kit saw his sister melt against her husband, fit herself against him and accept his attention, and that told him more than anything that Vil truly did love Kendall Brighton.

Fortunately, they weren’t at the office very long. Vil stormed in unannounced, putting the building on its ear, and went straight to her office. All three of her secretaries rushed in with her, a red vixen, a male fox, and a gray vixen, and while they stood by and listened, Vil gave the male a flash drive holding the board change proposition proposal, and had the red vixen schedule a board meeting for 10:00 on Monday morning. “Get everything that needs my attention organized and have it on my desk Monday morning,” she commanded the third. “Anything that’s critical, give me right now, and I’ll go over it over the weekend.”

“I have it all ready for you, Misses Vulpan,” the young gray vixen said immediately, offering Vil her briefcase, which she had left at work before her wedding. “Organized by importance.”

“Very good, Miss Harmon,” she nodded. “I’m not available until Saturday afternoon. So don’t even try.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the three secretaries said in unison.

“Get it done, good work while I was gone, and see you on Monday,” she commanded, then she led them right back out of her office as quickly as they entered.

“That was fast,” Jessie laughed.

“I’m not known for chitchat when I’m at the office, Jessie,” Vil said with a mild chuckle. “They may be young, but Harmon, Bell, and Thatcher keep the whole company running smoothly.”

“You don’t have an executive assistant?” Jessie asked.

She shook her head. “It would be too much work for just one fox, so I have three assistants, and each one more or less specializes in one aspect of keeping my office going. Harmon arranges my in-box paperwork, sorting it by importance and making sure it’s all correct, Bell deals with my out-box paperwork, making sure my orders are carried out, and Thatcher manages my calendar, schedule, and appointments. Oh, and don’t let the secretary title fool you, sis, those three make even more money than you do, and they *are* executives. But those three back there have more power in this company than just about anyone else,” she laughed. “Everyone knows they have to get past Thatcher to get to me, they know if they so much as don’t dot an I on something they send to me, Harmon will be giving them a call, and they know that Bell will be like a pit bull making sure my orders are carried out to my satisfaction.”

“Which one does your research?” Kit asked.

“All three do, handling the research for their role in the office. Harmon always knows what’s most important because she researches every piece of paper that hits my in-box, Thatcher researches all furs I do business with and all locations I visit before I go, and Bell researches past action of my office and the board and analyzes its impact and success. If it’s something outside those, whoever notices it does the research on it. If it’s something I don’t want showing up in the books, then Stav and Marcus do it, for an additional fee, of course.”

“Efficient.”

“The most efficiently run office in the company,” Vil said proudly.

They left Boston quickly after that, and in almost no time, they were back at Stonebrook. The entire staff was in the courtyard, lined up to greet Vil, and she fell in among them with smiles and pawshakes. To Kit’s surprise, Brian and Ruth came out of the garage, and they had Jonathon and Misty with them. “We heard you’re leaving tomorrow, and they’re throwing you a party, so we decided to crash it,” Brian chuckled as he reached them.

“We can’t let you go home without saying goodbye!” Ruth declared, kissing Jessie on the muzzle fondly.

“You’re looking a tad bleached there, Vil,” Brian remarked as she came over.

“A week in the Florida sun and then a week in the French Riviera can do that to a fox, Uncle Brian,” she chuckled. “We spent a lot of time on the beach.”

“You’re looking well, Kendall. Not too exhausted?” Ruth asked with a slight smile.

“A little bandy-legged, but otherwise fine,” he said seriously, which caused Ruth to erupt into laughter.

“We have the sun room ready for the party,” Stanley announced. “Which will begin at your leisure, Master Kit.”

The party wasn’t so much a party as it was a gathering of Vulpans, friends, and staff in the sun room, his favorite room in the house, amid tasteful decorations and a banner reading *We’ll miss you!* hung between the

windows. The cooks had made ordeurves and a large cake, and it was attended by the entire house staff and the friends and family. There were no gifts given, because they didn't need anything else, but there were plenty of hugs and kisses and pawshakes spread through the room as the staff got a chance to mingle with Kit and Jessie in a social situation before they went back home. Kit had spent a lovely couple of hours sitting around talking with the staff, as Jessie made promise after promise that she would send them lots of pictures of the baby when she was born. Kit had such a good time that he didn't really even object to Brian and Ruth being there.

There was some business discussed, though. "So, it's official?" he asked Vil.

She nodded. "Zach had it on my desk when I came back, just as I warned he'd better," she affirmed. "He's out. That means I have to hire at least two more board members, one to replace Zach, and one to fill the new spot on the board. I'm having it expanded by one and the shares redistributed through the board seats, everyone but me."

"How many shares is that?" Jessie asked curiously.

"There are eighteen thousand total shares of board-distributed stock, six thousand from each company, which is ten percent of the original sixty thousand shares issued from the when the stocks were first created. I own forty thousand of each, and the rest are spread through the family. Originally there were twelve board members, so each one had five hundred each. The board's size has contracted and expanded over the years, and then I stripped each of the current board members there are now of a combined thousand shares of each stock to sell to Kit. Well, Kit's going to surrender those thousand shares back to the board, because Steven had shares, and *those* will be awarded to Kit."

“Vil--”

“Hush,” she interrupted Kit before he could say another word. “Those shares reverted back to my control when he died, no matter what. That’s how they’re set up and have been set up since the thirties, and we never changed it. I’m returning a thousand shares each to the board pool, and you get the remainder.”

“How many did he have?” Brian asked.

“Twenty five hundred of each, so Kit and Jessie will gain five hundred shares of each company,” she answered.

Brian whistled. “Why did Steven have so many?”

“Zach sold some of his *own* stock to Steven on top of what Steven got from the family. Too bad for him he can’t claim those stocks now that Steven’s dead. They were in *Steven’s* name through a legal sale, and when he died, they came back to the company. They’re *mine* now, and I can sell them to anyone I please. Odds are, Steven was using the dividends to fund the Paladins, and that’s why he needed so many shares, since he doesn’t have his father’s rate, and Zach had to keep his involvement secret. Came back to bite him in the ass,” she said vindictively. “With twelve board members, that means each seat will get five hundred shares of each company, going back to the way it was originally set up. When all is said and done, you and Kit will control two thousand shares of each stock.”

“But if our dividend was three times what we usually get for even *less* stock--” Jessie started.

“Board members earn a weighted dividend,” Vil interrupted. “So do I. We earn more per share on the dividend, almost as if we owned more stock

than we do. It's how it was set up, to allow the dividends to be paid out at different rates while the number of stocks in each company never changed, to reflect the holder's worth and value to the family and the company when facing the fact that only twenty thousand shares of stock per company could ever be available. Every registered owner of stock is tagged with a multiplier to his dividend, what we call a rate," she continued. "Depending on who it is. Some earn face value, like you and Kit. Some earn a weighted share, like me, the elders, and the board members. There are even different multipliers in the board, based on rank and seniority. A stock can change paws, but the multiplier is tagged to the *holder*, not the *share*. When Kit was put on the board, his multiplier went up on *all* the shares he owns, both his private shares and his board shares, because he became a member of the board. That's why even though he only gained an extra three hundred sixty-two shares from holding a seat on the board, he earned four times his usual dividend. He has the lowest rate of all the board members, the minimum rate allowed by our rules, but it's still applied to *all* his shares."

"Oh, I see. That makes sense," Jessie nodded.

"It was our grandfather's solution to the fact that such a limited number of shares would be available," Brian added. "There are only sixty thousand shares of each company, and only twenty thousand of those are available. That number can never change. It's literally written into the company's charter. If not for the weight system, each single share would earn a huge dividend."

"It's zero sum," Vil elaborated to Jessie's slightly confused look. "For every point of rate one fox earns, that means that the rate, in a way, goes *down* for everyone else. It's based on the lump sum cash paid out in a dividend cycle. There's only so much money, so it's divided per share and

per weighted rate to disburse it evenly and fairly. What one fox earns over the baseline has to be taken away from the others.”

“Ohhh, okay!” Jessie said in comprehension.

“One of the ways Grandfather kept control,” Brian chuckled. “He couldn’t force someone to give up their shares, but he could adjust their rate to ensure they earned virtually nothing for them.”

“Back when the CEO had direct control of the rate system,” Vil sighed. “I’d love to have that power.”

“It’s controlled by the board now, isn’t it?” Jessie asked.

“Yup. So I’d have to have support to get a rate change through. That’s why I didn’t simply give you one share of stock and stick a ridiculous rate on it,” she winked at Jessie. “To make the shares pay off for you, I had to sell you a large number of shares.”

“And they weren’t cheap,” Kit grunted. “It was a huge chunk of my inheritance to buy the Vulpan stocks.”

“Pft, they paid for themselves with the first dividend,” she declared.

Kit chuckled. “They did.”

“Well, you’ll get more of a dividend as a board member. Your rate is about three times face value, give or take, which is the minimum rate allowed to a board member. Controlling two thousand shares per company, you’ll be looking about a hundred fifty thousand a quarter in dividend payments.”

“Which is why you won’t let me quit.”

“Mmmmaybe,” she said with a coquettish smile, which made Jessie giggle and him laugh helplessly.

“Then give me the card.”

“Oh, no way!” she laughed, pulling her paws away and over her shoulder as if holding it. “That doesn’t even *qualify* as meddling! I gave you a very logical reason for keeping you on the board! I *need* you on it, silly male! You’re my strongest anchor!”

“Card?” Brian asked.

“My wedding present,” Vil grinned. “I’m entitled to one act of meddling with no repercussions, a one free meddle card.”

“Within reason,” Kit stressed.

“Your concept of reason and mine are two very different things,” she said sweetly. “And since I’m the one who got the present, it’s *my* sense of reason that counts.”

Kit gave her a strange look, then laughed helplessly.

It was a very nice party. It lasted about two more hours, filled with conversation and laughter, and also a chance for Brian and Ruth to get to know Sonya better, and then it slowly broke up. Staff left one by one to return to their duties, then Brian and Ruth left with their kids, then Vil declared that she was ready to go *home*, to return to Hart’s Crossing...and that was that. The party wound down, and they walked Vil and Kendall out to a waiting limo that would take them home. “I’ll be back over here around seven,” she promised, “so I can take you to the airport. I doubt you’ll be awake before then, but I know you’ll be too anxious to go home to sleep much past it.”

“Are we so predictable?” Kit laughed as he hugged his sister.

“About some things, yes,” she winked. “I’ll see you tomorrow, little brother.”

“I’m glad you’re home, sis, because now I can go home too.”

“More’s the pity. I was hoping exposing you to your birthright would soften you up a little bit,” she said with a shameless wink.

“I’m Vulpan enough to be stubborn,” he chuckled in reply as he kissed her on the side of her muzzle.

“See you in the morning, taller sis,” Vil said, hugging Jessie. “I’m very disappointed in you, you know.”

“What? Why?”

“Because you were supposed to be completely seduced by his money and demand to stay here,” she declared, pointing at Kit. “You let me down!”

Jessie laughed. “I’m so sorry that I’m a normal girl at heart,” she answered. “It was fun to be here, and nice, and I can’t deny that there were times I really enjoyed it, but I want to *go home*, Vil. This is just a glorified vacation. My heart belongs in Austin, and it’s time the rest of me went back to it.”

“Well said,” Kit said with a nod.

“Good, that means I won’t have any competition for my wife’s attention,” Kendall chuckled as he hugged Jessie, then shook Kit’s paw. “See you two tomorrow.”

“We’ll be ready,” Kit answered.

“I guess we’d better wander off too,” Sonya said. “We still on for dinner tomorrow, Vil?”

“Sure are,” she answered.

“We’ll be back tomorrow to see you off,” Suzy promised as she hugged Jessie, then kissed Kit on the tip of his nose playfully.

“Wait a minute, you’re leaving us with Muffy?” Kit suddenly demanded. “No! Take her too!”

“Why you jerk!” Muffy retorted, which caused everyone, even Muffy, to crack up.

Muffy didn’t really factor much into things after everyone left, because Kit and Jessie were too busy, and she had her own things to do. She was staying at Stonebrook overnight and would leave for Connecticut after they left in the morning, and that left Kit and Jessie to finish getting ready to go home. Both of them had a few more calls to make, and Kit went through the manor with Stanley and a checklist to make sure that everything that was going to Austin was either already there or boxed up, and everything staying at Stonebrook was accounted for and didn’t accidentally get packed. Stanley was quite reserved and pensive through the whole thing, so much so that Kit had to ask him what was wrong. “It’s going to feel quite unnatural to have no Vulpans here to serve, Master Kit,” he said quietly. “We’ll have no purpose. We’ll be keeping the house up, that’s for certain, but it won’t feel like we have a *reason* to do it.”

“Oh, I’m not so sure about that, Stan,” Kit told him. “I think you’ll find that you’ll have plenty to do when we leave. For one, weren’t you talking about remodeling the kitchen?”

“Oh yes, I’ve had the funds set aside for that project for a while.”

“Well, with no kitchen demands, I think this is the perfect time to do it.”

“True, true. And there’s the landscaping project that Daniel wants to undertake in the garden, to smooth out that hill behind the fountain, and Bartholomew mentioned the other day that the Autumn cottage is due for an inspection and repainting.”

“Well, this is a good time to get most of the maintenance out of the way, mainly since you won’t have to listen to a bunch of Vulpans whine about all the dust, noise, and disturbance,” he noted, which made Stanley chuckle a little bit. “After you get that done, I think you’ll find that Vil will keep you busy. I told her to use Stonebrook as she sees fit, and you have to admit, this place *so* kicks Hart’s Crossing’s ass when she’s trying to make an impression.”

Stanley laughed. “That, Master Kit, is certainly true. We did not embarrass Mistress Vil at her reception.”

“So, I’d expect to be doing a lot of planning over the winter, Stan,” Kit noted. “I guarantee you, after you get the repairs and other maintenance done, Vil will not let you get lazy.”

“I certainly hope so,” he said honestly. “Master Kit, I want you to promise me something.”

“What?”

“If you run into any kind of difficulty at all down in Austin, please, don’t hesitate to call. This is your home, no matter how you feel about Austin, and the manor *and its resources* are always at your disposal.”

“I appreciate that, Stan, I really do,” he said sincerely, patting the older fox on the shoulder. “And it’s more of a comfort than you can ever realize to know that if all else fails, I can always return here, even if I’m broke and homeless.”

“You will *never* be homeless, Master Kit,” Stan told him. “For this is your home, and it will always be here for you. And if you are indeed broke, why, I’ll simply send a car for you,” he declared.

Kit laughed. “The way the economy is tanking, that’s always a distinct possibility,” he said sagely.

“Pft, to a Vulpan, a weakening economy isn’t a crisis, it’s an opportunity,” Stanley declared. “As I recall, your grandfather truly solidified the family fortune during the Great Depression, and then it skyrocketed at the onset of World War two.”

“True,” Kit nodded.

After they got everything squared away, the staff didn’t allow Jessie to cook her last dinner at Stonebrook. All three chefs all but ran her out of the kitchen, and they prepared a dinner of lobster, crab, tuna, and salmon, a true fisherfur’s feast, which made Jessie almost swoon in delight when they put it on the table. Jessie was all cat when it came to seafood, and fortunately Kit shared her taste for it...or he’d be in big trouble come dinnertime in the Vulpan household. Three or four dinners out of seven were seafood within their house, though usually not anything quite this extravagant. Muffy certainly wasn’t complaining either, for lobster was her favorite food in the entire world, and they had made sure to make her a very large one.

“Alright guys, I’m going to go out and see some friends,” Muffy said. “I think you two probably want to be alone on your last night here, so I’ll

clear out.”

“Whatever gave you that idea?” Jessie asked. “We love having you here, you silly vixen!”

“If I were you, I’d like a little privacy on my last night in that big bedroom...with that big bed,” she said knowingly, and she laughed when Jessie’s cheeks threatened to ruffle. “Besides, I do have a couple of friends to see tonight.”

“And a few parties to go to, and a couple of clubs to visit,” Kit added.

“Yeah, those too,” she agreed with a laugh. “So I’ll see you tomorrow if you’re not awake when I get back tonight, okay?”

“Don’t you dare oversleep!” Jessie warned.

“Who said I’d sleep? I just need to make sure I’m *back* by seven,” she said with a bright, toothy grin, then she laughed when Jessie shooed her from the table.

“She’s a Vulpan, all right,” Kit chuckled lightly.

There was something to be said for Muffy’s gesture. Kit found himself walking the halls and rooms of Stonebrook after Jessie went to go take a bath, to enjoy that huge spa tub in the bathroom one more time before going home to the much smaller jacuzzi tub they had in the master bathroom. He’d lived in this house for sixteen years before walking out of the house and the Vulpan family, and though there were enough bad memories to last a lifetime in this place, there were a few good ones. Memories like listening to his mother sing, dancing with her in the ballroom before a Christmas party, just the two of them, or sitting on the edge of the pool, before they remodeled it and made it bigger, watching Vil being taught how to swim by

Clancy. That was one of his earliest memories, when he was just two years old, sitting there in a pair of swim trunks and floaters on his upper arms. He recalled that his mother and father had hated the water, and so it was usually Clancy that went with them when they went swimming. He walked through the grand entry foyer, where his father had issued the ultimatum when he was sixteen, and he looked at the front door that Kit had stormed through almost immediately afterward, storming off into a bitterly cold late winter night wearing nothing but a dress shirt and a pair of slacks...and nearly freezing to death walking away from Stonebrook. The nurse to which the police had taken him said his thick fur was probably the only reason he *didn't* die out there in that storm. His thick, handsome fur was more than a matter of vanity, that night it had saved his life. He opened the front door and looked out over a huge front lawn where he used to play in the summer, and sled down its slope in the winter, since it was the steepest hillside that wasn't covered in trees on the grounds...but that wasn't saying much. He did remember once, when he was twelve, when the snow had frozen over with a sheet of ice from freezing rain, getting on his sled and absolutely *flying* down the hill, so fast he had to bail out before his sled zoomed into the trees between the hill and the front wall. Then there was that ice storm when he was fourteen, with ice so thick that he put on his hockey skates and skated around the courtyard. The whole city lost power for days after that, but Stonebrook had its own generators, so they hadn't gone without power. He remembered that Sheila had been over before the storm and was stuck with them overnight, and how she had fallen on her butt and slid halfway down the road towards where the chopper pad was now, and then spent nearly twenty minutes trying to waddle her way back up the hill, having to use the sawpoints of her figure skates to literally claw her way back up to the courtyard. Good grief, was she pissed that he hadn't helped her, had

done nothing but stand there and laugh, so much so she hauled off and whacked him a good one and knocked him down. Sheila was much younger than him as the cousins and kids in general reckoned such things, but since his father and her mother were the closest of all the Vulpan elders, she was over at their house so much that he knew her better than most of the other cousins, her and her siblings. Sam and Randy were happy-go-lucky troublemakers and Randy was Kit's own age, and they'd gotten themselves into all kinds of mischief when they were over...but never on purpose. Will and Duncan weren't quite so adventurous as Sam and Randy, but Kit rather liked them, too. Will wanted to go into the family business even at a young age, and was working hard to be ready for it, but Duncan wanted to be a painter. That hadn't panned out, because his bastard father had forced him to give over art and take up business, just as he tried to do to Kit, but Duncan was taking quite a few art classes in addition to business classes at Harvard, and he *was* a very good painter. Sheila was the true hellion of Sarah's kids; where Sam and Randy just liked to have fun and got into trouble as a byproduct, Sheila was the type that intentionally went out of her way to stir things up. That was why they were such good friends when they were kids, despite their age difference, and the only reason why Kit had given Sheila a chance in the airport down in Austin when she barged back into his life.

There were some good memories here, but the problem was that they were drowned out by the intensity of the bad ones. He and his father had had so many fights in this house, in almost every room, and he still felt like the ghosts of past Vulpans stared at him from the walls disapprovingly for him marrying Jessie.

Well, they could all go to hell. Jessie was his *match*, the femme he was put on this earth to find and marry, and he didn't give a damn if they didn't approve of the fact that she wasn't a fox.

He returned to the bedroom after a last, lonely tour of this house that he hated yet was now his, to see Jessie sitting in the body dryer, on the ventilated seat as twelve air nozzles oscillated around here to dry her fur. She was so pregnant that the bottom of her belly was pressing against the top of her legs, hiding the best part of her he liked to view, and he had to agree that she could pop any day now. She was drying her hair, and the warm, loving look she gave him when he stepped in was like sunshine, basking him in its radiance. "Hey, my handsome fox, mind getting the comb for me?"

"Only if I get to use it," he said.

She smiled. "Of course. Where do you want to start, tail or feet?"

"The tail, of course. That way I can paw your butt and just pretend I'm clumsy."

She laughed. "You're anything but clumsy, you naughty boy," she declared as she stood up, a bit awkwardly, then turned and around and presented her tail to him, flicking it at him in a manner that was considered an insult among the youngers of Cincinnati.

"Aat, you're about to lose your valet," he chided as he went over to the sink and got her body comb, one of the few possessions they'd left out.

"Suuure," she teased as he came over, stepped into the blowing air, and sat down on the damp seat despite his jeans and started combing her tail out to its usual long-tailed, silky, gorgeous perfection. Jessie was *very* beautiful,

to more than just him, and her vanity was one of her little quirks. She wasn't obnoxious or arrogant about it, but she *was* beautiful, and she knew it, and she liked to stay pretty. She didn't stay pretty to attract males or make her friends jealous, she stayed pretty because she liked to feel good about herself, and the fact she was pretty was one of the things that she felt good about. Hers was a private vanity of self-image, not a preening one meant to impress others, which kept her on a strict exercise regimen so she kept her figure and caused her to always want to make sure she didn't look like a mess when she went out in public. She didn't have to be *beautiful* to go out, but she did want to be presentable. And her *presentable* made almost all male eyes turn her way and made girls annoyed, because it didn't take much for a girl as pretty as Jessie to be "presentable." When she wanted to be beautiful, males gawked and femmes glared...and she didn't seem to understand just what kind of effect she had. That was part of her alluring charm, a ravishing beauty who was both modest and innocent enough to not fully comprehend just how gorgeous she was.

And she loved a plain, scarred, scruffy-looking male like him. Life was funny sometimes.

She laughed when, instead of pulling the comb through the fur of her tail, he instead pressed it up against her furry backside and sawed it back and forth "It's looking better already," he hummed.

"Stop being silly and start combing, or I'll fire you!" she commanded, whacking him on the side of the head with her tail.

"Hey, hey, watch it!" he called. "You already have five appendages that end with sharp pointy things, I don't need to be attacked by the only one that doesn't!"

“Five? Five? Where do you get five?”

“Don’t you have teeth in your pretty little maw?” he asked, slapping her on the rump playfully before he bent to the task of combing out her tail.

“My head is *not* an appendage,” she said primly. “You make it sound like I have an arm coming out of my forehead.”

“And if you did, that would have claws too,” he noted, which made her giggle, then gasp.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, putting a paw on her swollen stomach. “Oh my, that was a sharp one!”

“Another pang?”

She nodded. “I hope that’s not an omen that we’ll be landing somewhere in Tennessee,” she laughed. “The last thing Laura needs is the stigma of being a hillbilly on top of being a Yankee!”

“She won’t be if she’s born in Texas,” Kit mused.

“Sure she will, because her father’s a Boston blue-blood,” she winked down at him. “That makes her half Yankee.”

“And half what? Alley cat?” He barked in surprise when her tail swatted him again, then he laughed.

“Watch yourself, buster,” she warned in a thoroughly insincere dangerous voice. “You know what happens to little foxes that wander into the wrong alleys.”

“I’m not worried, because I have this cute little bruise that’ll be there to save me.”

“Bruiser!” she said in outrage, then slapped him a third time with her tail, which nearly made him fall off the seat laughing. “I give you the best years of my life, I’m bearing *your* daughter, and I’m a bruiser? Comb, you ingrate!”

He laughed brightly at that declaration. “Yes, dear,” he said mockingly. She moved to swat him one more time, but he was ready for her. He opened his mouth and intercepted her tail, and when he bit down on it, just hard enough for it to register, she squeaked in surprise and put both paws on her shapely backside. “You rat!” she declared hotly. “Leggo!” She gasped when he put a little more pressure on her tail between his jaws, then she put her open paw in his face and extended her claws for his benefit. “Let go *right now*, or you’ll be playing with one of the pointy ends!”

He released her tail, then spat out a stray hair from her tail. “Bleh, next time wash all the soap out of your tail,” he complained, spitting the taste out of his mouth. “Cat hair and soap is not a good taste combination. Ick.”

She almost fell over laughing.

It was their last night at Stonebrook, and as they climbed into bed, after watching a DVD, it felt a little strange, but it also felt like the end of a long ordeal, almost like he’d been sent out of state by Rick to do a long job. But it was over now, and they’d be going to bed in their own bedroom tomorrow night, back in their own house, and a house that would take a day or two to get straightened up after they unpacked everything. Jessie snuggled in against him, and all he could feel was her large belly against his side, almost feeling Laura’s heart beating through her abdomen. He wrapped his arm around her, and she sighed and nestled her head against his shoulder and chest. “We’ll be home by this time tomorrow, handsome fox,” she said quietly. “I can’t wait to go home.”

“Me either. And thank you for wanting to leave this place.”

She giggled. “It *was* nice. Almost like a vacation. But we don’t belong here, love. We belong in Austin, in our house, with our friends, and where our daughter will be born. It’s *home*.”

“Amen, pretty kitty. Amen.”

Vil knew Kit very well, but in this instance, she didn’t know him well enough.

Both Kit and Jessie were awake at 5:30am, and they couldn’t go back to sleep, despite honest attempts to try. The excitement at the idea of going home was like a kid at Christmas, and they were much too anxious to go back to bed. So, it was with honest annoyance that they got up, ate breakfast, looked at the clock, and realized that they were stuck there until Vil arrived. If they left without giving her the chance to take them to the airport, they’d be hearing about it for the next ten years. Hell, Vil would fly down to Austin just so she could smack them. So, after eating, getting dressed, and packing their laptops and their carry-on bags holding their toiletries and other necessities they’d left out, they had nothing to do but wait.

They tried to make the best of the time. Kit checked the weather in Austin and on their projected flight path using a manor laptop to see how things would be, and Jessie distracted herself with knitting, since she’d kept out her knitting bag and was carrying it with her. Then Kit pulled out the camera and took some final pictures of both the manor and those inside it, including a very nice picture of the sun rising over the forest to the east, and a picture of the manor house bathed in the golden light of the dawn.

Nick and Sylvia woke up not long after them and also got ready, and there were a couple of suspiciously large and ominous-looking cases stacked by the door. After they were ready, they joined Jessie in the TV room to keep her company, but Nick spent most of that time on the phone, making sure that the drive to the airport would be safe; as a last act, some of the mercs on the manor were spread out along the route to make sure nobody tried anything, and Donny and Grizz were at the airport, already at Signature's hangar, keeping their eyes open for anything out of the ordinary. After Kit and Jessie left, the mercs would pack up their bags, get their final pay, and then move on to their next assignment. But, they'd all go with a bag of Jessie's homemade cookies and a paw-written note of thanks from Kit for their effort and their service.

Fortunately, Vil wasn't quite as late as he expected. Around 6:30, Vil and Kendall arrived, buzzing in through the gate since Oscar hadn't made it out there yet. Stanley went to go hurriedly wake up Muffy as Kit and Jessie went to the garage to greet them. However, when they got there, they found out that Vil and Kendall weren't alone. Stav and Marcus were helping them out of the limo, Will, Vil's head butler, was with them, and even more of a surprise, Abigail Brighton was helped out of the limo by Stav as they came through the door. "There you are, duckies," she said with a bright smile, folding Jessie into a hug before Vil could reach her. "Why, you're even more radiant now than at the wedding, my dear," she said to Jessie, kissing her on the cheek.

"It's nice to see you again, Misses Brighton," Jessie said, a bit modestly.

"Aat, aat, you call me Abby!" she declared.

“Be nice, mum, they’re not used to pushy femmes like--oh, nevermind,” he said, looking at Vil. Kit laughed as Vil elbowed him in the ribs.

“I just got in last night,” she said as she hugged Kit. “I’ll be in Austin in just a couple of days. We took possession of the house on Friday, and I’ll be down around Tuesday to oversee the furnishing and decorating.”

“So you’re really coming down?” Kit asked.

“Of course we are,” she said dismissively. “Winston will be down sometime late next week or the week after next, and he’s bringing the boys. We can’t miss the birth of our daughter-in-law’s first baby!”

“I have tea prepared, and can have breakfast made if you’re hungry,” Stanley offered.

“I think we have time for a spot of tea,” Abigail declared. “But not long! I get the feeling that our duckies are anxious to go home!”

“That’s the truth,” Kit chuckled as he hugged Vil.

Brief was a good word for it. As the staff loaded the last of their things in Vil’s limo, Luann and Bartholomew served them tea in the TV room near the garage. Vil and Kendall didn’t look entirely awake once they sat down and stopped moving, but Abigail was just as animated and funny as ever, peppering Kendall with jokes and sly observations that made it clear that Kendall inherited part of his sense of humor from his mother. Muffy joined them, looking very haggard, not long after they sat down for tea, dragging herself in and flopping down beside Kendall and yawning widely. “Mornin’,” she mumbled.

“GOOD MORNING!” Abigail all but screamed, which made Muffy flinch violently and most of the others laugh. “Out a bit late last night, were we?”

“You mean this morning,” she said weakly. “I got in around four, but I made sure to be back in time to see you off. I thought you’d be leaving at like five,” she chuckled, then winced.

“We would have if not for the fact that Vil would have called her plane back in midair if we left without her seeing us off,” Kit said.

“Damn right I would have,” Vil affirmed with a sharp nod. “My plane, my rules.”

“Delta?” Kit said to Jessie.

“United,” she answered with a slight smile. “They have better peanuts.”

“It seems your services are no longer required, Vil,” Kit told her grandly. “It was so nice of you to get up to see us off, but we’ll be on our way now.”

“I don’t think so,” she shot back with a smile. “Besides, why are we still sitting here? I thought you wanted to go home.”

“Can I finish this first?” Abigail asked, holding her tea up. “I do so love the tea you serve here, Stanley. You absolutely must arrange to send some of it to us.”

“It’s a secret proprietary tea blended specifically for the estate, madam,” Stanley told her with a bit of regret in his voice. “I’m afraid that giving away the recipe is quite impossible.”

“Who said I want the recipe? Just send me a box, you silly male,” she retorted.

“She’s family, I think that’s alright, Stan. Besides, I get the feeling she’ll make your life hell if you don’t,” Vil said with a sly smile at the older vixen.

“It’s the femme’s way. Males threaten and bluster, femmes nag,” she said shamelessly. “And our way gets much better results.”

“Playing on the inherent annoyance factor of the female,” Kendall said sagely.

“So says the most annoying male on earth,” Vil snorted.

“But you married me anyway,” he teased.

“I’m desperate for a baby, and you were *barely* adequate,” she sniffed, which all but paralyzed the room with laughter.

After Abigail finished her tea, they were indeed off. Nick and Sylvia helped pack their carry-ons in the limo as the entire staff lined up in the garage to say goodbye to Kit and Jessie. Clancy was up and about, and he joined them to ride with them to the airport, so he skipped standing there and hugging the pair as they more or less went down the line to say goodbye to each and every member of the staff, and there were many promises that they’d take care of themselves and keep in touch. Frannie and the cooks made a light lunch for them to eat on the plane, and a very large thermos of Stonebrook tea was put in the limo for them to enjoy. After they said goodbye to everyone, Stav and Marcus helped them into Vil’s largest of her three limos. She owned three, a small one she used for daily business, a larger, more luxurious one for receiving guests and business associates,

and this two-seater stretch limo she used for groups. This one, with its two large seats that faced each other with plenty of legroom between and a utility third seat between the driver's seat and the passenger area, was more than large enough for all the Vulpans, Abigail, Clancy, and Nick and Sylvia, who had to ride in the middle seat because there was no more room up front. Abigail made quick work of making Clancy feel comfortable and welcome among them, and she engaged him in stories of the Vulpan kids' youth as Kit looked out the window and saw Stonebrook sliding by, as they went around the manor house and down the hill towards the front gate.

He felt relieved to be leaving it behind, but there was a small part of him that felt a touch nostalgic. After all, he had been *born* in that house, in the very bedroom where he'd been staying since coming up here. It was not his home, but it did belong to him, a final legacy of the Vulpan family, the final payment for the way the family had treated him. It was a bit of ironic justice that Kit would be the one to end up with possession of Stonebrook, the one Vulpan who wanted the least to do with his family. And yet, Vil had found a way to get her claws in him when he rushed up here to be with her and to help her when the family went after her, which said much about his sister's personality. Even in the midst of all that, she found a way to rope him into taking a seat on the board, and had acted in a very sneaky manner by making him the owner of the manor. She'd taken what he did in good faith and used it to alter the deed, and there was nothing he could do about it. Like it or not, and certainly it wasn't a matter of like to most of the elders and many of his cousins, Kit Vulpan, the renegade outcast of the Vulpan family, now owned the bastion of family power, and in many ways, the very icon of the Vulpan family. Stonebrook was the seat of the family power, so much so that Zach had moved in there to try to establish his dominance over Vil...and now *no* Vulpan would be living within it. It wouldn't be forgotten

or unused, that was for certain, for Vil would find ways to use the manor, but the staff would have something of a reprieve in the fact that there would be no Vulpans to serve for a while.

“Regrets?” Vil asked him quietly as he watched the manor go by.

“Only that it took this long to leave,” he answered immediately. “I’ve told you over and over, Vil, Austin is my home. It’s where I want to be, and it’s where we’re happy. I don’t belong in Boston, sis.”

“Well, excuse me if I disagree with you,” she said simply. “No matter where you want to be, brother, you are a Vulpan, and that means that Boston will always be your home. I will absolutely guarantee you that eventually, maybe twenty or thirty years from now, you will come home.”

“That’s a bet you’ll lose, Vil,” he said with a slight smile.

“We’ll find out, won’t we?” she said with a quirky smile.

Clancy entertained Abigail, and mortified Kit and Vil, with stories of their adventurous youths for the entirety of the trip to Logan. Donny and Grizz were standing by Vil’s private jet as they pulled up to the hangar at Signature Services, and the big bear opened the door when the limo came to a halt. Avery was standing in the hatch, and the jet looked ready to leave at any time. Ground workers rushed out to load the luggage into the jet, and Kit and Jessie hugged and kissed everyone goodbye. “You know, I’m surprised Brian isn’t here,” Kit chuckled as he hugged Vil and kissed her on the muzzle.

“He wanted to be, but I told him that you wouldn’t have appreciated it very much. So, he sends his regards.”

“I’m glad you thought to mention that,” he nodded as he accepted a hug from Abigail.

“I’ll be down early next week, ducky,” she told him, kissing him noisily on the cheek. “Tuesday, unless plans change.”

“Need me to pick you up, Abby?”

“I’d love it, that way I can show you where the house is,” she told him as she held her arms out wide to Jessie. “Don’t you dare pop before I get down there!” she warned as she kissed Jessie on the cheek.

She laughed. “I’ll try not to, but I don’t think I have much say in the matter, Abby,” she warned.

“Alright then, Laura, no early appearances!” the matronly vixen demanded sternly, wagging a pointed finger at Jessie’s stomach. “Or it’s no birthday presents for you for five years!”

“Such a mean mum,” Kendall teased as Clancy shook Kit’s paw, but then chuckled when Kit dragged him into an embrace.

“Be good, Clancy,” Kit told him. “And remember that we always have a spare bedroom reserved for you any time you want to come down and see us.”

“I’ll be down when Laura is born, my boy,” he promised. “And I’ll always remember that you keep a room ready for me.”

“Be good, pest,” Kit told Muffy as he hugged her. “Don’t drive them too crazy down at Yale.”

“As long as they don’t bore me in class, I won’t,” she laughed in reply, then winced. “I’m going right back to bed when we get back to

Stonebrook.”

“Who said you can go back?” he grinned at her. “You might try to steal the silverware.”

She laughed and slapped him on the arm. “Say hi to Sheila and Ally for me.”

“I will, I promise,” he assured her.

After all the goodbyes were said, Nick and Sylvia preceded them up the stairs and into the jet, carrying their carry-ons and Jessie’s knitting bag. Vil and the others stood back from the jet and waved as it started moving, and Kit and Jessie waved back through the window as Avery taxied them out and towards the runway. “Well, pretty kitty, we’re on our way home,” he said with an explosive sigh.

“And I can’t wait to get there,” she said, leaning her head on his shoulder. “I hope everything in the house is alright.”

“It should be, I doubt Lupe stole too much out of the house he had to put back,” Kit laughed. “Though I’ll bet money the big TV we sent down mysteriously found its way into his townhouse for a couple of days.”

“I wouldn’t take that bet,” Jessie giggled. “Did you get your apartment all fixed up and ready, Sylvia?”

“*Ja*, Jessie,” she nodded. “It has enough furniture for me to function until I can get it furnished. Barnett bought a cheap bed and some kitchenware and a chair, and that’s all I need until I can furnish it and have some of my things sent from Germany.”

“Well, if it’s not good enough, you can always stay in our spare bedroom until it’s ready.”

“*Dunca*, but I’ll be fine.”

“Well you can stay in my apartment, Sylvie,” Nick grinned. “My bed’s big enough for both of us.”

“No bed is big enough for your ego, wolf,” she told him darkly, which made Jessie giggle.

“I don’t think he’d fit on the bed we bought for the spare bedroom,” she agreed, smiling at Sylvia.

“It’s good they have their own apartments. We would have had to keep Nick in a closet or something until we needed him,” Kit said, giving Nick a sly smile.

“Just try and put me in a closet, mate,” he replied. “I don’t think you can make me fit.”

“I could after I broke your back and folded you in half,” Sylvia noted, which made Jessie laugh.

“Sylvie, don’t you love me anymore?”

“Did I ever to begin with?”

Chapter 41

It was an easy and enjoyable flight home.

Between the TV and their carry-ons they had plenty to do, but they ended up spending most of the flight playing bridge. Both Nick and Sylvia knew the game, and any self-respecting rich kid knew how to play, so all they had to do was teach Jessie, who had never played before. She did know how to play spades, however, so she was able to quickly grasp the fundamentals of the game. Like any beginner, however, she had absolutely no idea how to bid properly, but that was fine. They were playing to have fun, and even though Kit and Jessie lost more games than they won as Jessie learned the art of bidding, they had a good time and it made the time fly by while they were in the air.

It was a smooth flight, with nothing but sunny skies and calm air all the way home. Kit called Rick when they were about 90 minutes out to warn him that they were coming, when they were somewhere over Tennessee, and Jessie dramatically put her paws on her belly when he told her where they were and cried “Land the plane, land the plane, our daughter wants to be a hillbilly!” Nick and Sylvia had no idea what she was talking about, which made it that much funnier.

At 10:43 on a sunny, warm mid-September morning, their jet touched down at Bergstrom Airport, returning them home. Kit was almost pacing in the jet as it taxied up to Signature’s hangar at Bergstrom, but he smiled broadly when he looked out the window and saw Rick and Martha standing

outside the hangar beside Barnett and Krichek, and they waved animatedly as Vil's jet pulled into the temporary parking place. "Alright, we're here, Mister Vulpan," Avery's voice called over the intercom. "We'll disembark you in just a moment. Welcome home!"

"Thank goodness!" Jessie said with a bright smile, waving to those outside through the window. "We're *home*, handsome fox!"

"I won't feel like it til we're back in our apartment," he chuckled as the antlered co-pilot came out and began to open the hatch.

Kit all but ran down the stairs as soon as they were extended, and he laughed and embraced Martha as they came towards the jet. "I'm so glad to see you!" he said excitedly, then he reached out and took Rick's paw without letting Martha go. "God, I'm so glad to be home!"

"We've missed ya, friend," Rick said with a gentle smile. "The office just didn't seem the same without you there raggin' on everyone."

"I'm just glad you didn't fire me," Kit laughed as Jessie waddled down the stairs. Martha rushed over and embraced her, and put a paw on her huge belly with a bright smile.

"How can I fire you, you're a partner," Rick noted, then he laughed. "And you certainly kept your work up even in Boston! I think I should send you up there more often, you sent back way more material than you do down here."

"Boredom can do that," he grunted as Nick and Sylvia came down, carrying the carry-ons as the ground crew retrieved a couple of suitcases from the cargo hold. "Rick, Martha, I think you remember Sylvia Wagner.

Vil hired her to help Nick down here in Austin, just like Barnett and Krichek.”

“It’s good to meet you again,” Sylvia said with a smile, offering her paw to Rick. “*Herr* Kit and *Fraulein* Jessie think the world of you.”

“Well, it’s nice to see you, Sylvia,” Rick said for both of them. “We never really did have much of a chance to get to know you. I’m glad we’ll get the chance.”

“I’m surprised, though. You certainly don’t look like a bodyguard,” Martha noted. “I thought you were just one of Jessie’s friends from Boston until they corrected me.”

“That is the idea, *Fraulein* Martha,” Sylvia said with a wolfish smile.

“Don’t let the fact that she’s short and wimpy looking fool ya, Martha, our little Sylvie’s one of the best,” Nick said, grinning at the German pinscher. “Even I’m afraid of her.”

“You have reason to be,” Sylvia growled, giving him a cool look that caused both Barnett and Krichek to erupt into snorts and chuckles.

“I will get the bags,” Krichek offered.

Kit and Jessie didn’t waste any time at the airport. Once Krichek had the bags separated and loaded into the cars, they piled in and headed home, Rick and Martha riding with them, with the four guards in Nick’s Expedition, which had been sitting idle in the parking lot since they left. Kit made sure to pass by Avia to check on his plane, and much to his relief, it was sitting at its tie-down, and looked just fine. Alice looked to even had it washed while they were gone.

It was a fast and easy drive home, along roads that were familiar and, in a way, inviting. The mesquite trees and golden grasses of the low hills of south Austin had never looked so beautiful, traffic was light on U.S. 71 and then Congress Avenue, then 14th, then Guadalupe, as they turned onto the road that led to their house, slightly hilly, straight in that section, and with traffic lights on every other corner. Even the lights cooperated with them, staying green as they went through, until they pulled up to the gate of Westwood. Jessie made a flourish out of pressing the remote that opened the gate, which made Kit laugh, and they drove through and into their driveway. Jessie's car was sitting in the driveway, and the van was just behind it. Kit parked behind the van, and then a veritable pack of furs boiled out of Lupe's front door. Lupe, Dan and Mickey from the complex were there, Sheila and Allison, Sandy, Charlotte, the other Jessie, Danielle, and Lisa from the sorority, and Sam and Kevin filed out quickly, and Kit laughed as the gang from work rushed out behind them. The whole gang was here to greet them!

They never really even made it to the front door. They were swarmed as soon as they got out of the truck, and pawshakes and hugs and kisses were exchanged for long minutes on the front lawn as Kit and Jessie felt a little overwhelmed at the enthusiastic greeting they received from their friends and family. "Brah, we got brats and burgers and chicken and steaks ready to grill!" Lupe called as he shook Kit's paw. "We're welcomin' you home in style!"

"Didn't you think we'd be tired after being away so long?" Jessie asked with a laugh. "My house is a mess! I need to get it sorted out!"

"We thought you'd love to see your *real* family again after months," Sheila retorted as she kissed Jessie on the cheek. "And you have until

Friday to get things straightened out,” she added.

“Dude, where are the pictures?” Dan demanded. “I know you got a bunch from Boston!”

“Oh good lord, Dan!” Kit barked, which caused an eruption of laughter.

“Charlotte, start the grill! Mickey, roll the keg over from the center!” Lupe called. “It’s party time!”

“Can we get our luggage in the house first?” Kit said archly.

“No!” came a unified shout of reply, which nearly made Kit fall over laughing.

Despite their declaration, they did manage to get into their front door as the gang went around to the back deck to start setting up for the welcome home party. The large stack of boxes and crates in the living room was definitely unusual, but everything else was exactly as they left it, the house was nice and cool thanks to Lupe getting the AC on, and Kit had never in his life felt so relieved to be home in his life. He and Jessie padded into the kitchen and found everything just as they left it, Jessie nodded when she opened the refrigerator and found no congealed messes, just sparkling clean yet empty shelves, and it was a sight for sore eyes to see the big restaurant-style oven, the island, and the hanging rack over it Kit had bought Jessie for her birthday. That started an impromptu tour of the house, as he and Jessie went into every room both to make sure everything was alright, but also to see it, feel it, just *be there* so they could really feel like they were home again. They went through every room in the house, from the basement to the attic, but they spent a long time in their master bedroom, as Jessie checked every drawer to make sure everything was as she left it, and she

surreptitiously checked the “naughty” DVD in the closet to make sure it had been undiscovered, which could only make Kit laugh as she peeked into the box, then blew out a sigh and put it back on the shelf in the closet. “I had to make sure!” she said petulantly, which made him laugh even harder.

They met Sylvia in the living room as they came back downstairs, as she and Nick put their bags on the couch. “Your pictures don’t do your house justice,” she told them. “This is a *very* nice townhouse.”

“Now you see why we love it so much,” Jessie told her with a nod. “This is our *dream* house, Sylvia. Lupe may have built it, but we decorated it, and we tweaked its design until it was *just right*.”

“And as soon as Laura can crawl, she will destroy it,” Nick said, which made Jessie laugh.

After dropping off their bags, they enjoyed a gorgeous Texas late morning and early afternoon grilling on the large patio and barbecue pit that stretched behind their and Lupe’s townhouses, taking up much of what would have been a grassy yard. Mickey rolled the refrigerated keg tap dispenser over from the community center, Charlotte, Sam, and Danielle took command of the grill, and they had a wonderful couple of hours mingling with friends and family not seen since Vil’s wedding and even then not nearly long enough, getting the chance to catch up. Sandy had been home for the summer, so she, Sam, and Jessie spent nearly an hour sitting at one of the erected picnic tables, gossiping and giggling like schoolgirls as Sandy told them all about her summer...not that they didn’t already know, since Sandy called Jessie at least every other day. When she wasn’t doing that, Jessie was laughing and talking about the impending birth, often putting her paw on her large belly and bemoaning the fact that now that they were home, she wouldn’t mind going into labor *right now*. Kit made

the rounds through the complex gang and the work crew and Sheila and Allison, catching up on the news and feeling just fine, being back where he belonged, and among friends and family for whom he cared deeply. This was his home, this was where he belonged, in the townhouse with his wife, with Lupe nextdoor and Sheila, Dan, Mickey and Kevin just down the way, and knowing that when he went to work on Monday, Lilly, Barry, Jeffrey, Marty, Mike, Janet, Pat, Savid, Rick, Elly, Denise, and the new interns would all be there, working hard and having fun at the same time. Where Martha might come to call at any time carrying a covered dish, or the sorority girls might crash their townhouse looking for a hot meal and a little conversation.

This was *home*, and nothing could compare to it. Nothing.

Though the party was planned, it also wasn't meant to last all day. Everyone *was* aware of the fact that Kit and Jessie had just gotten home after months away, and they knew that they would probably like to have most of the afternoon to unwind, decompress, and start settling back into their familiar and comfortable surroundings. But, the guys did do some little things for them. Dan and Lupe vanished for a little while, and when they returned, they were loaded down with IGB bags carrying all the staples Kit and Jessie would need so they wouldn't go hungry. Lupe knew what brands they bought and what they usually kept in their pantry and refrigerator, since he raided them so often, so he brought back more than enough for them to feel like they wouldn't have to go out to eat until they hit the store themselves. Martha was one step ahead of him, though, for she had cooked them up a full dinner, all covered and needing only to be heated, her famous country fried steak, mashed potatoes, green beans, and spinach. The party had started around 11:00am, but it was most definitely over by 2:00pm, as

Lupe stood up on a table and called for them to start cleaning up. “Alright, we done held them up enough!” he barked. “Let’s clean up so Kit and Jessie can settle in!”

The whole gang helped clean up the patio, and then they started drifting home...at least mostly. Sam and Kevin lingered after most of the others left, as did Sheila and Allison. “I think they have news for us,” Kit laughed as he helped Lupe cover the now cool grill.

“More or less, yeah,” Sam laughed. “I’m moving in.”

“Well, we have two spare bedrooms, but Hannah’s going to be using one of them,” Kit said, which made Kevin laugh.

“No, I’m moving into the complex with Kevin. Together!” she told him, a bit tartly. “I don’t have much, so I’ll be moved in by tonight.”

“She made sure to wait until I had the townhouse fully furnished and we set a date,” Kevin teased, which made Sam laugh. “She wanted that concrete commitment before moving in.”

“And the sorority loses another one to marriage,” Jessie laughed. “Congratulations! When?”

“October tenth.”

“Ten-ten should be easy for him to remember when it’s anniversary time,” Sam said, which made Jessie giggle. “We already have the church reserved. Southside Baptist, down on seventy-one.”

“Yeah, I know where that is,” Kit nodded. “What are you doing for a honeymoon?”

“A weekend in New Orleans,” Kevin laughed. “Your cousin Terry offered to get us a nice hotel room. But, with my work and Sam’s school, we just can’t take any more time. We *do* intend on taking a trip during Thanksgiving,” he said strongly. “We’re going skiing in Colorado.”

“I’ve never been skiing before, I’d love to try it,” Sam said.

“Skiing is fun, I’m going to take Jessie this winter,” Kit nodded. “When she doesn’t have that little problem there.”

“This is not a *little* problem,” Jessie said primly, cupping her pregnant belly meaningfully.

“Vil owns a nice cabin in Aspen, I’m going to see if she’ll let us borrow it,” Kit said. “So, what earth-shattering news are you just waiting to tell us, Sheila?”

She laughed lightly. “Not much, just that we decided on our plane,” she said. “I put in the order for it on Friday, and they promised to have it ready by October first.”

“Nice, what did you buy?”

“A Cessna four hundred,” she grinned. “Me and Ally are gonna share it.”

“Actually, Sheila’s going to pay for most of it, and I’m going to pay her back in installments,” Allison corrected. “I have some money of my own, but not enough to pay for half of plane that costs three quarters of a million dollars.”

“Hey, that’s what friends are for,” she said simply, pushing lightly on Allison’s shoulder. “You have a damn good reason to use it, anyway.”

“Yes,” she said with a glorious smile. “Terry offered to buy me my own plane, then pay my half of this plane, but I told him no. I don’t want your family to have a single reason at all to think I’m after him for his money. But, he did rent a parking place for the plane at Lakefront in New Orleans so I have a place to park it when I go see him.”

“So, I’ll have a plane I can take up for joyrides or down to South Padre Island when I feel like going to the beach, and you’ll have a quick way to go see Terry whenever you have the time. That’s win-win.”

“As long as you don’t fight over it,” Kit chuckled.

“Well, after we’re both trained on it by Cessna, I can always borrow yours if Ally has ours,” Sheila grinned. “After all, I’ll be Cessna trained. Won’t you trust me then?” she asked with an outrageous smile.

“So *that’s* why you picked a four hundred,” Jessie declared, which made Kit laugh and Sheila wink.

“Nobody’s going to be doing anything in that plane til I have it overhauled,” Kit declared. “Monday. After months sitting out on the tarmac, I want it thoroughly inspected before we go anywhere in it.”

“What, you don’t trust Cessna?” Sheila asked.

“I trust Cessna. I just don’t take chances,” he answered. “Two months exposed to the elements can seep into the plane, Sheila. I want the mechanics up at Georgetown to check it out and make sure sitting for so long didn’t cause any damage.”

“Oh, well, nothing wrong with being careful,” she nodded.

“When my life depends on it running properly, nothing at all,” he answered seriously. “When do you go for your training?”

“We’re not *going* anywhere,” Sheila chuckled. “Cessna is sending two instructors down here tomorrow, and we’ll do our training every afternoon for three weeks starting Monday. We traded the mechanic training with a second pilot training. I think they’re the same instructors that taught you two. David and Luke. And some supervisor is also coming down with them, Amanda someone, the one that set up our training. She said she has a bunch of customers down here she wants to visit, and she’s just gonna come down with the instructors.”

Kit laughed. “That’s them,” he affirmed. “It sounds suspiciously like they’re trying to be nearby when you deliver, pretty kitty.”

“I’ll have to cook them something,” she said with a smile.

After they said goodbye, Kit and Jessie bent to the task of getting the house back to normal...and that was going to be a daunting task. The living room was filled with boxes they had to go through, much of it clothing and things from the house they had sent up from Austin, but some things that they’d brought home with them from Boston. They rested a little bit, then tackled the large stack of boxes in a methodical manner. Jessie would unpack them, organize the contents, and Kit would put them away. The dumbwaiter got quite a workout that evening as boxes of clothes and other items were moved upstairs, to the basement, or to the attic as necessary, either put back where it belonged, placed in storage, or replacing something in the house that would be dealt with later. Kit did install the TV and audio system that evening, replacing the TV and stereo in the living room. That TV would go up to their bedroom, and the TV up there would go to the sorority. The stereo they gave to Lupe for the community center, something

he intended to put on a cart so it could be wheeled into the community rooms if someone wanted music. The weapons that they'd brought home from Boston were secured away in the gun cabinet, and Kit made sure to put the MP7 down in the storage cabinet section under the glass doors, where Jessie put the K80, deciding to just leave it in its case rather than assemble it and put it in the rack. Fortunately, the model of gun cabinet came with both the large storage area under the glass display, and also a pistol drawer, where they placed the Glock and Beretta, their resting places when not carried about. And all of it, ever single door, drawer, and cabinet, locked, which Kit was sure to do, and he placed the key in Jessie's jewelry box where it was easily accessible to both of them yet not easy to find by someone who didn't know where to look.

They rested a while to eat Martha's dinner and finally get around to calling Jessie's parents and Clancy and the staff to tell them that they were indeed home, they were very busy, and they were alright, then they got back to work. They had focused first on the clothes and the things they needed in their everyday lives, and they had finally gotten it all back where it belonged. The clothes were back in the closets and drawers, the bathroom was restocked with their toiletries and back in working order, and the tools and items they'd taken to Boston with them were back where they belonged. Kit also went through the laptops to transfer everything they'd done in Boston to the desktop, things like their articles, comic scripts, research, everything they'd done in Boston. All the pictures and video they'd taken were also put on the desktop, some of it zipped up and sent to the office, the rest copied onto a DVD they'd take into the office on Monday. After that, they got down to the business of deciding what to keep and what to replace with the things that they'd brought from Boston, which was what really took up most of their time. They'd not realized just how

much they'd brought home from Boston until they had to sort through it and find places to put it all. Jessie's shower gifts, the DVD collection, odds and ends they'd collected while up there, it all had to go somewhere, and it took until nearly 11:00 that night to figure it all out.

After they were all done, when the boxes had been broken down and set on the front porch for them to put in the community center for whenever someone needed a box, they flopped down on the couch in front of their new home theatre system--though absolutely nothing compared to the one in Stonebrook--and gave a great sigh of relief.

"Well, we're all done, handsome fox," Jessie said wearily. "I think my back doesn't like doing housework when I'm carrying so much weight down here," she said with a chuckle, patting her belly.

"That's why I'm doing the housework until you and Laura are two different furs," he told her.

"I can still do my share of the chores!" she protested.

"You can, but you won't."

"Don't go and get all protective on me now!"

"Now is the perfect time," he said calmly. "Doctor Mac told you to slow down, and you're gonna slow down. That reminds me, we didn't call her and tell her the Tuesday appointment was a go."

"We can do it tomorrow," she said, sliding up to his side, tucking her legs under her sedately, and snuggling with him. "I can't believe we're home, handsome fox. Finally. It feels so wonderful."

“Tell me about it. I miss Stan and the others a little bit, but nothing compares to this. Nothing compares to home. I’m just so glad that Laura will be born here, and not in Stonebrook. This is where she belongs.”

“A true child of Texas,” Jessie giggled. “Even though her parents sound nothing like a Texan.”

“I dunno, you’re starting to get that Texas drawl a little bit,” he told her, putting his arm around her. “Much better than that cockneyed Ohio accent.”

“I don’t think you, mister *bah in the cah*, has any right to make fun of anyone else’s accent,” she declared.

“Hey, hey, hey, leave the true English alone!”

“That’s not true English. I should know, I’m going to be an English teacher,” she said primly. “You, sir, would get an F in my class!”

“Well, I think I’m just going to have to bribe the teacher in ways that would get you arrested for statutory rape if I were a real student,” he said, nuzzling her as she giggled.

“There won’t be any bribing and sweet-talking this teacher, mister,” she declared. “Just wait til I tell Vil you failed English!”

“She’ll laugh in your face, because everyone knows that us Boston furs were here first, so we make the rules about what’s proper English,” he teased.

“The Vulpans weren’t on the Mayflower,” she retorted.

“Nope. The Vulpans came to America in sixteen forty-two as part of the non-Puritan first wave of colonists, settled in Boston, and have been

there ever since. Of course, they own Boston now, but that's beside the point."

Jessie laughed. "Well, I've never been more glad to take a city back and exchange it for a better one."

Kit snorted, then burst out laughing at the idea of it. "We should have got a refund," he grinned down at her.

"And do what? Go to McDonald's? We got the better deal."

"I can't argue with that," he chuckled as he kissed her on her temple. "About ready for bed, love?"

"In a bit. I just want to sit here and cuddle for a while."

"I think I can manage that," he said, snuggling deeper into the couch with her and just being with her. No TV, no radio, just the ticking of the grandfather clock and the wonderful sound of her breathing, and the soft warmth of her silky crème fur.

Jessie thought Kit was joking about taking over the house, but she found out very quickly that he was dead serious.

It actually annoyed her by dinnertime, because after a relatively easy day of hanging out around the house and going over to the community center for poker day, she came back and waddled into the kitchen, reaching for her apron to get back to the warm and comfortable surroundings of her own kitchen, her private domain, and found an invader already wearing the very apron for which she had been reaching. "I can cook!" she protested indignantly.

“Mmm-hmm,” he said as he shook some salt into a pot of boiling water. “Why don’t you get the big saucepan then?”

She moved to go to the island, where many of the more-used pans hung just over her head and within easy reach. Jessie hung that saucepan directly across from the stove, as it was one of the ones she most often used, so she kept it within convenient reach. It should have been hanging just over her head, within reach, but it was gone. They were all gone, mysteriously, and she realized that Kit had put them all in the lower cabinets, where she would have to bend over to get them...and bending over was the one thing she couldn’t really do very well.

“Cheater!” she accused.

“Point. Game. Match,” he said calmly. “Go knit or something.”

“Revenge is a dish best served cold!”

“So is beer,” he said, flicking his tail at her. “Now shoo.”

She took great offense at the word *shoo*, so much so that she grabbed the hose from the sink, pulled it out, and called sweetly, “oh Kit, dear.” When he looked over at her, she let him have it. He spluttered when he got a face full of water, then retreated quickly away from her, getting out of range of her weapon. He gave her a shocked look, then laughed despite himself as she calmly replaced the hose, turned, and waddled away. “Since you’re doing all the housework, you can clean that up, too,” she said over her shoulder as she marched victoriously from the kitchen.

Jessie was utterly unrepentant at soaking her husband, and she ate dinner with a nearly disapproving air, as if trying to find something wrong with his cooking to harp over. But she had taught him well, perhaps too well

for her own taste, and he provided a meal that was both nutritious and tasty. However, she couldn't be angry with him forever, especially not when he was just doing what he was doing because he loved her, and she offered something of a truce that night by sitting with him on the couch, sidling up to him, and putting her head on his shoulder. He chuckled and put his arm around her. "Going into work tomorrow?"

She nodded. "I have a lot to do," she answered. "Talking with Jeffrey over the phone only goes so far, since he can't show me the boards."

"I know the feeling," he grunted in reply. "Having to describe faces and positions was getting old, especially since he won't email unfinished strips. He doesn't want them getting out until they're officially released. How about that article?"

"It's almost done. It'll be nice to be there when Rick edits it rather than trade drafts back and forth."

"Welcome home, pretty kitty," he chuckled. "I almost can't wait to go to the office tomorrow. It'll feel like my first day at work all over again. I feel so out of the loop."

"That'll last about an hour," she assured him.

"It won't be all work, though. I need to call up to Georgetown and see if they can take our plane for an inspection. And I'll call Alice and see if they'll pull it into the hangar and have Tom go over it to make sure it's safe to fly up there. I'm sure they'll do it for us."

"They will," she agreed. "Are you going to keep working on that house idea?"

He nodded. "Now that I'm home, it'll be much easier to research it thoroughly and see how feasible it is."

"I think it's a good idea," she told him, "and I also think it's a very good thing to do, helping furs who are in trouble through no fault of their own. I know I'd be devastated if someone showed up and evicted us from our house."

"Isn't that the truth," he agreed, nuzzling her lovingly. "Just think, pretty kitty, we're *home*. And we're all alone. That means you can wander the house naked again."

She laughed. "Only in the safe upstairs areas," she corrected. "Besides, you can't really see anything, I have too much baby in the way."

"Well, I can always go by memory," he said dryly, which made her glare shortly at him, then laugh ruefully. "Besides, if Doctor Mac's prediction is spot on, you only have thirteen more days of not seeing your feet, then you're mine again. All mine," he said, brazenly patting the outside of her breast.

"I've always been yours," she said lightly. "I wonder how long it will be until we can make love again."

"I'm patient, pretty kitty. Until you're totally recovered, I'll be waiting for you."

"You'd better."

"Well, I could always go to the Top Hat," he mused, then gasped and laughed when she slapped him on the stomach, just hard enough to sting.

"And if you do, you don't want to come home," she told him.

“You’d throw me out?” he gasped.

“In a heartbeat,” she answered calmly.

“Meanie.”

“But you love mean girls, or you wouldn’t have married one,” she countered.

He laughed. “Point.”

“I just hope it won’t take long.”

“Oho, is my pretty kitty feeling a little frisky?”

“I just don’t want Laura to be an only child for long,” she answered.

“That’s a good reason,” he chuckled, snuggling a little more with her.

Jessie was right in that it took him only about 30 minutes to get back into the swing of things at work.

They were met with donuts and tea when they arrived at 9:00 on Monday morning, as they chatted and got back to a sense of normalcy with the gang, but then they went to their offices and got back to work. Neither of them had stopped working when they went to Boston, but being back in the office made it feel like they were truly back at work. Instead of passing articles, research, and scripts back and forth via email and direct transfers to the servers, having to pick up a phone to confer with the others over research, article subjects, scripts, or edits, they instead just walked to an office. Kit had a long meeting with Rick first thing, as they went over the books and the projects and the plans for the future in detail, since Kit had over two months to catch up on as far as work went. They went over the

financial health of the magazine in great detail, which was surprisingly good despite the downturn in the economy and the more serious outlook among print media. The expansion Kit had engineered when becoming a partner had more than paid off, and circulation was higher than ever. Despite print being a dwindling media in the age when furs could surf the web on cell phones, *Lone Star* managed to keep high interest among a large block of age groups, from high schoolers all the way up to baby boomers. A mixture of highly interesting weekly features, *School Daze* and *Missy and Cutler*, and excellent writing and investigative reporting kept readers coming back week after week. Barry and Marty had made names for themselves in the realm of investigative reporting, and Lilly had truly come into her own as a staff writer. Even Mike, whose writing was restricted mainly to technical issues, had a very successful article.

Kit wasn't surprised, however, to find that Jessie's articles were among the most popular, especially with femmes. Jessie may be an English major, but she had a style of writing that was both highly understandable and extremely communicative, and her background as an English major gave her a vast vocabulary with which to work. She could make someone *feel* something in her writing, able to convey mood and emotion with amazing clarity, and she had the rare gift of being able to describe an object, scene, or setting in minimal words yet convey the *texture* of the object or place in a way that made one feel like they were actually there. Jessie wrote her comic strip and her weekly feature, which was Austin, life, and just general things that mattered to femmes, written by a femme. Her pregnancy and her preparations for motherhood had been the focus of many of her articles over the last few months, and there were also quite a few articles about Boston, Stonebrook, and the staff as well. Kit wasn't the only one who had

described their adventure in Boston through writing. Kit had told his side of it, and Jessie had told hers.

Outside of the writing, things were still good for the magazine. They raked in more royalties than ever as they sold rights to their articles and features to other publications, and the website was making a great deal more money than even Rick and Kit had expected through ad revenues and a few pay features. *School Daze* was now officially a nationally syndicated comic, and *Missy and Cutler* had even begun to spread into Sunday comic sections throughout Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana, as papers who ran *School Daze* found an audience for the spin-off. They had decided to lower their royalties a little more for the strip, and the result was they got even more papers to sign on...but they would go no lower. An average strip earned \$10 in royalties, but they were standing pat at \$25 per week. Despite the downturn in newspaper profits and circulation, papers couldn't deny that the strip was worth \$25, because in some cities, like Dallas, furs bought the paper *just* to read *School Daze*. In addition to the royalty revenue, Jeffrey had designed several tee shirts and coffee mugs, and from the looks of the pre-orders that had started rolling in on Friday night, the idea of merchandising the comic was a *huge* success. Jeffrey had offered four different tee shirts and three coffee mugs, and in just one weekend they had *thousands* of orders filed for them. They had contracted with a local silkscreener for the shirts, and a glass and crockery company down in San Antonio had agreed to do the coffee mugs for them. And were those contractors happy they took the job, since they had 4,384 orders for tee shirts and 1,093 orders for coffee mugs, more than making it economically feasible to produce them. Rick had wisely decided to order 1,000 of each tee shirt and 1,000 of each style of mug after seeing the initial orders, confident they'd sell the stock. It was more than worth the \$17,044.80 it

cost them for the shirts and the \$4,674.60 for the coffee mugs. That seemed like a big chunk of money, but given that they were buying the tee shirts at \$4.02 per unit and coffee mugs at \$1.47 per unit, and selling them at \$10 per unit and \$4 per unit, that was just pure profit after they deducted shipping costs out of it. They got that good of a deal on them because, like in most things, buying in quantity resulted in a lower cost per unit, which would have been \$6.28 per unit if they'd ordered 200 or less. By ordering 1,000, they'd pushed the cost per unit way down, and that widened the profit margin provided they could sell out. Processing the orders and shipping out the tee shirts was going to be a time-consuming process, so much so that Rick decided to hire a temporary office worker whose sole function would be to fill the orders. Rick had space for the boxes and boxes of shirts and mugs on his ranch, and they had a large storage room in the office where they could keep a supply of them, so the temp's job would be to mail out those tee shirts and mugs to their customers. The first shipment of 200 of each shirt and 100 of each mug was due to arrive on Thursday, and one of the things Rick had to do was clean out his barn and get it ready to handle a four large boxes of tee shirts and coffee mugs.

Once Kit was confident their capital and cash flow were stable, they discussed their future plans, which expanded the meeting to include Savid, Barry, and Mike, who were the heads of the other major departments. Now that Kit was back, Rick intended to expand the staff again, expand circulation, increase the pages of the magazine, and offer a few more features both in the magazine and on the website. Rick intended to hire another researching assistant, two more writers, one more artist, one more computer fur, and definitely another office worker to take some of the strain off Denise and the interns. Each of those hires would cut into their profit margin, the expansion of the magazine to 52 pages would cost more to

produce, but a business that did not aggressively expand faced the possibility of failure. *Lone Star* was hot, and they had to strike right now, while the magazine was popular. They had to keep their readers and attract new ones, and that was done by offering more and more for them to read and experience if they bought an issue and still maintain their high quality of writing and features. If they didn't take advantage of the magazine's success and popularity, they'd be shooting themselves in the foot in the long run.

They didn't finish the meeting until lunchtime, so the entire gang went down to the Olive Garden and enjoyed a nice lunch, and got back to the office a little later than a standard lunch break. After lunch, though, Kit settled back into his office and his routine, at least after setting up a maintenance appointment for the plane and having Alice pull it into the hangar to have the mechanics make sure it was safe to take to Georgetown. She did that for him gladly, for it would take any one of the mechanics only five minutes to inspect the plane and ensure it was safe for the ten minute flight up to Georgetown. By 2:30pm, Kit felt almost as if he'd never left Austin, for he was fully back into the routine of the office, and Pat was again spending almost as much time standing by his desk looking over his shoulder as they discussed a project as he did at his own desk out in the big room.

"I can't tell ya how nice it is to talk to you face to face again," Pat laughed as they discussed the requirements for a new project Lilly had put in their inbox, which dealt with a change to Austin's bar zoning laws that would make it harder for new bars to open. She wanted to do a piece investigating the impact of that law on the college social scene, and for that

she needed the researchers to dig up some facts for her, mainly on how similar laws had affected other cities with similar college populations.

“A lot nicer than using the phone or Skype, isn’t it?” Kit laughed.

“I’m surprised Jessie’s been here all day,” he noted when they saw her through his open office door, heading for Jeffrey’s office across the way. The two of them had been closeted up most of the time Kit and Rick were in their meeting, and she’d obviously not gotten everything settled with him if she was going back now. “She must be due any day now.”

“In about two weeks,” Kit told him. “Her mother is supposed to be here on Friday, but my sister’s mother-in-law’s going to be down here tomorrow.”

“Abby’s coming here?” he asked with a sudden grin. “We met at the wedding,” he said quickly.

“They bought a vacation house down here just so they have somewhere to stay when visiting, as if they’ll ever visit after Jessie delivers,” he snorted. “She said she’d be down tomorrow, and I think she’s bringing her sons, but I’m not entirely sure. I’ll call tonight and ask.”

“Harry and Mike are coming too?” he asked with a sudden smile. “I hope they bring Charlie!”

“You really mingled while you were there, didn’t you?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Sure did,” grinned in reply. “I’ll get busy on this. I’m pretty sure that Rick’s gonna keep you busy with other stuff the rest of the day.”

“I’m done with Rick for now,” Kit told him. “But if you want it, I won’t argue. I haven’t had a good chance to roam yet.”

“That’s another reason I’m taking it,” he chuckled as he filed out of the office.

He spent the rest of the day doing just that, more or less roaming around the office and chatting with everyone. He’d talked to everyone in the office quite a bit while he was in Boston, but it wasn’t quite the same as padding into an office and gabbing, or hanging out at Elly’s desk, or teasing the interns as they went about their tasks. He more or less wasted the rest of the day, but since all his work for the day was more or less finished, it was his first day back, he was one of the owners, and everyone tended to do it which made it part of office culture, nobody really said much to him about it.

By 5:00, however, he was ready to go. Jessie had been at the office all day, which was unusual for her, and besides they had something else to do. Martha had brought Jessie’s van, and they had to take that home as well as go to the airport...which took a bit of maneuvering. Kit followed Jessie home, then he got in her van and she took him to Bergstrom. “See you in Georgetown, love,” she told him, kissing him. “Don’t waste too much time jabbering with Alice.”

He laughed. “I won’t, I promise,” he said as he climbed out of the van. He went into Avia’s hangar and saw Mike and Alice near their plane, which was in one of the front maintenance spots, spent a few minutes saying hello, then Mike used the crawler to tow his plane out onto the tarmac. Once out there, he gave the plane a thorough walk-around inspection to make sure there was no damage from it sitting at the tiedown for so long, then climbed in and performed the full preflight checklist, paying very close attention to

everything as he worked his way down the checklist, listening, waiting, even smelling from time to time to make sure everything sounded and acted normally. The Garmin seemed a touch sluggish as he worked through the onboard computer startup section of preflight, but that was from it sitting so long. It spent nearly four minutes as the XM section of it negotiated with the servers to search for updates and do all those other computer things, but he let it do that on its own as he continued the preflight. When it came time to start the engine, though, he had no problems. It started right up on the first try, and it purred as smoothly and easily as he remembered.

Once he was done with preflight, he taxied out and quickly got back into the swing of flying. It had been months since he'd been in the cockpit, but everything came back to him almost immediately as he fiddled with the Garmin to set it up for the very short flight to Georgetown, then negotiated with air traffic control as he entered the queue for takeoff from the short runway, 36 Right. He'd be taking off due south and would have to swing around and head up to Georgetown, but that wasn't a problem.

His caution seemed a bit silly once he got the plane in the air, for it was smooth and easy and felt just like it always did, responsive and effortless. He was swept up in the momentary joy of flight as he executed a banking, climbing turn to head for Georgetown, using ground landmarks to navigate rather than bother to use his Garmin as he leveled off at 1000 feet for the short jump over the city, the minimum allowed altitude for flying over the city when not actively landing at Bergstrom, and he saw a gorgeous view of Lake Travis and the hill country out his left window, and the rolling low hills of the eastern ranchlands sprawled out from his right window. He flew over I-35, and much to his amusement, he actually saw Jessie's van as she left north Austin heading for the airfield. He passed over her as he got

clearance to land at Georgetown and lined up with the runway, and touched down smoothly and easily 12 minutes after taking off from Bergstrom. He taxied over to Georgetown Cessna, which was the maintenance shop, and parked the plane at a tiedown just in front of their hangar. A short ferret scurried out from the small hangar as he tied it off. "This the Vulpan Cessna four hundred?" he asked.

Kit nodded. "I have an appointment for nine tomorrow morning. They said I could tie the plane down here today."

"Surely surely," he nodded. "Just wanted to make sure it was you, that's all. We'll take her in and do the inspection and two hundred hour maintenance first thing in the mornin'. Should be done sometime Wednesday. Since you're here, we can get the paperwork out of the way."

"Sounds good."

Jessie arrived just as they finished up. The mechanics would perform a thorough inspection of the plane, inside and out, and since it was close, they'd also do the preventive maintenance planes needed from time to time. Cessna had a very rigid schedule of inspections of maintenance based on the number of hours flown, but Kit and the mechanics both agreed that since the plane had sat for so long, going ahead with the next maintenance was a good idea. "When will it be done?" she asked.

"Sometime Wednesday, ma'am," the mechanic answered. "We're gonna go ahead and do the two hundred hour scheduled maintenance on it while we have it in."

"But it's only got a hundred fifty hours on it since the last maintenance."

“It’s also been sitting for two months without so much as being turned on,” Kit countered. “And since they’ll have it open to do the inspection, it’s not much extra work for them to go ahead and do it now.”

“Ah. That’s a good reason,” she nodded. “I was thinking of taking a joyride tomorrow, but I can wait until Wednesday.”

“You’re a pilot, ma’am?” the mechanic asked.

“Yes I am,” she said with a smile. “I love our plane so much, I learned to fly it myself!”

“Nice planes can do that,” he chuckled.

It turned out, though, that Jessie was indeed taking a plane ride that evening. When they got home, Nick came over and finally upheld his promise to take Jessie up in his Beech King. He too wanted to check his plane after being gone for a couple of months, but unlike Kit, he’d had it done there at Bergstrom, which had a Beech mechanic there that had towed his plane in and checked it over for him last week. Kit and Sylvia ended up going along for the ride, sitting in the back seats as Nick explained the Beech to Jessie, almost a flying lesson, teaching her how it was different from the Crusader twin in which she’d earned her multi rating. Kit was already rated on Beech Kings, but not one quite so new or nice. This was a Beech King Air C90B, where he’d been flying the old steam gauge models. Nick’s Beech had glass panel displays and a flight computer, a Collins suite which Kit had never used before, so he listened almost as intently as Jessie as Nick explained how his Collins differed from the Garmin. Sylvia was both quiet and relaxed as Nick taxied them out, and they were airborne soon after.

They flew around for about an hour, and Kit found that Nick had made a good choice. The King was a good plane, rugged and dependable, and these new Beeches were also a very smooth, comfortable ride, stable in the air, and looked to be very easy to fly. Nick's hold on the yoke was almost negligent, hinting that the controls were soft and responsive, a suspicion confirmed when Nick let Jessie take over from the right seat. She had no trouble at all flying the plane, and hearing the questions she asked made him smile in pride at just how much of a pilot his pretty kitty had become.

When they got home, however, they got roped into helping Sam move. She only had a few boxes of stuff, but Kevin got caught up at the firm and hadn't come home yet, so Jessie and Kit helped her pack her things in the van and Jessie drove them back. Sam already had keys and the alarm code, so she opened the door of her new townhouse and saw that within it was clean and neat, with new furniture, but almost no sense of style at all. There were no curtains, just Venetian blinds, nothing in the walls, just a blank house that almost looked like a hotel room.

"He bought furniture, but not much else," Jessie noted as she carried a box in behind Sam.

"Yeah, well, he's been a little broke lately," Sam answered. "I guess you two know what it takes to furnish a place this big."

"Sorta, since most of our furniture was gifted to us," Jessie laughed. "But I remember how much it cost Kit to furnish the old apartment. I can imagine how much more it'd cost for one of the townhouses."

"Yo, you guys need help?" Mickey called from the door.

"A few boxes left in my van, Mickey," Jessie answered.

“No sweat, your work mule has arrived!”

With Mickey’s help, they got everything stacked in the living room in a matter of minutes, and visited with Sam for a few minutes before leaving her to the task of moving her things in and making the townhouse her home as much as Kevin’s. Kit had no doubt that Sam would use the bare nature of the townhouse to stamp her style on it, which was already half hers, since Kevin had bought the furniture of which Sam approved. He’d rented the townhouse fully knowing that he was renting *their* new home, and he made sure Sam was fully involved in its furnishing.

Lawyers were smart. Good ones were, anyway...and Kevin was a *good* lawyer.

By dinner, it was like they’d never left. Kit and Jessie both felt fully and completely *home*, and though Kit wasn’t letting Jessie do any chores, they both felt completely acclimated to being back where they belonged.

That was a relative feeling, however, for Boston and their time up there quickly intruded into their lives, in the arrival of Abigail Brighton. She arrived without telling anyone when she was arriving, wanting to surprise them, and surprise them she did. She *did*, however, get hold of Vil, who got her in touch with Nick, who sent Krichek to go pick her up and escort her around town. Vil’s sending extra guards wasn’t *just* about Kit and Jessie. She had originally hired Nick to act as a general security consultant and agent for *all* Vulpans and guests visiting Austin, and though there was more threat and more guards, they still fulfilled that other part of their duties of being available to guests. Krichek drove Abigail to the office, where both Kit and Jessie were; Jessie had come in again that day to work on next

week's article and work with Jeffrey on a new tee shirt idea about Missy and Cutler.

That had led to an expansion of the crew by one. Rather than hire a worker, Rick went through a temp agency he knew and trusted, and Lou Yetz was the result. He was a small, willowy calico mouse, but he was a hard worker who understood the duties for which he'd been hired. His first act that morning was to work with Mike and Kit, the resident IT guru and accountant, to set up an efficient yet simple system for filling orders and keeping track of everything. That was ready by lunch, and after lunch, he started. Tee shirts and coffee mugs were quickly packed and stacked, addressed by paw, and then a FedEx driver swung by at the end of the day to collect up four boxes worth of outgoing orders. But Abigail interrupted that around 1:20pm, when she arrived without warning with Krichek in tow. She hugged and kissed her way through the office, since she had met nearly everyone there, pausing only to be introduced to Lisa, Paula, and Lou. "And why are you working, dove?" Abigail chided when she kissed Jessie in greeting.

"Well, I can sit around at home or sit at my desk here," she winked in reply.

"At least here she isn't tempted to do housework, which she's forbidden from doing until she delivers," Kit added as he hugged Abigail. "When did you get in, Abby?"

"Just now," she answered. "Krichek here is going to take me to our new vacation house. My staff is supposed to be there by now waiting for us."

"Where are the boys?"

“Coming in later this week,” she answered. “Winston has them on something of a world tour. He’s promoted both of them to take over for Ken, so they’re going around meeting everyone they need to know to do their jobs. I think they’re in Singapore right now. But Charlie’s supposed to be flying in tomorrow.”

“I was hoping Charlie would come!” Pat said in excitement.

“You think he’d miss this?” Abigail smiled. “He’s all but a Brighton by name, he’s been hanging around for so long. Besides, he still hasn’t got a job since getting out of the Marines,” she laughed. “He’s still going through his ‘I don’t want to work’ phase. He’ll get over it soon.”

“I didn’t realize that Ken had a job like that,” Janet mused.

“He was a globetrotter, dove,” Abigail smiled. “He’d be in London one day, Paris the next, Cape Town the next, Bombay the next, and so on. But with him being married now, he doesn’t have the time to run all over the world, so Winston fired him. He has a *much* more important job now... giving me a grandson!”

“What if it’s a girl?” Marty asked with a chuckle.

“Well, Jessie here is already providing the granddaughter, so Ken had best not disappoint us!”

“He might rebel and give Vil a daughter, you know,” Kit chuckled.

“Well, we could forgive him for that. It’s not like he only has one chance,” she grinned. “Now, I’m going to go take charge of our new house. Krichek dear, time to go!”

“*Da*, Misses Brighton,” he said with a nod. He glanced at Janet and chattered at her in Russian, and Janet laughed and answered.

“I didn’t know you speak Russian, dove,” Abigail laughed.

“I’d better or I wouldn’t be able to talk to half my family,” Janet smiled in reply. “I’m the true daughter of immigrants, Misses Abby.”

“I’ll see you two tomorrow, duckies,” Abigail told them.

“Why not tonight? Want to have dinner?” Kit asked.

“Not if you’re cooking,” she answered with a light smile, which made him laugh.

In actuality, Abigail wanted that evening to get their vacation house set up and meet her new staff. She had four workers at the house; a butler/chauffer, a cook, a maid, and a groundskeeper/general handymale... though in a house that size, those were just titles. All the staff would do whatever was needed. Kit had seen pictures of the house, and it was what Kit would consider to be very large and luxurious, but to someone as rich as the Brightons, it would be “small and cozy.” While Kit and Jessie spent the evening getting the nursery completely ready and training themselves in the mysteries of car seats and diaper tables, Abigail was getting the vacation house prepared for the Brightons to arrive to inhabit it.

Wednesday, Jessie stayed home with Sylvia keeping her company while Kit went to work, and now that he had most of his work fully caught up, he was free to pursue some other matters. After the morning meeting with Rick and ensuring that the issue was ready, he delved into his real estate idea. He spent most of the day researching the feasibility of the idea by making some calls, searching through records of properties that were in

danger of foreclosure, and studying the families that lived within those houses. He found what he considered to be his test case, one Juan Ortiz, naturalized American citizen from Guatemala, who had a wife and two children. Juan had worked at an auto dealership as a service writer until the dealership closed, and it took him four months to get another job; he was now working at Baxter Ford as a service writer. But those four months of unemployment had been crushing because his wife had been on maternity leave for the first month, and then forewent the rest of her leave to return to her job at Wal-Mart. Juan had had an exemplary credit history up until he got laid off, and his financial troubles weren't really his fault. He was three months behind on his mortgage and was saddled with credit card debt incurred trying to keep his family treading water during his unemployment.

Their house was *exactly* the kind of property he envisioned when he got this idea. It was a very modest three bedroom in south Austin, down near 71 and only about two miles from the church where Sam and Kevin were going to marry. It sat on a .45 acre lot, which was quite small, and the house looked absolutely normal. A house like that was going for \$85,000-\$140,000 or so before the housing crash, but the three other houses for sale in that neighborhood were on the lists in a range from \$52,500-\$94,000, the average of which was almost half of what they'd been going for just a year ago...which was because there were two foreclosed houses in the immediate neighborhood, which drove down the value of the surrounding property. The house, when he drove by, looked well-worn but also maintained, with a very small fenced-in yard in the front where a little collie puppy ran back and forth playing with a frisbee by itself, the idyllic "lower middle class" modified ranch style house with a garage. At auction, a house like that would, if it followed the statistical trend, go for about \$45,000. Given that the house was easily worth \$45,000, Kit talked to a

couple of bankers in town and found that getting a \$45,000 mortgage would be easy for him, because he had rock-solid credit and strong collateral. When he talked to his own bank about mortgages, they almost laughed. They had absolutely *no* doubt it would be paid back, and the loan officer offered him a rate of 3.25%. The current going rate was 5.25%, but the name Vulpan was worth shaving some percentage off that number. The bank had no qualms about giving Kit a very generous rate, because his family had \$6.73 billion when the entire family was taken together. Both because he was a Vulpan and he had some \$162,756 in his bank accounts at that moment, and because the bank would *not* want to anger his family, they were more than willing to give him a rate far below what others would receive.

Just another way the rich profited from being rich.

Insurance wasn't as bad as he thought. The house wasn't in a flood-prone area, so he wouldn't have to buy flood insurance, which was a good thing. For the house insurance, buying a policy that basically only covered fire and unintentional damage, such as storm damage, and only having to insure for \$45,000, he'd only have to pay \$47 a month given where the house was and the kind of policy he intended to take out. That wouldn't add much to the base rent at all.

Adding it all together, mortgage, insurance, putting back a little each month towards annual taxes and repairs, and adding \$60 to guarantee a profit, Kit came to a final rent of \$350 a month.

Comparing that final rent total to the Ortiz family's annual income, Kit found that the deal would be quite workable for them. It would reduce their house payment by \$550 given that their mortgage was currently underwater in relation to the value of the house, and that reduced payment was more

than within the financial constraints of the family. They had a lot of credit card debt to pay down, but the rent they would pay to Kit would be cheaper than rent they'd have to pay on a house or apartment large enough to house the family. So long as Juan didn't lose his job, it was definitely doable.

Talking with Kevin over the legal ramifications of it, however, considerably changed his plan. Kit went to his firm and the two of them sat at his desk, which was still a cubicle near one corner of the main office area, within easy sight of Delores Kittimer's door. Kevin hadn't yet earned an office of his own, but that wouldn't take long given that he was one of their best rookie lawyers. Kevin listened to the entire idea, read over the conditions of the lease agreement that Kit had brought him, then leaned back in his chair. "Legally, it's pretty safe," he declared. "It would all come down to the lease agreement, which I could write for you in about ten minutes given you've laid everything out in this word file. But why risk buying at auction? I suggest you go straight to the bank and offer them what you think you'd pay at auction as a short sale. Given the bank wouldn't have to pay the costs of foreclosure, odds are they'd jump on it."

"A short sale, eh?" Kit mused, putting his elbows on the desk. "I hadn't considered that."

"Didn't you research it?"

"Of course I did, but I thought I could get a cheaper price at auction."

"I think you could easily get what you intend to pay at auction if you approach the bank directly. Banks never want to foreclose, and if they can get as much from a short sale as they can from an auction, they'll take the short sale. They recover more that way since they don't have to pay to foreclose."

“Hmm. I think that’s a good idea.”

“I’ll draw up a legal lease agreement while you go threaten the bank,” Kevin grinned. “I’ll make it more or less ironclad, but also with a couple of logical outs for both sides. You’re sure you want to lock in the rent?”

He nodded. “I want the only way it can raise is as a flat percentage based on increase in annual taxes. The idea isn’t to make money off one house, it’s to make money off a series of them, and an ironclad rent that can’t be raised on a whim is a solid indicator to the renter that I’m serious about it.”

“Ah, got it. I’ll go talk to Rogers, he’s our resident real estate law expert, and make sure your conditions are legal. If they are, this lease will protect both you and the renter.”

“The best kind.”

“Should be done by the end of the day. I’ll swing by and drop it off at your house after work.”

“Well, that’ll be easy now given you live four doors down,” Kit chuckled. “How’s it with Sam?”

“Much better than I thought it would, even if my bathroom is suddenly inundated with bottles.”

After talking to Kevin, Kit went to the bank holding the mortgage and had a little talk with them. They were a little surprised by Kit’s interest in the house, and as he expected, they initially turned down his offer to buy the house at what he thought was a fair price. That, however, was simply how banks worked, and he knew it. They would try to sell the house for the most possible, to recoup as much as possible. Kit, however, was a Vulpan, and he

knew how to haggle. They went back and forth over the price of the house for an hour, and Kit set a price lower than his original auction estimate and told them they could buy it from him now, or they could foreclose and get the same amount when he bought it at auction. Either way, they'd get the same amount of money, but the difference was they'd pay more to foreclose on the house, and therefore get less profit, then they would if they simply executed a short sale.

An hour after he left the bank, they called him back, and reluctantly agreed. They would sell him the house at \$42,500 as a short sale.

So, on his side, the idea was feasible and workable. It would come down to the Ortizes to find out if it would fly, because the other half of the plan was to have the prior owners sign a lease to live in the house. Kit wouldn't go through with the sale unless he had an agreement from the occupants.

Coming close to closing time, Kit picked up the phone and made the initial contact. "Service, this is Juan, may I help you?" Juan Ortiz called in his Spanish accent, but he spoke *excellent* English.

"Hello, Mister Ortiz, my name is Kit Vulpan. I know that this is coming right out of the blue, but I wanted to talk to you about your house."

"Are you from the bank?" he asked immediately.

"No, I'm what you might call an independent entrepreneur," he answered. "I wanted to talk to you about a plan that would let you stay in your house and convert from an owner to a renter."

"What do you mean?"

“It’s a little difficult to explain over the phone, and you’d probably think I was a scam artist regardless,” he chuckled. “So, how about you come by my work after you get off and listen to what I have to say?”

“Well, give me the basics so I know whether to show up,” he countered.

“What I was of a mind to do was to buy your house, then turn around and rent it to you at a reduced rent,” he said. “If it works right, you don’t have to move out, and it would cut down your monthly payment quite a bit.”

“That sounds...weird,” he said after a moment.

“It’s simple, actually, but I’d like to talk to you about it face to face. Show you exactly what I have in mind.”

“I, I think I can do that. I’m off in a half hour for lunch, how about then?”

“That’s fine. I work at Lone Star magazine, our office is on third and Congress.”

“You’re *that* Kit Vulpan? I read your magazine!” he said with a sudden laugh.

“Yeah, that’s me,” he chuckled. “So, at least now you know I’m not a con male. Swing by our office on your lunch break and I’ll show you what I’m working on, and we’ll see if it’s workable.”

“*Si*, yes, I’ll be there!”

Juan Ortiz was punctual, showing up exactly thirty minutes later. He was a *gespato*, which was a term for Spanish wolf mixed breeds that were

quite common through Latin America, the result of Spanish settlers and Conquistadors taking native wives. Juan was part wolf and part feline of some kind, and he had a wolf's muzzle but had cat ears and spotted and banded fur that was actually quite attractive. He shook Kit's paw when he arrived in his office, and with Kevin right there to listen in to make sure what they talked about wasn't illegal, and also with the lease agreement in paw, Kit explained his plan in detail to Juan, stressing that the agreement included signing a lease. "The bank is going to sell me the house for forty two-five, which is about what they'd get for it at auction. After I convert that into a thirty year mortgage, you'd be paying three hundred fifty a month in rent. That rent would be enough to cover mortgage, taxes, and put a little extra back each month for big repairs, but you'd handle small repairs yourself. When it's something big, we'd work together to get it done."

"Only three hundred fifty?" he asked in surprise.

"A thirty year fixed for forty or so thousand averages out to about a hundred twenty a month," Kit told him. "But there's also annual taxes, insurance, putting money back for repairs, and let's face it, I *do* have the right to earn a small profit from the deal. I'm not doing this entirely for charity, Mister Ortiz. But as you can see, my profit will be very small out of this agreement, sixty dollars a month. And I don't think you're going to find anything in Austin big enough for your family for three hundred fifty a month."

"You're right about that. Seven hundred was the cheapest I could find, and that was a rathole."

"We've already drawn up a lease," Kevin told him. "We'll let you take it home and read it."

“What does it say in general?” he asked.

“Mainly, it’s simply an agreement that you don’t move out two months from now. Kit’s putting his own money on the line, so the lease agreement is initially for five years, with options to extend. The rent is a flat percentage over the mortgage and the annual taxes, and it can only change if the government changes the tax rate. So, you’re locked into the lease, but you’re also guaranteed that the rent won’t increase, and you’d pay less rent than you would if you moved out of the house and rented an apartment. It states that you’re responsible for small repairs of up to five hundred dollars and also non-necessary remodeling, you split the cost with Kit of necessary repairs over five hundred. There *is* a clause, though, that states that the rent can increase if excessive repairs have to be made, to cover the cost of those repairs. But the rent returns to its base after that’s paid back.”

“That’s a strange clause.”

“It’s to prevent a tenant from getting the bright idea that one way to get Kit to help pay for non-necessary remodeling of the house is to knock holes in the walls and make a claim for it,” Kevin answered. “Basically, the lease more or less states that though Kit will own the house, you’ll be responsible for its upkeep up to a certain point. Kit will help pay for big repairs because you may not have the money to afford it, but little things are your responsibility. There’s also an option in the lease that basically allows you to rent to own,” he finished. “You get credit for mortgage payments Kit makes from the rent you pay him, and after five years, you have the option to buy the house from Kit by paying what’s left owed on the house, or sign a new lease to continue the agreement.”

“But my credit will be ruined.”

“Not as ruined as you think,” Kit told him. “By selling the house to me, you *avoid* the foreclosure. That won’t hit your credit. Pay off your other debts, and you should have solid credit by the end of the lease, and could probably buy the house back from me.”

Ortiz’s eyes lit up, and he leaned back in his chair, nodding. “I’d like to read the lease.”

“Here you go,” Kit told him. “Read it over, talk about it with your wife, heck, talk to a lawyer if you want to, then call me,” he said, taking one of his cards and passing it to the wolf-looking mixed breed. “I don’t want you agreeing unless you feel absolutely sure it’s what you want to do.”

After printing out the lease, Ortiz said his goodbyes hastily and rushed from the office. Kit glanced at Kevin, who only chuckled. “He’d be an idiot not to agree,” Kevin told him. “He won’t get three hundred fifty a month *anywhere* in Austin. That’s *half* what he’d pay in rent.”

“Probably.”

Charlie arrived more or less as they finished up at the office, storming into the office all chatty and happy, shaking paws, making all kinds of suggestive, flirtatious comments to every unmarried femme in the office—which was every femme but Jessie—and making his presence known. Charlie had made friends of just about everyone while at the wedding, and he roamed the office, delaying everyone going home, then stormed out as quickly as he’d arrived. “Gotta go see Abby and settle in at the vacation house, then I’m meeting Sheila, she’s taking me clubbing! Said something about a club called the Top Hat.”

Kit and Jessie exploded into laughter. “She’s taking his innocence right off the bat,” Jessie snickered.

“Look who’s talking,” Kit teased.

“This proves I’m not innocent anymore,” she countered, pointing down.

“And if I took you to the Top Hat, all your cheek fur would fall out,” he noted. “You just *think* you’re not innocent because you’re married. You are still the vestal virgin in some ways. And I like you just the way you are.”

She kissed him on the muzzle. “Well, what more does a girl need?”

“Oh, a thirty-eight D chest, maybe an inch longer legs, a practicing contortionist, and a totally depraved mindset that’ll make her try anything,” he said casually, which earned him a swat. “What, you asked!”

“There are some questions that have no right answer, buster,” she told him.

“Don’t I know it,” he sighed, then laughed as she swatted him again. “At least I can make due with you!” he added as he backed away from her.

“Make due? Make *due*?” she protested, and Kit ran for his office. The gang laughed as Jessie waddled after him, and he made it to his office and shut and locked the door. “Rick, get me my purse!” she called. “He forgets I have a key to that office!”

“Bring it on, you fangless weenie!” Kit shouted through the door.

“Such a brave male when he’s hiding!” she called back.

The gang decided to watch this bit of entertainment, as Marty brought Jessie her purse, and they exploded into laughter when she rolled up a newspaper and advanced on the door. She unlocked it and pushed the door

open, then squeaked in surprise when Kit grabbed hold of her and pulled her into an embrace, then kissed her with enough passion to make her drop the newspaper and clutch onto him for dear life, one of her feet rising up and bumping into her tail.

“That’s one way to get out of a punishment,” Mike laughed.

“The *only* way,” Janet added.

Kit didn’t have long to wait to hear back from Juan. He called back while he was cooking dinner, and Jessie brought the phone in. “Handsome fox, it’s someone named Juan. Is that the guy?”

“That’s him,” he nodded, putting down the wooden spoon he’d been using to stir browning ground beef and taking the phone. “This is Kit.”

“Hello, Mister Vulpan. I talked it over with my wife, and we’ll take your deal.”

“Well, that’s good to hear, Mister Ortiz.”

“We already signed the lease,” he laughed. “I can bring it back to you. I’m about to test drive a customer’s car to make sure of the repairs, but I can swing by wherever you are and drop it off.”

“That’s fine with me. I live in Westwood. Sixteen forty-two Guadalupe. If you’re facing the pool, the second townhouse past the gate, on the right.”

“That’s not far from the dealership,” he mused. “I should be over in about fifteen minutes.”

“Good, you can meet my wife,” he said with a chuckle as he slapped Jessie’s paw away from the spoon.

Juan was anything if not punctual. Almost exactly fifteen minutes later, the doorbell rang. Jessie answered it and invited him as he mixed the sauce with the ground beef and dug the other ingredients out of the refrigerator, which he'd cut up the night before. "Tacos are ready!" Kit shouted as he put the bowls on a platter and started carrying it towards the dining room. He met Jessie and Juan in the dining room, as Jessie giggled and thanked Juan for his congratulations for the impending birth of their daughter. "My wife delivered just four months ago," he added. "A week after I lost my job at Turnpike, when it closed down. That was *very* stressful," he said.

"I can imagine. A baby on the way, your wife can't work, and you lose your job. It sounds terrible!"

"Well, thanks to the generosity of you and your husband, Misses Vulpan, I think we can get back on our feet," he said with sincere gratitude.

"My handsome fox always says the best kind of deal is the one that benefits both sides," she answered as he set the platter down. "You get to keep your house, and we earn a little money we intend to put back for little Laura's education," she said, patting her stomach with a smile.

"*Si*, yes, it is," he nodded. "Here's the lease, Mister Vulpan," he said, offering a manila folder. "My wife and I both signed it. She came to work to do it," he laughed.

"Well, tomorrow, I'll call you bank and get things moving," he answered. "Odds are, I'll close on it by the end of the week."

"That fast?"

"I have certain advantages, Mister Ortiz. I'll write them a check. That clears up a *lot* of the red tape that slows things down."

Juan laughed. “I can imagine!” he said. “But you said you’re getting a mortgage?”

Kit nodded. “I only have so much cash, Juan. I buy the house with cash, then mortgage it for exactly what I paid for it. I get the cash back, which I can use to buy *another* house. That’s how it works in real estate. With just a little capital, I can buy a whole lot of property, so long as I can get banks to offer mortgages, and pay those mortgages.”

“Ahh, *si*, I get it,” he nodded. “So we shouldn’t pay our mortgage payments?”

“Forget them,” he said immediately. “As you saw in the lease agreement, your rent won’t be due until the fifth of the month, and the rent won’t start until *after* I get the mortgage on the house from my own bank. So you should look at starting to pay rent in November.”

“You mean we live in the house for a month for free?”

“More or less,” Kit shrugged. “I think you could use that month to sit down and look over your other debts and work out a payment plan. And remember, your first month’s rent is actually you paying your security deposit. The rent you pay from the month after the first are the ones that will count towards the mortgage.”

“I’ll remember,” he answered with a nod.

“Would you like a taco, Mister Ortiz?” Jessie asked.

He laughed. “*Si*, I gave up my lunch to talk to your husband, Misses Vulpan. If you’re offering, I would very much like a taco. But since I’m in a customer’s car and I should be on the road right now test driving it, excuse me if I don’t stay. I can always take it back with me and eat it at work.”

“Mean fox, making him go without food,” Jessie accused. “I’ll make you up a plate, Mister Ortiz.”

“Oh, here,” Kit said, taking out his wallet. “I’ll give you my card, it has my work number on it.” He fished out a pen from his portfolio and scribbled on the back. “The number on the back is my personal cell phone and home phone. That way you can get in touch with me.”

“I’ll give you our home phone number as well. I take it I just bring the rent by?”

“Or mail it, whatever works best for you,” he answered. “I’ll call you and keep you up to speed on what’s going on. I’m sure you’d like to know.”

“Oh yes, please,” he affirmed.

The door in the living room banged open from the sound of it. “Hey cousin!” Sheila boomed. “Where are you?”

“Well, you get to meet Sheila before you go,” Kit chuckled. “Dining room!” he called back. When she arrived, Kit saw that she was dressed to kill and ready to go clubbing, wearing a glorified bikini top and a pair of shorts, that showed off most of her lithe form. “Juan, this is my cousin Sheila. Sheila, this is Juan Ortiz. I just bought his house.”

“Ah, your real estate plan, eh? Well, nice to meet ya,” she smiled, shaking his paw. “I feel sorry for you, being in the thrall of my cousin. He’s a bastard.”

“Sheila!” Kit barked, to which she laughed.

“He may be so, but the lease agreement I signed definitely was not,” Juan answered.

Sheila laughed. “Oooh, tacos! Hope you made enough for one more!”

“Aren’t you going out with Charlie?”

“Of course, but a femme needs her energy for what we’re doing tonight,” she purred in a predatory manner. “I warned him to eat *before* we leave, there’s no restaurant there.”

“True.”

Jessie returned, and Juan was politely quiet as Sheila and Jessie bantered a little, as she made Juan a couple of tacos and put them in a disposable Ziploc container, one of the cheap plastic ones. “Here you go, Mister Ortiz,” she smiled. “Just be careful. Kit cooked, so I can’t promise you won’t get sick.”

“Ya, ya, ya, you’re just jealous because I won’t let you cook,” Kit countered, which made Sheila laugh and Juan smile. “Just for that, the next meal gets doused with stuff off the *top* spice rack. Liberally.”

“You’re the one that has to live with it if you make me sick, buster,” she countered. “I’ll throw up on the carpet and watch you clean it up.”

“I think she’s got you on this one, cousin,” Sheila grinned.

“Oh, make your taco and scram,” he told her shortly.

“I do need to go. Thank you for the dinner, Mister Vulpan, Misses Vulpan, and thank you very, very much for calling me out of the blue today. I thought we were going to be thrown out of our house for sure, but then you show up like a guardian angel. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Just make sure you pay your rent on time,” Kit chuckled.

Juan shook their paws, then nodded to them and let Jessie walk him to the door. “So, did you rape him?” Sheila asked.

“Nowhere near,” he answered. “I’ll make about sixty dollars a month off the deal I made with him.”

“That’s *it*?”

“Yes, that’s it. But Juan’s won’t be the *only* house I buy. I may only make a little money, but after I buy about twenty houses, do the math.”

“Oh. Ohhhhhhh,” she said, her eyes widening. “Hell yeah, cousin! As long as you can make them pay their rents, you’ll make a killing!”

“The beauty of it is, as long as I’m very careful about which houses I buy and the furs that live in them, it’s guaranteed money. Even if a tenant ends up violating the lease or moves out, I still bought that house for far less than market value, and I can rent it out much more cheaply than anyone else.”

“But that’s a lot of legal mess, dealing with real estate. My mom had a few rental properties, but it was such a headache she sold everything and got out of the business.”

“That’s why I have Kevin and the law firm. They have a couple of real estate lawyers,” he answered. “And once I have about ten houses, I’m going to organize things a little. Lupe’s already signed on to have his handymen go out and do service calls on the houses for far cheaper than I’d get through a contractor, and me and him are talking about turning the idea into a real estate company. He was talking about working on finding the right kinds of houses out of his office in his spare time. Lupe has a lot of spare

time on his paws even with the complex, and he *really* knows the real estate business.”

“He should, he’s in it, in a way,” Sheila chuckled. “And that’s not a bad idea. Maybe I should buy in,” she mused. “We could start the Vulpan Real Estate Company.”

“Sixty dollars profit per unit isn’t much.”

“But after we own five hundred houses, it’ll split nicely,” she countered. “And my money would go to good use, helping furs down on their luck because of the recession keep from getting kicked out of their houses.”

“What is this? Sheila showing she has a heart?” Kit teased.

“Yeah, it’s right under this,” she retorted, grabbing her left breast crudely.

“Make your taco,” Kit commanded.

Abigail was everything he expected her to be. She was affable, charming, kind, sincere, and maybe just a touch nosy, but she had a good heart and sunny disposition. And he knew that she would drive his family *insane*. She intended to go to Boston after Jessie delivered and get to know the in-laws, and Kit was certain now that Abigail would upend the Vulpan in the worst way, for she acted nothing like Vulpan did...and since she was old money, they couldn’t even snub her for not knowing the rules.

But for Kit, she was a delightful femme that he enjoyed having down in Austin. She threw a dinner party the day after Charlie arrived at her

vacation house, now that she had it all settled in, and she invited not just Kit and Jessie, but all their friends, the guys from work, just about everyone that had come to the welcome-home party they threw when they got back from Boston. Abigail was intrigued by the tradition of the Texas barbecue, and her house had a very large and almost sinfully luxuriant barbecue pit near the pool, so they had a nice afternoon cookout. Jessie was still the absolute center of attention, and that just made Kit happy, for she deserved every bit of it. There were a few amusing things to watch, though, like the deer-in-the-headlights look Charlie had. Sheila had introduced Charlie to a level of sin and debauchery he probably hadn't known existed, and he looked a little scattered even nearly a day after she took him to the Top Hat. Sheila wore a smug little smile, and Charlie almost flinched every time she draped her arm over him. Charlie had had a taste of the infamous Vulpan girls up in Boston--probably literally--and Sheila had proved to him that the Vulpan Party Pack really *was* like that.

They had a very good time over at Abigail's, and were maybe a little late getting home given that they had to go pick up Hannah at the airport in the morning. Jessie's back was hurting, so Kit gave her a long, gentle backrub and then sent her off to the bathroom to take a hot bath. Kit had some writing to do, so he retired to the den to get it done, working on an article that would be in the issue two weeks from today, dealing with how it felt to be an impending father, the feeling of responsibility and all the new worries, and a humorous little anecdote about how he and Jessie had had trouble putting the crib together, and various other little mysteries that had entered their lives now that they were about to be parents. He got most of the article written, then glanced at the clock and realized it was nearly ten. Hannah was set to come in around nine, flying in on the Brighton's private

jet that Abigail had sent up for her. Jessie had set up the guest room for her mother that morning, so at least that was ready to go.

“Kit,” Jessie called from the living room. “Kit. Kit!”

“I’m in the den, love!” he called.

“Well, get in here!” she called. “And call Doctor Mac!”

“What? Why?”

“Because my water just broke!” she answered.

He knocked the chair over in his rush to get into the living room. Jessie was wearing a bathrobe, and had both paws on her stomach as she stood, her face just a touch concerned. “Are you alright?” he asked urgently.

“I will be in a second, I think I just had a labor pain,” she answered. “My water broke as I was drying off,” she told him. “Call Doctor Mac, love.”

He snatched up his phone from the shelf and used speed dial to get in touch with her. “Jessie’s water just broke, Doc!” he called as soon as she answered the phone.

“Good!” she said brightly. “Earlier than I expected, but good! Put her on so I can talk to her while you go get her suitcase, Kit.”

He did just that, giving Jessie the phone and rushing upstairs. They had a suitcase packed for Jessie holding everything she’d need for her trip to the hospital, and hurried downstairs with it. “Just a little, but not much,” Jessie’s voice reached him. “No. At least I didn’t ruin any clothes, I was drying off from a bath when it broke,” she said with a laugh, then winced slightly. “Okay, *now* I’m feeling a little something,” she announced. “I

thought I wasn't supposed to start feeling real labor pains for a while after my water broke. Oh, okay." She pushed the phone at Kit. "She wants you."

"Yeah, doc?" he asked into the phone.

"It's the real deal," she answered. "Jessie has a little time before she goes into full labor, so take her upstairs, help her put something on other than a robe, then take her to the hospital. I'll call ahead so they're waiting for you, and I'll be down in just a bit, alright?"

"Okay, Doc. How long til she goes into labor?"

"It's not a set time, but from the sound of what she told me, she has enough time to get dressed."

"Alright. See you there, Doc."

Kit was both wildly excited and very concerned as he helped Jessie go back upstairs, taking each step one at a time, then all but literally dressed her himself. Jessie looked to be in a little discomfort, but no outright labor pain as he helped her into a pair of stretch pants and a tee shirt, and for some strange reason, she insisted on wearing a bra. Kit put a paw on her belly and literally felt Laura moving around in there. "Yeah, I know," Jessie said with a weak chuckle. "Alright, handsome fox, let's get going." She winced again. "I think we should *really* be on our way, love. That wasn't just a back spasm."

He helped her down the stairs as quickly and carefully as he could, then grabbed the suitcase and helped her out the door. He helped her over and into the passenger seat of her van, then hurried around and got in. He backed out with one paw while his phone was in the other, after quickly dialing Vil. "Sis," he called.

“It’s a little late, bro, what’s going on?”

“Jessie just went into labor,” he announced.

“So soon? Oh, hell! Ken! We gotta get to Austin *now*!” she boomed, clearly not meaning to shout into the phone. “I’ll call John and Hannah, bro. Abby said she was sending a plane up for Hannah, right? Is it already there?”

“I have no idea.”

“I’ll call her and find out,” she declared. “You just get Jessie to the hospital, I’ll call out the cavalry.”

He chuckled. “Sure thing, sis. Want to talk to Jessie?”

“Sure!”

He gave Jessie the phone as he pulled out onto Guadalupe, then fished Jessie’s phone out of her purse while Jessie talked to Vil. “Nick,” he said when the wolf answered the phone.

“Yeah, mate?”

“I’m taking Jessie to the hospital, she’s going into labor,” he said. “We’re already on our way.”

“Oi, so soon?” he asked in surprise. “No worries, I’ll spread the word, and I’ll have Sylvie there as soon as she can make it!”

“Okay. Excuse me if I cut this short, I do *not* want to drive and talk on the phone right now.”

“No worries, hang up and get that femme of yours to the hospital!”
And to reinforce the order, Nick hung up.

Kit drove like a little old lady, but also with a certain urgency. He was the epitome of a defensive driver, keeping well away from everyone else, as Jessie continued to chat with Vil, mainly Vil keeping her distracted, as they made the three mile trip from the house to Austin General. Doctor Mac was literally as good as her word, for an raccoon orderly bustled out as soon as Kit pulled up to the emergency room door, pushing a wheelchair before him. Nick's Expedition screeched to a halt behind the van, and Sylvia, Krichek, and Barnett boiled out of it before Nick pulled out to go park his truck. "Here you are, Misses Vulpan," the orderly said as Jessie transferred from the van to the wheelchair. "Doctor MacNair is already on her way, and we have a room waiting. We'll just roll you past the admission desk and let your husband take care of the paperwork."

"I will park van, Kit," Krichek told him, holding his paw out for the keys. "Go!"

Kit nodded gratefully as he gave Krichek the keys, then rushed in with Jessie with Barnett and Sylvia behind him, Sylvia holding Jessie's suitcase. Kit was held up at the admissions desk as he more or less signed Jessie in. They'd already made the arrangements to have the baby here, so all the big information for which Jessie would need to be there was already done, so all Kit really had to do was sign a couple of papers and then move on. Jessie already had a room literally just down the hall from the delivery room, a short wheelchair trip from the admission desk and to the elevator. Austin General's maternity ward was on the fourth floor, the biggest in Austin and one of the best in Texas, and Kit was ushered into the room in time to see two nurses, a bobcat and a young sable, helping Jessie undress, a hospital gown waiting for her. Kit quickly opened the suitcase and made sure everything was in it, but almost immediately he realized that they hadn't

packed the cameras into it yet. They hadn't expected to be doing this for another ten days!

Easily solved. As one paw put Jessie's things away in the dresser provided in the room, he called Lupe. "Lupe, get up," Kit called.

"Brah, what you calling so late for?" he asked.

"Jessie's water broke, she'll be going into labor any minute," he declared.

"Already? It's too soon!"

"Tell that to Laura," Kit chuckled. "Listen, I need you to get my camera and video camera and bring them to the hospital. I hadn't packed them yet, and I didn't have time to think about it."

"Sure, brah, sure! They still in the den?"

"Yeah, in the shelf right by the computer desk. The spare batteries are on the charger on the bottom shelf, and there's a little pack of cards right by the cases."

"No prob, brah. What room she in?"

"Four twelve," he answered. "If we're not in the room, then Jessie's delivering, so just wait in the waiting room."

"Sure, sure! I'll warn Dan and the others before I head out."

"Don't wait too long, I'd like to be able to take some pictures!"

"No sweat, I'll do it the mean way."

Doctor Mac strolled into the room, wearing green scrubs and with a stethoscope hung over her shoulders casually. "I see you made it," she

chuckled. “You two, go wait in the waiting room,” she commanded Sylvia and Barnett. “Lay down, Jessie,” she ordered as the two guards filed out, a bit sullenly, grabbing the stethoscope in a paw and setting it in place in her ears.

“The doc’s here, so I gotta go. Get over here,” he told Lupe.

“I’m on the way, brah,” he answered, then hung up.

Jessie submitted to the doctor’s examination, which included an examination of her pubic regions. “Well, you’re dilating, so Laura’s serious about blowing my delivery date out of the water,” she chuckled. “You’ll be going into labor any time now, hon. We’ll let you stay here until Laura’s ready, then roll you down for the delivery, alright?”

“Okay, doc,” she answered.

“Remember your La Maz, Jessie. And you’d better spend some time helping her instead of being on the phone the whole time, Kit.”

“I *do* have to call a few furs, but I’ll make it quick,” he assured her.

“Alright. Don’t make me take your phone, though. I’ll do it,” she warned, which made Jessie laugh, then she winced.

“Ow! Ow ow ow ow!” she gasped. “That was--ow!”

“I think you’re starting labor, Jessie,” Doctor Mac smiled. “Just remember to breathe, and you should be alright. And I’ll either be right here with you, or just down the hall talking with the nurses. Now let me go talk to the floor manager about the delivery room. I’ll be right back.”

Kit sat on the bed and held Jessie’s paw as he called Rick. “Rick,” he said even before Rick could fully answer the phone.

“You wouldn’t be calling this late if it wasn’t serious,” Rick noted.
“Jessie?”

“Yup, she’s just started labor,” he answered. “Can you do me a favor and let everyone know? Doctor Mac threatened to take my phone if I did it.”

Rick laughed. “I’ll take care of it, son. Need me to call Vil?”

“And have her spank me for not calling her first? Please,” he snorted, which made Jessie laugh.

“I know who you’re talking about,” she grinned, then she sucked in her breath and winced.

“I’ll have Martha call around while we’re on our way up,” Rick assured him.

That was the start of a very, very, *very* long night for Jessie. She went into full-blown labor not long after Kit called Rick, and it was not fast. Kit was right there with her, holding her paw, brushing her hair back, doing anything he could to make her feel comfortable as she endured the painful contractions, urged her to practice her breathing, and it seemed to go on forever to both of them. And much to her credit, Doctor Mac was there with them. She gave Jessie a quick exam about every ten minutes or so, timed her contractions herself, which never seemed to come any shorter which was an indication that birth was imminent, but other than that she was a quiet, reassuring presence in the room, and that was very much unlike what most doctors did. Most doctors let a nurse take care of such things and only showed up for the important parts but Doctor Mac wasn’t like other doctors.

Jessie was in labor long enough for her family to reach Austin, and Kit was startled to see John and Hannah rush into the room to see them while Doctor Mac was out talking to another doctor. “We made it in time!” Hannah said with an explosive sigh. “Thank God!”

“I’d rather not thank him at this particular moment,” Jessie said weakly, her fur and blond hair matted from sweat and the cool cloths Kit had been putting over her forehead. “I’ve been in labor for four hours!”

“I was in labor for nine hours with you, Jessica, and even longer with Jennifer and Ben,” Hannah told her casually. “Long labors are something of a curse that runs through our family.”

“I knew there was something to be said for using birth control,” Jessie grunted, which made Kit laugh despite himself.

Doctor Mac strode into the room. “Get your scrubs on, Kit,” she declared.

“It’s time?” Jessie asked, then she winced and her grip on Kit’s paw became almost crushing as she suffered another contraction. “Oh, please say it’s time.”

“It will be soon,” she said calmly, coming over and sitting on the bed. “Your contractions are at three minutes now and shortening, so you’re just about there,” she said with warmth, patting Jessie on the shoulder. “So, let’s get Kit ready, and we’ll be taking you to the delivery room as soon as your contractions are about a minute apart.”

“Okay,” Jessie said, panting a little. “I didn’t expect it to take this long.”

“It’s worth it, though, isn’t it?”

Kit dressed in green scrubs not too much different from the ones Doctor Mac wore, and he again sat by Jessie and comforted her as best he could. Her parents, like everyone else that had tried to visit, had been banished to the waiting room, leaving him with her as he tried his best to nurse her through the pain of labor. When not wincing, gasping, or groaning in pain, she gave him weak smiles and kept firm hold of his paw, often running her fingers along the scars on his forearm, the jagged white lines that ran up from his dark mittens and into his reddish fur. He hated seeing her in pain, and in a strange way, she was trying to comfort him, ease him through seeing the femme he loved enduring a long labor.

God, did he love her.

But finally, blissfully, Doctor Mac called for a gurney. Jessie's contractions had narrowed to whatever threshold Doctor Mac felt was necessary, and in a surprisingly short time, Jessie was wheeled from the room to a delivery room, which was surprisingly small, with a intimidating-looking table with stirrups flanked by several pieces of medical equipment. A nurse helped Jessie onto the table, and Kit took his assigned spot at her right side as Doctor Mac put on a surgical mask, called in a nurse, and seemed to get ready to deliver the baby.

Doctor Mac was clearly someone who had a lot of experience with such things, for not two minutes after Jessie had been put on the table, she seemed to go into real labor. Her contractions narrowed down shockingly fast, and a nurse put a blanket over Jessie's distended belly. "Alright, let's make this smooth and easy, Jessie," Doctor Mac called. "When you feel an overwhelming urge to push, don't ignore it. Just say it's time and do it. You'll know when that is," she said when Jessie lifted her head to look at her.

“Handsome fox,” she panted from the table.

“Yes love?”

“If you take a single picture of me in here, I’m going to kill you.”

Kit laughed despite himself, then leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. “I won’t take a single picture until Laura’s in your arms, I promise.”

All those long hours in labor seemed to prime Jessie for delivery, for when it started, it *happened*. Jessie’s eyes snapped shut and she gasped. “It’s time!” she declared, then she gritted her teeth and her grip on Kit’s paw was like a vice.

“Push, Jessie, push!” the doctor ordered. Jessie seemed to obey that command, because Kit feared for the bones in his paw. He put his other paw on her shoulder and patted it as he looked down at Doctor Mac, who had her paws between Jessie’s legs. “Well now, here she comes,” she announced, “I see a little nose! Push, Jessie!” Jessie cried out for the first time, a real scream of pain and not just a grunt or groan, and she hunched her shoulders and pushed, her eyes shut tightly and a look of dreadful concentration on her face. She drew in her breath and then hunched again, giving a strained, growling cry, then she cried out again. “Almost there, Jessie, one more push!” Doctor Mac called. Jessie dropped back to the table, panted, then sucked in her breath and gave the doctor that push, again hunching up her shoulders and lifting her head off the table as she pushed. Kit actually saw Jessie’s stomach suddenly heave, then deflate noticeably, and Doctor Mac shifted from her concealed position at the base of the table. “And here she is, Laura Beth Vulpan!” Doctor Mac announced happily as the nurse rushed in. Kit saw his daughter for the first time, and she was a

wet, stained, streaked little thing that looked like a hacked-up hairball...but he expected that. Babies weren't all that pretty until *after* they were cleaned up. His heart lurched when he realized he heard no crying, and was shocked to see the nurse hold Laura up, the umbilical cord still attached, and hold her upside down just enough to tilt her head down. A thin stream of liquid issued from Laura's nose, draining from her lungs, then she took a gurgled breath, then began to cry. The nurse wrapped Laura in a blanket as Jessie held her head up to look, and Doctor Mac used forceps and a pair of scissors to cut the umbilical cord close to Laura's stomach. "Nurse Winters will go clean her up, measure her, and bring her right back, but we're not done here, Jessie," she warned. "Let's deliver out the afterbirth, and then you can hold your daughter."

At least they never took her from the room. As Jessie expelled the placenta from herself, which seemed much easier on her than the birth had been, they watched as the nurse cleaned up Laura. Kit saw almost immediately that Laura had fox markings. She had dark mittens on her paws and feet, and her tail had a three-banded tip, the Vulpan tail, a dark end with a white tip. As she was cleaned up more and more, Kit saw that she had fox coloration as well as the mittens. Most infants were born with fur on the tops of their heads rather than hair, which then grew out to become hair, but Laura wasn't like that. She was born with hair, a head full of blond hair not too far from the color of her mother's hair. The nurse looked down, then gasped and smiled as she looked into Laura's face. "Well, that's certainly a lovely pair of eyes you have, little lady," she told Laura as she finished cleaning her up.

"What color are they?" Jessie asked.

"She has her father's eyes," she answered.

“Vulpan eyes breed true!” Kit laughed, patting Jessie on the shoulder.

“Now for the important part,” the nurse said with a chuckle, measuring Laura’s length. “Twenty-one inches,” she announced. “Six pounds, eleven ounces,” she added after putting Laura on a small scale on the counter. “Completely healthy, from the looks of her. And ready for you now, Misses Vulpan.”

All cleaned up and wrapped in a blanket, the nurse brought Laura over to them. Kit’s heart melted when he saw his daughter up close for the first time, and she was *all* fox. She had fox coloration, fox markings, and she had Vulpan eyes. The only real unusual thing about her from a fox perspective was her blond hair. But that didn’t matter. If she came out all cat, Kit would have loved her just as much. After all, she loved Laura’s mother, and Laura’s mother was all cat herself. Jessie gave a happy little squeal as she gingerly took her infant daughter from the nurse, and Laura’s crying seemed to ease. Her eyes opened, her left eye amber and her right eye green, and she looked up at her parents with a startled yet sober look in her eyes, as if she was mystified by the sight of them.

“Hello, my little Laura,” Jessie cooed in a voice so tender it made Kit’s heart melt anew for his wife. “Am I glad to finally see you!” Jessie touched Laura’s face gently, lovingly, and Laura freed one of her tiny arms from the blanket and reached up for Jessie’s paw. Kit clearly saw that she had inherited at least one thing from her mother...claws. She had retracted claws on the tips of her fingers, which extended as she touched her mother’s dark-furred paw. Jessie blinked when the flash went off, Laura blinked as well, and almost started crying again had Jessie not rocked her gently on her breast.

“Now that I have the picture,” Kit chuckled, leaning down. Jessie smiled lovingly at him and helped him take hold of Laura, and he held her in the crook of his arm, gazing down at her with gentle wonder. This was *his* daughter. She was so tiny, so tiny...and so beautiful. Kit fell in love for the second time in his life, looking down at his infant daughter, Vulpan eyes staring into Vulpan eyes for a fleeting moment before Laura yawned and closed her eyes, content to be held. He held her for a long moment of utter contentment and joy, and then tenderly, carefully, and gingerly settled her back into her mother’s arms. “Happy mother’s day, my pretty kitty,” he told her with a smile. “And happy birthday, Laura Vulpan.”

“At five twenty seven a.m. on Friday, September twentieth, two thousand eight,” Doctor Macnair told them with a smile. “That makes your little girl a Virgo, you know,” she added. “Now, as soon as I get the post-partum exam out of the way, we can get Jessie back to the room so everyone can get a look at Laura.”

The post-partum exam didn’t take very long. Doctor Mac had the nurse check Jessie’s blood pressure and pulse as she performed an exam of Jessie, making sure Laura’s birth didn’t do any damage to her birth canal. It only took about ten minutes to complete, the entire time. After the exam and Doctor Mac signing off on Jessie to return to her room, with the nurse and Kit helping, Jessie very gingerly moved from the table to a waiting wheelchair, never letting go of their infant daughter. Laura didn’t wake up during the move, and Kit was the one that pushed her out of the delivery room, with the nurse and Doctor Mac right with him. They only had to go about thirty feet to get to Jessie’s private room, which had its own crib. Austin General, and Doctor Mac, were of a mind that it wasn’t good to separate the babies from the mothers after birth, so each room had a crib for

the baby. In double rooms, babies crying and keeping mothers awake might be a problem, but Austin General also didn't believe in keeping mothers in the hospital any longer than absolutely necessary. Jessie would be discharged 24 hours after the birth, during which time both mother and child would be given complete exams and check-ups to ensure they were healthy and there were no hidden complications. But once they were sure of it, mother would be back home 24 hours after delivering, with her new infant.

They helped her into her bed, and then Doctor Mac went out and allowed visitors, but she set very strict limits on time, because both Jessie and Laura needed to rest. Naturally, the first ones in were Vil, Kendall, Rick, Martha, John, and Hannah. They gathered around the bed and fussed over both Laura and Jessie. Vil laughed when she touched Laura's tiny paw. "I see you left your mark on her, Jessie, and more than just the hair," she remarked.

"She'd better have claws, or she's not my daughter," Jessie said with a weary but light smile.

"Does she have--"

"Yes, she has Vulpan eyes," Kit cut her off, which made her laugh ruefully. "Looks like I won the war," he added, smiling down at his wife and daughter. "Laura's all fox except for her claws."

"I'll beat you next time, love," Jessie smiled up at him.

"I told you the fox in you would make it certain."

"We'll see with the next one, won't we?" she challenged.

“Well, I’m just glad both you and the baby are alright,” John told them. “That nazi of a doctor of yours said we only get two minutes, so let me get a couple of pictures of the new parents and our granddaughter.”

“Too right, we need pictures,” Kendall nodded, taking out his camera.

Laura took the entire camera thing rather well. She didn’t wake up as the flashes went off, as all three couples took pictures of Jessie in bed, Laura in her arms, and Kit sitting on a stool just beside them, a paw over Jessie’s, which was over Laura. And when two minutes were up, Doctor Mac showed up and bullied them all out of the room. They were replaced by six more almost immediately, Sheila, Terry, Allison, Sam, Kevin, and Sandy, and they too were only given two minutes to visit, and the cameras came out quickly. Mike, Lilly, and Janet, who came in with the third group, made no pretenses, for their cameras were out and ready, and Mike and Janet both were already literally snapping pictures as they walked in. Kit was a bit surprised as the groups came and went every two minutes, for *everyone* they knew in Austin was there, and more than just them. Abigail and Charlie were among those who visited, and after kissing Jessie on the forehead, she patted her arm. “Winston should be here soon, and the boys will be here as soon as they can,” she promised. “Winston before the boys. He’s flying in from London, but the boys are flying in from Singapore. That’s a much longer flight.”

“That’s alright, I’m happy knowing they cared enough to drop everything to come running,” Jessie assured her.

“Why, you’re *family*, dear!” she said. “What family wouldn’t drop everything at the drop of a hat for such a happy occasion!”

It turned out that the Vulpans were that kind of family. Unlike the Brightons, the Vulpans saw the birth of Laura to be the first sign of the Apocalypse, and none of his family outside of Vil, Sheila, Muffy, and Terry came down, which was just fine with him. The presence of his family would have just been salt in his wounds, and he was just as happy that they hadn't come as they obviously were at not having to look a mixed breed Vulpan and know that the family "purity" had been compromised.

It took a while, but eventually the two minute rotations of visitors reached its end. The last ones to visit, Sandy, Lisa, the other Jessie, Danielle, and Pat, were herded out by Doctor Mac, and she closed the door meaningfully. "I want you to get some sleep now, Jessie," she commanded. "You had a very long night, and you need to recover. Just put Laura in her crib and get some sleep."

"But I don't want to let her go yet," she protested, gazing down at her sleeping daughter.

"She'll sleep better in the crib, Jessie, and take it from an obstetrician, sleep is good for her right now. She had something of an ordeal today too, after all, and she needs to rest. It's hard on more than just you, you know," she smiled. "She'll sleep a little bit, then she'll be hungry and you'll get your first opportunity to breastfeed her. So, let Kit put Laura down for a short nap, and get some sleep yourself. And no more pictures!" she declared.

Kit laughed. "I don't have to take any more, I'm sure I'll have a few thousand to choose from once the others get them all burned on DVDs."

With Doctor Mac's professional observation and advice, for the first time, Kit put his daughter in bed. He collected her up from Jessie carefully,

making sure to support her neck and head since it was very vulnerable right now, then held her for a long moment, gazing down at her with both love and wonder. But a touch on his arm reminded him he had a task to perform, so he carefully placed her in the crib bed, then carefully smoothed her fur and hair back over her eyes, between her impossibly tiny little ears. She was so small, so defenseless, Kit felt a powerful need to protect her rise up inside him, an instinctive parental response to seeing his tiny daughter lay there, so small and in need of him.

Fortunately, the crib was literally against the side of Jessie's bed on the other side of the stool, so Laura was literally within reach of her. She seemed to want to reach out for her daughter about ten times in the first minute, as Kit sat on the stool and took her paw, then he leaned over her and kissed her tenderly as Doctor Mac quietly withdrew from the room. "Congratulations, my pretty kitty," he said in a gentle voice. "We're *parents*."

"Isn't it wonderful?" she asked dreamily. "I never thought this day would get here."

"I'm just glad it's over. I hope you never go through a labor like that again."

"It was *so* worth it," she said immediately, gazing over at the crib, where her daughter was sleeping, then she yawned. "I am a little sleepy."

"You were up all night," Kit smiled at her.

"So were you."

"That's alright, I'm a Vulpan," he said with a sly smile. "I'm ten times better than other males. A little lost sleep? Ha! I can--" he cut off and

dropped his head down against her chest and made exaggerated snoring sounds, which made her laugh. “There, that’s one of the best sounds in the world,” he said as he raised his head, and he kissed her again. “Now get some sleep, pretty kitty. I’m going to go out there and face the rampaging horde, then take a little nap myself.”

“You know I can’t sleep without you near me,” she complained, reaching out and grabbing hold of his forearm.

“Then lay back and go to sleep, love. I’ll be right here until you do,” he told her, stroking her hair back from her face. She leaned back, and her expression softened and relaxed when he sang her a lullabye.

She was asleep before he was done.

Austin General’s approach to the maternity ward was definitely unusual as far as hospitals went, for they preferred mother empowerment. Babies were kept with the mother instead of a mass baby room much like what furs would see on TV. They didn’t hold a mother for any longer than absolutely necessary, sending them home usually 24 hours after childbirth, and only holding them for that long to ensure there were no complications to the mother or the baby, though they did require the mother and baby return for three exams over the two weeks after the birth. But during that time, they conducted what Doctor Mac called “life lessons,” where a nurse and Doctor Mac herself would assist the new mother with the baby for that first day to show her exactly what to do. The vast majority of mothers came into it with extensive advice or experience either with prior children or others, but it still was a good thing for the mother to *see* a nurse bathe a

baby, or feed a baby a bottle, and Doctor Mac was there to give her patients a practical lesson in breastfeeding.

Jessie's first day with Laura was filled with both hospital activity and quiet observation. She got to see how the nurses and Doctor Mac handled Laura, and she learned the best techniques for picking her up, holding her, and putting her down. From the nurse, she learned the most effective method of sponge-bathing a newborn, and she also got her first opportunity to breastfeed Laura after they both woke up, under Doctor Mac's watchful eye. Despite Jessie's intent to breastfeed Laura, she learned the proper technique for bottle feeding from the nurse as well, and Jessie was the one that had the dubious honor to be the first fur to change Laura's diaper.

But it wasn't all about the mother. Kit too underwent these simple lessons, which were simply real-life demonstrations of things he'd already been taught using his own daughter as a test subject. Jessie may have been the one to do things *first*, but Kit was right there watching, oftentimes taking pictures, and he too learned first by watching, then by doing. Kit was the one that got to change Laura's second diaper, and he bottle-fed Laura while Jessie was being given a couple of tests down the hall.

It was such a *magical* feeling to sit there holding his daughter as she nursed from the bottle, held at an expert angle, but also under the nurse's watchful eye. He still couldn't quite get over the feeling, the idea, that this exceptionally tiny little female was *his daughter*, and he felt like he was the luckiest male on earth to have such a perfect wife in Jessie, and now to have a healthy, happy, serious little baby daughter.

And oh, was she serious. Outside of when she was born, Laura had yet to truly cry. She made a few fussy sounds now and again which were instantly quelled when she was fed, but outside of that, she was a quiet little

girl. Her Vulpan eyes gave her a penetrating stare, and it also gave one the impression that she was a very intelligent and sober little femme, regarding everything and everyone around here with that serious gaze. At least when her eyes were open, anyway. Newborns slept far more than they did anything else, Doctor Mac had told them, and thus far Laura had proven the doctor right. In the ten hours that Laura had been born, she had been asleep for about nine of it. She'd woken up three times to eat, and after eating, she'd gone back to sleep after only a few minutes of activity, where she would look around, move her arms, legs, and tail, and then as if that little bit of activity tired her, she would settle down and go to sleep.

There was a constant flow of visitors in and out. John, Hannah, Vil, Kendall, and Martha had all but taken up residence in the hospital, coming in and visiting for a while before being herded out by Doctor Mac to give Jessie a little rest. Rick had gone on to work, but he dropped by with most of the gang from work around lunch to check up on them, and also so Mike, Lilly, and Janet could take even more pictures of Laura, this time by herself in her little crib. Winston Brighton arrived not long after Laura had been born and had taken his turn holding her, and the Brighton boys had arrived around noon, crowding around the bed where Jessie held Laura and showering her with praise even as they made funny faces at Laura.

When not being visited and taking care of Laura, Kit caught little naps here and there in a chair by the window. He'd sat vigil by Jessie's bed that morning until she was sound asleep, then had retreated to the chair to get a short nap. He'd been returning to that chair throughout the day, at least until Doctor Mac literally threw him out of the hospital around sunset, so he could get some rest. Not just Jessie's room, not just the fourth floor, the *hospital*. She sent him home and told him in no uncertain terms not to come

back until tomorrow morning, when he could come pick Jessie and Laura up and take them home, and he had *better* get some sleep. He would have gone crazy, but Vil took him in paw and kept him busy, kept his mind occupied, dragging him to the Brightons' vacation house to visit with his in-laws, a private affair of just Kit, Vil, Terry, and the Brightons, which was the new core of what Vil considered close family.

Naturally, they spent most of the time going through all the pictures everyone had taken, which Vil had collected up and compiled.

The pictures didn't stay private, either. The very first thing Mike did after he left the hospital was run to the office and hastily post the best of the lot he'd taken showing Kit, Jessie, and Laura on the magazine's website, which formally announced the birth of Laura Beth Vulpan to the general public. And because of the nature of the internet, it wasn't long before that picture started showing up on other websites, mainly gossip sites, and quite without Mike's permission at that. A picture of Laura even managed to find its way onto the CNN website.

Vil sent copies of the pictures back to Stonebrook by courier at Clancy and Stanley's request once Mike had a DVD of every picture everyone took compiled, which he paw delivered to the Brighton house just before they sat down to dinner.

After a distractingly pleasant dinner with the Brightons, Kit returned home to his empty house and tried to sleep, but about all he managed was to doze off on the couch with his laptop showing a slideshow of the picture DVD. He just could not get over the fact that he was a father, and he constantly wanted to look at pictures of his wife and daughter since Doctor Mac threatened to do some very mean things to him if he showed up at the hospital a *second* before 8:00am.

He disobeyed her anyway.

He was at the hospital bright and early at 7:30am, and luckily for him, Doctor Mac hadn't arrived yet. The nurses let him into Jessie's room, and he gave her a crushing hug. "Feeling better?" he asked her.

"Some, yes, thank you handsome fox," she answered. "I'm still pretty sore and a little tired, but I'm ready to go home."

"Where's Laura?"

"The nurses have her, they're giving her an exam. If she passes it, we can take her home," she answered. "I've already been cleared to go home, we just need Doctor Mac to sign me out."

"Good. Well, how does it feel to be able to see your feet again?" he asked, putting a very gentle paw on her recently deflated belly. He felt a tiny bit of residual fat there, but he knew his wife, and knew that she'd be back to her sleek, trim self as soon as she felt up to exercising.

"Feet, pft, I'm just glad I can get up out of chairs again," she laughed. "And I love holding our daughter much more than having her under my heart."

"Any of those symptoms Doctor Mac warned about?"

She giggled. "A couple," she answered. "My nipples are sore, but Doctor Mac said that would ease once I got used to feeding, and I'm wearing these pads they gave me because the milk keeps leaking out," she said, touching her breast gingerly. "It beats having dark spots on my shirt."

"Well, at least I'd know where to keep my eyes," he teased lightly. "Your folks have all but taken over the house," he told her. "Hannah

brought *pots and pans*,” he grunted.

Jessie laughed. “She’d better not hog my kitchen. I fully intend to go back to cooking now that you can’t use my pregnancy as a leash.”

“I’ll just have to get a real one,” he told her, kissing her lightly on the muzzle.

A nurse padded into the room, pushing a wheeled gurney that was more like a stroller than anything else. “And here we are, Misses Vulpan,” she called. “Laura passed her exam with flying colors, so all you need is your doctor to sign you out, and both of you are on your way home.”

Kit literally blocked Jessie from the rolling crib, reaching down and gingerly picking up his daughter. She opened her eyes and regarded him quite seriously, then she yawned impassively. “Hey, little angel,” Kit cooed to her, touching her gently with the tips of his fingers. “How was your first night free of your evil mother’s womb?”

Jessie laughed. “She had a very quiet and comfortable night,” Jessie told him. “She woke up around one because she was hungry, but outside of that, she’s been a very happy little baby.”

“In other words, a quiet baby,” Kit smiled.

“Enjoy it while you can,” the nurse said lightly. “They start quiet, but just get louder and louder as they age.”

“That’s what duct tape is for,” Kit said immediately and seriously enough to make both Jessie and the nurse gawk at him, then both erupted into laughter, which made Laura open her eyes and fuss just a little bit, voicing her displeasure at being woken up. Kit rocked her slightly in his

arm until she calmed down, which only took a few seconds, then she yawned and again closed her eyes and seemed to fall asleep.

“Is everything ready at home, love?”

Kit nodded. “I couldn’t keep your mother out of our room, but I didn’t sleep there anyway. I fell asleep on the couch watching the picture DVD Mike made. He gathered every picture everyone took of Laura and put them on one DVD.”

“Oh, good!” she said happily.

Doctor Mac filed into the room, then stopped at the doorway and chuckled. “I warned you about showing up early, Kit,” she said with a teasing smile. “But it’s good you’re here. Both Jessie and Laura have passed their physicals with flying colors, and I’m going to let them go home.”

“That’s good to hear,” Kit nodded. “When’s their next exam?”

“Monday,” she answered, “here. Then they have another exam on Thursday, and another one a week from Thursday. Hospital policy,” she added absently. “After that, Jessie’s going to have weekly appointments with me for about a month so I can make sure she recovers completely, and then I’ll be referring her to a general practitioner. I’ve already scheduled Laura an appointment to see Doctor Lewis Wilstein, the pediatrician I recommended to you. He’s the best pediatrician in Austin.”

“As long as it keeps the two most important girls in my life healthy, I won’t say a word,” he answered.

“Did you put a baby seat in your car?”

He nodded. “Already installed,” he answered. “Do I need to go get the stroller?”

“No, the hospital provides them,” she told him. “And you have to *use* it. They won’t let you carry Laura to the car.”

“Why on earth not?”

“Because they were sued five years ago by a mother who dropped her baby,” the nurse answered. “So, now the policy is the baby has to leave in a stroller.”

“Stupid furs, suing over every little thing and ruining it for everyone else,” Jessie fumed with uncharacteristic heat.

Jessie packed up her things from the hospital room as Kit signed the papers that released Jessie and Laura, and in a surprisingly short amount of time they were ready to go, but they weren’t alone. Jessie had called Vil to tell her she was being released, and Vil and all the Brightons had rushed over to the hospital to attend the happy event. Nick and Sylvia were also there, quietly accompanying Jessie, doing their jobs as guards but not being overt about it. Rick and Martha were also there, and Rick took quite a few pictures of the Vulpans exiting the hospital and moving towards their van, which Sylvia had kindly retrieved and brought to the drop-off circle outside the main entrance. A hospital nurse supervised and gave a few words of advice as Jessie transferred Laura from the stroller to the baby seat, and once the nurse was satisfied she was safely and snugly secured, Sylvia gave over the van to Kit, though she did ride in the front seat while Jessie sat in the back seat beside Laura, not wanting to even be separated from her by a car seat. Vil and Kendall were also riding with them in the third row, behind

Jessie and the baby, and the Brighton limousine was waiting to follow them back to the house.

“Ready to go?” Kit called, looking at Jessie through the rearview mirror. She gave him a thumbs-up, so he pulled out and headed towards home, driving slowly and carefully.

Sheila, John and Hannah were waiting for them at the townhouse, opening the door and rushing out as Kit parked the van. Jessie hugged her parents in tandem as the Brightons and Nick pulled up in front of the house, then the two cats gawked and marveled at the newborn infant napping in her car seat. “I have everything all ready for her,” Hannah announced as the Brightons joined them.

“Then let’s take our daughter inside,” Jessie said with a beaming smile.

“Not without pictures!” Sheila protested, taking out a video camera and rushing towards the front door. “Okay, Laura comes home, take one. Annnnd, action!” Sheila barked, putting the camera up to her face.

“Take *one*?” Winston protested. “I don’t believe that this is so difficult we have to practice!”

“I dunno, old male, you can’t seem to do anything right the first time,” Harry teased.

“Eh?”

“Wot, look at *Ken*,” he said, pointing at Kendall. “You definitely had to try again to get it right.”

“Jealous,” Kendall said airily.

“Very,” Michael agreed.

“I blame that on your mother.”

“Don’t put this on *me*, Winston!” Abigail protested. “You named him, so he’s your mistake!”

“Ken’s not a mistake,” Charlie said with a sly smile. “He’s more of an accident than a mistake.”

“A catastrophe,” Harry corrected.

“Oi, you’re not even *in* our family, Chuckie!” Kendall pointed out.

“I’m the son Winston wishes he’d had instead of you,” he answered smoothly.

“Aren’t you so glad you married into my loving family, Vil?” Kendall asked blandly.

“Yo, you’re holding up the show, here!” Sheila called from the door. “Stop preening and get moving!”

With a little fanfare, and with Lupe, Dan, Sam, Kevin, and Mickey wandering over when they realized they were home, Jessie carried Laura into the house. Hannah had moved the crib that they’d put down in the dining room into the living room, but that was easy given it was on wheels and was going to be moved around to wherever it was needed downstairs. Jessie gently placed Laura into the crib, and they all crowded around the crib to look down into it. Laura endured all the attention like a champion, looking up at them all with her calm, sober eyes, then she yawned and closed them and promptly went to sleep.

“Isn’t she just a little angel?” Sam asked in a whisper.

“She’ll be a little devil in about two years,” Kendall chuckled.
“They’re cute and lovable at this stage so you don’t murder them later.”

“Just for that, there will be no nanny, Ken,” Vil warned. “I’ll have you care for our first born.”

“I’m up to it,” he said with a smile. “Just you wait, little Laura, you’re gonna be spoiled *sooo* rotten. Billionaire grandparents-in-law, millionaire aunt, Kit and Jessie will have to buy a warehouse just to hold all your presents.”

“Shh, don’t give it away,” Abigail protested.

“I was going to buy her Rhode Island, she can put her presents there,” Vil said lightly, which made Kit laugh.

“Hey, feel like spoiling a poor yet honest lawyer?” Kevin grinned.

“There is no such thing as an honest lawyer,” Sheila countered lightly.

“We’ll let Kit and Jessie give your first born all Laura’s paw-me-downs,” Abigail said with a roguish smile.

“Hey, I’ll take ‘em,” Kevin said immediately.

“Make room, sheesh,” Lupe protested, elbowing Dan and looking down into the crib. “What a cutie!”

“She is *off limits*, Lupe,” Mickey said lightly.

“I think she’s a bit too young to go on a date, Mick,” Lupe countered.

“She’s almost your size,” Dan said calmly.

“Ahh, cork it, ya overgrown cat,” Lupe snorted, which made Jessie giggle.

“Thank God you got home in time to deliver her here, Jessie,” Dan said. “She’s not a Yankee.”

“You’re about to offend half the room, Dan,” Sam chuckled.

“True Yankees are proud of the title,” Vil told them. “I *am* a Yankee. Anyone born and raised in New England is proud to be called a Yankee. We’ll have to make Laura an honorary Yankee. She *should* have been born in Stonebrook.”

“Not in this lifetime,” Kit snorted. “This is her home, Vil, this is where she belongs, and here is exactly where she needed to be born.”

“Well, that reminds me. Have you hired a nanny to take over when Hannah goes back home?”

“Why would we need a nanny?” Jessie asked. “We can take care of Laura just fine ourselves!”

“But what about when you back to school in January?”

“I’ll be taking her to work,” Kit answered. “There are plenty of paws there to help out if I need it, and my office is big enough for a crib.”

“Besides, a nanny wouldn’t have anything to do when I’m home. And I don’t think I’d like a stranger living in our house. That would be creepy,” Jessie added.

“That’ll work until she starts crying,” Vil said. “I think you need a nanny, guys. Or a dependable babysitter if you don’t want to go the nanny route.”

“Well, *I’ll* hire a dependable nanny, and you can drop Laura off at our vacation house when you need a babysitter,” Abigail announced. “That way

the nanny doesn't live in your house, but you can still have that option."

"That's what I was going to suggest," Vil chuckled. "Bringing Laura out to my ranch, once it's built. I already have a nanny lined up that's going to move to the ranch when it's finished, and that way you'll always have an option if you need it."

"But it would be a stranger," Jessie protested.

"I think Luann would be offended if you called her a stranger," Vil chuckled.

"Luann?" Jessie asked in surprise.

Vil nodded. "She asked to be transferred down to the ranch, and I approved. Luann's taking classes and training with some professional nannies as we speak so she can do the job. I think Laura would be safe with Luann."

"Well, that's very kind of you to think of it, Vil."

"It's not *just* for you," Vil smiled. "When I have a baby, I'll need a dependable, trustworthy nanny here in Texas too, so Luann's going to be an asset to both of us. Luann misses you guys, and unlike Stanley, she doesn't have huge responsibilities that hold her in Stonebrook. When she heard about the ranch I'm building, she asked to transfer down to it so she's closer to you two."

"Aww, that's so sweet of her!" Jessie said with a smile.

"Besides, that way Laura's also close to the Arabian thoroughbred I'm going to buy for her," Vil grinned.

"Behave," Kit chided.

“Make me, brother,” she winked in reply.

“I think that’s a solid idea,” Winston agreed, reaching down and touching Laura. “Trust me, Jessie, when you’re a very busy woman, having a nanny available to help can be invaluable.”

“We had nannies to help with the boys,” Abigail agreed.

“So that’s what happened to them,” Charlie grinned. “I always wondered.”

“I think we can move this somewhere we’re not bothering the little angel,” Mickey said quietly when Laura stirred. “I think she’s trying to sleep.”

“I’m about to make breakfast,” Hannah announced. “You’re free to stay if you want.”

“She’s so free with our food,” Kit noted to Jessie, who giggled.

“Nah, I’m good, but thanks for the offer, Misses Williams,” Lupe said.

The others drifted away, one by one, until only Kit and Jessie were left. They stood by the crib, Jessie leaning into Kit and with his arm around her, as they gazed lovingly down at their infant daughter. “She’s so beautiful,” Jessie whispered.

“Almost as beautiful as her mother,” Kit answered, kissing her on the temple. “I’m just glad you’re okay and she’s okay.”

“So am I,” she answered, her fingers tracing the scars on his back absently. “Are you ready, handsome fox?” she asked cryptically.

He understood exactly what she meant. “I think I am, pretty kitty,” he answered. “We’ve waited nearly a year for this moment. With Hannah here

to prevent me from doing something stupid, I think I'm ready for this job."

"It's not a job, it's a labor of love," she said with a light laugh, leaning against him. "Emphasis on the love."

"Well, I think we're ready, pretty kitty. After all, this is what I was born to do."

"Get me pregnant?"

"Be your husband and the father of our children, and love both you and them with all my heart, for ever and ever."

She sighed in contentment. "I think you're right, love," she told him lightly, leaning against him. "I'm sure you're right, actually."

"I'm so glad," he drawled, reaching down into the crib. Jessie leaned in with him, and they both laid their paws gently and lovingly over their infant daughter. Laura stirred slightly, but remained asleep. For her, all was right with the world.

And it was also for her parents.

Chapter 42

It was strange having so many furs in their house, but then again, they were all more than welcome to be there.

Having Hannah in the house was definitely interesting, at least for him. He'd wondered if she'd be as pushy as usual in the house, but it turned out that she was quite a bit less pushy being their guest rather than them being a guest in her house. She did take over in some ways, such as pushing Jessie out of her own kitchen, but all in all Hannah was a very polite houseguest.

But Hannah was the only permanent fixture among a swirl of visitors. In the three days since Jessie had delivered, the Brightons, Rick and Martha, Vil and Kendall, and quite a few others had cycled through the house day after day to see the baby, visit her parents, or just hang out. Some visits were quick, such as John and Winston's. Both of them were very busy and couldn't make protracted visits, and had to return to their jobs the day after the delivery. Harry and Michael as well had to leave, one to go back to work and the other to return to school, the day after their father left, leaving Abigail with only Kendall for immediate family around her. Clancy had managed to come down to see Laura, but he went back home the next day because he wasn't feeling all that well. Suzy too came down to see Laura overnight, but she was about to embark on a business trip before the delivery and didn't have any extra time to visit.

It was most certainly a magnitude shift in their lives. He knew that Laura would become the absolute core of their family, the hub around

which all other activity revolved, and he was a bit surprised just how true that turned out to be. Nothing really had been done in the house since before they went to Boston that didn't have Jessie's impending birth in mind, and now that Laura and Jessie were separate, all that attention had shifted from Jessie to the baby. In the three days since the birth, Kit could barely have a single thought in his head that didn't directly or indirectly involve his little girl, and those few that escaped Laura's grip were about her mother, her beautiful, gentle, perfect mother.

For her part, Jessie had adapted very quickly to the idea of no longer being the most important femme in the house, and had done so with grace and enthusiasm. She shared Kit's devotional love to their daughter, and she had picked up quickly the core change in her daily routine to bring Laura into her life. It had only been three days, but already a pattern of sorts had surfaced. Laura was remarkably mellow for a newborn, and didn't fuss very much. She made few sounds, and those sounds were always quite serious, almost as if she were too dignified to babble or gurgle, but when she was hungry, the entire house knew it. She didn't cry so much as make a fussy sound, and that sound ceased the instant she was held to Jessie's perfect breast. She made that sound first around two in the morning, and Kit honored his promise to wake up and stay up with Jessie while she fed their baby. After Laura was satisfied, all three of them went back to sleep, at least until about seven. Kit usually woke up about then because work waited for no fur, and he'd gone back to work the day after Laura was born, showing up in the afternoon on his day off to get some work he'd neglected done and resuming his schedule the day after that by taking Sunday off. And this was where Hannah had disrupted their daily lives, for every day since she arrived, he'd come downstairs to find her in the kitchen, cooking. She had learned very quickly when Kit woke up, and made sure to have breakfast all

but waiting for him when he came downstairs. Kit didn't think she needed to cook for him, but it made her happy, and he wasn't going to push things. Around eight or so, Vil and Kendall would show up, and Abigail would arrive only about ten minutes later, and they stayed all day both days. Saturday, Winston and the Brighton boys were with them all day, but he had to return to England and Singapore. John was with them all day Saturday and most of Sunday, but he too had to return to work, since he had to teach a class at 8:30 Monday morning and he was out of vacation time. Vil and Kendall too had to return to Boston by Monday, so by Sunday night, the only one left in the house outside of them were Hannah and Abigail, though only Hannah was staying in their house.

Over the weekend, they were together, adapting to the idea of being a family. They kept Laura in a rolling crib downstairs while they were awake, keeping her close but also keeping her in the den so the bustle and noise of a filled house didn't wake her up. She'd wake up about every four hours or so and demand to be fed, but outside of that and being awake when they changed her diaper, she slept almost all the time. This was normal, Kit had come to find out. Newborns slept almost constantly just after being born, for their bodies were focusing on growing. She was active before and after feeding and before and after her diaper changes, almost like she was exercising, then she would go back to sleep. After the day was done, they moved Laura to her crib in their room, where they intended to keep her for about two weeks before moving her to her own room. They'd intended to keep her in the room longer, but both Hannah and Doctor Mac told them that the faster Laura adjusted to being alone at night, the less trouble it would cause both her and them. Hannah and Abigail spent nearly as much time teaching Kit and Jessie about how to care for an infant as they did anything else, and both of them proved to be quick learners. Between what

they were taught in the hospital and what the matrons taught them, by Sunday night Kit felt completely comfortable picking up and holding his daughter, changing her diaper, and had bottle fed her twice

But Kit and Jessie weren't the only ones who wanted to learn. Vil seemed quite acutely attentive when the two older femmes taught the new parents the tricks of the trade, and she too learned how to pick up and care for an infant. Kit didn't miss that, not one bit, and neither did Jessie. Both of them giggled a bit over it that night in bed, for Vil was demonstrating her intentions like blaring trumpets. She may be the CEO of a multi-billion dollar conglomerate, but her primary goal from the day of her marriage onward was to get pregnant and have a baby. Luckily for Kendall, that was what he wanted as well, else going to bed with her might be something of a chore.

All during the weekend, they were either constantly visited or they hosted family members. Abigail would come over as soon as she woke up and stay all day, as did Vil and Kendall. Lupe and the complex gang also found just about any reason to step over and visit, spending a few minutes cooing at Laura and the rest of the time in the living room chatting it up with the Vulpans and the Brightons. Mike and Janet both also showed up, and they took enough pictures of Laura in her crib to wake her up with the flashes and put her in a fussy mood, which got both of them coolly banished to the living room. Thank the Lord above, Laura seemed to not like excessive media attention, a trait that would make her get along very well with her parents.

That morning, Kit woke up to go to work and again found Hannah in the kitchen, fixing him a plate of Texas Mash, a local breakfast dish that was basically an omelet's ingredients scrambled into eggs instead of made

into an omelet. “Morning, dear,” she told him, setting it on the kitchen table for him as he padded in.

“I don’t think John will appreciate you calling me that, Hannah,” he teased lightly.

“Sit and eat your breakfast,” she barked commandingly, which made him laugh and exaggerate his dash to the table. Hannah sighed and shook her head, but chuckled despite herself. “Are you going to work?”

“For about two hours,” he answered. “Jessie has an appointment at the hospital at eleven, so I’ll be back around ten thirty to take them. I need to have a little chat and training session with Julie.”

“Trouble?”

“No, not trouble per se. It’s just that she was hired while I was up in Boston, and I wasn’t here to train her to our archiving system. Pat understands it, but he’s not a very good teacher,” he chuckled. “So me and her are going to go through it this morning.”

“I don’t think I met her.”

“She didn’t come when Laura was born, she has this idea in her head that she shouldn’t attend things like that until we get to know her. Silly, but she’s a very, well, *proper* young lady.”

“Sounds like a good girl.”

“Just a little insecure,” he countered. “She’s never really talked to Jessie, and didn’t know how Jessie would react to a total stranger coming to the hospital.”

“Ah, when you say it that way, you can at least understand her trepidation.”

“She’ll lose it quickly,” he chuckled. “It’s Rick’s fault more than anyone’s. He’s the one that sent Julie and RJ to San Antonio for that piece he’s doing, and they’ve barely been in the office since we got back. They barely got the chance to so much as say hello to us when they got back before Jessie went into labor. Jessie didn’t even realize we had new furs in the office until the day before Laura was born,” he chuckled. “I’ve been working with Julie over the phone and Skype since she was hired, but Jessie totally forgot Rick hired them.”

“Why did he send a researcher to work with a reporter?”

“Because Julie’s more a researcher than a writer, and he wants her to get exposure to the rest of the business. Though, we’re getting so big now, I guess everyone doesn’t really need to be a jack of all trades anymore.”

Jessie padded into the room, yawning, and Kit stood up and kissed her on the cheek. “Morning, ball and chain,” he teased.

She laughed. “Morning, pain in the butt.”

“Laura still asleep?”

“Yah, I wanted to sleep but Mom’s cooking smells too good,” she said with a smile at Hannah. “You going into work?”

He nodded. “I’ll be back in time to go to the appointment. I need to walk Julie through the archiving system.”

“Well, don’t forget,” she told him.

“Like you’ll let me forget,” he retorted. “Besides, I’m too afraid of Doctor Mac to not show up.”

She giggled. “So, now I know who to call when you need to be *punished* punished,” she noted lightly.

“That’s what she’s for,” he countered, pointing at Hannah.

“Don’t make me spank you, Kit, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, we Williams cats are not afraid of Vulpans,” she warned, which made him laugh.

“Duly noted. Lemme get dressed and head in.”

He couldn’t resist spending a good five minutes just watching Laura sleep after he got dressed, then he kissed the femmes goodbye—getting swatted by Jessie for daring to kiss her mother on the cheek—and headed into work. Rick was the only one in the office when he arrived, and he stuck his head into Rick’s open office door. “Hey boss,” he called as Rick stared at his computer monitor. “When did you get here?”

“About two minutes ago,” he answered. “Get any sleep last night?”

“Sleep isn’t the problem, Laura’s actually pretty quiet,” he chuckled. “The problem is Jessie waking up every hour to check on her when she doesn’t need to be checked on.”

“Typical new mother reaction,” Rick chuckled. “Just let her settle down some. Doesn’t Jessie have a doctor’s appointment today?”

“Yeah, I’m just in to go over some things with Julie before she goes to San An.”

“Today should be the last day they have to go. RJ’s almost done with his interviews. But, they always leave really early, so I’ll just send Pat with him today.”

Julie was almost always a half hour early, according to Rick, and she proved it by coming in about ten minutes after Kit arrived. Julie was a fellow Yankee but in name only, for she was born in Vermont and her parents moved to Austin when she was five. She was also a mixed breed; her mother was a New England red fox and her father was an Acadian wolf, which gave her a husky yet surprisingly attractive appearance. She had pattern fox markings, but she had a broad, stocky muzzle and a shaggy-furred tail that had a black tip. She was sturdy, maybe a little husky, but she was not in any way fat. Some jokingly called fat furs “big boned,” but in Julie’s case that was a pretty accurate description. She was an inch taller than Jessie and had a proportional figure for any thin, slender femme, she was just taller and a bit huskier, almost like a Nordic wolf rather than an Acadian wolf. She was also deceptively strong, and had played softball while in high school and college, so she was pretty athletic. Kit had rather liked her when he interviewed her over the phone, because she reminded him in some ways about Jessie. She had the same kind of old-fashioned propriety. The fact that she always dressed in ankle-length skirts reinforced that concept of her to many. The truth, however, was actually quite different. She was very proper to strangers and dressed modestly, but once someone got to know her, she was witty, sharp, and a trifle bit naughty, but never dirty or improper. Abigail would find Julie to be a wonderful femme.

“Morning, morning,” she called to them as she looked into the office. “Kit! Welcome back, boss!”

“I should say welcome back to you,” he chuckled, standing up.

“Julie, you’re staying here today, and I’m sending Pat with RJ,” Rick said.

“No problem, boss,” she nodded. “I’m almost tempted to ask what I did wrong,” she smiled.

Kit chuckled. “It’s what Pat did wrong, not you,” he answered. “He didn’t train you right about the archiving system. We’re gonna fix that this morning.”

“Oh, okay. Lemme get my stuff organized so Pat doesn’t have any trouble.”

In that respect, the three of them almost shared the same brain...which was another reason why Kit picked her. Kit could pick up almost anything Pat was working on and know exactly what he was doing, where he was, and usually how much work he had left, as could Pat with him. Julie had proved during her interviews that she could do the same. Using their notes, any of them could pick up where another left off if they swapped jobs going only by their notes and work.

After about twenty minutes, they got started. It was a bit different working with Julie in the office rather than over the phone or Skype, but it was much better. Julie took the chair Kit had behind his desk most often occupied by Pat, and they went through the archiving system thoroughly. The office filled up as the two of them worked, and Kit had to wave off multiple attempts by the gang to talk to him on his first day back, since he wanted to get this done before it was time to go to the doctor’s office. Julie was very smart, and she quickly picked up where she’d been making her mistakes, things Pat hadn’t taught her very well because Pat wasn’t a very good teacher.

They started at around 8:30, and they were done by 10:00. Julie had corrected her mistakes quickly, and they had a good fifteen minutes to just prattle. Julie was a modest young lady to strangers, but she had a barbed sense of humor, and their talk quickly degenerated into gossip as she told him all about some covert flirting that had been going on between Mike and Janet. “I think they’re on the verge of dating,” Julie noted in a conspiratorial whisper as Janet passed in front of Kit’s door, pausing to wave to them.

“I don’t see anything wrong with that,” Kit chuckled. “But I have a minority view around here.”

She chuckled. “You’re one of the old males now, boss,” she winked. “You need to gray your chin and wander around lamenting about the old days, then snapping at us that we’d have never made it back in your day.”

“Watch it, little missy, you’re only a year younger than me, and you dress like an old lady already.”

She laughed. “Leave my skirts out of this!”

“Oh no, there are no out of bounds in war,” he retorted. “That reminds me. You busy tonight?”

“Not particularly.”

“Good. Six o’clock, my townhouse. Bring wine.”

“Boss! Are you asking me out? And you just had a baby girl!” she gasped in mock astonishment.

“You need to get to know Jessie so you don’t have to think you’re not the same as the rest of *them*,” he answered, motioning towards the door.

“So, you want me to become a drunken reprobate?”

Kit laughed. "Yes, time to seduce you to the Dark Side."

"Ohhhh, you're gonna seduce me. I'm all aflutter."

"Go finish Pat's project," he told her curtly, but he was grinning.

"Yes, boss," she answered flippantly, then bounced up from the chair and all but skipped out of his office.

Yeah, Julie was gonna fit in perfectly around here.

But he wasn't done yet. He called RJ's Blackberry as he got ready to leave. "This is RJ," his bass voice intoned.

"RJ, it's Kit. When are you getting back from San An?"

"We're almost there now. I have one interview to do, and we're coming back," he answered. "So maybe around two or three."

"Good. You busy tonight?"

"Not really."

"Why don't you come to dinner at my house? You need to get to know Jessie, and she'd love to talk with you."

"And you can show off your daughter?"

"Well, that too," he said honestly. "Six o'clock good?"

RJ chuckled. "Sounds good. I'll be there."

Kit hurried home after hanging up, where Hannah and Jessie were already getting Laura ready for her first trip out of the house since coming home. To his surprise, Sylvia was there as well, holding the baby bag Jessie

had decided to carry when taking Laura out. “Your furniture arrive yet, Sylvia?”

“*Ja, Herr* Kit,” she answered.

“Need help getting it set up?”

“*Nein*, the boys helped me.”

“The boys?” he asked.

Sylvia smiled slightly. “The wolf, Krichek, and Barnett. I made sure to make them rearrange the living room five times before settling.”

Kit laughed. “Keep ‘em on their toes, Sylvia.”

“Always,” she murmured.

“What are you doing over here? Just visiting?”

She shook her head. “*Fraulein* Jessie never leaves the house without an escort,” she answered. “Nick’s rules,” she added quickly. “He felt it was safe to allow you to leave the house alone because you aren’t overly distracted, but since *Fraulein* Jessie has the baby, he felt that she needed extra eyes with her at all times.”

“You know I’ll never complain a bit when it comes to keeping my Jessie safe,” he assured her.

“Good,” she nodded.

“You made it on time, handsome fox,” Jessie noted as she came into the room holding Laura in a clever little handled carrier, their daughter safely tucked in with a blanket over her, already asleep.

“And have Hannah skin me if I’m late, then face the wrath of Doctor Mac when we get there? Please,” he snorted, which made Jessie giggle. “Oh, by the way, love, I invited RJ and Julie over for dinner tonight so you can get to know them.”

She laughed. “Then we’re gonna be crowded, because I invited over Amanda, Luke, and David, and Abby said she’d be over after our appointment!”

“We have a big table,” he shrugged. “I’ll do the coo—“

“Aaaat!” she barked, pointing at him. “You can’t keep me out of my kitchen anymore! *I’ll* cook!”

“Alright, alright, I know better than to get between you and your favorite toy.”

“That’s right,” she said, blowing him a kiss, and making Sylvia snort to suppress a chuckle.

Hannah accompanied them as they piled into Jessie’s van, her mother watching carefully and only giving advice once as Jessie and Kit placed Laura in her car seat. Kit drove them to Doctor Mac’s office, for one of their last month of appointments with her before Jessie was referred to a general practitioner who was well versed in post-partum femmes. Laura had already been referred to a pediatrician, a doctor named Assan Sahib, and Jessie was supposed to schedule an appointment for Laura this morning. Hannah and Sylvia were stuck in the waiting room as Doctor Mac examined both Jessie and Laura, checking Jessie for any complications after her delivery and checking Laura to make sure she was alright and developing normally. But, to Kit’s delight, both mother and daughter were rosily healthy, leaving Doctor Mac to nod approvingly when she scribbled on a

chart. How she wrote with those claws mystified Kit, but then again, he was equally amazed she could do her job as an obstetrician without clawing up her patients. “Next appointment is Thursday, same time,” she told them. “Did you call and schedule your first appointment with the pediatrician I recommended?”

“This morning,” Jessie answered with a nod. “Our first appointment is tomorrow.”

“Good. You’ll like Doctor Sahib.”

“I hope I can understand him.”

Doctor Mac chuckled. “He’s from Brooklyn, hon, son of immigrants. He’s also the best pediatrician in Austin. I think you’ll like him.”

“As long as he keeps Laura healthy, it’s all good,” Kit said simply.

As Jessie carried Laura out of the exam room, Hannah and Sylvia stood up. “How did it go, Jessica?”

“Just fine, Mom, we’re both healthy.”

“Disgustingly healthy,” Doctor Mac added, which made Jessie giggle. “Confirm the appointment with the receptionist, and I’ll see you on Thursday.”

“Sure thing, Doctor Mac,” Jessie answered. “Have a good day.”

“Two new patients today. Two new husbands to train,” she grunted, which made Kit laugh.

“Get out the whip.”

“I may need it.”

“Whip?” Sylvia asked.

“Doctor Mac has certain standards she expects out of the husbands,” Kit explained as Jessie talked to the receptionist, a rather perky poodle. “Things like showing up at the appointments with the wives, being engaged and involved with the wife’s pregnancy, that kind of thing.”

“Ah. I can see why she may need a whip.”

Kit had his family back home by one, and he returned to work to finish out the day. He still felt a little scattered, and had to really focus to get things done, since he constantly started musing and daydreaming about his new daughter, about his new family, and all the plans he had for them. He also had to chuckle a little ruefully when he checked his bank account, now full to overflowing with Vulpan money.

Odd how suddenly having a daughter to care for could change a male’s morals. A year ago, Kit would have simply shipped that money right back to Vil, and done so with a few very ugly words to her about her meddling. But now, with Laura laying in a crib back home, he found that his towering morals about making it on his own, without any help from his sister or family, were wavering *slightly*. Kit still wanted to make it on his own, to prove to himself and his family that he could be successful, but he now had more than just himself and Jessie to consider. He had a daughter, he had a baby, and that single fact made that money sitting in the money market account look much less threatening and ominous. He would not use that money in the business, but he would keep it in there *just in case*.

He tended that bit of business after getting settled back in. He called the bank and discussed the available options for trusts, for he fully intended to take most of the money Vil had tricked him into taking and put it in a

trust for their children. That money was not his or Jessie's, it belonged to their children, and he intended to keep it separate from their money. Vil may have managed to push money at him beyond what he wanted, but she was going to learn that that money was only his for as long as it took him to deposit it into a trust.

He settled on one of the bank's blind trusts, that would stay open-ended so that when they had more children, their names could be added to it. It also had attractive options, reasonable fees, and no penalty for early withdrawal so long as the trust had over \$100,000 of total balance and they took out no less than 10% of the balance, which also wouldn't drop the balance under \$100,000. Given that about \$400,000 would be going into that trust per year until Kit freed himself of Vil's claws and resigned from the board, he felt that it was the trust with the best options.

He called Jessie, and she reluctantly left Laura with Hannah as she met him at the bank. The manager went over all the details for Jessie's benefit, and in about an hour, they had the trust opened with an initial deposit of \$125,000. "And, there we are," the thin white mouse manager noted as Jessie signed the forms. "When you receive your quarterly deposit from the Vulpan company, all but thirty thousand dollars of it will automatically be deposited into the trust. In addition, all but two hundred dollars of your weekly deposits will be deposited in the trust, Misses Vulpan."

"That's exactly what we want," Jessie said.

"Yep, that way I don't have to come down here every three months and mess with this," Kit agreed.

Kit walked Jessie out of the bank, into a hot but dry later summer day. "No separation anxiety?" he asked with a chuckle.

“A *little*,” she admitted, then she giggled when he patted her on the shoulder compassionately. “This is the first time I’ve left her alone.”

“She’s not alone, Hannah’s with her.”

“You know what I mean,” she replied.

“You’ll live,” he grinned.

“Mom’s throwing me out of the house tomorrow,” she protested.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean she called Sheila and told her to come get me after class tomorrow and take me out, without telling me!” she told him. “She told me to go play golf!”

Kit laughed. “Now that’s the Hannah I know and love. Any reason why she did it?”

Jessie’s cheek fur ruffled slightly “She said I have to remember that there *is* life outside of Laura,” she answered. “She said I should still do my hobbies, and that she knows me and I wouldn’t take a single foot outside unless she makes me.”

“That seems only healthy to me, love,” he told her calmly. “You *do* need a little time to yourself, and as long as you feel recovered enough to go play some golf, it’ll be good exercise for you.”

“I think so. I’m still just a tiny bit sore,” she told him.

“You can’t spend every waking moment with Laura, if only because it prevents me from subverting her and making her a daddy’s girl.”

“Cheater!” Jessie accused with a giggle.

“I never pretended to be fair,” he grinned. “So, tomorrow you and Sheila and Ally can hijack Sam and go play a round, and me and Laura will be there waiting when you come home.” He glanced at her. “And she was right that she had to kick you in the butt to get you out of the house.”

“I can’t help it,” she laughed as they approached Jessie’s van. “I love her so much, I don’t want to leave her for a second.”

“Hey, where’s the sympathy for me?” he challenged. “I have to go earn us a living, you treacherous femme! You just sit home and get all the time in the world with our daughter and spend my money!”

“Just the way it should be,” she said primly. “That’s the only reason I married you, after all.”

“You cheap little gold-digger,” he accused, then she laughed when he tickled her. “I’ll deal with you when I get home!”

“So brave when he’s in public,” she taunted as she unlocked her van. “We’ll see how brave you are when I have a pillow handy!”

“You’ll see,” he wagged a finger at her. “Need me to bring anything home?”

“Nah, I’ll pick it up myself on the way home. We’re having lasagna.”

“Sounds good. Remember, you’re feeding nine.”

“More like twelve, since someone’s bound to crash dinner,” she amended, to which he could only chuckle and nod in agreement. “I’ll enjoy it. Finally, allowed back in my own kitchen!” she exclaimed, kissing him on the muzzle. “See you at home, handsome fox.”

“I should be home on time, pretty kitty. Drive safely,” he told her as he helped her into the van, then closed the door for her. She blew him a kiss after starting the van, put on her seat belt, and he watched her pull out and onto the street. And just behind her, Barnett pulled out of a parking spot driving a Toyota sedan, probably an Altima or Camry, waved to Kit, then followed her out.

Nick was serious about not letting Jessie go *anywhere* without an escort. And it was darn considerate of him not to have Sylvia follow her around all the time, to make her feel like she was under constant scrutiny. Jessie may not even be aware one of the guards was following her, and Kit rather liked that idea.

Kit ended up simply bringing RJ and Julie with him when he left work, having them follow him back to the townhouse. He could see that Abigail was already there when he parked behind his Pathfinder, for she was sitting on the front porch with Hannah, sipping a glass of wine as the two matrons talked. “Hannah, Abby, I’d like to introduce RJ and Julie, from work. Guys, these are the evil mother-in-laws, Hannah and Abby.”

“I’m not evil, I’m just a nagger,” Abigail said cheekily as she stood up. “Nice to meet you, duckies! Kit’s friends are my friends.”

“That’s a lovely dress, Julie,” Hannah said as she took her paw. “Quite proper.”

“I’m just a proper girl, Misses Williams,” she said with a bright smile, showing off her long fang-like canines.

“It’s the proper ones that cause the most trouble,” RJ noted dryly to Kit.

“Tell me about it, I’m married to one,” Kit agreed with a nod, which earned him a tart look from Hannah.

Julie was in her pattern “wait and see” mode when they went in, being friendly but a little quiet, feeling things out as Jessie talked to her and RJ, then showed off Laura to them. RJ, on the other paw, was asking about a thousand questions of Abigail, trying to learn what it was like for her to be the wife of one of the most powerful foxes in Britain, the venerable and formidable Winston Brighton. RJ even referred to him as such, which made Abigail burst into laughter. “If you called him venerable, he’d box your muzzle for being cheeky,” she told him. “He’s only fifty-four, RJ. A fox doesn’t *have* to be old to run a company, you know.”

“If you called Vil venerable, she’d have one of her panthers brain you,” Kit added, which made Julie laugh, then quickly cover her mouth with her paw and look a bit contrite.

“Besides, Winston gets enough of that from his sons,” Kit said lightly.

“Part of the eternal Brighton War,” Abigail laughed. “It starts when they start pecking at each over their football teams, then it descends into pranks and names. Never live in a house where all the males support different football clubs, Julie dear. It’s a recipe for disaster.”

“That’s your fault for not pushing *your* team at them when they were young and impressionable,” Kit noted.

“Yes, John made sure to *infect* our daughters with their love for the Bengals at a young age,” Hannah agreed.

“And you don’t cheer when they score a touchdown,” Kit teased.

“It’s cheer or sleep on the couch,” she retorted, which made him laugh.

David, Luke, and Amanda arrived about a half an hour later, and Jessie waited not five seconds to proudly show Laura off to them. Amanda held the infant while the two instructors took pictures and cooed at her, then she carefully gave her back to her mother. “Well, now that my maternal instincts are mollified,” she laughed. “I haven’t held a baby like that since my son got too big to fit in the crook of my arm.”

“How goes training the clueless?” Kit asked as Jessie scurried back to the kitchen after placing Laura in her crib.

Luke laughed. “It’s not that bad. We’re not training quite as many as usual thanks to the recession, but there’s enough traffic to keep me off the unemployment line.”

“Sad to say,” Amanda sighed. “Word is they’re going to consolidate the factories. Close the Columbia factory and move it to Kansas. They say it’s costing too much to run factories halfway across the country from each other. They want to move the four hundred production into the prop factory.”

“They’re not discontinuing the four hundred, are they?” Kit asked in concern.

She shook her head. “No, they sell too well for them to drop it. But, rumor is that they might suspend the production of the Columbus until the market improves. That might be a good idea. I’d hate to see them shelve the program, but if there’s no market for them when we start building, it’s best not to spend the money on the program now. Just wait until the economy rebounds and restart the program.”

“Yeah, sounds smart,” Kit agreed. “Just hold off until you can sell them.”

“At least the Vulpans are keeping us in the black,” Amanda laughed. “We sell two four hundreds to you and your cousin, and Vilenne bought two CJ ones and a CJ three for the shipyard. We should be making delivery of the first one in about two weeks.”

“I figured that was coming,” Kit chuckled. “I wonder why she bought three, since she already has two jets.”

“From what I heard, she’s basing two of the jets in Boston, and one in New Orleans,” she answered. “Not that that’s really my department, since I’m the training manager, but word gets around. It’s easy when we’re all within a hundred miles of each other and most of us have pilot’s licenses,” she chuckled.

“She’s giving Terry a jet,” Kit reasoned. “I guess he needs one, since he’s on the board. He’d need a way to get back to Boston when he’s needed and not have to wait for a jet to come down from Boston, and board execs don’t fly commercial,” Kit snorted. “She probably gave him the CJ three.”

“I wouldn’t want to make that trip in a CJ one over and over,” David agreed. “That’s a long trip in a one.”

“Enough with the shop talk,” Abigail said. “Us normal furs have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“Oh, we can fix that for you, Misses Brighton,” Amanda said with a wolfish smile. “You say the word, and I’ll have David here personally train you up for your own pilot’s license.”

“So you can sell me a jet, eh?”

“Well, wouldn’t you want to buy what you learned in?” she asked with an innocent smile.

“Clever girl, I wasn’t born yesterday! I was born last week, but could talked into being born yesterday when it comes to pawbags,” she said in a surprisingly close imitation of Kendall’s airy demeanor.

“Quit trying to sell everyone in this house a jet, Amanda!” Jessie called from the kitchen. “And someone come set the table, dinner’s almost ready!”

RJ shifted his grilling of Abigail to grilling just about everyone around the table, his reporter’s instincts going into overdrive as he tried to sniff out anything he could turn into a story, but that stopped after about his third bite of lasagna, when he realized that it was *good*. They enjoyed Jessie’s first uninterrupted meal cooked in her own kitchen, and she went out of her way to make it as sumptuous as possible. “Oh dear, Jessica, you outdid yourself,” Abigail said with a contented sigh as she finished dessert, which was a mousse recipe taught to her by the Stonebrook chefs.

“Thanks, Abby,” she said, then she laughed when Laura started fussing from the den, placed in there so the noise wouldn’t disturb her. “At least she let me eat a hot meal,” she said as she stood up. “I’ll be back in a while. It’s time to bring her back out anyway.”

“She’s just unhappy she missed this meal,” Julie told her.

“Too bad there’s so much left over,” Amanda noted.

“Yes, you can take some home with you,” Jessie said as she pushed in her chair. “And there’s a big box of pastries for you to at least pretend to take back to Kansas with you. I doubt any will make it out of Texas.”

“Dang, she knows us too well,” David laughed.

“Hey, it’s our treat for actually coming down here,” Luke added. “We put in the miles, that means we get the goodies.”

“How are those two doing, by the way?” Kit asked curiously.

“Marvelously,” Luke answered. “Sheila plays a lot, but she learns quick and she’s honestly interested. I think Dave has too much trouble keeping his eyes on the MFD to really teach Allison very much,” he said with a sly look at his partner. “We flipped a coin for who gets to train Allison, and he cheated.”

“Not that it matters, she’s taking her qualification ride tomorrow,” he answered. “I think the fact that *my* student is going to be qualified *days* before *your* student demonstrates just who is doing the better job.”

“Allison has a very good reason to be certified as fast as possible, since that’s her ticket to New Orleans,” Kit mused. “I’ll bet money that if you certify her by noon, she’ll come beg to borrow our plane, then be in New Orleans by six.”

“She has relatives there?”

“Terry is there,” he answered. “My cousin. They’re dating. The entire reason she learned to fly was so she could fly to New Orleans and see him, since he’s very busy and doesn’t always have time to come here.”

“That sounds like there might be another wedding in the Vulpan family soon,” Julie noted.

“I’d be shocked if there wasn’t,” Abigail said. “You can tell by looking at them that they’re mad for each other.”

“I can hear the screams from Boston already,” Kit said with a dark chuckle.

“Why is that?” Julie asked.

“Allison isn’t the *right type* for a Vulpan, Julie,” Kit said scornfully. “She’s not rich, she’s not from an established family, and they disapprove of her. The only thing they see as a saving grace is that she’s a fox. If another Vulpan married outside the breed, I think they’d have apoplexy.”

“Just goes to show that background doesn’t make the fur,” Abigail said sagely. “I’ve never met a smarter girl than Ally, except maybe Vil, but that’s a serious toss-up. She’ll do well with Terry. That boy is just too smart for his own good, he needs a femme that can shake his tree when he gets too smug.”

“Enough talking about my dysfunctional family,” Kit snorted. “How have things been in Kansas?”

“Fine, fine,” Amanda said. “We still have a waiting list for training, so that means we’re still selling planes, so that means at least we keep our jobs,” she laughed. “I need to get you and Jessie on the schedule, though. When in November are you coming up?”

“Oh, I dunno, we haven’t really talked about it yet,” he answered.

“Have you been studying your manuals?” David asked.

“When we can,” he answered. “Jessie’s been studying more than me,” he admitted with a rueful chuckle. “Then again, she had all kinds of time. After we got back from Boston, I had work, and she just sat around the house doing nothing.”

“Ducky, she’s gonna whack you,” Abigail laughed.

“Oh, I know,” he grinned. “It’s about time she needs to punish me anyway,” added dryly.

Jessie brought Laura out from the den after feeding her and let everyone gawk and coo and pay attention to her, and Kit got the rare opportunity to hold his daughter for more than a few minutes as Jessie got settled on the couch. “Alright Jessie, you need to pick a date for your commercial,” Amanda announced after they sat down.

“Oh, I don’t really know,” she answered. “Laura will be close to two months by then, so I think she’ll be old enough to handle the transition.”

“Are you ready?”

“You mean have I been studying? Yeah,” she answered, giving Kit a cool look. “I had to do *something* while sitting around doing *nothing*, you know.”

“Busted,” David laughed.

“I’m holding Laura, she won’t dare hit me.”

“You won’t be holding her long,” Abigail noted.

“I’ll just hold her hostage until Jessie forgets all about it. She’s flighty, all I have to do is dangle a shiny trinket to save myself. It’s a cat thing, I think.”

“Oh really?” Jessie asked with an edge in her voice.

“Yup,” he answered with a sly smile. “You’ll even forget about this conversation.”

“I think you forget there’s more than one cat in this room, young male,” Hannah noted sharply.

“I think we need to give him a bigger shovel,” Julie giggled.

“Nah, popcorn,” RJ answered, which made Julie laugh.

“Actually, I think this is part of his clever plan to gently push us all out of here so he can have his daughter all to himself,” Amanda said with a light smile. “And he has a point. It’s getting a little late, and I have an appointment in the morning to finalize the sale of a CJ one to AAIA.”

“They’re going through with it?” Kit asked.

She nodded. “Yup. They might even call you to see if you wouldn’t mind doing a little instruction from time to time,” she told him. “You’re one of only three certified CJ one flight instructors in the Austin area. At least right now,” she chuckled. “AAIA’s sending three of their CFAs to Kansas for training.”

“Lucky dogs, I bet they fought over which three get to go,” Kit noted.

“Not entirely, since AAIA is making *them* pay for the training,” Amanda said.

“Wow, and they’re standing for that?”

“I guess they are, since half of what I’m doing down there tomorrow is putting their CFAs on the schedule. And only two of them have to pay. The third is going as the free pilot trainee.”

“How much will it cost them?” RJ asked curiously.

“The CJ one rating program is two and a half weeks, and costs seven thousand dollars,” Amanda answered.

“Wow, that’s a lot.”

“That’s about average for a small jet rating. If they were training to the ten, it would be twelve thousand.”

“Well, the ten’s not for the meek,” Kit noted, staring down at his daughter, who was falling asleep. “It’s for serious pilots only. And I think it’s time to put a certain someone down for a nap.”

Laura’s needs also broke up the party. Jessie boxed up the leftovers for the Cessna gang, and they all said their goodbyes and went back to their hotel. RJ and Julie hung around about half an hour longer, talking with Jessie, then they too said goodnight and went home. Kit cleaned up after they were gone, as Jessie and her mother were talking in the living room, and Jessie caught up to him in the kitchen as he was washing the pans too big to fit in the dishwasher. She looped her arms around him and hugged him around the waist, putting her chin over his shoulder. That wasn’t that hard for her to do, since she was only about three inches shorter than him and could get her head to his level by standing on her toes. “So, I wonder what I should do since I do so little around here,” she said in a barbed voice, digging her claws slightly into his lower stomach.

Kit laughed. “I’ve been far too good lately, and needed to find some reason to be punished. Laura just makes me too respectable,” he surmised as he rinsed the pan.

“Well, I think I can find a suitable punishment for a naughty fox later tonight,” she breathed near his ear in a manner that made his tail threaten to stand straight out. It had nowhere to go, though, so it jammed up against her hip and made her laugh.

“Feeling well enough?”

“I’m not sore anymore,” she said huskily, “and maybe you wouldn’t be naughty if I saw to a few of your male needs.”

“And a few of your female ones,” he teased lightly.

“It’s your duty as my husband to see to those needs, and you, sir, have been slacking on the job!” she declared, caressing his stomach, almost kneading her claws against his fur. “You should have sensed that I’ve recovered and been there, but noooo, you were too busy being a bad boy to be sensitive to me!”

“Digging your own grave,” he teased in a singing voice.

“We’ll see who’s digging who’s grave tonight,” she whispered.

Jessie gave him motivation to turn in far too early for Hannah not to be a little suspicious, and it was certainly a little...awkward. Neither of them had really considered the thought that Laura was *in the room* with them when they put her down for the night and climbed into bed, and Hannah and Abigail’s insistence Laura be in a room of her own suddenly made a lot more sense. But, urges overrode propriety.

Jessie woke him up an hour before he was supposed to be up. She was all but laying on his back, a finger unerringly tracing the scars on his back and her head and muzzle nuzzled in against the back of his head. She was purring in contentment, and it was that purring that awakened him. It was one of the sounds she made that instantly got his attention no matter if he was awake or asleep, and he was content to just lay there and listen to that wonderful music.

Jessie, however, was just as sensitive to him as he was to her. She knew he was awake, but didn’t say anything, just kept stroking the scars over his back with her fingers. He laid there and submitted to her tender attentions for nearly fifteen minutes before she finally spoke. “Morning,” she whispered.

“Morning love,” he said quietly back. “Feeling alright?”

“Just fine, no soreness, no pain,” she answered. “Sorry I woke you.”

“You can wake me up any time, silly kitty,” he told her with a low chuckle. “Especially when you’re feeling kittenish.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” she whispered, nipping playfully at his damaged ear.

“Oh, are we feeling frisky?”

“Not really, I’ve just missed snuggling. We haven’t really snuggled much since Laura was born.”

“Exhaustion and your mother,” he chuckled, worming under her until he was on his back, and she settled into his arms. “But we’ll find some couch snuggle time tonight after you get back from golf, I promise.”

“Golf, yeah,” she said. “Mind if I’m late getting in?”

“Not at all. An idea?”

“There’s that public course down in New Braunfels. Remember it?”

“Oh yeah. So, my pretty kitty’s feeling the flying bug biting her butt, eh?”

She giggled. “I haven’t flown the plane for a while. I hope I’m not rusty.”

“You should have plenty of time,” he told her. “Sheila might have to bow out of her flight training after school today to do it, though. And if Allison passes her certification, you know she’s gonna fly to New Orleans as soon as Dave signs the form, in *our* plane.”

“Well, New Braunfels is only like fifty miles from here so we can drive, and I think I’ll see if Sam and Kevin want to go. Sam’s pretty good, and Kevin’s been talking about learning. May as well get him started. It’ll give them something to think about other than the wedding,” she grinned. “Unless you want to go, that is.”

“Nah, I’ll stay here with Laura and work on making her Daddy’s girl,” he answered, which made her giggle. “I like golf, but my back doesn’t.”

“Vil said you’re actually really good at it.”

“I’m not bad, but like I said, my back starts twinging by the fifteenth hole.”

“Well, think you can play nine holes with us this weekend? You’ve never once came to play golf with us, not even to just watch.”

“Never?” he asked in surprise.

“Not once,” she answered.

“Well, we’ll fix that,” he told her. “I can probably handle nine holes. What, trying to keep me away from Laura?”

She grinned at him. “Keeping you from spoiling our daughter,” she winked in the darkness. “Besides, I want to play golf with my husband,” she cooed, kissing him languidly on the muzzle. “Even if you only golf for two holes and then drive me around in the cart afterwards.”

“Oh, so you just want a chauffer,” he retorted, putting his paws on her sides and tickling her, which made her giggle and writhe atop him.

“I want to spend a little time with my husband doing something we both like to do,” she answered. “I know your back won’t let you play a full

round, but that's no reason to play a *little* and quit before it starts hurting. Just promise that you'll stop if it hurts, Kit. And I mean *promise*."

"My word as a Vulpan, I'll stop if it starts to hurt," he answered immediately.

"Good enough for me," she said, giving him a long, lazy kiss. "It keeps me off the tennis court."

"Ha, I knew you had ulterior motives!" he accused.

"Too late, you're playing golf instead of beating me up on the tennis court now," she teased.

"Can't even beat a cripple, you're such a pathetic tennis player," he taunted.

"Oh, you're getting it now, buster," she giggled, and they woke Laura up as they wrestled on the bed, laughing. Laura gave a fussy sound that quelled both of them instantly, and they looked over in the darkness to her crib. "Uh oh, we're being scolded," she giggled as she got out of bed and went over and picked her up, calming her.

Kit yawned, watching his wife comfort their infant, and for a moment he felt as if life was complete. This was all he had ever wanted out of life. Not a wife, not money, not really even a child...he had always wanted a place where he knew he *belonged*. And that was this place. With the love of his life, the first of hopefully many children to come, a good job he enjoyed and the potential to spread his Vulpan fingers through the business world of Austin and eventually take control of it—he *was* a Vulpan, after all—and the opportunity to prove to himself that he could make it on his own, this was where he belonged. This was what he always wanted out of life.

He was an Austin Vulpan.

Jessie looked at him, and as usual, her sensitivity to him told her that he was having weighty thoughts. She smiled at him, bouncing Laura in her arm, then she sat on the edge of the bed. “Look at her, my handsome fox,” she whispered. “If we ever did one thing right in our lives, it’s right here. She’s going to be special. I can feel it. I don’t know how or why, or what she’s going to do, but she’s going to be so special.”

“I think you’re right,” Kit breathed, putting his arm over her shoulders. “How can any child of Jessica Vulpan be anything but special?”

She gave him a heart-melting look, and leaned against him. “I love you, Kit.”

“I love you more, Jessie.”

“Not possible,” she said with a slight smile, glancing at him. “Because nobody on Earth could love anyone more than I love you.”

“Well,” he said in a slightly teasing tone, then he chuckled and kissed her on the cheek. “I won’t challenge that declaration, if only because it makes me feel good.”

She kissed him, then stood back up. “Well, I’m up and I’m not really sleepy,” she complained. “May as well start breakfast.”

“I’ll be down in a bit,” Kit told her.

“Any requests?”

“Pancakes?”

“I’ll have a stack ready for you,” she told him as she picked up her robe from the back of the vanity’s chair, then pulled it on as she started for

the door.

Kit dozed a little, then went down for breakfast, bringing Laura down with him. To his surprise, both Abigail and Sheila were at the kitchen table with Hannah, and Sheila was chowing down on pancakes. “What are you doing up so early?” Kit asked her as he placed Laura in the rolling crib by the table.

“Big day today,” she grinned in reply. “I have my first project in culinary arts today. We have to plan a menu.”

“Wow, already? I thought they saved that kinda stuff for the later semesters.”

She shook her head. “Half of it is learning the business of being a chef,” she answered. “And stuff like multitasking. They don’t just teach me how to cook, they teach me how to cook three things at once while listening to a waiter bitch.”

Hannah gave her a frosty look. “Watch your language, young lady,” she warned.

“You’re guarding a glassless window there, Hannah,” Abigail chuckled.

“I’m a bad girl, Hannah,” Sheila grinned shamelessly at her. “You’ll never change me.”

“You’ll find out how wrong you are,” Hannah retorted.

“It’s your gray hair,” Sheila shrugged, then she glanced at her watch. “Shit, I’m late!” she barked, jumping up quickly. “Later cousin, thanks for the pancakes Jessie, and bye old femmes,” she said as she rushed out.

“Where are you going at seven in the morning?” Kit called after her.

“Working out before class, won’t have time after!” she shouted as the door opened, then slammed shut.

Hannah looked a bit miffed, but Abigail just laughed. “She’s a plucky one, daring to call us old,” she grinned. “I think we have to take little miss young thing down a peg or two, Hannah.”

Hannah gave her an ominous little smile. “What do you have in mind?”

“Not sure yet, but I’ll think of something,” she answered, then she looked at Kit. “Say, do you have a key to her apartment, Kit dear?” she asked, which made Kit laugh.

“Actually, I do,” he answered.

“Alright, that opens up the possibilities,” Abigail grinned, which made Jessie splutter, then start giggling over the stove.

Around two, David called and told him that Allison was taking her check ride. At around four, he called back and told him that she passed. “I thought I was check riding someone who’d owned that plane for ten years,” he chuckled as Kit was letting Julie and Pat argue over a piece of research Julie did. “That girl is almost frighteningly intelligent, Kit.”

“That’s why she’s perfect for Terry, who’s an honest-to-goodness genius. So she’s certified?”

“Yup. I already filed the paperwork with her insurance carrier, so she’s certified in a four hundred.”

“Which means I should get off the phone because I’m about to get a begging phone call.”

“You should hear the call waiting beep any second,” David answered with a chuckle. “She said she was going to fly there if she passed, and since she won’t get the plane til next month, yours is the only one around.”

“I feel sorry for Sheila. She more or less bought that plane, and if she gets to fly it once a month, it’ll be a miracle.” He then heard the call waiting beep. “And there she is.”

David laughed. “Well, make her beg for it.”

“I can do that.” He ended his call with David and picked up. “Ally,” he called.

She laughed. “He ratted me out, didn’t he?”

“Yup.”

“Well, I’m flipping him off as we speak,” she told him, which made him laugh. “So, Kit, seems I just got my four hundred rating, and our plane isn’t here yet,” she trailed off hopefully.

“Yes, you can borrow the plane,” he said, which made her give a happy little squeak. “Meet me over by our parking spot so we can at least go over my plane. It has a few little quirks you need to know about.”

“Sure thing. I’ll be waiting for you.”

He hung up and got his juniors’ attention. “I’m leaving a bit early, you two have your epic battle and tell me how you want to do it when I get home. Ally passed her check ride, and I’m letting her borrow our plane to go to New Orleans tonight.”

“Cool, tell her grats from us!” Pat said with a smile.

After walking Ally through the little things unique to his 400, he watched her take off without a single worry. If David said she was certified, he had no worries at all that she would bring the plane back in one piece. After sending her off to see Terry, Kit ended up watching Laura, which he was actually looking forward to doing, while Hannah pushed Jessie out of the house. Allison had probably landed in New Orleans by the time Jessie left, so she ended up taking Sam, Kevin, and Sheila to play golf at that public course down in New Braunfels while he got his chance to subvert Laura to his camp. Hannah and Abigail just seemed amused as he kept hold of her most of the time, cooing to her, holding her gently as she slept, feeding her, then parking himself on the couch and spending nearly an hour just looking at her, in gentle-eyed wonder.

She was feeding again when Jessie got home, her golf bag on her shoulder and looking maybe just a touch tired. “Hey, handsome fox,” she smiled as she set the bag in the foyer. “How is she?”

“Just fine, and I’m stunned you didn’t call once an hour to check up on us.”

She laughed. “Sheila took my phone the first time I tried,” she admitted, which made Kit grin at her. “You’re still here, Abby? Did he at least remember to cook dinner for you?”

Abigail grinned. “He hasn’t so much as put her down once since you left,” she retorted, giving Kit a sly look. “Hannah was the one that cooked dinner.”

“Kit!” Jessie declared.

“Hey, you have her all day, and she’s asleep most of the time when I get home,” he said defensively. “How can I make her Daddy’s girl if I don’t get bonding time?”

Jessie just laughed helplessly. “Well, put her in her crib. You have a promise to keep.”

Hannah and Abigail decided to leave them be, and they truly appreciated it. They snuggled on the couch with Laura in her crib by the couch, the lights low, no TV, no radio, just them enjoying the nearness and touch of the other. They hadn’t done any real snuggling since Laura was born, and in a way it felt like they had come full circle, back to that first night they snuggled on his couch in his old apartment, an apartment that now no longer existed, with his piecemeal furniture. He could spend hours, days, just nestled against her and listening to her purr. But Jessie was tired, and she fell asleep not long after they started snuggling. Kit just put his head against hers and held her close, until he dozed off himself.

“I think they’re asleep,” Abigail whispered as she looked in from the dining room.

“Jessica stopped purring, so I know she is,” Hannah answered.

“Quite the couple, aren’t they?” the British fox asked as they went back to the kitchen and their game of rummy. “You can’t look at them and not see the love there.”

“I find it hard to believe I objected to their wedding,” Hannah said ruefully. “I didn’t believe they’d ever stay together more than a year.”

“I guess they acted differently back then.”

“No, pretty much the same,” she admitted with a chuckle. “I didn’t doubt that Kit loved my daughter, but I didn’t believe it would last.”

“And now?”

“They’ll still be married in eighty years, if they live that long,” she predicted. “I’m happy I was proved wrong.”

“That’s true love in there on that couch, Hannah,” Abigail smiled. “Laura’s going to be such a lucky girl, raised in this house.” She elbowed Hannah lightly. “Maybe that’s why Jessie turned out so good, because her parents have the same thing she does,” she grinned. “I think true love runs in your family.”

Hannah blushed slightly. “Oh, go on with you,” she retorted, sitting down at the small table. “Like you don’t talk about Winston every other minute.”

She laughed. “I’d love him even if he wasn’t a billionaire,” she winked. “What was it like for you, marrying into the Vulpan family? I’m sure it was a shock.”

“It was, but not because of money. Remember, Kit doesn’t really have his family fortune. My shocks came from how they treated him, and how they still treat him. That boy would bend over backwards for a family he hates because he’s still loyal to them, but they treat him like garbage.”

“He’s loyal to Vil, Hannah, and not a single other Vulpan,” Abigail answered. “She really needs to work on him, though.”

“Over what?”

“They shouldn’t be living in this *apartment*,” she said. “They should be in a nice house with a big yard where their kids have plenty of room to play.”

“I thought you liked this apartment.”

“Oh, it’s nice, there’s no doubt about that, and it’ll do so long as they only have Laura. For a family with one child, this townhouse is ideal. But I have no doubt I’ll be back here about this time next year to welcome my second grandchild into the world, and a large family needs a good house with a large yard so the kids have plenty of space to play. One child could do well here, but they’re going to have at least five, and so they need more space. They should move while they’re still small, so they can be all settled in by the time their family gets big. This place will certainly do until we talk them into a house.”

Hannah smiled. “I do believe that we have some common ground here, Abby,” she declared. “Five, you say?”

“At *least*,” she answered. “Big families run through Kit’s side of the family. I think they might have as many as eight.”

“I was thinking four. Martha thinks they’ll have three.”

“I smell a wager coming,” Abigail grinned.

“I don’t bet with someone who can buy my entire state, Abby.”

Abigail laughed. “Clever girl,” she grinned. “Now deal.”

Kit had more than one mission the next morning, at least after he got all the assignments worked out. Barry had dropped five different research

projects on them, ideas for upcoming articles that RJ and Paula would be writing while Barry and Lilly kept working on the Election Special, which was coming down to the wire, so Kit put two each on the juniors and did the hardest one himself, which took him the majority of the morning. After lunch, he sat in with a meeting of the department heads about future plans, then he exercised a little boss leeway to do some private research...country clubs.

Jessie was getting more and more serious about golf, and it was about time to let her play on a nice course. Country clubs could be pretty expensive, so the objective of his research was to find the nicest club with the best perks and most acceptable rules that had the most optimal fees. Austin wasn't the biggest city in Texas, but it probably had more rich furs in it than Dallas and Houston, so they had 12 different country clubs scattered in and around the city. All of them had websites, and all of them had contact information, so he spent the afternoon calling around, investigating club rules and services, and looking at pictures of courses. Of course, those pictures always put a course in its best light, so the only real way to check them out was to look at them...and Kit could do that from the air. He first called Allison to make sure she was back in Austin, and after making sure she'd brought back his plane, he left work early to get his keys from her at her house. He'd never been inside her house before, but he knew where it was, and he'd stopped by a few times. She met him out by the curb, looking very happy. Now that she'd finished her flight training, Allison really didn't have much to do. She was graduated, and really didn't *need* to work. "When did you get back?" he asked.

"About ten," she answered. "Your plane flies like a dream."

"Thanks. I kinda need it."

“Oh? What are you up to?”

“Gonna overfly some of the golf courses around town. I’m looking into a country club for Jessie.”

“Ohh, want a copilot? I’ll get a membership wherever you do. Sheila and Jessie are getting me into golf too,” she laughed.

“Sure, hop in,” he told her.

They drove down to Bergstrom and chitchatted about nothing in particular, her telling him about her date with Terry the night before and her staying at a hotel overnight before flying back, at least until he brought up her future plans. “I haven’t really decided yet,” she answered. “I was going to find a job as a chemist somewhere around town, there are plenty of places that are hiring, but if I get a job, I might not be able to go see Terry,” she hedged.

Kit laughed. “You are so hopeless,” he teased. “Terry really has your leash, doesn’t he?”

She gave him a little glare with that gorgeous face of hers, then she laughed ruefully. “Hey, it took a lot of time and courage to finally find a male that accepts me despite my past,” she said.

“Well, if you don’t feel like getting a *real* job, maybe you can help,” he mused. “Me and Lupe started a real estate company, you know.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, from time to time I’ll need someone with a good eye to go out and look at houses. Feel like being an errand girl?”

She grinned. “Well, since you’re letting me borrow the plane, I *guess* I can help out a little,” she winked.

“Just mind that Lupe might go with you,” he warned.

She laughed again. “I can handle Lupe,” she replied in a calm voice. “I have Alice’s number.”

Kit looked at her maybe half a second too long for him to be driving, then he burst out laughing. “How did you get it?”

“Jessie gave it to me,” she said in a purring tone. “I know how to deal with pushy flirts, Kit. I go for the throat.”

“I should say so,” he laughed. “But you can do me a favor and call Jessie and tell her we’re going on a quick spin around. If she finds out me and you were out alone, she might get the wrong idea.”

“I can do that,” she nodded, digging for her cell phone.

Judging a golf course from the air wasn’t the best way to do it, but it at least let them a good idea of its layout and see how well it was maintained. They traded off flying, as Kit flew them to each course, then Ally took over so he could check it out with binoculars. Going by what he’d already researched, he’d narrowed his search down to five clubs, two very close to town, two near the lake, one on the south side, and one up near Georgetown. Allison looked as best she could while she was flying, pointing things out, until they’d checked out the last club up near Georgetown. Kit let Ally fly the rest of the way back as he went over his notes. “Looks like Oak Lake is the winner,” he said. “A bit more expensive than the other four, but they have more amenities and their course looked pretty good.”

“It looked pretty hard.”

“You don’t expect to get good playing on easy courses,” he scoffed.
“Besides, the harder courses are better maintained.”

“That Vulpan superiority is starting to ooze out there, Kit,” she teased.

“Yeah yeah, excuse me if I expect the best,” he replied with a light smile. “So, what’s Sheila saying about her birthday? It’s just a few days off.”

“She was wondering if you remembered,” Allison chuckled.

“I’ve been waiting for her to tell me where she’s having the party.”

“Parties,” she corrected. “She’s having a tame one in the community center there at Westwood, then she’s having a big bash at the Top Hat.”

“Naturally,” Kit grunted, which made Allison giggle.

“She’s inviting most of her cousins to the Top Hat party,” she warned. “She’s even invited Terry, but he’s not sure he can make it. That’s why she hasn’t really told you about it yet. She doesn’t want any friction between you and them. She did tell Vil that she invited the cousins down, though. She said she’d get in a lot of trouble if she did that and didn’t warn Vil.”

“Well, she’s thinking ahead, I’ll give her that,” Kit noted, then glanced at her. “So, going back to the Top Hat, eh? Sure you can do it?”

“I can manage,” she said calmly. “I look a lot different with my clothes on, you know.”

Kit spluttered, then started laughing.

Allison landed them and they tied down the plane, then he went home after dropping her off at her house. He got in just as Laura was being fed, so he got in some baby cuddling time after feeding, as Hannah cooked dinner, enough to feed six. Rick and Martha were going to come to dinner, and Hannah wanted to cook for them. Kit opened his laptop and went over his research one more time, as Jessie came back in after putting Laura down for a nap. “So, what did you have to do that Ally had to fly you around?” she asked.

“Looking at golf courses,” he answered. “Since you’re getting into golf so much, it’s about time to join a country club, so you can play on a nice course that’s not so crowded you’re either hitting balls at other golfers or ducking them yourself.”

“Why, that’s sweet of you, handsome fox,” she said, kissing him on the top of his head. “Why did you need the plane for that?”

“I wanted to look at the courses,” he replied. “See how they were laid out and how well maintained they looked.”

“Oh. Always thorough,” she teased, pinching his injured ear.

“I’m a researcher, Jess, we define thorough,” he replied lightly. “I also blackmailed Ally into helping us with the real estate idea, go out and look at houses. She’s got a sharp eye. Once we show her what to look for, she’ll pick us winners.”

“Blackmail?” Jessie laughed.

“Hey, she’s using our plane. Vulpans *never* do favors for free,” he replied flippantly. “There’s always a hook in it somewhere.”

“And here I thought you weren’t like Vil. You two are just the same!” she declared lightly.

“Face it, love, you married a pirate.”

“At least he’s a handsome pirate,” she replied, patting his shoulders. “And he’s going to make us rich someday, all on his own, without Vil helping him!” she added, kissing him on the top of his head, then scurrying off to the kitchen to help cook.

Kit chuckled, happy that she had such confidence in him, and also happy that she *got it*.

Sheila crashed in on them after she got out of class, dropping her bookbag by the door and coming to the den, where he was finishing up some work. “Ally said she ratted me out,” she declared.

Kit chuckled as she looked up at her from his desk. “I was wondering if you were even having a party,” he said. “Four days away and not a word!”

“I had to make the arrangements, but it’s on now,” she answered. “A tame family party in the community center after class, then the *real* party over at the Top Hat.”

“How many cousins are coming?”

“Just about all the Party Pack but Mary, she’s over in England right now, my brothers, and Danny,” she answered. “Terry said he’d try to make it, but he’s not sure. He’s buried up to his ears in work over there right now. I asked Dahlia to come, but Uncle Tom won’t let her,” she frowned. “I think it’d be good for her to take a trip, have a little fun. Chrissy’s coming too.”

“Chrissy? You’re taking a sixteen year old into the Top Hat? Sarah will blow a fuse when she finds out!”

“Oh, get off it, cousin, you know she’s nowhere near a virgin,” Sheila protested. “And what kind of sister would I be to snub her? She’s old enough, at least by Vulpan standards.”

“I’m not coming anywhere near this one, Sheila,” he warned. “When Sarah finds out, it’s your head.”

“Mom won’t care,” she shrugged. “She was doing even wilder shit when she was fourteen. Anyway, I only invited Muffy and Terry to the community center, since Laura will be there. Them and all our friends here in Austin.”

“At least you thought ahead that much,” he noted.

“So, wanna go to the *real* party after the one here?” she asked with an outrageous grin. “You and Jessie?”

“Don’t ask that around Hannah, or she’ll whip you,” he warned.

“Why do you think I’ve been keeping it secret?” she asked with a laugh. “I’m not tangling with Hannah, nuh-uh.”

“Well, you have the sense to be afraid of Hannah,” he noted, which made her laugh again. “So, Ben turned you down, eh?”

She glared at him. “He has a game on Saturday!” she said, a bit sharply. Sheila’s birthday was on Friday, exactly one week after Laura’s, so that was true enough.

“And he still turned you down despite that,” he surmised.

“Oh, bite my furry ass, Kit!” she barked, which made him laugh as she stormed out. That girl would never learn. Having a wild party at the Top Hat would just tell Ben that she was nowhere near ready to commit to him, so he’d just keep his distance from her. Sheila was actually pretty bright, but she was still too selfish to think that she’d have to seriously change if she even wanted a chance to date Ben.

But, that was her problem. Jessie had told her what she had to do. If she wasn’t willing to do it, she had no one to blame but herself.

Dinner turned out to be more than just Rick and Martha. Nick and Sylvia dropped by to talk to them, but ended up staying for dinner themselves. The guards had done exactly what they said they would do, they melted into the background, but they were always there, and they always ensured that Jessie never went *anywhere* alone. Either Sylvia went with her, or one of them quietly tailed her from a discreet distance. Kit felt very safe and comfortable with them in the complex, ready at a moment’s notice in case there was trouble, but also just there to hang around with. Kit rather liked all four of them. In the weeks since they’d been home, they’d fully integrated into the complex and into Austin, and Nick was again more or less in the middle of everything, one ear with the police and the other listening to the city. Sylvia remained the other primary “visible guard” outside of Nick, and Barnett and Krichek had melted into the background, always close by if they were needed and working their own angles. Barnett was gaining a foothold with the tech-heads and computer geeks in Austin, since he was so skilled at computers and electronic systems, and was watching the internet for any chatter or sign that there was a threat incoming against the Austin Vulpans. Krichek was making very discreet connections with Austin’s criminal element. Not to commit crimes himself,

but to listen for anything that might threaten Kit and Jessie. Krichek's father was involved with the Russian mob and he'd been in America long enough to know how to go about such things, so he knew how the underworld worked. Krichek was the ear on the dark underbelly of Austin, Nick kept his ears open to the police, Sylvia concentrated on protecting them, and Barnett used his skills and growing contacts to keep an eye on Austin's cyberspace.

"I was wondering if you two were still around," Martha noted as Nick sat down at the table.

"We're good at hiding, Martha," Nick grinned back. "Even someone as big as me."

"It's called blending in, Martha," Sylvia said mildly. "I still escort *Fraulein* Jessie around if she needs to go out and she's alone, but we try to be as unobtrusive as possible. If anything, I'm an extra pair of paws for the baby."

"But packing a pistol somewhere in those stylish, form-fitting clothes of hers," Nick smiled at her.

"Nowhere you will find it, wolf. Not if you want to keep your fingers," she replied, which made Kit laugh. He had no doubt both of them had at *least* one pistol on them at that moment. Kit himself still gritted his teeth and strapped on his own Glock every morning, never forgetting the fact that it was Rick's concealed carry permit that had saved his life. He hated carrying that gun, but he'd do it to protect himself and his family, if it came down to it.

"Well, since you're here, Nick, we've decided to join a country club, so Jessie has a nice place to play," Kit told him.

“Ah, which one?”

“Oak Lake.”

“I’ll go up and look it over tomorrow,” he nodded. “Talk to their security, you know, do my job,” he smiled. “I’ll call you tomorrow when I’m done. So, when are you going skeet shooting again?”

“Not with you, I’d like to look like something other than an idiot,” Kit called, which made him grin.

“You’ve gotten quite good at shooting trap, *Herr* Kit,” Sylvia protested. “I think you’d do well on a skeet shooting range now.” “Listen to you two, pretending we don’t have a baby!” Jessie laughed.

“They’re talking sense, dear,” Martha said calmly. “You don’t just drop your life after your baby’s born. Yes, your life revolves around Laura, but you need time for yourself as well. You’ll burn out quickly if you stop doing what you love thinking you have to spend every waking moment watching after her.”

“I know, it’s just not easy,” she said, her cheeks ruffling a bit. “When we went golfing, Sheila took my phone so I couldn’t call and check up, and I felt so...I dunno. A little afraid that something might happen.”

“That’s new mother syndrome, dear,” Martha said with a smile. “Trust me, you’ll learn how to trust Laura with your husband. Though I know how hard that can be,” she added, glancing lightly at Rick.

“Hey now, all our sons lived to adulthood,” Rick protested. “Sure, I mighta addled Brian a little, but that was his fault.”

“I come home and find them playing some game that involved them breaking my lamp,” she noted.

“She never lets me forget that lamp,” Rick complained.

“It’s how we keep you males under control, Rick,” Hannah told him with a slight smile.

Abigail joined them near the end of dinner, blowing in like a cheerful tornado. “Hello duckies!” she called as she came into the dining room. “Damn, I was trying to get here on time,” she said. “I’ve had the longest day!”

“I was wondering where you’d gotten off to, Abby,” Kit chuckled. “What happened?”

“The furniture they delivered for the pool deck was all wrong!” she complained. “I’ve been getting it all straightened out. These Texas furs can be so dense!” she complained, looking right at Rick and Martha as she said it.

“The door’s right over there, Abby,” Rick told her with a slight smile.

“Anyway, that was the last of the furniture, and I’ve been getting it all arranged just so. The house is all together now, and it looks smashing! You need to come over and see it!”

“I think we can swing that tomorrow,” Kit said, to which Jessie nodded. “We’ll take Laura. Her first trip outside the house that doesn’t involve the doctor.”

“Sounds lovely!” she beamed. “I had a nursery installed just in case you came over, so she’ll have a nice place to nap while I give you a tour.

Hopefully, Kenny will give me a little something to put in that nursery himself,” she added.

“I’m sure Vil’s making him work,” Kit chuckled. “She’s dead set on getting pregnant.”

“Trapped in a house with a militant femme. We should send him some consolation cards or something,” Nick grinned.

“Vil has him pretty much well leashed, I noticed,” Abigail said with a cheeky smile. “Just where a male should be!”

“Hey now, Abby, I think we might have something to say about that,” Kit protested.

“Hush, slave,” Jessie chided him with a wink.

“Charlie’s still spreading the stories back home,” Abigail laughed. “Kenny’s gonna murder him when word gets back across the pond what he’s saying.”

“I hope they put that on pay-per-view, it should be a fun fight,” Kit noted, which made Rick and Nick laugh. “Kendall has one hell of a right hook.”

“I dunno, Charlie was in the army, so he’s probably tougher than he looks,” Rick speculated.

Sheila came in without knocking, as usual, carrying her backpack. “Hey!” she called from the living room, then she came into the dining room. “Hey guys,” she called. “Glad to track you down, Abby,” she grinned at Abigail. “I’m having my birthday party in the community center on Friday afternoon, after I get out of school. So, you’re invited.”

“A party, eh? And how old will you be?” Abigail asked.

“As old as my driver’s license says I am, Abby,” she winked.

“Twenty,” Kit supplied. “As in still not legal.”

“Pft, I’m a Vulpan, my name is all the legal I need,” she snorted.

“Anyway, it’s gonna start around two, and just about everyone’s invited. I didn’t want you to think I snubbed ya,” she grinned.

“Well, I guess I can make it. If an old femme like me won’t drag down your party,” she replied lightly.

“That’s why I’m having the tame party here, so you old fogeys can keep up. The *real* party will be somewhere else that night,” she replied with a smile dripping with sweet, honeyed venom.

“Listen to this,” Martha declared, giving Sheila an amused smile.

“I know you can go all night, Martha, but Abby? She’d keel over by ten, and I won’t be responsible for murder,” she dug.

“I’m so glad you think so, ducky,” Abigail chuckled.

“Anyway, I got stuff to do, plans to make. I’ll see you guys on Friday. Two o’clock, don’t be late! Later guys, later old femmes!” she called, then rushed right back out.

“That girl needs a serious reality check,” Abigail said, her eyes narrow and deliciously wicked. “So, Kit, what’s this other party about?”

“She invited a bunch of our cousins and probably the younger furs she knows around Austin to the Top Hat,” he replied. “From what I’ve heard, she rented the whole place for the night. Knowing Sheila, it’ll be the epitome of debauchery and excess.”

“Oh really?” she asked brightly. “And where would this place be?”

“I know where it is, Abby,” Nick told her.

Abigail gave him a long look, then a malicious smile graced her muzzle. “Nick, ducky, how’d you like to do a little job for me?”

Nick laughed, glancing at Kit. “I’m already under contract, Abby.”

“Oh, I’m not going to steal you from Kit, he needs you,” she replied. “But I think a male like you has just the connections I need to take Little Miss Young Thing down a few pegs. So, why don’t we go take a trip to this Top Hat place?”

Kit laughed, giving Nick a smile. “Go ahead,” he told him. “She’ll nag us into it anyway.”

“Hannah, Martha, get your purses, girls. We have a mission,” she declared, standing up. “The Society of Old Bats must avenge this insult!” she cried, thrusting a fist into the air, which made Jessie almost fall out of her chair laughing.

“This sounds interesting,” Martha said with a light smile. “I’ll call when I’m ready to be picked up, dear.”

“Have fun, love,” Rick told her with a chuckle.

“A chance to get back at Sheila? I’m in,” Hannah declared, standing up.

The three femmes filed out with Nick, leaving Rick, Jessie, and Sylvia to finish dinner. “Why do I get the feeling that this is gonna be memorable,” Rick noted, taking another bite, then chuckling.

“Because Abby’s a lot more dangerous than Sheila thinks she is,” Kit replied, which made Jessie go right back into peals of laughter. “I get the feeling that Sheila’s party is going to be unforgettable, and not for the reasons Sheila thinks.”

“*Fraulein* Abigail is rich and smart, and she has a very quirky sense of humor, like most of the Brightons. That is not such a good combination for Sheila,” Sylvia noted.

Laura started to fuss from her crib by the table, and Jessie was there before she had much of a chance to get going. She picked her up and cooed to her, rocking her in her arms a little, but when she continued to fuss, she looked at the clock. “Oh dear, someone needs a new diaper,” she told Laura in a gentle voice. “And I think it’s about time Laura had her own dinner, she’ll probably get hungry before I finish changing her,” she told them. “I’ll be upstairs, love. Mind keeping my dinner warm?”

“Sure thing, pretty kitty.”

“Sylvia, tomorrow, find out from Nick what Abby has up her sleeve,” Kit said after Jessie left. “Not that I’m going to stop her, but I do want to know what’s going to happen before it happens.”

“Certainly,” she nodded. “I’ll stop by your office tomorrow afternoon.”

“Works for me.”

Kit more or less put the party in the back of his mind the next day, because work called, and not all of it was the magazine. Allison had started her first day as roving real estate appraiser, stopping by his office that morning with Lupe as they went over a few properties he’d found that were

on the verge of foreclosure that fit the model Kit had made: owned by more or responsible furs who could make the payments if he bought the houses and rented them out, and were in dire straights basically through bad luck. Lupe and Allison headed out in her beat-up old Camry, her puttering car, then Kit did some real magazine work before lunch. After the department head meeting Rick had after lunch, he started investigating his other idea, T-hangars. There was a massive shortage of T-hangars, and even with the impending financial downturn that Kendall was predicting, furs with planes still needed places to put them. His movement on that idea wouldn't be until after he saw if Kendall was right, where he might be able to pick up some cheap real estate abutting an airport and convince the airport to allow him to run a taxiway from their network out to his T-hangars. The other option was to find enough empty area in an FAA approved area and build his own T-hangar complex, and just pave a long enough runway for pilots to take off and land there.

He certainly had the time. Between Pat and Julie, he really didn't have all that much research to do anymore. There was enough to keep two researchers hopping, but not three. They did the majority of the routine work, and he did the most important research projects, picked up whatever slack when the work overflowed Pat and Julie's in-boxes, and focused on what Rick called the management aspects of the magazine when he got his research done.

Sylvia came in as he was checking out stand-alone hangar location options, which were mainly in the ranch country south and east of the city, and she just couldn't help but smile. "Uh oh."

"*Fraulein* Abigail is a *monster*," she declared, which made Kit burst out laughing.

“Close the door,” he told her. She did so, and sat at the chair behind his desk, leaning against it and giving him a wolfish smile. “Alright, what’s she going to do?”

“Scare Sheila half to death,” she replied. “She asked Nick to find some burly, scary-looking males in the profession that are between contracts for a quick and easy job. She intends to have them raid the Top Hat while dressed as SWAT police.”

Kit bent over, he was laughing so hard, then looked at her. “That’s a bit illegal,” he noted.

“She doesn’t really care,” she replied. “And she’s already arranged it with the owner of the Top Hat. The club will know it’s coming, so they don’t panic. They intend to raid the club about two hours after the party begins, looking the part all the way down to badges and uniforms, and they will do it professionally. You know, blocking all exits, rounding up everyone, acting like cops. Then, after everyone is suitably shaken up, *Fraulein* Abigail will show up and simply call them off and join the party herself.”

Kit just couldn’t help but laugh some more, then he wiped his eye as he finally got control of himself. “That femme is the devil,” he declared. “I knew I liked her!”

“She is an evil femme, but that’s part of her charm,” she murmured, which made him nod vigorously while trying not to laugh again. “Oh, she intends to have our comrades video the entire thing, which she’ll give to Sheila after it’s over. I’m sure she’ll give you a copy as well.”

That sent him right back over the edge. Sylvia started laughing herself when he just couldn’t control himself, pounding his fist on the desk and

knocking Jessie's picture over. "Oh God, the Vulpans attending the party are going to have a cow when they find out it was a joke!" he wheezed. "Vulpans aren't used to being made fun of!" Then he went right back to nearly maniacal laughter.

"There might be some friction with your family's elders, but what can they do?" Sylvia shrugged, which made Kit laugh harder, and her join in.

This, Kit knew, he had to keep secret, after he got control of himself. He sent Sylvia back to the complex so she could return to her duties of being nearby for Jessie. A plan like this was complicated, and the more who knew about it, the better the chance it could go wrong. It was pretty mean, and it would probably cost Abby a few tens of thousands of dollars to hire a raiding party of mercenaries and outfit them in Austin-style SWAT uniforms, but she was rich and could afford it. But still, the sheer audacity of it, hiring mercs to crash someone's party, that was just *mean*. Brilliant, hilarious, but *mean*. His respect for Abigail went up a few notches, as well as a bit of healthy fear.

There was one femme that did need to know, however, if only so she could weather the storm when the furious elders got wind of what happened to the kids. He called Vil at work, and to his surprise, it was Kendall that answered the phone. "Oi Kit," he called lightly.

"Where's Vil?" he asked.

"In the loo, she'll be out in a minute. We were about to go home."

"What are you doing at the office?"

"Picking her up. We're going to theatre down in New York tonight. Part of my coddling for when basketball season starts," he said eagerly. "I

have season tickets at half court now, the seats right beside the Vulpan family seats.”

“Who did you have to kill to get those,” Kit chuckled.

“It wasn’t cheap,” he said seriously. “But I didn’t want to tie up the Vulpan seats and infuriate your family with me being there every single game, so I bought my own. So, our families now control about half that row, your six and my four,” he said with a laugh.

“Every single game? Uh oh,” he noted.

“We’ve already had that fight, and I won,” he declared triumphantly. “And Vil will be there with me as much as she can. She knows how much I love the Celtics.”

“So that’s why you married Vil. Because she lives in Boston.”

“She wouldn’t have been half as attractive if she lived in New York,” he replied, then he cried out. “Ow!”

“Is that so?” Vil barked in the background, and there was a commotion that made Kit laugh. “Hey bro,” she finally said into the phone.

“Stop beating that poor male or he’ll get an annulment,” Kit teased.

“It’s his own fault, being such a weenie,” she replied, which caused Kendall to make some indignant remark Kit couldn’t quite make out. So, what’s up?”

“I’m calling to give you a warning,” he said, then he explained what Abigail was going to do. Vil broke down in helpless laughter after he explained it, and it took her a couple of minutes to get her composure back.

“Dear God, I love that femme,” she finally said. “I’ll handle the outrage up here, but I want a copy of that video!”

“I’m sure she’ll pass them out on street corners if only to further dig on Sheila,” he chuckled. “Our cousin bit off more than she could chew this time.”

“It’s good for her, it teaches her that there’s such a thing as the real world,” Vil said dryly, which made Kit laugh. “Hate to cut it short, bro, but we gotta go. We’re going to New York for a show.”

“Ken told me. Have fun, sis.”

“You know it. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Kit hung up the phone, and just had to smile to himself. It was going to be an *eventful* weekend.

Friday arrived, and Kit almost couldn’t keep still. He went in that morning to get the paperwork done and handle all the end of week stuff with Rick, who also came in early on Fridays. Rick knew, of course, because Martha told him, but they’d kept it completely quiet outside of them. Jessie didn’t even know. The two of them plowed through all the figures and reports, then Kit left to go up to Oak Lake to finalize his buy of the country club membership. It was pretty expensive, but it had the most bang for the buck, and besides, it was for Jessie. And what Jessie wanted, Jessie got. They gave him a tour, explained their rules, and after they treated him to lunch, he agreed to a one year membership for him and Jessie. The manager all but fell over himself when he realized that Kit was a *Vulpan*, since the upper crust rumor mill told everyone in that tax bracket that

Vulpans had started colonizing Austin, and it was a matter of prestige for Oak Lake to land a Vulpan member. Snobby country clubs used the worth and social reputation of their members as measuring sticks, and Oak Lake *was* one of the swankier country clubs in the city...but despite that, they had reasonable fees for what services they offered, an excellent golf course, and all the little perks that a member expected for his considerable membership dues. Such a member would attract other members, and that was more profit for the country club. The fact that Kit had joined would bring Sheila, and possibly Terry as well, who would probably join just for a nice place to play while visiting Austin.

They shook paws, Kit was issued membership cards and parking decals for himself and Jessie, and that was that. He and Jessie were now members of Oak Lake, and were granted access to their numerous and excellent services and facilities, from their small on-site gym to their hot tub to their restaurant, and had unlimited access to their excellent golf course, a course so good that it had hosted four PGA events over the last ten years. He bought the club package that included unlimited course access without additional greens fees, because he never wanted Jessie to have to pay a dime for anything but refreshments when she came here to golf. She wouldn't have to pay for herself, and she wouldn't have to pay for four guests who golfed with her, though any guests past four did have to pay a much reduced green fee; none of their packages offered greens fee waivers for guests past two. It was expensive to get the four guest option, but since Jessie often golfed with three others, it was more or less mandatory so Sam could golf with Jessie and not have to cash out her savings bonds to pay the pretty steep greens fees at Oak Lake.

He called her on the way home and told her the good news. “So, now you can take Ally and Sam to a *nice* golf course the next time you go,” he told her. “You can take up to four guests and you don’t have to pay greens fees.”

“Ohhh, I’ll have to drive up and look at it before the party!” she declared.

“Heck, call Sylvia and have Hannah watch Laura, I’ll turn around and meet you there so you can get a tour.”

“Okay!” she said enthusiastically.

Jessie’s van arrived at Oak Lake about half an hour later, and Sylvia got out of the passenger’s side and waited just by the driver’s side for Jessie to get out and lock her van. Sylvia padded along just behind them, a quiet and reassuring presence, as Kit went back in with her, the manager just happened to meet them in the lobby of the clubhouse, and he happily gave Jessie her own tour of the clubhouse and grounds. The manager basically fawned all over Jessie, and she endured it with a good-natured smile, though being treated like that never failed to make her a little uncomfortable. “We have a PGA level golf course, eighteen holes, par seventy-two, which I’m sure you’ll enjoy,” he said. “I’ll get us a golf cart and take you on a drive through it.”

“How long are you open in the winter?” she asked.

“We stay open year round, Misses Vulpan, though the course does close for three weeks in late January and early February for major maintenance, landscaping changes, and course alterations,” he answered. “Outside of that maintenance, the course is open seven days a week, from noon to dusk Monday through Thursday, and from seven a.m. to dusk on

Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. We can, however, arrange to have the course available for a morning tee time on weekdays by special request, as long as you submit your request at least seven days before your planned tee time.”

“Guess you have to rearrange the lawn mowers,” she noted.

“Just so, ma’am,” he nodded. “We do most of our landscaping and divot repair before opening, but if we can arrange it, we can work around golfers when a member requests a weekday morning tee time.”

“So, when I want to golf, do I schedule a tee time or can I just show up?”

“Both work, ma’am,” he told her with a smile. “If you know your tee time, you’re welcome to make a reservation so you can bypass the walk-on line, if there is one. But you’re welcome to walk in at any time and play a round. You might have to wait, sometimes we do have a few too many golfers show up at once, but you never have to wait long to get to the tee. That’s a promise,” he smiled.

Kit played with his Blackberry as the manager did the second tour, not paying much attention, but Jessie was very impressed with the course, if not a little intimidated by how hard it looked. “The objective is to have fun, Misses Vulpan. And you can always just not keep score until you get better,” he winked.

She laughed. “I might have to. I think my first score on this course might be three hundred.”

“We won’t tell if you won’t.”

“Deal!” she giggled.

They were there so long that it was time to go to Sheila's party when they finally left. She invited a whole lot of furs, so the community center's deck was packed. Everyone from the office, most of the girls from the sorority, and a lot of furs from Sheila's classes over at U.T. were there, and there was plenty of catered food and lots of beer. Dan was there, Mickey got there about an hour late due to work, and Kevin managed to pop in right at the tail end, but Kit spent most of the time trying not to laugh every time he looked at Sheila, knowing what was coming, which irritated Jessie quite a bit. Abigail showed up near the tail end as well, all happy and bubbly smiles, but the knowing smirk she shot at Kit as Sheila opened her presents made him burst out laughing.

"What? What is going on?" Jessie demanded.

"I'll tell you after the party. I don't want to ruin the surprise," he replied.

There were a few crashers at their party as well. Just after Sheila finished opening her gifts, Muffy arrived, waving frantically and running up. "Where's Laura, I wanna see her!" she declared.

"Hey, this is my party, bitch!" Sheila protested, then she laughed and hugged her cousin.

Jessie couldn't resist showing off their daughter, so she picked her up from her stroller and held her gently. "This is little Laura," she cooed. "Laura, this is your second cousin Muffy."

"She's adorable!" she gushed. "The pictures I saw just don't do her justice!"

"Who showed you pics?" Kit asked.

“Vil,” she answered with a smile. “She has a huge album she pulls out any time anyone asks. Mom demanded a DVD.”

“Your mom? Ruth?”

“Yeah, she thinks Laura is just a little dollbaby,” she laughed. “Dad thinks she’s cute too.”

“I’m not sure I like the idea of Brian and Ruth wanting pictures of my daughter,” he said darkly.

“Oh, lighten up, Kit!” Muffy protested. “Mom and Dad like you, what’s wrong with them thinking your daughter is cute?”

“The fact that she’s the first mixed breed in the family, maybe,” he replied immediately. “I just don’t like the idea of about *anyone* from the family outside of you, Sheila, Terry, and Vil showing any interest at all in my daughter.”

“Well, loosen up and given at least some of us a chance,” she told him.

The other crasher was Terry. He arrived and immediately gave Allison a hug, kissed Sheila on the cheek, then came over and gave Jessie a kiss on the cheek. “Alright, trot out the kidlet,” he demanded.

Jessie laughed, but she did again pull Laura from her stroller and present her to Terry. Terry smiled down at her, then put a very gentle finger under her paw, holding it up. “She’s so tiny,” he mused.

“She’s a newborn, she’s supposed to be tiny, dink,” Muffy teased, nudging him.

“How much hell has she made out of your life, cousin?”

“Not much at all, she sleeps most of the time,” he answered. “The hell comes when she works out of her sleeping phase and gets more active.”

“Getting much sleep, Jessie?”

“Three hours at a time,” she laughed. “Laura wakes up about every four hours and wants to be fed. She’s got her own little schedule, and we all live by it.”

“That’s the way of babies, just taking over everything,” he said sagely, carefully removing his finger from under her paw and letting her snuggle back down and close her eyes, content in her mother’s arms. “I’m glad I got here early enough to see her.”

“How’s it going at Avondale?” Kit asked as they all sat down.

“Pretty smoothly now,” he replied. “I’ve got their departments reorganized to be more efficient, and they’re starting to learn the system. I’m still having small problems with the union, but they’re about one step from falling apart.”

“You busted them?”

“They busted themselves,” he answered. “Once the workers saw the pay scale, pension, and health insurance plans we offered, they basically revolted against the union. The union told them to vote no on the contract, but it passed with ninety percent. The union wanted it all, wanted to strike and hold us hostage until we caved in, but now the workers see that as long as they live up to our expectations, they’ll get paid even more than they did under their last contract.”

“Money can do it every time,” Kit chuckled as Jessie carefully put Laura back in her stroller.

“Well, the union’s teeth were pulled, but they’re still trying to make noise. If they’re not careful, though, they’ll see a mass exodus. Furs are starting to get used to the new routine, and though they don’t like the new training and new QA inspectors, they don’t mind the paychecks.”

“Hey, this my party, dweeb, stop spending all your time over there!” Sheila called sharply to Terry, which made him laugh.

“Queen Sheila calls,” he said with a slight smile.

The party wound down, and only when Kit got Jessie back home and behind closed doors, he told her Abigail’s plans. It made her collapse into helpless fits of laughter, so loud that it woke up Laura. “I can’t believe she’s going to do that!” she squealed in mirth.

“Where Abby’s concerned, I would,” he laughed.

Kit stayed close to the phone that night, quietly counting down the hours, then the minutes, and then he got the phone call he was expecting at about 11:00. It was Nick, and he was laughing when Kit picked up the phone. “So, how did it go?” he asked.

“Oh God!” he laughed. “I was watching from the control van, it was classic! Just classic!” he rumbled. “The mates had them all but peeing their boxers! They put everyone in the lounge and made them sit there for nearly twenty minutes, never said a word, scared the ever-lovin’ crocpiss out of ‘em. A few of your cousins tried to bribe them, and every time they did, they just pulled out pawcuffs like they were going to cuff ‘em and ship ‘em off to jail. Then Abby strolls in and calls them off, looks right at Sheila, and asked her if she was about to keel over. The music started back up, and all the mates started dancing right there, holding their PDWs and in their SWAT uniforms! You shoulda seen the look on Sheila’s face when she

realized it was all an elaborate set-up, she looked right ready to go on a rampage! It was absolutely classic!” he wheezed, then started laughing again.

“Dude, I want a DVD as fast as you can get it here,” Kit told him, laughing himself.

“I’ll have it in your paws in an hour, as soon as I compile all the video and edit it,” he promised.

An hour later, said DVD was in Kit’s paws and being loaded into the player. Nick and Sylvia stood behind the couch, Nick in a black paramilitary uniform and Sylvia in a tee and jeans. “I think I got a good edit on it, I took it from the three cameras the mates were using. I got most of the looks of horror,” he grinned hugely. “And there’s a good one of Sheila whining like a little girl as she was put in the lounge. Sheila’s going to be pissed for *years*.”

“Just goes to show, never mess with a billionaire with time on her paws,” Sylvia murmured, which made Kit laugh.

The laughter reached uncontrollable proportions as they watched the DVD, as he saw his cousins rounded up by big males in black uniforms just like Nick’s, big SWAT patches on the chest and shoulders to make them look real, and all of them armed with submachine guns, just like a real SWAT unit would be. His cousins looked shocked, flabbergasted, scared out of their minds, or drunkenly indignant as they and the other guests and club workers were rounded up, and it was more hilarious to see the calm looks on the club workers, since *they* knew it was all an elaborate joke. Then Abigail struts in, dressed to the nines in a glittery party dress, calls off the merces, and looks right at Sheila. “Who’s the one keeling over now, ducky?”

she called with a wicked smile, then she snapped her fingers. The DJ started the music back up, and all the mercs started dancing in place. And just like Nick said, the look of horror on Sheila's face turned to indignation when she realized she'd been had, then she got furious, shaking her fist at Abigail, who was dancing with a merc Kit knew, it was Donny from Stonebrook. The Vulpans slowly started to realize it was some kind of joke, and not a single one of them except for Terry looked amused at *all*. Terry just leaned back in his chair, watched Abigail a minute, then burst out laughing.

“*Herr* Kit, your stepmother is almost good enough of an actor to be German,” Sylvia murmured, which made Kit almost fall off the couch laughing.

“She’s certainly somethin’,” Nick agreed with a big grin.

“Oh, there’s going to be a reckoning for this,” Kit laughed. “But it won’t be until Sheila feels brave enough trying to take on Abby.”

“Then it’ll be a few years,” Jessie giggled. “I think the Vulpan-Brighton war just begun.”

“Oh yeah,” Kit agreed, then he laughed.

Kit knew he was going to get a visit that morning, so he got up early enough to unlock the door and started breakfast as Jessie fed Laura. And sure enough, Sheila barged in without knocking and stalked into the kitchen. Kit took one look at her, still in the clothes she wore the night before, her hair all out of place, and he almost dropped the frying pan on his foot laughing.

“You...you **KNEW!**” she screamed at him.

“Yup,” he replied, smiling at her, then laughing again. “I had to warn Vil so she didn’t think something went terribly wrong and Nick had let a bunch of maniacs into the city. Speaking of Nick, he dropped off a wonderful DVD of Abby’s night out with the girls.”

“That BASTARD!” she screamed. “I’m going to get her for this, I swear I will! Even if it takes me a hundred years!”

“Are you sure you wanna tangle with her again, Sheila?” Kit asked, then he sputtered and laughed again. “I think you’ve learned not to call Abby old, haven’t you?”

“That bitch! She almost scared the piss out of me!” she complained. “And Joy nearly had a seizure!”

“Oh come on, cousin, it *was* funny,” he told her.

“I’m so glad you think it’s funny, she didn’t do it to *you*!”

“I’m not dumb enough to be sassy to her, either,” he replied. “Besides, you *know* what the Brightons are like, Sheila. Does it surprise you she’d prank you?”

She looked about beside herself, then blurted out in helpless laughter. “That crusty old bitch! I’m gonna get her, I’m gonna get her, and I’m gonna get her good!”

“Did the party go on after Abby’s little stunt?” he asked.

“Sorta. A few cousins left, but enough stayed around to get drunk with me so we could forget about it,” she answered, which made him laugh again.

Abigail sauntered in, wearing a Texas tee shirt and a pair of slacks, and she gave Sheila the biggest smile Kit ever saw on a femme. “Why *hello*, Sheila! I’m so glad you invited me to your party last night, I had so much fun!”

Sheila glared at her, then gave her a grudging smile. “I’m gonna get you, you old battle-axe!” she declared.

“Go right ahead and try, ducky, my purse is bigger than yours,” she replied easily, which made Kit burst out laughing again. That earned him a punch in the shoulder from Sheila, who then stalked out with as much dignity as she could muster.

“Abby, you are one mean femme. I love you,” Kit told her.

“I’m so glad you enjoyed it,” she winked. “I’ve already sent copies of the DVD to Kenny and Winston. I’m sure they’ll get a good laugh out of it.”

“I don’t think my aunts and uncles will find it very funny, but it was worth it,” he said.

“They need to take the steel rods out of their butts anyway,” she shrugged. “So, what’s for breakfast?”

As much as they loved having Abigail in town, and as much fun as her little joke with Sheila was, the needs of her own family took hold of her after they held Laura’s two-week birthday celebration. She’d said she would be around for a couple of weeks, so after two weeks, she was preparing to return to Britain. She was going to stay to attend Sam and Kevin’s wedding

on Monday, but was planning on flying home on Monday evening, after the reception.

Kit was sad to see her go, and was surprised when Hannah told them that night that she too would be leaving to go home. “I was here to teach you how to take care of Laura. Well, I don’t need to teach you anymore,” she announced. “I’m confident you will do just fine, and I would like to go back home,” she smiled. “I’m sure John has completely destroyed the house by now. I should have never left him alone this long.”

Jessie laughed. “How are you doing getting used to the empty house?” she asked.

“It’s been a challenge,” she answered honestly. “The house is so quiet now. No loud music blaring from upstairs, no weights crashing on the floor, and John says that watching away games just isn’t the same. Ben and Jennifer do come down for home games, though.”

“Gotta enjoy those awesome seats Vil gave him,” Kit chuckled.

“I think that has something to do with it,” Hannah agreed. “So, I’ll be leaving on Wednesday, so I can stay to babysit Laura while you go to the wedding. By then, I expect to see you find a competent babysitter for when you need one.”

“Oh, I think Martha will cover that,” Jessie laughed. “She already said she’d watch Laura for us if we needed it, and I feel safe leaving her with Rick and Martha. But, we do owe Ben something.”

“I’m smelling a road trip,” Kit noted.

She giggled and winked at him. “We missed his first game, and we owe him a game. So, how about this. Mom, we’ll take you home in our

plane while we fly up to see him play. We can leave next Friday, if you can wait around for another week, watch him play on Saturday, and come home on Sunday after the Bengals game.”

“I like that idea,” Hannah said immediately. “When is his next home game?”

“Saturday,” Kit and Jessie said in unison. “But next Saturday is also a home game,” Jessie added.

“It’s a home Bengals game as well,” Hannah mused.

“Yeah, I’ll be up in the skybox with Laura,” Jessie said. “But I’ve missed going to the game. I’d like to see one.”

“I can swing a day off from work, and I like the idea of you logging some cross country hours,” Kit agreed.

“I should be in the back with Laura,” she said. “She’ll need to be fed.”

“That’s what bottles are for,” he replied immediately. “You need to log the hours, so you’re flying.”

“But—“

“What, you don’t trust me or your mother?” he asked pointedly.

She gave him a slightly annoyed look, then laughed ruefully. “You just want more spoil time.”

“She *will* be a daddy’s girl,” he declared without a whit of shame.

Laura was still the focus of their lives, but the outside world had slowly started working its way back into their routine. Sam and Kevin were going to be married next week, and that was very important to Kit and

Jessie, since they were in the wedding party, and everyone was starting to gear up for the wedding. They'd attended two rehearsals after getting the news that Abigail and Hannah were leaving, and Sam had a bridal shower on Thursday, followed up by a bachelorette party on Friday night. Kevin had deliberately gone out of his way *not* to have a wild party like Kit's, and they were going to hold his bachelor party in the community center at the complex on Saturday night. But, Lupe being Lupe, he did arrange for a few strippers to be there. "It ain't a bachelor party without naked femmes," he declared to Kit after telling him about it.

"Yeah, and if Sam catches Kevin with a naked femme, she's going to do something to him," Kit chuckled. "She's going to be right across the street, Lupe."

"Ain't my fault he's whipped, brah," Lupe grinned.

"Lupe, someday Alice is gonna show us her leash."

Lupe laughed brightly, slapping him lightly on the shoulder. "I got Alice under control, brah. Trust me."

Hannah did help them out by babysitting on Saturday morning, because Kit owed Jessie a round of golf. Sheila was busy that night, and Allison was again in New Orleans in their plane, so Kit and Jessie asked Sam and Kevin to go, to help them take their minds off their impending wedding a little bit, to have one relaxing afternoon before the chaos began, since they were going to be married in two days. It did require a little next-day air, though. Kit had had a set of golf clubs at Stonebrook before he was disowned, and while he had outgrown them, he was sad to say that his father's clubs were just about perfect. They were top of the line Callaway clubs, and had been gathering dust in the basement for years. Clancy

overnighted them down to him, and Jessie had signed for them and pulled them out of the box about an hour before he got home from work. “Whose are these?” she asked him.

“They were my father’s,” he said with a dark look as he pulled the driver out and took hold of it, finding that it was pretty much well perfect. He was almost exactly the same height as his father. “Well, they were sort of, that is. My dad never even touched these. He bought them just before he found out his heart was bad, so Vil says, and they literally went into storage without ever being taken out of their shipping box. If I knew he’d used them, I’d take them out back and melt them down in the barbecue pit.”

“Callaway. Is that a good brand?”

He nodded. “Eagle is just as good, though.”

The doorbell rang, and Jessie went over and opened it as Kit pulled the bag out of the box, the original Callaway shipping container. Clancy had just dusted off the box and had Fedex throw new shipping labels over the old ones. “Hey Jessie, hey Kit,” Sam called as she came in. “You bought clubs, eh?”

“They were at Stonebrook, been sitting in the basement for about three years,” Kit answered, seeing that they were didn’t come out of it free and clear. The rubber grips were a tiny bit dried out from being stored in the box for so long, but they’d do. “Which course are we going to?”

“Lakeside,” Jessie answered. “It’s pretty nice.”

“I really need to look into getting you a country club membership, pretty kitty. Private courses are much nicer.”

“Kevin ready?”

“He’s getting our clubs,” she answered. “He said you’re doing this on purpose to make him look stupid.”

Kit laughed. “We all start somewhere.”

“He said he needs to learn, since lawyers are supposed to play golf,” Sam grinned.

“Doctors too,” Jessie reminded her.

“He any good?”

“He’s about as good as me,” Jessie answered.

“Then this should be easy enough,” he said with a slight smile at her.

“That’s starting to sound like a bet,” Jessie challenged.

“Only if it’s nine holes.”

“We’ll see after nine holes, then,” she winked.

Kit packed the golf bags while Jessie and Hannah cooed a bit over Laura, then he got his turn when Kevin got home. “We shouldn’t be gone too long, Hannah,” he told her as he kissed Laura and put her back in her crib. “Want us to bring you anything back?”

“I’ll have a late lunch or early dinner waiting for you when you get home,” she answered. “Just call when you’re getting close.”

“Thanks, Hannah. And thanks for watching Laura for us.”

“I told you, dear, you do need a little time to yourselves from time to time. After I leave, I had better hear Martha telling me she’s babysitting at least twice a month.”

“That’s how you did it?”

“As well as we could. We tried for once a week, our weekly date night. Sometimes we managed, sometimes not. Just because you have a child doesn’t mean you shouldn’t keep working on your relationship, dear.”

“Then I’ll be guided by you, Hannah, else you might spank me.”

“Oh, go on with you,” she retorted, whapping him lightly on the rear as he danced away.

“I get spanked anyway, even for doing the right thing! It’s so unfair!” he said teasingly as he hurried to the door.

Sam and Kevin had their own clubs now, but Sam’s were used clubs and Kevin’s were new, but he only had about eight clubs in the bag, which was used. Sam had found a good deal on a set of very well maintained used clubs that fit her, but Kevin was buying his set one club at a time, filling a used bag with them. It would have been cheaper in the long run to buy a set, but he couldn’t afford a full set, where he could afford the absolute minimum number of clubs he needed to golf at least without embarrassing himself. He only had two drivers, four irons, a pitching wedge, and one putter in his bag, where the standard set was three or four drivers, nine irons, two wedges, and one or two putters. Kevin and Kit loaded their bags in his Pathfinder, and then after waving goodbye to Hannah, and seeing Nick and Krichek quietly pull in behind them in Nick’s Expedition, they were off to Oak Lake, their first golfing trip to their country club. “How much practice have you had, Kev?” he asked.

“I’ve been going down to the driving range during lunch,” he answered. “At least when I can. Delores plays too, and I’ve actually gone down with her and emptied a couple of buckets after work as we talked

about one of my cases. I can hit the ball just about every time, it's just making it go straight that's the trick."

Kit chuckled. "It comes with practice," he assured him as he put Jessie's bag in the cart. "I used to play with Vil a lot when we were kids."

"She's good?"

"She's *very* good," he nodded. "Terry's the best golfer in the family, but Vil is no slouch."

They had a reserved tee time, but there wasn't a line waiting to walk on either, so they went basically straight from the truck straight to the tee, after warning Sam and Kevin that they were going to play a PGA level course, so it was going to be difficult. "So, two more days," Kit said teasingly.

"God, you were so right," Kevin laughed. "All I can think of is why aren't we married yet?"

"Told ya," he grinned. Kit felt a little sorry for them. Because Sam was in school and Kevin was still proving himself at the firm, they had almost no time for a honeymoon. They were also very tight on cash. Sam's parents had paid for the wedding, and the reception was being held in the community center to make it as cheap as possible, but Kevin had no money for a honeymoon even if he did have the time off work to take Sam somewhere. Their honeymoon was going to be a weekend down in San Antonio a good four days after they were married. Sam didn't mind, though, because she knew that they didn't have either the time or the money for anything serious. After they were earning money, they'd make up for the lost honeymoon with some extravagant vacation.

The demands on a first year associate were harsh, and little leeway was given. Kevin had to all but beg to get the day off for his wedding, and they expected him right back at work on Tuesday. If he wasn't one of their most promising rookie associates, they wouldn't have even given him that.

"Sounds good," Kit said as Jessie hurried out of the office and waved them forward.

Kit let the others tee up and go first after they waited their turn, and gave the couple playing ahead of them enough time to get down to their balls and hit them forward. Jessie teed off first, and Kit was pleasantly surprised to her drive a very nice shot, a good 150 yards and almost straight down the fairway, her ball landing close to the left rough. He knew from Sheila that Jessie had some natural talent on the links, but seeing it was a surprise. Sheila said that Jessie had a nice drive, but her short game and her putting were her weaknesses. Well, Sheila was right about her drive.

"Wow, way to make me feel like packing my bag and waiting in the bar, Jessie," Kevin laughed as he stepped up to take his turn. He managed a fairly decent shot for a new player, which meant that his ball went further than Kit expected, and was solidly in the rough. Sam's ball ended up close to his, since she was just learning too, and then Kit teed up and felt them watching. He hadn't golfed in years, but he remembered enough to send the ball down the fairway, rolling to a stop near Jessie's ball.

"I've been playing longer and have had more practice, Kev," Jessie winked at him. "Don't worry, I'm sure you'll be a golfing lawyer real soon."

"Delores plays, and she's pretty good," he said as they got into the golf carts.

It had been a long time since he'd golfed, and it came back to him much faster than he expected. He three-putted the first four holes, but managed to two-putt the fifth, and actually pulled double bogey on the par 4 seventh hole, the lowest score of any of them thus far. By the time they reached the back nine, Kit's back actually felt pretty good, and he was already 37 over par...which was the best score among the four of them, and Kit felt proud of it since it was such a hard course. Jessie was four shots behind him, and Sam and Kevin weren't even keeping score. Sheila was right about Jessie's game, though. She did drive a nice ball, able to hit a much straighter drive than most other beginners, but once she was within 50 yards of the hole, she started having trouble. This wasn't unusual for starting golfers, though. But what was unusual was that Jessie could chip better than she could putt.

"Back alright, love?" Jessie asked as they rode the cart over to the tenth tee.

"Doing fine, pretty kitty," he answered. "And you're four strokes back."

She laughed. "I'll win when you quit," she winked.

"Oho, that sounds like a challenge."

"Only so long as you don't hurt your back trying to finish," she warned seriously.

"I won't do that."

"Alright, then, it's a challenge, handsome fox," she grinned.

The last time he tried to play golf, almost two years ago, his back started hurting around the tenth hole and forced him to give up not long

after that. But unlike the last time, his back didn't even start twinging until they got to the 17th hole, a long par four. He felt it when he made his initial drive, the torque on his back, but he knew he could finish out. Maybe two years of healing and exercising his back playing tennis had helped mitigate the pain-inducing motion of swinging a golf club. Jessie actually managed to pull par, jumping up and down and squealing in delight when she sank her second putt. It was her first ever par, and they all applauded her for her achievement. She'd managed to pull within one stroke on the eighteenth hole. "Down to the wire," she grinned, putting her paw on his lower back. "Doing okay?"

"Twinging, but no pain," he reported dutifully. "I'll be able to finish so long as I don't put ten strokes down."

"Good. I'll give you a nice massage when we get home...if you let me win, anyway."

He laughed and nearly drove the cart off the path. "Such blatant bribery!"

"I'm not bribing you, I'm offering you a deal," she winked at him. "You give me something, I give you something. It's a fair trade," she said in a completely insincere serious voice.

"I have *got* to keep you away from Vil," he complained as they stopped after the very short ride from the 17th green to the tee area of the 18th hole.

The 18th here was a par five, and Kevin winced when he saw that the green was behind a pond. The five water hazards on the course had punished Kevin severely so far. "What is it with golf courses and ponds?" he complained.

“At least you’re brave enough to go after the balls,” Kit chuckled, looking at his damp feet and slacks.

“At twelve dollars for a little box, you’re damn right I’m going after the ball,” he retorted instantly, which made all of them laugh.

By the time they finished, Kit’s back felt alright. A little twingy, but alright. They’d had a good time, and Kit was glad that Jessie had really enjoyed the course despite the fact that it was so hard. “That was fun,” Kevin said as they walked off the 18th green, back towards the car. “I felt like an idiot most of the time, but it was fun.”

“It’s a PGA level course, Kev, you did just fine for your first time playing it. And someone owes me a little something for losing,” he said lightly to Jessie.

“I’m a femme of my word. I promise not to be mad at you for beating me at golf,” she grinned, which made him laugh helplessly.

Kit drove them back home, and after Sam and Kevin headed back for their townhouse, Jessie headed in as he got the clubs. His phone rang, and he saw that it was Vil. “Hey sis, what—“

“I’m *PREGNANT!*” she screamed in glee, so loud it hurt his ear. “I’m pregnant, Kit! I’m gonna have a baby!”

Kit laughed in delight. “Congratulations! You two certainly didn’t waste any time,” he teased.

“I just found out this morning! I realized I missed my period and a doctor came over and gave me a test, and I’m pregnant!”

“I’m so happy for you, sis! Have you told Kendall yet?”

“He’s right here, goof! Put Jessie on, I gotta tell her!”

“She’s inside, lemme head that way. So, that was fast,” he noted again.

“The doc said we must have conceived during the honeymoon or immediately afterward,” she replied, calming down just a little bit. “I just can’t believe it! I need to get the best obstetrician I can find, we need to start making plans! I’m so happy, I’m just beside myself!”

“It’s easy to tell,” he laughed as he went in. “Jessie! Vil needs to talk to you!” he called.

She came out of the kitchen, the smell of some kind of beef or meat heavy in the house, and took the phone from him. “Hi Vil!” she called cheerfully. She listened only a second, then screamed and actually jumped up and down in place a few times. “Oh my god! That’s so wonderful!” she gushed into the phone. “I’m so happy for you, Vil! When did you find out?”

Jessie wandered off with the phone, her tail slashing behind her as it tended to do when she was happy, and Kit could just lean against the doorframe and chuckle. Vil hadn’t wasted any time getting pregnant, and now that she was, things were going to both settle down and heat up in the family. An heir had been secured, and that heir would eventually own both companies...and become one of the most powerful furs on Earth in the bargain. That was a lot of pressure to put on a kid, but he couldn’t doubt that his impending niece or nephew would ever want for love from Vil and Kendall. He was happy for her, for he knew exactly what kind of happiness and joy would soon come into her life. The anticipation during pregnancy, then that beautiful day when she got to look her baby in the eyes for the first time, and all the love and contentment and joy that she would feel the entire time. The fulfillment that came with having a child was a wonder and a joy

unlike anything other in the world, and he was so totally happy that his sister was about to experience that fulfillment herself.

As usual, Vil got what she wanted, quickly and efficiently. Though, he was fairly sure that Kendall hadn't minded the chore of getting her pregnant all that much.