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Provoking the Desiring

Written by BlueKittyTales as a contest entry for Saetia from FurAffinity.
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Part 1 – Calling Card

Wednesday, March 27th, 1991, 15:36. Gabe and Asher's relationship is the fortress they keep well defended, but what they remain unaware of is that somewhere in an alternate universe, a sinister being is scheming, pondering, waiting for the right moment to strike.

Shadows abated for only a short moment as the clouds obscured what remained of the sun, blanketing the sky above the city in an overcast glow. The buds of spring and the sprouting of the leaves on the trees had come soon before, while blossom was carried by the light wind and strewn around as birds of many shapes and sizes travelled northwards. The whistling of the wind as it blew through the trees, however, was swiftly drowned out by the sound of the bustling city all around, every inhabitant approaching and going about their lives in every which way imaginable. Night was only a few hours away, but not for a moment did the pace of the day start to slow down. Particularly prevalent it was in the main business park in North Triston's capital city of Topi, dominating the life and atmosphere of the city while remaining unaware of it doing so.

Inside the MediaStar premises, the central board room had been host to a large meeting with the main directors and managers, and Silvano watched as his employees left, parting them goodbye as they took their notes with them. He remained seated at his desk as the door quietly closed behind the last man, but inside the room and outside of their forms, forces of light and dark were silently at work, shaping the perceptions of the world in ways that were beyond their reach. It was a feeling that was too wondrous to beat or to release his grip from now. Just as the door shut, Silvano's human form shifted and lost all shape, before morphing into the form of a labrador he'd come to call his true form, his thick black fur a stark contrast to the pale flesh that he'd worn with reluctance. From the corner of the room, another creature who had been intricately noting every topic of the meeting, a powerfully built griffon by the name of Anthracite, flowed into view, coming out of his state of complete invisibility.

"Wonderfully conducted, Silvano." he smirked. "Not a single soul in that room has anything to say to disagree with you."

"Just how I planned it." replied Silvano, tendrils of a sly smile crossing through his features. "Not one soul, not even the President himself, has any idea of what caused that Senator's death. He knew too much; this company wields a commanding position that we cannot lose now. We're releasing StarDOS 5.0 in a few months with no compatibility with our opposition, remember?"

"Yes indeed." said Anthracite. "It is not a duty that will come cheaply, though. And not just where debts go. Were this ever to be discovered by – "

"While I wield power at MediaStar," interjected Silvano, casting his hand paw across his view of the city from the window, "there shall be no chance of the halt wits out there ever learning the truth. As far as they're concerned, he died of a heart attack in his sleep. And that's the way it will stay if I have anything to say about it. "

"Well, fair enough." replied Anthracite, folding his wings behind him. "A task like this isn't to be conducted for free, as you'll know. We have still to settle on the right payment in blood, in return for a loss of such an influential figure."

"Yes." replied Silvano. "In this world, finding a being whose blood is entirely pure is a matter of hunting high and low in any place you can name. But there is another way. Just as I have, you've travelled to alternative universes to ours, haven't you?"

"I have."

"And they are linked inextricably in many different ways, as you know."

"That's true. Do you mean to say that it is in one of these worlds where you wish to look for something to fulfil the debt you owe me?" Silvano smiled.

"We're on exactly the same page now." he replied, tilting his head back. "It's so perfect. It's too easy!"

"Except it does come with a high cost." continued Anthracite. "Travelling between worlds is as risky a business as you can get, as doing so can destabilize the balance between them if not done in the right way." Silvano, however, appeared dismissive and disinterested by this. Indeed, he was already back at the window, and seen only to him, his reflection shifted, and in the space of a few minutes, the creature he had his eyes on stood before him, completely unaware of his presence. The young male coyote looked so innocent, so pure, like he had nothing in his life that could possibly bother him. But creatures could conceal their intentions well – he would have to peer into his mind as well, although this time he didn't feel the need to. It would merely be a waste of his energy when he could do other things with it. Silvano turned to the griffon with a slick smile. "However, I always was a being with an eye for a high value target. And I love to take risks."

"Then you shall have your sacrifice, Anthracite." he said. "Once you have that, there's nothing that can stop us. Eventually, this world could be ours."

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At Pearson College, the last lesson of the day for Gabe was soon to call forth, and only a few minutes remained of his free period. He emerged from the men's toilets on the second floor with a smile he tried his best to keep hidden, although it was not to prove the easiest of matters; some of his peers had already sensed that there was more to his expression than he was letting on. He was a golden corgi who stood at about five and a half feet in height, with a tall and slender figure that illuminated him amongst the many students he walked with. Watery grey eyes took in the world around him, coupled with a head of blonde hair that blended in well with his fur. For the past few months, he'd barely been able to escape the sense of enthrallment from his mind, for in the very class he was about to go to was a creature he silently regarded as the man of his dreams. He would be seated next to Asher, who he'd tried before to erase from his mind without success. But no matter what, his heart raced whenever he encountered him, though he never could form the courage to do anything more than watch and envision what in his mind he could say to him. Sometimes he could interact with him fluently, but sometimes he would barely be able to speak. But today, he was determined not to fail. Something was missing, though.

"Aw, just what I need." he groused to himself, running his hand paw down the side of his rucksack. "Left my deodorant in the gents' again." With that, he hurried back down the corridor, aware of the stares he attracted in his wake. He paid no mind to them, and a minute later he went back into the toilets, finding his aerosol can next to the paper towel dispenser. He lifted his shirt and sprayed some onto his chest and underarms, but just when he'd finished, he noticed his reflection in the mirrors shift and rapidly disappear, before it was replaced by an image of a black Labrador. *Huh? What's going on here?* thought Gabe, looking confused. And the moment he looked into the Labrador's eyes, he snarled at him fiercely, looking as though he would leap through the mirror and tear him limb from limb. Panicking, he raced out of the room, not stopping until he'd reached his form room. Coated in a light sweat and with a racing heart, he drew stares from the classmates who had gathered outside, even managing to distract a gossiping hawk from her mobile phone.

"Everything alright, Gabe?" inquired Harvey, a blue and white skunk. Gabe did not look up at his concerned face.

"Yeah, sure." he replied. "I'm fine." *No-one's gonna believe me if I tell them what I saw.* he thought, turning away and avoiding any further eye contact. He knew that he hadn't imagined it – the image of the Labrador lingered in his mind, and the sound of the snarl reverberated, as though he was right in front of him again. What was this being, and what did he want from him? He didn't know it now, but as his tutor arrived, it wouldn't be long before he found out in a way he never could have imagined.

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Much to his surprise and delight, Gabe found himself seated next to Asher, and his heartbeat raced like a rally car's engine as the lecture began. Asher was a grey coyote who had a figure not much differently built from Gabe's, and grey fur coated him from head to toe, lightening to white around his cheek, chin, chest and paws. Brown hair paired itself with eyes of the same colour, and he stood slightly taller than he did, and he had to admit – it was hard to avoid staring into those eyes once he made contact with them. They were the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen. Indeed, he found himself occasionally gazing upon him rather than what his feline tutor was writing onto the paper board at the front of the room, while Asher seemed completely oblivious to this. Normally his art classes collected and captured his attention, but whenever Asher was this close, his focus could only stay in one place. It was only when he attracted a silent but stern expression from his tutor that his attention perked back up to him, while around him he brushed off several stares.

Still, this did not quell the deep seated emotions he felt within him. How he longed for Asher, how he wanted to hold him in his arms, but at the same time, how could he express his feelings for him? In a world like his, he seemed like such an inconvenient crush – there was no question that he wanted him desperately, but at the same time, outside forces would make it much more difficult to build their relationship. But the subtle signs that Asher had shown him seemed to indicate that he loved him back. Smiles, engaging him in casual chatter, and even once inviting him into the college's art studio were strong signs, but what more would he do?

As the tutor finished his speech and instructed the class to pull out their sketchbooks and set up their easels, Gabe noticed a glint in Asher's hand paw. At first, seeing the glint had come from a small mirror, he thought nothing of it, but then he caught a second glance at it. He could see a mysterious figure in the mirror. And none of his peers looked anything like the image he could see, nor were there any such markings around. His heartbeat's pace climbing further, he turned to Asher's eyes, which by now looked glazed.

"Asher?" he said, looking worried. But he gave no answer, instead emitting a high, delighted sigh as he leaned back in his chair. And it was then that Gabe realized what the figure was. *Oh my God, it's that Labrador again!* And instead of growling, he looked to be beckoning him, inviting him somehow, completely entrancing him to the point where he was numb to any other inputs.

"Asher?" asked Marie, the vixen Asher normally sat next to. "Are you alright?" As quickly as he had been overcome, Asher awakened from his trance at the sound of her voice, and the figure disappeared into the infinite reflectivity of the mirror. Harvey stared from behind them.

"What?" he said. "Oh, yes. Yeah, this thing needs a clean." Gabe watched him silently, wondering how conscious he was of what had happened. It was a wonder how only he and Marie had noticed; not even the tutor had spotted them. For the remainder of the lesson, Gabe kept to himself as he painted out the sketch they had drawn the day before, all the while watching Asher attentively as he worked. Replaced by worry were his deep emotions, but hopefully, that would be the last time they would ever see the Labrador, whatever his mission was.

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The class came to an end in what felt like a mere few minutes, with Gabe having had trouble concentrating near the end of the lesson. On this occasion, his courage had faltered, and he found himself unable to speak to Asher. But his hope wouldn't be dashed this time. Just after he followed his classmates out of the room, Asher approached him from behind, with a smirk of a type he remembered all too well from the other times they had met eyes. Immediately he stopped in his tracks, his heart fluttering like the wings of a butterfly.

"Hiya Gabe." he chirped, casual yet sounding delighted to see him. Gabe turned to face him, bracing himself for what was to come. *I must not overreact or clam up. I must remain level headed.* he told himself.

"Hey Asher." he replied in a small voice, adding a smile for good measure. Asher's expression displayed warmth and invitation, but just as he'd expected, he seemed as shy as he felt. Indeed, Gabe had trouble keeping eye contact with him.

"You alright?" asked Asher, Gabe looking up at him again.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm getting on alright." he replied quietly. *The question is, are you?* he finished internally, not daring to ask about the being he'd seen in his pocket mirror, or the one he'd seen in the toilets. Wanting to advance the conversation further, he asked the first question that came into his mind. "How was art class for you?" *That sounds so corny.* he thought, hoping this was far enough from touching upon what he'd seen.

"I enjoyed it, rather." he replied with another smirk. "But I can never get my artwork done before the lessons end."

"Yeah, you can't rush art." said Gabe knowingly. "If you hurry it, you never feel satisfied with it, and you compromise on its quality too." *What's he gonna say to that?* he thought, nervousness visibly clouding his mind by this point.

"I couldn't agree more." replied Asher earnestly. "And it's a lot more than people think it is as well. They don't realize that artists pour their hearts and souls into their work."

"That's probably because they don't see that unless they make a picture of that very thing." Gabe said. But he quickly stopped himself. *Uh oh. Did I say that or just think it?* To his relief, Asher smiled again – such a simple expression sent a rush over the length of his body.

"I think you're right." responded Asher. "I like it when you're right." His mind froze, and all he could do was chuckle to himself, as though in disbelief.

"You do?" he said meekly.

"I do." he replied brightly. "Listen – I'm going to the art studio to finish that painting. I'm not gonna be happy with it until I've finished it."

"Now there's the sign of the determined artist." quipped Gabe, and this time his eye contact and bright expression did not falter. But he was not ready to wrap things up yet. "You...you don't want me to come along, do you? I've...got some more to do on my painting too." Asher thought for a short moment. Gabe was for a moment terrified that he would reject him, but his silent aspiration was soon granted.

"Sure, why not?" said Asher enthusiastically. "I'd love to see what you're making. I didn't get a clear look at it from where I was sitting."

"I can't wait to see what yours comes out like either, Asher." grinned Gabe, barely able to contain his delight. "I'll be right there!"

"Okay!" cried Asher. "See you there!" And with that, Asher headed off to the studio with his supplies in hand paw. Gabe's delight only lasted for a short moment, however. Harvey appeared behind him with a stony face, and Gabe instantly guessed what was on his mind.

"Hey Gabe." said Harvey.

"Hello, Harvey."

"Forgive me for getting right to business," he said, "but did you notice anything...odd, about Asher this lesson?" *Oh, no...he knows.*

"Not really." he lied. Harvey did not look convinced, however.

"He...looked pretty out of it when he had his mirror out." said Harvey slowly. "I saw the expression on his face. It was like he'd been hypnotized or something...and you didn't notice?" Gabe, rather uncontrollably, felt himself becoming nervous, and he could not stop his tail's motions from slowing right down.

"Well, I...I didn't..."

"Gabe," insisted Harvey, "I think there might be something wrong. Did you see something in that

mirror?"

"Well, no."

"While you're in the studio with him," instructed Harvey, "keep your eyes on him and see if it appears again. There's a screen lined with mirrors in that studio. Whatever that thing is, it's some serious business."

"What do you mean?" asked Gabe.

"I mean he could be in danger. Something like this was in the news last year – when some creature abducted somebody and took them into another world. I don't know who they were, but they never came back." He opened his mouth to object, but he knew that Harvey had struck right at the heart of the matter. He scented danger as well, although he wasn't sure he could admit it, and now that others knew about it, it was not going to be taken lightly. Instead, he submitted, in hope that this would amount to nothing.

"Alright," said Gabe. "I'll keep a look out."

"See that you do," replied Harvey. "He's my friend as well as yours." With that, Harvey headed towards the staircase, while Gabe thought about what to do next. He would soon find out – he heard the familiar slamming of the door of the men's toilets just down the corridor. He thought nothing of it at first, but then he came to a rapid realization. *The mirrors above the sinks...oh, Asher! Not again!*

"Oh my God," he cried, "this can't be happening. I'm on my way, Asher!" He raced towards the toilets as quickly as his legs would carry him, never stopping or looking back until he'd reached them. *That creature is not taking him away from me.*

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Gabe didn't stop until he'd reached the toilets, almost running into a vixen coming out of the women's toilets opposite, though she was too preoccupied with her handheld *GameHead* to notice. He had to get to Asher as soon as he could, even if it meant cutting right across anyone to reach him – no matter what, he could not allow the creature to strike again, but he sensed that he would discover his true intentions very soon. And sure enough, when he slid the door open slightly, he heard a soft, almost passionate sounding voice he recognized from the first note.

"Asher," sighed the voice, which sent a chill down Gabe's spine. He burst in at that point, and he shivered in terror at what he saw. The Labrador had returned, and this time had reached through the mirror for Asher, who stood completely hypnotized at the row of sinks. Asher's expression was one of utter elation as the Labrador stroked his cheek and chin, as though he was experiencing his own vision of Heaven on Earth.

"Asher," sighed the Labrador again, eliciting a delighted sigh from Asher. But the moment he noticed Gabe in the room, he disappeared in a blur of black, leaving Asher staring endlessly into the mirror.

"Asher?" said Gabe meekly. "Are you okay?" Immediately, Asher broke out of his captured trance and turned to face him.

"Huh?" he said, looking confused. "Oh yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. I'll be with you in a minute." Gabe frowned.

"Asher...I'm not sure I believe you." countered Gabe. To his surprise, Asher looked at him suspiciously.

"What are you talking about?" he questioned. *There's only one way to say this to him, and he won't like it.* he realized, nerves beginning to overtake him again in an instant.

"It's just...you've been acting pretty odd today." said Gabe. "I mean, that Labrador that's been following you...what do you think he wants from you?" Asher's suspicion faded, replaced with total confusion.

"Uh, Gabe," he replied, "what *are* you talking about?"

"That Labrador you were just looking at in the mirror!" insisted Gabe. But Asher looked even more bewildered. It was as though his memory of what had happened had been wiped clean in the space of a mere few seconds. Asher shook his head as he began to make his way out of the toilets.

"Nope, I still don't know what you're talking about," he said. "Come on – you still want to come to the art studio, Gabe?" *There's another mirror in that room.* he reminded himself. *I might be able to stop him from coming back this time.*

"Yeah, alright," said Gabe, bowing his head in embarrassment. Part of him wished he hadn't said anything, but part of him also ached at the idea of what the Labrador planned to do him. Whether Asher believed him or not, he knew it was up to him to plot what the next moves of the Labrador were, much like the next moves of a game of chess. A blush could be seen underneath his fur as he followed him, but he hardly dared to speak, wanting to see what Asher would say first. Whatever they were about to be led into, Gabe tried his hardest to brace himself for what was to come.

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The art studio was rather sparsely populated that afternoon, with only three other students in the room on that occasion. Rather than setting up their supplies in the main section of the room, Asher led Gabe into one of the two small interview rooms that had windows backing onto the main room, where two chairs and two easels were set up. Gabe was silently relieved when he noticed that they were away from the screen outside, although it did not last for long; another mirrored screen was present, and all of its mirrors faced them. It was a gamble they'd bet on and lost, but not if Gabe acted quickly were the Labrador to strike. But he didn't want to let on to anyone outside the room that something was wrong, so he followed Asher in and set up in silence. It was not until they'd each put up their unfinished paintings that the silence between them was broken, this time by Gabe, though his heartbeat quickened even more.

"Asher," said Gabe as Asher turned his easel away, denying him a sight of the painting. "What are you making a picture of?" Asher smiled as he filled his row of small paint pots, nonchalant, innocent, endearing.

"Hmm," he said, as though to hang a feeling of suspense, "it's a secret."

"Secret, hm?" hummed Gabe as he mixed his paints.

"Yep, secret," replied Asher, showing a sly wink. Gabe's mind began to race.

"And why might that be, Asher?" sighed Gabe. *How's he gonna react to this?* he thought, both dreading and eagerly anticipating his reply.

"I've been thinking," replied Asher, and Gabe noticed that he began to blush as he spoke. "What if...what if this painting was a little something for you?" Gabe's eyes brightened, and his expression was one of great surprise, but this didn't come without a sudden idea. *I'm not sure about this...but let's see what happens.*

"And...and what if this painting...was also one for you?" he said hesitantly, unable to maintain eye contact with him.

"Well, isn't that a nice surprise?" grinned Asher. "That's a lovely thought!"

"So is yours," replied Gabe, craning his head to try and get a look at Asher's easel. But he pulled it away, as though afraid he might take it away from him.

"No peeking until I'm done," said Asher quickly, a look of confidence permeating. "I want this to be a surprise."

"I like surprises!" blurted Gabe, before he realized he'd spoken it. *Uh oh. I've gotta clear this up fast!* But suddenly, Asher looked sullen.

"Oh, Gabe," asked Asher, "I've run out of green paint. Can I have some of yours?" Gabe inspected his paints.

"I'm nearly out as well," he admitted. "Don't worry – I'll go and get some from the locker."

"Okay," replied Asher, turning his easel away from the window. And with that, Gabe left, but it was just when he'd closed the door behind him when he suddenly remembered...*the mirrors on the screen! I've gotta get back in there fast!* Luckily, the supply locker was next to the door they'd come in, and he managed to quickly find the paint he needed. But just when he was about to return, he could see through the windows that Asher stood staring at something in front of him, completely ceaseless, entirely enthralled. *No! Not this again!* cried his mind. As one of the other students left, he found himself frozen to the spot at what he saw. The Labrador had appeared again, and this time he was taking Asher by the hand paws, clearly encouraging him to step through the mirror into his world. At that moment, he burst in, but he was too late. *Oh dear God, please tell me this is not happening!*

"Come with me," sighed the Labrador in a slow, rhythmic whisper, and before Gabe could do anything to stop him, he pulled Asher in with him as he stepped into the mirror, and Gabe watched frozen in utter horror as the coyote he wanted so much to call his love, Asher, mechanically and silently walked with the Labrador further and further away from the world he'd inhabited just moments before, leaving only his own reflection behind. His mind was a maze of emotions, but his body remained completely still, unable to respond to any command from his brain as he stared blankly into the mirror. He could not even speak, not did he appear to acknowledge Harvey when he came in.

"Gabe," he asked, "what's the matter?" He looked into his eyes, and only then did Gabe respond.

"Asher," he said in a hoarse voice that was almost a whisper. "Asher...he's gone."

"Oh my God," cried Harvey, "I knew it! It's just what I thought it was!"

"Harvey," said Gabe almost silently, starting to become tearful, "what...what are we gonna do?" Harvey's expression was grave.

"There's only one thing we *can* do," he replied, gesturing to the mirror. Gabe turned to him, skeptical of his motives. "Do you see those grooves in the middle?"

"No," said Gabe. Harvey showed a sudden smile.

"Who or whatever that thing is, this mirror's still open," he said.

"So...you're saying there's a chance we can save him?" said Gabe in a small voice. "But Harvey...we can't go in there. We'll never get back out." Harvey inspected the mirror more closely, and turned back to him, looking suddenly optimistic.

"We can," he countered, "and we must. But it's slowly getting smaller – we have to do this before it closes."