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WARNING: May contain coarse language, violence, gore or sexual content. Reader discretion is advised.

Chapter 10. “Stealing My Breath”

Alexei started to become distant. He came home drunk more often. He would become angry with Troy and storm off to his room. Troy hadn't the slightest idea what he may have said or done, but he had to figure out what changed with his friend.

He felt dirty. Alexei was off at the bar and here he was sifting through his friends' things. He never had a reason to be in Alexei's room before. Alexei had a few pictures in frames and on the walls. A picture of his younger self in a “grandma's sweater” was on the end table. Other pictures from his childhood adorned the wall. On his dresser was a turned over frame.

Troy lifted the edge of the frame. The glass was broken and the picture inside looked as if it were crumpled up and flattened out several times. He knew that other person. Two rings made of bone or ivory lay where the frame covered. He picked up the larger of the rings and looked over it. An intricate chain was carved out of the outer surface. An inscription was etched inside.

“Alexei - The chain binds us...”

He placed the ring down and lifted the smaller one. It had the same raised chain carved into the outer surface. There was an etching inside of this one as well.

“Trinity - ...together, forever.”

Troy knew of Trinity. She was an actress from another studio. The two studios had done collaborations off and on throughout the years. Another was in the works. They had a meeting about it shortly after the last film wrapped. Alexei seemed to become like this whenever these collaborations happened. This time, though...it felt different. Something was eating at Alexei and it seemed to have been brewing for a long time. It was a volcano about to erupt. Now Troy knew why.

He looked around the room as he started for the door. He found a photo in a polished silver frame of Alexei carrying him over the threshold of the apartment when gay marriage was legalized. They...had a few drinks. That smile and the light in his eyes told a different story from that found in some other pictures of before Troy knew him. Alexei's hair was long and the light was gone. Like he was just coasting through life without feeling anything.

Some index cards were framed next to a Master's Degree in Psychology. On the other side was a Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Development.

"All that education and he's doing adult films," Troy thought and sighed.

He flipped off the light and slowly closed the door. He spent the rest of the night trying to come up with a way to console his friend. There had to be something he could do. Something he could say, perhaps.

Troy made and ate some breakfast. He left a plate out for Alexei with a note that he was making dinner tonight and he wanted Alexei to be there.

The spring air cooled his heated fur as he jogged around the town. Many eyes followed his form as it passed by. There was only so much he could hide - that he wanted to hide. He liked the attention. What better way to get a date?

His eyes locked on to the glowing yellow fur of a cheetah jogging his way. The way she ran was almost uncoordinated - like she was having a hard time seeing the things in front of her. Her frame was wiry, but she looked strong with the muscle rippling beneath the fur as her legs and arms moved. Speaking of arms: Hers seemed long. There was something peculiar about her eyes.

Troy stopped and grabbed his head. He knew he should have worn his sunglasses. Someone seemed to be growling as they passed by him. He peeked an eye open as the cheetah passed by him. Compared to him, she seemed tiny. He was almost a foot taller than her and she seemed malnourished with bones poking out from under her fur. It didn't make sense why she had that kind of muscle rippling next to them.

Troy shook his head and continued his jog. He wanted to make it to the store for his cooldown. Making dinner was going to be a long process. He was no cook. He barely knew how to boil water. Surely there was a recipe online he could follow.

He made it home and put the items away before showering. He began looking up recipes that had the ingredients he bought: Shrimp, fettuccine noodles, parmesan cheese, and a thick marinara sauce. There was a bottle of wine just in case.

He put on a nice, short-sleeved gray polo and a pair of white slacks. Perhaps not the greatest idea of things to wear around a stove that was heating marinara sauce.

He began heating the water for the noodles and sautéing the shrimp. He added a few pinches of salt on the shrimp before flipping them in the pan. He poured the sauce from the jar into a covered saucepan and let it simmer. He added the noodles and set the timer to go off when they were done.

Something crashed into the door to the apartment. A key could be heard scraping the deadbolt until it slid into the slot and turned. Alexei stumbled through the door and his bag dropped from his shoulder. He audibly huffed from his mouth as he teetered in place. His eyes were half open and he looked disgusted with the site of Troy in the kitchen.

"Dinner will be ready soon...if you're interested," Troy said, then turned off the heat to the frying pan.

The smell of whiskey filled Troy's nose. Alexei shut the door and pulled his bag back over his shoulder. He stumbled to the hallway and crashed against the walls until he slammed his door open.

Troy shut off the screaming timer and the heat to the noodles. He carefully strained them, then poured them back into the pan with some butter and salt. He pulled out two plates and silverware, then set the table. He put a couple of potholders on the table and placed the noodle pan on top of one. He turned off the heat to the shrimp, then poured them into the sauce. He turned off the heat to the sauce as he stirred, then placed that on the table next to the noodles. He pulled out the new container of parmesan cheese from the pantry cupboard, then sat at the table.

Alexei stumbled out of his room and slumped down at the table. Troy mocked a smile as he began to pile some noodles on Alexei's plate, then spooned some shrimp and sauce over top. He slid the cheese over by Alexei's plate, then served himself.

"Would you like something to drink?" Troy asked politely.

"Wadder'sss fine," Alexei slurred.

Troy got up and grabbed two cups. He poured some water from the filter pitcher in the fridge for Alexei, then popped open the wine for himself. He placed the water next to Alexei's plate, then sipped on his wine as he sat back at the table. Alexei spun his fork into some noodles, then shoved it in his open muzzle.

"Crunch. Crrrunch. Crinch."

Troy put some of the noodles in his mouth and found his teeth echoing the sound from Alexei's mouth. He cringed. He stabbed a shrimp and began to chew it to, hopefully, cleanse his mouth of that atrocity. It felt like he was chewing on a piece of gum.

"This is fucking gross," Troy said plainly.

"Y-yeah. Ginda," Alexei said quietly.

"I'm so sorry. I'll order pizza."

"Yeah," Alexei whispered and took a drink of his water.

Troy walked to his room and grabbed his phone. He tapped the app and placed the order. He placed his phone back on the nightstand. He couldn't help peeking into Alexei's room. Clothes were strewn all over his bed. Troy felt bad for not noticing it sooner. He looked over at Alexei - who was sipping more of his water. Alexei was wearing his "I want to get laid" clothes. It was a silky, short-sleeved, navy blue button-up with baby blue designs and pleated, black slacks. Troy felt his face get warm. Alexei wasn't wearing that when he stumbled in. The faint smell of Alexei's cologne wafted from the doorway.

Troy grabbed some containers from the cupboard and spooned the failed dinner into a few containers. Perhaps he could salvage it for lunch tomorrow. He could feel Alexei's eyes on him as he placed the containers in the fridge, then began to wash the dishes.

Troy placed the last dish in the drying rack when the doorbell rang. He dried off his hands and walked over to the door. He handed the rabbit forty dollars and closed the door. He placed the boxes on the counter, then grabbed Alexei's cup to refill it. After placing the cup back on the table, Alexei moved over to the couch.

"Ah'll pud a moo-vee on," Alexei said and turned on the TV, then surfed through the channel menu.

Troy pulled a couple of paper towels off the roll and grabbed the plates with pizza and breadsticks. He passed Alexei his plate, then went back for his wine. He returned to the couch and sank into the seat.

Alexei chose a superhero movie that came out recently. They were supposed to watch it together a couple of weeks back. Alexei chose to who-...go out for drinks instead. Troy shook the ill thoughts from his head.

Troy got up after they cleared their plates and came back with more. After clearing their plates again, Troy returned the dirty dishes to the sink. He slammed more of the wine while he watched from the kitchen. It was uncomfortable sitting next to his silent friend. He wanted to talk to him so bad his fur was on end.

By the end of the movie, Troy could feel his head swimming from the wine. Alexei had gotten up while the credits rolled and went to the bathroom. Troy turned off the TV and sat there with his arms hanging between his knees - elbows on his thighs.

Troy gasped when he felt strong hands begin to knead into his back. He sighed heavily and relaxed. He closed his eyes and let the husky work his soft, strong fingers into the knots along his back.

He blinked and found Alexei groaning softly across from him as Troy worked his fingers along Alexei's spine. He couldn't believe the mess his friend's back was in. Tiny knots up to ones the size of golf balls. He never realized how miserable his friend was. He knew how his back felt before and after Alexei massaged him. How Alexei wasn't crying in pain was a mystery.

Troy felt a lump rising in his throat. "Ah," came a raspy voice from his mouth. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Alexei. Um...can we, uh...talk?" He felt as timid as his voice sounded.

"Hmm?" Alexei hummed.

"I, um...have been thinking. A-a lot."

Alexei turned and faced Troy. Troy stared at Alexei's soft, nearly translucent blue eyes through his drooping lids. The life seemed to be gone from within them. It hurt to look at.

"I," Troy began and cleared his throat again. He looked down and squeezed his eyes shut. He looked back up at his friend. "I..."

Troy felt his heart slam in his chest. He felt his face flush hotter and hotter. He slowly reached up and placed his hand under his friend's jaw hinge and leaned forward suddenly. He closed his eyes as he pressed his lips against Alexei's. His body trembled with the feeling. He was afraid he'd gone too far.

He drew a sharp breath through his nose as he felt Alexei's hand slide around his neck and rest behind his head. He slowly fluttered his eyes closed as Alexei's tongue began to slide into his mouth. His pants began to feel very constrictive.

Troy opened his eyes and locked them on to Alexei's. The life seemed to have returned to them. They sparkled - even with the crappy incandescent lights shining from the ceiling. Troy slid his tongue out from his mouth and tasted his friend's flesh for the first time. He wanted more but couldn't exactly explain why. He used his free hand to cradle his friend's balls as he held the stiffening rocket pouch in the other.

"Make sure to use plenty of saliva. Canine dicks are very sensitive to dry and coarse things," Alexei coached as he panted from his open muzzle.

He was glad Alexei was going to be his first. He admired his professionalism. He admired canine cocks in porn he watched on his own. He always seemed to nut the hardest when he watched Alexei's on screen. He found it easy to confess his love to his friend. He wasn't sure he could confess his collection of videos Alexei starred in that were stashed on his hard drive.

Troy blinked again. Alexei was panting and groaning as he thrust into Troy's mouth. Troy worked his tongue over the slippery surface down to the knot, then up to the squishy conical tip.

"Oh! Gawd! I love you, Troy," Alexei cried out and tensed up.

Lava shot into the back of Troy's throat. It tasted a bit like when Troy licked his fingers before starting the second set of bench presses - the taste of the bar stinging his tongue. It had a very thin consistency, but there was a lot of it filling his long muzzle.

Troy tried to breathe. He snorted as cum found its way into the back of his sinus. Alexei thrust up and stabbed Troy's uvula. Troy gagged and pulled away. Alexei's cock stabbed between Troy's lip and his gums. Troy's vision blurred with tears. His throat hurt and he began to wretch as he pulled further away from Alexei.

Alexei's color slowly changed. Troy couldn't seem to catch any breath in his mouth. It felt like something was stuck in his throat. Alexei's fur turned gray, his eyes swirled with shades of blue, and wings appeared behind his back.

"This isn't real, Troy," Alexei...the wolf said.

Troy's vision began to darken. A dim, green glow began to surround him.

"She's coming! Stay strong! Stay alive!" The wolfman seemed to shout - his voice getting quieter and quieter.

Troy's guts squeezed harder. Harder still. He was salivating so heavily that it was spilling from his mouth. One more heave and a tube shot out from his mouth and splatted on the floor. A clear, gel-like substance sprayed everywhere. Several voices shouted around him as Troy squeezed his eyes shut and caught his breath.

His stomach, chest, and throat ached. His arms felt like they were bound. He slowly opened his eyes to see several beast-men around him. His memory slowly returned to him. This was the alien ship. He was human. They were not.

It seemed that wolfman - Mykol, as Troy seemed to recall - didn't want Troy to stay in that alternate reality too long. Troy agreed. He wanted nothing to do with it. Though he wanted nothing to do with the wolfman, he seemed to be Troy's only ally - even if he wasn't real.

Horns shouted to Troy's right. A voice from Troy's right barked in opposition. Horns shouted back. Troy's eyes met his. Horns' eyes seemed...sad. Apologetic, even. The liquid stopped spraying and a creature picked up the hose. Troy's head felt like it was about to explode. Images flashed in his head. He felt something press to his lips and slide down his throat.

Troy opened his eyes. He looked down at Alexei. Alexei looked like a scientist with his eyes exploring a new species while trying to come up with a name for it.

"What's wro-..."

"Probably the longest this beautiful creature's been out without being expertly placed into a ready and waiting hole and I'm staring at it trying to figure out what I want to do with it first even after years of daydreaming and dreaming and thinking of how I wanted to tame this beast but I'm in absolute awe that I'm finally this close to it and I just

can't get over how the real thing is absolutely stunning with its size and length and girth and how it'll feel when you slide this hoss down my..."

"Alexei! Snap out of it!" Troy said loudly. Perhaps mostly in jest.

Alexei cupped the base of Troy's cock and began to rub the helmet and piss hole over his nose, lips, and tongue. His hot breath wrapped around Troy's cock head as his other hand cupped Troy's balls and gently squeezed them, then caressed the sensitive skin that surrounded them.

Troy closed his eyes and moaned. He grabbed Alexei's hips and slowly thrust inside of his friend. Alexei's warmth filled his loins with a passion he hadn't felt in a long time. Alexei moaned and cried with glee as his insides were filled with horse meat.

Troy squeezed his eyes shut. The world moved around him. He didn't feel like he was a part of it. He opened his eyes and looked around. People moved around him, but it didn't feel real. His pained eyes looked up as he tried to force his face to return to normal.

"Troy?" Came a female's voice.

Troy looked over as a nurse looked around the waiting room. He slowly stood and walked over to the nurse. He looked down at her. The female cheetah somehow seemed familiar. He could hear a soft growl coming from her. Her eyes were very strange. They looked like gold spheres. *Actual* gold. She blinked and her eyes changed to a deep blue. They, somehow, reminded him of Alexei's.

"He said he's ready to see you now," the nurse said, her voice a bit deep and raspy. It reminded Troy of one of those pay-per-minute phone ads.

Troy took a breath and made his way down the hallway. The sterilized smell touched his nostrils. He didn't like it here. Not like this.

Alexei lit up as Troy walked into the room. It hurt to see his friend...his lover like this. He couldn't be mad at him for hiding this for so long. It's not like Alexei knew for sure himself. Not until today.

Alexei's eyes filled with tears as he took the flowers from Troy's hand. He placed them in his lap and grabbed Troy's wrist. He began to quietly sob as he rubbed his muzzle and cheek against Troy's hand.

"Stay with me, Troy. I can't be without you. I feel lost. I feel alone. I feel empty. I love you so much, it hurts," Alexei said through sniffles.

Troy felt the urge to hug him. To hold him. He felt stuck.

"I don't care if you fuck other people after I'm gone. I just want you to be happy."

"You're not going anywhere," Troy choked out.

"I have cancer...Troy. Inoperable...cancer. It's spread from my colon into my blood. They aren't sure if chemotherapy will succeed." Alexei's voice was cracking and he began to sob uncontrollably - his body quaking with each second that passed.

Troy felt the lump in his throat begin to choke him. His hand trembled as he reached down to Alexei's neck. He pulled his lover to him and began to sob himself as the words finally sunk in.

"I'm so in love with you," Alexei cried out and wiped his eyes. He took a breath and seemed to chuckle. "I never told you about the dream I had. It was long before we became a couple. It was when we spent the night at that cabin by the lake. You followed me out there to make sure I didn't do anything stupid."

Troy remembered that night. Alexei had been drinking and stumbled out to the dock. It was just after the reviews for Alexei's latest video came out. They weren't kind. Troy walked up behind Alexei and hugged him. Alexei cried so hard that Troy had to carry him back to the cabin.

"I was so weak back then. You gave me strength that night. I fell in love with you as you held me. I haven't even slept with anyone outside of filming. I just...*stared* at your face as you carried me back. I woke up covered in cum after dreaming about you." Alexei giggled. "I've never done that before. I've had wet dreams before. But, something about you made the dream more intense. I was still so hard it hurt. I thought of you as I jerked off. It was the most intense feeling when I finally came. Remember: I didn't look you in the eyes all day?"

Troy remembered that. He felt like he'd done something wrong or that, perhaps, Alexei was just embarrassed. He didn't know it was because he was fodder for a fapping session. Though tears streamed from his eyes, he felt his face redden.

"I don't care what you think of me after hearing that. I'm tired of living with regret. I don't want to live with," Alexei said and sniffled. He wiped his eyes again and wrapped

the hand around Troy's torso. "I don't want to die with regrets. Stay by me, Troy. Stay with me until I go. I want to cherish our time together." Alexei sighed. "Has it really only been a month since that night?"

Troy's chest tightened and he began to cry. He bent over and kissed the top of Alexei's head. He sobbed into Alexei's hair. He felt the dampness around his nose as he squeezed his friend.

"Please, Troy. Promise me you'll find happiness. Promise me you'll live on with joy in your life."

Troy opened his eyes and looked up. He wiped the tears from his cheeks. The preacher's voice was muffled. The sound of birds chirping filled the air. Troy glanced over the crowd around him. They were all coworkers. His bigoted family never showed. How he hated them right now. That was their son in that fucking box!

Troy's eyes caught something in the distance. He narrowed his eyes and focused on the people standing next to the tree. It was a wolfman. But he had wings! Next to him...he recognized that cheetah. She looked different. She wore, what looked like, bandages around her torso and a loincloth covering her privates. She looked primitive. The wolfman pulled her close to him into a half hug. Troy blinked and they were gone.

He brushed it off as his thoughts went back to when he and Alexei met. How they interacted on set. The day that Alexei moved in. All the times they talked and laughed. All the times he held Alexei at night as he cried. The meals they shared. The time that Alexei drunkenly told Troy he loved him. When Troy finally said it back. The love they made.

Troy reminisced on something that happened before the diagnosis came in. They shared some moments together, but this one felt so special.

Troy hung up the phone and sighed as he set it down on the table. He ran his fingers through his hair and stared at the wood grain.

"Who was that, sweetums?" Alexei asked from the hallway - holding a fresh batch of dry laundry in the plastic basket.

"Some crazed feline fan girl that I hooked up with once." Troy felt guilty for that candid confession.

Alexei murred. "A smitten kitten, eh?" He asked with a playful tone.

Troy groaned as he squeezed his eyes shut. "I shouldn't have said anything," he muttered. The guilt grew painful.

Troy heard the basket poof into the couch and soft steps came close. Alexei jerked Troy's chair back. Troy looked over at Alexei in shock and slight irritation. Alexei held a tired and pained, yet loving, expression. He slid his left hand across Troy's wide chest and raised a foot up. The foot hovered over Troy's lap and landed on the floor with the handsome husky lowering himself onto Troy. Alexei rested his forearms on Troy's broad shoulders. Troy felt Alexei's hands slide into his mane and comb through the hair. Alexei looked so deep into his eyes that Troy yearned to kiss him.

"I understand, love. You still desire female companionship. I was the same way when I first found out I craved men more. It's not always an easy transition." Alexei slowly drew closer and whispered. "Just promise me - no matter what or who you do - that you'll come home to me after you satiate your desires."

Alexei leaned in and tenderly kissed Troy. Their lips parted enough for Troy to respond. His eyes remained closed for he wanted to stay immersed in his lover's arms.

"Okay. I promise," he whispered back - his cock hardening in his jeans against his lover.

Alexei passionately kissed him as he moaned and pressed his own bulge against Troy's. It was a special memory to Troy. It was the last time they made love. Troy never did seek out a female since that talk.

Alexei would come home late from treatments. He was always so tired and disheveled. Troy lay awake at night just to listen to his lover's wheezing snore. He feared he may pass in his sleep and Troy wouldn't be awake to hear his final words. The chemotherapy was going well. They even said the cancer was in remission. It was such happy news. It wouldn't last long.

There was a call from the hospital and the look on Alexei's face...it crushed him. It hurt so bad to look at the love of his life's expression in that moment. All the trips to the hospital after that. Sleeping in the chair beside him as they held hands.

They had removed Alexei's colon and one of his testicles. More chemotherapy treatments followed. Alexei was just too weak to continue any more surgeries or treatments.

One night, Alexei nudged Troy out of a sleepy daze.

"Troy?" Alexei said weakly.

"Yeah, I'm here."

"I'm sorry." Alexei's lips were trembling.

"What for?" Troy asked as he put his hand on Alexei's. He felt the lump rise in his throat and he felt like he was about to cry.

"I tried...for you...but...I don't..."

Troy caressed his lover's hand and pressed his lips against the cold flesh and fur. He felt his heart sink and his guts clenched. Tears fell from his eyes onto his love's fur. He looked over at him as Alexei opened his sunken eyes.

"Do the films...and...have fun...enjoy...life. Love...again...my sw-...sweet Troy."

Troy's heart felt like it was being torn from his body as an elongated "*beep*" filled the room. He cried out as he gripped his lover's hand tighter and tighter. Troy's stomach clenched with pain. He squeezed his eyes shut and cried out louder.

"This isn't real! This can't be real!" He thought as he wailed.

Someone was barking orders to his right. The beep had turned into a pulsating whine. He pried open his heavy eyes and they slowly cleared to reveal the green, dimly lit room. Someone pulled something away from his body and delicately held it up. A wild ache filled his body and a fresh, slicing pain traveled down his chest. It looked like the person...no...a creature was holding up human flesh. Troy looked over and saw his pale skin held no fur. He slowly looked over to the other arm to see a thin layer of fat covering visible muscle. It looked like something out of an anatomy textbook.

Troy felt fully conscious at this realization. He wasn't an equine in love with a husky. He wasn't mourning the loss of his lover. He was screaming out in pain as his flesh was being cut from his body.

He glanced over and made eye contact with a frantic Horns. Horns stopped moving and speaking. He stared back at Troy with a slack jaw and panicked expression. Horns' eyes began to fill with tears. Troy heaved out a fresh scream as the rest of his skin was cut from his torso. The creature held it up with both hands and moved away

from Troy. Troy's lungs were on fire and his throat was raw from straining to push anything else out. He felt faint. His eyes closed.

He opened his eyes and wiped away fresh tears. He held Alexei's portrait in his hands as he kneeled over Alexei's bed. He bent over and inhaled sharply. He could still smell Alexei's scent in the sheets. He pulled back and glanced over. His eyes landed on that stupid photo of Alexei carrying him into the apartment. The joy in their eyes. In *his* eyes.

Troy's eyes filled with tears again. He began to sob. He folded his arms over Alexei's bed and cried uncontrollably. He spoke nonsense. He cried out nonsense as memories filled his head of his dead lover. He didn't know if he could keep his promise. He felt empty. He felt lifeless. He didn't...couldn't live without him.

Something clicked behind him. It sounded like one of those refillable lighters. Troy wiped his eyes and looked over at the doorway. The flame lit up the face of a lizard creature. Troy wasn't sure what - let alone *who* - she was. The flame danced as the end of a cigarette was lit. She snapped the lid shut and took a drag. The orange glow burned brighter for a brief moment, then dimmed as she exhaled.

"Snap out of it, you whine ass," she said in a calm, deep, sultry voice. "This isn't reality."

Troy sniffed and wiped his eyes again. It smelled like clove. He knew that scent from a shoot long ago when they did a cross-promotion. Troy noticed he wasn't in the bedroom anymore. He was kneeling before a tree stump and she was leaning against a tree.

"There were so many days I prayed to have an alternate reality. The pain overwhelmed me and I couldn't take it anymore." She looked sternly at him. "You're not a fucking horse with a magic dick and a slew of whores ready to worship your balls."

"Brooke! That's exceptionally rude. Besides, you shouldn't be here," came a male voice. He was soft-spoken and sounded very familiar.

A bluish glow came from beyond her. The glow split into two eye-shaped objects, then he finally stepped from the shadows.

"Well fuck. I mean: There's nothing wrong with gay lovers. Whatever makes you happy." She sounded apologetic - sympathetic, even. Sincere. "Even if..." For whatever reason, she trailed off.

"I can't pretend to know what you're going through, Troy," said the voice behind the glowing blue eyes. They looked so sad, yet frightening. "I do know loss."

The winged wolf hung his head. A soft blue glow seemed to surround them both. Other figures appeared behind him. Troy recognized them from the other dreams.

"I just wanted to live happily," the winged wolf said.

His image flashed. He briefly appeared to be missing part of his lower jaw. His heart blinked a few times, then stopped.

"The loss of those we love can cut deeper than that knife," the goat in the wheelchair said. Her image flashed to show her sobbing uncontrollably as she emptied a bottle of pills into her mouth and washed it all down with a bottle of wine.

Brooke took a drag from the clove cigarette. Her scales sparkled around the red dress she wore. "Counselors tried to help. I know my friends loved me dearly." Her image flashed to show her lying in a bathtub nearly filled with blood red water. Her hand dropped one of those utility knives with snappable blades to keep the edge sharp. Blood poured from her wrist onto the floor. There appeared to be several healed scars surrounding those final gashes.

One of the fox-raccoons stepped forward and hugged the winged wolf around his waist. "Please don't smoke here," her tiny voice directed at the lizard. Her image flashed to show a stillborn baby and her lifeless body.

"Lives replace each other," said the other female fox-raccoon as she walked over to the nearly hairless cheetah boy and hugged him. Her form appeared to have died upon a lethal injection table. His form appeared in a police uniform riddled with bullet holes.

"We try to do too much," the female cheetah said from beside the young male cheetah. Her form collapsed as an internal image of her head filled with blood until her brain swelled.

"What the hell is going on?" Troy wondered inside of his head.

"No matter how much you love someone, a series of unfortunate events can separate you," said the female gazelle that appeared next to the winged wolfman. She

appeared to be crying inside of the wolfman's arms - blood pouring from a gunshot wound to her stomach a few inches below her belly button.

All of the images distorted as the winged wolf flickered through different forms - most of them the ones Troy had seen before. Some were new and unfamiliar. His image fixed on the wolf form. He appeared to be uncontrollably crying while holding the still body of his pet dog - the one that licked Troy's hand.

"Cancer can kill anyone. Even those touched by," he said, then paused as he stroked her head. "The special ones."

"Okay," Troy finally said. "Who...who *are* you? How are you here? Are you inside my head?"

The winged wolf hugged the dog and let her go. Her form flickered, then appeared next to him. She licked his face and laid down in the grass. He stood and changed form into that of a human. He slowly walked up to Troy as he bit his lower lip. He sighed heavily and looked up at Troy with pained, yet brilliant blue eyes.

"You can call me Mykol. These people are lives that I've lived and the ones close to them." He shook his head and glanced away. "That's not important right now," he muttered and looked back at Troy. "What *is* important...is that I'm here to help, but not interfere. The garbage of you being something you're not will eventually end. It can't be helped, but I can warn you that someone very dear to you will be taken away from you. You'll cry out, your heart will ache, and you will die a little inside as you hold her lifeless body."

Mykol looked over at the gazelle as she walked up and hugged his arm. She rested her head on his shoulder, then he kissed her head. His body lurched as it grew fur, bones snapped and popped, then wings sprang from his back sending feathers everywhere. His tattered wings stretched out, then came to rest neatly folded behind his back.

"Tell her you love her or you'll regret it for the rest of your life," Mykol said as he looked solemnly into Troy's eyes.

The group behind him slowly turned to walk away. Their forms faded into the darkness of the forest.

Troy had more questions than answers he was given. He felt this...angel or whatever knew everything. His voice caught in his throat as he began to wonder just

who, exactly, he was going to lose. He didn't have anyone! And when? Did that mean he was going to get out of this hell in both realities?

"I already told you, Troy," Mykol began to say as the gazelle's form slowly disappeared. He kissed her lips until she was gone. "Someone's on the way."

Troy's eyes caught a figure walking behind Mykol. It looked female...and *very* familiar. Mykol wiped tears from his eyes as he turned to walk away.

Troy began to feel what Mykol was feeling. He clenched his eyes shut as loneliness filled his body and soul. Whoever was coming for him had better hurry. He wasn't sure how much more torture - inside or outside of the simulation - he could take.

The strangest noise filled the air around him. It sounded like the "wrong answer" buzzer from some cheesy game show pulsating louder and louder. A soft glow began to fill his closed eyelids. It was only as bright as a dimly lit theater during the previews, but it was enough to fully grab his attention. The buzzing sound grew to about as loud as a car alarm down the street.

A dull ache washed over him - starting in his fingers and toes, then traveling to his core. He tried to move to clutch his chest. He tried forcing himself to move. He felt stuck. Nothing seemed to work. The ache became very painful. Perhaps he *was* moving. Maybe not. It was so hard to tell through the pain.

He tried to open his eyes. They were *so* heavy. There was a muffled commotion somewhere. People shouted. There was an explosion. Cries of pain followed. It became rather quiet - save for that obnoxious buzzing. Being the only useful sense at the moment, Troy listened intently. He couldn't hear anything out of the ordinary. Just buzzing. He couldn't even hear his own breathing.

Troy realized then...he wasn't.