

# ROVER'S MASTERPACK



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**Dedicated to Pala and Jaxson**

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# 1. FAMILY PACK

Waking up in is hard to do. Masterdog agrees with me that sleeping is divine. Since the moment we met through the mesh, we felt a powerful bond and knew we were meant to share a family pack.

Masterdog and I share the big doghouse with two catdogs. I take great join in chasing catdogs but chase the catdogs in my family pack only if I get permission from them first – except for sometimes. Permission means waiting until a catdog is willing to engage in a conversation, which is usually only when they decide they have something important to say. Catdogs are incredibly smug and their ongoing lectures are a real snooze. I don't believe catdogs are as important as they think they are. Masterdog calls the catdogs in our family pack, Sebastian and Bob.

Sebastian's an old fart who talks too much, drools on my bed and drinks from my water dish. But his poops are usually firm and stinky and delectable. He poops in the

yard because he hates the cat box. Lucky me. Bob is young and obnoxious. No way will he poop in the yard. Oh no, he has to go yard next door. And he's mean. I've told him to stop clawing my nose when he wants my attention, but if he's mad at me – which can be at any time for whatever reason – he does it anyway. And he's sneaky. He'll creep up behind me and spook me by crawling between my legs, or he'll feign a dead sleep at bedtime on the part of the bed where I usually sleep. I don't get the sneaky thing. Why bother being sneaky when you can get what you want by asking for it?

Like many catdogs, Bob often sees into the future. Creeps me out. Most of us dogs live in the present. For reasons I learned later but tend to forget, I can also hold onto pieces of the recent past. Bob foresaw the evolution of the Masterpack without any input from the bipeddog-with-no-smell. He's the one who told Bob who told me that the Masterpack would be both glorious and terrible, and he was right.

\* \* \*

*I have no scent because I am not human. Did I really use a personal pronoun? Curious. Humanity is not only rubbing off on Rover, but on ... me. In regards to who I am, the fact that “dog” is “God” spelled backwards could be meaningful, maybe sometimes. Who am I to say. I do find dogs to be amazing creatures. Who wouldn't want the life a well-loved canine? Even I envy such a life, and I'm barely an “I.”*

Liz had no particular moral ethic driving her, but she couldn't fathom deliberately breaking the law. It simply wasn't in her nature. Despite being a little full of herself -- not a rarity amongst unmarried 30 somethings -- Liz was a good girl. She'd always been a good girl despite her tattooed artsy exterior, complete with twenty-plus ear piercings. She was somewhat slight, her hair long and full, and her big brown eyes looked out from an acne scarred face that retained

a kind of exotic beauty. When not in her painting clothes, she dressed vintage. She loved beaded sweaters, poodle skirts, flapper frill and anything made with brocade. Her style was attractive and uniquely her own.

When Liz was a kid, she had been a girl scout, albeit the freak of her troop. She attended all the meetings, obeyed all the laws and was known as the singer of songs. She hadn't been an honors student, but she used to hang out with the geniuses in high school. They liked her eccentricities and she theirs. They weren't perfect little angels, but they did have to struggle to rebel – like the time the police almost arrested them for trespassing.

An exclusive housing development was being erected in the hills of Daly City, just a few minutes away from San Francisco, where Liz grew up. At various points along the steep road that circled up the hill, entry structures with fountains were built. Colorful indirect beams of light shined from under water. Many of these entry structures were architecturally more interesting than



the mansions being built at the end of winding driveways. Because few of the mansions were occupied, young lovers parked in semi-private locations to view the sparkling lights of the city in between tongue-wrestling or whatever else they had in mind.

Liz directed her crew of nerds to strip down to their various flesh colored long underwear. She had them strike poses for the lovers in search of a parking place. The reactions of passersby to the spectacle were largely positive. One couple even stopped and tipped them. Liz put a great deal of thought and preparation into creating each tableau. In her mind, the photos she took of living fountains were more than painting fodder, they were a spiritual offering to the gods. She would add accessories to the various shades of brown bodies from her photos when she put paint to canvas.

The cops protecting the housing development appreciated the show, but also told them to leave and never come back. The company of nerds was so intimidated, they

not only never went back; they didn't get together as a group for almost a month.

\* \* \*

Masterdog knows I hate being left alone for too long. I hear the echoes in her mind and images she projects of where she goes or what she does, but I don't always comprehend what I see and hear. I've gotten better at understanding some of her singing, thanks to the bipeddog-with-no-smell and the adventures with the Masterpack, but I still struggle to understand her. Bipeddogs, Masterdog included, are not normal dogs. Catdogs – well, they're insane, but bipeddogs are complicated

Unlike catdogs who do as little as possible, bipeddogs are always busy doing things. Personally, I would rather *be* than *do*, although I admit, sometimes doing is part of being. Digging is a doing thing -- so is chewing. I don't bark too often because the sound of my own woofs drives me crazy

unless it's for a good reason. When I bark, it's because it's my job to protect Masterdog, the catdogs and the big doghouse in which we live. If I bark, Masterdog says I'm a good dog. Except for sometimes.

Masterdog has an all-bipeddog family pack. She's taken me to the queen bitch's dogless doghouse a few times. It smells funny and I can't relax there. Maybe that's because the bitch and her mate don't like me. The bitch tries to be nice, but I can smell her fear. Why she would be afraid is beyond me, although it secretly makes me happy. Is secretly the same as sneakily? I'll have to ask Bob. The bitch's mate doesn't even bother being nice to me. Lucky for him he doesn't challenge my dominance or there could be big trouble. Masterdog insists in song and other ways that she'd never go back to live with this old family pack. Based on what I sense from her – and from them – I believe her.

During visits, Masterdog turns into a bipedpuppy, submissive and whiny. When her old family pack is around, I have to be the one who's dominant. Lucky for the

rest of them, they understand and treat me accordingly.

\* \* \*

As a civilized member of society, a landlord's dutiful tenant, an accountant's client every tax season, a seeker of win-win solutions, each and every day, Liz proved that she was willing to work within the system. On their last visit, her parents went into a tizzy when she claimed such a thing. After all, Liz was the love child of free-loving, free-thinking, do-gooding hippies. She had toddled at political rallies, her diapers publicly changed at sit-ins. Thirty years later, her father practiced law for a publicly funded law firm and her mother volunteered for all sorts of precious organizations. They liked to brag about how they used to go to Grateful Dead concerts so loud they couldn't hear for a week. That didn't stop them from harassing Liz whenever she cranked up her iPod without her headphones. Their looks of disgust when Liz brought runaways home

for a hot meal and a bed, made her want to puke. Hypocrites, she'd mumble to herself.

Liz found solace in painting and drawing, figuring art would be her religion until her dying day. She also knew that the odds of art ever being more than a hobby were close to nil and dropped out of college in her sophomore year. She told her parents she was too smart to waste her time going to college. She left the University of Washington, ecstatic to move out of the dorms into her own apartment.

She attended Lake Washington Vocational Technical School where she learned how to be a paralegal. She tried to think of herself as a paranormal paralegal because she didn't want to admit that the last thing she thought she'd end up doing was scut work for lawyers. Her parents tried to talk her into going back to college, but there was no way she'd let them think they knew better. Her best friend Sarah told her that by not going to school, she was doing a pisspoor job of latently rebelling against her parents because it was at her own expense.

"You work for the kind of law firm that give us lawyers a bad name, Liz," her father would say. Liz decided to believe he was only pretending to be unimpressed by the glamorous high-rise with a stunning view of Puget Sound in which she worked, and was secretly jealous.

Liz dragged herself to the office because she and mornings had never been on the best of terms. No matter how early she got up, she was always late. Liz hated her job, but also felt lucky to work amidst beautiful modern art with intellectually adept attorneys with publicly notable clients. Maybe if they didn't take immense pleasure bossing her around, she wouldn't be so miserable. That's what she told herself anyway.

\* \* \*

Like all good dogs, I take my family pack very seriously. I like being social with other dogs and their bipeddogs, but I don't go out of my way to get their attention. If I sense

any threat to Masterdog, Sebastian or Bob, I'm on it. I admit, sometimes I see the threat as bigger than it really is and get a little rougher than I should, but I refuse to be too bothered by it, even when Masterdog yells at me. I remain true to my nature because I am a dog.

Every dog knows there is a protocol for meeting and greeting. I'm better with those who follow the protocol than those who don't. If they don't, I let them know it and teach them what their instincts seem to have forgotten. That goes for all dogs, including catdogs and bipeddogs, no exceptions. I'm a little more careful with bipeddogs because, frankly, they can be dangerous. Besides, I don't want to go back to the jail where Masterdog found me – no way.

\* \* \*

The only palatable part of early mornings was time Liz spent with Rover – her tall, lanky, golden, square-faced, short-haired dog who was the size of a pony. The pound

told her Rover was probably a Rhodesian Ridgeback and Great Dane mix. No matter the time of day, Liz felt safe as long as Rover was by her side. Keeping up with Rover was no easy trick. Those long legs needed running. That big black nose needed to sniffing. That expansive joyful spirit needed to cut loose and play.

Every morning before work, Liz ran around the track of an abandoned junior high school. The large fence enclosure relieved her of the need for constant vigilance. She plugged into the public radio news and ran while Rover either frolicked alongside or made mad dashes across the field to retrieve a ball she'd throw. Sometimes Rover frolicked with an agenda of her own which made Liz smile. Most of the time Rover ignored the other joggers despite her instinct to chase after anything running. If Rover sensed the jogger feared her, Rover would bark at them and run away. Liz hated the jogger-types who got nasty about it, but fortunately, they were few and far between. Periodically, one would



rant and rave at her about Rover not being on a leash. Despite her righteousness, guilt and Liz had a symbiotic relationship.

Afternoon walks after work in various parks around Seattle were easier, despite the expensive threat of getting caught walking a leashless dog. Dog parks were everywhere, but their plots of grassless dirt and mud couldn't compare with dense forests that surrounded them. Nothing was too good for her puppygirl.

\* \* \*

Our big doghouse has many rooms with strange things in them. When I first got there, the chow room scared me the most. Big vibrating things live in there. Dark mysterious places with their own doors hide bipeddog food. My food is behind one of those doors. Sometimes I walk by just to catch its scent. That's the crunchies. She keeps the gooey food in tin cans.

My water dish is next to the stinky cold box that used to scare me because it makes

nasty noises. Sometimes when Masterdog opens the door, it smells yummy, but mostly it stinks. Masterdog doesn't drink from her water dish. Sometimes she fills it with hot water and stinky fluff, and then dips other dog dishes in and out. It's one of those many things she does that keeps her busy. The water from the dishes rains down onto the floor, where it runs down a hole. I tried drinking from where it pooled on the floor, but the stinky fluff tastes bad.

Then there's that room of many different water dishes. I seriously avoid this room. She drinks out of one water dish, although she spits out most of the water. Another, she uses to pee and poop in. Silly bipeddog, doesn't she know that's what grass and dirt are for? Storms wash away most of what she deposits. I like to drink from it -- it tastes like her.

The worst water dish is the one with feet. She may like getting into the dish when it's filled with water, but I hate it when she forces me to get in there. Because she's the Masterdog I let her put stuff on me that

smells like the stinky fluff. She only thinks she's stealing my scent and covering it with fluff stink. Luckily I get back to my own smell within a short amount of time. I know she's only doing it to me because it makes her so happy when she gets in that water dish herself.

Our bedroom has a bed big enough for me, Masterdog and the catdogs. A big box holds the blankets Masterdog puts on her body because she has so little hair. No way would I ever wear blankets, but Masterdog likes blankets of differing colors and textures. Sometimes she'll leave one on the bed and if Sebastian doesn't claim it first or Bob second, I sleep on it. Smells of Masterdog make us happy when she leaves the big doghouse.

There are other beds on which I can sleep. One is in the room where that box talks to her. It's nice and warm in there. Sometimes when I hear dogs or catdogs in the box, I tell Masterdog. She usually pretends I'm making it up or laughs at me. I get over it because I like this room.

My other bed is in the busy room. I don't understand this room. The floor is cold, my bed uncomfortable and there's all kinds of mud and things that smell funny in there. Masterdog is different in there too. She seems to go someplace else -- a place where I can't follow. She uses sticks with hair to put the colored mud onto movable doghouse walls.

Once a movable wall was lying on the floor and I walked on it because it was there. It felt wet and gushy. Masterdog yelled at me at first because I marked the rest of the floor with that colored mud. She wiped off my feet and then looked at her wall. I could see where my feet made marks. At first I thought she was going to yell at me again, but she smiled and hugged me instead. Lucky me.

\* \* \*

Once Liz entered her cubicle, stacked with documents to be typed, scanned, faxed, efiled, emailed or mailed, she pretty much stayed to herself. The people on either

side of her in their own cubicles could listen in on her few personal telephone calls, but Liz didn't particularly care. She knew her co-workers' interest in her bordered on obsessive. They liked having a pet artist around -- vicarious thrill and all that. They tried engaging Liz in what they considered meaningful chats about creativity.

"I can't imagine what it's like to need to create," her neighbor said too early one morning.

"You needed to create kids, didn't you?" Liz said, trying desperately to keep her crankiness to herself.

"True, but it's not the same."

"Sure it is. Why do you think they call it procreation?"

When it came to water cooler discussions, Liz tended to argue, especially when it came to politics, religion and especially art. At first she figured it was a reflection of her upbringing. As a Jew, albeit a complacent Jew, she was raised to believe arguing was the highest form of flattery, whether it was with a stranger, a friend, a

family member or with God. But if that were the case, she probably wouldn't have walked away from these workplace altercations feeling irritable and lonely. Liz concluded that her co-workers -- especially the lawyers -- had good intentions, but no clue what being committed to a creative process was really all about. Liz was hurt by those who couldn't comprehend what she deemed to be the most meaningful sacred aspect of her life.

Suffice it to say, there wasn't anyone at work with whom she could really talk. Not that she ever had an easy time making friends, except for Sarah. Liz preferred a relatively solitary lifestyle. Or so she thought. The Masterpack would change that.

In her spare time at the office, Liz sketched in her sketchbook. Her co-workers begged to see what she was drawing, but she refused to show them. Liz had talent but lacked the technique and training to fully implement her talent. Worse, she knew this. She wanted to chalk it up to being a perfectionist, but those tendencies had been

tempered since getting a dog, and she refused to see her lack of education as an issue.

After eight hours of shuffling paper and doing good phone, Liz would rush home to her converted garage. It was a little on the dingy side, but it was no easy trick finding a home/studio to rent with a fenced yard that took pets. Part of the garage was still unfinished. She set up her studio there.

The early evening hours that served as a transition between office encounters and taking brush to canvas were for dogwalks. What made this experience joyful were the plentiful parks filled with trees, fields, bodies of water and a multitude of dogs. What made this experience uncomfortable were the threats of bad-natured antidog people who loudly whined about the leash law. Or Animal Control who enforced the leash law. Like other dogpeople, Liz carried at least one plastic bag to pick up after Rover, hating to step in it as much as anyone else.

As a paralegal, Liz fulfilled a function. As a painter, she expressed both the personal

and the universal. As a dogperson, especially an urban dogperson, Liz considered herself the epitome of a civilized human being.

“Dogpeople seek the healthy socialization of both our dogs and ourselves,” she’d say when anyone asked about the responsibility of owning a dog and the lifestyle it perpetuated. “Dogpeople learn how to bypass personal differences and thus create a strong sense of community. Dogpeople accept that each dog owner may have a different way of relating to their dog or dogs, and try extra hard to get along. Yes, dogpeople are the righteous, the pillars of the community, even if we do break the law sometimes.”

\* \* \*

Timmy worked the night shift. Not that he had to work. Not long after his birth, his parents won \$10 million in the lottery. This moved them out of their trailer in Kent, bought by Daddy’s physical labor at the Salmon Bay smelter and Mummy’s empty



efforts as a model, into not-so-distant neighbors of Bill Gates. Even with their expensive habits, their wealth continued to grow. Mummy liked gold jewelry, antidepressants and alcohol. Daddy liked cars, marijuana and an occasional shot of heroin. Mummy's and Daddy's little man was less a son and more of a good luck charm for Mummy and Daddy. Not so with his older sister, Ashley. Mummy and Daddy probably burnt out in parenting raising the next Miss America. Timmy's obsession with his attractive yet not-so-bright sister bordered on pathological.

Timmy chose not only to work nights in a seedy downtown hotel, but to live there as well. Timmy knew what his parents wouldn't admit – his family was afraid of him.

Maybe this was because of the tangled umbilical cord that complicated his birth and disrupted Mummy's peace of mind. When he was a toddler, an elastic band kept him connected to Mummy whenever they went outside the house. She'd periodically forget their connection, yank on the leash,

and send Timmy into the air so that he landed in precarious positions. The laughter of anyone watching humiliated Timmy down to his core, fed his seething slow-burning rage. Mummy broke the connection so he could go to kindergarten. For the short time Timmy was gone each day, Mummy indulged in a wide range of self-maintenance practices to calm her nerves. Then it was back to his life-sized rubber band.

The summer before first grade, Mummy sat at her vanity mirror carefully putting on makeup. The elasticized Timmy sat on her bed. Unbeknownst to Mummy, Timmy grabbed a lighter from Daddy's bedside table. Mummy was busy on her cell phone, arguing with her best friend about the best places in Seattle to drink Margaritas. She didn't notice Timmy setting her pillow on fire until flames erupted from the bed and Timmy yelped loudly in surprised glee, even though the flames slowly heated up his skin. Daddy raced in, familiar with the smell having once been too stoned to notice as he fell asleep and

set fire to the mattress in his workshop. He grabbed his wife, assuming the elastic would pull his lucky charm to safety which it eventually did, but only after searing off Timmy's hair and bumping his head on the ground four or five times. Timmy was lucky his body only suffered second degree burns. He had little or no scarring on the outside, but the scarring on the inside couldn't be helped. This helped Timmy turn into a master at the blame game. The good news was that Mummy would be able to redesign the bedroom – again.

Timmy had planned to leave home at 18 but couldn't make it past 16. Luckily he looked older. Now at 19, he felt he could manage his own life even if it seemed that the world didn't like him any more than his parents did. Fuck 'em, he'd say whenever he had the urge to say anything which was rare.

Maybe it's my name, Timmy pondered periodically. He kept the childlike version because he liked the way it irked him whenever someone called him by name.

Timmy was handsome in an otherworldly way. His skin was practically translucent, his black hair out of control. He'd tried every conditioner, every gel, every mousse, and still his thick curls danced around his head. His dark eyes were too large and close together, so that he looked sad yet sweet. Timmy used this to his advantage during the rare times he'd connect with other people.

"Why couldn't you be more like Ashley?" Mummy would ask him. His sister charmed everyone with a coy innocence that got under Timmy's skin. If they only knew their beloved Ashley, who looked like the female version of Timmy which on her was extraordinarily attractive, was really a nymphomaniac. At least that's what Timmy thought. After all, she did have an abortion when she was only 15.

"Hey, buddy, Bill here?" The voice jolted him out of his reverie.

"Louie's," he told the voice from his cage at the hotel from which he disseminated temporary housing. He was too busy

cleaning his fingernails with the switchblade knife he'd just bought to look up.

"Where?"

"Tavern next door." Timmy sliced a cockroach in half. It wasn't as satisfying as the rat he'd cut up the week before, but it was better than ants. The booth was filled with greedy vermin because the day manager stored food in every nook and cranny he could find. Timmy liked it that way. He would spend his nights playing exterminator.

This world -- the hotel, its occupants and the other sundry street urchins that wandered in -- made sense to Timmy. The lobby had been elegant, once upon a time. Now, the velvet wall paper was faded and stained, the chairs dusty and lumpy, and the colorless carpet threadbare. It looked and felt neglected and angry, the way Timmy felt most of the time.

Timmy's room in the hotel, complete with bugs, the sounds and smells of the other tenants, the filthy bathroom he shared with them and the trophies of his

accomplishments, felt more like home than the modular designer loft his parents built for him in one of the out buildings near the garages of their mansion. He knew they only built it to keep him as far away from them as possible. It even had its own electric fence around it.

Timmy wasn't especially rebellious. On the contrary. Timmy was unnervingly cooperative and polite. However, he also broadcasted a dangerous menacing energy that kept even the most unconscious people at arm's length. He'd always been something of a loner and wanted nothing more than to go unnoticed which, due to something he could not explain, was impossible. No matter how hard he tried to fit in, Timmy stuck out like a sore thumb. People would stare at him for no apparent reason. Timmy tried desperately to ignore these intrusions but failed miserably.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" relatives, teachers and therapists would ask.

“Older,” he would answer. If the asker laughed, he gave them one of his cold stares that seemed to nip in the bud any thought they might have had about camaraderie. If they didn’t laugh, Timmy rewarded them with a deceptively disarming smile.

Timmy had no particular goals or aspirations, although he envisioned himself as something of a warrior on an important mission. He never doubted the fact that he had something important to do. With patience he lived his life in anticipation of that important task.

## II. THE PARADOX OF ANIMAL CONTROL

*Both humanity and dogs understand and are even comforted by hierarchy. Those who are not top dog recognize their authorities and acknowledge their power. The result is more than dominance and submissiveness because there is nothing simple about humans. Because I come from an egalitarian existence, this hierarchy business is both confounding and convenient.*

I love Masterdog. Actually, it's more complex than that, but difficult to explain. Masterdog and I are bonded. We nurture our connection. We like the way one another smells – especially our farts. I think most bipeddogs smell funny because they eat some of the grossest food I've ever seen. Yuck. I'll eat grass when my stomach hurts, otherwise, nothing green goes beyond these fangs.



Masterdog usually takes me out twice a day. I love going to new places. New places mean new smells and sometimes, new friends. Friends aren't part of the family pack, but I do like to play with them.

I'll play with dogs I don't know as long as we're clear on rank. I prefer being dominant. Sometimes I pursue dominance because a dog's Masterdog strikes me as low in rank. These bipeddogs haven't earned respect. It is so sad how the bonds between creepy Masterdogs and their dogs can pervert a dog's personality. I stay away from these dogs. They don't understand how to be a dog. I like to bark at them and their Masterdogs because it drives them nuts and besides, they don't deserve any better.

\* \* \*

Liz had taken Rover to Sandpoint Park long before an acre of dirt was designated an official dog park. Not that she stayed within the fenced area. Having tried out most of the parks in the Seattle area, she and Rover

agreed that none competed with the environment and dogpeople of Sandpoint, especially those who wandered through the old growth forest, fields of high grass and sandy beach on Lake Washington. Part of the park was supposed to be a nesting area for birds, but the dogpark and free-running dogs outside its boundaries remedied that situation. Some dogpeople were careful to go around the nesting zone, but where there are birds, there are dogs that take great joy in chasing them.

Liz loaded Rover into her doggyized car. When she first bought it, it smelled so new and clean. Now it had holes in the upholstery and despite the vacuuming, was coated in animal hair. It smelled like wet dog no matter how many different cleaning products Liz used. Rover owned the back seat. Liz didn't bother keeping the back windows clear of drool, preferring to enjoy the changing shapes that coated the glass.

She had had a particularly grueling day at the office. One of the lawyers had been sitting on a project for a week, only to

discover it had to be in the client's hands within a day. This seemed to Liz to be an ongoing occurrence that served to test the stress levels of all involved. There was additional stress attached to this one because the client was one of the other lawyer's mothers. Relieved at the idea of the dogwalk transition that would leave the source of her stress behind, Liz prepared for a much-wanted walk. She transferred her wallet to the fanny pack already filled with a leash, two tennis balls and a few plastic bags. She still followed that Girl Scout adage: leave a place cleaner than you found it.

Keeping in mind that her mind was not within her keeping, Liz parked at the far edge of the parking lot in case she missed something that might condition their walk. She let Rover out to sniff the grass and the bushes while she attached the fanny pack to her fanny.

"Keep your dog on a leash. There is a leash law, you know." Where did this shrieking woman come from? Liz was sure

the coast was clear when she drove up. And why did this woman's words piss her off so much? Every time some small-minded antidog person said this or something like it, Liz's first reaction was to want to hurt them. Within seconds, however, she flipped to the familiar guilt of knowingly breaking the law. Her next flip was getting pissed off at feeling guilty. However, it was Liz's nature to quietly distill her negative feelings into bitterness.

This particular shrieking woman wasn't all that overweight, but she walked like her body was something awkward she had to carry around. Her white stirrup stretch pants emphasized every piece of cellulite. Rover, sensing Liz's dark and confusing emotions, played bark-and-run with the woman who tried leading her small child away. The child, who was round and goofy looking but had a wonderful laugh, thought Rover was pretty funny. Mom slapped the child who delivered a piercing scream that frightened Rover away from them. "See what your dog did to my baby?" Mom said to me.

“I’m sorry,” Liz apologized through gritted teeth, knowing that no other form of communication was possible. At the same time she thought, if this idiotic woman, when pregnant, had to go through the grilling I had endured by the Humane Society so I could take home a new puppy, maybe she wouldn't have been allowed to be a mother. She might have saved the world from still another angry child who is raised to see the world as a cruel and competitive place, and then goes about proving it.

Pulling her eyes away from Mom, who was yanking the arm of her wailing child, Liz noticed Rover finished her business in the high grass. She followed the little trail Rover had made, plastic bag in hand. She was bent over, frowning at the fact that the bag had a hole in it so that she picked up the shit bare-handed, when a voice came up from behind me: "This your dog?"

Ready to confront another antilog person, Liz stood up before cleaning off her hand to shake hands. When she saw the uniform, she did a little dance of innocence

and wiped her hand clean on the grass. She had never met Animal Control in the flesh. A voice in her head told her she still hadn't, but she squelched the voice so that she could present a positive picture to an authority she'd learned to fear.

"Yes, she's mine. She's trained on voice command." She knew better than to use the voice command ploy to avoid a ticket, so followed it up by saying, "although I am aware that under the law that makes no difference." Rover did her bark-and-run game with the nudge-the-crotch-with-the-nose-and-run twist. Liz rolled her eyes and crossed her fingers.

"Nice dog," the uniformed man said, playfully challenging Rover.

"Rover, come," she commanded. Rover decided this was a good time to pretend she didn't understand. So much for voice command, thought Liz, making a mental note to do more training and then stashing the note with the others she let go unread. On the fourth try, her voice reached the low register that communicates to Rover that

she means business. Rover sat down on Liz's right foot.

"We appreciate you picking up after your dog." Liz was speechless. "Thanks for not launching into some diatribe about the agonies of owning a dog in the city or pretending that this was the first and only time in your dog's life she's ever been off a leash. Do you have some identification?"

As he reached out to take Liz's driver's license from her hand, Rover growled. "Easy, girl," Liz commanded. She remembered some dogperson telling her most dogs don't like people in uniforms because mail carriers and other strangers in uniform intrude on a dog's domain unmolested and threaten the dog's ability to protect his or her territory.

The Animal Control guy kneeled down, looked Rover straight in the eye and said something unintelligible. Liz expected Rover to snarl and tightened her grip on the leash. To Liz's surprise, Rover took a step forward and licked his face.

He rose and copied down the information from Liz's license. As he handed it back to

her, he said, "Bet you didn't know the inlet by the boat launch is called Wolf Bay."

"No, I didn't." This piece of information seemed to take on monumental importance although Liz could not imagine why. Uniforms had this effect on her. Her mind filled with images of wolves and dogs playing by the water. The movie of her mind kept her spellbound for what could have been a long time. She couldn't be sure.

"You okay?"

"Yes, fine. Are you giving me a ticket?" She knew the answer but felt compelled to participate in what was beginning to feel like a charade. What the hell.

"Tell you what, we'll call this a warning. I can see you are a caring dogperson willing to clean up after your dog. But the law is the law and you don't want to go around breaking the law -- unless absolutely necessary." Before Liz could respond, the Animal Control guy pivoted and walked away. She and Rover watched him cross the field and walk through the gate that separated the park from the traffic. At first



Liz wondered why he parked on the street, but stopped wondering and let relief wash over her at not having to fork out \$150. She tried putting the incident out of her mind while loading Rover back into the car. "No walkies today, puppygirl. We'll go home and play ball in the yard instead."

\* \* \*

That bipeddog was weird. I could smell it. Actually, I couldn't smell it. That was the problem. He had no smell. He didn't even taste like a bipeddog. He didn't taste like anything. Perhaps he isn't a dog at all. How curious. I don't know what he is, but I do know I liked him, even if he makes me miss my walk. There's a rightness to him. When we get home, I tell the catdogs about him. They ignore me as per usual.

Masterdog tries to play with me in the yard, but it's too small to run very far, ball or no ball. Masterdog finally gives up. What a relief. Either we go for a walk or let me do

my own playing. Although a bone would be nice.

Usually I hang out inside the house after a walk. Today Masterdog is uncomfortably agitated, so I go outside. She thinks she's calm, but she's not. Neither am I even if the bipeddog-with-no-smell was a refreshing surprise. I missed my walk, there's nothing in the yard I want and Masterdog doesn't give me a bone.

Finally, Masterdog calls me to go to bed. She sees my night's work. Usually she yells at me when I dig holes, but this time she doesn't. Lucky me.

In the morning we go to the running-around-in-circles field. It's not my favorite place to play, but at least it's large enough for me to sprint. Hobbs is there. He lives across the street from the field and sometimes he comes over and plays with me. He's not the smartest dog in the world, but he plays a mean game of chase. I try to warn him to pay attention, but he runs straight into Masterdog and knocks her over. I figure she'll chase him and bite his neck like I do

when he runs into me. She doesn't. She just sits on the ground and cries. Hobbs and I try to lick away her tears, but she keeps pushing us away. I hate it when she cries. It makes me feel bad and when I feel bad I get mad. I growl at Hobbs and chase him, trying to bite his neck. Finally, I get him on the ground and roll him over a few times.

"Its okay, Rover," I hear her say. Actually, I don't quite understand the words, but I know her song.

When we get home she picks up that square thing, pokes at it and then sings into it. Bob and Sebastian are as confused as I am. Why does she like to sing into that thing? Bob whines but Masterdog ignores him while she sings into the square thing. At least she stops crying. Maybe the square thing is supposed to stop a bipeddog from crying. No, that can't be right. I give up. Sometimes, bipeddogs are beyond my ken.

Masterdog gives me a bone. This is a sure indication she'll get into the large tin can and go away. I don't want her to leave. I give her my most worried and sorrowful of looks,

hoping she'll stay home with me. She frowns back at me, telling me that she has no choice. I accept the bone and take it to my doghouse under the large tree as she closes the door.

\* \* \*

Timmy had no pets. No matter how many times his parents gave him a living thing, he couldn't keep a pet. Actually, he couldn't keep a pet alive. He nurtured them for a while, but couldn't resist killing them as part of his growing interest in anatomy. Actually, it was a fascination of blood, flesh and bone.

Pieces of his past pets were included in his collection along with piles of the photographs he took. His Nikon was his one and only prized possession. He bought it from the pawnshop down the street from the hotel on First Avenue. Sometimes Timmy fantasized about what happened to its previous owner. Death by gunshot. Death by knifing. Death by the relentless bite of an angry Pit Bull. Death by fire. He kept his old

pristine Nikon camera locked up in a strongbox under his bed. The alarm system on it had only gone off once and that was due to a mild earthquake.

Timmy used black and white film because he was colorblind. Despite the aura of violence that surrounded his subject matter, his photographs reflected his otherworldly beauty. Their stark eloquence was lost on Timmy. He was only interested in them as documentation of past deeds and his pictures were as private as his collection.

His sister, Ashley, was the only person to whom he had shown his collection and his pictures. She was totally wasted at the time and claimed she didn't remember, for which he was thankful. She was a sweet and sexy drunk, but the pictures had sent her into a crazy rage. So much for intimacy.

Timmy kept copies of some of his pictures in his wallet, touching them throughout the day, reinforcing the warrior inside of him waiting to emerge so he could fulfill his mission, his purpose revealed at last. Sometimes the anticipation was so

stimulating, he'd have to masturbate two or three times in a row to get back on track.

Timmy was fascinated more by death than sex. He took pride in his ability to end the lives of animals and insects quickly. Torture was cruel. He was also curious by what had kept them alive in the first place. His hand-eye coordination was impeccable, allowing him the skill to dissect in the ways needed to better see how each body part worked. He could have been a surgeon, although he had visions of becoming a mortician, preferably for bodies that had seen a violent instantaneous death. Too bad the price was so high. School bored him to tears. He had no patience for a formal education.

### 3. PACK PRO TEM

*Dying and death are two completely different events. Dying is part of life. Death is the transition into something else. Dying is the resistance of embracing life or death. Death doesn't diminish the experience of dying, it ends it. I'm so glad I don't have to worry about such things.*

The day I almost lost Masterdog was one of the worst days I ever had – worse than jail. For some reason, my experience in jail sticks with me and serves as a baseline for everything that happens to me. Sebastian and Bob felt the same way about almost losing Masterdog, although they never had to spend any time in jail. Lucky them.

This is how it happened: Masterdog's face is in one of the water dishes as she pukes and pukes and pukes some more. I puke sometimes, but only if there's something in my stomach. And then I feel better. But Masterdog doesn't feel better, she feels

worse. She finally climbs into the big water dish and I figure she'll sigh with pleasure the way she usually does, and she kind of does and kind of doesn't. As she soaks in the water dish, her being seems to leak out of her body. I go to her, lick the side of the dish to try and tell her it's hurting her not helping her, but she doesn't understand me. She pushes me away.

Sebastian and Bob think Masterdog is reacting to her mating cycle. I can smell it, but because I never had one, I don't know it for what it is. After the catdogs explain it to me, I bark at the door so Masterdog will let me out. I figure if I find her a mate, she'll get better. But she ignores me, sings about no walkies. I keep barking to her that I could care less about walkies, but she doesn't get it. Bipeddogs can be incredibly dense.

\* \* \*

Because Liz periodically suffered migraines around the time of her period, she was on intimate terms with severe pain and



sickness. This was a migraine, but it also wasn't. In addition to the throbbing pain, a deep absorbing apathy had attached itself to her head, draining her of motivation and energy. As she hugged the toilet for the n<sup>th</sup> time since calling in sick, she wondered what to believe in -- what entity would deliver her back to health. As her head pulsed with a pain that moved slowly from the right one side to the left, she desperately reached for something larger than herself -- something she could call God.

Liz's parents' answer to religion was to send her to a Jewish community center. It was more of a cultural or social environment as opposed to a religious one. They broke matzo, lit candles, sang all the songs, and learned the history and purpose of most of the traditions. But Liz never felt that spiritual zing or cosmic oomph. As she rested her face on the cold toilet seat, she longed for a faith in something larger that would protect her because, frankly, she could feel the life force slowly bleeding out of her body.

She ran a scalding hot tub. Usually, sloshing around in hot water was as she imagined the womb must have been once upon a time. As she undressed, she noticed she had neglected to change her tampon and found her sweat pants wet with blood. Thank goodness they're black, she thought. She removed everything she had on and in her body, and settled into the water's loving embrace. She felt herself float in and out of mindless consciousness. The Epsom salts kept her above water. The beads of sweat tickled her cheek and dropped into her ears, usually creating an unwanted sensation. But Liz was beyond caring.

Rover barked at the front door. Liz knew she needed a walk. Usually she could get past any illness and oblige, even for a short jaunt. Not this time. This time Liz didn't care, couldn't care.

The only reason she ventured out of the tub was to satisfy the needs of her rumbling bowels. As she got out of the water, the bathroom spun round her until she could no longer stand. She sank down heavily on the

toilet, saving herself from slipping off by grabbing the toilet paper dispenser in one hand and the sink in the other. She quickly did her business while tearing off the wrapper of another tampon. Its insertion took so much out of her, she collapsed onto the floor.

Liz hoped that dying would include a white light or angels or something infinitely satisfying. But as she clutched the bathroom rug, she felt nothing. There was no bang -- barely a whimper, and the whimper came from her lips.

Liz crawled to her bed and pulled herself up, mostly because she didn't want to be found dead by the toilet. "Dying is such a disappointment," she thought just before passing out.

\* \* \*

The smells of sickness make me uncomfortable. I don't know if I can help her, but maybe if I groom her a while she can sleep. Bob tells me to leave Masterdog

alone. He lets me groom him instead. What a guy.

Awake or asleep, Masterdog usually projects pictures into my head. I can't describe these pictures, but I know them when I see them. Bob says he sees them all the time. He says he sees ones I send him even when I'm not aware I'm sending them. Sebastian sends fewer and fewer pictures. I ask why, but they ignore me.

Tonight I don't see any pictures from Masterdog. That wouldn't be a big deal except that Bob doesn't either. The lack of pictures creeps me out. Bob doesn't admit it, but I can tell he's worried.

Masterdog wakes up suddenly, staggers around, drinking things only a bipeddog would drink and returns to the water dish. She pukes what she drank and sits on the floor. I go to her, not knowing what to do but determined to do something. I nose around the trash, find something that smells like what I think is her mating call, and grab it between my fangs. She reaches towards me and I growl because I want her to listen to

me instead of singing to me not to go into the trash.

I don't know what happens, but she hugs me.

\* \* \*

Liz woke up suddenly feeling hot and sweaty, yet cold and shivering. Her head felt like someone tightened even tighter the vise grips that held her skull together. She managed to get up and take a couple pain killers left over from when she had had her wisdom teeth pulled and washed them down with Alka Seltzer. They stayed down for 15 minutes before finding the most convenient exit.

She stared at the swirling water circling down the toilet as if it carried away with it her ability to be. And when it came down to it, Liz liked being and wanted to be some more. As she sat there on the cold comforting floor, Rover went into the trash and grabbed her used tampon. When Liz tried to grab it from Rover's mouth, Rover

growled. Liz made the mental leap she needed to save her own life. She hoped she wasn't too late as she replaced the tampon she wore with a large bundle of toilet paper and staggered back to bed.

\* \* \*

We catch glimpses of outlines of the pictures in Masterdog's mind as she sleeps. Usually the pictures are brighter. The sketches are almost worse than nothing at all. Something's very wrong with Masterdog and I don't know what to do. Bob and I send each other pictures until the sun comes up. Finally, just as I'm about to groom Masterdog because I can't take it anymore, she sends Bob, Sebastian and me a picture. It's so delicate and fragile a picture, I lay very still, afraid if I move it will go away forever. Even so, it makes me feel warm and sleepy. Masterdog will be okay.

The next morning when Masterdog gets off the bed, the pictures are dull but strong. Bob says they'll get brighter in time, but that

even though Masterdog has come back, a big piece of her is lodged in a place she cannot reach. I ask him what it will take to reach it, but Bob won't talk -- neither will Sebastian, except to say he will keep that piece of Masterdog safe until she retrieves it.

\* \* \*

Liz slept a dreamless sleep late into the morning -- a Saturday morning -- and awoke with only a dull pain in her head and no need to purge. Tears ran down her face. She had made it -- barely. She remembered that toxic shock could be a killer. She smiled at what could have been her obituary: "Murdered by a tampon."

Liz knew she had come close to death, but felt nothing. She wasn't sad or scared or happy -- she wasn't even numb. She was nothing -- detached and not completely at home in her body. Nor could she bemoan the fact that she had experienced no spiritual awakening after taking a plunge into the River Styx without drowning. Or maybe I'm

still underwater, she thought. Sure feels like it.

Rover was antsy from having missed a walk the day before. Liz still didn't feel all that lively, but figured fresh air and movement might do her some good. She also knew if she didn't go back to Sandpoint, she'd never go back. The shame of getting caught by Animal Control would force her to alter her routine and go elsewhere. Not that any of the other parks in the city were any better. Animal Control left no park unturned.

Liz took the sparsely wooded back trail to the lake. It wasn't as nice a trail as some of the others, but Animal Control rarely went there and if they did, their truck was easily visible. She was a little nervous about going to the lake, but Rover insisted, running ahead.

Rover dove into the water happily. Despite signs to the contrary, this was obviously a dog beach. Only the toughest weeds survived and on a hot day, the earth wreaked of urine.



"Rover's here," said the owner of Zeus, a black lab whose only purpose in life was to fetch. A warm fall day for Seattle (around 65°), the woman wore shorts and a tank top. Her muscles rippled as she threw the ball. Liz figured she probably spent most of her waking life working out that incredible body of hers rather than working for a living -- unless that was her living. Rover had tried to engage Zeus in play countless times, but Zeus was totally fixated on his ball.

Spot, a young Jack Russell mix who liked to play with the big dogs, challenged Rover into a game of chase. Liz smiled gratefully at Rover's gentle treatment of Spot. Spot's owner also smiled which was rare since he usually had a criticism for everything. Liz thought Spot's owner looked like he'd just posed for an L. L. Bean catalog and doubted it would have occurred to him to buy anything that didn't have a label. He stood as though in a daze, black circles under his eyes. He looks like how I feel, she thought.

"Animal Control was here," Liz announced, the words tumbling out of her

mouth. She felt like she was watching a movie in which she was a bit-player.

"When?" Spot's owner asked looking around, preparing to attach the leash he clutched in his manicured hands.

"Around 7:30 last night."

"But that's impossible," Zeus' owner responded, grunting as she threw a ball into the lake. "They stop patrolling at 7."

"He told me it was just a warning," Liz replied.

"But that's impossible," Zeus' owner said. "They don't give warnings, they give tickets." The Girl Scout in Liz didn't like being called a liar, but she didn't have it in her to fight the muscular woman.

"Did you see his truck?" the man pursued with an accusatory tone a voice that made Liz flinch until she remembered him mentioning he was a lawyer. Like she did at work, Liz automatically stashed her anger and picked up the gauntlet.

"No, but--"

"Then how can you be sure he was Animal Control?"

"How the hell do you think?" she asked, the look on her face matching the calm tight-edged tone in her voice.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by that." Apathy seeped back into Liz's attitude. "This week was the worst," he sighed. "At least Spot and I have the park."

"An oasis of sanity," Zeus' owner piped in.

"The Animal Control guy told me this inlet used to be called Wolf Bay," Liz said without enthusiasm.

"No kidding?" Zeus' owner said as she turned to face Liz for the first time. The intensity of her stare normally would have made Liz uncomfortable. She shrugged instead.

\* \* \*

While at the park, I consider those with whom I play part of a pack pro tem. It fulfills my need to play. Dogs come and go as part of the pack pro tem. I like the changing pack pro tem of friends -- some who play with me

directly, like that silly Jack, and others who play simply by being present, like Zeus.

The nature of a pack pro tem can change as dogs and bipeddogs come and go. We dogs know this, even if the bipeddogs only sense it. It's not like we change who we are, but our nature changes -- we feel differently about the moment and therefore, we feel differently about ourselves and each other.

It's not a bad thing -- not at all. At the time, I wondered what it would do to our natures if the pack pro tem didn't change. Would our nature change and if so, how? The Masterpack answered a bunch of those questions.

These are the things I think about. Not all dogs do, but such is life.

When I play with Jack and Zeus, I sense there is something more -- something better than a family pack or a pack pro tem. I even mention the concept of the Masterpack to them in pictures and yips, but they ignore me. Now I know they simply weren't Masterpack material. No problem -- few dogs and bipeddogs are.

\* \* \*

A large chocolate lab yapped its arrival. Rover took the opportunity to show dominance by baring her teeth and making scary growling sounds so that the chocolate lab cringed on the ground. Rover seemed to be in the same mood as Liz. The owner of the chocolate lab came running, flailing her arms, screaming for Rover to back off. By the time the owner arrived, Rover and the chocolate lab played happily, Spot nipping at their heels. The owner was in her late twenties and had one of those permanents that poof one's hair up like a crown. Her makeup was heavy and her pink jeans were a sure indication she was new to dogwalking.

"Rover gets a little too dramatic sometimes," Liz said lightly.

"I thought they were fighting," the woman said apologetically in a voice that whined. "Chip's not my dog. I'm dogsitting for my boyfriend. I guess I'm a little paranoid."

"I thought that might be Chip," Zeus' owner said, glancing over at Liz with a slight sneer to her smile.

"Not to worry," Liz said, acknowledging the smile. "Chip and Rover are old buddies. That was part of their routine."

"This dog walking stuff is more than I bargained for. How do you do it day after day after day?"

"Comes with the territory," Zeus' owner explained as her finely defined biceps danced with her throw of the ball. Liz admired her form.

"It's part of being a good dogperson. I look forward to it," Liz said, thankful at being distracted by the ball throwing dance.

"You don't get sick of the same routine? I feel like my entire life now revolves around the needs of a stupid dog. I have a life too, you know," the woman whined. Zeus' owner rolled her eyes.

"If Chip were your dog, you might feel differently," Spot's owner said. Fat chance, Liz thought.

"Walking him makes me nervous," Chip's temporary owner continued whining.

"You get used to it." Liz tried to respond to the woman's words rather than her tone of voice. Rover often got aggressive with dogs that cringed too much, overt submissiveness, an action demanding acknowledgment. Liz reacted the same way to whining. Liz fought against letting the woman ruin a perfectly good dogwalk, despite the fog that clouded her mind. "The dogs pretty much take care of themselves if you leave them alone."

"What about dog fights? My boyfriend has told me some terrible stories," she whined.

"And you believed him?" Liz snapped before she could stop herself, having suddenly remembered Chip's owner. He was a smug slimy son-of-a-bitch who encouraged Chip to "show 'em whose boss." Chip cringed from him too.

"Spot used to get into it with certain dogs and despite his size, sometimes he'd win. He likes to think he's a dominant dog," the

lawyer remarked proudly. Liz would have contradicted him, but since Rover had Spot's entire head in her mouth, she didn't feel it was necessary. They laughed instead. The worry lines in Spot's owner's face turn into a smile. Liz's smile matched his and she could feel a little light of clarity burn through the fog.

The light faded all at once as Spot, Chip and Rover took off down the trail. Chip's temporary owner called after him frantically. Only Zeus stayed, continuing his workout.

"Give it up," Liz said, as four dogs accompanied by Chip, Spot and Rover rounded the bend, followed by a man and a woman. "Our pack couldn't possibly compete with that one." The woman's panic made Liz smile broader. She looked over at the lawyer. He stifled a laugh.

"What do you mean?" the woman asked on the verge of panic.

"Dog party," Liz yelled just a little too loudly. Spot's owner laughed openly, watching his little dog jump gleefully from one dog to another. The temporary owner



stood frozen. It was quite a sight watching so many dogs, most of them large, play happily with one another. Serves her right, Liz thought.

Two of the additions to the pack pro tem, another black lab and a brindle mutt, raced to the water. Jack, a Brittany Spaniel mix and the black lab tried to grab the ball from Zeus. Zeus made it clear that it wasn't going to happen, baring his teeth and glaring at Jack. Zeus' owner grabbed the ball and threw it out of reach. Jack raced Zeus to the ball, but lost by at least six lengths. The brindle swam in circles and ran back to join the party as the dogpeople couple approached the shore, each carrying an armload of leashes, plastic bags and tennis balls.

"Are all of those your dogs?" Chip's temporary owner asked.

"No," the man answered. He and his lady looked like they probably hadn't changed their lifestyle since the 60's. Liz imagined her parents dressed the same way years ago. They wore jeans, ponchos imported from

South America and matching wire rim glasses. He wore a pin with a picture of the earth that said *Love Your Mother*. "We own Jack, the Brittany Spaniel mix and Jill, the little terrier mutt. We're fostering Bonzo and Muffin this week."

"You're what?"

"We work for DCCC -- Dog and Cat Community Care," the woman answered. "Every few months we take in dogs from the Humane Society who await new homes. We become their caretakers rather than some cold and alienating kennel. More and more owners prefer DCCC."

"Hello, Bonzo," Chip's temporary owner said to Bonzo as he danced around her. "I think he likes me," she exclaimed. She would never be more than a dogpeople-wanna-be, Liz thought.

"Did something happen to Bonzo's owner?" Liz asked, recalling the pleasant hour she'd passed earlier in the week with his owner, a dynamic woman in her early 20's who wore all black with holes in her clothes.

"We're just dogsitting for a few days," answered the woman.

They chatted about nothing in particular as the dogs played. Liz heard and spoke words, but felt like they had nothing to do with her. Spot's owner pontificated on the best dog food. Chip's temporary owner asked innumerable questions about dog care. The man-half of the couple answered her with infinite patience. The woman-half spent most of the time yelling after the dogs. Zeus' owner listened or didn't, throwing Zeus the ball with rhythmic discipline.

Simultaneously they each selected their paths to one of three parking lots. Liz and Rover had a path of their own. Usually, Liz found nothing more satisfying than those last moments of a dog walk. Today, no satisfaction was available. The effects of her toxic shock episode lingered along with something else Liz could not identify.

\* \* \*

Chip is such a wimp. He's so submissive, I make him cringe just for the fun of it. That squealing Masterdog made me want to make Chip cringe even more. His Masterdog's singing sets my teeth on edge. Zeus and his Masterdog -- now there's a pair. Even when the pack pro tem is hopping, their ball is the be-all and end-all. Zeus loves his ball even more than I love my bones.

I wonder why I'm so cranky. It's not early morning and these are my friends, after all -- my pack pro tem. Maybe it's because Masterdog is not satisfied after our walk. Usually she finds a sort of contentment. Not this time. Something's missing. Masterdog feels it too, even if she doesn't know it. I hope Sebastian will give it back to Masterdog when we get back to the big doghouse.

Lying on the bed with Sebastian and Bob, I try to relax, but I can't. Sebastian tells me the missing piece is safe but he can't retrieve it. Only Masterdog can do that. Sebastian rubs up against me before jumping down to drink some water. I don't know what to think. Sebastian never does

things like that. I ask Bob what's going on, expecting him to ignore me, but he doesn't. He tells me that two vortex points must merge and that Masterdog and I are part of one of them. He says that my having helped Masterdog save herself from going to the moment outside the framework we know as life was significant and binding to the development of the vortex. Sure, that makes sense – maybe to someone other than me. I don't even know what a vortex is.

Before I can ask more questions, Masterdog calls for chowtime. I like food. After chow, I get cookies. Masterdog gives me one cookie at a time. I take each cookie to my cookie-eating spot in the backyard and crunch on it. Then I go inside and get another. That's what I call satisfying.

\* \* \*

It was Saturday night and Liz actually had a date coming to pick her up. After two months without Bernie, she figured she was ready to date again. Bernie had dumped her

for someone else. Actually, he had dumped Liz's doggie lifestyle more than Liz. Bernie tolerated Rover, but he wasn't a dogperson or a catperson, for that matter.

Following Rover's walk, Liz raced through a quick shower, fed Rover and the cats, and tried to relax so that she could present a calm demeanor for the stranger who would pick her up. Blind dates were not Liz's style, but Amy, a co-worker, insisted that her cousin was different. Liz suspected it was Amy who had a little crush on her and wanted to impress her. At the time, Liz was too excited about a potential man in her bed to pay it much mind.

"He's creative just like you," Amy had said. She worked in the Records department and visited Liz often to play with the toys she kept on the counter in front of her desk. "He just moved to Seattle from New York City. He says he wants a more peaceful existence and that 3000 miles between he and his ex might help. She just wasn't strong enough for him. He's kind of unemployed, but that won't last long. I forgot to ask him about pets, but his

mom had a small dog, so I think it's okay. I just know you'll both fall madly in love."

A nice Jewish boy from the big apple seemed promising. She very much liked his voice, even though the only time she'd heard it was via voicemail. His messages were abrupt, but she expected nothing less from a New Yorker.

Rover barked loudly at his knock on the door. Taking a last look in the mirror, Liz thought: Not bad, considering I'm not all here. She had added a little more mascara to her newly outlined bedroom eyes -- that's how all the men in Liz's intimate life had described them. At the second knock Liz looked in the full view mirror. She had decided to wear her painted pants over her ample yet sensual hips. They were white the day she had gone to a party of painters who decided that white was boring. Now they resembled a Jackson Pollack. With a clingy and shiny silk T-shirt, she figured she'd fit into a casual or formal environment albeit as an artiste. That is, formal according to Seattle standards, where practically

anything goes. New York standards are completely different, or so Liz would find out.

She opened the door to a non-descript good-looking white male in an impeccable suit and conservative tie. At first glance, she thought she was back at the office. Inwardly she groaned and outwardly she smiled broadly. Liz knew she had a terrific smile that could melt ice caps.

"I didn't know you had a dog," he said with a tone Liz found grating. Her smile obviously hadn't done the trick this time.

"And I didn't know you were a suit," she said, broadening her smile. He didn't laugh, didn't even crack a smile back at her.

"I'll wait for you in the car while you put something on over whatever it is you're wearing and lock your animal inside your home," he said. "I don't wish to get hair all over me."

It was going to be a long night, Liz thought.

"Amy says you're an artist of some kind," she said over dinner. He'd taken her to a nice Italian restaurant in the University



district. She tried to explain that in Seattle, even in the nicest restaurants, the dress code was relatively casual. He looked around to confirm her claim, but Liz could tell that his disapproval now expanded to the entire city.

"Amy likes to think I'm a creative type because I used to work with creative people," he said.

"What did you used to do?" she asked politely.

"I'm an art director for an ad agency," he said. "I interpret what the client wants and translate it in terms the graphics people and copywriters can understand. My sweet cousin's limited attention span has never allowed me to explain what my life is really all about. Unless it's full of trauma drama. When I was going through my divorce she couldn't get enough. I know she thinks I'm looking for a job in a gallery or something. To tell you the truth, I think most of those creative types are pretentious flakes. Not that I don't appreciate art. I do. I got my B.A.

in art history before getting my MBA. So I know real art."

Dinner sitting like a heavy lump in her stomach, Liz changed tactics and took this guy, who's name she kept forgetting, to an opening at her favorite gallery. She knew he'd hate it. His diatribes on bad art described just about every piece in the show. She especially enjoyed his discomfort when she introduced him to the artist, a shaggy gray-haired man with a wild beard. No matter what Ezzie wore, he looked like his clothes didn't fit him. She and Ezzie went way back and Liz was thrilled that he finally got a show. To her satisfaction, her date was not impressed.

"Would you like to come in for a cup of coffee?" she asked as he pulled up to her garage, knowing perfectly well he would decline. He walked her to the door and Rover barked like a crazy dog.

"It's getting late. I'd better not," he said.

"Thank you for a lovely evening." Liz succeeded in keeping cynicism out of her voice.

"Good night," he said, driving off as soon as she opened the front door. So much for getting laid, she thought.

Liz despaired as she prepared for bed. I miss Bernie, she thought. No, I miss my relationship with Bernie. Nine months with Bernie and the fantasy of marriage had taken its toll. Liz knew it was too soon to date again. Her level of trust was not conducive towards building a relationship unless the object of her desire had four legs.

\* \* \*

Masterdog smells like that weird bipeddog I scared away. Why would she spend time with someone who obviously doesn't like me? I follow her around, sniffing his scent. She turns to hug me and I move out of reach. She calls me, but I show her I want to go outside. She follows me, but I ignore her. I don't even try to get on the bed when we go to sleep. I go sleep in the other room where I can't smell that disgusting

bipeddog. She notices, but pretends she doesn't.

The next morning she smells like herself again. I'm so relieved I give her kisses. I'm rewarded with a trip to my favorite park. Lucky me

.

\* \* \*

Timmy slept until the sun went down. Sometimes he liked to think of himself as a vampire. He liked blood as much as any vampire, but the thought of actually consuming blood made him queasy. He preferred the greasy coffee shop around the corner. Not that the food was very good. Every night they had a different special, yet all the food tasted the same.

Before heading downstairs, Timmy looked in the mirror. He looked like he needed a shave, but then, he'd looked like he needed a shave since he was 12. The wild hair on his head didn't stop there. He had hair practically everywhere on his body, including the knuckles of his hands and

feet. Sometimes he liked to think of himself as a werewolf. He could relate to the primitive nature of predators and full moons made him hinky. He had killed any number of animals and he aspired to kill a human being someday.

Timmy dressed in frayed designer jeans, a worn out Pendleton, scuffed Doc Martens and a broken-in leather jacket. He was an expensive version of his friends, the kids who lived on the street. They knew little about him, although they were very thankful when he offered them a place to sleep. If the rooms were empty, he'd let them stay the night. He liked watching them sleep. He also liked the way they looked up to him as though he were defying the authority of the hotel. He'd never tell them that the owner dictated his supposed generosity to him. The owner didn't want word to get out regarding his generosity for fear more would be demanded from him, so he trusted Timmy to make good choices

Except for the time some guy trashed the room, Timmy did right by his employer

because he knew his employer wasn't afraid of him. In fact, his employer liked him. A lot. Timmy loved and hated his meetings with his employer in the drafty empty laundry room that smelled like mildew and detergent. After a meeting, Timmy couldn't sit comfortably for a day or two. Then again, Timmy liked discomfort.

Where's Gina?" he asked a group hanging out in Pike Place Market, a farmer's market by day and a place to hang by night. Gina was a girl he liked. So much about her reminded him of Ashley. Unlike Ashley, Gina was a professional. He knew she didn't consider the few times he had paid to do to her what his employer did to him as in any way meaningful, but for him, it was what he imagined love could be.

"Gone, man," one of the boys answered.

"Gone where?" Timmy asked.

"Don't ax me. She left with some guy night before last. Never got back to the Zone." The Zone was wherever they decided to sleep during the early hours of morning.

"Deano says the guy smelled bad. Maybe she don't come back, maybe she do."

Timmy's heart sunk. The voice in his head told him she'd never come back -- at least not in one piece. Agitated and annoyed, he grabbed his Nikon and walked up to Capital Hill. He didn't like the crowds that flocked Broadway -- too many pretty boys -- but the residential areas were filled with unsuspecting cats. He'd help reduce the overpopulation by trying out his new switchblade on something larger than a rat.

He locked up the camera that still had three pictures left and glanced at his new trophies while he shaved before going to work. His knife was better than he thought. He hung the three cats' paws upside down over the sink so the blood would drain. When they were dry, he'd add them to garland of paws he was making as part of his trophy collection. When the film was used up he'd go to the do-it-yourself place and develop the pictures himself. He thought of going digital, but he hated all computers except his xBox. Then he'd add his new

prizes to his collection. He marveled at his creation. It circled the entire room once and half around again.

A pang of longing hit Timmy unexpectedly. How he wanted to share the beauty of his collection with someone who could understand. Why couldn't Ashley understand? Gina wouldn't, but that was okay. This wasn't a new type of longing. However, he also sensed the someone or someones he longed for were close. Very close.



## 4. SARAHD OG

*Everything is relative, but more importantly, everything is relationship, which is why dogs prefer packs. I understand why humans value separation as a time of contemplation, but those who stay in isolation are dangerous – mostly to themselves, but sometimes others. The rhythms of relationship smooth the edges of self-containment.*

We visit Sarahdog's doghouse a lot. It has no other smells than her own -- except for sometimes. I respect that in a bipeddog. She's practically a pack of her own.

When together, the three of us form a pack. It's not like the family pack or a pack pro tem, but a special pack nonetheless. Of course the catdogs disagree. Bob thinks the family pack of he, Sebastian, Masterdog and me is the only pack of significance -- except, perhaps, for the Masterpack soon to come. I want to agree, but sometimes it's hard for

me to feel that larger something a pack provides when catdogs are involved. They work hard to avoid anything that remotely binds them to anyone or anything else, yet remain loyal. Catdogs are baffling.

Masterdog is the alpha dog of both the family pack and the pack with Sarahdog. She likes to let Sarahdog believe Sarahdog is the one who's dominant because it's important for Sarahdog to see herself as dominant, even if she isn't. If Sarahdog could hear how she whines like a babydog some times, she'd know Masterdog was far more powerful. I don't mind being at the bottom of our pack. Because I'm not a bipeddog I get special treatment, like tasty treats. Lucky me.

\* \* \*

Liz was glad Sarah enjoyed entertaining at her apartment overlooking Lake Union. Walking into Sarah's apartment was like walking into an antique store. Everything was old, nothing matched and it seemed

Sarah only considered purchasing furniture that was large, unwieldy and weighed a ton. The contrast between the urban setting and the funky interior was baffling. It was difficult to believe by her corporate style of dress and aggressive nature that Sarah grew up in a small country town in the old south. But Sarah possessed many contradictions. She had one blue eye and one hazel eye. Liz liked to believe that was what accounted for Sarah's ability to see many points of view at the same time, yet remain nonjudgmental. Sarah glowed with beauty despite her sharp features and stringy dirty blond hair. Her country goodness made her approachable and her presentation was the same whether she was with top executives, family or anything in between.

On the first day of her new job, Sarah had tried selling a fleet of printers to the lawyers in Liz's office. Liz had found her crying in the restroom. Sarah hadn't learned how to handle rejection. Nor had she learned since, making sure she made the sale before walking through the front door. As their

friendship blossomed in the years to follow, Liz told Sarah that her need for acceptance made her the perfect candidate for dog ownership. Sarah continually reminded Liz that she traveled a lot with her job. Liz admitted to having a selective memory on this point because Rover liked Sarah and that was only partially due to the fact that they had been visiting Sarah since Rover was a puppy. Sarah's home was one of the few places Rover felt completely at home.

“Have you rejoined the living?” she asked. Sarah was the first person Liz called after her harrowing near-death experience.

“I guess,” she said.

“I guess not,” Sarah said. “So you didn’t see God or angels or anything?”

“Nope.”

“There’s an emptiness about you that concerns me, Liz.”

“Can we change the subject?” Usually talking helped Liz. Not this time. This subject seemed to send her further into a spiritual void.

"Meet any available dogpeople this week?" Their conversations more often revolved around the men in their lives.

"No, and since I'm still brooding over Bernie, I don't really care." Liz told her about her blind date fiasco.

"Dogpeople. That's what you need. A man with a dog or two. He'll show up. You're just in that transitional phase just before you go back to the hunt. Let's see, it's been two months. I give you another month and the grieving time will come to a conclusion. Hopefully you'll be back in your body by then. But promise me, Liz, next time you'll pick a guy with a dog."

"Tell me about it. Bernie was terrific as long as we were at his condo. I'll never forgive him for refusing to stay at my house." Bernie had complained he was cold all the time. Baseboard heating and bad insulation didn't guarantee 70°. Liz learned to wear sweaters and down booties, but her home couldn't compete with Bernie's well-insulated and pristine little house. The thought of him still made Liz shiver with

rage. Why couldn't he learn to love Rover and my lifestyle as much as he said he loved me? she'd say to herself.

Sarah had never approved of Bernie, claiming he walked with a pole up his ass. What if he did? Liz would respond. He removed the pole when he was horizontal. Or maybe he just shifted it to give her pleasure. Who says size isn't everything? The worst part of breaking up with him was giving up great sex. He used to whisper sexy things that drove Liz into a titillated frenzy.

"I'll never forget the night you took Rover over to his house. I wish I'd been there." Sarah loved reminding Liz of the night Rover ate his couch. His silk couch. It had been the final straw, breaking the camel's back.

"How's John?" Liz asked.

"Great. I got a letter from him yesterday. He says he'll be back in a few weeks." John, Sarah's boyfriend, worked on fishing boats.

"How do you do it?"

"What?"

"You know, it. By phone? Skype?"

"Phone sex is not my idea of a hot time and watching John masturbate on my computer screen is sad, not sexy," Sarah sneered. Liz sensed she wanted to say more, but wouldn't or couldn't.

"Where do you go next?" asked Liz. Sarah's ultimate success at selling secured networked computer printers took her all over the world.

"We're doing a deal with a Japanese company."

"Japanese? Don't they have enough printers? I thought they supplied half the world."

"We've developed a unique printer. It's half the size of most printers that print Japanese characters, which makes it only twice the size of the printer you use at work, and has a chip that translates just about every language into Japanese. If I make this deal happen, I'll be in fat city for a while."

"Rover, don't even think about it." Liz watched Rover eyeing one of Sarah's larger plants. Liz had learned to hang most of her

plants because Rover liked to dig them up and eat them.

"Come here, Rover," Sarah called. Rover happily obliged, licking her hands. "How would you like to have a new little friend to play with, Rover?"

"You're finally getting a dog?"

"No, I'm having a baby."

"Are you serious?"

"I am." Liz wanted more, but knew Sarah hated it when people tried to push confessions out of her. She waited patiently while Sarah played with Rover, reassuring her that a baby would be a great playmate.

"What are you going to do?" Liz asked, unable to contain her impatience.

"John and I are getting married."

"That's wonderful."

"And then we're moving to Boise." Ouch, thought Liz. Of all her close friends, Sarah was the only one left in Seattle.

"When?" Liz asked, only mildly ashamed of her self-interest.

"The wedding is next month. I expect you to be my maid of honor."



"Of course, but when do you leave Seattle?"

"After the first of the year."

"But that's only four months away." Liz tried unsuccessfully to disguise her anxiety.

"John's off in January but when he leaves in February, he could be gone six months. By then -- well -- I'll be in no shape to move."

"Why Boise?" Liz had pictures of freshly scrubbed white faces singing hymns on their way to the little red school house.

"We figured that Boise was a better place to raise children."

"Too many pale-faced goyem." Sarah was a good Catholic girl, but Liz considered her an honorary Jew because of her ability to argue without taking it personally. They also shared the tendency to embrace guilt and shame whenever available.

"Not all of it. It's not like we going to join the Aryan National Church. It's clean, safe and houses are cheap."

"What about John? He's got to stay in Seattle if he's going to keep hustling fish, doesn't he?"

"He's quitting. He says he's ready to give up the sea. I'm not sure what he'll do next, but he says he's got ideas brewing. And I believe him."

"John's not a flake. I'm sure he'll come through for you and your offspring."

"My offspring? Geez. I'm sorry, Liz. I wish we could take you two with us. Will you and Rover visit?" she asked, unsuccessfully hiding her own anxiety.

"Of course." Liz answered, aware of the fact that she wasn't able to leave town more than once a year and that Boise wasn't her first choice for a vacation.

Sarah and Liz had fantasized about family living. Now Sarah would live out their fantasy.

"I'm sorry, Liz. I can't tell you how terrified I am." The next hour was taken up with processing Sarah's fears. Sarah loved being scared. In this case, she was scared she'd want to quit work completely when the

baby was born. Then who would she be? Being someone's mother was not enough.

The evening ended without Liz having talked at all about what was going on with her and how she felt it. That wasn't unusual. Sarah had a knack for being the center of things. It usually worked out okay because it took Liz a while to figure out how she her feelings, let alone talk about them coherently.

\* \* \*

Masterdog is anxious again, I can feel it. So is Sarahdog. The bond between the three of us has changed. I'm confused. Masterdog may not know it, but she is mad at Sarahdog. They've had conflicts before, conflicts like the ones I've had with certain dogs. But this is different. I don't like it.

Masterdog leads me to the large tin can. I pace in front of the opening. I can't be sure she really wants to leave Sarahdog's doghouse. Even when Masterdog's song is adamant about my getting inside the can, I

sense her ambivalence. I bark at her to let her know I'd be glad to stay rather than leave Sarahdog. Masterdog abruptly grabs that thing around my neck. This can only mean she wants to leave regardless of her internal conflict. I don't argue. That thing around my neck can choke me if I'm not good. I get in the large tin can.

Masterdog cries all the way home. I try to warn Sebastian and Bob, but they have food on their minds. Their meows distract Masterdog and she stops crying. She gives them milk. I run outside and sit by my dish, but Masterdog doesn't come. I have to go back in the house and bark at her to feed me. Sometimes bipeddogs are incredibly selfish.

\* \* \*

It's not fair. How could Sarah do this to me? Liz thought as she sat in her overstuffed chair/scratching post sipping a glass of wine. First Bernie dumps me and now Sarah's going away. It took so long for Liz to

develop strong friendships, she worried about to whom she would confide after Sarah left town. She thought about the people in her life that had come and gone. She remembered how she used to feel sorry for the middle-aged women she met who talked about being lonely. How could anyone be lonely in a world so filled with people? And here it was only a few years later, and Liz was terrified she'd become the object of someone else's pity. At least she was finally feeling something -- not that it was the emotion of choice.

The next day Liz went back to the park, desperate for contact. Rover, sensing her mood, stayed closer to her than usual, periodically nudging or licking her hand. The park was deserted. They met a few dogpeople, but no one with whom either of them cared to strike up much of a connection. Neediness hung from Liz's neck like a ball and chain. What was worse, the days were getting shorter and soon it would be too dark by the time Liz got home from

work to take Rover to Sandpoint. Liz hated the long dark wet winters of the Northwest.

\* \* \*

The flashing light burns my eyes. Masterdog sings apologies, but I know she doesn't mean it. Bob pretends nothing's happened except to nuzzle my belly. Fortunately his nose is as warm as his fur. Sebastian, who had been sleeping in between Bob and Masterdog stands and does a dramatic yawn before walking on the soft spot of Masterdog's belly on his way off the bed -- his commentary on Masterdog's flash session. I decide to follow his example. I carefully extricate myself from Bob, casually step on Masterdog's leg and jump down. She exclaims, but I know she understands she's only gotten what she deserves.

Outside in the yard, I sniff the perimeter, noting that a pair of squirrels has come and gone. Other than that, the yard is secure. After relieving myself, eating the chow

Masterdog gives me, I climb back on the bed. Masterdog will be ready for a walk after I digest my breakfast. Even if she isn't, she will be.

\* \* \*

Liz took the Polaroid picture into her studio and tried, unsuccessfully, to sketch out a family portrait of Bob, Sebastian and Rover. She never put herself into her paintings. She would photograph the finished product, reproduce it and mount it on cards to send to her family and long lost friends for the holidays. She'd been making her own cards for years. One year she did a digital version that gave her more options for a fantastical piece of art. The learning curve was steep and the results were not satisfying. She preferred paint to canvas. It felt right and besides, her work had subtleties that would get lost without the layered acrylic paint that gave her work more dimension, even when photographed. She was very particular about her art.

Liz had been painting holiday cards since high school, but the family portrait routine started when Rover joined the family. That first year, the three critters were in the old west. She put a saddle on the then puppy-sized Rover. Bob and Sebastian wore cowboy hats and holsters filled with flowers because she hated guns. As she painted, she wore gaucho pants, boots and a floppy hat that kept flopping into her face. Lucky for her animal family she didn't make them pose or actually wear their costumes.

Last year they were of the Renaissance. Bob and Sebastian wore large ruffs and Rover, a taller and more elegant, wore a wide kirtle with an elaborate hat. As she painted, Liz wore tights, a tunic and a jester hat with a bell that kept getting in her face. Will I ever learn? she laughed to herself.

This year, she decided upon a science fiction theme. She was torn between the ever classic *Star Wars* or *Star Trek* or something more current. But it was only September. She still had plenty of time.



At the park while she and Rover walked the path, Liz struggled with visual ideas. Without warning, two dogs sprang from the bush. Even Rover was surprised. She chased after the wiry Airedale who chased after a Basenji.

Two women turned the corner in front of Liz, talking intently while eyeing the doggie drama. Liz didn't wish to intrude on their conversation, but did so want Rover to continue playing. The three dogs romped well together. Liz let the two women pass, and followed behind just out of earshot.

The chase ended as the Basenji ran in between the two women. The Airedale had enough control to curb his movements, but Rover slammed into one of the women. She lost her balance and fell into a mud puddle. Out of the corner of her eye, Liz could see the dogs continue their game of chase. She ran to the two women. The one prone in the mud slapped at the muck, making even more of a mess. She was a large woman in her fifties with short brown cropped hair and a generous smile. The other woman, tall thin

and beautifully delicate, pointed at her and laughed.

"Are you all right?" Liz asked with concern. "I'm so sorry."

"Just don't knock me over like that again," the prone woman smiled. "Although, the mud is awfully nice this time of year." Liz couldn't help but join in the laughter. "Here, help me up." She extended a muddy hand and when Liz grabbed it, she pulled Liz down into the mud. Liz laughed even harder. "There, we're even," she said amiably. "Anna," she lyrically called to the other woman, "don't you want to join in the fun?"

"No thanks. Puck, come," she commanded. "Your mother needs you." The Basenji seemed to look at them, roll his eyes and run in the opposite direction. Rover and the Airedale followed.

"Nina. It's a pleasure meeting you," the muddy woman said, once again extending a muddy hand. Liz shook it with a muddy one of her own.

"Liz. Likewise I'm sure," Liz replied.

"I'd shake your hand, but I'd rather not," said Anna, who remained standing and without mud coating her clothing. Liz tried to articulate Anna's accent.

"French?" she asked, trying to gracefully get up out of the mud. Nina had already risen and was busy wiping herself off in the grass.

"French-Canadian," Anna answered abruptly.

"Don't pay any attention to her. It's rare for anyone to place her accent correctly. She likes to pretend it offends her. But then what do you expect? She's from Quebec."

Liz didn't know what to say. Fortunately, the dogs distracted them from potential discomfort by introducing themselves. Two noses sniffed Liz up and down. Rover stood back proudly.

"The Basenji is Puck and the Airedale is Rembrandt," the Quebec woman said smiling.

"This is Rover." The two women snickered. "Rembrandt? Are you a painter?"

"No, a sculptor," she answered. "But Rembrandt fits him better, don't you think?" Rembrandt's owner looked more like an artist's model than an artist. Her long brown hair framed a perfectly chiseled face.

"Are you a painter?" asked Nina. Her warm smile made her scrutinizing all-seeing eyes sparkle.

"Yes," Liz answered.

"I direct plays," she said. Puck did a little dance to avoid the noses of Rover and Rembrandt. "Such a little performer you are, Puck."

"You should put him in one of your plays," Liz suggested.

"He'd never cooperate, not even for me. He's a Basenji."

"Rembrandt is an impossible model. He has the attention span of a gnat."

They walked and talked about art, dogs and the downfall of civilization while the three dogs romped in the grass. Liz didn't want it to end, especially in light of Sarah's imminent departure from her daily life. But Liz was a well-trained dogperson. If the fates

saw fit to bring together those who have shared a walk, a more personal relationship might or might not evolve. And even then, that relationship might or might not last. Regardless of her righteous internal declarations, Liz's neediness made her cringe.

Liz left the park that day inspired and ready to paint. I crave a brush in my hand, she thought, and the smell of oils up my nose.

\* \* \*

Timmy woke up sniffing. He hated getting sick, but a cold is a cold is a cold. Only once had he gotten really sick. He had been four years old. His father went to a car show and his mother had an acupuncture and spa appointment, leaving him at daycare despite the staff's protests. One of the daycare workers was so worried she took Timmy to the hospital. Timmy's parents insisted he only had the flu, but the doctors confirmed meningitis. His parents tried to

blame the daycare center for Timmy's ill health and begrudged the few days they took turns taking care of him. Their caretaking was laced with resentment and they subtly invoked shame at every opportunity. From then on, Timmy learned to stay healthy or if he did get sick, he figured out how to take care of himself.

Timmy managed to get dressed and wandered over to the coffee shop. It was closed, soon to be re-opened under new management. What upset Timmy was not that it was under new management -- the food might actually taste like something -- but that he'd have to go somewhere else, some place unfamiliar, when he didn't feel well. He peered into the window. So far, the inside didn't look any different.

Dejected yet starving, Timmy wandered into an upscale vegetarian place. He hadn't planned on going there, but was too busy worrying about the future of his coffee shop to notice that he'd arrived and sat down. He came back to reality when a waiter asked him if he'd like something to drink and

recited a list of strange sounding concoctions.

"Coffee," said Timmy.

"We only serve espresso," the waiter said. "But I can have them make you an Americano. It's just like regular coffee only better."

"Fine," said Timmy. The affectations of his waiter made him nervous. Before the waiter could dash away, he quickly ordered the eggplant lasagna. Most of the people who frequented his coffee shop were white. Every now and then someone of color would walk in, but they usually didn't stay. The racism in the air was more palatable than the tasteless food. Pretentious people of all shapes, sizes laughed over lattes. It made Timmy even more uncomfortable than he already was.

Timmy would always choose black and white over color, and white over black. Differences meant danger, danger meant fear, and fear made a man stupid. His parents tried to teach him to pretend not to be prejudice, but Timmy hated lies too much

to learn. His parents would love this place, he thought as he looked around at the mixture of people eating various forms of vegetable matter. He ate quickly, paid his bill and left. The streets might be more threatening, but they couldn't be more nauseating.



## 5. NINA'S STORY

*Humanity's struggle through the morass of the real and manufactured dramas is more admirable than enviable, especially since true objectivity is not available. Individual experience and perception condition every moment as it unfolds. In other words, people have to create systems to avoid being ruled by the own subjectivity. Remarkable really.*

Nina grew up in New York City, her crib overlooking Central Park. Her father was a successful businessman and her mother, a debutante. Much to her dismay, Nina was their only child.

Her mother liked dressing Nina up in frilly dresses and showing her off at parties for women whose primary purpose in life was to be the center of attention. Nina hated it, but to please her mother, she pretended she wore costumes and performed to the

best of her ability. She knew oh too well the rules of etiquette and breeding.

At 13, Nina's proud parents sent her to a boarding school in Switzerland. While the other girls sprouted breasts and nicely sculpted hips, Nina blew up all over. Her parents started sending her to fat camp in upstate New York during the summers, but Nina remained plain and plump, not unlike grandmama on her father's side.

At 16, Nina and her best friend ditched fat camp and hitchhiked to Woodstock. For three days, she danced in the mud puddles, smoked marijuana and lost her virginity. She never felt so alive, so vital.

The fat camp had called Nina's parents when she and her friend disappeared. The day after their return to camp, transformed and happy, Nina's parents dragged her home, back to her old life. But it was too late. Nina was changed for good. It wasn't even that her parents disapproved of Woodstock. If anything, they were envious. Nina knew this and tried to use it to her advantage, but pissed them off instead.

Seeking an appropriate form of punishment while worrying that she would escape again and do God knows what without telling them, her parents put her on a strict diet, took away her allowance and enrolled her in a private arts school in Manhattan, six blocks from home. Nina found other ways of getting the foods she craved, drew on her savings during the rare times she needed money, and gladly went to school.

Nina discovered true passion when she fell in love with the theater. Because of her size, she was rarely cast in plays, but she often stage managed productions. In her senior year, she directed her first play: "The Beard," a one-act by Michael McClure, one of the original beat poets out of San Francisco.

Until the last scene of the play, Nina's parents sat proudly in their seats. Their posture changed dramatically at the end of the play when Billy the Kid plunged his face into the crotch of Jean Harlow in sexual ecstasy. The play received a standing ovation. Her parents remained seated.

Her parents were proud when Nina was accepted into the theater department at the University of California, Berkeley. By the early '70's, the political demonstrations had diminished in stature, allowing the students to focus on the fine education they could receive at such a prestigious institution.

The summer before school started, Nina worked at the fat camp as a counselor. By the last session, she was diagnosed with pneumonia. She arrived at school two weeks into the first quarter. She missed auditions and because she was a freshman, there was no way she could direct anything. However, one of the MFA students in playwriting also arrived late because his mother had been killed in a car accident. He was in his second year, having spent the first year translating his version of *Three Penny Opera*, by Bertolt Brecht. He desperately wanted to mount a workshop production. This meant minimal sets and costumes. Most of the roles had been cast before he arrived. Nina pleaded with him to include her and he cast her as one of the beggars.

At the first rehearsal, Nina sat next to what could have been a man or a woman. Their face was soft and pretty, except for the masculine square jaw. The tight pants revealed very little because they sat with their legs carefully crossed. A leather jacket hugged their chest. The red lipstick and dangling earrings told her very little except that this person had impeccable taste. Fascinated and distracted, Nina asked them for a smoke.

"Sure," he said. His deep baritone voice was unmistakably male. His smile was unmistakably friendly.

Over coffee following rehearsal, Nina learned that Mickey and the seven other actors playing beggars lived together with a bunch of other "freaks." They were all musicians who played backup for Crouton Circus Clowns. Nina remembered seeing an album cover packed with people. Mickey told Nina that this pack of people who appeared periodically at Crouton Circus Clowns concerts to make spectacles of themselves were well paid. Lucky, the 65 year old hippie who converted to Islam after befriending

Malcolm X, kept them organized -- or more to the point, disorganized. He was the one who had volunteered them for *Three Penny Opera*. He'd always liked Brecht, it seems. He also insisted the translation was a breakthrough and besides, the director promised to let Lucky direct the scenes with the beggars. Mickey assured Nina she was a welcome member of the ensemble.

Lucky rehearsed the beggars outside the regular rehearsals. At least that's what he called their gatherings. It felt more like chaos to Nina. Nina noticed the director's ambivalence at having his power usurped while trusting Lucky's unusual talent and ability to bring out the best in this group of weirdoes. Nina loved every minute. Every rehearsal was filled with new discoveries and surprises -- some pleasant, some not so pleasant. Mickey flew into uncontrollable rages that turned his character from a man to a woman and back to a man again. Lucky showed amazing compassion for Mickey and directed him to be whichever gender felt right at the time.

The other actors from this odd family also went through dramas of their own. Mickey told her that one of them had lied his way out of the state mental institution. Lucky's wife, Medic Woman, had been giving him herbs as a way of helping the man manage his schizophrenia.

Periodically, Nina would say something that revealed her privileged background. At first she was embarrassed, ashamed of having had a childhood free of abuse, neglect or economic struggle. Lucky pulled her aside and told her that he too had come from an upper-class family and that it didn't matter where you came from, only where you were. Nina suspected he lied about his childhood, but took comfort in his support.

The show flopped. The director's translating prowess did not mean he could direct actors. The performances of the other actors were at most, adequate, having endured too many contradictory instructions from a director who had little experience in making a play work. The beggars stole the

show. Nina was happy with her work, considering it changed every performance.

After their two-week run, Nina rarely saw Lucky, Mickey or any of the other members of the group. Hers was a different world, filled with books, papers and fellow classmates. She spent more time in the library than in her dorm room or anywhere else. The work was more laborious than she expected.

Whenever Nina got too tired or frustrated and sought out a coffee house for refuge, she'd see Lucky or Mickey or one of the others wandering along Telegraph Avenue. Once she saw Lucky lead a very unlikely performance on the quad. Everyone else said it looked like chaos, but Nina knew how careful Lucky was at creating images of chaos within very structured parameters. These performances made Nina smile with delight.

Following graduation, Nina's parents expected she'd want to move back to New York, the theater capital of the country. Maybe she'd direct a play on Broadway.



Instead, Nina moved to a commune on Sonoma mountain. She liked the structure and discipline it took to maintain a community. It reminded her of what it takes to mount the production of a play. Every once in a while she wondered how Lucky approached the management of a community and whether it was as chaotic as his directing.

Utilizing people from her commune, Nina founded a children's theater company that toured the schools of northern California. She made little money, but they didn't need much.

Her life changed when at 23, she met Charlie, a musician who joined the commune. Like Nina, Charlie had escaped his petty bourgeois upbringing on the east coast to embrace art, love and spirituality on the west coast. Like Nina, he was relatively apolitical but dedicated to the furthering of his craft. He had long fuzzy hair and a beard that looked like it could house a family of rodents. He wore wire-rimmed glasses and carried a large gut he'd gotten from drinking

too much beer. He also played a mean conga.

They were married on the commune, but accepted plane tickets for a party thrown in their honor by their parents in NYC. During their trip back home, Charlie and Nina stayed stoned and oblivious to everyone else except each other. Both sets of parents hid their concern under their perfectly coifed presentations as their mothers competed to be the center of attention.

Soon after they were married, Charlie and Nina moved to Seattle. Charlie decided it was time for a change and Nina was ready to leave the commune, since her theater company didn't seem to need her any more. In Seattle, she got a job raising money for a children's theater, periodically directing plays. Charlie played in a number of bands that never got anywhere. He loved music but liked to eat even more. Nina and government grants supported them while he went back to school to get a teaching credential.

Nina loved the rain, but Charlie complained that the gloom was slowly

driving him insane. It had rained on Sonoma Mountain, but for some reason, it hadn't bother him when they lived there. He tried talking her into moving back to California, but Nina had found a home in the Pacific Northwest.

Nina joined a women's group she'd heard about from one of the actors. She wanted to be part of an ensemble for which she didn't have to seduce those of means for paltry donations. She found a sense of community bordering on family with this group and like the other women, felt safe enough to focus on herself. After the first year, the group ran out of psychologies to test on one another. The group revitalized when Delta joined up. Delta proclaimed herself to be a practicing witch.

For the next few years, every month, the group gathered together to perform rituals for the solstices, the equinoxes and other holidays. Nina, Delta and Marta, the accepted leaders, took turns managing these rituals. Nina loved participating in the designing, directing and choreographing of

rituals. It was a way of utilizing her theater skills in an entirely different way, a more religious or spiritual way. She even learned how to play the conga. Charlie smirked as she practiced, but she could tell he was pleased at her progress.

Her most memorable ritual was one she put together for Beltane, May 1st. Despite Charlie's objections, she built a large paper maché figure of a goddess in the backyard. It was mounted on two tall poles. The face was bright pink with locks of long orange plastic hair. Nina draped the goddess in purple rayon that didn't fade when it dried from the periodic rains.

Marta had helped her dig out and cement a fire pit a few feet in front of the goddess. It had taken them many long hours, but the two women didn't mind. It gave them a chance to get to know one another. Charlie worried about what the landlord's opinion would be of their landscaping, so Nina called her and to Charlie's surprise, she celebrated the idea.

Friends of both genders were invited to attend this Beltane ritual. Nina was more than a little nervous. She recognized the feeling from opening nights. She patted herself on the back for getting the group to rehearse the complex parts of the ritual ahead of time. The group had fought her, but she had won.

Candles danced in a circle around the backyard. A fire blazed in the pit. Everyone was required to dress in bright colors and flowers. Nina's four cats wandered about, sniffing the beautifully laid table filled with the food everyone brought. Potlucks are to Seattleites what dinner parties are to New Yorkers. Nina, Delta, Marta and two other women played drums. Nina had invited Charlie to play with them, but he declined, saying he wanted to observe rather than participate. Nina was both disappointed and relieved, although she smiled at his assumption that anyone at a ritual could remain an observer, especially the way she had it planned.

At a time that seemed appropriate, Nina set aside the drum and grabbed two four-foot long bamboo sticks. Delta and two others followed, maintaining the same rhythm they'd established with the drums. Marta helped line everyone up behind the goddess. As the four stick drummers created a pathway between the goddess and the fire pit, slamming the bamboo together in the complex pattern they'd practiced, they chanted:

*Dream, dream  
Dream a queen  
Queen a king  
King a dream*

Marta was first. She grabbed a handful of sand mixed with sulfur from the bucket behind the goddess and ducked underneath the poles that held the goddess aloft. When she stood, she was surrounded by the clicking bamboo. The chant ended.

"I dream I meet an old woman. She hands me a scroll with writing on it. The

scroll warms my hands as it bursts into flames. Words from a language I do not know dance before me."

"Name the dream, name the dream," the stick drummers chanted, laying the sticks across her bowed head.

"Words," Marta shouted. The sticks were lifted. She threw the handful she'd been carrying into the fire. The fire flared upwards. As it died down, Marta leaped over the pit.

The same routine was used by each participant.

"I dream I am being chased by a crowd of women dressed in postal worker uniforms," Charlie said, amused by his cleverness. He eyed carefully the sticks that clicked around his head. "They shout that I need an extra stamp to go air mail. Just before they reach me, I fly away. I didn't even need an air mail stamp." Nina cringed at Charlie's mocking humor.

"Name the dream, name the dream."

"Flight," said Charlie. So relieved was he when they lifted the sticks, he threw the

sand into the fire and leaped across the pit at the same time so that the flames flared upward, nearly burning him. He contorted his body in the air and landed wrong, twisting his ankle.

Marta took the place of each stick drummer to allow them a turn.

"A large white dog stalks me," said Nina. "He runs faster and faster around me until I am surrounded by a circle of light."

"Name the dream, name the dream."

"Light," she said. Nina's only fear coming into the ritual was the leap she'd have to make over the fire pit. She had never been very athletic. As fire flared upward and she felt something inside of her rise with the flame. A gust of wind blew through the air. As if in slow motion, she felt her body leap, turn and land softly on the other side of the fire pit. Everyone cheered as she took her place back with the stick drummers.

Last to perform was Delta. She moved with the grace of a gazelle. The sweat on her dark skin shimmered in the moonlight.



"I dream I am a deer, a red deer with sharp antlers. I hear a gunshot. I know the bullet is headed right for me. I leap into the sky and land on a star."

"Name the dream, name the dream."

"Flight." The fire flared upward and Delta leaped into the flame. Like a salamander, fire surrounded her yet she landed unscathed. Nina led the group into a circle.

"Choose, choose, choose the queen. Queen of May, Queen of May," they chanted. Nina held a stick over each person and invited the group to cheer their choice. Everyone cheered loudest when she held the stick over Delta. Delta bowed as Marta placed a wreath of flowers on her head.

"Choose, choose, choose the king. King of May, King of May," they chanted as Delta held the stick over each participant's head. The loudest cheers came when Delta held the stick over Nina's head. Nina shot a glance at Charlie who sat on the grass massaging his ankle. He shook his head with disgust. Nina felt a gap open between them as Delta placed the crown on her head.

Together, Delta and Nina held a tall pole with long ribbons attached. Everyone except Charlie grabbed a ribbon and danced around the Maypole, cocooning the royal couple.

Nina could smell Delta's sweet breath as the ribbons entwined them. The feelings she'd thought she'd successfully repressed since Delta's arrival to the group burst forth and with them her heart. How long had she been in love with her May Queen? Her heart quickened as the crowd led them into a shadow cast by the goddess. Nina had planned it so the entwined couple would be left alone in the shadow to symbolize the intimate lovemaking of the King and Queen of the May while the others drummed around the fire. What came next was totally unexpected.

Nina and Delta giggled as they extricated themselves from their cocoon. As the ribbons fell away, Delta leaned down and kissed Nina fully on the lips. The ribbons that held them were replaced by their arms as they ran their hands up and down each other's

bodies. The intensity of their passion increased. Nina's breath came in short pants as her excitement mounted. Delta's touch was unlike that of her husband. Her body had a woman's softness, a woman's lumps and curves, a woman's scent. Nina couldn't be sure how much time had passed but at the peak of their excitement, they howled.

The others cheered as Delta and Nina joined the circle. Nina looked over to the shadow where she and Delta had found one another. She was relieved to see that the fire prevented anyone from actually seeing what had transpired. She looked around for Charlie.

"He's icing his ankle," Marta said, giving her a knowing smile.

The divorce was amicable. Charlie was too embarrassed to fight. Nina tried to convince him that her latent lesbianism had nothing to do with him, but she knew that no matter what she said, he wouldn't believe her. Marta said he didn't want to understand because he'd already fallen in love with his new lover -- despair.

Charlie accepted a teaching job at a high school in San Diego. Nina moved into the house Delta owned where they lived in marital bliss with one exception. Nina thought she wanted children. Delta knew she didn't. They settled on a dog. Delta relinquished all responsibility of Puck, mostly because her long hours as an accountant were not conducive to caretaking.

Marta visited often, parading a series of lovers before them. They usually lasted three months, tops. Their circle of women had fallen apart, but Marta, Delta and Nina still celebrated some of the holidays together.

When Marta was diagnosed with breast cancer, Nina and Delta took turns taking her in for radiation or chemotherapy. Marta maintained her positive attitude despite the pain and discomfort. The three women performed healing rituals regularly, but Nina wasn't convinced they were helping. Neither was Marta, but Delta insisted they continue performing them just in case.

\* \* \*

What can I say about Puck? He won't speak for himself -- I've never met one who can, except for me -- but Puck can't even bark. Ask a bipeddog about their lives and they'll tell you more than you ever wanted to know. But a dog lives in the moment. A dog tells tales through smell and posturing. And once the tale is told, a dog creates or recreates reality accordingly.

Bob is an unusual catdog. I know this because he actually takes time to talk to me. I consider our conversations an extraordinary form of communication. I can honestly say Bob has inspired me to have a voice of my own. Masterdog and I communicate too, but because she is a bipeddog, she's largely incomprehensible.

Which brings me back to Puck. He's comprehensible, but what a character. He has more personality in his pointy snout than most dogs and bipeddogs have in their entire bodies. Bob doesn't like to hear me compare him to Puck, but Puck can be

like a catdog. Bob believes saying that is disrespectful to catdogs everywhere. Bob's smart, but something of a snob. Not unlike Puck.

Lucky for Puck, Ninadog appreciates his unique nature and values his inability to sit still for too long. At home he has a toy basket. Ninadog keeps it filled up with toys. Puck says he creates new realities each time he plays with them. Until the nightmares started. The nightmares disturbed all of our normal playing patterns. In Puck's case, because of the nightmares, he had less of a need to create new realities. Poor guy.

Puck likes to play pranks on his Masterdog and Deltadog, the members of his family pack. His favorite prank is hiding those funny paw coverings bipeddogs find so important. He says he buries them in a big hole behind a bush in his yard. He likes his collection. When Deltadog and Ninadog start yelping like babydogs, demanding he reveal his secret place, he looks up at them with innocence, pretending he doesn't have a clue

what they're talking about. He's as inscrutable as Bob.

Puck still has his balls -- I mean the ones in his body. This means he can get aroused. Personally, I'm relieved that I don't lose control because of urges I can't comprehend -- especially after watching what those urges did to Masterdog. Although I must admit, sometimes I feel like I'm missing something or I'll start feeling funny and I don't know why. At least I act the same whether I'm with puppygirls or puppyboys. Puck has two different personalities. The first is the one he has at home with his Masterdog or when he's playing with the Masterpack.

The second is his stud personality. Once, before the Masterpack came together, I saw him get excited over a babybitch in her mating prime. His magnificent tail, the part of his body he likes third best next to his pee-maker and his mouth, curled higher and tighter. His little pink pee-maker shot out of the sheath. I got so jealous of the attention he paid to her, I rolled him a few times and

then bit his butt. He didn't even notice. The funny part is that the babybitch was three times his size and no matter how hard he tried he couldn't reach up high enough. The babybitch, the bipeddogs and I got a good laugh out of it. But Puck was too intent on his goal to even hear us laughing at him. The babybitch's Masterdog finally took her away. Puck followed her all the way to the large tin can. He jumped up and down making strange sounds, desperately trying to get into the tin can. The tin can took off despite his insistence. Puck got so depressed he wouldn't play with me, poor guy.

\* \* \*

Timmy was a man of purity. He accepted no drug into his system except caffeine and the occasional aspirin. His body was a sacred temple. The fact that it could also use more sun and exercise didn't concern him. Timmy's heightened senses were so acute, he could learn a great deal about people by the way they smelled. The man who seemed



to spend a ridiculous amount of time in the lobby during Timmy's shift, smelled like soap and cigarettes. Timmy noticed this each time he leaned over the man to empty the ashtray.

The man looked like he was Timmy's father's age and was completely bald, his head so shiny it looked polished. He wore nondescript clothing – Northwest style plaid shirt and Dockers. His only other outstanding feature was that he looked and smelled, despite being a heavy smoker, very clean -- obsessively clean. Timmy was intrigued. Two nights in a row the man spent a good three hours calmly chain-smoking in the lobby. Periodically, Timmy caught him staring at him.

While eating at the coffee shop that had reopened yet looked and tasted the same, Timmy made some decisions. He would call his parents, tell them if they didn't keep their spies out of his lobby he'd move back in with them. Then he would confront the man. When he called, his father denied any such thing and haphazardly invited him to

dinner on his next day off, the tone telling Timmy he wasn't particularly thrilled by the idea. Timmy needed to do his laundry any way and told him he'd be there Tuesday at 6. His father, the compulsive negotiator, suggested 7. They compromised on 6:45. Timmy hated negotiating every detail of his life with his father. Someday he'd out maneuver dear old dad. Someday.

Timmy waited for the lobby man all night long, except for the twenty minutes it took to catch the rat in the laundry room downstairs. Room #112 had just poured soap onto her clothes when the rodent ran up one leg and down the other. Timmy had waited until the woman finished her midnight laundry run before venturing downstairs. He hated the machines because they didn't clean very well, but he liked the laundry room itself, especially if he was all alone.

He left the lights off -- the hall light was enough to see by. He didn't want to lose his advantage. He felt his heart leap with joy at the sight of not one, but three rats

scrounging for crumbs. They never knew what hit them as Timmy grabbed their necks and threw them into a plastic bag. After tying off the top, he watched them panic at the lack of air. He opened the bag and tossed it into the dryer. For 25 cents he had a grand old time watching the rats try to escape the rotating dryer. After they were dead, he put them back into the plastic bag and then into a paper bag he'd pulled from the trash. He could hardly wait until his shift ended so he could perform the autopsies.

Timmy was disappointed to find an empty lobby. He really wanted to nail the lobby man. But Timmy knew the man would be back. Timmy's disappointment turned to manic glee at the thought of being the hunted instead of the hunter.

## 6. NIGHTMARE PACKS

*Dreams are usually a combination of chemical expression of the body and a way of reconciling reality. Once in a while a dream is a vehicle to another plain of existence, but this is rare. Cats and dogs understand this in themselves and others because they share dreams. Shared dreams helps dogs feel connected. For cats, shared dreams justify their dismissive nature because after all, they have to protect themselves from those who couldn't possibly think like a cat.*

Sebastian is dying. Masterdog knows he's sick, but Bob and I know he's not long for this world. I kiss him with my tongue. He hisses at me and tries to scratch my nose. Masterdog thinks it's funny. Bob curls up beside him and grooms his head. Sebastian likes that. I ask Bob why Sebastian won't let me groom his head and he says it's because

my tongue is too big and scary. All I want to do is show him I care.

When I hear barking coming out of that box with the fuzzy flickering pictures, I bark back. Masterdog sings to me that the dog is really okay. He doesn't sound okay. And where is he? Is he hiding in that box? I bark louder, but Masterdog tells me to shut up.

I go outside and gather my toys. I like the ones that squeak. I bite one, throw it in the air, chase it and bite it again. I see Masterdog at the door. She comes outside, grabs the squeaky toy and runs. I chase her until she throws it in the air. I bite it hard, harder than I mean to bite it because I'm cranky. I must have killed it because it doesn't squeak any more. Masterdog tries to pull it from my teeth. It rips into two pieces. I'm scared Masterdog will yell at me, but she hugs me instead. Lucky me.

\* \* \*

Having bitten the squeak out of still another squeaky toy, Liz decided to take

Rover to the pet store to buy a new one. Most pet stores encourage dogpeople to bring their well-mannered dogs inside the store on leash. At the store Liz frequented, they all knew Rover. One of the merchants gave her a cookie. Rover gobbled it up. Liz was perplexed. Usually Rover only ate cookies at home. Liz wanted to believe this meant Rover was finally getting used to the pet store.

Liz called Rover over to the squeaky toy section. As Liz handed Rover a sample, a familiar-looking man entered the pet store. He was close to Liz's age, bearded and dressed in nice slacks, shirt and a long wool coat. Liz couldn't place him. They exchanged a confused glance of recognition. He couldn't place her either until he saw Rover, at which point, he smiled. How am I supposed to recognize a dogperson without their dog? thought Liz.

He quickly purchased a 40 pound bag of designer dog food, waved and left the store before Liz or Rover could approach him.

Rover was far too busy deciding on a squeaky toy.

While making her purchase, Liz exchanged dog talk with the merchants. They even gave her a smoky smelling hoof for free. Liz exclaimed thanks and left the store, heading for the park.

\* \* \*

That place. It's overwhelming. Too many smells. I eat the cookie because its smell overpowers the other smells, not that I'm complaining. I like the dog store.

I like the squeak of one of the toys, so Masterdog gets it for me. I can hardly wait to play with it. It makes a loud sound like the sound I imagine a squirrel would make if I could catch one. They're fast little suckers.

It's raining in the park. I see that big hairy dog who thinks he's oh so dominant. Masterdog yells at me when I try to show him otherwise. Usually she lets me handle my own business, but this dog's Masterdog doesn't like me. I don't take it personally. I don't take very much

personally. But I know this whiny Masterdog is afraid of all dogs except that big hairy excuse of a dog.

Two more dogs come barreling down the path. I try to play with them, but they're tag teamers. Whenever I play with one, the other bites my butt. Masterdog and the two other bipeddogs laugh, so I run ahead to see who else is walking in the rain.

I don't mind the wet, but usually it means we probably won't stay anywhere long enough to form a pack pro tem. Most bipeddogs cringe against the rain. With so much plastic on their backs, how can they sense what's going on around them? Another bipeddog mystery.

I smell something wonderful behind the bush. The only thing better than cat poop is fermented deadthing goo. It's brown and sticky. I lean my head down and roll so that it coats my fur. I run back to Masterdog to show off my new scent. She doesn't like the scent of this fermented deadthing goo either. What a disappointment. Someday I know I'll roll in some fermented deadthing goo she'll



like, I just know it. She massages dirt into my coat. It feels nice. Then she throws a ball out into the lake. At least I think it's a ball. Out in the water, I can't find it so I swim back. Oh, well.

At home, Masterdog feeds us. In the mornings, the catdogs get fed first. But at night, I get to eat first.

Even though it's nighttime, Masterdog sends me outside, gives me a hoof and closes the door. I hear the large tin can leave the front yard. I'm too tired to care. I take my hoof into my doghouse. I like my doghouse. It keeps the rain out so that only my body can make my blanket wet and it smells the way I like it. The smell of my new scent is faint, but that's better than no scent at all. The wet from my fur makes me cold. I curl up real tight to keep warm. I can smell the good stink of the hoof. I'll chew on it when Masterdog gets home. I'm too tired to do anything else but sleep.

\* \* \*

*I'm with a pack of dogs and dogpeople. Rover's head has too many eyes – maybe 50 of them. Dogs and dogpeople move around in a large circle on the hill at Sandpoint Park. The humans move clockwise, the dogs widdershins. In the middle, a puppy lays on a blanket. It reminds me of Rover's blanket, the one covering the foam rubber she uses as a bed in her doghouse.*

*The puppy is whining as we chant something in what I believe is Latin. The whining turns to howling as our volume increases. Suddenly, we in the human circle stop and yell something. The dogs jump onto the puppy, except that they aren't dogs any more. They're bald naked humans wearing dog skins. Blood splatters and flows everywhere. I look away. I notice a tree is watching me with disgust and I wake up.*

Liz rarely remembered her dreams, but this one left a clear yet bitter impression. Even though it was still the middle of the night, she got up, put on three sweaters and ventured into the studio. She started to prepare to paint the portrait she'd finally

finished sketching, but something told her, her current frame of mind might turn the magic of *Harry Potter* into the horrors of *Saw*. Instead, she picked up a sketchbook and scratched out images from her nightmare. Sebastian and Bob rubbed up against her and Rover licked her hand before laying down beside her. She couldn't be sure if Rover was shivering from the cold or if her mood was contagious. She sketched until dawn, thankful it was Sunday morning. Spent, she fell into a deep sleep, the cats curling up beside her body on one side, Rover on the other.

Liz woke up groggy and fuzzy just past noon. Over coffee, she perused the Sunday paper. The article jumped out at her. Not that it said a lot, it didn't. It simply speculated at the happenings at two state parks near the Canadian border, approximately 100 miles from Seattle.

The bucket of blood they found at the first park contained animal blood. More specifically and even more horrifying, it was dog blood. Burnt bodies of three dogs were

found in the barbecue pit, twenty yards from the bucket of blood. The bodies had been staked to a tree and drained of blood before burning. There were human feces rubbed into the rocks surrounding the fire pit. The authorities speculated that for reasons as yet unknown, perpetrators of the atrocity had been scared off in the middle of some kind of ritual. The article related few details about the site at the second park. All the police would say is that they thought a similar ceremony had been disrupted.

Based on her nightmare, Liz knew exactly what these crazies were doing. She reviewed her sketches. The images seemed to coincide with the few descriptions outlined in the article. It was her turn to shiver.

\* \* \*

I usually dream about things I know, like running, chasing, biting, eating. But this dream is different. I can't even describe it, it's so weird. All I know is that it's bad. I can still smell the very bad stinks from my

dream, stinks that remind me of Sebastian's bad-breath smell. It creeps me out.

Masterdog doesn't sleep very well either and goes into the busy room to do some scratching. Instead of moving walls, she uses small flat scratching posts. I used to think her scratching posts were like the ones for the catdogs. But unlike the catdogs, Masterdog leaves marks on her scratching posts. The weird part is they make her feel good and then mean so much to her.

The scratching posts she works on after my bad dream don't make her feel good. The pictures I see in her mind remind me of my dream. I mention it to Bob, but he's busy watching over Sebastian. I don't know what it is, but something bad is coming and it's moving closer.

\* \* \*

Before obsession and fear could keep her from venturing outside, Liz grabbed Rover and headed for Sandpoint. She needed dogpeople and dogs to distract her from the

images that shrouded her hazy consciousness. The emptiness inside her seemed to deepen and threatened to consume her ability to function. It was October already so that they only went to Sandpoint on weekends because the sun shed little or no light after 4:00 p.m.

Two corgis burst onto the scene. Liz thought Rover must be having a difficult time taking them seriously because she was so much taller. However, they proved to be playful. Rover let them scrutinize her closely before leaping into a run. As they played happily, Liz took a better look at the owner of the funny-looking dogs. He was stocky and short-legged like his dogs and the look in his eyes was intense. Instinctively, Liz looked at his left hand. Sarah is right, she thought. I am back on the hunt. She didn't let herself get too excited by his ringless finger because he wore a large cross around his neck. A religious zealot, she thought. Must have come here right after church.

"Good day to you," he said smiling. Liz thought she saw in his smile an attitude that he had all the answers to the universe.

"Hi. What are your dogs' names?" Liz asked a safe question. It was Sunday but Liz was not up for a sermon, even if she did need a spiritual boost, still feeling out of her body.

"The male is Judah and the female is Rachel. And your dog?"

"Rover." He nodded his head, didn't even crack a smile.

"My first dog's name was Rover. He died of old age. I was only eleven when he died. His was the first death I ever had to face. Sometimes I think I'm still not over it. May your Rover live a full and wondrous life." His sadness was quickly replaced by that smile. They walked in silence. Rover had found a long stick and was challenging Judah into taking it away from her. Rachel barked a deep resonating bark at the two of them.

"Did you read that article in the paper?" he asked.

"Which one?" Liz countered, knowing full well which one.

"The one about that Satanic cult."

"How do you know it was a Satanic cult? Couldn't it have been voodoo or Santeria or some other religious practice?" Liz couldn't believe she was practically defending them. She was worse off than she thought.

"Based on what they found, it has all the makings of a Satanic cult. In voodoo and Santeria they sacrifice goats or chickens quickly and cleanly, drain them of blood and give the meat to participants to take home to cook and eat. These people mutilated dogs in the first park. Sounds like fucked up Christians to me." Liz's eyes widened. Maybe I read him all wrong, she thought as Judah and Rover, with both of their jaws around the stick, awkwardly ran together.

"That must bother you, being a Christian and all."

"Actually, I'm Catholic. I usually wear this inside my shirt. But today after reading that article – I don't know. It seemed like the



right thing to do. I take it you're not a Christian or Catholic."

"Are you kidding? You're talking to one of the Chosen," she said. He laughed.

"You mean one of the chosen to kill Christ. That's all right, you don't have to feel guilty. I forgive you. Too bad you'll have to wait until Yom Kippur to confess your sins. I can go to a confessional any time."

"Lucky you." Liz smiled for the first time that day. A Catholic with a sense of humor, she thought. What a relief.

Judah yanked the stick out of Rover's mouth and flung it into the air. Rachel grabbed it and ran until Rover caught up with her and barked. Rachel dropped the stick instantly and shook her body, pretending she was too busy to play with a stupid stick. Rover snagged it and ran off, Judah on her tail.

The dogs disappeared into the bushes. David and Liz waited, their silence comfortable. They could hear breaking branches in the brush. The first dog to emerge was Puck.

“Where the hell did Puck come from,” Liz exclaimed. Rover, Judah and Rachel gleefully burst out of the bush in pursuit.

“Puck,” Nina yelled as she turned the corner. Puck was busy playing cat and mouse with the others. “Fucking son of a bitch shithead,” Nina mumbled as she approached David and Liz. “Hey, it’s the mud woman. Liz, right? Hi, I’m Nina,” she said to David.

“David,” he said. “Judah and Rachel.”

“A biblical family, eh?” David shrugged. “Don’t tell me. You read that bullshit in the newspaper, put on some protection that usually works against vampires and therefore, might be effective against all black magick, and then dragged your puppies to the park in search of something. Maybe it’s community or maybe it’s a sense of safety in the park you love.”

Liz expected David to balk at Nina’s assumptions, even if they were probably true. He surprised them both by breaking out into a smile. “Guilty as charged. You too?”

“Yeah, me too,” Nina said, fondling the silver pentacle she wore around her neck. “Liz is here because of a dream she had. Now don’t get so fluttery, Liz. You’ve got the same dark circles under your eyes that I woke up with after having one doozie of a nightmare. Thought I’d take a chance. I hate it when I’m right. But hey, our doggies need walkies. You headed for the beach?”

“Sounds divine.” David’s light tone invited a shift of focus and attitude.

Nina’s words helped dispel the black cloud that had shrouded Liz’s brain since waking up. The emptiness was there, but not as looming. Some of the spent tears she shed as she drove home were those of relief at spending quality dogtime with David, Nina, Judah, Rachel, Puck and Rover. At least that’s what Liz told herself. She had no other explanation at the time.

\* \* \*

The only problem Timmy had with sleeping during the day was the noises of the

city. Not that they woke him. If anything, they lulled him to sleep. Rather, they seeped into his dreams. Sometimes the characters in his dreams would mouth the words of some shrieking schizophrenic outside his window. Granted, he was eight stories up, but he had the hearing of a bat and certain sounds found their way into his room. He was as sensitive to sound as he was to smell.

He loved his dreamtime despite the intrusion. He'd been a lucid dreamer since he was a small child. Unlike most kids, nightmares didn't keep him up nights. On the contrary. He much preferred a good scare over the disjointed and disorderly way his dreams could re-interpret his everyday life. The older he got the harder it was to determine which memories came out of dreams and which defined his waking life.

Having gone to sleep earlier than usual, Timmy woke up at 4 p.m. The sun tried to push its way through the cloud cover and then through dusty Venetian blinds, casting grainy shadows. Timmy reached over to open the drawer to the nightstand and pulled out

the bible. It wasn't really a bible. He'd pulled the cover off the original hardbound bible and kept his journal there. The original pages of the bible he kept under his pillow, just in case. He'd even read it periodically when he couldn't fall asleep.

He grabbed the pen he'd stolen from downstairs and opened his journal to the next available page. He wrote:

Dream. She's dressed in a pink bodysuit. She dances for me and I feel my body respond to her gyrations. The harder I get, the redder her suit becomes. It's exciting. She has this look on her face like she's hurting. The red bodysuit starts to drip. Like blood. At the moment my sperm explodes out of my body, her body explodes, leaving nothing but a lump of red wetness. A dog barks and I wake up.

Timmy cleaned himself off, piled the wet sheets in the corner for the maid, and

walked out into a bloody sunset. The food at the new coffee shop tasted better following a bloody nightmare. After the last bite, he realized he was smiling stupidly with satisfaction.

Taking an early evening stroll, Timmy was so lost in this rare feeling of calm and rightness, he didn't notice the man who'd been watching him follow him back into the hotel. The rare feeling of joy also blocked his usually sensitive nose that too often invited odiferous intrusions into his thoughts. When he got into the cage for his shift, he deftly flicked out his switchblade and stabbed a mouse. He set it aside for further scrutiny later. He looked up and saw the man smiling at him. Timmy was both scared and exalted. Life is good, he thought.

## 7. DAVID'S STORY

*Building a Masterpack is a delicate business. While the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, the purpose of this particular whole is fleeting and sometimes dissipates even before the purpose is actualized.*

Like most twins who grow up together, David and Gary were best friends. Since they were kids, Gary bragged that he was the older brother because he came out of his mother's womb first. They looked identical and most everyone, Father included, confused one for the other and vice versa. Mother never confused them. When she looked at them, she saw two very different human beings. She refused to dress them up in matching anythings and never assumed that if one twin liked it, the other would too.

David and Gary were born in Tulsa, OK. Gary said that's what made them OK guys. Because Father was in the air force, they rarely lived in one place long enough to

make friends. However, in 1978, they moved to Whidbey Island, just north of Seattle, because it looked like Father could be stationed there for an extended period of time.

Despite appearances, Gary and David were very different. Gary was an extrovert who craved attention. David was an introvert who sought privacy. They taught themselves how to play the piano when they were very young. There was nothing else to do on the base and the one thing they could count on was that no matter where they lived, there would be a piano. David played when no one else was around and favored the classics -- especially Bach. Gary used the piano to connect with other people, mastering show tunes and other sing-along songs.

Mt. St. Helens blew her top on their sixteenth birthday. Gary said it was a good omen. Their parents were very generous that year. Gary got an electric keyboard and David got a computer with a modem. While Gary played the keyboard that connected to his small amp he hooked up to large



speakers or headphones, David played the keyboard that connected his computer to the Internet and the World Wide Web. He especially liked talking to the other users on Bulletin Boards, then via email or sometimes an IRC. The primitive state of the online world limited options. Sometimes David would play the piano while Gary sent email to their friends, using the same account, but a different handle. David liked the fact that the other users recognized he and his identical twin as two completely different people.

At previous schools the boys attended, Gary had gotten in the habit of playing tricks on fellow students and teachers by convincing a reluctant David to trade places or pretend to trade places when they were in the same class. Sometimes he'd tease David's friends, many of whom didn't particularly like him.

Their new high school was not unlike the other schools they'd attended. Gary hung out with the coolest of the cool and David spent his time with the nerds. Only when

they were alone, did their different natures modulate into something of a balance.

The day before spring break, David waited for his brother in the parking lot. They shared a ten-year old Datsun. David didn't mind that Gary souped it up or that he used it more than David did. Gary made sure David got where he needed to go -- eventually. Gary was late again. David used the time to think through a database he was designing.

"Duck," Gary shouted, running past David. Before he crouched down, David saw three very large boys running towards them. "Pop-up," Gary called out from a few cars away. David knew the drill, much to his dismay. They had done this many times when Gary was in trouble with guys who didn't know he had a twin. David crawled away from where he'd heard Gary shout, wondering for the n<sup>th</sup> time when his brother would learn how to avoid these types of situations.

"Where'd the fucker go?" One of the boys was closing in on him.

"Over here, dildo," Gary called from the other end of the parking lot. David counted to ten and popped up from behind the car that hid him.

"Over here, dildo," he shouted.

"What the fuck?" he heard one of the boys say as they headed for him. He crouched down and headed for another section of the parking lot.

"Hey, boys, what's the matter with you?" Gary shouted.

"How'd he do that?" one of the boys exclaimed as he led them towards Gary. Whoever was chasing Gary would usually tire of the game and take off. These guys were no exception.

"Thanks," Gary said when they got to the car. "I know, I know. But they're assholes. Don't worry, they don't even go to this school."

"Then what are they doing here?" David asked as he got into the passenger seat.

"Selling drugs, what else?" Gary smiled, showing David a wad of \$20 bills.

"You idiot. They'll be back for that."

"They barely share a brain between them and besides, it's covered," Gary said with a voice that told David not to pursue the subject. David dropped it easily because when Gary said it was covered, it was covered.

Years later David came home to Whidbey from his first year at MIT for summer break and checked out his brother's new house. It looked exactly like his parents house. Gary had married his high school sweetheart after graduation. Her bulging body had announced to everyone all they needed to know. Father had helped Gary join the air force, some kind of intelligence job. While reminiscing, David asked Gary about the drug dealers from high school.

"I told their boss they were skimming profits," Gary answered.

"But how did you know their boss?" asked David.

"He was also my boss."

"You sold drugs?" David was incredulous.

"Don't look so horrified. I only sold the mild stuff -- marijuana, pills, hash, if I could

get it. How do you think I could afford to fix up the Datsun or fill it with gas?"

"I guess I didn't. Did you also take the stuff you sold?"

"You of all people would have known if I did."

"You never told me." David was more hurt that his best friend and brother kept a secret from him than the fact that Gary had sold drugs. At the same time, he remembered the night of their prom. A drunk at the party they attended after the silly celebration at school kept asking him for speed. In fact, that was only one of many times someone asked him for one drug or another. David figured everyone got asked all the time. The revelation that Gary had kept secrets from him forced David to briefly look at his own skills at denial. How could he have been so deliberately dense? Easy, he thought. Gary likes his secrets, I like my denial.

"What's happening boys?" Father's voice jolted him out of his reverie.

"Just talking about old times," Gary said, winking at David.

That summer, Father announced he would be joining the diplomatic corps. Putting Father in the same sentence as diplomatic was beyond David's comprehension. Mother could barely contain her pride and joy. She loved travel and the idea of moving to Beirut, the Riviera of the Middle East, was more than she could bear.

The day a bomb executed a chunk of the American army, David camped out next to his telephone and watched everything available about the incident on television. He was in graduate school and had at least 50 more hours of computer time to log before the end of the week, but this was a crisis.

"Hello?" he said into the phone, nearly dropping it because his hands were so sweaty.

"It's me, bro." Gary sounded serious. David started babbling uncontrollably about his concerns when Gary cut him off short. "They're okay, David."

"How do you know?"

"It's covered. They're in Israel. Actually, they've been there for almost a year."

"Father called me last month. Why didn't he tell me?"

"Classified, David."

"Then how do you know?"

"I know everything, David." Once I came from a family of soldiers, now I come from a family of spies, David thought to himself for the hundredth time. "How's school?"

"Fine. Brenda and the kids?"

"Terrific. Gary junior starts kindergarten next year. Can you believe it?" David let Gary talk him into calmness. How he loved his big brother.

"I applied for a job at Microsoft," David confided. "I miss the Northwest."

The phone rang as soon as he hung up with Gary.

"Hi, son. Just called to see how you're doing."

"Why didn't you tell me you moved to Israel?"

"You know better than to ask, David. But I can tell you now. We have an apartment in

Tel Aviv. Here, your mother wants to say hello."

They talked about David's school work and the possibility of his moving back to Washington. She even said a little about how much she loved living in Tel Aviv. David figured she must really like living around large masses of people who carried firearms.

"We love you, sweetie," Mother said. Her tone let him know she was sorry she couldn't always tell him what was happening.

"I love you too." David tried to hide his annoyance.

"I know, David," Mother responded to the conversation they were having but not having. "We'll be in touch. Promise."

David moved into a small apartment close to Microsoft in Kirkland, across Lake Washington from Seattle. He slipped into a comfortable routine, working more hours than he expected, but happy doing the work. Jerry, a fellow programmer, had married Darla, a secretary in the legal department. They kept inviting David over on weekends



after work to parade before him a wide range of single and available women. The women were sweet, charming -- good girls. Being such a good boy himself, David wasn't interested.

The day before he planned to tell Jerry he didn't need a matchmaker, David met Eva at the supermarket. Eva's laptop sat in the child carrier of her cart. David watched her pick out apples, place them in her cart, and type up something on her computer before continuing to the next item on her shopping list. His interest in food was minimal, but he shopped with increasing interest so that he could follow Eva without looking suspicious.

He'd always been attracted to women like Eva, but never had the nerve to approach them. She dressed in black, although the surfaces were lightly coated with animal hair. Her body was tall, lithe and muscular. Her short black hair made her already large blue eyes look larger and emphasizing the multiple piercings of her ears and nose. In his mind, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

David compared the ingredients in the various breakfast cereals when he heard Eva swear under her breath. She frantically punched the keys of her computer.

"Come back, please come back," she begged.

"Computer problems?" he asked, trying to be nonchalant.

"The mother fucking son-of-a-bitch ate my class outline. I've been working on that turkey for days and now it's gone."

"Maybe I can help."

"Maybe not. I've got a lot of important stuff on this thing. I don't want to lose everything just so you can show me how well endowed you are."

"I... I won't lose anything," he stuttered.

"You do and I'll break your pretty little head. As it is, I may not be a computer whiz, but I know enough to know I don't have the software to restore my document. Not that you believe me. Men never do believe women can actually do anything. Still think you can help me? I won't hate you if you say 'no.' But if you fuck up my other stuff, you're

dogmeat. That's dead and mutilated dogmeat."

"As long as you don't eat me, I'll be fine." David cringed at his lame joke, pulling a CD out of his jacket pocket. Eva laughed. Her laugh was music to his ears.

"Don't tell me," she said, "you work at Microsoft."

"Yes, but it's a job, not a disease." She stood patiently with a smile on her face that threatened to distract David from his task, as he inserted the disk. "I carry this CD around just in case I meet a damsel in distress."

"But never in your wildest dreams did you expect to use it. Am I right?" It was David's turn to laugh. "You saved my document. My hero."

"You teach mathematics?" David was more than a little surprised.

"Got my Ph.D. at 22 and teach at the U. I'm a regular whiz kid except when it comes to computers. I'm more interested in the theoretical than the technological. Did you decide which granola is best or is

comparison shopping a hobby of yours." David blushed.

"Maybe I'd better get going."

"Relax, I don't bite so no, I won't eat you. Well that's not exactly true," she sneered. "although the few friends I have say my edges are too sharp."

"I like sharp edges. They cut away the bullshit."

"There's a coffee house next door. Can I buy you a cup? It's the least I can do after you saved my drowning document from certain death."

"Sure." David followed her like a puppy dog, purchasing a few items he'd collected while following Eva throughout the supermarket. Outside the rain fell. She opened an umbrella.

"You're not from the Northwest, are you," he asserted.

"How did you know?"

"True Northwesterners don't bother with bumbershoots." David's courage increased along with the downpour.

"And here I have an extensive collection of umbrellas. My father manufactures them."

"Where are you from?"

"Boston."

"I went to MIT."

"My alma mater as well."

Over coffee, they spent the next few hours discussing Boston, themselves and anything else that came to mind. David was in heaven.

"I have to get going," she said suddenly. "The rain's finally stopped and there's only a few hours of daylight left. My dog needs a walk if I plan to get any work done tonight. You're welcome to join us. Quark is in the car."

David had never been around dogs, but he always thought he'd enjoy them. In the shopping center's parking lot, Eva pointed to the old Volvo station wagon. Quark was a large black and brown beast. He barked when he saw Eva.

They drove to Marymoor Park, the largest dogpark King County. David couldn't tell if he'd fallen in love with Eva or Quark or the

new community of dogs and dogpeople he met. He watched Eva and Quark meet and greet countless canines of all shapes and sizes as they strolled through the park. Usually unable to initiate conversations with strangers, David found himself comfortably talking with new people by first playing with their dogs. He had no idea a world like this existed.

"Just remember, dogshit stinks, even if it's from your own dog. Same with dogpeople."

"I was just being friendly."

"I didn't invite you so you could coo over other dogs and their owners," she snapped. "Hell hath no fury like a woman ignored."

"Don't you mean 'scorned?'" he said. Eva's glare made his blood freeze. Alarms went off, but David ignored them. "Sorry," he said, smiling a disarming smile that seemed to take the frost off of Eva's frown. "How about doing this again next weekend. I'll make a picnic and pay you more attention that you could imagine." Eva smiled.

It surprised David how submissive Eva became when making love. David liked that. He'd been trained well by one of his professors at MIT. She had been older by 10 years, married for 20, but insatiable when it came to sex. Why she chose David, he never did figure out. Even after he'd seen her wedding picture, he denied his obvious resemblance to her husband. Oh, sweet denial.

Eva purred with pleasure as he gently explored every nook and cranny of her long lean body. He was careful not to toy too much with her vulnerable lust, concerned that she learned to trust him. In turn, her touches were tentative and full of what David could only identify as innocence. He made love to her as though she were fragile and easily broken. Her resistance to surrender gave him a satisfaction he'd never felt with any other woman.

Over the next few months, David opened his heart to Eva. Her fascination with theoretical physics and quantum theory opened his mind to new ways of perceiving

the world. Even her animosity towards anything military started to rub off on him. In the few waking hours he had away from work or Eva and Quark, he read books, some of which Eva recommended, some he found on his own and introduced to Eva. His thirst for knowledge had expanded from computers to philosophy, science and religion.

His brother invited David and Eva to visit Whidbey Island, but David declined the invitations. He didn't think Eva's conspiracy theories would go over very well with Gary, especially since she'd probably infer Gary was a willing participant. And maybe he was. Regardless, it didn't bode well.

Trouble started when the first Gulf War broke out. David tried to tear Eva away from the television but Eva fiercely resisted. She insisted the media was working in collusion with the government to cover up the atrocities the Air Force was committing on the Iraqis in the name of oil. One night, David prepared an extravagant dinner for Eva and Quark with plans of asking them to



marry him. Eva remained planted in front of his television.

"Check it out, David."

The threat of Tel Aviv's devastation by Iraqi missiles distracted him from his original intention for the evening. He called his parents who were awake and alert at 5 a.m. His father insisted they would be all right, thanks to the patriot missiles, but David was not convinced.

"Those Nazis deserve whatever they get," said Eva.

"You mean the Iraqis?"

"No, the Israelis. Look at how they treat the Palestinians."

"The Palestinians in Israel are treated better than those in any of the Arab countries. At least they have universities and hospitals in Israel."

"Not good enough."

David glanced over her shoulder at the table he'd set with his best china, candles and a centerpiece of fresh flowers. He'd ended up giving Eva a plate of food while

watching the latest hysteria infiltrate the air waves.

"I can't believe you support Israel," Eva said, throwing Quark a piece of the London broil he'd meticulously prepared.

"They're an island of civilization in a sea of fanatics."

"I say bomb the bastards."

"I hope my parents will be okay."

"Fuck your parents," she said. "My parents are dead and soon yours will be too. Time to grow up, David." Something deep inside him died. He thought he could handle Eva's sharpest of edges. He was wrong.

"I don't want them to die."

"They're part of the reason the world's turning into a shithole, David. You should be celebrating their demise."

A few days later, David returned the ring he'd bought. His parents were fine, they survived the war. His relationship with Eva had been a devastating casualty. She tried a feeble apology, but David knew her heart wasn't into it and besides, the damage had

been done. He'd never feel the same way about her again.

David saw Eva shopping in the supermarket a month later. Instead of clutching her laptop computer, her hands combed the bushy gray hair of a man twice her age. David knew she saw him. He watched her bathe her companion in the affection she'd once showered upon him.

Worried that he'd bump into her again and greatly in need of making some serious changes in his life, David bought a townhouse across the water in Seattle. He shopped at a new supermarket, determined to put his relationship with Eva behind him. It surprised him how much he missed Quark and the community of dogs.

A month after he moved, David's parents stopped by for a weekend visit on their way from a short time at the Whidbey Island to visit his brother before flying back to Israel. David didn't realize how much he'd missed them until he saw them looking for him as they exited the helicopter. Gary, Brenda and the kids joined them to see his new home in Seattle.

The reunion started off well. The kids swam in the indoor pool while the adults talked. Periodically, David caught his brother and his father talking in low voices so that no one else could hear. David smiled. He had no illusions about his family of spies.

When they drove off for the airport and beyond, David felt empty. It wasn't that he missed his family. He talked to them often, although lately, conversations too often turned towards the importance of a strong military to protect America from third world countries whose chaotic or naive way of governing themselves threatened the civilized world. David still agreed with Eva's opinion that the American government couldn't be the ultimate authority in all things. At the same time, he longed to join his family in their simple convictions that protected them from complex realities.

On Christmas eve a few months later, on impulse, David attended the mass at St. Marks. How he loved the pageantry and exuberance of the service. What he once saw as blind faith transformed into something

else. These rituals helped these people feel part of something larger than themselves. He especially enjoyed the music. The choir soothed his restless soul.

Some of his fellow office workers gathered together Christmas day. Having had a little more wine than he was used to, David sat himself down at the piano and played music out of the Christmas Songbook. Despite the fact he hadn't played in years, his fingers took easily to the keys. A crowd gathered around him, singing along. At first the singing threw him off. Pretend you're Gary, he said to himself. This thought gave his fingers new freedom and they danced on the ivories until they were too stiff to continue.

As he rose from the bench, the crowd around him applauded. His heart swelled with joy for the first time since Eva.

"That was terrific," Jerry commented.

"I had no idea, David," said Darla. "We could use you."

"Yes, we could," said Jean with a tone of voice David did not recognize coming out of her mouth. Jean and David had worked

together for years, but this was the first time they talked about anything outside computers or women's politics.

"How so?" he asked, floating on air with satisfaction at playing the piano again.

"We're in the choir at St. Mary's and our accompanist just announced she's moving to Phoenix."

"St. Mary's?"

"It's a Catholic church on Queen Anne," said Jean. David thought Jerry and Darla approved of the conversation for more than one reason. More than once they had asked him about his relationship with Jean.

"I'm not Catholic." Jean's frown so saddened David, he said: "But I could be. I guess. How do you reconcile being a Catholic with being a feminist?"

"I don't even try. Well that's not quite true. The spiritual elements of Catholicism speak to me. And I support a lot of what the church does to help people. I figure it's up to me to do whatever I can to encourage new thinking in the church. The choir director

and I spend countless hours rewriting a lot of our music so it isn't sexist."

"Is that allowed?" David was still trying to adjust to the religious nature of his colleague.

"Why don't you come on Sunday and find out?"

David attended services every Sunday after that night and agreed to attend rehearsals one night a week to accompany the choir. Jean introduced him to Father Andrew. David truly admired this man. It wasn't as much his obvious charisma as his ability to talk with David about the books he'd read. David suspected Father Andrew was equally thrilled to have someone with whom to talk about the line between metaphysics, physics and religion. Father Andrew even loaned David books now out-of-print books from his own library. David reread the old and new testaments with a new eye.

His baptism had felt contrived, but he could live with that. David basked in the warmth of his new-found community. He learned he had a great deal to offer these

people and they in turn, gave him more than he ever thought he'd deserved.

David's life had taken a new shape and until the day he decided to explore the park near his townhouse, he thought he was content. He even dated a few of the women he'd met at church, but no one exceptional had revealed themselves.

David drove to Sandpoint. He'd avoided the park largely because it sat next to a naval base. He continued to avoid anything military except his family. But he was drawn to the park for reasons he couldn't identify, nor did it matter. The lake shimmered in the sunlight and the air smelled sweet. He watched the sailboats, speedboats and jet skis skim over the surface of Lake Washington.

"Lexington come," he heard a man command. A mid-sized ball of wet dog came out of nowhere and shook the excess water out of his coat onto David. David laughed. "I'm so sorry," the man said as he guiltily dragged his wet dog away.



As he continued down the path, he found a small beach with half a dozen dogs. He welcomed the opportunity play with the friendly ones. Most owners avoided him. After a while, he figured that because he was dogless, the dogpeople assumed he didn't want dogs anywhere near him. How wrong they were. However, he decided that walking through the actual dogpark might be pushing it.

On the drive home, an old sadness erupted in David's chest that he'd successfully buried until that moment. The minute he got home, he called his brother to set up a visit. He thought what he needed was a shot of family.

"I joined a Catholic church," David inserted into the conversation casually. He'd driven up to Whidbey the day after his walk through the park.

"First Mom, then you."

"Mom?"

"Didn't she tell you? She's converted to Judaism. I guess certain Israelis have had

quite an effect on her, which is odd since most Israelis are not particularly religious."

"What about Dad?"

"He says he's too old to get religion. But he's had to adjust. Mom's kosher and everything."

David felt pangs of jealousy. His parents rarely told him anything of significance about their lives in Israel.

"They keep asking me when you're going to settle down and have kids of your own." Gary had noticed the sadness David tried to hide as he watched the kids playing.

"They ask me too. In the meantime, maybe I'll get a dog or two." David hadn't planned on saying this, but the more he thought about it, the better it sounded.

David spent a month researching the different breeds of dogs before settling on Corgis. He liked their size and temperament -- small dogs with an attitude. He found a breeder and bought two puppies.

Some of the joy he'd felt with Eva and Quark returned. Had he known how much of this joy was dog-related rather than love-

related, he might have gotten dogs sooner. His co-workers snickered at the pictures of his canines he used as the screensaver on his computer.

David learned quickly the dogpark rules, but found the most joy wandering out of the dogpark to the beach he'd encountered the his first dogless time at Sandpoint. In two years, he only had one encounter with Animal Control and that was only a warning. He felt lucky it was only a warning.

\* \* \*

Judah and Rachel are smarter than most dogs think. They're squatdogs, but not squeakerdogs. I hate squeakerdogs. They're worse than babydogs. Squeakerdogs are just asking to be dominated and nipped. Fortunately, Judah and Rachel aren't like that.

I ask them what it's like to grow up with a littermate. They tell me it's the best. They're never lonely and for the most part, their need to eat or play or even pee comes

at the same time. I try to establish this relationship with Bob and Sebastian, but catdogs only bond with other catdogs, if anyone. Too bad.

Rachel and Judah don't know what it's like to be in jail. I'm lucky I was only in jail a short time before Masterdog bailed me out. Judah and Rachel do remember playing with other littermates in a big yard. I remember littermates too, but we played in a box, not a big yard. Daviddog plays with them a lot. They don't like toys, they like to wrestle. They say they especially enjoy making Daviddog fall down so that he too is on four paws, even if his hind paws bend funny. He growls with them and lets them groom his face.

Judah and Rachel treat me with the deference I deserve. In fact, they respect most dogs that are bigger, which is just about all dogs except squeakerdogs. They have respect, but they aren't afraid and they don't like squeakerdogs either. Once when we were at the park, I saw them go up to a squeakerdog wearing blanket like a bipeddog

and they growled. The bipeddog picked up the squeakerdog and started singing at Daviddog. It sounded almost like the squeakerdogs squeaking. Much to my surprise, Daviddog squeaked back. Masterdog backed away because she found it too funny to watch without making that yuck yuck sound she makes when she's happy. Judah, Rachel and I felt exactly the same way.

\* \* \*

"We've been watching you." The man who had continued to periodically sit in the hotel lobby said to Timmy. Timmy pretended to organize the cage for his work cycle.

"We?" he asked the man. "Who are you?"

"I'm Buzz," the man said, extending his hand.

"Timmy." Buzz's hand was cool and slimy with sweat.

"I'll meet you after your shift at the coffee shop. I think you'll like us. I know we like

you." Before Timmy could say anything, the man walked out.

Something about the man and the fact that he was part of a "we" excited Timmy. No one had ever sought him out. The fact that someone actually noticed him made him a little nervous, but his intuition told him that this cigarette-wreaking man would be important in shaping Timmy's future. Saturday nights were usually busy so at least the time would fly by.

As he said he would, Buzz drank coffee in the coffee shop after Timmy's shift.

"Don't tell me, let me guess," Buzz said after he ordered Timmy, "you escaped your middle-class parents who probably are more relieved than worried when you did because you feel compelled to explore a human reality that scares them. You understand the streets, but you're not quite of the streets, because you don't really fit in. You've become more of a watcher than a doer. Your routines are like rituals and as long as you perform them, people can say or do anything around you and you don't care one way or

another because you think most of them are morons anyway."

"How many of you are watching me?" Timmy asked. He was a master at hiding his feelings. His stoicism made Buzz laugh.

"Easy, Timmy," Buzz said. "I'm the only one and you've had me in your sights at all times."

"Then how do you know so much?"

"I just do," Buzz said.

"Who are you?" Timmy asked. He liked the fear Buzz evoked in him and sensed he also titillated Buzz with fear.

"I'll tell you all about me on the way to my house. It's where we meet. Say the word and I'll bring you back here."

"Are you a bunch of do-gooding fundamentalist Christians or something?" Buzz laughed.

"We use the bible in our own way," Buzz said, his mouth smiling, his eyes harsh. "But as far as do-gooding goes, forget it."

"Is this about self-actualizing," Timmy said, drawing on terms he'd heard his parents use, "or is it more like

empowerment?" Buzz's smile widened and his eyes darkened.

"It's about power, Timmy -- raw wild unwieldy power," Buzz said as they exited the coffee shop. "Better than any drug on the market, almost better than sex. Take my ring, Timmy." Timmy obliged, pondering what he'd have to do to make sure he came out ahead. "Oh, you'll come out ahead. Don't you feel it?" Timmy noticed he'd broken out in a sweat. His nose started running. He swayed in his steps. Just before he fell, Buzz snatched back his ring. "Get up, Timmy. You did well for an untrained novice. Pick you up at 4. We'll take a walk in the park before going to my house. You'll like it, Timmy. I know you will." Buzz lit a cigarette and walked away down the street. Timmy was too stunned to chase after him. He went up to his room, exhausted. When he blew his nose, out came blood. Lots of blood. He hadn't had a nosebleed for years. He always liked blood. He took it as a sign that Buzz's invitation was worthwhile. He set his alarm and fell into a deep sleep.



## 8. BLOODY NIGHTMARE

*Humans live in a dualistic world, although in between is where color emerges. A noir existence has no meaning for dogs, humans and beyond. I prefer the beyond but I also enjoy color.*

Sebastian, even before he got sick, didn't talk to me very often. If he has anything to say, he usually makes Bob do the talking. So imagine my surprise when one morning, after Masterdog leaves in the large tin can, Sebastian lays down beside me near my small doghouse. Bob visits me there sometimes. I've even found him sleeping in there. But for Sebastian to leave the warmth of the bed in the big doghouse, jump outside through the small window and talk to me – this is something special. I am stunned and honored, especially since I can feel he is in pain.

But that was only the beginning. He starts talking about the bipeddog-with-no-

smell as if they've met. Sebastian insists they have. I get a little angry that the bipeddog-with-no-smell has somehow gotten into the big doghouse to talk to Sebastian without my knowing about it. Sebastian sits very still while I howl about it, waiting patiently for me to finish. When I am done, he says the bipeddog-with-no-smell is not really a bipeddog, but an entity that lives outside our world – kind of like a catdog only different. I want to thank him for the information, but I haven't a clue what he's talking about. Sebastian tries explaining again, but the concept is beyond me.

I apologize to him for not understanding. Sebastian rewards me by sleeping with me in the small doghouse. He tells me my understanding won't matter because everything has already been set in motion. His purrs soothe both the pain in his body and the confusion in my mind.

\* \* \*

John and Sarah invited Rover and Liz over for dinner to discuss the wedding. It wasn't Liz's favorite topic of conversation. They insisted on a simple affair, but it still required lots of planning. Rover had eaten before going to Sarah's condo; however, Liz brought a large bone just in case Rover decided she needed more attention than the humans were willing to give.

Sarah glowed with health. In the past few weeks her belly had started to bulge ever so slightly and she rubbed it absently as she opened the door. Rover immediately began sniffing around, ignoring the humans for the time being. John smiled and gave Liz a hug. He smelled like fish.

"Sorry, I just got in. I'll leave you three to gossip about me while I shower." John was a large muscular Scandinavian with a big blond beard and mustache. His eyes twinkled with amusement most of the time. Rover sniffed him up and down. "You like fish, Rover?" She licked his hand and continued sniffing his long legs. She was so absorbed with the activities of her nose, she

didn't even flinch when he reached down to pet her.

"I hate you for leaving me, Sarah," Liz said as soon as the bathroom door closed.

"I know. You tell me that every time you talk to me. But it'll work out, you'll see."

"It's true then. Pregnant women really do glow. How does John get any sleep with you lighting up the room like that?" Liz said, following Sarah into the kitchen. Sarah put a bowl filled with water on the floor for Rover. God, I'm going to miss her, Liz thought for the millionth time.

"Meet any available dogpeople lately?" Sarah asked, stirring one of her infamous soups. Liz's mouth watered.

"I have a confession to make."

"Don't tell me. You've discovered that you are back on the hunt once again. Am I right?"

"I never could hide anything from you."

"Did you meet someone?"

"No, but I'm aware that I'm looking."

"Good. You deserve the best, Liz. I can hardly wait to come to your wedding."

"One wedding at a time, Sarah. Besides, I've got to meet someone first."

"What's he like?" This was the game they used to play when they were both unattached. Each would describe their mates with as much detail as possible. They hadn't played since Sarah started seeing John. Liz didn't really have it in her to play, but she promised herself to give this evening over to Sarah and John, and keep her depression to herself.

"He's tall dark and handsome." The one-sidedness of the current game made Liz uncomfortable.

"He owns a dog," Sarah encouraged, pretending Liz's obvious discomfort did not exist.

"Yes, he owns a dog." Sarah had this look on her face that told Liz if she didn't continue, Sarah would call her a bad dog and wouldn't give her any supper. "He probably works in film or television -- artsy film or public television, of course. That way he has a clue what the business of art is all

about. Did I mention he's very very very successful?"

"You just did. Go on."

"He's been married before so he won't require too much training." This was all straight off Liz's ongoing list, complete with no surprises.

"If John hadn't ever been married, I would have written him off."

"And he's physically, psychologically, spiritually and mentally healthy."

"I knew if I left you alone you'd talk about me," John said, towel drying his hair. Rover sniffed him, gave him a confused look, trotted into the living room and laid down with a loud thud. They laughed.

"Why don't you have the captain of your ship perform the ceremony on the boat?" Liz asked over dinner.

"First of all," John began, prepared to make a speech, "only Rover would appreciate the stench. Second of all, the visual aesthetics of a small fishing boat leave a lot to be desired, and third of all, captains don't have the power to perform weddings any

more. Judge Elton has been helping us outline the ceremony."

"Outline -- that was his word, right?" Liz sneered.

"What if it was?"

"I can't believe you got Judge Elton."

"He's a friend of the family."

"He's the clown of the court. No one takes him seriously." Liz knew the snippy aspects of her depression were starting to show, but this was too much for her. Judge Elton had caused she and her co-workers nothing but grief.

"But he's a judge, Liz," Sarah defended. Why don't people consider professionals like judges, lawyers or doctors capable of being total idiots? Liz thought.

"He makes long speeches during trials just to listen to himself speak. His judgments are loud and dramatic. Everyone agrees he's got a short-man complex," Liz argued.

"And shortly he's going to give us our marriage vows," John said firmly. Liz didn't

think he recognized the pun he made, so she didn't laugh.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to be difficult."

"Sure you do, but we forgive you," Sarah said smiling with just a twinge of pity.

They filled in the details. Even Rover had a job. On her back she would carry a basket filled with rose petals John's niece would throw on the path Sarah would take to the altar. Hopefully Rover wouldn't bite this sweet little precious thing, Liz grumbled to herself.

"How's your family portrait going? I got a real kick out of last year's," John asked Liz while they sipped coffee in the living room. They had to talk a little louder because the sound of Rover's teeth gnashing the bone threatened to make conversation impossible. Liz was thankful neither John nor Sarah seemed to mind.

"I took a picture of them lying in bed with me. Boy were they pissed. They ever so casually walked all over me afterwards. As far as a theme goes, I'm still working on it."



"You'll come up with something, I'm sure," Sarah commented. "It's only October. You still have plenty of time."

"I know, but this is the first time I've had so much trouble. Usually I commit myself to a concept and keep working until the piece is finished. Not this time. I've filled an entire sketchbook without coming up with the right thematic image. Maybe it's because of the awful nightmares I've been having lately."

"What kind of nightmares?" John asked. He had a funny look on his face Liz couldn't read. At first she thought it was because his bushy beard and mustache covered a large part of his face. But it hadn't been a problem in the past. His eyes seemed to go flat and lose their spark at the word "nightmare." Sarah fidgeted.

"The people and the dogs keep changing," Liz began, "but they all take place at Sandpoint, the park on the lake where Rover likes to walk."

"Is there blood in your dreams?" John asked intensely.

"Yes. In fact, blood is usually everywhere. I can almost smell it. It's really gross."

"Tell her," Sarah commanded before heading for the bathroom.

"I've been having a few nightmares myself. But I only have them when I'm on land. At sea, I sleep like a baby. I can't give you too many details because I either forget or try to forget as soon as possible. However, I do remember lots of blood, dogs howling and a group of people chanting." Liz could tell there was more, but didn't want to push him. He looked sick enough as it was.

"One night, I woke up screaming," he continued. "Sarah made me tell her everything I could remember. You were in the dream, Liz. You and Rover." At the sound of her name, Rover stopped grinding her bone and looked at John, head cocked to the side before walking over to John.

"What were we doing?" Liz asked. John petted Rover with a distant look in his eye. Liz liked how she was warming to him, even if the conversation left her cold.

"Excuse me?" Distance was replaced with fear.

"In your dream. What were we doing?"

"It was like I was watching you through a fun house mirror. You know, the ones that reflect upon themselves into infinity. And there were dogs everywhere. And pieces of dog. And humans. And you--" He glanced at the closed bathroom door. "You were naked."

"How'd I look?" Liz asked. John laughed. It released some of the penned up tension.

"It was only a dream, Liz," he said with a crooked smile.

"No, it was a nightmare," she countered.

"All I know is that going to sleep is becoming a problem. I've even started taking something to knock me out. Sarah's worried."

"Who can blame her?" The mention of Sarah's name made her heart sink. Liz liked flirting with John. She hadn't flirted with a man for too long and wondered if Sarah knew how lucky she was. "I wish I could give you some words of reassurance, but I can't. I'd take something to knock me out too

except that when I do wake up after one of those nightmares, I do my best sketches."

"I'd like to see them sometime." The toilet flushed and so did Liz.

"How about tomorrow? It can't be earlier than one o'clock. I dream my worst nightmares on Saturday nights and sketch my best work before the sun comes up. I may be a basket-case when you arrive, but I'll have plenty to show you."

"It's a date."

"I don't know if dating my best friend one month before our wedding is such a good idea, John." Sarah sat down on the couch, leaning over John to give Rover a scratch.

"It's a double date," John said hugging Sarah's waist. "You and me and Liz and Rover."

"No offense, John, but Rover and I are well past the dating stage." Liz made her goodbyes and headed for home.

Like clockwork, a nightmare jolted her out of bed around 3 a.m. Her sketches were bloodier than usual. She drifted off and woke up again at noon and reviewed her

night's work over coffee. Nausea threatened to ruin her day. She retreated into that empty place as though the toxic shock was back again.

"Maybe you could make it into a costume Rover could wear to that All-Dog All Hallows Eve Party you mentioned last night," John suggested. Sarah had stayed home. She said she didn't like the idea of transmitting horrific images to their unborn child. Liz couldn't blame her. John looked like he'd had a rough night too.

"Maybe I will. The party isn't until a week from Monday and I haven't come up with anything else. But wouldn't her costume look just a little too grotesque?" The nausea had subsided, but she felt as rotten as John looked.

"No, it'd look a lot grotesque. But we're talking Halloween."

"What if she scares all the other dogs away?" Liz couldn't help but smile at the thought.

"It's not the dogs I'd worry about. I'd be honored if you let me help. Maybe it'll help

put an end to these nightmares. I woke Sarah up last night. She said I was yelping in my sleep. I took something -- Sarah is driving me almost as crazy as the nightmares -- so I don't remember what I dreamed, but I woke up in a sweat."

They spent an hour translating the sketch into a design plan. Now Liz's spaciness had with manic edges. The creative process always got her wired. After John left, she loaded Rover into the car and headed for Sandpoint. The air was cool, but she left all the windows open. The frigid breeze felt wonderful.

\* \* \*

Something important is happening. Bob knows it too. Sebastian senses it through the veil of pain that envelopes him. He spends a lot of time on the window sill waiting for the bipeddog-with-no-smell. I find it a curious dog to wait for, but don't question it either. Bob says it has finally

begun. I ask him what has begun, but he ignores me as usual.

Johndog and Masterdog ignore me too. They're too busy staring at pieces of paper on which master dog has scratched images that remind me of my dream. They look at me and then back at the papers. Bob says they're going to put the papers all over my body. I don't believe him because it's a silly idea.

At the park, the pack pro tem includes Spot, Judah and Rachel. Two dogs I've never met before try to join our pack. They're very young and like to get in the way. I like them as long as they don't trip me, an activity they find amusing. Babydogs can be a real pain. Luckily, they go in another direction. Spot and I go swimming while Judah and Rachel hang out by the bushes. They don't care for the water, silly dogs. I guess most squatdogs must find it difficult to swim with their stumpy legs. Too bad for them.

Spot and I race out of the water and head towards the top of the hill. Spot may be small, but we're running so fast, Judah and

Rachel don't even try to follow. Usually I'm good and I wait for Masterdog. I hear her call but she's singing in a way that tells me she doesn't really mean it. Lucky me.

At the top of the hill, Spot and I practically run over a bunch of bipeddogs standing in a circle. All but one are hairless and wear big blankets. There's something very wrong with these bipeddogs. I look around for their dogs, but I don't see any. The one with hair stares at me in a way that makes me shiver. Spot goes over to them to investigate, the fool. I stay back. I don't particularly care for bipeddogs I don't know, but something else bothers me about them, although I don't know what that something is. My dream flashes quickly through my mind, leaving only a sense of foreboding. I watch as one of the bipeddogs reaches down for the rope around Spot's neck.

Don't let them touch you, I bark. He wags his tail. What a dufus. The bipeddogs look around to see if there are any other dogs or bipeddogs around. Satisfied that I'm their only audience, they start to walk down the



other side of the hill, one of them carrying a wriggling Spot. My dream was a warning. I can feel it.

I run up to the hairless bipeddog who has Spot. Another hairless bipeddog tries to grab me. I growl deep inside my throat and show them my teeth. No one grabs the rope around my neck except Masterdog. No one. Not even Sarahdog or Johndog or the Masterdog of one of my friends. The hairless bipeddog backs away. I have very impressive large white teeth. He's certainly impressed.

Spot sees me and I hope he'll do what I do and show his teeth even if they are tiny, but he doesn't. Poor guy. His Masterdog has trained him to repress his survival instincts underneath his good nature. Not unusual for a dog. I bark at him to try and reach past the goodness for that primitive survival-instinct humans cannot comprehend. But Spot holds on to his good dog nature, too afraid to explore the wildness beneath.

I know it's up to me. All but one of the hairless bipeddogs circle around me. The one with hair watches, but he scares me

more than any of the others. I shift my body in avoidance of their hands and flash my teeth again at the holder of Spot. I want so much to bite his hand, but I can't reach past my own good nature to bite a bipeddog.

All at once I hear Spot's Masterdog call him. Either the call gives Spot the courage to jump out of the hairless bipeddog's grasp or the hairless bipeddog drops him. I don't know which because I hear Masterdog call for me and I look to see from where the sound comes.

Spot and I run towards our Masterdogs. The pack of scary bipeddogs run down the other side of the hill. Our Masterdogs never see them. Spot is beside himself. Rachel and Judah head down the path the hairless bipeddogs took. I bark, but they won't listen to me as per usual.

I try to tell Masterdog what happened but she doesn't understand what I'm saying. She thinks I want to play.

\* \* \*

At the top of the hill, it seemed to Liz that all the dogs were especially agitated. Spot jumped around more excitedly than usual. Rover barked and pawed the dirt. Judah and Rachel took off.

David headed after his Corgis, while the lawyer and Liz tried to engage their dogs in play. Spot shivered. His owner tucked him under his arm, waved and took off towards the parking lot. Liz saw Rover had taken off, catching up with David halfway across the hill.

All of a sudden, Judah and Rachel burst out of the bushes followed by two large wriggling Rottweilers who didn't so much chase them as follow. Rover charged ahead, running circles around the two large dogs that probably outweighed her by 50 pounds each and Rover weighed 90 pounds.

The two large Rotties greatly resembled their owner. The owner commanded them to come and they obeyed, sitting like two guardians.

"Wow," Liz said, catching up with David.

"Damn. Compared to him, I'm a piss-poor dog owner," David said to Liz.

"Looks like we both know what you'll be talking about in confession," Liz was beginning to like his smile.

Just before Rachel, Judah and Rover reached the two Rotties, the owner said, "Bananas." The dogs left his side and went nosing around the bushes.

"Bananas?" Liz asked as the owner joined them.

"As in, go bananas," he said. His broad smile triggered a release response of the tension Liz was unaware of carrying. Damn, she thought, here I consider myself someone who accepts each individual, one person at a time, yet I clenched at the sight of this large black man -- I mean African-American -- even though he's obviously a dogperson.

"They're friendly and so am I," the man said. David looked as guilty as Liz.

"I'm sorry--" Liz started.

"Forget it. I just had two very strange encounters. First I was stopped by Animal

Control." Liz reached for the leash. "Relax, he left the park."

"In his truck?" asked David.

"That's just it. He gave me a warning and walked out the entrance. He must have been parked on the street."

"Did he have flaming red hair and blue eyes and a pointy nose?" David described the same Animal Control guy that had stopped Liz.

"That's the man. I'm Bo and those two hulking beasts are Shakti and Gandhi."

"The Corgis are Judah and Rachel. I'm David."

"I'm Liz and the tall gangly fawn-colored monster is Rover." Bo's laugh came from somewhere very deep within his gut. It was contagious.

Rover noticed Liz wasn't alone for the first time and came over to investigate. Liz feared the worst. Fortunately, Bo didn't try to reach out to her, letting her sniff him even when she stuck her nose in his crotch. Satisfied, she backed out of the way. Shakti nuzzled Liz's hand and she automatically

stroked the huge head. Like Rover, Shakti was so tall Liz didn't need to bend over to scratch her back. Judah and Rachel darted from one person to the next, licking shoes. Gandhi woofed with the depth and richness of his owner.

When they reached the lake, Rover dove in. Judah and Rachel did their wading thing. Gandhi pranced at the lake's edge, biting the water. Just as Shakti was about to jump in, Bo grabbed her, scratching her butt. She looked up at him adoringly.

"She loves the water but she is especially stinky after she goes swimming and the smell drives my wife crazy. Gandhi likes to wade, but avoids going past his knees."

"So what was the second encounter?" Liz asked.

"What?" Bo said absently.

"You said you had two strange encounters."

"Oh, yes. A group of skinheads practically mowed me down as I climbed up the hill. You didn't see them? They seemed to be coming from the hilltop."

David said, “Now we know what scared the shit out of Spot and Rover.”

“And Judah and Rachel ran after them,” Liz added.

“I don’t know if I should be glad they wanted to be protective or angry for the same reason. They think they’re the size of Shakti and Gandhi.”

“I suspect that group was relatively harmless,” Bo said. “Except for that one guy with the hair. He’s bad news, believe me.”

“How do you know?” David asked.

“I’ve seen that look in his eyes before,” Bo said and made it clear that was the end of the conversation.

They talked about dog breeds, dog food and dog care while the dogs romped in and around the water. Bo led David and Liz to the parking lot. They'd all parked by the tennis courts.

Rover slept all the way home, making Liz feel that special relief a dogperson feels when he or she knows his or her dog has had a good romp. The fatigue wouldn't last more than a day, but it's better than nothing. Liz

felt more at home in her body than she had since before the tampon attack, which wasn't saying much, but was better than feeling completely vacant.

\* \* \*

Those are the biggest and goofiest dogs I've ever seen. Shakti is a sweetheart, but she blocks me when I run. Gandhi thinks it's all very funny, the poophead. He plays, but only on his terms, whatever they are at the moment. They're bigger and older so they rank higher, and therefore command respect. I'm glad their Masterdog knows how to reason with them because I certainly can't. Too bad they didn't get to meet Spot. He'd have driven them crazy until they played with him. I refuse to think about the pack of hairless bipeddogs who tried to take Spot. Some bipeddogs are not worth thinking about because thinking about them makes them come back.

Usually when two dogs share a Masterdog they won't play with me. But



Judah and Rachel are so different from each other, it works out perfectly. Judah likes to chase me and Rachel likes to wrestle. Judah's legs are so short I run circles around him and I fall down every time I try to grab Rachel's neck, but all in all, we have a good time. Lucky me.

At home, I'm so tired I can barely bring myself to eat -- not really, but it sounds good. What a workout. Sebastian is crabby which is how I can tell the hurting is getting to him again. He purrs as Masterdog holds him. If she only knew how bad he was. I only know because Bob tells me. Catdogs are inscrutable.

Bob lays down next to me. He wants a conference. He tells me Sebastian is beside himself with pain, but that they have a plan. He says he can't stand watching Sebastian suffer. I ask him how I can help, but he just walks away. Catdogs are not only inscrutable, they're incredibly rude.

\* \* \*

Buzz drove Timmy and the four others back to his house. Timmy's instincts were right so far. He liked these odd folks and they liked him. In the van, they talked about how they'd have to get dogs some other way because the ones who roamed the park all had diligent owners nearby.

"Too bad Dan moved to Idaho," an orange-haired red-lipped woman said. She wore a satiny pink shirt over pink jeans that clashed with her neon hair. "The pound never missed the dogs he brought us." Timmy didn't ask her why they needed dogs. He preferred to use his imagination. He even put the pink woman in his fantasies. All of her pink deepened into red as it turned into blood, just like in his dream.

Buzz's house was in an innocuous neighborhood in North Seattle. It was small, sparse and clean. Timmy could smell the faint odor of disinfectant and cigarettes. He prepared to sit on the couch until he noticed everyone following Buzz down the stairs to the basement. The basement was in no way innocuous. It was painted in red and black.

Blue lights gave it an even eerie glow. The only piece of furniture on the red carpet was an ornately carved wooden cabinet with glass windows that revealed a collection of knives. Timmy smiled.

"My father made this cabinet," Buzz said. "He carved the images himself. Our religion is an old one, Timmy. By the time you undergo your initiation you'll get to know which images represent what."

While Buzz talked, Timmy's attention moved from the demonic figures that seemed to crawl along the cabinet to the knives inside.

"It's beautiful," he said looking at a particularly ugly knife with a jagged edge. He noticed that it sat next to others that had strange beings carved into their hilts. Timmy didn't care as much about the hilts as the blades and the sharp points at the other end.

Timmy sat on the floor with the others. It was uncomfortable but Timmy didn't mind. He was so wrapped up in his fantasies of how he could use the knives on a dog mixed

with what he and the pink woman could do together, he barely heard Buzz preaching. However, having practice from dealing with his parents, Timmy projected a look of interest, nodding periodically for effect. The pizza they ordered sent him further into his fantasy world.

"Romero's makes the best," one of the others said. Timmy put all "the others" into a single category and pretty much ignored them. Only Buzz and the pink woman held his individual attention.

Timmy liked looking at the pizza almost as much as eating it. He'd imagine the tomato sauce was blood, the cheese flesh, and the toppings could be any number of things.

Everyone else took off in their own cars just past 1 a.m. The pink woman winked at him before leaving. Her glossy red lips made his mouth water. This was the first woman Timmy found attractive in a very long time -- except for Gina, of course. And his sister.

"I told you you'd like us," Buzz said as they got into his minivan.

"I like you very much," Timmy said. He knew he'd say or do anything to get his hands on those knives, a dog and the pink woman.

"And more important, we like you," he said. Timmy could tell Buzz's analysis of him was way off, but knew this could only work to his advantage. "We'll schedule your initiation."

"My what?" Timmy asked.

"Before you can join us, you must prove yourself worthy."

"I'll do anything you ask," Timmy said. He could feel himself reel at the possibilities. It was as though he'd waited his entire life for this.

## 9. BO'S STORY

*Humans are capable of incredible cruelty and extraordinary compassion – sometimes at the same time. Dogs aren't all that different. Dogs allow these experiences to condition their way of being. Humans layer this conditioning with conscience, which complicates the way they think about or even remember their experiences.*

The day of Bo's seventh birthday party, his father was convicted of armed robbery. The jury's verdict zapped the joy out of Pin the Tail on the Donkey. Just before they left the party decorations and half eaten birthday cake to head for the courthouse to hear the judge's verdict, Papa pulled Bo aside. He told Bo he loved him but that he would have to go away for a long time. Papa removed from his index finger the ring that Bo and his big brothers had always admired, and gave it to Bo. It was both the best and worst birthday Bo ever had. Mama helped

him put the ring on a leather thong so that he could wear it always. He never saw his father again. His father was killed by another inmate. Bo's brothers, only a few years older, had also gotten special tokens from Papa, but envied their little brother.

During the first few weeks of Papa's incarceration, neighbors came from all over to help them out. Unlike his brothers, Bo enjoyed the many different kinds of food their neighbors brought them. They lived in a Seattle community of Africans, African-Americans, Sephardic Jews and various combinations. The Jewish neighbors contributed food that smelled exotic to Bo. His mother insisted they eat everything on their plates. His brothers complained loudly, Bo ate with relish.

Years later, Bo learned that Papa had been innocent and wrongfully accused, and that everyone knew, including the police. The perpetrators of the crime laughed at the joke they'd played, but never again returned to Bo's neighborhood because their father

was an attorney and threatened to ground them if they did.

Mama took over running the small store that she and her husband had built into a successful enterprise. Bo never met his aunt, but proudly wore the African printed fabrics she sent from Nairobi that Mama sewed into shirts, pants, skirts and caftans. Bo vowed he'd visit his aunt one day.

Until Papa was sent to prison, Bo's family had lived well. Papa had a good head for business and took advantage of the fact that African printed clothing was becoming popular. The store also prospered as a result of the inventive styles Mama designed and sewed. After school, Bo and his two brothers tried to help Mama run the store, but mostly they got in the way.

When Papa was gone, Mama was forced to hire a sales girl, depleting the family's income just enough to seriously restrict their spending. James, Bo's oldest brother of 16, got a job delivering baked goods for the delicatessen down the street. He liked his employers despite their strange ways and



brought home day-old breads and pastries. Robert, Bo's 13 year old brother, spent most of his time with his friends, getting stoned and planning the revolution. Bo was large for his age and very shy. He'd come straight home after school and bother Mama until she gave him something to do. Noticing Bo's ability to work well with his hands despite their size, Bo's Mama taught him to sew.

Mama turned the small retail store into a wholesale distribution outlet. She let the sales girl go and hired two seamstresses and a mail clerk to pack the clothing to send to stores all over the country. Bo's brothers, thankful for their Mama's success but anxious to prove their own worth, grew increasingly frustrated with their limited job prospects, having no desire to go to college. Mama offered them jobs, but they refused. They joined the army instead, shipped out to Iraq, never to be seen again except in body bags.

Bo loved his life at home with Mama, sewing exotic fabrics and joining up with his

fellow classmates in high school to demonstrate in the name of peace. The rationalization for the first Gulf War was to protect Kuwait , but Bo wasn't convinced any type of war made sense.

Bo had tried to transform his rage and grief against the death of his siblings into something creative and meaningful. But grief draped over him and Mama like a down jacket on a blistering hot day. Bo made a decision Mama refused to support.

Bo's friends threw him a massive going-away party. The next day he would leave for basic training, and then Iraq. Technically, because his brothers had died in the service of their country, Bo wasn't allowed to register, but he outwitted the paperwork. Mama argued but knew she couldn't win. At the party, he and his friends cried together, held each other close and danced the night away in a stoned stupor. The next morning, Mama cried, saying she knew she'd never see him again. Bo assured her that wasn't the case and left behind his childhood.

Bo had no illusions about being a soldier and kept quiet his opinion that it was a bad idea. He learned quickly how to fade into the background, despite his size. He avoided alcohol because he saw how it turned frightened boys into loud careless idiots. He avoided narcotics because it too easily made his predicament acceptable. He was miserable, but this was the life he had chosen. He wanted to believe his brothers and even his father looked down on him with pride.

Bo met Angelica in the hospital that tended his leg, injured after stepping on a land mine. He was six months into his tour of duty. Angelica wasn't an army nurse, in fact she wasn't even American. Her father had been a Russian officer who died just before Russia left Iraq. Her mother raised her in a small village in Kuwait. Like Bo, Angelica was seven years old when her father went back to Russia. Her mother refused to return. She told Bo she'd thought about going to Russia to find her father, but refocused her priorities when her

mother was killed in a car accident.

While Bo's leg healed, Angelica told him about her life as a prostitute. Her exotic yet fragile look would appeal to any man. She had dark hair and the almond-shaped eyes of her mother, but the round sensuous body and blue eyes of her father. She glowed with pride and self-assurance, having seen more horrors in her short life of 20 years than most of the soldiers. The work was dangerous in this part of the Middle East, and she only serviced men of rank. The money she made with her body was fair, the officers were quick about their business. Until she met Bert. Bert was the son off one of the officers and a virgin.

"He was so sweet, so shy and too young to be a soldier," she told Bo as she wheeled him around the hospital grounds. "He was also a large man with dark skin. You remind me of him." That explained why she spent so much time with him.

"You fell in love," he said quietly.

"Yes."

"And you had his child."

"How did you know?"

"I'm a soldier which means I'm also a romantic. What happened to Bert?" he asked, assuming the worst. She had wheeled him to cool spot under one of the few trees and although he couldn't see her because she stood behind him, he imagined she looked out on the desert with pain and longing.

"Dead," she said, her voice quivering with emotion. Bo imagined a single tear falling down her cheek. "I told his father about our relationship and Bert, Jr. He sent me a large amount of money, more than I'd ever seen before. I told them it wasn't necessary. I was prepared to continue my trade to support us."

"But he insisted," Bo continued for her, all too aware of the probable outcome. It was at this point Bo realized he and Angelica would be good friends, nothing more. He cared for this woman, but could not see a happy ending. He'd always remind her of Bert.

"I thought his father would hate me for my lifestyle, but he didn't."

"And in exchange for another tidy sum, he took home his grandson for him and his wife to raise," Bo finished for her, sensing she could not speak through the guilt that hung heavy on her heart. "And as repentance for your mixed good fortune, you volunteer here at the hospital, even though you have the means to begin a new life."

Angelica came out from behind him. She fell to her knees and buried her face in his lap, crying from somewhere very deep within herself. Bo's sympathy didn't help him maintain control over his erection, but Angelica didn't seem to notice or if she did, she ignored it.

"I have an intimate understanding of irrational guilt," said Bo. He told her all about his family and his dreams for something better. She loved listening to his stories. While he healed, they also talked about philosophy, shared books they'd read. Bo didn't want it to end.

Angelica especially liked eastern thinking. After Bo's leg healed neither assumed their friendship would end. Until his tour ended, they each found ways to see one another. Their reunions were continuations of a relationship grounded in trust and respect.

A few weeks before his tour would end, Angelica announced she was going to move to a Zen monastery in a remote region in Quebec. By this time, Bo had sustained a number of injuries, most of which he carried on the inside, rather than the outside. He'd seen too much, done too much. However, upon her announcement, he broke into tears, the first he'd shed since leaving Mama.

"I'll write you, Bo. Maybe you can come live there too."

When asked where he wished to go after finishing his time in Iraq, Bo said Montreal. He'd debated long and hard in his mind the two months following Angelica's

departure. He knew he should go home to Seattle, spend time with Mama. But Bo was not the same boy Mama had taken to the airport only two short years before. His demeanor had hardened, his rage was explosive and his soul was unsettled. Mama would have to wait until Bo could share with her the man she hoped he'd become.

Bo called Mama from the airport in Montreal. She said she understood, but Bo couldn't be sure. Years later, he learned to reconcile his guilt by asserting the notion that she was better off dying with a vision of him as he was -- a large gracious young man who was good with his hands.

His reunion with Angelica was not at all what he expected. On the bus to the monastery, he envisioned hugs and crying and possibly making love. His mind knew what his heart denied, but he seemed to have lost a large chunk of his mind in battle and refused to remember agreements they had made. Visions of her were all that kept him going his last few grueling months in Iraq. Instead, Angelica greeted him like a



friendly acquaintance. She too had reshaped their relationship into a form that suited her. Each worked hard to reach past their needs and recreate their connection. Unlike before, this time took more diligence. His heart sunk as he realized she didn't need him as much as he needed her.

Angelica's outer beauty was accentuated by an inner strength Bo had always suspected was within her grasp. During the short time she'd been at the monastery, she'd found the beginnings of the inner peace Bo so desperately craved.

"I knew you would come," she said with a knowing smile. Bo couldn't remember ever seeing her smile. It made her even more beautiful. Something in her smile pointed out a gulf between them that he didn't like. "I must seem very strange to you, I know. I'm only beginning to find out who I am outside circumstances that have conditioned my life. If I seem distant and selfish to you, it's because I am. For now, anyway."

Bo struggled with his demons during those first twelve months. In between these

battles, he meditated, studied tai chi or took long walks by himself. He didn't see much of Angelica. The priests were largely Tibetan, a few Chinese.

The second year, she frequently visited him as he sewed clothing out of the finely woven linen others wove. They sold the finished clothing to some of the same distributors to whom Mama sold clothing. He told Angelica he missed Mama and that writing her weekly and calling her monthly didn't lighten the burden of not seeing her.

News that Mama was dying determined Bo's departure from the monastery. He had no idea she had been ill. The priests reassured him that he was ready to leave, but Bo wasn't so sure. Ultimately, it didn't matter because Bo knew he had no choice. The community at the monastery gathered together to celebrate his new life. How different this going-away party was from the one thrown in his honor before he left to fight a war.

"I have something for you," Angelica said, pulling him away from the festivities. She

removed the necklace of Bert's dog tags she'd worn around her neck since before Bo met her. Without a second thought, he removed the leather thong with his father's ring from around his own neck. Their exchanging of tokens demonstrated a depth of feeling they could not otherwise share.

"Will you stay here?" he asked calmly, heart swollen with joy and grief.

"For now. I plan to visit Russia at some point. I also plan to track down my son. Not yet, but soon. I'll keep you informed."

"I'll miss you, Angelica."

"And I you. Promise me something, Bo."

"Anything."

"Promise me that if you need me or if I need you, we'll be there for one another, reach out to one another. You're the closest friend I've ever had."

"I know. You know I'll always be there for you, Angelica." Bo was confused at having to promise something he thought was understood.

"I say this because last night I had a dream -- a nightmare, actually. I don't wish

to share the details, but I can tell you that there will come a time when you will need me."

"When I do, I will reach out to you wherever you are, Angelica." Bo realized that a piece of the grief that surged up into this throat was for the death of a fantasy he'd secretly harbored about he and Angelica raising a family together. Angelica made it clear she wished to remain alone, celibate and untouchable. Bo tried to respect her wishes without feeling rejected.

Mama had died the day before Bo arrived home. Her friends treated him kindly and with a respect his guilt prevented him from accepting blindly. Fearful of their rejection, he was relieved at their lack of judgment over choices he had made.

The fact that the aunt he'd vowed to visit had died while he fought in the war was all the justification he needed to sell Mama's business. The man who'd managed it for her for years and took it over when Mama was too sick to manage it bought the business for less than he would have expected,

thanks to Bo's generosity. The money bought Bo time to figure out what he would do next.

His greatest peace still came from sewing clothing. He decorated denim with leather and found his calling in designing unusual clothing. The activity calmed him, just as it did when he and Mama worked together or during his time in Quebec. He gave away a lot of clothing to the kids in the neighborhood or sent them off to friends and relatives. He even sent an intricately patterned outfit to Angelica.

Bo lived in Mama's house. He used a chunk of the proceeds from the business to hire an architect and redesign the interior. The exterior looked like it always did, but he spared no expense in creating the inside of Mama's house to suit his needs. His tastes were simple, even stoic, as a result of his monastic life. He even converted his old bedroom into a meditation room.

Bo lived a simple life, but knew that money was running low. A few items he'd designed and had not yet given away hung in the hall closet. He didn't look forward to

working for someone else. However, the voice in his head told him to wait, take no action. His throws of the I Ching reinforced this notion, despite the anxiety that crept along the periphery of his psyche. Bo was anxious to get on with the next chapter, but trusted the voice that had saved his life more than once in the desert.

Bo's ambivalence turned into a humble acceptance and in turn, joy, the day Mr. Fineman called him. Mr. Fineman had been Mama's attorney and had also helped Bo settle her affairs and sell the business. Now he was Bo's attorney, if Bo ever needed one.

"I don't know how it got misfiled, but it did," Mr. Fineman apologized over the phone. Mama had taken out a life insurance policy. "Could \$100,000 help you out?" Mr. Fineman liked Bo. He didn't understand Bo, but then he also knew he didn't.

"Yes," was all Bo could say, shocked and surprised. When he first met him, Bo thought Mr. Fineman to be something of a shyster. Bo learned Mr. Fineman loved double talk not because he was greedy, but

because he loved language. What's more, he'd done good by Mama.

"A neighbor of yours, a Mr. Rosen, has called me about you. Have you ever met him?"

"I don't know." Bo was never very good with names. He hated to admit it, but the Orthodox Jewish men with their black suits, funny fur hats and long side burns, all looked alike.

"Would you mind if I told him to call you?"

"Not at all," Bo responded, trusting the ever illusive Mr. Fineman had something up his sleeve. The voice in his head seemed to laugh. Something about Mr. Fineman reminded him of the priests at the monastery, although he couldn't say exactly why.

A few days later, Mr. Rosen called and invited Bo to Sabbath supper. The ritual of blessing of the candles and the wine satisfied Bo's hunger for spiritual community. Basking in the warmth of the ceremony, Bo determined to find a

Buddhist temple the following week. He'd put it off for too long.

Mr. Rosen was an ancient man with fire in his eyes that shone with a shrewd intelligence. Bo hadn't recognized him, but Mr. Rosen didn't seem to mind. Mr. Rosen lived with his daughter, son-in-law and four adolescent children. Dinner was relaxed yet lively and Bo found himself arguing agreeably over points of philosophy with Mr. Rosen and his grandchildren.

After dinner, Mr. Rosen took him into his study. The house was enormous, allowing for privacy. When they sat down, Bo noticed the numbers tattooed on Mr. Rosen's arm.

"War is ugly, yes?" Mr. Rosen said watching Bo.

"Yes," Bo said, memories battling to emerge.

They talked well into the night, sharing the horrors of their lives. At first Bo was resistant, but Mr. Rosen was relentless. As Bo talked about his experiences in Iraq, he felt a knot he didn't know was tied so tight in his gut, unravel just a little bit. Mr.



Rosen's experiences in Germany as a child during the holocaust were so horrifying, Bo felt comfortable sharing his own horrors.

"What will you do with the money?" Mr. Rosen's question catapulted Bo into a new plane of thinking. He knew this technique from living at the monastery and appreciated how Mr. Rosen timed his question.

"Start my own business," he heard himself say.

"The clothes you sew, yes? I've seen them. They're very popular with the young people. I know something about the garment business. Perhaps I can help you."

"Why?" Bo asked, knowing his direct inquiry would be appreciated by Mr. Rosen.

"Because I promised your mother I would."

They talked about Mama, Bo taking in everything Mr. Rosen had to say about her last few years.

"The sun is coming up. Go home and sleep, Bo. We'll talk. Gut Shabbas."

Bo Britches was born a few months later.

Bo met Melinka around this time. She worked as a buyer for Nordstrom's. It was love at first sight. The fact that Mr. Rosen had introduced them made the commitment easier for Bo, who still periodically pined for Angelica. Letters from her told him she continued her life as a monk, traveling the world teaching Zen and Tai Chi.

Bo and Melinka conceived Bo, Jr. while honeymooning in Nairobi. Bo's aunt was long gone, but her remaining family treated him and his new wife like family. Bo and Melinka attributed the easy conception to not only the love they shared, but the love they received from Bo's relatives.

Bo never knew such joy as the day his son was born. Mr. Rosen's death that year had dampened his spirits. How proud he would have been to see Bo's beautiful baby boy.

In the years that followed, Melinka bore two daughters and Bo Britches grew into a respectable business. However, as Bo approached mid-life, restlessness threatened to destroy what he had built. In desperation,

Melinka gave Bo two Rottweiler puppies for his fifty-fifth birthday. She said he needed special time to himself and since he wouldn't take it on his own, maybe the puppies' needs for walks and discipline would force Bo to take the time.

As always, she was right. At first he worried that puppy duty would diminish his ties to his family. But Thandaika was away at graduate school, Jana studied at the University of Washington and Bo, Jr. said he saw enough of his dad at work. Bo, Jr. would do good by Bo Britches one day. Melinka patiently waited for Bo to discover that dog-raising was something he had to do by himself, for himself and for his dogs.

Bo's daily disappearances served to enhance the quality of time he spent with his family. He liked regaling them with stories of his dogwalking adventures and the other dogpeople he met.

\* \* \*

Shakti and Gandhi grew up together on a puppydog ranch not unlike where Judah

and Rachel grew up. On the ranch, they could run and play to their hearts' content. Lucky dogs. Jail is no place for a good dog.

Shakti and Gandhi say they live like bipeddogs. They have their own room, a big soft bed off the ground and they eat bipeddog food mixed with crunchies. I tell Bob how lucky I think they are and he thinks it's funny because he lives like that most of the time, plus he gets his own poopbox inside so he doesn't have to go out in the wet.

Shakti and Gandhi are nice, but also claim they're not very social. That's not completely true, but they are so family pack-oriented I don't argue. Besides, even if they are big and smug, I feel them to be an important part of my life. Bob agrees, although he won't tell me why. Typical.

For some reason, whenever Shakti and Gandhi are around, I feel safe. They tell me it's their job to guard the door, whatever that is. For some reason, I know that on the other side of the door is danger. Sometimes I sense something on the other

side of the door wants to enter my world and hurt me, but Shakti and Gandhi won't let them through. Lucky me.

Maybe Shakti and Gandhi are only part dog. Maybe that's why they seem so dense. It's not like they're stupid, they're not. But their singularity of purpose reminds me of Zeus, who obsesses over his ball. Whatever they are, I'm glad they're on my side. If they're around, I run faster and play harder.

\* \* \*

"What are you so happy about," Mummy said to Timmy as she spooned out the savory smelling soup. Timmy might not like the company or the conversation, but the food was always terrific. If only Mummy had spent her precious few hours away from her social duties or internet chatting on childrearing rather than gourmet cooking, maybe he wouldn't have to punish her by becoming a failure. "You look like the cat that caught the canary."

"That's ate the canary, dear." Daddy said. Timmy was surprised to see him. Usually he ate in his garage, surrounded by a fleet of fine automobiles he was committed to maintaining all by himself.

"There's a girl I like," Timmy said. Ashley looked surprised. Timmy hoped she'd be jealous but she looked genuinely happy for him. He blushed at her attention and wondered if she knew how much she affected him.

"Are you so ashamed of us you won't bring her home?" Mummy asked as she lay platters of roast beef and scalloped potatoes on the linen tablecloth. Timmy blushed again and this time Mummy noticed. "Oh, I see. It's still new. You haven't gotten past the endocrine imbalance stage."

"You'd better be using condoms," Dada said. "If you're not, you're an idiot."

Timmy said nothing and they silently indulged in the rich delights before them. Timmy enjoyed these quiet moments that resembled what he imagined was normal family life. A piece of him deep inside wanted

desperately to live that normal life. However, to allow this need to surface also meant suffering a longing he could in no way manage.

Timmy refused to take responsibility for his nutty family, because he knew it wasn't his fault. Instead, he shoved his unmet needs down deep into his psyche where they morphed into a seething hatred. At least hatred was real.

He was beginning to think he was better off focusing his need for something resembling family on Buzz, the group and the woman in pink. At least they liked him. Buzz didn't continually criticize or negotiate for power and control as a way of showing love. Buzz didn't shame him with his inadequacy or roll his eyes at everything he said. Best of all, Buzz didn't talk down to Timmy with pity and disdain, a prerequisite for being included in his biological family.

Too bad Ashley couldn't be part of his new family. He could prove to her he was worthy of her respect. Not that she'd understand. She was too preoccupied with

manipulating wealthy married men to comprehend something as silly as the power of belief. It was her tough luck that she didn't have an initiation to look forward to like he did. On Halloween he would enjoy the intimacy of family he previously only experienced in fleeting fantasies. The waiting was difficult but the anticipation and preparation were divine. Screw his biological family. Tonight he was taking home his last batch of clean laundry and gourmet leftovers.



## 10. COSTUME BUILDING

*Chemicals in the body collect the emotion of memories and can explode with the feelings at seemingly inappropriate times. For humans, when these aberrations are recognized and resolved, the chemical compounds created can change. If not, the body builds fortresses to withstand reason, logic or even sanity. The result is resistance which can have a life of its own within the human body.*

Masterdog takes Sebastian away in the tin can. I ask Bob if we'll ever see him again. He stares at me like I'm an idiot. I hate it when he does that, but at least I learn that Sebastian will come home.

When Sebastian does return he's his old pain-free self again. He even plays tag with Bob. They haven't done that for a long time. Happy that they're happy, I try to join the game, but Sebastian actually hisses and runs away. And here I thought we were

becoming friends. Bob sneers at me so I go onto the big bed and lie down.

Sebastian sees me pouting and sits beside me to groom himself. He tells me not stop being so sensitive. What a guy. Since he's in a talkative mood, I ask him if he's talked to the bipeddog-with-no-smell. He says he has but tells me nothing more. He also says he couldn't respond to Bob either when he asked him the same question because something prevented him from doing so.

I ask Bob and he tells me to forget about it and give Sebastian a break. I can see he's happy that Sebastian is back, unlike Masterdog who still feels like she's missing pieces of herself. I want to know more, but Bob runs after Sebastian instead. Catdog priorities are a mystery.

\* \* \*

Liz took Sebastian to the vet. His breath was beyond tolerable and his mouth seemed to hurt so much he wouldn't eat. He wasn't

Liz's 18 pound bully anymore, and she was worried.

Liz had a crush on her vet. Even after I meet the man of my dreams, I'll have a crush on him, she thought. He was always so kind and caring with animals and their owners. Liz figured half his female clients took their pets in just to have him coo over them. Liz might have done that herself except that he charged too much and she knew that he was gay.

Liz couldn't believe his diagnosis. Sebastian had FIV, which meant cats could get AIDS. The vet said there were two kinds of FIV. One was not unlike HIV, and meant AIDS would eventually follow with a slow depletion of the immune system and certain death. The other kind resulted in chronic gingivitis. The vet diagnosed Sebastian with the latter. What a relief. Liz spent the last of her savings on getting his teeth clean. It didn't look like she was going to be able to buy that nice set of pots she saw at the kitchen store that she hoped would encourage her to cook at home more often.

She was even going to add a chunk of her next pay check and do it right. Oh well, I hate cooking, anyway, she thought.

Following his teeth cleaning, Sebastian was a new cat. Liz sat in her ancient tattered but comfy overstuffed chair and watched the cats play. They scampered from one room to the next, chasing the unimaginable. Rover liked the running part and tried to join in. Sebastian hissed and ran away. Rover sat there with a very confused look on her face and jumped onto the bed. Sebastian joined her and started licking his genitals. Liz could hear Bob thrashing an empty paper bag in the kitchen before challenging Sebastian again.

Moments like these were very precious to Liz. Liz had grown up around people who were always doing things. Her parents kept their house filled with people, mostly intellectuals and artists her mother collected. This meant the house had to be pristine at all times. Liz hid in her messy yet comfy room not because she didn't like her parents' friends, but because she could only

take so much stimulation. Liz felt better amongst her piles of dirty clothes and half-completed projects.

When she did hang out with her parents' friends, it wouldn't take long before she felt like her brain was going to explode. They had strong opinions on every little thing. In her room, she felt less over-stimulated, but longed for a sense of connectedness. She tried joining the crowd by fading into the background to observe the interactions between these people. This rarely worked. These were the chronically curious who wanted to know everything about everyone so they could give unsolicited advice. Her mother claimed it was because they were all doing different therapies. Gatherings were an opportunity to see who was the most healthy and able psychologically, sociologically or astrologically. Helpless children such as herself didn't have a chance, making great test subjects. Liz wished they hadn't found her to be so interesting. She imagined what Skinner's

daughter must have felt like, not that she was exactly raised in a cage.

Liz rarely invited people to her garage slash studio slash home. It was her sanctuary, her place of work, her private space. Despite her ability to be anally retentive at work, despite her perfectionist tendencies, she was a slob. Messes from her studio kept spilling over into her living space. She hated the sound of the vacuum cleaner as much as the animals. No way her messy excuse of a home could compare to the clean welcoming environment of her parents.

Animals don't care about messes because they like the familiar smell, Liz thought. They don't pass judgment or get critical as long as they are loved. As Bob and Sebastian groomed each other and Rover snuffled her armpit, Liz felt like she had come home. She had that wonderful sense of connectedness without the over-stimulation. If each member of society was required to cohabitate with another species, we'd all get along better, I just know it, Liz thought.

Parts of her were still circling around the ethers, but those parts that lived in her body actually felt at peace and satisfied.

\* \* \*

Bipeddogs do things that are beyond my comprehension. And that's not including all things they do with all those strange plastic or metal things they use to get through the day. But for the life of me, I can't figure out why Masterdog puts blankets, plastic and pieces of trees on me, her canine companion. She and Johndog spend a great deal of time attaching stuff to my body. The first time they dress me up, I shake the crap off with no problem. The second time, I can't seem to get it off of me. I try scratching, rolling, rubbing up against the wall. Nothing works. Finally, I lay down in the middle of the rug. Bob and Sebastian make fun of me, the scumdogs, while Masterdog and Johndog make cheering sounds. They keep singing praises, but I'm too miserable to care.

At the park, I don't even pretend to be happy. I can still feel alien objects covering my body. The bows in the hair of a small dog remind me of that thing I had to wear. I snap at the submissive little squeakerdog who tries to sniff my butt. Both his Masterdog and mine yell at me, but I could care less. I hear Masterdog singing apologies to the other Masterdog. What a waste of song.

I eat my chow and go to bed before Masterdog dresses me up again. Bob and Sebastian rub up against me the way I like to be rubbed. They even let me lick their butts. Lucky me. Bob tells me the thing they put on me makes me look stupid. I yawn in his face.

The next morning I stay in bed after Masterdog gets up just in case she wants to dress me up. I hear her singing angrily at Bob and Sebastian. Curious, I go into the big room to see what's happening. Sometime during the night, Bob and Sebastian had attacked the thing. I am thankful even if they didn't do very much damage. Masterdog puts the thing in one of the small rooms



where she hangs her own blankets and shuts the door.

Bob flicks his tail at her. If Masterdog only knew what horrible things catdogs can say with their tails. I wag my tail happily. I figure Masterdog has decided that she will wear the thing instead of me.

\* \* \*

Every year, just before the freeze, Liz performed genocide. Flea genocide. She loathed and despised those hearty little pieces of insect.

Luckily neither Bob or Rover were allergic. She usually had to take Sebastian to the vet once or twice each summer for a special treatment. Without the treatment he licked himself until his butt was hairless and covered in scabs. If he got too bad he had to get a shot of steroids which meant he drank twice the water, ate like it was his last meal, peed like a fountain and got even more crabby and testy. He'd also race from room to room all night long with nervous energy.

Liz scrubbed her little house as clean as she could get it. Before leaving for the park, she locked the cats outside and flea bombed the house. She hoped this would work the first time, but was prepared to do it a second time. When they got back from the park, she loaded the sprayer with this biological warfare stuff she got from the vet that supposedly contained a parasite that eats fleas. She hooked up the hose and saturated the yard. Bob shook a foot with disdain, spiteful of the imposed stinky wet, before entering the house.

The air was relatively clear except for the faint stench of chemicals. At least the house was clean, even though that wouldn't last. She filled the bathtub with a little bit of warm water. Kitties first.

Sebastian endured his bath. Liz knew he hated it, but he was such a good guy, he pretended it didn't bother him. Wet, he still looked like a large cat. She toweled off as much moisture as she could and set him free. She put on old leather gloves to bathe Bob. He was a lunatic in water. He'd claw

her hand off if he could. The worst part was holding him for five minutes while the flea shampoo soaked in. His eyes were so full of hatred Liz refused to even look at him. Finally, wiped down, he leapt to freedom. Unlike Sebastian, Bob looked like a wet rodent. Rover licked him in passing. Bob didn't even hiss.

Liz drained the tub, and took off her clothes. The cats got baths, she and Rover got a shower. Rover stood very still in the spray while Liz soaped her up, turned off the shower and talked to her while the shampoo did its thing. Unlike the cats, Rover looked worried, the wrinkles above her eyes creased in concern.

She shook before Liz could cover her with a towel, sending water all over the bathroom. Liz used three or four towels to clean up after an all animal wash. That's the price of flealessness, Liz thought, hooray for genocide.

\* \* \*

We're all wet and none of us smells like ourselves. Bob and Sebastian lick like crazy. I do too, except that unlike them, I know that it's only a matter of time before we'll smell like ourselves again. I try to remind Bob, but he doesn't want to remember, or else he can't.

The entire house is without the old smells. In fact, the smells that have replaced the old ones don't smell very good at all. The first time Masterdog did this to the big doghouse, I got so scared I wouldn't come inside. I didn't think I belonged in the house any more. But now I know better. At least she doesn't do it to the small doghouse, even if she wets everything with stinky stuff.

I don't sleep as well without all the familiar smells. My nose wakes me up. My only consolation is that both Bob and Sebastian feel as weird as I do. Someday I'll find a way to ask Masterdog why she corrupts our home with smells that don't belong.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Liz dragged herself out of bed after a night full of images best forgotten. She'd dutifully gotten up early and sketched for a few hours before conking out again. It was Sunday, her house was clean and she welcomed the opportunity for some quality time with Rover at Sandpoint.

Bo and his two giant Rotties jumped out of his truck just as she drove into the parking lot. Shakti, Gandhi and Rover greeted each other like long lost friends. As they walked, Liz told Bo about the encounter she'd had earlier in the week with the miniature poodle with a jacket and its owner with the miniature brain. Nothing she could say or do would remedy that situation. Her rage and guilt were still close to the surface days later and it showed as she recounted the ugly exchange. Bo listened intently, aahing at the right moments. By the time she finished, Liz felt a lot better.

Bo was inspired to tell Liz about an awkward encounter he'd had the night

before with his neighbor who complained his dogs trampled the flowers in her yard.

"I tried to tell her it couldn't have been Shakti and Gandhi because I never let them out unsupervised and that someone had trampled through my bed of marigolds as well. She didn't believe me. Even when I showed her, she said it was my own fault for owning two large dogs."

"What a bitch," Liz said without thinking first.

"Our neighborhood used to be a lot quieter. But in the last few years, the kids have gotten angrier and meaner. Their way of rebelling is to get violent and destructive."

"Where do you live?" Liz expected him to say the Central District or Beacon Hill.

"Laurelhurst," he said with a knowing smile.

Laurelhurst was one of the more wealthy neighborhoods in Seattle. Liz was not at all proud of her assumptions. "What do you do for a living?" she asked, revealing her unwillingness to believe that he could live in such a neighborhood. Bo laughed. Gandhi

barked at his laugh. Liz watched Rover try to get Shakti to run, hoping Bo would ignore what he might consider an intrusive question.

"You're wearing what I do," he said.

Rover gave up challenging Shakti to sniff the ground intently. Something dead or dying must have been close by. Liz quickly inventoried her attire. She wore an unknown brand of rubber boots, an old sweatshirt from the University of California, Berkeley, a ragged pair of leather embroidered designer jeans she'd gotten at a thrift store and a jacket her mother bought her out of an Eddie Bauer catalog.

"Your real name is Eddie Bauer?" Liz asked. Before he could answer, she noticed Rover had done her business in the middle of the trail. She dutifully pulled a plastic bag out of her fanny pack to pick it up. As she bent down, her well-worn jeans ripped at the knees. She swore as she knotted the plastic bag.

"Those jeans are currently our best sellers, although we've stopped selling the

pre-torn ones. Consider yourself fashionable," Bo said.

Liz glanced at the label sewn into the seam on the left thigh. "You're Bo Britches?"

"In the flesh."

"Wow," she said without looking at him. Now that Rover had relieved her bowels, she challenged Shakti with greater tenacity. This time Shakti obliged, but as they ran she got side-tracked by smells that interested her. Rover tried challenging Gandhi, but he either didn't understand or he didn't care. Liz suspected the latter. Rover ran around in circles anyway.

"My mother taught me how to sew. My brothers refused to learn, but I find it soothing. When I was in Iraq I was known as the Patchman. I sewed patches over bullet holes. Now I make sure jeans have enough patched of embroidery made of leather to make them cool. Times change."

"You fought in Iraq?"

"Two fun-filled years."

"Wow." Liz remembered with discomfort how the country rallied in favor of the invasion. Her parents didn't, so she didn't.



Hers was not a popular opinion, but at the time, she didn't care. Her even stronger opinions about weapons of mass destruction in the second Gulf War seemed even more absurd. She believed the invasion was a distraction for being clueless about how the events of 9/11 occurred. No, like her parents, she was against war. "Why did you go?"

"I didn't know any better."

"My Dad didn't go."

"He didn't miss anything. My big brothers went, so I did too. We wanted to be good Americans. I'm the only one who made it back into the world. The whole thing tore me apart. I couldn't even come home and face Mama after I was discharged."

Liz didn't say anything for fear she had triggered memories best forgotten. They walked in silence. Bo wasn't the first Gulf War vet she'd met, but he was the only one who talked sense. Most of the others either brushed it off or lived on the streets. She was honored that Bo even mentioned it.

Bo and Liz were so lost in their own thoughts when they noticed the elderly pair

with an obese beagle on a leash. Shakti, Gandhi and Rover surrounded them. Liz was surprised that Rover played her bark-and-run game. She usually reserved that game for people without dogs.

"Get away," the man yelled. The woman clutched frantically at the leash as the beagle bayed protectively. Rover thought it was all a game. Bo called his dogs and they came running to his side. The man picked up a stick and swung it at Rover, barely missing her head.

"Stop that," Liz yelled. "If you want to hit someone with that stick, hit me."

"I'll kill your dog if you don't put her on a leash." Rover ran out of range.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Liz didn't hear the answer because the three of them simultaneously yelled at each other at the top of our lungs. Bo's dogs heeled on either side of him. He ignored the shouting match and waited quietly. The man lifted his stick and as he swung it towards Shakti's head, Bo grabbed it.

"With all the violence around us, is this really necessary?" he said in a tight hushed voice.

"You're the ones doing the violence," the man shouted at Bo's skin.

Bo threw the stick away. Rover went after it. Shakti and Gandhi stood as still as Bo, staring at the man.

"I'm sorry we frighten you," Bo said calmly.

"These dogs should be on leashes outside the official dogpark," sneered the woman. "It's the law. Don't you believe in obeying the law?"

Before Liz could snap back, Bo looked at her and motioned to move on. She followed obediently. The couple continued grumbling about lawlessness, but their tone had changed to something more defensive and fearful.

"I hate people like that," Liz said through gritted teeth as Rover dropped the stick in front of her, tail wagging. With stick in hand, Liz looked over her shoulder.

"Leave it," Bo commanded. How did he know I wanted to throw the stick at the couple, Liz thought.

"Well my day's ruined," Liz said, throwing the stick in the field for Rover to retrieve.

"You're angry," Bo remarked.

"Aren't you?"

He sighed. "I'm irritated and annoyed but even that's subsiding. They were frightened, that's all."

"That guy could have hurt Shakti."

"Her head's so thick that even if I hadn't grabbed the stick, it probably wouldn't have hurt her."

"People like that make me so mad."

"I'd hate to be the object of your rage, Liz," he said, gently patting her back. "Relax. Rover is safe now, although I suspect she'd take good care of herself and you if confronted by a real threat. She'd do anything to protect you, you know."

Something in his deep voice stripped Liz of her anger, replacing it with tears. Bo kept his large hand on her back as she cried silently. Liz didn't even notice Rover had

dropped the stick in favor of chasing Spot, the little Jack Russell, who ran circles around the two Rottweilers.

"You might want to watch out for an older couple with a fat beagle on a leash," Liz heard Bo tell Spot's owner.

"Are you all right?" The lawyer asked the weeping Liz.

"He threatened Rover. He said he would kill her," Liz gasped.

"Did anyone get hurt?" Spot's owner asked.

"Not physically," Bo answered, rubbing her back.

"Good. Thanks for the warning. If anyone did get hurt, those of us with our dogs off leash could be liable."

"Rover gets especially nasty with dogs on leashes," said Liz. "I was scared she'd do something to that man, the way he was waving that stick."

"Rover can handle herself," Bo said.

"It's best to just stay away from people like that," the lawyer asserted. "Again, thanks for the warning."

"Are you going to be okay?" Bo asked. Liz hadn't even noticed he'd led them back to their vehicles. Rover licked her hand.

"I guess," she said. "It's just that they were dogpeople. They should have known better."

"I know. But they were also older and fearful for their safety. Let it go. It won't be the last time this happens."

"Nor is it the first," Liz said. "Sorry to be such a crybaby. I haven't been myself lately."

"Then who have you been?" Bo gave her shoulder a squeeze before loading Shakti and Gandhi into his truck. Rover panted happily in the back seat of Liz's car.

"See you at the Halloween party?" Liz asked Bo as he got into his car.

"It'll be a dog party to remember. Wait until you see Shakti and Gandhi in their costumes."

Liz cried all the way home. Either she was saddened by the sorry state of humanity or she was feeling sorry for herself. She opted for the former.

\* \* \*

Bipeddog fights are bizarre. All that loud singing. Masterdog may be my Masterdog, but Bodog is top dog. Shakti and Gandhi are proud of him and who can blame them? I like the way Bodog sings to Masterdog. Doesn't she know those two bipeddogs and their dog on a rope are submissive? They might not sing so, but their bodies say it all. That doesn't mean they're not dangerous. If Bodog hadn't grabbed the stick, I would have had to do something. Shakti is my friend.

Masterdog cries like a babydog all the way home. At least she's not mad or scared any more. Her sadness makes me sad. I tell Bob what happened and he actually listens. He tells Sebastian something I don't understand. Sebastian goes to Masterdog and meows until she holds him. I can hear him purring from across the room. Bob tells me I don't have to be sad any more. Sebastian will take in Masterdog's sadness. I flop onto my bed and go to sleep.

I wake up to the sound of Masterdog putting chow into my bowl. I'd know that sound anywhere. I lick her hand and she scratches my back until my leg shakes with joy. Her sadness is gone, thanks to Sebastian. I kiss his nose on my way outside to eat my chow. He twitches, but I can tell he appreciates the thanks.

\* \* \*

Liz made her way through the week and celebrated with what ended up being a near perfect dog walk. At home, she sipped a latte and stared out the window at nothing in particular. I thought basenjis were fast, but that whippet, Adagio, was superdog, she thought. Adagio and Rover had become instant friends. When Adagio ran, not even Puck, Nina's basenji, could keep up. Liz had been afraid Rover or one of the other dogs might hurt Adagio, he looked so thin and frail. But once he started running, her fears had been relieved. She couldn't tell from which Asian country his owner was from



until the woman introduced herself as Sookie and said she was originally from Korea. Her English was almost perfect and it was easy to see she was a very intelligent woman. When she said she still felt out of place in American society even after having been here for over fifteen years, Liz suggested the dogpeople subculture might help her feel like there was some place where she belonged.

David and Liz were single and childless except for their dogs and cats. Nina was in a relationship, but had no kids. Therefore, while Sookie and Bo had talked about their children, the rest of them spent more time listening than talking. Liz was glad to hear Bo had kids and figured they'd grow up to be exceptional like their dad. When Sookie had told Bo about her teen-aged children, Liz figured she must be Nina's age, forty-something.

Had Liz known what was to come as she stared out the window, she might have paid closer attention to that particular dog walk. Later she would note that it served as the

beginning of the Masterpack. It was more than community, but not quite family. Liz had become comfortable with the changing packs of dogs and dogpeople for so long, at the time, it didn't occur to her something special had clicked into place. After all, perfect moments come and go. Even when she'd seen the Animal Control guy, truckless once again, wave at her as they all had caravanned out of the park, the magic of that encounter eluded her until much later.

\* \* \*

At my favorite park, I jump out of the large tin can and Puck, that catdog-like dog, greets us. He's so cool. We run and run until I poke him so he rolls over in the grass. He doesn't care. He just gets up and runs some more. Judah and Rachel join us on our way to the lake. The other Masterdogs sing to each other while we run in and out of the bushes, Puck in the lead, Judah taking short cuts and Rachel woofing.

At the lake, we meet a new dog. His Masterdog calls him Adagio. He's nowhere as big as me, but he's also very skinny. He can't seem to decide if he's dominant or not. I let him know he's not. For some reason, Masterdog doesn't even yell at me. Adagio decides to follow me around no matter where I go. He's much younger, practically a babydog, but not annoying like a babydog, so I let him.

I dive into the lake and he follows me. On shore, I can hear the Masterdogs cheering. This is the first time Adagio has ever gone swimming. Because of his long legs and tiny body, his dogpaddle is awkward, but he holds his own. We get out of the water and shake. I like to shake next to the bipeddogs so they can share in my joy of swimming. I know they don't like it because they always squeal like babydogs, but I keep trying.

We walk up the hill and see Shakti and Gandhi wandering around. Adagio and Puck look at me. Space cadets, but nice, I say with my eyes and a twitch. We run and play for a very long. The only reason I know it is a

long time is because by the time I get into the large tin can, I'm pooped. That Adagio can run faster than any other dog I've ever met.

I'm not only tired, I feel a great sense of satisfaction. It reminds me of how I felt during those first few weeks after I was born, whenever that was. Masterdog and I both feel this same way after our walk. I can tell by the way she smells.

Packs are easily made, but it is rare to participate in a Masterpack. And that's what we are building: me and Masterdog; those two squat-dogs, Judah and Rachel, and their Masterdog, Daviddog; Puck, the catdog-like dog and his Masterdog, Ninadog; Adagio, the fastest dog I've ever known and his Masterdog, Sookiedog; Shakti and Gandhi, the large goofdogs and our topdog, Bodog. At least I think he's topdog. Bipeddogs are inconsistent so determining rank is no easy trick. However, I do know that together we are a Masterpack.

I tell Bob about the Masterpack when I get home. He says he already knows all

about the Masterpack and that something important is taking shape, whatever that means. He says the Masterpack has a purpose. I ask him to tell me more, but he ignores me.

Masterdog rubs me dry with a blanket. It feels good. After I eat, Masterdog opens the door to the small room where she hangs her costumes. She pulls out that costume she and Johndog put on me. And here I thought I'd had the perfect day.

\* \* \*

“Got it?”

“Sure.”

“Some of it may seem silly to you, but do it anyway, Timmy.” Timmy knew he'd do everything the way Buzz had told him. He was good at following directions. “Some of what we'll do has nothing to do directly with your initiation, but serves as a way of helping you prepare your mind and soul.”

“Whatever,” Timmy said into the phone. Buzz had called him just before he went off shift.

“Whatever doesn’t cut it, Timmy.” Buzz was beginning to sound like Daddy. “Once you’ve gone through your initiation, you’ll see why it’s so important that you attend to every detail. I know you think I’m acting like some tyrannical dictator, but we’ve all gone through this. It’ll pay off. Do you understand?”

“I \_\_\_\_\_ guess.”  
“I can tell that you don’t. That’s okay, Timmy, you don’t have to understand. I’m pretty good at picking initiates and I’m sure you’ll do what you’re told to do.” Before Timmy could agree, Buzz hung up. He had mixed feelings about the phone call -- he hadn’t planned on sounding so resistant. Years of rebelling against his parents had trained him not to show too much enthusiasm or cooperation. Buzz seemed to understand.

He reread the list of tasks he would perform on Halloween night, the night before

his initiation. It was pretty damn weird, but if it meant getting closer to those knives and playing with blood, what did he care?

Timmy collected the corpses of the bugs he'd killed and put them into the trash can, covering them with a piece of paper. The day manager would freak if he knew what Timmy did all night.

“Timmyboy.” His employer signaled him from the doorway to the stairs that led down to the laundry room. Timmy wasn't quite in the mood for it, but was too tired to argue. Besides, a little pain might inspire him to get in the spirit of his initiation.

“Quiet night, Tim?” The day manager carried with him two bags of take-out and junk food. The usual. Timmy ignored him as usual and followed his employer downstairs.

## 11. SOOKIE'S STORY

*If it wasn't for the incredible interface understood as music, humans would have killed each other off a very long time ago. Music can tame the beast within, provoke the rage without and everything in between for both the individual and the collective.*

Sookie was born Jung-Sook. She was led to believe she was born in a suburb of Seoul, Korea, but then she was also led to believe her mother was capable of bearing children. Kwang-Deok, her father and a wealthy minister in the South Korean government, made sure only the family doctor and a few trusted servants knew that Sookie's biological mother was Sun-Yee, a sweet young orphan girl he brought into the house as a "companion" for his wife. He loved Jung-Ja, his beautiful yet fragile wife. He especially loved the way she told stories. Jung-Ja could create a bubble of illusion around herself and whoever listened,



convincing them she spoke only truth. He would have done anything to please her. However, the only thing his wife really wanted was a child.

During the nine months of Sun-Yee's pregnancy, Kwang-Deok sent her and Jung-Ja to their summer house in Pusan. Jung-Ja despaired when soon after Sookie's birth, her husband sent Sun-Yee away. She never asked to where, too thankful for the child Sun-Yee left behind. Nor did she know that her husband maintained contact with Sun-Yee, sending her letters and photographs of Sookie's childhood. Jung-Ja promised her husband that the truth of Sookie's birth would never be spoken aloud to anyone. This was a major feat for Jung-Ja because despite her storytelling abilities, secrets and lies were contrary to her nature.

Sookie's childhood, like that of other wealthy government ministers' children, was one of protected joy and satisfaction. At least that was how it appeared to others, thanks to Kwang-Deok.

Like a cancer, the secret of Sookie's birth built inroads into Jung-Ja's precarious sanity. At least that was what Kwang-Deok told himself, too frightened to admit that his wife's creativity and peculiar behavior was the result of mental illness. When rested and calm, Jung-Ja carried herself with the dignity of her station and was able to spend short amounts of time in public. However, when tired or stressed from performing her duties as wife and mother, her behavior went from one extreme to another. Her doctor prescribed calming and stimulating herbs and medications as needed, but Jung-Ja refused to take them.

The household got used to Jung-Ja's tantrums, her crying fits, her manic need to clean, and her many other idiosyncratic behaviors. Whenever it looked like Jung-Ja might reveal the family secret, her husband locked her up in a small room in the attic where her words could only be heard by the mice in the walls.

"Your mother is a good woman, Sookie. She's a highly spiritual and creative being.

But she is not well, as you can see," he told his infant daughter. He imagined she understood.

Unlike her mother, Sookie grew tall and thick. She did not have her mother's grace or beauty. Sookie tried hard to emulate the fluid movements of her mother, but tended to be clumsy and often knocked things over.

"My poor little baby," her mother said after the four year old Sookie knocked over her father's favorite vase. "So like your mother, you are." Fearful she could send her mother into a fit, Sookie kept her confusion of this comment to herself.

For her fifth birthday, her mother gave Sookie a flute. Her father smiled politely at Sookie's attempts at making music. One morning he found Jung-Ja crying and watched little Sookie try to calm her. Sookie tried everything, but her mother continued weeping uncontrollably. In desperation, Sookie grabbed the flute. To everyone's surprise, she made a melodic sound. Jung-Ja ceased crying, looking around for the source of the sound. Sookie blew another

note on the flute and watched as her mother clapped her hands with glee.

"That's the most beautiful sound I've ever heard. Play more, little one." Fearful her mother's mood would change, Sookie struggled and succeeded in making the flute sing.

From that time on, whenever Sookie sensed her mother getting overly emotional, Sookie played her flute. The household, including her father, rejoiced at Sookie's emerging talent as notes became songs and Jung-Ja's extreme behavior centralized into something resembling normal.

Relieved and satisfied that his daughter showed the same kind of dedication to music as he had for his own work, Kwang-Deok enrolled her in a private school that focused on music. Sookie loved learning and embraced her education with the same fervor she embraced her music.

General Desmond, an American who Kwang-Deok had befriended after the war against North Korea, gave Sookie a tape recorder for her 10th birthday. Sookie taped

her music so that her mother could play it while Sookie was at school or out playing with her friends. So as not to be out done by his old friend, Sookie's father gave her a pair of dogs, two tall lanky whippet pups. Sookie named them Melody and Harmony. She and her friends took them for long walks on the grounds. The puppies thrived in Sookie's presence, even if her mother looked upon them with disdain.

One day, a year after she'd adopted her pups, Sookie returned from school and could not find Melody and Harmony anywhere.

"Where are my dogs, mother?" she asked, trying to squelch the fear behind her words.

"They were crying for you. They mustn't do that. So I had to punish them," Jung-Ja said firmly.

"What did you do to them, mother?" Sookie held her panic in check. Her mother may be crazy, but she wasn't stupid.

"I haven't hurt your precious puppies. I merely punished them."

"Where are they?"

"Is something wrong?" Kwang-Deok said as he entered his home.

"Mother has punished Melody and Harmony but she won't tell me where they are," Sookie gasped, no longer able to hide her fear.

"Come with me," he said to Sookie. She followed him up to the tiny attic . Sookie had never been allowed to enter this mysterious room. He opened the door, and Melody and Harmony leaped to her, licking her face. The floor of the room was covered with new and old urine stains and dry excrement. Evidently, Jung-Ja had been punishing the dogs periodically for a long time. Kwang-Deok had the room cleaned and boarded up. Jung-Ja never mentioned the room or punishment again. She also ceased telling stories. Secretly, Sookie was relieved. Her mother's stories had gotten strange and disjointed. But Jung-Ja's silence permeated the house and made everyone even more uneasy.

Unable to take the silence, Sookie played the flute for her mother, hoping to draw her

out again. Jung-Ja remained silent. Sookie could see her father shake his head with concern for his wife's well being. Kwang-Deok overheard a few maids talking about how the church had healed someone's grandson. He wasn't a great fan of organized religion, but assumed that it could do no harm. Even if God didn't heal her, at least he'd get her out of the house for a while.

Without Sookie's assistance, Kwang-Deok would never have been able to talk Jung-Ja into going. Sookie convinced Jung-Ja that the music alone would brighten her spirits.

"How was it?" Kwang-Deok asked, noting Sookie's frown and Jung-Ja's manic glee upon their return.

"Wonderful. You should have come with us, but then again, I doubt you would have liked it very much. You're much too rigid. As you can see, the priest healed my voice. I can speak again. He has the touch of the Lord. Isn't that right, Sookie?" Jung-Ja continued without noticing her daughter's rolling eyes. "The priest invokes God so you can feel Him. Did you notice that nice

woman next to me? She seemed so quiet, so shy, and then in the middle of the sermon, she jumped up and started speaking in a language I've never heard before. I could feel the Lord working through her, even if I didn't understand a word of what she said. What a glorious service. Maybe next time the Lord will speak through me."

Sookie was relieved to see the disapproval on her father's face. Jung-Ja didn't notice.

Jung-Ja's voice came back, but her words were only for Jesus and the words she read from the tattered bible she carried with her everywhere. Her mother's new spiritual life left Sookie more time for her friends, the dogs, and most importantly, her music. However, Jung-Ja insisted Sookie attend services with her every Sunday.

Sookie hated church, but it was a small price to pay if it meant pleasing both her parents. The priest encouraged her to play her flute at services, but Sookie declined.

"I can't seem to pray and play the flute at the same time," she told the priest. To her



friends she said: "I wouldn't be caught dead sharing that which I hold most dear with a bunch of religious nuts".

Like all her friends, Sookie studied frantically for her college entrance exam. Whenever she walked Melody and Harmony, she took a book with her. And her flute. Like her mother, music was the only thing that could soothe her anxieties. Her entire future depended on these exams and she wanted to do well.

Ecstatic at the results, Sookie attended an exclusive college that catered to the musically inclined. Kwang-Deok had expected nothing less. The hardest part was leaving her dogs. Fortunately, their new gardener loved dogs and she knew they'd be okay. Sookie's teachers encouraged her to play the flute at special faculty events, honoring her talent and her hard work. She also learned English, a language she found made her mouth sore, but helped her make new sounds on the flute.

When Sookie graduated from college having not even had one boyfriend, it became quite apparent that her looks would not attract an appropriate husband. Sookie more resembled her biological mother -- sturdy, strong, angular but without grace and beauty. Only when she played the flute did Sookie's presentation soften.

"I guess my body knows I don't want anyone to recognize me as Jung-Ja's daughter," she told her friends. Her words had gotten more strident and angry as each of her friends got married. She knew they were concerned for her. She was concerned for herself, too.

One night, her father brought home Sok-Joon, his latest assistant. Sok-Joon was short, stocky and laughed a little too loudly. However, he did seem to like it when she played the flute. Sookie knew she had little choice but to learn to like this young man.

Sookie and Sok-Joon were married a month later in a small chapel. Jung-Ja had won the struggle with her husband, and the

priest of her church performed the small wedding. Fearful that her mother's congregation would start wailing and talking in tongues during the ceremony, Sookie insisted the wedding include only close family. Since most of Sok-Joon's family had been killed in the war, the gathering was very small.

Sookie and Sok-Joon moved into a house not far from where she had grown up. Her new home was a wedding present from her father.

Sookie tried to like Sok-Joon, not only to please her parents, but to please herself. He'd been civil with her throughout their engagement, although she suspected it was more her father to whom he got married than to her. Melody and Harmony remained at her parents' house. Sok-Joon was still deciding whether or not he wanted them in his house.

On their wedding night, Sookie changed into the silky nightgown her best friend had given her for the occasion. She liked the way it draped over her full breasts and hips. She

brushed her long black hair until it shined. She dabbed onto her neck, wrists and breasts the musky perfume her mother had given her.

As she entered the bedroom, Sok-Joon stared at her body hungrily, patting the bed beside him. With all the grace she could muster, Sookie danced onto the bed. Sok-Joon grabbed her firmly and pressed her down, tearing at the silk, ripping it off her body. A virgin and as yet inexperienced in sex, Sookie let Sok-Joon take the lead, assuming that at some point, she too would be aroused.

She cried out in pain when he entered her and she thought she could feel the tearing of her hymen. The pain made her uncomfortable as Sok-Joon grew larger, moving in and out of her without rhythm. Sookie figured she'd better figure out a way of enjoying herself, or sex could become something she disliked. That would be unacceptable to Sookie, having heard too many tales of woe from her friends. Besides, she'd been practicing. She concentrated on

her breathing, focusing on a place deep within herself. Her efforts paid off when she felt something deep within her rumble and vibrate. Her breath turned to gasps as she grabbed Sok-Joon's backside, pushing him deeper inside of her. The arousal she had only experienced in fantasy built with increasing intensity. Sok-Joon's release came before she was ready. He pulled away from her, panting and sweating. She reached out to him, but he pushed her hand aside.

"Never touch me afterwards," he commanded. She watched him as he seemed to go into a trance-like state she recognized was not sleep. Her own body twitched with raw desire like an electricity trapped in a closed circuit, threatening to catch fire. Unable to calm down, she moved her hand to the place Sok-Joon had carelessly left burning with need. Her fingers were not as stimulating as Sok-Joon's engorged penis, but their movement aroused her. Her gasps turned to cries of pleasure as the rumbling seemed to burst inside of her.

Still panting, she looked over at her husband. His smile told her he had watched her. She blushed with self-consciousness and shame.

"I like watching you pleasure yourself, Jung-Sook."

"I've never -- I didn't know --"

"You have a lot to learn, wife," he said with a fierceness that made Sookie shiver. "But don't worry. I'll teach you everything you need to know about pleasing a man."

That night, he took her three more times, withdrawing before Sookie could climax and then encouraging her to pleasure herself while he watched. These first sexual experiences set a foundation for her marriage, a marriage filled with hidden shame and humiliation.

Sookie's pregnancy made her parents happier than her husband. She knew Sok-Joon already felt like he competed with Melody and Harmony for her attention, let alone a baby. She also feared he would treat their child the same way he treated her old canine friends. He had accepted the dogs' presence in his home and didn't physically beat them, but he yelled at them, taking joy in the way they cringed in his presence. Sok-Joon's aggression had elevated him in the

government, but he saved his penned up rage at what he had to do to attain success for his home life. Sookie tried to smooth over his rough edges of anger by playing her flute. Sometimes it worked, but mostly it aroused him.

Their sex life had gotten more experimental and more demanding. Had her parents seen the bruises and bite marks hidden beneath her clothing, Sookie thought they might have been more concerned. As it was, they commented on the seemingly boundless energy of their son-in-law.

Jung-Ja demanded Tae-Joon's christening be held at her church, led by her priest. Unable to refuse her mother and knowing it would tweak her husband, Sookie agreed. Sok-Joon used the time before the ceremony to demonstrate his close relationship with his father-in-law, Kwang-Deok, for the other ministers and their families who attended. The event went well until during the priest's sermon, Sookie's mother started moaning. Kwang-Deok tried to lead his wife away, but Jung-Ja wouldn't

have it. Sookie stifled a smile as her mother started speaking in tongues. Although Sookie was only too familiar with her mother's periodic demonstrations of faith, many of the other guests had never seen anyone gyrate and chant gibberish in the name of the Lord. Sookie secretly enjoyed the looks on their faces as they watched her mother. Her enjoyment turned to fear when she saw the familiar rage bubble beneath the surface of Sok-Joon's frozen smile.

Sookie managed to protect Tae-Joon's infant body from the slaps, hits and kicks of her husband that night. It had been a long time since Sok-Joon took out his rage on her. She locked away the memories of his abuse the same way Jung-Ja had locked her dogs away. With her resurfacing memories, her fear for her son's future drove her into taking actions she knew inappropriate. She woke up early while Sok-Joon slept off the previous night's drink, and returned to her father's house. He was in the early stages of waking up when she arrived. She mustered as much courage as she could harness and



told him about her husband's rough treatment of the dogs and her anxiety about their son. His treatment of her was a shame she would keep to herself.

"I have been witness to Sok-Joon's rages," her father responded. "He put a fist through the wall of his office. However, he is your husband and the father of your child. I will not interfere."

"But he looks up to you, father. Surely a few words to him will make him stop."

"All marriages have their problems. It is time for you to face yours."

"I hate to think what mother would do if she found out," Sookie said, measuring the effect of her words.

Kwang-Deok frowned. He had taught her too well how to apply pressure without making overt threats. If she were a boy, he would have raised her to follow him in his footsteps.

"I will talk to him," he said, kissing baby Tae-Joon, dismissing Sookie with a nod.

Whatever Kwang-Deok said to Sok-Joon worked. At least it worked towards

protecting her son. But Sok-Joon punished his wife by demanding an even more vigorous and intrusive sexual acts. He took her in every room, at any time of day, sometimes in front of their crying son. Only when she got pregnant a second time did Sok-Joon's perverse sexual appetites cease. In fact, he stopped having sex with his wife all together, preferring to get his needs met elsewhere until the baby was born. Sookie tried to be jealous of his other lovers, but was too relieved to care.

One evening four months into her pregnancy, Sookie played with the two-year old Tae-Joon. He liked to build obstacle courses with the furniture. Sookie was careful to teach her son to restrict this activity to times she knew his father would be working. Sok-Joon liked a quiet orderly household. Her heart leaped to her throat when she heard a car pull up. Looking out the window, she expected to see the large ostentatious black Buick that made Sok-Joon so proud, embarrassing Sookie whenever he took her anywhere. However,

the car that pulled up to the house was the small white Hyundai her father drove.

"We must talk, Sookie," Kwang-Deok said softly, lifting Tae-Joon high into the air and flying him around the room. Sookie loved moments like these. Unlike her husband, her father knew how to play with children.

"Time for bed," she said as if her father had directed her to say so.

"I'll put him down," he said, taking the laughing Tae-Joon upstairs.

Sookie made tea the way her father liked it, periodically looking out the window in case Sok-Joon came home. He'd been out all night the night before, but this was not unusual. Sometimes she didn't see him for two or three days.

"Thank you," her father said, averting his eyes and gazing into the cup of steaming tea.

"What is it?" She tried to be patient, but something in her father's demeanor made her uneasy.

"Your husband has been disgraced," he said still looking into his cup. "He embezzled

money to pay for his -- needs. He's been arrested and thrown in jail."

Something in her father's tone told her he didn't blame her, but blamed himself. At the same time, she felt a spark of hope come from deep inside her, a spark she thought had burnt out a long time ago.

"I want you to take Tae-Joon to America."

"Take him? I don't understand." Sookie understood that she herself would have to leave, but to actually take her son -- that was more than she could hope for.

"There is no one left in Sok-Joon's family to take care of him and your mother -- well, I don't think she's up to the task. I thought you'd be pleased to take him with you."

"I am, father," she whispered, too emotional to say more.

"Here are tickets for you, my grandson, and my grandchild to be. You fly to Seattle tomorrow."

Sookie could detect the despair in his voice. "So far away?" she said, a picture of a world map flashing across her mind. She

could practically taste her father's grief. Her own didn't taste very good either.

"Desmond lives there with his family. You remember Desmond?"

"He gave me the tape recorder to record my playing for mother," she said automatically, warming to the idea of beginning a new life, yet frightened of the same thing.

"They will take care of you until you are able to take care of yourself. Pack your things. You leave tomorrow morning. Come by the house to say good-bye to your mother. I love you, Sookie. But such is life. Promise you'll write to your father."

Sookie felt tears bubble up at the pain in her father's voice. "Once a week. And I'll send you photographs of the children. And tapes of music for mother." Uncharacteristically she flung herself into her father's arms, crying freely. He too cried. She thought she heard him mumble an apology at his outburst of emotion, but she couldn't be sure.

"I'll leave you two to your goodbyes," Kwang-Deok said the next morning. "Tae-Joon and I will warm up the car."

"Sok-Joon hurt you, I know this," her mother said with unexpected clarity.

"He only--"

"Listen to me, Sookie. I wish I could have given you a better life, but I lose myself sometimes. Forgive me?"

"Of course." The pain on Jung-Ja's face tore at Sookie's heart.

"I will write you when I am clear-headed. Your father has promised to see to this. He is a good man, your father. But I fear my sanity has become an elusive state in my mind. I may not write to you as often as you would like."

"I understand, mother."

"I lose my mind because I am weak."

"That's not true--"

"Please, daughter. I need to say this while I can. And if I'm really really good, Sun-Yee will show me how to play hopscotch."

"Who is Sun-Yee?"

"Where did you hear her name?"

"From you just now."

"Forget what I say. See how my mind breaks down? Sookie, promise me you'll never keep secrets. I've tried to be honest with you, but I haven't always told you the truth. Secrets are what makes the mind go mad. They demand more and more space, pushing sanity aside, until they take over the mind. Promise me you'll live a life without secrets. Speak your truth, as Jesus taught us. A cross is a horrible thing to bear. If you hurt someone with the lie you tell them, Jesus may forgive you, but you'll never forgive yourself."

"I love you, mother," Sookie said, fearful she was losing her mother forever.

"I know. And I love you too, Sookie. I'll do my best to take care of Melody and Harmony. They're getting on and won't be too much trouble. Your father will help. Just make sure you take care of my grandchildren. I know they'll grow up to be big and strong just like their mother. I'm so proud of you, Sookie. And don't worry about your father and me. We'll be fine. I only hope

that someday, I will see you once again and when I do, recognize the beautiful musician daughter who has helped me hold onto the little bit of sanity I have left."

Sookie opened her mouth but no words came out. She reached over the table for her mother's hands. They squeezed back with a strength Sookie didn't know her mother had.

"Ready?" her father asked as he entered. "Tae-Joon is in his car seat."

"May the Lord protect you, daughter," Jung-Ja said. "What am I doing? I have an entire house to clean. Look at this mess." Sookie looked around at the spotless kitchen. "There are bugs everywhere. I hate bugs, don't you, Sun-Yee?"

"She'll be all right," her father said doubtfully.

"Who is Sun-Yee?" Sookie asked as they drove to the airport.

"Desmond's wife. Your mother met her a few times," her father said in a voice that indicated he did not wish to elaborate. "Do you have everything?"



"I suppose," Sookie said. They drove in a painful yet comfortable silence. Tae-Joon sang to himself in the back seat.

True to his word, Desmond picked Sookie up at the airport. He'd arranged a house for them.

"This is Amanda," he said, introducing the bright-eyed young woman who greeted them at the door of a small house in the West Seattle district. "She'll help you set up the house and take care of your boy. She doesn't speak Korean. I hope this won't be a problem."

"We are Americans now. We speak only English. What is that?" she asked, pointing out the living room window towards the downtown Seattle.

"The Space Needle. They built it last year for the 1964 World's Fair. My family lives close by Seattle Center. I think you'll like my wife, Sun-Yee. You and Tae-Joon will have to come visit and we can give you a tour of the city. Do you know how to drive?"

"I can learn," Sookie said with more courage than she felt. Adjusting to America

was going to be more challenging than she thought.

"Amanda can drive you around in the meantime."

"Let me show you your new home. I live in the little house in the back." Amanda's warmth melted some of Sookie's icy anxiety.

Amanda proved indispensable as Sookie slowly learned how to live her new life. The mundane tasks that seemed so simple back home, became difficult teachings in the complexities of cultural differences. However, Sookie had always been very thorough about her learning and picked up details most native-born Americans miss. When Amanda took Sookie to the supermarket for the first time, Sookie gasped in awe at the choices she would have to make. Unused to cooking western dishes, Sookie was relieved to find ramen. Amanda encouraged her to buy other foods and promised to teach Sookie how to cook.

What shocked Sookie the most was the disposable nature of American life. When she asked Amanda where all the garbage

went after it was picked up by the bright yellow trucks, Amanda ranted and raved about the landfill and other environmental issues. Sookie thought she understood, although she couldn't be sure.

Sookie named her daughter Jane. It was her way of combining an American name with that of her mother's name. The birth was thankfully easy. During her stay in the hospital, Amanda brought Ty, Tae-Joon's new American name, to visit. Desmond and Sun-Yee popped in as well. Sookie had come to love these two. Sun-Yee had Sookie's sturdy build and seemed very familiar to Sookie. Sun-Yee's Korean revealed her rural roots, but Sookie found it a relief to hear her native tongue every now and then. Sometimes she'd notice Sun-Yee staring at her strangely. Sookie assumed it was because she had a lot on her mind.

True to her word, Sookie wrote letters to her parents once a week, receiving one letter from her father for every five she sent. Sok-Joon had been killed in prison. Sookie wanted to feel sad, but she couldn't. Jung-

Ja sent her a few postcards filled with biblical references.

When Jane was old enough for kindergarten, Ty was in second grade. Sookie grew restless. One morning the quiet of her home drove her to dragging out her old flute. She oiled and polished the soft metal, caressing the instrument with every stroke, praying she could still play. It had been close to 6 years since she'd held the flute in her hands.

Hours passed before Sookie knew it, the music temporarily taking her out of linear time. The joy of playing her flute brought tears to her eyes. How could I have neglected my music for so long, she thought to herself, recalling the many concerts she had given.

Sookie used her free time to practice. No one but the slugs in the overgrown garden would hear her play until she was ready. Not even her children.

One morning as she practiced, Amanda dropped by unexpectedly. She stood in the empty kitchen as flute music captivated her attention.

"I had no idea," she said, walking into the living room when Sookie finished her song. Sookie blushed with shame. "You're good. I know, because I've played my guitar with the best of them. Not that I'm all that good, but I know good when I hear it."

"Thank you," was all Sookie could say.

"I'm having a party to celebrate my acceptance into medical school."

"Congratulations, Amanda. Will you leave Seattle?"

"No, I'll be going to the University of Washington. Please come to my party. I want you to meet my friends. Will you come and play? There'll be other musicians there. Promise me you'll play."

Sookie couldn't refuse, nor did she want to refuse. The other musicians enjoyed playing some of the same classical music Sookie dearly loved. Despite the differences in background, they played well together.

"You must come to dinner and play for us too, Sookie," Desmond insisted. He had taken care of the children. Amanda raved about her performance.

"Did you know Sun-Yee used to play the flute as well? She'd love to hear you play."

Desmond invited a few other families. Some of the children were Ty's and Jane's ages, freeing Sookie to perform without worrying about them. However, once she started to play, the children came inside from their games of tag to listen. Sookie could hardly believe their silence as she let the music pour from her flute.

"She's hired," she heard a gray-haired man say to Desmond following the applause.

Sookie's new job with the Seattle Symphony threatened to disrupt her family life. Amanda was too busy with her studies to help with the children. Fortunately, the second violin lived in the same neighborhood and helped Sookie find suitable daycare. Sookie was hesitant to leave her children with strangers. She'd been raised to believe that children belonged with their parents. However, despite the monthly checks she received from her father, Sookie longed for independence.

Sookie's life took on a new shape as she adjusted to being a working mother. Her work with the Symphony gave her a new confidence. She got involved with the Korean-American community, a women's consciousness-raising group and fell in love. She met Ron at a fund-raiser for the ethnically diverse daycare center her children attended after school. He worked as a journalist for the *Seattle Post Intelligencer*. Ron's parents had moved from Japan to America just before World War II. Ron was born in an internment camp. Once their lives were returned to them, his parents tried desperately to disown their heritage and fit into American life, celebrating his marriage to an all-American girl. His wife died giving birth to their son, Jake, six years before he met Sookie. Ron was shocked when his parents practically disowned him after he announced he would marry Sookie.

Sookie understood Ron's parents' problems with her. The Japanese occupation of Korea did not sit well with either culture. Her father was very angry at Sookie's choice

of mate too, but at the last minute, attended the wedding anyway. Kwang-Deok looked old and tired. He told Sookie he had to put Jung-Ja into a residential treatment hospital. The threads of sanity had all been broken and he could no longer take care of her. Sookie knew her mother's behavior must have gotten very extreme. Her father wouldn't have let anyone else take care of her otherwise. He even brought her the collars of her dogs who had died of old age.

The ceremony was simply performed by a justice of the peace. Neither Ron nor Sookie wished to alienate anyone. Ron's family kept their distance from Sookie's family, although their friends happily mingled. From across the room, Sookie watched her father and Sun-Yee. Their exchange seemed intense and painful. She wanted to ask her father about the exchange, but never got the chance.

Sookie's new family moved into a house near the University of Washington. The children had difficulty adjusting at first. Jake was in awe of Ty and followed the 10 year old everywhere. The fact that they had



to share a bedroom didn't help. The 8 year old Jane mostly complained at having to leave her friends.

When all the children graduated high school, Ty moved to New York to go to college, Jane moved in with a girlfriend, determined to become an actress, and Jake moved to Los Angeles to play in a rock and roll band. Sookie and Ron, now in their early forties, were forced to re-create their lives. Ron went back to school. He loved journalism, but decided it was time for a change. He studied to be a psychotherapist. Sookie got a dog.

The day she brought home Adagio, she received a telephone call that her father had died. The heart attack was sudden and quick. Despite his squawking, Sookie left her new puppy in Ron's care while she returned to Korea.

At first Sookie's mouth had trouble speaking Korean again. It had been a long time. But within hours, Sookie spoke and acted as though she'd never left. Yet she was uncomfortable. Her mother, a shadow of her

former self, didn't recognize her. With sorrow and grief, Sookie returned home to Seattle.

Walking the puppy helped Sookie through her grief. She enjoyed meeting other dogpeople even if she did have to force herself to be sociable. Adagio was unlike Melody and Harmony with his aggressive disposition. It took many obedience classes to get him to behave, but Sookie loved every minute. Even Ron learned to love Adagio.

\* \* \*

Adagio grew up in the forest. When his first Masterdog died, he and his littermates were sent to jail. He tells me that he was prepared to die and rejoin his Masterdog until that miraculous moment Sookiedog bailed him out. I tell him it must be like what a catdog feels when they've expended one of their lives. I ask Adagio how many lives a dog has but he doesn't know either.

Adagio lives to love, be loved and most importantly, to run. He says he does other things, like gnawing bones, but only running

makes him truly happy. I ask him what he's running from. He tells me he runs from death -- not because he's afraid, but because he likes the race of life. I don't understand, so I tell him about Sebastian. He's never spent any time around a catdog so he doesn't know what to say. All I know is that when I chase Adagio, he's running away from me, not death. Same thing when other dogs chase him. This running from death thing makes no sense, but if that's how he understands his amazing ability to outrun everyone, who am I to claim otherwise.

I tell Bob what he says. Bob laughs because he understands and I don't. He can be such a poophead. I tell him I don't have to understand Adagio to like him. Bob swishes his tail and pretends to go to sleep. So what else is new?

The only time I see Adagio stumble is when a dog who looks just like him only bigger demands he chase him. At first he thinks it's a joke. He's yet to meet a dog who can run faster than him. But when this dog

shoots out ahead of him, I see him stop in his tracks, sniff the air, and run the other way. Maybe like him, this dog runs from death and Adagio is afraid that when death passes him by to catch up with the other dog, he too will die. He won't tell me if I'm right, so I make him chase me instead.

\* \* \*

Gina practically ran Timmy over when they both turned the corner at the same time from opposite directions. As a result, both were on the verge of exploding into rage just before they recognized one another.

“I’m sorry--”

“Excuse me--”

Rage turned to awkwardness to flirtatious giggles.

“You okay?” Timmy asked.

“Do I look okay?” Timmy was entranced by the changing colors of her black eye. The scab on her cut lip threatened to open.

“Bad john?”

“Bad manager.”

“Reggie did that to you? Why would he damage the merchandise?”

“I told him I couldn’t work for a while because of -- well, I’m kinda sick.”

“You mean--?”

“It’s nothing, really.” Timmy had to control himself before he started asking her questions that could spook her, even if he’d find the answers exciting. “Reg got pissed and added injury to injury, the fuck.” Afraid he’d say something stupid, Timmy said nothing. “Wanna go with me to Trattoria’s for dinner? I’m buying. That is if I don’t embarrass you.”

“Sure. Where’s Trattoria’s?” Timmy was thrilled to spend time with Gina. He hoped he looked okay.

“Pioneer Square. It’s below street level -- you know, where underground Seattle is.” Timmy remembered Daddy taking him on the tour of underground Seattle when Uncle Alex was in town. Something about the cold dank enclosures made him feel like he was entombed -- no matter how big the space. He liked it.

The fall evening was cool but rainless, so they walked along the waterfront. Gina even took him to Ye Olde Curiosity Shoppe. He'd always meant to go there, but hadn't until now. Had he known they had all those cool dead things in jars of formaldehyde, he'd have made a point of going there before this. Gina squealed over the two-headed pig, but he could tell she liked it -- perhaps not as much as he did, but that was cool. Neither of them found the rows of souvenirs at all interesting.

Although he'd never been inside, the Seattle Aquarium had one public exhibit. Gina was fascinated by fish and other animals that lived in the ocean, so Timmy was patient while she rambled on about the Aquarium. They contemplated taking a ferry ride just for the hell of it, but Gina was too hungry.

The restaurant had low ceilings and walls covered with displays that used large olive oil containers, artificial flowers and grapes, old wine bottles and an odd assortment of

old Italian postcards.

Timmy wasn't used to small talk, but Gina was obviously a whiz. She asked him questions, made him laugh and turned what could have been a routine dinner into something special. Four or five times, Timmy was tempted to tell her about Buzz, but a voice in his head told him not to bring it up, especially if the whole thing turned out to be bogus. He did end up telling Gina all about his family. Gina was fascinated by his rejection of their money and mansion.

"I grew up in a tiny house in Kent," she said. "I hardly ever had any privacy. Now I'm thrilled to have my own studio apartment, even if my johns stink it up. I can't imagine a whole loft to myself."

"It's cool, I'll grant you that," Timmy said. "But I can't live with those people near me -- they're nuts. They don't have any time for anyone or anything other than themselves."

"They leave you alone," Gina said.

“That’s just it -- they don’t give a shit about barging in on me whenever they feel like it.”

“Oh,” Gina said. “That would suck. I know about invasion of privacy oh too well.”

They walked back via Fourth Avenue, peering into stores that were way beyond their budgets. By the time they got back, Timmy’s shift was about to start.

“I’ve got three rooms tonight,” he said, hoping she’d stick around.

“I’ll tell the kids,” she said. “My friend Tami and I are going to one of those movie theaters with lots of movies. We’ll pay for one and sneak into the others.”

“Cool,” Timmy said. “Thanks for dinner.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, waving and heading out the front door. Timmy was glad she didn’t say “no problem.” He hated it when people said that -- perceiving a problem where there wasn’t one.

Timmy wandered over to the cage, greeted the swing shift guy, and checked out what was living and crawling around.



## 12. HALLOWEEN RITUALS

*The cultural need of humans for ritual has little to do with religion because it is inclusive and nonjudgmental. If dogs had any idea what the word “dogma” meant, they’d be appalled.*

It's raining but Masterdog sings that we'll go to the park anyway. She puts on layers of plastic and we head out in the large tin can. I stick my muzzle out the window. The rain soaks my nose and makes me sneeze, but I don't mind.

We go to the park where the water is salty. No one else is around. Masterdog throws sticks for me. I try to run, but the rocks hurt my feet. I see hundreds of birds holding a convention at the water's edge. Such odd animals, not at all like dogs. They chatter at the same time yet I'm sure they hear what each other is saying. I really want to catch a bird and ask it what they talk about.

I race towards them but instead of talking to me, they fly away. They always do that. How do they all take off at the same exact time? Someday I'll find a bird who'll talk to me and I'll find out everything.

\* \* \*

Rover was obviously unhappy wearing her costume, but Liz figured a few hours wouldn't hurt her. She really did look incredible. Red strips of plastic were cut and draped to make her look like she was bleeding. The handle of a large plastic knife stuck out of one side of her head, the point out of the other. On top of her head she wore a bonnet covered with plastic eyeballs. A necklace of plastic bones hung from her neck. John had helped out a lot, making sure it was escape-proof. Liz startled at the images that so closely matched her nightmares. The sight of Rover even brought back a feeling of dread. Perfect for Halloween.

The All Dog All Hallows Eve Party was sponsored by a wealthy dogperson whom Liz

had never met. Somehow, he rented one of the hangars at the naval station next to the park at Sandpoint. Because it was a private party, leashes were optional. How this dog patron arranged for insurance was beyond anyone's ken. From the parking lot, the sound was deafening and increased moving forward. Many clicking toenails on cement, barks of joy and other expressions and commands ranging from "no" to "leave it" to "good dog" restricted human communication.

Rover stayed very close to Liz, uncomfortable in her costume and overwhelmed by what she saw and smelled. Rover wasn't a fan of crowds -- dogs, human or the combination. She sniffed at a few unfamiliar dogs dressed in creative collections of clothes and accessories and looked up at Liz. Her face wrinkled with worry. Liz reached down to her belly and gave her a reassuring scratch before moving her on.

They wandered about, checking out all the costumes. Rover leaped from Liz's side to

greet Adagio and his proud owner. Sookie wore an expensive evening gown and Adagio, a tuxedo.

Liz watched as Sookie studied Rover. She had a baffled look on her face, tipped with fear. "Scary, isn't she?" Liz asked in an attempt to break the tension.

"She reminds me of something. I want to tell you it's a nice memory, but it isn't. Look at my arms. I have -- how is it -- gooseflesh."

"You'd better watch that. Judah and Rachel live to chase goose flesh." David appeared wearing a halo. He shifted to his right and revealed his large gossamer wings, nearly knocking Liz and Sookie over in the process. Judah and Rachel wore similar angelic accessories.

Sookie smiled at David, pleased by his angelic presentation before turning back to Liz: "Did you design Rover's costume from a famous painting? I know I've seen it somewhere."

"I'd know her anywhere. She's a hound from hell. Unlike moi," David interjected. He

didn't look any happier about Rover's costume than Sookie.

"Actually, I sketched the design one night after a nightmare woke me up."

A deep woof announced the arrival of Gandhi and Shakti, Bo trailing behind. If she hadn't recognized the woof, Liz might not have known Gandhi and Shakti were underneath all those feathers.

A German short hair dressed in a tutu tore across the hanger to chase after what he thought were very large birds. The look on his face when his nose revealed his mistake made everyone laugh. Bo commanded his bird dogs to honk. Shakti and Gandhi opened their large mouths and yawned, letting out high squeaking sounds. The hangar broke out in applause. No question who would win the costume contest.

Adagio, Judah, Rachel and Rover moved to get a closer look at the feathered monsters and howled in recognition, leading the two birddogs towards where the masterpack was coming together. Rover was proud of seeing through her friends' disguises.

The crowd around them increased as more and more dogs and dogpeople arrived. It frightened Rover. She nuzzled Bo's hand from behind. Bo looked down to greet her and look at her for the first time. He pulled back his hand in fear and stepped back.

"You too?" Liz asked.

"For two years after Iraq I had horrific nightmares. I thought those days were over. But lately -- where did you come up with that costume, Liz? Why the hell would you dress her up like that? Never mind, I'm afraid I know why."

"I'm so so sorry," Liz's default response when someone got mad at her. Conflict was great, but confrontation -- not so much.

David, Sookie, Bo and Liz stood in silence, their dogs nosing each other happily. They would have continued standing there in silence if Puck hadn't burst in on the scene, his compact Basenji body wrapped in a clear cellophane with sparkling sequins. The only reason they knew it was Puck was because Rover greeted

him like a long lost friend. But Puck shied away from Rover, making deep gurgling sounds of fear.

"Puck, come," Nina yelled from across the hanger.

"Over here," Liz waved.

"Why did I think a basenji could actually behave well enough to bring to-- oh my god, oh my god, oh my god. That's what I saw when I--" Liz could tell Rover wasn't at all sure she liked the response she was evoking.

"You've had nightmares too?" Liz asked Nina who was visibly shaking.

"The red-haired Animal Control guy. Have you ever seen him?" she demanded.

"Yes," David, Bo, Sookie and Liz said simultaneously.

"Good." Nina took a deep breath and relaxed.

"What's going on?" David voiced the question they all wanted to ask. Before she could answer, Puck, who had finished examining Rover, took off towards the other side of the hangar.

"Saturday, Sandpoint, two o'clock. Be there," Nina commanded just before she ran after Puck.

"I don't know about you folks, but I'll be there," Bo said tensely. "She may or may not have any answers, but if I don't find a way to get through the night without screaming, my wife is going to leave me."

"Really?" David asked. His innocence made Liz smile.

"No, but these nightmares are making us both a little nuts."

"I've been having them too," David confessed.

"I don't remember my dreams, but I know I haven't been sleeping very well," Sookie added.

"I'm so so sorry I dredged up such ugliness," Liz apologized. "But I couldn't take it anymore. This was all I knew how to do to try and get those images out of my head."

"Better the devil we know than the one we don't know," Bo asserted. His calm had returned and his words broke up the tension.



"What did she mean about that Animal Control guy," Liz asked. Saturday was too far away to wait for understanding. Before anyone could answer, a cattle dog dressed up like a priest, the white collar making his head appear very large, challenged Rover.

"Rover, leave it," Liz commanded. Rover circled behind Liz and sat down, leaning against her legs quivering. "I think Rover and I have had enough for the evening. See you Saturday."

Liz took the costume off Rover before letting her into the car. Rover was so happy to be free of it she barked and leaped before jumping into the back seat. Liz took it over to the garbage can but was intercepted by a pretty but otherworldly young man who looked like he stuck his finger in an electrical socket. He politely asked if he could have the costume. Liz was happy to get rid of it. Something about this boy was familiar but Liz didn't remember. "Take it," she said and walked quickly back to her car. Rover was barking like a crazy dog. Liz got in

the car and her barking stopped. Good riddance to bad rubbish, Liz thought.

The next morning Liz woke up fresh and alert. Even Rover seemed happy to greet the day. They ran the track with abandon. Hobbs even came by for a quick frolic. He and Rover spent a lot of time in the sand pit area. Liz didn't even get angry when she smelled the unmistakable stench of catshit on Rover's breath. It wasn't until half way through the morning as she was typing up a memo regarding a company that manufactured sleeping pills that Liz realized she'd had a dreamless night.

\* \* \*

It was bad enough I had to wear that stupid costume. But when Puck and my favorite bipeddogs were afraid of me -- that was too much. I was so disappointed to find out Shakti and Gandhi weren't really birds. I told them so too. Judah said that maybe if Shakti and Gandhi wore their costumes in the park, the birds might talk to us. Adagio

didn't think that would work and I had to agree.

Before taking off with Ninadog in tow, Puck let us know he knows something but he can't tell us what it is. Not yet, anyway. He's inscrutable like a catdog.

I must admit, I was beside myself when I saw Masterdog talking to the bipeddog that I'd seen at the park with that group of hairless bipeddogs who tried to take Spot. At least he took that thing I was wearing from Masterdog. Didn't she recognize his smell? I only stopped barking because the man-with-no-smell had smiled at me through the front window of the large tin can and told me it was okay. Masterdog didn't even see him. Bipeddogs. Snort.

Before I can say anything, Bob says Sebastian's pain is gone because he's accepted what it is he must do. I don't understand and Bob refuses to explain. I ask Sebastian what it is he's accepted. He says he'll be free soon and I shouldn't worry about it. I tell him about the evening's events and he actually listens and responds. The

fact that Sebastian talks to me takes the creepiness out of the evening and replaces it with joy. Lucky me.

I sleep deeper than I have in a very long time. Masterdog is more rested when she wakes up too. At the track, I tell Hobbs about the party. He says his Masterdogs wouldn't let him go to the party. Poor guy. I let him bite my neck when we run. That makes him happy. Finding catdog poop in the sand -- that made me happy.

I spend the day sleeping in the sun. It's cold out, but the rays of sun penetrate my fur and make me feel good. Bob and Sebastian lay in the grass next to me. What a glorious day.

\* \* \*

At first, Liz actually enjoyed going back to work the day after the All Dog All Hallows Eve Celebration. However, her first good night's sleep in weeks couldn't prevent exhaustion from creeping through her body by mid-morning. Manipulating the mundane

was all she was up for doing. Fortunately, everyone else seemed to have a Halloween hangover and left her alone. As soon as she got home from the work and took Rover for a brief walk, Sebastian and Bob meowed to be fed.

Liz popped a frozen something in the microwave and gathered animal food dishes. She mindlessly scooped out dry food, a heaping clump of canned, poured in a little water and stirred it together for Rover, who was ravenous as usual, inhaling her food. Liz mixed dry into the canned for Bob, but spooned out only canned for Sebastian. Bob ate loudly, making growling sounds as he gobbled his food. Sebastian's teeth were hurting again. He sniffed the food, licked it a few times, shook his head and looked up at Liz. Getting the message, Liz poured him a bowl of milk, his favorite. He lapped it up happily.

Liz removed her hot frozen dinner from the microwave. It smelled the way all frozen dinners smell. She smothered it in roasted garlic powder she got at the Puyallup Fair

and fresh asiago cheese, flopped down in the big chair and turned on the television. It was prime time, but everything on the network channels was either a rerun or a reality show, and the idea of watching wrestling, an infomercial or even streaming a show or movie, did not appeal to her.

She settled on a talk show. Skinheads were debating a priest and rabbi on the nature of religious freedom. The hatred of the skinheads ran so deep and was so ingrained and aggressive, the priest refused to look at them and the rabbi wept openly in despair. Arson Bell spurred the spectacle on by asking provocative questions. He was on a roll and Liz had to admit, he could drive a show as well if not better than Jerry Springer or Oprah. The camera followed Mr. Bell as he moved through the audience. Having had enough tension and anxiety, Liz prepared to change the channel when Mr. Bell put the microphone to the face of the Animal Control guy she'd seen in the park, the one Nina mentioned. Even out of uniform, his red hair

and deep blue eyes and pointy nose were unmistakable. He almost looked handsome in his cheap suit and bow tie.

"We await the time when chaos will reign," the skinhead ranted. "Only then will we truly be free from that which binds us."

"I have to agree," the Animal Control guy said quietly. Liz expected reaction to obliterate anything else he had to say, but for some reason, the audience, the skinheads and other performers waited expectantly for more. "Only when we resist being controlled by someone else's rigid structure are we truly free. But if our resistance succeeds in breaking us free from everything that holds us down so that we the world of became one of chaos, we'd be free from resistance, but we'd also be free of a meaningful existence. A life without any meaning is a meaningless life. Surely the resistance you are demonstrating at this this very moment is more meaningful than the ultimate chaos that you seek? And if it is, do you not now at this very moment, feel

freer than you could if all was chaos and there was no outside resistance for you to conquer?"

Liz could tell only a few people in the audience followed his logic. The priest nodded his head sternly. The rabbi clapped his hands in joy. The skinheads stared at him blankly. Arson Bell, sensing he could lose his audience if he didn't do something said, "If all were chaos, would there be good and evil?"

A bald-headed woman on stage responded: "The ultimate sacrifice is turning evil into good and good into evil. Only then are we truly free." The audience groaned as the other skinheads slapped her on the back in congratulations.

"What sacrifices have you made besides the hair on your head?" asked the Animal Control guy. The audience laughed.

"Wouldn't you like to know," another skinhead sneered.

"Yes, I would," the Animal Control guy said quietly.

"How does good and evil -- a dualistic structure, if you will," Arson Bell began



as he moved away from the Animal Control guy, addressing the bald woman. "How do they exist in the world of chaos?"

The discussion degenerated into another shouting match that had more to do with grabbing the power of the moment than making a point. Liz muted the sound, hoping to get another glimpse of the Animal Control guy, but he never reappeared. Liz turned off the television when the show ended. Weird, she thought.

\* \* \*

Masterdog gives me my morning bone before leaving in the large tin can. Sebastian and Bob come out the little door through which only they fit (I've tried, dog knows I've tried) and sit with me. Bob says it's time for Sebastian to go. I lick his butt as they crawl under the fence into the front yard. I hear a large can squeal, followed by a thud. I wait, licking my bone.

Bob crawls back under the fence first. He bounces around frantically. Sebastian

follows, dragging his leg painfully. I run over to him. Bob tells me what to do. I grab Sebastian's neck skin with my teeth and help him through the little door.

Bob comes out and tells me Sebastian screwed up. He says Sebastian wouldn't leave without seeing Masterdog one last time.

Masterdog comes home. I follow her into the yard as she calls out for Sebastian. I see Sebastian drinking out of my water dish. I go up to him to ask him if his leg's better, but I notice he has no smell. I try to lick his butt. My tongue goes right through him. He scampers about, teasing me, and runs into the shadows. I sniff the path he's taken, but I can't smell him. When I see him sitting on the couch, I'm shocked. I ask Bob. He says something like the mind is willing but the flesh is weak.

\* \* \*

Liz successfully repressed her worry over Sebastian by getting lost in her job or by

sketching the nightmares that returned the night after the night of the dog party. Thursday evening Liz came home, walked Rover around the block in the pouring rain and did the food routine. She thought she saw Sebastian scoot out the back door into the yard. Rover, having inhaled her food, sniffed around as Liz called out to Sebastian. She scoped out the shadows of the yard to no avail. A ball of anxiety rolled around in her gut. She looked in the bedroom, but he wasn't there. She found him on the couch where she'd first noticed him when she got home. She picked him up and he purred loudly. She stood him in front of his dish, but he toppled over, unable to stand on his left rear leg. Holding him up, the leg dangled, obviously unusable.

Liz called the emergency referral number on her vet's answering machine. A kindly woman suggested she bring him in. Liz was tempted, but what did these strangers know about Sebastian? She called Sarah instead.

"I'm so sorry, Liz," Sarah said. She made it sound like this would be Sebastian's last

night. Layers of denial fell away and Liz knew she was right.

"But I'm not ready to let him go," she cried.

"It's not your choice, Liz."

They talked strategy. Sarah said she'd accompany Liz to the vet the next morning.

Liz left a light on in the living room where Sebastian slept. She woke up every few hours to sit with him. Bob groomed him, periodically sitting on his injured leg.

Tired and distraught, Liz called into work, told them she'd be in after lunch. Sarah and Liz took Sebastian to the vet. The vet frowned and took him in the back to x-ray the injured leg.

"It's shattered," he said. "Under most circumstances, cats heal easily from breaks and fractures. But Sebastian is 14 years old and I'm afraid he's no longer simply FIV positive, he's showing signs of AIDS. I question his capacity to heal from his injury."

Sebastian continued purring as the vet inserted the long needle. Liz looked up,

hoping to see his kitty soul burst free into death, but saw nothing. Maybe that was him who had scooted out the door last night, she thought, and he left only a small part of himself in his ailing body.

Liz arranged to have him cremated and they left. Sarah went to work. Liz took Rover for a special walk at Sandpoint. They met up with a woman who Liz didn't particularly like. Her dog, whose name Liz couldn't remember, played happily with Rover. The reason Liz didn't care for this woman was that she struck her as the hysterical type. Whenever Liz saw her, she was in the middle of one crisis or another. Like Rover, her facial features showed a permanent look of worry. Liz decided to get the jump on her and told her about Sebastian. The woman didn't even launch into a diatribe about the losses she had endured. Instead she was surprisingly comforting.

Thankful and relieved, Rover and Liz left the park. At home, Bob sat in the window in Sebastian's old spot. Liz thought he might be looking for Sebastian and started crying

again. He surprised her by crawling into her lap, purring as she stroked his soft fur.

Liz finally got to work, but didn't accomplish all that much. Lucky for her, a few co-workers understood. She was too lost in grief to care about those who didn't.

Sebastian's departure left a hole in her animal family, a hole filled with emptiness and despair. Liz knew the grief would eventually pass, but for the time being, she was lost. The three of them all slept very close to one another that night.

Liz's nightmares were interrupted by a dream where the Animal Control guy and Sebastian talked to her while she sat on the toilet. When she woke up, she couldn't remember what they said, but felt better having seen Sebastian once again.

\* \* \*

At first Timmy was excited about his little Halloween scavenger hunt that would serve as preparation for his initiation, even if it did mean riding the bus. But it was still

relatively early. He would have his own celebration later that night. He had his own tradition of special autopsies on Halloween.

“October 31, All Hallow’s Eve is for invocation,” Buzz had told him over the phone “But November 1, All Souls” Day is for provocation.”

Timmy had already gone to the blood bank and donated some blood. So what if the nurse thought he asked bizarre questions about blood -- that was her problem. He wanted to tell her what he had learned from Buzz -- that blood is life, blood is power. But he could tell she would probably not be at all impressed. Besides, he wasn’t convinced some towel head could comprehend such a thing, let alone embrace it. From her accent, Timmy figured she was Muslim. Timmy had a thing about Muslims since he lost an uncle on 9/11 and had see any documentary on the subject he could. He cheered when Osama ibn Laden was put in the ocean.

On the bus from pill hill that consisted of hospitals and low income housing, across

Capital Hill to St. Mary's Church, Timmy replayed the prick and needle sensation over and over in his mind. It made him smile. He was also amused over the fear and disgust on the nurse's face when he asked to see the vault where they kept the blood. After all, it was a blood bank. She had to call in a supervisor. What a laugh. Her supervisor was a fat little man who explained to him how that would not be possible.

At St. Mary's, Timmy sat in a pew just like Buzz had told him. The crucifix in this particular church showed Jesus in a bloodier state than most. An elderly woman played the large organ, filling the church with eerie music. Timmy studied the large figure, noting any detail that demonstrated suffering. He didn't need to write down these details as Buzz had suggested -- his memory was practically photographic. Satisfied he'd done his homework, Timmy pulled the vial from his pocket, filled it with holy water and caught another bus. The organ player hadn't even noticed him.



This particular bus carried a pack of teenagers in costumes, obviously on their way to a party or rave or whatever. They were loud and obnoxious -- especially the colored boy who didn't fit in with the sea of white pasty faces. Timmy's cold demeanor seemed to make him their chosen audience, even if he pretended otherwise. When Timmy got off the bus in the University District, he sensed their disappointment as the bus continued to Laurelhurst -- a place where Timmy wouldn't be caught dead.

The occult bookstore was brimming with business. Timmy figured they were all doing last minute ritual shopping. Reaching for the incense Buzz told him to buy, he bumped into a sickly woman who wore a large pentacle around her neck. Obviously the pentacle wasn't protecting her from death.

"Hey, watch it," her ebony friend said.

"Watch yourself," Timmy muttered as he walked away. Dikes, he thought, shaking his head. Think they run the world.

Timmy was happy to get out of the store, although he would have liked to study the knives -- athemes, they called them.

Tired of buses, Timmy decided to walk through the neighborhoods to his next destination. Twilight brought out all the trick or treaters. Parents steered their children clear of him which made him smile. The walk was longer than he thought. He found a shadow in someone's yard to take a whiz. No sooner had he pulled it out and started to relieve his aching bladder, car lights shone on him as the car pulled into the driveway of the house. A large white man slammed his car door and started yelling at Timmy. His wife, a chunky Asian of some kind, stood by the car door and stared at Timmy with an intensity that actually unnerved him -- far more than the yelling of her hubby. Timmy zipped up when he was ready and casually walked away. The hubby had run into the house -- probably to fetch a firearm of some kind -- while the woman continued staring. Timmy could feel her eyes burning his back.

Timmy followed the line of cars across the old naval base. The loud barking assured him he hadn't missed his final destination. Standing by the large trash bin next to the window to the madness inside, he turned on his tape recorder to record their noise. Why anyone would voluntarily attend such a fiasco was beyond him. He could think of better things to do with dogs on Halloween than dressing them up.

He was just about ready to leave when he noticed a dog in the finest costume he'd ever seen. Sure it was gross, but it was a good gross. He couldn't believe his good fortune when the owner disrobed her dog and headed towards the trash bin. She was going to dump that piece of art. He didn't look at her as he asked if he could have the costume. She gave it to him and he took off for the bus stop. Her loss, he thought.

## 13. DEATH

*Death is simple and divine. Grief is hard and complicated.*

Nina?" a familiar voice asked when she picked up the telephone.

"Charlie? Is that really you?"

"The one and only."

"How are you?"

"Busy, but fine."

"I haven't heard from you in what, six years? Is something wrong?" Nina knew Charlie too well to believe this was a casual call of hello.

"No, everything's fine. What's happening in Seattle?"

"Marta's got cancer and I got a dog." Nina was uncomfortable making small talk, but she knew Charlie would only reveal the purpose of his call in his own time.

"I'm sorry to hear that. About Marta, I mean. What kind of dog?"

"A basenji."

"What's she look like?"

"Small, feisty and adorable even when I find the furniture chewed up and my socks missing."

"What's her name?"

"His name is Puck."

"He's a he? I thought you'd get another bitch."

"Damn you Charlie. Get over it already."

"It was a joke, Nina, honest."

"Sure it was. Now will you please cut to the chase and tell me what's going on?"

"I called because -- now don't hang up on me, okay? I called because I've been having these weird dreams. Nightmares, actually. Is Puck brown and white?"

"Yes."

"Puck is in my dreams too, along with a bunch of other people and their dogs."

"I've been having the dreams too, Charlie. I wish I could tell you what they're about, but I haven't the faintest idea. Creepy, aren't they?"

"The creepiest. How's Delta?"

Nina tried to ignore Charlie's transition from nightmares to the love of her life. "Fine," she said with finality.

"There's something else, Nina." Something in his voice made her shiver with anticipation. "I'm engaged."

"That's wonderful," she said with relief.

"Yeah. Cathy's pretty terrific. She reminds me of you. Anyway, her brother lives in Seattle."

"No kidding?"

"Small world, isn't it? We're going up there for Christmas. Cathy wants to meet you."

"Me? Why?"

"Beats me. Something about closure and acceptance. Cathy's a psychologist." Nina held back her laughter.

"We'd love to see you and Cathy, Charlie," Nina replied, emphasizing the "we." "I'll make dinner."

"I'll make you a deal. You buy the ingredients and I'll cook for you. Do you like Thai food?"

"Since when can you cook anything, let alone Thai food?" Nina asked, releasing her penned up laughter at last.

"I'm a new man, Nina."

"So it seems." They talked about old friends, shared laughter over fond memories and said their good-byes.

"Who was that?" Delta asked, emerging from the office she'd set up in the spare bedroom.

"Charlie."

"No kidding."

"He's coming up for a visit with his fiancée."

"When?"

"Christmas. He wants do dinner, and--"

"Let me guess. We buy the food." Nina smiled knowingly as Delta continued: "Some things never change."

"Yes, but he wants to cook for us and his fiancé, the shrink."

"This could be entertaining. Christmas, eh? That's only three months away. We'd

better start cleaning the kitchen now. It's filthy."

"After he cooks dinner, it'll take us another three months to clean up after him." Nina didn't have the heart to tell Delta how excited she was to see her old friend again. Until he called, she didn't realize how much she'd missed him.

The house was quiet when Nina came home from the All Dog All Hallows Eve Party. She found Delta in bed weeping. Delta looked up at her and started crying. Nina and Puck jumped in bed. As Nina cradled Delta in her arms, Puck cuddled next to them.

"It's spreading," Delta gasped.

"What's spreading?"

"The cancer, damn it. Marta's dying and there's nothing I can do about it."

"How long?"

"What do you mean how long?" Delta snapped, accidentally kicking Puck off the bed.

"What's her prognosis?" Nina asked calmly.



"Not good. Not long."

"Let's go see her," suggested Nina.

"Not now. She and I went to Pandora's Box earlier to buy some incense. That's when she told me. I was able to keep it together, but I can't let her see me like this." Nina held her until she fell asleep.

Despite a good night's sleep, Nina was restless and anxious. She spent the day running errands. Delta had gone into the office and left her a message she'd be home late. Nina went into the living room and turned on the television. Only a small part of her mind watched intently as Arson Bell talked with the Animal Control man. Her restlessness was replaced with intention -- an intention to do what, she couldn't say. But at the very least, she felt her grief-stricken self-absorption expand into something larger and more all-encompassing.

That evening, despite her resolve, Delta cried throughout their visit with Marta because Marta insisted they use the time to say their good-byes. The nurse she'd hired to

take care of her so she could die at home, read a magazine in the next room. What a brave woman, Nina thought as Marta calmly thanked them for their friendship. Marta even confessed that the Beltane ritual had been a set up. She'd told everyone to vote Nina and Delta as king and queen of the May, knowing what would probably happen in the shadow of the goddess.

Marta died in her sleep a few days later. In her grief, Delta turned in on herself, worked longer hours and resisted the comfort Nina offered her. Nina let grief wash over her, aware that it affected her every thought and feeling, but also felt relieved that Marta had gone to a better place and suffered no more.

Nina was excited to wake up Saturday morning with the knowledge she'd be meeting up with other dog people and their dogs. She hoped she hadn't given them the wrong idea about this meeting. She and Delta had tried puzzling out the mystery, but finally came to the conclusion that not enough information was yet available to

make a determination of what was happening or what they should do next. On the other hand, directing plays had taught Nina patience and the acceptance of periods of seeming ambiguity or chaos. She hoped she could distract Delta from grief by getting into further musings about the doggie drama as she got more information from the others.

\* \* \*

On the morning after his first bout with the nightmares that disturbed David both emotionally and spiritually, Gary called.

"I know we haven't been all that close these last few years, but we are twins and therefore, we share certain -- you know. The dreams I had last night seemed more yours than mine. They had dogs in them. And lots of blood. I just had to call."

David and Gary discussed their dreams in detail. There were plenty of differences and too many similarities.

The telegram didn't arrive until the day after the All Dog All Hallows Eve party.

David had slept better than he had in weeks. At work, he reviewed email, expecting anything other than what he got. His parents had gotten into a terrible car accident on their drive to Jerusalem. They died on impact.

David went home and mindlessly made dinner for himself and his dogs. He turned on the television and muted the sound. Arson Bell was interviewing skinheads. David called his brother.

"They wanted to be buried in a cemetery just outside Tel Aviv," Gary told him. David didn't bother asking how Gary knew this. "Rather than fly to Israel, I've arranged a memorial service here at the base next Wednesday."

"You don't think we should go to Tel Aviv?"

"No, I don't. It's covered, David."

"I'll come up Tuesday after work."

David moved through the next few days in a daze. When he woke up Saturday morning, he remembered he was supposed to meet the other dogpeople. At first, he

resisted the idea of going, but figured he'd be better off doing something.

\* \* \*

When the nightmares started, he had tried to hide them from Melinka. But she knew him too well. She politely waited for him to talk about them, but Bo could see the concern in her eyes. One night it got so bad he cried out in his sleep, waking both he and his beloved. They stayed up the rest of the night, Bo recalling everything he could from the nightmares.

The day after the All Dog All Hallows Eve party, despite the fact he'd had the best night's sleep in weeks, he was restless and couldn't focus. The voice in his head told him to flip on the television to Arson Bell for reasons he couldn't fathom. He wanted to be surprised by seeing the Animal Control guy arguing with the skinheads, but he couldn't. The telephone jolted him out of his reverie.

"Who is it?" he called out.

"It's your friend Angelica." Bo had told Melinka all about Angelica soon after they'd met. It amazed him how supportive Melinka had been of his relationship with this woman she knew had captured a piece, albeit a smaller piece of his heart.

"Hey, girl," he said into the phone.

"I expected you to call by now, Bo." Her voice was serious and stern. A light bulb flashed on in Bo's mind.

"Nightmares?"

"The worst."

"Where are you?"

"Tibet. Bert, Jr. came to see me. He's a lot like his dad. "

"And ever so curious about his mysterious mom," Bo said.

"Yes," Angelica said. "He is committed to his acting career, although it barely feeds him and he can't afford to travel much. And, well, his divorce was final last month. But Bert isn't having nightmares -- you and I are."

"I had no idea you were," Bo said.

"I'll be flying him home and in as much as I'd rather return here, I won't. Not yet."

"Coming to visit me for Christmas?"

"I only hope I won't be too late."

Bo knew better than to ask too late for what.

"The guest room is yours. Bert can sleep with Bo, Jr., if you want to bring him."

"I won't be bringing him. His grandparents are rather elderly and don't want to miss Christmas with their grandson and great grandsons. Yes, I'm a grandmother, but we can talk about that later. My disappearance from their festivities should make them happy."

"That good?"

"They never have liked me much. Anyway, I'll let you know the details of my arrival later. These nightmares are so full of blood. And dogs. Hounds of hell?"

"Are they big black dogs with brown eyebrows?"

"Yes."

"You'll like Shakti and Gandhi. They're nice dogs."

"So they really do exist. Do the others exist as well?"

"I suspect so, if your dreams are anything like mine. Is this what your dream all those years ago foretold?"

"Yes." She hung up without explaining anything. Bo expected nothing less.

That evening, Bo hid his anxiety until he heard Melinka scream. He ran into the kitchen where Melinka stood screaming and crying. A voice on the phone receiver she'd thrown across the room kept asking if she was all right. Bo picked up the receiver.

Bo, Jr. was dead. He'd been stabbed to death at the video store by a young man who demanded his jacket, a special design Bo had made personally for his son's twenty-sixth birthday. Utilizing old skills at dealing with death, he numbed himself in order to take care of business.

The next few days were hellish for his wife and family. Melinka was having trouble keeping herself together, leaning heavily on Bo for support. Thandaika flew home and was so scared Bo spent a great deal of time



helping her understand her feelings. Like him, Jana seemed numbed by the experience. He knew grief would crumble his strength and hers at some point, but now was not the time.

On Saturday, Melinka cried quietly as he prepared for the walk he'd take with the other dogpeople. The girls studied quietly in their rooms. His heart told him to stay and comfort his family, but the voice in his head demanded he leave. Torn yet determined, Bo loaded the dogs into his truck and headed for Sandpoint.

\* \* \*

When the nightmares began, Sookie feared for her sanity. Would she become her mother? she asked herself. Ron had enrolled in a program at Antioch University after the *Seattle PI* declare bankruptcy, to become a psychotherapist. He tried desperately to help his wife by analyzing her dreams, but Sookie was not convinced anything

he said had a lot to do with their true meaning.

"I almost got a ticket today," she said over dinner.

"For what?"

"Walking Adagio without a leash. The Animal Control officer gave me a warning and let me go."

"Maybe your nightmares were a premonition," Ron suggested.

"Maybe," Sookie said. "I'm taking Adagio to the All Dog All Hallows Eve Party tonight, but I won't be too late."

"Sounds like fun. Maybe it'll help you reconcile your dreams. You could use with a full night's sleep."

"We both could."

The next morning, Sookie slept late. The Symphony had no concerts for a few weeks so Sookie had control over her time. When she woke up it was early afternoon. She made tea and flipped on the television, staring at the picture but seeing very little. She almost spilled her tea when

she saw the Animal Control officer who she'd talked to the day before. She listened carefully as he asked questions of the skinheads who boasted that they had secret ways of harnessing power. The word "secret" made Sookie shiver, reminding her of her mother's final lucid words to her about the dangers of keeping secrets.

Sookie turned off the television until the television and stared into space until the telephone snapped her out of her reverie.

"Sookie?"

"Yes?"

"It's Sun-Yee. I have some disturbing news. Can we meet?"

Sookie looked around the coffee house and team room, anxious and annoyed. Too much unhappiness made her uncomfortable. She spotted Sun-Yee at a corner table. Sun-Yee did not look very comfortable either.

"Where do I start?" Sun-Yee said.

"Is Desmond well?"

"Yes. Everything is fine." For some

reason, Sun-Yee's discomfort reminded Sookie of her last conversation with her mother.

"You knew my mother, didn't you?" she asked, trying to initiate some kind of conversation.

The surprise on Sun-Yee's face made Sookie look away. "Did she ever mention me?"

"Just before I left Seoul. She said something about you teaching her how to play hopscotch. When I asked father who you were, he told me but you know how he gets."

"That I do."

"How is it you know?"

Sun-Yee laughed briefly. "So like him you are, Sookie. And so like me." Realization dawned on Sookie so quickly she was unable to speak. "Yes, I am your biological mother.

At least I don't have a genetic disposition towards insanity, Sookie thought, blushing with the shame of relief.

"Your father wanted so much to have a child. Your mother, too, although she couldn't conceive. After you were born, your father took care of me. He even introduced

me to Desmond. For that, I will always be grateful."

"What were you two talking about at my wedding?" Sookie asked without thinking, her mind overwhelmed.

"First let me tell you that your father has kept no secrets from either me or Desmond. We've kept track of you all these years. When your father decided to send you here, Desmond and I agreed to take care of you. His only request was that we keep the secret of your birth until -- how do I say this -- excuse me for my clumsiness, my tongue feels like two left feet." For some reason, this made Sookie laugh, recalling the clumsiness she'd always felt. Sun-Yee, as if reading her mind, laughed with her. The discomfort overcome, Sookie and Sun-Yee talked intimately about that which they shared.

"I never could figure out -- so many things. Sometimes, when I was growing up, I'd wonder if I hadn't been exchanged at birth. Why did you wait to tell me?"

"A promise. At your wedding, your father told me that his having to hospitalize Jung-

Ja was due to the fact that the stress of taking care of her was weakening his own health. He made me promise that if anything happened to him, I would keep the secret of your birth until –"

"Until mother died," Sookie finished for her.

"Yes."

"How did she die?"

"Peacefully in her sleep. I think I must have known her death was near because I've been having these awful nightmares. The night I got the news, I slept through the night."

"Were there lots of dogs in your nightmares?" Sookie asked, reaching for more tea. She watched her hands perform the movements as though they had no connection to her.

"Yes. And blood."

"I've had the dreams too. So have a number of other dogpeople I know. We're getting together tomorrow for a dogwalk. Have you ever been religious, Sun-Yee -- or do I call you mother?"

"Sun-Yee is fine. And, no, I've not found a need for religion. Why?"

"Some of the imagery reminds me of the revival meetings my mother used to drag me to. They are Christian in nature, with a few added twists. Maybe the other dogpeople will know."

"Perhaps I should go with you tomorrow," Sun-Yee suggested with a tone that told Sookie that it was the last thing she wanted to do.

"Why don't I call you after we meet?"

"I'd like that. I'm sorry about your mother, Sookie."

"Don't be. Will you come with me to Korea to take care of things? We'll make it a short trip, if that's okay."

"Of course, but let me make the arrangements, Sookie. It's the least I can do."

Their hug outside the tea room brought Sookie back into her body temporarily. By the time she got home, she felt like a cloud descended over her mind. Not even telling Ron about her meeting with Sun-Yee

brought her back into herself -- whoever that was.

Sookie slept very little that night. It was her thoughts and her fears that kept her awake, not nightmares. In a daze, she gathered together her dog-walking accouterments and drove to Sandpoint.

\* \* \*

Timmy vibrated with excitement. He had done all of his preparations for his initiation. Buzz would go bonkers over that dog costume he'd obtained. It looked better on a human anyway. He'd made a few adjustments so it would fit him. Waiting in the chilly garage wearing only the costume over the skimpy white robe made from a sheet, Timmy thought about what Buzz had told him.

Buzz's grandfather founded the Church of Mephistopheles somewhere in Idaho, Timmy forgot where. Having had a minimal amount of exposure to religion, the most pertinent being the pages of the bible he still



kept in his hotel room that he read sometimes, Timmy's beliefs were like a soft clay waiting to be sculpted. Timmy especially liked the spin Buzz put on the bible. But that was only the beginning. Buzz also gave Timmy copies of all kinds of books and papers. Timmy read everything Buzz gave him and soaked up the information like nothing he'd learned in school. Although the Church used Christian symbols, it went much farther. No wine and wafers at this church – they went for blood and meat.

Timmy's first and most important initiation would entail a baptism in blood, whatever that meant. It sounded good to Timmy. He liked blood -- no, he loved blood. Buzz said blood was the most sacred of all substances and the most powerful, if one knew how to harness its power. Buzz did and soon Timmy would.

Louise, Timmy's pink woman, dressed in a red toga with red leggings. She asked him to remove all his clothes except his underwear. Timmy's mouth watered. She licked her glossy red lips before speaking

with a deep sultry voice and Timmy moaned with pleasure.

"Do you think I'm pretty enough to be a movie star?" she asked. Timmy, mouth open slightly, nodded. She laughed and lathered his head. The razor must have been very sharp, because she shaved the hair off his head easily. Timmy couldn't be sure if it was accidental or on purpose when she nicked him. He liked the sensation of her tongue lapping up the blood. "Saliva makes it clot faster," she said. "If you're real good, you can see some of us on television after your initiation. We were on the Arson Bell Show. I sat in the audience and didn't say anything, but some of the others were actually on stage. It was awesome. Even Buzz liked what he saw." Louise's excitement was contagious. Timmy was thankful the costume covered his erection. Louise's touch made him shiver all over.

When she was finished, Louise knowingly put Timmy's hand on her left breast as she redressed him in the costume he'd brought. Buzz hadn't been impressed but Louise

ooed and ahned. Properly adorned, she led him into the yard. One of the church members owned the farmhouse and the acreage surrounding it. It had no trees, no sense of protection except for the fact that the owner's holdings went as far as the eye could see. Timmy wasn't so impressed, although he did enjoy the crisp salty air of the ferry ride to Whidbey Island.

The yard had been transformed while Timmy was locked up in the farmhouse. Carcasses of what could have been dogs, pigs or whatever else, were strapped to wooden stars and cut in so many places, blood disguised their skins. The blood dripped into large buckets. Timmy was so awed by the sight he barely remembered the words Buzz had told him to say.

The incense Timmy brought didn't cover the scent of death, but somehow enhanced it instead. The sounds of dogs barking coming out of the large stereo vibrated inside Timmy's head. The group surrounded Timmy, chanting something and gyrating to the arrhythmic continence. Timmy matched

their gyrations with moves of his own that made the eyeballs bounce and the red strips quiver.

Louise led him to a child's inflated swimming pool, removed his costume and underwear and sat him down. Two people took each bucket of blood and poured it over his naked body. Timmy writhed in ecstasy as they dipped pots into the pool and continued the blood bath. The loud barking that accompanied the bath enhanced his pleasure. He looked up at Louise who had removed her toga and danced topless for him. Timmy's mounting excitement translated into another erection that did not go unnoticed by Louise or the rest of the group. Buzz led him out of the pool and over to a table. A young girl, maybe a year or two younger than he, was tied to the table. She looked a lot like his sister did only a few years ago. He figured she must be drugged because she continued laying quietly except for her head that rolled back and forth, even when Buzz instructed him to mount her.

Timmy did as Buzz bade, covering the girl in blood. As he entered the girl, she tried to reach through her drug-induced stupor and resist, but her reach wasn't far enough to stop Timmy from consummation. He could also tell that he was not her first. Too bad.

Timmy didn't remember much after that. Buzz gave him an injection that put him to sleep. Later, Buzz told him this was only the second time in 15 years he'd had to calm an initiate down with drugs. But Timmy, just before ejaculation, had reached down and tried to choke the girl to death. Buzz was not about to let one of his flock die at Timmy's hand. Buzz explained that he did what he had to when things got out of control. Death was divine but murder, after all, was a sin.

## 14. MEETING OF THE MASTERPACK

*A group working together brings out both the very best and the very worst in the participants. Too often there's at least one person who is so overwhelmed, they disrupt the group or run away, but not always and not forever. Groups are like packs, with an extra layer of intention. The willingness for participants to submit their individuation feeds the power of the group as well as each participant.*

"You got us here, so spill, Nina," demanded Bo.

"I never claimed I had any answers," Nina said. "But all of you and that Animal Control man keep appearing in my dreams. I also see shadows of people I've never met. And then there's all that blood. Lucky for me, red is my favorite color. It seemed important to meet, that's all."

"That's all?" snapped David. "What do you mean that's all?"

"I' a witch, not a god," she responded.

"There's got to be more," Liz insisted.

"Looks like we have work to do," said Sookie.

"Work? What kind of work?" David snapped again.

"I do know that the only dreamless night I've had in weeks was the night we met at the party," Nina said.

"Me too," Sookie concurred.

"Does that mean we have to get together dream without nightmares?" Bo asked.

"I suspect so," Nina said. "I think Sookie's right in saying we have work to do."

"What work?" David screeched.

"I don't know, David. We have to make it up as we go along," Nina said with a smile.

"Why don't we start by getting to know each other."

They talked, barely scratching the surface. Especially ominous was their stories of a recent death in their lives. This was some dark serendipity.

Thankfully, the dogs didn't require very much attention as they romped happily. Three hours went by quickly, their minds filling with new information. By the end of the walk, they agreed to meet every Saturday and Sunday at 3 p.m. for dogwalks.

Liz was a little disappointed when she woke up late the next morning. A dreamless night meant she was rested for a change, but she vaguely missed her pre-dawn sketching session. While sipping coffee, the phone rang.

"How are you?" asked Sarah.

"Weepy and pre-menstrual, but okay. And you?" Liz wasn't about to freak Sarah out with her real concerns.

"We got our second full night's sleep in weeks. John couldn't be happier. Those nightmares were really getting to him."

"I didn't dream either." Liz looked at the clock. It was closing in on 3 p.m. "I hate to say this, Sarah, but--"

"You've got places to go, dogs to see."

"Right."



Liz couldn't help but wonder how John fit into the Masterpack. As she packed her fanny pack with dog accessories and led Rover to the car, she looked over at the window where Sebastian usually sat and was surprised to see Bob, lift his paw as if waving good bye. He looked as sad as she felt. Or maybe she was projecting her feelings onto a cat because when it came down to it, he looked like the same old Bob. As she put Rover into the car, she envied Bob's seeming ability to expedite his grief and move on.

Rover was especially jumpy in the car. The rain prevented her from sticking her head out the window without sneezing. Whenever she sneezed, she dampened the back of Liz's head. What a gal.

"Easy, puppygirl," Liz tried to soothe. Like Rover, Liz had butterflies in her stomach. Somehow she knew this dog walk would be like no other. This pack was like no other. They were a Masterpack -- that was Nina's word -- bound together by grief. Together they were to do something

important. At the time, it took everything in her to have faith that all would work out the way it was supposed to because she didn't have a clue what was going on. Neither did the others. Neither did Rover, although Liz could never be too sure about her canine friend.

\* \* \*

I figure our long romp with the Masterpack accounts for a night without dreams. The bipeddogs were so focused on their singing it was easy to ignore them. Besides, we had some things to work out amongst ourselves – like the hierarchy. It took a while, but we finally made some agreements. We had two hierarchies – one was serious, the other playful. The serious one goes like this: Gandhi, me, Shakti, Adagio, Judah, Puck and Rachel. But the playful one: Puck, me, Adagio, Judah, Rachel, Shakti and Gandhi. I like being second in both. It's the best. I only have to challenge one other topdog, which I wouldn't

because I have no desire to do so, but all the others have to go through me first.

At first, we tried to include the bipeddogs but we gave up. They'll work their way into our hierarchy once they figure out their own. We could wait.

We also took some time while we rested in between romps to share information about our familypacks. It seems they'd been very sad lately. Like me, Shakti and Gandhi lost one of their members. Unfortunately, everyone except Shakti and Gandhi live without catdogs, so they thought I was whining about nothing. Still, we recognize we share something that binds us even more to the Masterpack.

Gandhi insists we will be called to do something. I believe him because he's our topdog, but I'm also suspicious. Can't we be a Masterpack just because? Gandhi says I'm second dog because I'm such an optimist and he's topdog because he's a realist, which of course gets everyone else to come up with what they are. Puck claims he's a magician, which is probably true. Rachel says she's the

runt who pretends to know less than she does. Adagio thinks of himself as a dancer who can gracefully move around any obstacle. Shakti knows herself to be cheerleader who likes to make other dogs feel good. Judah can't decide what he is. We discuss it together and finally agree he's a dog's dog -- loyal and predictable.

So satisfied are we by the end of our long walk, we happily get into our different large tin cans to go back to our individual large doghouses. Life is good.

\* \* \*

Timmy woke up the evening following his initiation with a smile on his face. He couldn't remember ever feeling so content. The dried blood under his nails reminded him that the ecstasy he had experienced was real. However, discretion was next to godliness -- that's what Buzz said -- and he scrubbed away the last vestiges of his night of glory. The last thing he remembered telling Buzz before Louise washed him up

and took him home was that he was worried the future would pale by comparison. Buzz had smiled and said, "The best is yet to come. You've tasted the glory, soon you will embrace the power."

Gina walked into the coffee shop while he ate. She had a deep cut across her cheek and two black eyes. She walked with a limp and her left arm was in a lace sling. Her new dress clung to every curve. Timmy was glad to see she was okay, but found his passion had been spent elsewhere.

"He only raped and tortured me," she said as she sat down. "No worse than what my father did. At least he paid me big bucks." Timmy shrugged and continued eating. "I like your head," she said, stroking his baldness.

"Me too," he said smiling. Despite his calm, Gina still made him a little nervous. But most people who talked to him made him nervous. "Got three rooms tonight."

"I'll spread the word. I could use a room of my own tonight. No way I can work

looking like this. In fact, I'm thinking of taking a vacation."

"I think you look great," Timmy said eyeing the cut.

"That's 'cause you're horny," she said. Before he could respond to the contrary, she got up and limped out of the coffee shop. "Later," she said flipping him off just before the glass door shut.

Timmy was so content, the night flew by. The next morning, Louise dropped by just as his shift ended. At first he didn't recognize her. She wore a wig that looked like real hair and dressed in a tailored suit. She even wore make-up and perfume.

"Bad news, bad boy," she said. "Buzz says you can't attend another ritual for at least three months. He says you're too unstable." She obviously enjoyed his shock.

"But I've got to go again and soon," he whined. He'd never felt loss like this before. It was intolerable.

"I know, bad boy, but at least you can come to meetings," she said.

"Not good enough," he said. "Why me?"

"He does this sometimes."

"This is bad news, really bad news."

"Maybe I can cheer you up, bad boy. I hear one his rejects is out there doing interesting stuff."

"How do I find him?" he asked with an edge of intimidation and fear that made Louise twitch with excitement.

"I used to fuck him and any other rejects during the initiations, but I also fucked Nero outside the group. I haven't seen him in months. Last I heard, his daddy got him a job at Boeing."

"Boeing?" Timmy liked airplanes.

"He works in an office doing something."

"His name's Nero?"

"No, that's his nickname. His real name's Nathan Eichenberger."

"Why are you telling me this?" Timmy asked.

"Because I'm getting sick of Buzz telling everyone what to do and I always liked Nero. He's a bad boy like you."

"What does that mean?"

"Find him and you'll see."

"I will."

"When you do, call me." She handed him her card. Louise Hatcher was a sales representative for Dow Chemicals.

"Thanks," Timmy said. "I'll be in touch."

"I know," she said, her voice promising things that made Timmy breathe faster. "Bye, bad boy." He watched her swing her voluptuous hips as she sauntered out the door of the hotel.

"The future is mine," Timmy said as he pulled out the phone book to look up Boeing.



## 15. PARKLESS AND DOGLESS

*The mind is conditioned by the body's reactions to various forms of nourishment. Other conditioning factors can include the environment in which sustenance is ingested, and the other people who share in the partaking. Fueling a body is a lot of work – and play.*

By Thanksgiving, the Masterpack had gotten to know one another rather well. They came from such different worlds, they concluded if they hadn't met through their dogs, they might never have met. Their lives had no other connection -- up until the present, that is. Death and nightmares bound them together in a way that was both comforting and terrifying. Liz still missed Sebastian, but everyone else had lost a person or people, so she didn't voice her grief as much as everyone else. They were all at different points in the grieving process. At least that's what Sookie said. Her husband

had been studying the stages of grief and used them as guinea pigs to prove what the books said.

The humans of the Masterpack decided to try out seeing each other outside their dogwalking venue. It seemed like a good idea at the time. Bo invited all of them to his home for a potluck on the Sunday evening following Thanksgiving. Liz made her always-popular chicken soup with fresh chicken, veggies and matzo balls. Nina made lasagna, Sookie brought a vegetable casserole and kim-chee, David brought a chocolate cake, and Bo made a salad and provided beverages. No dogs were allowed to this particular gathering because the ensuing madness did not seem worth the effort. Besides, they all wanted to get to know one another without having to participate in canine activities.

Liz was surprised that Bo's home was rather nondescript, except for the collection of African art locked away in his study. Otherwise, the colors were muted, the furniture conventional and the accessories

uninspired. And it was spotless. Evidence of children and dogs was obscenely absent.

"You must vacuum twice a day to keep the animal hair at bay," Liz said.

"Shakti and Gandhi are only allowed in certain rooms," he said. "Same with the kids when they were little. But I promised the kids I wouldn't show you their rooms." The dogs had their own room. It resembled a shabby lived-in den, complete with two couches and a floor covered with old dog bones. Liz had no idea Shakti and Gandhi were boneheads like Rover.

Their small talk kept returning to topics related to dogs. The fact that they weren't able to do any more than scratch the surface bothered Liz. On dogwalks they'd intimately confided in each other. But here in Bo's home, relaxed and civilized, they couldn't seem to get past social convention. It was as though something prevented them from making a meaningful connection.

"Did anyone else see that Arson Bell Show with a bunch of skinheads?" Liz asked out of nowhere.

"Was it last month?" asked Sookie.

"It was sometime between the All Dog All Hallows Eve party and our first meeting," David said.

"Yes, but did anyone else notice that Animal Control guy?" Liz pursued. Everyone nodded, but said nothing.

"That reminds me," Nina exclaimed. "I got a ticket last week."

"Where?" David asked.

"Up at the monastery. I knew I should have kept Puck on a leash until we got to the woods."

"Was it the same Animal Control guy?" Liz asked.

"No, it was a woman," Nina answered. The conversation continued along the lines of "tickets I have gotten." Something about the way each of them took the stage made Liz feel disassociated, like she did at a party where everyone else knows one another. Looking around, she sensed everyone else felt the same way.

"I've been working on my yearly solstice painting," she said.

"Your what painting?" David asked.

"The winter solstice, David," Nina said. "She paints a picture of her critters. Will we all get copies?"

"If I ever get the damn thing painted. Whenever I work on it, I think of Sebastian and, well, I don't know." Bad move, Liz thought.

"Do you do something like what Liz is doing to celebrate the winter solstice, Nina?" asked Sookie. Bless her and her curiosity, thought Liz.

Nina launched into a diatribe about how many of the roots of modern Christmas festivities are rooted in paganism. Bo said he believed Christmas was less of a religious holiday and more of an opportunity to celebrate. David argued that Christmas was a holy time but that its meaning was lost in commercialism. Sookie said Christmas was different things to different people and that to her, it meant her performance schedule intensified. Liz did her usual tirade about how it was the one time of year she felt like an ostracized minority because people

accused her of being a scrooge or someone without a spiritual center, all because she didn't appreciate rituals alien to her, just as her Hanukkah rituals were alien to them. By the time they agreed to disagree, they each felt like outsiders and that no one else really understood their point of view. With self-consciousness and discomfort, each took their leave.

"Saturday, everyone," Nina said. They all nodded their agreement.

As if to reaffirm her intention to continue going on dogwalks with the Masterpack and leave the extracurricular activities out of it, rather than having no nightmares that night, Liz had the worst yet. She woke up to blood all over her sheets. The images of her nightmare jolted her conscious mind until she realized she'd just gotten her period.

\* \* \*

Masterdog leaves me in the house before taking off in the tin can. I'm never quite sure what to think when she leaves after the sun

goes down. It changes our routine. Bob says he doesn't care, but catdogs have a very different relationship to time and space than normal dogs. He tries to explain it to me again, and while he's speaking he makes complete sense. But the minute he stops talking, I forget everything he's said. It makes him mad and he climbs into the window and ignores me.

I do what I usually do when Masterdog is away and she leaves me inside. I climb up onto her bed and sleep. I like sleeping. I especially like that place between waking and sleeping. I imagine it resembles Bob's perceptions of reality. The images in my mind are clear and I feel a rapport with all living things and the energy they produce. I can even sense what the dog next door is thinking.

I wake when I sense Masterdog's large tin can is close to home. By the time she unlocks the door, I'm wide awake and ready to greet her.

When Masterdog walks in, the first thing I notice is that she smells like Shakti,

Gandhi, Bodog and all the other biped dogs in the Masterpack. I'm stunned. How could she go for a walk without me? But she also smells like bipeddog food, most of which smells bad.

Masterdog is not happy. Sure, she gives me hugs and kisses -- Bob too, much to his dismay. But I can tell she still feels like that something she is missing is becoming more and more difficult to live without. I try to tell her that the something missing is me, but she doesn't understand, or if she does, she disagrees. I bark until she gives me cookies. Instead of taking them outside, I surprise her by eating them in front of her. At first she doesn't notice. So I crunch them louder than usual. I feel her unhappiness fade once she realizes that I can also change the routine.

Bob meows and curls up in her lap, making purring sounds only catdogs can make. I try to imitate him, but I can't no matter what I do. All of a sudden, he swats his tail, gets up and goes to drink water. I try to replace him in Masterdog's lap, but



she just pushes me away. However, she does scratch me under my neck the way I like it. My leg twitches in ecstasy, the closest I can get to Bob's sounds. Life is good, I think, just before I go lie down on my bed and go to sleep again.

\* \* \*

"Why didn't you just leave that abusive husband of yours," Nina asks Sookie. The Masterpack had reconnected on the level Liz loved best.

"Where would I have gone?" Sookie snapped back.

"Home to your parents," David suggested.

"And shame my father? No. I couldn't do that," Sookie said.

"But he was beating you up, raping you, humiliating you, let alone abusing your dogs" Nina pursued. "Puck, leave it." Puck reluctantly dropped whatever awful substance he was eating.

"You don't understand," Sookie said. Liz didn't either, but figured it was some cultural thing.

"American women have no idea how much more freedom they have," Bo said.

"American men are just as sexist as the men of any other culture," Liz said. Sookie laughed.

"You have no idea, what you're talking about, Liz," Nina said.

"The packaging is different, that's all," Liz continued. "I grew up believing I could do anything I wanted. But I also thought everyone else believed I could do anything I wanted. So now I do anything I can, which is less than what I want, and everyone else wonders why I'm doing the small part of the big part of what I want to do, let alone do the big part of what I would rather be doing."

"I'm having trouble following you," Sookie said.

"So that's why you're still single," David said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Liz challenged. David could be a real pain. Rover

was nosing Puck's belly so he'd roll over.  
"Rover, take it easy."

"I only meant that the women I know want to have it all -- children, career, personal and spiritual growth. And then they complain there isn't enough time in the day to do it all."

"David's right," Sookie said. "My marriage to Ron is very American -- not at all like it was with Sok-Joon. Ron likes to think he does his share of housework and child-rearing, but when it comes down to it, I do most of the work. And then I have the symphony on top of it. It's not so easy being an American woman with constant choices. In many ways, life in Korea was easier." Adagio burst forth from the bushes.

"Except for when your husband beat the crap out of you," Nina spat. "Charlie never hit me, but he was still impossible. Men are the problem. If women ran the world, it'd be a different place."

"Different, yes," Bo said. "But better? I don't know. I've seen women get pretty petty and manipulative when a man's involved."

Liz could tell Bo's only intention was to be provocative. He takes particular pleasure in watching us get all worked up, the slime, she thought.

"Is it so different being in a relationship with another woman?" Sookie asked Nina, diffusing the responses ready to explode.

"I don't pretend to be the spokeswoman for the lesbian nation, but in all honesty I'd have to say yes and no."

"Typical female response," David said. He was the only one who laughed at his joke.

"Fuck off," Liz said before she could stop herself.

"Easy, you two," Bo said. "I want to know more about this yes and no ambiguity. Carry on, Nina." Liz bit her tongue. She was tired and cranky and bleeding on herself. All she really wanted was to be was angry. Damn Sebastian. It was all his fault. His absence was affecting her in ways she didn't expect.

"Delta and I try to avoid the typical male-female roles, but sometimes it's not easy."

"Are you the man or the woman?" Sookie asked, making Liz cringe with embarrassment.

"You mean who beats up on who when we're having a fight?" Nina's rage at Sookie's victimization was startling. Liz made a mental note to ask her about it when she knew Nina wasn't going to bite her head off.

"Why is my past so important to you?" Sookie asked, verbalizing my question.

"I hate victims."

"So you become a persecutor instead?" Bo asked quietly.

"Victims make me feel helpless and feeling helpless pisses me off."

"You're not the only one who feels helpless when it comes to these terrible nightmares," Sookie said through gritted teeth.

Oh yeah, those, Liz thought, trying not to beat herself up for blaming her dead cat.

"They're obviously not getting to you," Nina said through gritted teeth, imitating Sookie.

"Cat fight, cat fight," David interjected.

"Fuck off," Nina, Sookie and Liz said in unison, followed by hysterical laughter. David grinned, but Bo didn't even crack a smile.

"I'm sorry," David said.

"No, we're sorry, right girls?" Liz said. He looked so sad and dejected, she had to say something even if he was acting like a jerk.

"I thought you hated being called girls," Bo said with a patronizing sneer.

"Only other women can call each other girls," Nina explained.

"Any other rules we boys should know about?" David asked. No one responded to his question, assuming it was rhetorical. They continued the dogwalk in an uncomfortable silence.

The Masterpack got to a fork in the road. Liz half expected the men and women to take different paths, but they didn't. Maybe it was because the dogs all played so well together, or maybe it was because they really didn't want to separate. Either way, the combination of disruptive emotions and happy dogs made her feel even more

connected to these strangers with whom she walked.

\* \* \*

I hear the bipeddogs nip at one another, but the rest of us are determined to stick together. After all, we're a Masterpack. I wish they'd decide upon their ranking already. Then maybe they wouldn't play so rough.

We reach a place where we can either walk up to the top of the hill (boring) or continue to the beach. Puck, Adagio, Judah and I make it clear we opt for the beach. Shakti and Gandhi don't care as long as we stay together. Rachel doesn't want to go to the beach, but she knows she's outnumbered. The bipeddogs follow like good bipeddogs.

Their silence bothers me. Bipeddogs usually sing up a storm when they're together. So I roll on the ground on my back and start barking. Gandhi gives a deep woof as reinforcement. Judah and Rachel stand over me and bark. Our voices inspire the

bipeddogs back to singing the way they usually do. What a relief. Now I can concentrate on having fun.

\* \* \*

"Ever since my parents died, I feel like I've lost my net," David said. "Not that I ever leaned on them as an adult. But now that they're gone -- I don't know."

"I know how you feel," Nina said. "My father died last year and it's as though I no longer have someone to protect me. Not that he ever did."

"Ron says that losing a parent is a major life change and brings up all the unresolved childhood insecurities," Sookie said.

"Is that happening to you?" Liz asked her.

"Yes, although I also gained a mother. It's all a bit too confusing. One minute I'm happy, the next I'm sad and then I'm irritable. The ups and downs are very disconcerting. If Ron wasn't there, I don't know what I'd do."



"My mother died years ago but sometimes it feels like yesterday," Bo said. "I was in the sky 1,000 miles away, but I knew the moment she died. I felt like a piece of me left my body. It took me years to retrieve that piece and regain my sense of self. Sure, I went about my daily business, but something very crucial to my being had been missing."

"Ron also says that losing a child is the worst type of grief," Sookie said quietly.

"It is," Bo said. "I may never get over it. I think of all the young men whose lives I took in Iraq and I can't help but feel even worse. Only lately did I start to realize that all those boys had parents."

"But it was war," Liz defended.

"So? Death is death. Grief is grief. If someone you love dies, how they die means less than the loss of them in your life," Bo said with such pain Liz felt her eyes water. He held Shakti while the other dogs played in the water. She struggled against his grip.

"Let her go," Nina said. He obeyed. Shakti bounded into the water with so much

enthusiasm, she splashed the other dogs. Bo smiled as Judah, Rachel and Puck, who had been playing along the water's edge, got drenched. Even Gandhi got wet.

"I hate grief," Nina said. "It makes me feel like a helpless victim." Without thinking, Sookie gave Nina a hug. As she cried softly on Sookie's shoulder, everyone else touched her lightly.

The miserable humans of the Masterpack walked back to the parking lot, this time in a comfortable silence, periodically reaching out to another with a pat or a squeeze. Liz had never felt such closeness with strangers before. But then again, they weren't exactly strangers any more. They weren't friends either. No, they were a Masterpack.

\* \* \*

My hair is short, but thick. When I get wet from the rain I dry quickly. But when I go swimming, it can take a long time to dry. Whenever Shakti gets wet, she stinks. I envy her. At the tin cans, Bodog takes a

blanket out of his large tin can and rubs her down. I can't tell if she shivers from the cold or with delight. If it was me, I'd shiver from the cold. As it is, Masterdog loads me into the large tin can and I scratch the blanket until it forms a pile before lying down. She opens the window, but I'm too concerned over staying warm to enjoy the wind up my nose.

Bob greets us at the door, meowing and whipping his tail in delight at our arrival. He even lets me sniff his butt. I give him a big lick and he actually likes it. I ask him why he's so happy and he tells me that the Masterpack has passed the first test, whatever that means.

Sarahdog and Johndog come over to play. While Masterdog makes bipeddog food and sings to Sarahdog, Johndog plays fetch with me in the yard. I'm tired from my walk, but Johndog is so excited when I fetch the ball, I play along. Bob runs from one end of the yard to the other. I want to chase him, but I know if I do, he'll get mad at me and at this point, I want everyone to be happy. I'm

not a babydog no matter what the other dogs in the Masterpack say. Learning to cooperate is what sets the dogs apart from the babydogs. I know they're just teasing me, but sometimes I don't like it.

We all eat at the same time. Johndog slips me some yummy morsels under the table. I pretend I don't see some of them, so Bob can eat them. I may be part of a Masterpack, but I'm also part of a family pack. Lucky me.

\* \* \*

An hour before his shift, Timmy sat in the coffee shop drinking coffee when both Gina and Louise walked in at the same time. Talk about weird. He watched their visceral reactions to one another, despite their obvious resemblance. They were both attractive blondes wearing red that hugged their nicely proportioned bodies. Gina was younger, taller and had the prettier face. But Louise's breasts and butt were shapelier and her countenance more mature and enticing.

Timmy didn't hide his joy of the moment when the two women jostled for the chair across from him. Louise grabbed Gina's breast and squeezed.

"We're busy, little girl," Louise said. Tears came to Gina's eyes but she remained unmoved.

"Squeeze harder, baby," she said, rubbing both Louise's breasts. Louise let out a small shriek. "How many, Timmy?" Gina asked, still staring at Louise.

"All filled up tonight," Timmy said.

"Liar," Gina said, turning her attention to Timmy. She looked more hurt than angry. He shrugged. "Does your boss know you're using the spare rooms for your special meetings?" Timmy blushed. "Your boss is a client of mine, Timmy. Better watch your backside. Word's out you and your friends are scum." Before he could respond, Gina walked out.

"Fuck her," Louise said as she sat down. "Once Nero pulls off the heist, you won't need your stupid job."

Timmy liked Nero, but he didn't always trust him. Tracking him down at Boeing had been a snap. He'd risen up the ranks to contract officer. It took a while for Timmy to convince Nero who he was, but mentioning Louise and describing his initiation did the trick. He, Louise and Timmy had gotten together almost every chance they got, often having late night meetings in one of the empty rooms. Nero claimed no one else was good enough to join. Timmy's employer was clueless and seemed to have found another receptacle for his libido.

Nero captivated Timmy's attention like no one else ever had. Not even Buzz had Nero's charisma. He made the impossible sound probable. Timmy desperately wanted to trust him, but robbing an armored truck was no small task. However, Nero had convinced him and Louise that he had the perfect plan. The return, if they pulled it off, would cover everything on Nero's shopping list, including a few fancy knives for Timmy. Nero had a thing for antiques he could use in rituals -- ornate buckets, goblets, scepters and torture

devices. Nero lived on a farm he owned on in Fall City, 30 miles east of Seattle, and said he wanted to build two or three separate buildings for Timmy, Louise and others he planned to recruit. But he needed money to do that, more than he made at Boeing.

"Nero wants to do another ritual," Louise whispered.

"Where?"

"A beach on Whidbey Island. It's nowhere near where you had your initiation. Nero says the tide will wash away any -- you know."

"Who owns the land?"

"It's a state park."

"Cool," he said. Nero had been giving him all sorts of stuff to read about how the government was intruding into people's lives, making horrendous mistakes at the expense of citizens, and the world order conspiracies in which they participate. Timmy was learning how to hate the government which was easy, since he already hated authority of any kind.

"Nero says we need to generate more power to make sure the -- you know." Louise abruptly stopped talking when a cop walked in.

"Where is Nero?"

"Asleep in his room. He wants you to wake him when you get off shift so we can have a long meeting." In Timmy's mind, he could visualize the bulk he knew as Nero, snoring loudly in a bed that could barely hold him. Nero was about as non-descript as a man could get -- medium height, overweight, balding, shifty-eyed. But the man could move his bulk in ways unimaginable when the need arose. The room Nero had claimed as his own was next to Timmy's room, the one he periodically shared with Louise. At first he was self-conscious. Louise liked loud sex. But Nero insisted on hearing as much as he could. He'd declared himself some kind of priest, embraced celibacy, but got off on other people's pleasure.

"Let's wake him together," Timmy said, grinding the toe of his cowboy boots into the



spot in between Louise's open legs. She moaned with pain and pleasure, and threw a glass of water into his face.

"Bite me, babe," she said, laughing as she sauntered out the door. Timmy followed, his mouth watering in anticipation.

## 16. MASTERPACK UNITES

*When a group of people come together, they start viewing themselves in a new way. Most group members find this both terrifying and liberating. When the veil of denial is lifted and acceptance offered by the rest of the group, the terror is released. There is nothing in the universe more astounding than the human heart.*

Liz woke up in the middle of the night following a nightmare and found herself painting a canvas red. The paint was so thick in places, it coagulated like blood. In semi-wakefulness she grabbed a small brush, dipped it in black and sketched what ended up being something of an abstract with parts of dogs' bodies. The only connection between the parts was blood. Gross.

Rover barked at it, bringing Liz to full wakefulness. Looking at the hideous piece she'd created, she felt a surge of rage so

intense she threw the paintbrush across the room. Lucky for her and the landlord, it landed in the unfinished half of her garage-home-studio, artfully marking the naked drywall. Her heart sunk when she realized she'd painted over the pencil drawing of the portrait she'd been working on. It had taken her the better part of a week to perfect images of Sebastian, Bob and Rover proudly walking on the moon alongside their space capsule, dressed in space suits and planting the American flag. Damn. Her working deadline was only a week away. She'd planned on taking pictures of the finished product on December 21, the shortest day of the year. No way that was going to happen now.

Although it was only 4:15 a.m. on Saturday morning, Liz was too angry to go back to sleep. She made coffee and watched an old movie on television instead. She must have dozed off because the next sensation she felt was Bob's tail up her nose. His fur made her sneeze. It was afternoon and her critters were ravenous.

Liz pattered about until it was time for Rover's walk. Still groggy and edgy, she wanted nothing more than to take in the wonderfulness the Masterpack had created since the man versus woman conflict the weekend before. Either that, or go back to bed.

Sookie looked as exhausted as Liz felt. Within the last week Sookie had flown to and from Korea and buried her mother. Liz figured that accounted for her lacking her usual tactful approach to everyone and everything.

"You're the first black man I've ever talked to, Bo," Sookie confessed.

"None play in the symphony?" Bo sneered.

"A few, but none in my section," Sookie responded as though Bo's words weren't dripping with sarcasm. Bo also looked as tired as Liz felt. David laughed at the discomfoting atmosphere.

"Did I say something funny?" Bo snarled at David. The look in Bo's eyes made me shiver.

"Easy, Bo," Nina said.

"I don't want to be easy. I want to be mad. Shit. I haven't felt like this since Iraq."

"That bad?" Liz asked.

"No, that good." We waited quietly for him to explain, not wanting to antagonize the man in any way. "Look, I'd like to say my tour was horrifying and it was, although mostly boring. But when under fire, it was the best high I've ever known, a high that didn't come from drugs. Fuck, no. It came from sleep deprivation, grief and living a nightmare, on the edge, ready for anything. These nightmares I've been having—"

"We've all been having nightmares, Bo," Nina corrected. Liz couldn't believe she interrupted him. He looked like he was looking for an excuse to hurt someone. Instead, he nodded her direction as though a piece of him understood.

"These nightmares we've been having -- they're making me nuts. At least in Iraq I had an outlet. Melinka and the kids -- they're scared of me. I'm scared of me. I feel like I'm going to explode."

"I read in the paper about that kid who stabbed your son," Nina said, ignoring Bo's sharp edges that looked ready to slice into something. "At least they tried him as an adult and the jury put him in prison. Maybe now that the trial is over you can start putting it behind you, Bo."

"Yeah, except the fucking trial was my outlet. I sat in the front of the courtroom off to the side so the kid could see me if he moved his head even a little bit. I stared at him, fantasizing all the horrible things I would do to him if I weren't a civilized member of society."

"But he's a 14 year old kid," David said. Liz groaned to herself. David had the tact of a ravenous flea.

"I killed younger in Iraq. They had fucking machine guns."

"Was the boy who killed your son black?" Sookie asked.

"Yes," Nina answered for Bo who clenched his fists. "Isn't that the American way? Rather than deal with our individual

prejudices, pit the objects of our hatred against each other."

Sookie said, "As a means of discipline, the Japanese pitted -- is that the right word -- pitted their Korean prisoners against each other in the concentration camps."

"The Nazis did the same thing to the Jews," Liz said.

"Which is why we should get rid of affirmative action," David said. This time Liz groaned out loud.

"I agree," Bo said, surprising all of them. "If the black man is going to prove himself, he needs to do it without special consideration." Liz wanted to ask him about the African-American woman, but was too relieved to hear his change of tone from on-the-edge rage to thoughtful.

"But that's impossible in supposed civilized society the shape it's in now," Nina objected. "African-American men have three strikes against them the minute they're born. Affirmative Action barely balances out the odds."

"Once someone is hired, they still have to prove themselves regardless of why they were hired," Sookie said. "It's not so different for Koreans or any other non-white person in America."

"Somehow I don't think potential employers see the same threat in you as they see me," Bo said.

"But is that because she's Asian or because she's a woman," Nina said. Liz had been wondering when she was going to bring the discussion back around to male chauvinism.

"Enough gender wars," David said and Liz had to smile. "Bo didn't need any extra consideration and he lives better than any of us." Bo said nothing, much to David's dismay.

"He got help from that old Jewish guy," Nina said.

"That old Jewish guy was his lawyer," Liz said.

"No, the other guy -- Mr. Rosen," Nina said. Bo was loudly silent.



"Can I ask you a stupid question, Bo?" Sookie asked, obviously trying to change the subject.

"There are no stupid questions," David said righteously.

"Only stupid clichés," Nina said. Even Bo laughed.

"I warn you -- I don't share the same views of many African-Americans." The nasty way he said African-American confused Liz. She thought it was a term he'd embrace.

"Let me first say that when I talk with Sun-Yee in English, I talk differently. My phrasing is different, my accent, everything. I can't explain it, but it's true."

"Couldn't that be because she's your mother?" Nina asked.

"We spoke like that before I knew she was my mother. No, I don't think that is the reason," Sookie defended. "It's something else."

"So you want to know if I speak differently with the brothers," Bo said. "The answer is yes, I most certainly do. I also speak differently with Melinka when we're in

bed or with my children when we're playing games. I speak an entirely different way when I'm doing business. Context is everything. However, I must admit, my cadence changes the most when I'm around other vets."

"I turn into a JAP around my parents," Liz confessed.

"Excuse me?" Sookie asked, obviously startled and confused.

"JAP stands for Jewish American Princess," Liz said. "But be careful who you say it to. It's offensive for a non-Jew to say that to a Jew, at least most of the time."

"So why do you use it?" Nina asked.

"Because as offended as many Jewish women I know are, it's a term that describes a behavior of many a Jewess to a tee," Liz said.

"What kind of behavior would that be?" David pursued.

"Self-centered, needy, born to shop," Liz said.

"I turn into a JAP around my parents and I'm not even Jewish," Nina said.

"When I speak to my parents, I--" David stopped in his tracks. "But I can't speak to them anymore because they're -- it's not fair." Grief erupted from deep within David. He shivered uncontrollably beneath Nina's warm embrace. He cried from somewhere so deep within himself with such despair, Liz teared up. They all did. "I'm sorry," he said when he caught his breath. "That's the first time I've cried since -- since--"

"See, everyone," Nina said, "even supreme white males have feelings." David's tears turned to laughter and back to tears. The rest of them laughed a little too loudly.

Liz recognized that their conversation was a bit contrived, resembling some kind of diversity training exercise, but didn't see any way around it. They were all so different, living in very different realities. Perhaps that accounted for the uneasiness that she felt but tried to ignore.

Her quiet contemplation was interrupted by barking. It sounded like Shakti and Gandhi. Frantically, they called out for their

canines who they assumed romped happily in the high grass.

Rover led the pack. Liz wanted to hug her, but her stench was overwhelming.

"What the hell have you been rolling in?" Liz asked her.

"Adagio, you're caked with brown goo," Sookie said.

"So is Puck," Nina said. "Judah and Rachel are too. This is too disgusting."

"I stopped at the drug store on my way here and bought shampoo," Liz said. "We could wash them in the faucet near the parking lot." As she said this, Liz realized the challenge she'd have getting Rover under the faucet. It was too short for her.

"I've got an old bucket in my truck," Bo said as if reading her mind. "And a few towels. You're welcome to them." Liz could tell he was trying very hard not to be patronizing, given that Shakti and Gandhi had not rolled in the decaying goo.

"I've got my own towel," David said, snapping out of his reverie.

"Shall we head back?" Nina suggested. Without saying anything, they reversed direction, encouraging the dogs to play far enough away so they didn't have to smell them.

\* \* \*

The bipeddogs nip at one another again. Silly dogs. The rest of us stay out of range so they can't turn their nips onto us. The more they nip, the more I wonder if ranking would them stop their rough play. I think they like rough play through singing. Not me. I like to know who's where and behave accordingly. Well, maybe not all the time. We dogs do like to tease one another. The rest of us are clear that Gandhi is topdog, even though he doesn't play. But neither he nor Shakti interacts with the rest of us too much, so we don't bother challenging Gandhi. Sometimes if we're playing, I'll roll on my back in submission. I know it's all in fun, even if Puck doesn't.

We run in and out of the high grass, my favorite. Since I'm the tallest (Gandhi and Shakti run around together without us), I'm topdog of the high grass. I stop suddenly at a small clearing. The smell is fascinating, intoxicating and draws me in. There's nothing like the smell of brown deadness. I hesitate to roll because I don't want to let Puck think he's dominant. But he also smells the brown deadness and I know that if I don't roll in it first, I'll lose standing.

The gooey deadness coats my shoulder blade as I rise and shake. Puck rolls next, followed by the others. I sense Shakti and Gandhi are not far away but know they prefer keeping their own scents. I lead the new-smelling dogs so we circle Shakti and Gandhi. Our circle gets tighter and tighter until we surround them. At first they don't recognize us and start barking. When they see us, they stop barking and act like nothing's new.

We hear our Masterdogs call out and run to show them how we've disguised our scent. They don't like the smell. Masterdog sounds

like she wants to nip me. So do the other bipeddogs. But none of them do. Phew.

\* \* \*

"I know you all think that because I'm a white male, I have it easy," David said, picking up a thread I wished had stayed permanently broken. Liz liked argument, but this was felt more like posturing.

"Just because most educational, cultural, financial and governmental systems in this country were designed by white males, why would we think you've had any advantage over the rest of us." Nina's diatribe may have been accurate, but the truth seemed ugly and mean.

"You assume all white males are alike," interjected Bo.

"You mean you don't agree?" Liz said without thinking.

"Aren't white men what African-Americans call 'the man'?" Sookie asked. Bo was wrong, Liz thought. There are stupid questions.

"'The man' is different things to different people," Bo said. "I associate 'the man' with the slavemasters."

"Speaking of history and slavemasters," David interrupted. I could hardly wait to hear what insidiousness would spring out of David's mouth. "The growing anti-Semitism amongst blacks led by Islamic leaders is too ironic." Not bad for a non-Jew. Better he said it than I.

"'The man' has money, Jews have money," Nina said.

"I'm a Jew and I don't have money," Liz said.

"Your parents do," Nina said.

"They're reasonably middle class, but not all families of Jews have money, Nina." Liz couldn't believe how angry she felt.

"That's true," David said, "but Jews have always been the money-changers, the bankers, etcetera, etcetera."

"He's got a point there," Bo said in my direction.

"How dare you," Liz said, amazed at her anger and hurt by what she sensed was Bo's



disapproval and angry that his approval meant anything to her. "We spend an entire week each year celebrating the Passover, the most sacred of all Jewish holidays, focusing on the enslavement of our ancestors in Egypt. We were slaves too, Bo, and we didn't wait for someone else to free us. We claimed our freedom." Liz wished she could have taken back those last words, not because she didn't believe them, but they didn't sound very nice. So much for nice, she thought.

"Thank God your people had a desert to run to," Bo said. "And it only took forty years of isolation and a new generation born free to work out the slavery mindset. We've had to work it out while in the company of our former slavemasters. Now do you see why I find affirmative action so patronizing? How the hell are we supposed to claim our freedom when we're too busy watching our backs or self-destructing in urban ghettos. What does 6 million compare to the loss of a generation or two of black men?"

"We endured pogrom after pogrom. Six million is the tip of the iceberg of those Jews killed for being Jews. Next you'll be calling the holocaust a hoax," Liz said. Her rage had gone past her usually politically correct demeanor.

"No one would do that," Sookie said. "How could they?" Liz bit her tongue and tried to breath calmness into her rage for fear she'd lose control.

"Under-educated white trash is beginning to believe it," Nina said.

"You mean like those awful skinheads on Arson Bell?" Sookie said. "They not only hate Jews, they hate anyone who doesn't look and act like them."

"Maybe we should do what Germany did and make it illegal to call the holocaust a hoax," David said. "Maybe we should try and be more civilized like the Japanese."

Sookie gasped before speaking. "My great great grandparents didn't think the Japanese were civilized. They thought the Japanese looked down upon everyone else but themselves."

"I met a dogperson who kept calling the Japanese internment camps, concentration camps," said Liz.

"Perhaps to the Japanese living with uncertainty in those camps did," said Bo.

"They had food and water and other amenities," Liz responded.

"Doesn't mean they felt safe," said Bo.

"All that ranking they do, you'd think they were dogs," Nina said.

"Enough with the Japan-bashing," said David. He turned his rage onto Sookie. "If they're so bad, why'd you marry one?"

"My husband is an American," Sookie answered. "Even so, my own father almost refused to come to our wedding."

"My father refused to come to Delta and my wedding," Nina said.

"No offense, Nina, but same-sex marriage as always seemed odd to me, mostly because my friends tell me how awful divorce can be," Bo said.

"Did I ever tell you that Delta is African-American? Or does that make it even more odd."

"There's a lot of anger here," said David.

"Ron says that when someone gets angry at you, they are paying you a high compliment," Sookie said, seemingly out of nowhere.

"Bullshit," David said. "When someone yells at you it's because they don't like you."

"I think Sookie's right," Liz said looking at Bo. "I only get outwardly angry at people I know I can trust will not hate me for dumping on them."

"Unless the anger comes from hate," Bo said, ignoring me.

"Even then," Nina said. "Pushing past hate into forgiveness brings people together."

"I'm not very good at being angry -- never have been," said Bo. "Well that's not entirely true -- I did learn to tame it enough so I don't lose control."

"I can see that," Nina said with sincerity.

"I don't mean to trigger your rage," said Liz.

"Liz. My rage is about me, not you," Bo said with a genuine smile.

"Good, because anger scares me," said Sookie.

"Forgiveness is mandatory if we want to get past hate," said David.

"Yes, but offering blanket forgiveness without expressing the underlying feelings is empty," Liz said. "As a Jew, we're encouraged, practically commanded, to argue with one another -- even with God. Understanding is as important as forgiveness."

"Or else guilt sets in," Bo said as he squeezed my shoulder.

"Guilt is a Catholic thing too," said David.

"Speaking of guilt, the chill in the air does not bode well for our soon-to-be-wet puppy dogs," Nina said as we reached the parking lot.

\* \* \*

We walk, run and play back to where the tin cans are parked. Bodog, Daviddog and Masterdog grab things out of their tin cans. Then Masterdog puts me on the rope. I hate the rope. Sookie puts Adagio on a rope, Nina does the same to Puck and David does it to

Rachel and Judah. This doesn't feel right. I pull against the rope, but Masterdog pulls back and drags me to where water falls out of a very small tree.

Bodog gives Masterdog a large water dish and she fills it with water from the tree. I want to believe this is for us to drink, but I know better. I hate it when she makes me wet. I'd rather get wet all by myself. The worst part is when she puts the stinky fluff all over me. It makes my skin feel funny. I'd rather keep the smell I found on my own.

I do whatever Masterdog wants me to do because struggling only makes it worse. I learned that the hard way the first time she did this to me. At least everyone else has to go through it too. Except Gandhi and Shakti, of course.

After I shake, she wraps me up in a blanket that smells like Gandhi and Shakti. But I'm still cold. I'm so cold I barely say good-bye to all my friends. I bark. We all do. At least the large tin can will be warm.

At home, Masterdog drags me into that teeny tiny room that holds what I figured out

must be a bipeddog's catdog box filled with water. I made the mistake once of drinking from it. Masterdog's pee tasted worse than bad.

I resist going into the teeny tiny room because I'm afraid Masterdog is going to make me get wet again by putting me into that big dogbowl where the rain falls out. Instead, she grabs that loud thing that's filled with hot air. Usually I run when I hear her use it, but I'm too cold to care. The warm air moves up and down my body. It feels good. Usually I hate sounds like that, but something inside me is changing. My thinking is different. I understand things that didn't use to make any sense and some of these things are very undoglike. The awareness I have of other dogs when I'm in that place between sleeping and waking is with me all the time. At least in reference to the members of the Masterpack. I don't know what they're doing, but I can sense their thoughts and feelings.

Bob flicks his tail at me when we finally emerge from the teeny tiny room. He thinks

it's all very amusing. I give him a big lick, just the way he hates it. At least it's chow time and I get to eat first. Lucky me.

\* \* \*

Rituals with Nero were nothing like Timmy's initiation with Buzz and the others. Timmy would never admit to Nero or even himself that he missed Buzz. Buzz always sent shivers of intimidation down Timmy's spine when he led a ritual. He saw the rituals as sacred and important.

Nero was wildly spontaneous and did things that appealed to him on the spur of the moment. Sometimes rituals meant walking from one end of downtown to the other and tickling all the homeless while they tried to sleep. Another ritual might involve curious sex acts with Louise and other people Nero would include. He tried to get Gina to participate, but she despised Nero and Louise. Timmy was fine with that.

Unlike their rituals, the threesome spent the rest of their free-time away from their



jobs planning and researching the heist. During these sessions, Timmy learned about the parts of Louise's and Nero's personalities that helped maintain the jobs they held. They were very smart. Timmy was too – and they knew it – but he didn't have Louise's savvy or Nero's education.

During the planning stages, Timmy knew he was out of his league, but found comfort in being intimidated by his own ignorance. Nero announced that Timmy would drive the get-away car they'd rent with a credit card Louise lifted off one of Buzz's people. She still went to meetings. That way, if something happened, it would be traced back to Buzz.

Timmy knew the heist was a point of no return. Even if they didn't get caught -- and Timmy was not convinced they wouldn't -- he'd never be the same again. His bond with Nero and Louise would bind tightly, hopefully not so tight it strangled him. Timmy knew what Nero hadn't told them. Timmy knew that in all likelihood, Boeing would include Nero on their next huge list of

lay-offs. Nero had proven to them that he was good at what he did, but was a little too high-maintenance to be considered cost-effective. Not that Nero didn't know any better. He knew exactly what he was doing. He would exact his revenge. The contracts for the airplanes they sold, especially the used ones, would probably fold in on themselves. Timmy knew Nero was fully capable of planting traps that would cause enormous damage and initiate a chain-reaction of disaster.

Thankfully, Timmy was too absorbed in the intricate and constantly mutating relationships he had with Nero and Louise to worry too much about his own future. He much preferred to fantasize the new knife collection he would buy with his share of whatever they got from the heist, than worry about things over which he had no control.

Timmy was thinking and panting from the exertions Louise demanded he make on her behalf when Nero walked in yawning. Nero took off his clothes and sat on the bed. Timmy was too done in to care.

Nero told them it was time to do a ritual to get to know one another better because fucking didn't tell anyone anything. Timmy caught Louise's fleeting smile before she resumed a look that showed compliance and seriousness. They lit a bunch of candles Nero brought with him. The scent of mastic incense flooded the room with smoke. Each of them would talk for one full hour about themselves without stopping. It didn't thrill Timmy to spend his night off this way, but he would do anything Nero said. Nero told Timmy he had to go first.

Initially, Timmy stumbled over bits and pieces. He wasn't much of a talker anyway. Nero helped by asking questions. Eventually Timmy found memories surfacing so that stopped stumbling and told stories. He surprised himself with his own candor, admitting things to Nero and Louise he had difficulty admitting to himself. He included talking about his infatuation with blood, death and his sister. Because of the context, Timmy couldn't really tell how Louise or Nero felt about this tale. More surprisingly,

he found he didn't care. He knew they cared about him because they were still there and naked and willing to take their turns.

Louise had been a shy mousy little girl. She grew up in Kent, just south of Seattle. Her parents were low-level bureaucrats in the federal government, but did as little as possible. As the oldest, she had to run the household and manage her two younger siblings so that her parents could drink themselves into a coma each night. Not that she ever saw the bottles of Tequila except in the recycling bin. Her parents thought themselves discreet. When it became apparent that her baby brother was an exceptional athlete, she and her sister's lives became even less important. Their parents spent all savings on whatever Bobby needed. Not that they ever had much to spare. Neither parent had risen above a GS-6 classification, and hockey could get very expensive.

Other than hockey, Louise hated anything with ice. She even ordered soft drinks without ice. And when the snow

came, she refused to leave her room, except to see her brother play. He was brutal. The violence of the sport fascinated her. She tried hanging out with the team, but went unnoticed amidst the sexy pre-pubescent girls who also clamored for the team's attention. So, she started going to professional hockey games and tried to get the attention of the professional players to no avail. Until she bought a pink body suit and red lipstick. Her firm teenage body was irresistible. Her brother's teammates wanted to meet her, but she shrugged them off for bigger and older game. Not that she let them touch her. No, she was going to save herself for that important moment that would change her life.

One day when she was 17, she accidentally spooned detergent rather than non-dairy creamer into the thermos of tea her brother took to practice. She marveled at his unexplained illness. Most interesting were his unusual symptoms. It inspired her to learn all about chemistry, especially when it came to the effects different combinations

of chemicals and poisons had on the body. At community college she furthered her studies. Buzz was one of her professors. He took her under his wing and tutored her outside class. In exchange, she'd attend his rituals and serve her body up to new initiates. It wasn't her fantasy of how she'd lose her virginity, but the rituals did give meaning to the sex act. Buzz even got her a job at Dow Chemical, knowing it would give her access to all kinds of chemicals with which she could conduct experiments. She had bred mice to use as victims. She knew better than to do actual experiments on humans. Buzz was very proud of her.

Nero's eyes widened during her monologue. Timmy figured she'd never told him about the chemical part of her life. He couldn't blame her. Nero took advantage of everyone and everything. Buzz did too, but not like Nero. Buzz was an adult with questionable values and practices, but Nero was the ultimate "bad boy."

Nero grew up with money. His father was a commercial real estate broker, his mother

a surgeon. Like Timmy, he rarely saw them. His primary caregivers were nannies he took pleasure in driving to hysteria. His mother may have believed his feigned innocence, but his father knew better. His father complained Nero was too rough on the revolving door of nannies, but winked his approval at his son's creative tactics.

With car and credit card, Nero fed his need for wild spontaneity. His genius made it easy for him to get through school without studying. Nor did any of his teachers have a clue that outside the school gate, Nero was a wild man. He carefully kept his worlds separate. Compartmentalization was a special talent of his. Nero also liked the ponies and frequented Longacres. His bulk made him look older than he was and his generosity made him irresistible.

More than gambling, Nero was a prankster. He'd spend days planning. Not that his pranks made anyone laugh. They didn't. In fact, more than one person usually ended up in tears. While his pranks were in bad taste, he didn't do anything that would

be considered illegal. His father had taught him well.

Once he came a little too close for comfort. One of the jockeys had laughed at him for betting on a long shot, a nag who the other jockeys knew hadn't a chance. A friend of the jockey witnessed Nero putting Vaseline on the stirrups of the saddle. Only after the jockey fell off his mount during the race and had to go to the hospital did the friend realize this was not standard procedure. Lucky for Nero, his father intimidated the jockey out of suing and the jockey settled for a mere \$10,000. Not that this dissuaded Nero from pranks. He just learned to be more discreet.

The best part was that the witness to the petroleum jelly incident had been Buzz. Buzz manipulated Nero's hatred into a love of power. Buzz had no idea how bad bad could be until he worked with Nero. Nero sabotaged his own initiation by inviting a group of prostitutes he paid to dress like nuns. He said they were here because they'd never seen a Satanic



ritual. Buzz let them stay for the initiation but asked Nero to leave his church.

When Boeing bought up the property that was Longacres, one of his favorite gambling locations, Nero vowed revenge. He was patient and waited for an opportunity to exact his revenge, but that time never came. He spent free time thinking about what he could do and that seemed to satisfy his need for the time being. However, one day he knew he would act -- he knew he was too clever to get caught.

Nero's story sent chills of thrill through Timmy's body. He could hear Louise's breath coming in pants.

"Do it for me," Nero said, fondling himself. Timmy couldn't tell how long he'd been erect, but he did know that if he didn't find release soon, he'd be in pain. Louise looked at him with a similar hunger. "Keep it going until I'm done with myself," Nero said. Thirty minutes later, Nero squealed with delight, followed by Timmy. Louise didn't seem to get off, but she never did -- not with

Timmy, anyway. Nor did Timmy particularly care one way or the other.

## 17. DIRGE PLANS

*Art is a humane way of pushing past limitations, invoking an inductive process and expanding intuitive abilities, whether it be the artist or the audience. Therefore, keeping art alive can help ward off the evils of the world. If humans only knew.*

“There's no way I'll have the portrait done by solstice,” Liz said. It was Sunday. Tuesday would be the winter solstice and then four days until Christmas. The rain fell like cats and dogs but the Masterpack could care less. Dogpeople have an intimate relationship with the weather. They don't notice themselves getting wet or muddy until someone else points it out or until they finally get home and change clothes. Even so, Liz was glad she wore her plastic pants and slicker. They made her sweat, but the rain rolled off her back.

"Puck, leave it," Nina shouted. Liz looked up. The dogs surrounded something on the ground. Bo ran over to take a look.

"So send out your cards for New Years," Sookie suggested.

"But painting the portrait is my holiday tradition. At this rate, I'll never get the thing painted," Liz said dejectedly.

"Quit whining, Liz," Nina said. "It'll come when it comes and not a moment before. You know the drill. Careful how you combine your art with your spiritual practices. If the gods and the muses aren't on speaking terms for some reason, you're the one who gets screwed."

"Whatever the dogs were after," Bo said, "was dead and is now buried. We're lucky no one rolled in it. Good eye, Nina." She acknowledged the compliment with a nod. They all knew a "good eye" had nothing to do with it, but supported Bo's pretension. If Liz wasn't so busy feeling sorry for herself, she'd have joined the dogs around that fascinating piece of decay, loving every minute of it. Normally, she would think this was weird

and creepy. Nina said she thought participating in a Masterpack was altering their individual perceptions. Even from a distance Liz could smell what the dogs were after. She knew everyone else felt the same way to one degree or another, depending on their individual denial factor. Bo claimed he wasn't in denial, but he was also struggling for his humanity so he didn't frighten his family.

"So don't send out a portrait this year," David said. "No big deal. Painting's just a hobby for you, right?" Liz gave him the Bronx Cheer, too numb to respond with words.

"Isn't all art a hobby?" Nina said sarcastically.

"I didn't say that," David defended. Liz was too depressed to rise to the bait -- David's or Nina's.

"Art should be market-driven, like everything else," Bo said.

"Are you serious?" Nina was genuinely taken aback, as was Liz. Art and popular

culture were apples and oranges as far as Liz was concerned.

"That's not practical for the individual artist," Liz said.

"Why not?" Bo asked. His usual playful provocative nature was replaced with a burning intensity that made everyone anxious.

"Arts institutions are market-driven," Sookie said. "They make as much money as they possibly can on something that has a track record of success so they can afford to take a risk on something new."

"But that means that the small arts organizations take all the risks," Nina continued in the same calm tone, "along with developing those somethings that fail along with the few that are successful. And for every proven something, there are hundreds of duds. Sometimes they're not even duds, just work offered to the public at the wrong time or in the wrong venue. These small arts organizations cannot survive without support, even when no one gets paid."

"It's the nature of the individual artist," Liz said, "to reach deeply into their most personal experiences to produce art. That's after spending years to develop their technical skill. If they do come up with something ground-breaking, it may take a while before the market acknowledges it as worthwhile, if ever. In big businesses there's a research and development department. There's nothing like that for artists. We have to do it all on our own at our own expense."

"Do you consider yourself an artist?" Bo asked.

"Most of the time I try not to," Liz said. "I say I paint for myself and then I periodically pursue opportunities that usually don't pan out and if they do, I hope my work touches someone. That's as far as I can go or I start feeling like a failure. Rejection is a way of life for most artists, but sometimes it penetrates to the bone so that it takes everything I have to keep on painting. But if I were to stop and try to conjure up exactly what I thought the market would bear, it probably wouldn't be all that different than what I'm doing now."

"You could always join the Starving Artists," Nina said. "You know. Those outdoor galleries of crap where you can buy two paintings for \$10."

"If I only created art I thought would be popular, I'd go mad," Liz said. She was surprised at her own ability to articulate her passions. Maybe I'm not the part-time imbecilic painter I thought I was, she mused.

"I have to come up with what I think will be popular and I haven't gone mad," Bo said. "Not yet, anyway."

"You consider yourself an artist?" Nina exclaimed.

"Careful, Bo," Sookie jumped in. "Projecting your experience of success onto every other artist is as wrong as the prejudice many people project onto you."

"Do you consider yourself an artist?" Bo returned.

"No," Sookie said. "It's not because I don't have skill, but my job is to translate the intent of the composer, who is the real artist. Besides, I'm good, but not great."



"You can really tell the difference?" Liz asked while at the same time trying to determine just how good an artist she really was by comparing her work to those of the masters. Bad idea.

"I'm trained to listen to musicianship," Sookie said. "I've heard the great, the bad and everything in between. The brilliant balance of technique and personal expression is found only in a very few musicians."

Liz could hear Rover barking, joined in by Judah and Rachel. David and Liz called out for their dogs. Rover was barking at a low flying bird, and Judah and Rachel were teasing her. They played in the high grass so that they couldn't be seen, but the growing Masterpack awareness told the humans how they were doing. As if to confirm this growing knowledge, the dogs came running, circling them before taking off again.

"When I play the piano," David said, "I play so much from the heart, my skill

suffers. Except during church services. I mean it. At services I play like a master."

"Because you're playing not only from the heart, but from the spirit," Nina said with a smile. "How wonderful. Sometimes I envy the actors in my plays. The really good ones don't freak out when they come up against what I call the 'wall.'"

"You mean a wall like when I'm running?" Liz asked.

"Exactly. And like a runner, the actor will hit a point in rehearsal where they'll either freeze up and stop what they're doing or they'll break through to the other side. The difference is that runners get high. Actors do too, but only after they merge with the emotional pain of their character. Maybe that's what's happening to you and your portrait, Liz. You're up against the wall."

"Goody goody," she said.

"Have you considered acting in one of your plays?" Bo asked. "You know, so you can feel what it's like to break through the wall?"

"Not a chance. I prefer being a voyeur."

"Chicken," David teased.

"I don't think so you smug son of a bitch." Nina's flip into anger startled Liz out of her reverie. Nina turned to Bo and said: "Do you do any of the actual designing or do you feed off of your employees' creativity?"

"Do you write the scripts you direct or do you feed off the words of some struggling playwright?" David intercepted Nina's attention, holding his own. Liz could see she approved because she laughed. Bo ignored the exchange.

"Easy for you all to laugh," Liz said. "I'm the only generating artist here and I've got news for you. Sometimes it's glorious, but most of the time it sucks. If I could give it up I would. It's especially disgusting when your nightmares start making you sabotage your own hard work." She told them the real reason the portrait wasn't happening and by the time she was finished, she was in tears.

"And the worst part of it is, every time I work on the portrait, I remember Sebastian and -- and --" Liz started crying again, "I miss him."

"But he was an old cat," Bo said tensely, "not your child."

"Fuck you," Liz shouted, rage breaking through the tears, "I know he wasn't my child. He was my pet. But does that mean I should just brush off my grief? He slept with me for 14 years. His love was unconditional."

"You need a man, Liz," David said.

"And you need to get fucked," Liz said, turning on David.

"What if I do?" he said.

Liz felt Rover's nose against her hand. Puck and Adagio looked up at Liz concerned. They made her smile. She knew they were communicating, although she had no idea what was being said.

"Having a partner will not take away your personal pain," Nina said. "Am I right, Bo? Sookie?" They nodded to themselves.

"You already have partners and in your case," David said pointing to Nina, "you don't want to have children. I do. I know I'd make a terrific dad. A lot better than my dad."

"Kids are both a wonder and a way to drive you insane," Bo said. "Thank God mine are adults."

"I love my children," Sookie said. "And I wouldn't trade them for the world. But if I had it to do all over again, I'm not so sure I would have had them."

"I love having kids," Bo said.

"Delta and I have talked about artificial insemination," Nina said.

"What if you had a son?" asked Bo.

"We'd have him surgically altered. Jesus, Bo. What makes you so sure we couldn't raise a healthy All-American boy? Isn't Puck a happy guy?" Puck heard his name and ran to Nina. She gave him a cookie. All the other dogs surrounded her, expecting a treat. Liz could feel their excitement in a way she never had before. She almost begged for a cookie too. She was surprised that Rover ate her cookie greedily as though she were afraid Liz would take it away from her and eat it herself.

"Who would be the mother?" Sookie asked Nina.

"Our child would have two mothers, Sookie. It couldn't be worse than one mother all alone without the father."

"No, I mean who would get pregnant?"

"Oh. Delta would. I've been spayed."

"Look, guys," Liz said, hoping her mouth would continue working despite her fear of showing how vulnerable she felt, "if you know a single man you think might -- you know -- it's just that I haven't met someone who -- you know --"

"What about David," Sookie asked mischievously. David blushed. If her Semitic skin could blush, Liz would have too.

"That would be a mistake," Nina said, bless her heart. "They're compatible dogpeople, but I doubt they'd get along really well outside the park. Am I right?" David and Liz nodded shyly. Liz thought about the dinner party at Bo's.

"If the spark were there, they'd be together by now," Bo said. Liz hadn't thought about it before, but he was right. Liz could see the relief in David's eyes as they exchanged smiles. "I'll keep my eyes open,

Liz. For you too, David. It never occurred to me to pay attention, but I do have quite a few young dynamic creative employees. A few even call themselves artists."

"I'll keep my eyes open too," Sookie said. "Good you ask, Liz. If I were you I'd be too afraid."

"Thanks," Liz said, pleased by her words.

"My community is creative and intelligent, but the men are usually gay or married," Nina said. "However, if I get an opportunity to play yenta, you know I'll go for it. Now you, David. For you I might have some possibilities."

"That's okay," he said.

"Knock it off, David, I'm talking about terrific women" she said not unkindly. "I'd really like to help you out. You're a good guy for a supreme white male."

"You really think so?" he asked with genuine interest. They laughed. The dogs checked up on them periodically, otherwise played amongst themselves. Liz couldn't remember going on a dog walk where

someone or another wasn't yelling after their dog every other minute. Lucky us.

"Since Liz opened the door," Bo said, "I have a favor to ask too."

"Ask away, Bo," Liz said affectionately. How she wished she could ease his obvious pain.

"We buried Bo, Jr. over a month ago, but I was so busy controlling things and making sure everyone was okay, I didn't much participate. My son and I talked once about how we'd like a funeral like they do in New Orleans. You know, a procession of friends, loved ones and musicians following a hearse with the casket to the grave-site. Bo told me he liked the idea except that he wanted to be cremated."

"You talked about this with your son just before he was killed?" David said. "Sounds morbid."

"I think it sounds healthy," Sookie said. "Parents need to talk about death with their children. It's an important part of life."

"Lucky for us we did," Bo said. "His sisters have been nagging me to do



something special with his ashes. I was thinking that we could form a procession and I could throw his ashes out into the lake or scatter them or something. Bo, Jr. loved dogs. He had two when he died. Thankfully his girlfriend wanted to keep them." Bo wanted to go on but couldn't.

"We'd love to be the procession," Sookie said, speaking for all of us.

"Good. I was aiming for the Sunday after Christmas."

"Slow down, folks," Nina said. "Bo, just how much of this have you actually planned?"

"Mostly it's in my head, but I know I can make it happen."

"No doubt," Nina said. "And you're doing this because you want our help putting this behind you."

"That's about it," Bo said.

"I can well understand that Bo, because I need the same thing. I suspect everyone here feels the same way. Yes?"

"What are you saying?" David asked.

"Bo, would you consider opening up this procession to the rest of us? Before you answer, hear me out. What if we were to invite our separate communities to join us in a glorified dog walk here in the park? We could reserve the barbecue area, although I doubt it'll be a problem this time of year, and drink hot sake or cider or chicken soup. Each of us could build altars to our lost loved ones. You too, Liz. The space around each altar would be a sacred space reserved for those who wish to grieve. Each community of people could perform a ritual of sorts to spread ashes or do whatever they need to do. That way each community would have a place of their own, but we'd share the rest of it."

"Did you just think of that off the top of your head?" Sookie asked.

"It's what I do," Nina said smiling with that glow that only comes from creating something wonderful.

"Only if you let me have the whole thing catered," Bo said. A spark of his old self surfaced.

"What's a procession without music?" Sookie said. "I bet I could gather a few musicians who can walk and play at the same time."

"I don't know what I can contribute," David said. His eyes were glassy as he held onto his tears.

"What about inviting some of the people in your church choir?" Sookie suggested. "My people can play just about anything with just about anyone."

"Members of the symphony would accompany our choir?" David let his tears drop. "That would be wonderful. I could even get you the music ahead of time. We'd have to do this after services."

"What time would that be?" Nina asked, her mind obviously structuring the event.

"Noon or so."

"Let's schedule the procession to begin at two o'clock." Everyone agreed.

"What can I do?" Liz asked.

"Why don't you design the basics for the altars," she said. Visions of simple constructs immediately flashed before her

eyes. "We can ask everyone to bring something to put on the altar -- photographs, tokens, you know," Nina said.

"Great," Liz said. They walked in a comfortable silence, their minds identifying the tasks at hand.

\* \* \*

The bipeddogs have finally determined the ranking and because of that, they feel better and so do I. I also understand them better and I don't know why -- not that I usually ask why about anything. Weird.

Lately I've become less interested in my kibble and more interested in Masterdog's food. I beg politely so she'll throw me tasty morsels. Bob does too, but he thinks most of Masterdog's food tastes bad. He just likes to beg. I tell him he doesn't like her food because catdogs have no taste. He flicks his tail and jumps onto the couch to lick himself.

Masterdog tells me all about the funeral procession. I'm not sure what she's talking

about, but I'm glad the Masterpack will be there. I tell Bob, but he ignores me.

We sleep late the next morning. It feels good. On our dog walk with the Masterpack, the bipeddogs are quiet, communicating more with their bodies and that other thing dogs use to communicate. That other thing has no name, only a purpose. They even sniff the air more than usual. By the end of the walk, dogs and bipeddogs are satisfied. We sing and bark our goodbyes as we get in our large tin cans. Life is good.

\* \* \*

Nero watched Timmy and Louise make love on top of the \$500,000 they had successfully stolen. In between playing with himself, Nero showered them with them with some of the bills. They drank champagne and regaled themselves with the telling and retelling of their glorious day. Nero's manic joy was contagious.

Monday morning, Timmy had woken up with his arms around Louise. Louise had

called in sick the night before, but Nero made elaborate plans for a vacation into the wilderness, lest someone in the office try to track him down. Timmy thought it excessive, but knew better than to tell Nero.

Nor did he say anything as the three of them moved through the day with such planned precision, Timmy thought he better understood what it must be like to be in the army. Nero put make-up on all their faces to alter their looks. He added a small bandaid to his nose. They had bought ugly innocuous clothing at a thrift store. With her long stringy yet realistic wig and no make-up, Timmy had a better sense of how Louise must have looked before she donned the pink jumpsuit. He hardly recognized her.

Timing was everything. And special equipment. Timmy watched from the rented Toyota, parked in the mall at Northgate, the oldest enclosed mall in the country. Louise tripped and fell in front of the armored truck personnel. She hugged each man for helping her, placing an adhesive patch soaked in a combination of chemicals on the backs of

their necks. Nero had watched these two men for weeks, timing how long it took before the one man returned from his rounds. Louise had used Timmy to perfect the timing of the patches. He didn't like the nausea it caused or the sudden inability to stand up or focus, but if it meant success and making her and Nero happy, so be it.

Louise waited near the bank machine while Nero walked casually through the parking lot as one of the men emerged carrying two bags of money. Just as the one waiting unlocked the truck, the drug took hold. No one could have predicted such perfect timing. Timmy could see Louise grin. So when a couple of older folks slowly walked past the truck, Timmy got nervous.

Louise intercepted the couple and asked them directions to somewhere, forcing them to face away from the truck while walking them to the entrance to the mall. Timmy could imagine her playing dumb, not being able to take in the information they gave her so they'd have to repeat it over and over again. Nero carried a sports bag and

pretended to talk to each of the guards as they dizzily collapsed in the back of the truck. No one was around to see Nero emerge from the truck carrying a now heavy sports bag. Timmy couldn't believe it. It looked like they were going to get away with it after all and it had all been so simple, so easy.

Louise caught up with Nero as they got into the car, casually walking as if nothing was wrong.

"Easy Timmy," Nero said when he got in. "Just pull out like you would if you weren't carrying \$500,000 in stolen cash."

Timmy did as he was told. He briefly noticed some guy in uniform -- Animal Control or something -- stare at him as he turned the corner of the building. No way the guy could have seen what happened, but he creeped Timmy out. Just as he was about to say something, Nero grabbed his shoulder.

"Good work, Timmy boy," Nero said. "Now you can buy those knives you've been dreaming about. Imagine, \$1,000 worth of knives. All yours." Timmy put the sight of



the Animal Control guy out of his mind and fantasized his new collection of knives. Louise grabbed his hand and put it in her panties. Way in the back of his mind, Timmy felt like they missed something, but covered his anxiety with what was in front of him and in his hand. His future looked divine.

That night, they dressed up in their nicest clothes and went to the Camlin, one of Seattle's nicest restaurants, and ordered platter after platter of delectable food. At midnight, both Nero and Louise took off to drive to their other residences. Nero took most of the money for safekeeping, whatever that meant. Timmy went to work.

Lost in a rare reverie of joy, the night flew by. The next morning Gina, healed from her nasty john and tired from a long night at work, joined Timmy for coffee. Timmy told her what he had been afraid to say since he met her.

"I've always thought you were beautiful, Gina," he confessed. "I've always had a crush on you too." Something in his tone of confidence and seeming concern made Gina

melt. She gave him a freebie and slept with him until the sun went down. That evening, Timmy took Gina to dinner and a movie and didn't even have to pay her for her time.

It was 10:30 p.m. when they returned to the hotel. Louise was waiting. She motioned for Timmy to get rid of Gina and meet her upstairs. Timmy was confused by the generous smiles she gave Gina. So was Gina.

"But, Timmy," Gina said. "I thought--"

"See ya, Gina," he said. "Thanks for a nice evening." He headed up the stairs. He hoped Louise wasn't mad at him. That would be bad, very very bad.

"Fuck you," Gina shouted.

"Later," Timmy shouted back.

Upstairs, as sexy as she looked in her tight red dress and high heels, Louise was all business. "Nero and I got back together last night. He'll be here in a few minutes, but I told him I wanted to tell you myself. Sorry, Timmy, but he's always been my number one. Your little chickie is cute. Don't lose her."

"I don't even have her," he unintentionally whined.

"Yes you do, Timmy," Louise said with a compassion Timmy didn't know she had. "She's nuts about you. Who knows. Maybe she'll join us when Nero remodels the farm."

Before he could say anything, Nero opened the door and grabbed Louise. Timmy didn't know if he liked watching Nero fuck Louise or not. He was brutal and mean. Fortunately it didn't take very long.

"The more it changes the more it stays the same," Nero quoted. "'The hand just rearranges all the players in the game.' You bi, Timmy?"

"Buy what?"

"Bisexual."

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"Well, now that I've given up celibacy, we'll just have to find out, won't we." Despite his repulsion at Nero's suggestion, Timmy could feel himself getting erect. "You're a tricky one, Timmy. But save it for later. First we can look over the articles in the newspapers about our escapades to make

sure none of us was identified. Then we've got plans to make and we have, what -- 70 minutes -- before you go to work and leave me to ravish this succulent creature." Timmy stuffed his jealousies down as deep as they would go.

## 18. ANIMAL URGES

*Early imprinting as a result of fearful experiences are a challenge to overcome. Dogs may work past their fears for awhile, but they come back as the dog grows older. It's not so different for humans, although there are other layers of emotion to condition this process.*

“You don't think it's weird that other people in our lives are having these nightmares?” David asked.

“That's ‘one other person’ and of course we think it's weird,” Nina answered. The dogs were doing their usual. Liz couldn't help but share their joy of play even though she was plagued by nightmares, fatigue and the strange events in the lives of the Masterpack.

“Gary's my twin. We've often shared inexplicable things.”

“Fraternal or identical?” Bo asked.

“Identical, although our personalities are completely different.”

“They’d have to be,” Bo said. “No way I’d mistake you for military, David.”

“No kidding,” David said.

“Angelica comes from a very different world but we share something fundamental to our beings. I can’t believe she’s coming here.”

“Are you worried about Melinka?” Liz asked. Normally she would try to be more discrete, but there seemed to be an urgency that eliminated the act of walking on eggshells. Or maybe it was the fact that the Masterpack had gotten close enough to trust without dancing around issues. Validation came in the form of all the dogs suddenly swarming around them. They were all distracted into playing with their four-legged friends. A few minutes later, the dogs went back to racing through the bushes.

“In answer to your question, Liz, no I’m not worried. You’ll see what I mean when you meet her.”

“We will?” Sookie asked.

“Makes sense,” said Nina. “Please don’t judge me too harshly when you meet Charlie. He’s really a very good guy in spite of himself. Besides, I was very young when I married him. I still don’t get why he of all people would be included. David’s twin makes sense. Bo’s spiritual sister makes sense. Sookie’s real mother makes sense.”

“What about me and my best friend’s fiancée?” Liz asked.

“Well, there is that,” Nina said and they all laughed.

“Maybe it isn’t about our relationships with these people,” Sookie said. “Maybe each of these people has qualities that contribute to this - what did you call us, Liz?”

“A Masterpack. Rover’s term for us.”

“Yes, our Masterpack.” No one questioned Liz’s comment about Rover.

“Which might mean,” Bo continued, “we’re supposed to do something.”

“Like what” David asked.

“We’ll know when we’re supposed to know,” Nina said.

“Sounds too weird and wu wu to me,” David said. Liz thought he sounded especially unnerved by the whole situation. They all were, but David was on the edge of panic. She also knew everyone else sensed the same thing. Even the dogs seemed to understand. Thankfully, Gandhi reassured Rachel and Judah that all would be well. How Liz knew this was beyond her ken.

“There must be a connection to the deaths in each of our lives,” Sookie said. “Sun Yee and I buried my mother -- my other mother. I mourn her death, but I still feel like it isn’t over.”

“Grief is like that,” Nina said.

“No no, I mean other than grief.”

“Which is why we’ll do the memorial,” Bo said. Liz could also see the connection, but still felt something else was missing. “I’m glad Angelica will be here for that.”

“Gary too,” David said.

“I could give a fuck whether or not Charlie was here,” Nina said.

“John is allergic to cats. He never even met Sebastian,” Liz said.



“What did you and Charlie have in common?” Sookie asked. Liz looked over at David who, like her, repressed a grin. Sookie could ask zinger questions. Liz also noticed Sookie had witnessed their exchange. “I ask because perhaps it will help us discover that missing something.”

“Beats the shit out of me,” Nina said with finality.

“Nina, don’t go there,” Bo said. “It’s not like you to just shut down.”

“He hates everything I love,” she responded.

“But you’re the one who screwed him over,” Liz said without thinking.

“I know,” Nina said dejectedly.

“I’ll ask again,” Sookie said. “What did you and Charlie have in common?”

“Well, we both loved the creative process. We did compete for success, although that isn’t what drove our ambitions.”

“Compete?” David reiterated. Liz felt Nina’s frustration but could also feel the support and concern of the others. She hoped they all really did feel that way.

Actually, she already knew they all felt that way although she couldn't say why.

"I finally get him to come to a ritual and he, master drummer that he is, won't even drum with us. He was too good to play with peons -- especially pagan peons. He was always so self-righteous."

"Unlike you," Bo said. Even Nina had to laugh.

"The only thing John and I have in common is Sarah," Liz said.

"You're not secretly in love with him are you?" Bo asked.

"Or her?" Nina piped in, obviously happy that the focus was off of her.

"No," Liz said with conviction. The secret infatuation scenario didn't fit.

"Perhaps David is onto something," Sookie said.

"Me? Really?"

"You and Gary probably competed for your parents attention, right?"

"I suppose."

"Liz," Sookie continued, "you and John compete for the love of Sarah."

“I don’t know if I’d say--” Liz saw the smile on Bo’s face. “Well maybe a little.”

“Melinka and Angelica don’t compete, although they could.” Bo interjected.

“Didn’t Charlie and Delta go at it at one point, Nina?” Sookie asked.

“They sure did,” Nina aid. “And your mother and Sun Yee competed for you and your father even if they didn’t seem to do so.”

“But what does that all mean?” David asked.

The dogs took that moment to charge through the humans. Their numbers had expanded to include Spot, Zeus, Rembrandt, Bonzo and a few others. It was a remarkable sight -- there must have been fifteen dogs. From three different directions, their human counterparts came running.

\* \* \*

Sing, sing, sing. That’s all those bipeddogs want to do. Boring, I say. They want to hang out on top of the hill? Fine.

Puck and I get everyone to run around them until they play with us. Even Sookiedog is bounding and challenging. Bodog runs around the perimeter and we follow him. Masterdog and Daviddog run too. Ninadog stands in the middle. She lets out a call and we all run in different directions to do her bidding. Somehow, I don't think she really knows what she has commanded, but we do. We run off to obey her command. Except the bipeddogs. They know they're supposed to do something, but don't know what it is. All they're supposed to do is stay, silly bipeddogs.

Puck and I take off in one direction, Adagio in another, Judah and Rachel in still another. Shakti and Gandhi follow behind at their usual sauntering pace. Puck and I go to the lake where Zeus is swimming after the ball. The water is cold and so is the air. No way I'm going swimming. Puck can't bark, but he has a funny whine. I contribute barks to tell Zeus what's happening. Much to the surprise of his Masterdog, he swims to the water's edge, ignores the ball his Masterdog

has thrown for his retrieval and follows us into the bushes. That's where we find Rembrandt, a friend of Puck's I've only met once, but remember well. He's the one who got me to knock Ninadog into the mud and who in turn, dragged Masterdog into the mud. Rembrandt understands immediately what's happening and follows us. We can hear the Masterdogs of Zeus and Rembrandt calling after them but figure they'll follow like the good submissive dogs they are in relation to the Masterpack.

I can see Spot leading Judah and Rachel. He runs twice as fast as they do but runs back and forth to stick with them. His Masterdog follows without yelling at him. Lucky Spot. Adagio has Bonzo in tow. I hadn't seen Bonzo in a long while, but Adagio had. That's why he went after him. Bonzo's Masterdog walks easily up to the top of the hill. From still another direction, we see Shakti and Gandhi leading five other dogs who I've never met or if I have, I've somehow forgotten. The Masterdogs of this

pack sing loudly and try to keep up with the dogs.

We all make it to the top of the hill at about the same time -- the bipeddogs take longer. The Masterpack, along with the additional dogs, are a sight to see. In the distance I hear a siren. Masterdog has explained to me that there is a difference between sirens and howling, although we like to howl with the sirens. I can tell she hears the siren too because she starts to howl. Soon all the other Masterdogs in the Masterpack are howling, along with the other dogs. Even Puck does some kind of howl.

The Masterdogs of the other dogs disrupt the howling by yelling at their dogs. Too bad. We sounded oh so cool.

\* \* \*

“What the hell is going on?” asked Spot’s owner as he joined the group of howlers.

“You sound great,” said Bonzo’s owner, adorned in her usual torn black uniform.

The Masterpack et al stopped howling in favor of laughter.

“I don’t know if this is safe,” Rembrandt’s owner said, her thick accent almost obscuring her words.

“Yowza,” exclaimed the man of the wire-rimmed DCC couple.

“Oh fuck!” yelled the woman half, pointing to the all familiar Animal Control guy slowly heading their direction.

“Hold it,” Nina said. The Masterpack did exactly that as the others quickly grabbed their canines and ran for the bushes. The DCC couple leashed up and took off faster than Liz thought possible. She remained unmoving along with the other Masterpack members, watching the Animal Control guy.

“Wrong call,” he said to Nina. She nodded her head. Liz didn’t get it, but remained still and silent for fear her actions or words would be used against her.

“Are you going to give us tickets?” David asked.

“No, he’s not,” Bo answered. The Animal Control guy smiled, turned around and

walked away. The dogs frolicked around him. At first Liz thought he was taking away their dogs. The others seemed to share her fear. But somewhere at the edge of the bushes the Animal Control guy simply disappeared. Surprise was upstaged by relief as their dogs ran back to them.

“Did you see what I saw?” David asked.

“I didn’t see anything,” Bo responded.

“A wrong call?” Nina asked.

“The howl you did earlier – when our dogs engaged us all in play,” Sookie answered. “I did sense your command was wrong, but I don’t know what that means.”

“Me neither,” Nina responded. “But now I know. This is too weird. I think I like it.”

“You’ll know when it’s an appropriate call when you’re supposed to know,” Liz said without thinking. Nina snickered. “Oy vey, I’m starting to sound like you.”

“And your point?” Nina said with an ironic grin.

“Okay, I get it now,” Bo said.

“Get what?” Sookie asked.



“I get that we’re up to our eyeballs in something -- something important, something larger than each of us. I also get that all of our talking and sharing won’t make it any clearer.”

"Yet it seems important for us to share our stories," Sookie said.

"Yes, this is weird, and yes, I like it too," said Liz.

“No, not good enough for me,” David said. Liz thought he must have used his father’s voice because it certainly didn’t sound like David.

“It’ll have to be, David,” Nina said.

“Fuck this,” David said. “I’m out of here. This has gotten way too strange.”

“Don’t go, David,” Liz said. His leaving made her feel irrationally fearful for some reason. “We need you.”

“Judah, Rachel come.” For some reason, the two dogs obeyed him for a change. “Nice knowing you all. Have a good life.”

David’s abrupt departure left them more stunned than the disappearance of the Animal Control guy.

\* \* \*

The man-with-no-smell explains to us why we did what we did and how it was not the right time. Then he disappears. Puck and I exchange shrugs before heading back to the bipeddogs.

When Daviddog, Judah and Rachel leave, we all feel very uneasy. Something is wrong with the Masterpack. Puck even starts to shiver. At first, Ninadog thinks he's cold, but realizes that's not it. I know this because we all seem to be communicating in a different way -- a clearer way. The abrupt departure of the three missing from the Masterpack doesn't affect our communication even if it does make us all scared.

No one can move. Even when we can all hear Daviddog's large tin can drive away, we find ourselves frozen. Gandhi finally woofs for our attention. He wants to leave the park. We all do. With his woof we all start moving. The bipeddogs don't sing any more. They too are silent. I feel the hair on my back rise.

Puck continues to shiver. Adagio twitches. Thankfully, Gandhi and Shakti are their usual selves. But like the rest of us, they are worried. Masterdog tries to be strong but I sense water falling out of her eyes. Sookiedog feels the same way but without the water. Bodog, like Gandhi and Shakti, is consistently himself. Ninadog is the most worried of all. I know she feels badly for having given the wrong command. She blames herself for Daviddog leaving.

Usually after the Masterpack gets together, I have a dreamless sleep. That night, the nightmares are worse than ever. I can't help but hope Daviddog is also having these nightmares and is starting to understand that he can't just run away. Daviddog, Judah and Rachel are members of the Masterpack, like it or not.

\* \* \*

After a long night of work and a restless few hours of disturbing dreams about dogs chasing him, Timmy got out of bed. It was

just past noon, so Nero and Louise were already at their mutual jobs. Nero had left him an envelope with \$1,000 and a note that said "Play well, son. Mom and Dad will be back tomorrow night." Rather than let the words sink in deep enough to provoke feeling, Timmy thought about the look on his sister's and parents' faces when they opened their classy Xmas presents. He hadn't given them much of anything for years, but this year would be different. He tried coming up with gifts he knew they'd like -- a large bottle of single malt scotch for Mummy, a sterling silver coke spoon for Daddy and a life supply of condoms for Ashley.

The lunch hour in downtown Seattle made Timmy nervous. Fight it as he may, he couldn't help fearing the suits, whether they be men or women. Suits meant humiliation and humiliation made him feel very small and very very angry. In the gloom of another rainy day, he rode a bus to a knife specialty store. During the drive, he remembered what it felt like the one day he donned a suit in high school.

Timmy knew he probably should skip the formal dance that would crown the homecoming king and queen, but Ashley tortured him until he agreed to go. He liked the way he looked in his pin-striped suit, even if he didn't really feel adequate enough to wear one. He knew he'd never be a suit guy. He hated uniforms.

"You'll know you're a real man when you can wear a suit with pride," Daddy had told him. "Otherwise it's only a disguise."

"Forget it, Dad," Ashley had said, pulling him aside. "Timmy, if you don't go to this and nail some girl, you're never going to be a real man. Do you know how embarrassing it is for you to be a virgin? Tonight you fuck first, think later." She gave him a packet of condoms.

He had no idea his big sister set him up. He should have suspected, but he couldn't resist Shauna's charms. She was all over him at the dance. The looks of jealousy from not only the other nerds, but some of the cool guys, made him feel like a real man. Towards the end of the evening's festivities,

she pulled him into her car. They had to share the space with her 100+ pound St. Bernard. Shauna kept the dog in the front seat by issuing commands using hand signals. Timmy liked the power she silently exerted over both the dog and over him.

After removing their clothing, she blindfolded Timmy and told him to relax. Her tongue on his erect penis sent him into spurting ecstasy. He removed the blindfold only to find Shauna and two of her friends outside the car laughing at what her dog had done for him.

He grabbed his now crumpled suit and ran home in his underwear. When he got home, his sister was waiting. Someone had phoned her and she stood ready to take her turn at humiliating him. He hadn't worn a suit since.

Timmy got off the bus two stops past the store at the entrance to Sandpoint Park. He decided he could do with a little walk. He crested the hill where Buzz had taken him that first night. It was the highest point in the park and he could watch the

innumerable people with dogs. He tried to calm himself by fantasizing what he could do to reshape the body of a little schnauzer-mix who ran into the bushes close by.

"Your pain becomes my pain," a voice resounded somewhere in his head. It wasn't a voice, exactly, but something imprinted itself on his mind, leaving the memory of a voice. "Be your own victim and take your fantasies with you."

He shook his head, watched as a black lab leaped into the water after a ball. The woman who threw the ball was all muscle. Timmy smiled.

"Keep it to yourself," a different voice imprinted. "I've got a ball to fetch and I won't be interrupted by your pain."

He tried to imagine how he could put the knife he was going to buy to good use as he watched a Jack Russell race around the field, a Doberman-mix trying to keep up. The Dobie-mix was no match for the little dog.

"You couldn't catch me if you tried," another voice imprinted. He tried imagining

he was the Dobie-mix and caught the little dog that ran.

"I'll chase him, not hunt him," still another voice imprinted. "He's my friend. Pain is your friend, so hurt yourself and leave the rest of us alone."

Timmy was so stunned by the series of imprints these dogs made on his mind, he hardly noticed his own actions as he left the park, went to the knife specialty store and bought a machete. Only when he'd gotten back into his room did he come back to himself. The machete wasn't his first choice of knives, but it would have to do for now. Actually, he liked the feel of it the more he swatted it around his room. He imagined he parried a sword.

Timmy hid the machete under his mattress and headed downstairs for something to eat. Lack of sleep made him hinky – that had to be why he felt funny. Besides, he was excited about showing Louise and Nero his new purchase.

"You're better than that."



"No, I'm not," Timmy said to Gina over coffee at the diner. It was just before his shift. "I deserve worse, far worse."

"But Nero's the one who--"

"Nero can't help it." Actually, Timmy hadn't seen much of Nero except at the periodic meetings where he'd give Timmy small amounts of the stolen money. Nor did he see much of Louise. But he could hear them both if he stayed in his room in the evenings. Unlike Nero, Timmy derived no vicarious pleasure during their loud couplings. In fact, he surprised himself at the rage he felt upon hearing Louise's familiar cries of ecstasy.

"Nero's farm is unlivable right now," Louise had told him in the hallway on her way to their room, carrying a six-pack of Elephant Beer. "The renovations stir up too much dust. His allergies can't handle it."

"Why don't they stay at Louise's?" Gina asked.

"Her landlord pulled a gun on Nero when they were together before. Said he'd call the cops if Nero ever showed his face. Nero said

they tried staying there a few weeks ago, sneaked in around midnight. But the sirens made Nero so paranoid, he couldn't sleep."

"So now you're stuck with them."

"They work during the day. No big."

"I'll do you in exchange for a place to crash tomorrow when they're at work," Gina said. "They'll never know I was there."

"Nero would. He leaves pieces of thread and shit in particular places. Sometimes I think he's keeping money hidden in there." He hadn't told her anything about the heist.

"And he's afraid you'll steal it?"

"I guess." Timmy wanted so much to tell her everything, but he'd promised Nero. "You can sleep in my room. I can sleep on the floor."

"That's very noble, but no way," she said in a voice that said that's exactly what she expected him to do.

"I haven't been sleeping so good. I've been having weird dreams. At least on the floor they're less weird. I've been sleeping down there since – since Halloween."

Sex with Gina the next morning was better than he'd imagined -- better than with Louise, better than ever before. He didn't notice he was crying until Gina reached around him and held him to her as if he were a small child. She didn't ask questions or make comments as he sobbed from somewhere very deep inside. He almost wished she said something since he could not figure out why he balled like a baby. He woke up briefly and noticed he was still in Gina's arms as she snored lightly. He easily fell back to sleep.

They woke up at the same time and made love slowly and deeply. For the first time, Timmy put his heart into it. He suspected Gina did the same.

They smiled at each other shyly over coffee.

"You're getting to me," Gina said.

"Same here," Timmy said blushing.

"I gotta go. I've been contracted for the entire evening," she said.

"Come by tomorrow morning?" he asked hopefully as he stared into his empty coffee cup.

"You want me to?" she asked.

"I guess," he said looking up. They made eye contact for the first time since making love. Gina kissed him lightly, stroked his cheek and left the coffee shop. Timmy grinned after her. For the first time in a long time, Timmy felt complete and not just because he was in love. If anything, love was a distraction because he knew it made him vulnerable. His parents would tolerate Gina, but disapprove as per usual. Ashley would too, but more because she'd be jealous. Nero and Louise could go fuck themselves. Buzz, on the other hand, would approve. Timmy just knew it.

## 19. THE OUTPACK

*Sometimes a choice is offered that is illogical and irrational, but somehow feels right. Gut feelings are often correct, unless they are a result of madness. The line between is thin.*

Whenever Charlie started blaming Nina for haunting him with nightmares, Cathy talked him out of it -- told him he was giving her too much power. Always the psychologist, he mused as the bus traveled through familiar territory on its way between the high school and his home. The sun was straining through the marine layer.

Cathy had this terrific idea that they leave the temperament warmth of San Diego to spend a soggy Christmas in Seattle. Truth be known, he was looking forward to showing Cathy his old haunts. He might even take her to the coffee house in an alley next to the U.W. campus where his ed psych professor used to hold court. He

probably still did. Yes, that was a must-do when in Seattle.

Charlie hadn't lied to Nina. His life had changed dramatically. He marveled at the energy of his junior high school students. Keeping up with them was an ongoing challenge, especially because it really meant keeping up with their hormones. He loved teaching music and he was very good at it. He was also getting very tired of the politics of teaching. His band of drummers brought him the greatest joy. Whether it was Latin or African polyrhythms, he was amazed at the music they made.

Of course if he had his druthers, he'd start his own band. But whenever he brought it up to Cathy, she'd laugh it off. If anything, she told him, he should open a music store or studio where he could teach during the summer rather than mope around the house. But he didn't want to teach, he wanted to play. Sure, he'd filled in for a few drummers in local bands -- mostly mariachi bands -- but it wasn't enough. Being a white boy with a beat didn't carry

much weight. His buddy, Roberto, had even made him an honorary Hispanic, told him he could play in a band full-time if he wanted to, but would have to give up the day job.

Charlie tried to repress the illogical thought that maybe Nina could somehow help him figure out what to do. She understood better than anyone what it took to be a working artist. She'd help if he could get her away from her bitch of a lover. He and Delta had quiet disdain for one another. Nina and Cathy both thought he was jealous and angry that he couldn't fulfill Nina's needs. He wasn't. He and Delta simply didn't like one another. Maybe going to Seattle was a bad idea, he thought. The bus stopped a block from his house.

"Have a good one," the bus driver said. A substitute, Charlie thought as he waived at the red-haired freckle-faced man who smiled broadly.

It would be good to see Seattle again, see Nina, and drink good coffee. Downtown Seattle was beautiful at Christmastime even if there was rarely snow and plenty of rain.

Maybe the rain would wash away the residue left from his bloody dreams. Wouldn't that be nice.

\* \* \*

Angelica marveled at the young man who had grown up quicker than she thought possible. In sleep he looked much younger than his 30 years, more vulnerable. Soon the plane would land and she'd have to say another goodbye. He'd smile his father's smile, pull at his dreadlocks and tell her for the nth time he loved his work when he got it, he saw his kids regularly and life in L.A. had promise. She'd have preferred he'd gone to college, but Bert was convinced the two commercials he'd done would lead him into a life of Hollywood success. Angelica had to admit, he'd always had a special charisma, let alone being beautiful to look upon.

She wished Bo could meet him, but knew this wasn't the time. A shiver went through her at the thought of the nightmares. While living and traveling through Tibet, she'd seen



many terrible things – unspeakable atrocities done in the name of an empty righteousness. The Chinese were ruthless, although they had stayed away from the monastery. However, there was an evil to these nightmares that seemed to touch her in a more personal way.

Angelica looked forward to seeing Bo and meeting Melinka. She knew she would leave Tibet and move somewhere else soon -- but she didn't know where. She hoped Bo might somehow help her, although she couldn't quite fathom how. She'd visited Seattle before and wasn't all that impressed. Bert wanted her to move to Los Angeles. The idea of living in such a large city with so many people did not appeal to her. She knew there were ashrams and monasteries all over the world that would welcome her as a resident and teacher, but no place in particular felt right -- not yet, anyway. All in good time, she reminded herself.

“Can I get you anything?” The steward with the red hair and freckles jolted her out of her reverie.

“Some tea would be nice,” she said. She reached out her chi to touch his in thanks. What she touched was not at all what she expected. The mandala projected into her mind turned slowly, unfolding like a kaleidoscope, colorful and energizing.

“You okay, mom?” Bert brought her back to her body. The steward was gone. He had left her a cup of tea. She looked at Bert and smiled. His chi was familiar and grounding. Leaving him would not be easy. It never was.

\* \* \*

Sun Yee was torn. Or maybe she was still recovering from jet lag. The trip to Korea with Sookie had taken its toll. So had seeing her homeland again. Little had changed in 40 years. Perhaps that was why she now found herself eating lunch in a little Korean restaurant in the international district. From block to block, a new Asian focus took over. There was a Chinese section, a Japanese section, Vietnamese, Cambodian and Korean.

The tastes and smells were familiar and somehow soothing. Sookie had made it easy on her, had forgiven her for hiding the truth. But that wasn't what nagged at Sun Yee. Until the day she told Sookie that she was her biological mother, Sun Yee felt she had been blessed with the absence of a maternal instinct or need. This had served her and Desmond well. His nieces and nephews had stayed with them periodically over the years, but their stays were limited and their leaving a relief. Sookie's children had taken to calling her choma long before they knew her to be their grandmother, but with Sookie's schedule, they rarely saw one another.

However, since confessing to Sookie the truth a change had come over her. "A bit latent in the mother department aren't we?" Desmond had asked.

Perhaps she was. Perhaps she missed Korea more than she knew. Perhaps the nightmares were driving her mad. Whatever the cause, she'd come to see this particular Christmas as a turning point. Sookie had invited her to spend Christmas day with

them and also attend a memorial she and her friends were having the next day. How odd that they'd all lost someone close to them. Maybe spending time with Sookie would help her better understand her confused feelings.

Sun Yee paid her bill and walked out into the drizzle. A man lightly bumped into her as she scurried down Jackson Street towards downtown.

"Excuse me, 'mam." At first his freckles confused her, but soon Sun Yee smiled and let him pass. What an odd man, she thought.

\* \* \*

I love this woman so much, John mused. Sarah's look of excitement made him vibrate as she modeled still another wedding gown. The bulge of her belly made John smile. At least this was a dress she could wear on other occasions; although he wasn't sure how many formal events they'd attend in Boise, Idaho. He couldn't believe they

were moving so far away from the ocean. His new job would work out fine, but he knew he'd miss the salty air. Sarah insisted they move and John could refuse her nothing.

In truth, he shared Liz's attitude about the move. Liz. He loved Sarah but was entranced by his lover's best friend. It was more than the fact that they shared those awful nightmares. Liz was like one of the boys on the ship, yet not. She was easy to be with, easy to work with. John found himself feeling more grounded when she was around. Sarah did too, even if she didn't know it. Granted, he never did understand her thing with dogs and cats. He liked Rover, even though she tried to bite him once, but had been raised to live without dogs in the house. They lived outside. His allergy to cats precluded that particular scenario.

But the move was becoming more of a problem. He also thought that it was the root of the nightmares. Not that he could tell Sarah that. No way. But at some point, he would talk to Liz about it. Maybe she had some ideas that would put his heart and

mind at ease. Becoming a father seemed perfectly natural in comparison.

“I like that one the best,” he said out loud.

“It is the most versatile given your condition,” the salesman said. His freckles seemed to dance around his amiable face.

“It’s \$400,” Sarah said with a mischievous grin. “But it has room for John Jr. as he grows and I can even wear it after he’s born.

“Let’s buy it,” John said. He wished the conviction he felt at that moment would carry over to the move. The salesman raised his eyebrows and shrugged at him as though reading his thoughts. I gotta talk to Liz, John thought as they left the shop to do still more shopping, not one of John’s favorite activities. But he did love to see Sarah glow with joy at her new purchases.

\* \* \*

Gary had trained his wife and family well. They loved celebrating holidays with him,

but didn't expect it. This was a good thing. Nor did they ask him about his work. This was a mandatory thing. Not even his parents had known his specialty. Nor did Gary himself understand how he'd developed his specialty. It was straight out of the *X Files*. It's not like he believed in ghosts or aliens or other paranormal phenomenon. Granted, he'd seen things he could in no way explain - - weird mysterious things. But somehow, he'd found a way to accept them as unexplainable while getting enough sense of what they were to handle them. He could only imagine how complicated working Roswell must have been. Not that he was privy to what happened. He had to get his information through reports, books, articles and the internet - like everyone else. Sometimes he supplemented his work by plowing through piles of unsubstantiated claims.

As Gary sat in the waiting area of his commanding officer in an unaccommodating chair, he fidgeted at the fact that he'd have to rely on his own brother without telling

him anything. Lying to David was not easy. Nor was David going to willingly help him.

Gary thought about their phone call a few nights ago. Gary planned on using David's knowledge of Sandpoint Park to help him with his investigation. But David started ranting about never going back to the park because of this Masterpack and other odd claims. Gary had to admit the night following the call brought the worst nightmares yet. Perhaps David's rejection of his dog buddies had something to do with it. If Gary had his way, he'd leave David out of it -- he'd always been protective of his baby twin bro.

"Let me hit the head and we'll talk, Gary," said his CO as he scurried past. Gary was surprised when another man emerged from his CO's office -- a civilian in a suit that made his freckles stand out.

"You must be Gary," he said. Gary wasn't sure he liked this first name basis.

"And you are?" Gary asked, automatically reaching out his hand.



“Red,” he said, firmly shaking Gary’s hand and maintaining eye contact. Despite his wariness, Gary got a good hit off of this man. “I’ll be working with you on the Sandpoint project. I was the primary investigator at the other sites.”

“And you work for...?”

“Does it matter?” They laughed. “You look like you’re losing sleep over this.”

“It shows? Actually, I’ve been having nightmares. I don’t know if they are related or not.”

“Blood and dogs?” Gary nodded cautiously. “Could be.”

“Sounds like you have information that could make my life and job a lot easier,” Gary said with his usual charm, wondering how in the hell Red knew about his dreams.

“That may very well be, but I’m afraid I can’t stay. I’ll be there when you need me.”

“When will that be?” Gary asked, a little uncomfortable with the man’s cavalier attitude at his expense.

“Gary, you’ll have to trust me.” For some reason beyond Gary’s comprehension, he

did. "And I was never here. Your CO prefers it that way."

"It's covered," Gary responded automatically.

"Shall we go into my office? We have work to do," Gary's CO said just as the freckled man disappeared around the corner. By the time their meeting ended, Gary was briefed on what he was getting into -- not that it told him the whole story. On the contrary. The scenario was as mysterious as ever. But at least he would spend Christmas with his brother.

\* \* \*

Timmy looked up at the clock again. He figured he had an hour or so before Nero or Louise came looking for him downstairs. Thankfully, they were busy with each other. Timmy tried not to think about why he had to sit on only one buttock at a time. Truthfully, he liked the feeling Nero pounding against him. His employer's body

felt like an invasion, but Nero was much smaller. Not that he was gay. No way.

“Trying to forget something?” Timmy looked up at Buzz and felt tears come to his eyes. He rarely cried, but Timmy didn't have the control to stop it. “Thanks for meeting me, Timmy.” Buzz ignored Timmy’s silent weeping. “I know you thought I betrayed you. You found us and we made you leave. Timmy, you really do belong with us. I know this to be true. But you weren’t ready.”

“Am I ready now?” Timmy was surprised by the longing in his voice.

“Not quite, but soon. I came here to invite you to our Yule ritual on Christmas eve.”

“Isn't that next week?”

“Yes. It’s one of the rituals we do for extended family. You can even bring your girlfriend.”

“What about—”

“Ethan is not invited.”

“I was talking about--”

“I know who you were talking about.” Timmy was taken aback by Buzz’s sudden seething anger. At the same time he

remembered Ethan was Nero's real name. "I'm sad we lost Louise, but she's not invited either."

"Maybe I will ask Gina," Timmy said, hoping to please Buzz and steer him away from being mad at him.

"Good choice. Because many members have to go home to their children, we will meet at 4:30 p.m. and then we'll perform our own midnight mass at 5 p.m."

"Where?" Buzz filled him in on the details.

"Timmy you're mixed up in something very dangerous and dark."

"That's good isn't it?"

Buzz and Timmy glanced at the Animal Control officer who smiled at them before sitting down at the next table and ordering coffee. Buzz lowered his voice.

"Timmy, our rituals come from a long tradition designed to focus power in a specific way. We are not selfish in the same way Ethan is selfish. We wish to harness power but recognize we are to share that power with our community. We do it for the

group, not ourselves. Ethan only does things for himself. I'm sure you've noticed."

"And he keeps changing the rules."

"That's because he derives power from chaos."

"And that isn't good?"

"Yes and no. There's nothing wrong with chaos. In fact, it feeds the power of darkness. But chaos can be unwieldy and unpredictable. Our rituals were designed to channel chaos, so that the power generated is more reliable -- so the group feels more connected."

Timmy hadn't paid much attention to the others in Buzz's group except Louise.

"I can see you're beginning to see, Timmy. I may have lost Louise to chaos, but I hope to bring you back. Chaos is incredibly seductive, especially for those seeking raw dark power. But control is paramount. Without control, the powers of the dark take on lives of their own that can easily destroy us rather than build us up."

Timmy stared at his coffee, contemplating the nature of life. He was both

disturbed and relieved by what Buzz had to say.

“Excuse me,” Buzz called out to their neighboring patron. The Animal Control officer looked up from his newspaper and smiled. “Is it true that dogs get more viscous when on a leash?”

“They can get protective of their owners. Sometimes that translates into vicious behavior. Mostly it means putting on a show of aggressiveness.”

“But dogs are more aggressive when restrained.”

“A dog protects his or her pack – not unlike humans. A greater threat comes from the collective nature of a pack. One dog’s behavior becomes an extension of the pack. You have to look at the nature of a pack before determining how to handle a particular dog.” The Animal Control officer glanced at the clock on the wall. “And duty calls. Good day.”

“He’s right, you know,” Buzz said. Timmy wondered if Buzz noticed that the Animal Control officer seemed to answer an

unspoken question, not the one Buzz actually asked. Buzz stood up to put on his coat.

“He may be right, but there’s something about him that isn’t,” Timmy said vaguely. The man had creeped him out.

“I’ve seen him before, but I’ll be damned if I can remember -- which means I’ll remember eventually.” Buzz’s laugh made Timmy smile. “You’re all right, Timmy.” Timmy’s smile grew into a grin.

Two dark-skinned men, likely middle-eastern, walked in and meticulously moved away the dishes left by the Animal Control officer and neatly folded their coats before sitting down. Buzz rolled his eyes. “They’re everywhere,” he said before leaving the coffee shop. Timmy thought he could smell the skin of the men at the next table. He dropped a five on the table and left, practically running into Nero. They stood outside the coffee shop in the drooling rain.

“There you are,” Nero said. “Don’t tell me. Buzz invited you to Yule. Don’t deny it. I saw Buzz leave.” Timmy nodded his head but

said nothing. “Maybe we’ll all go to his precious ritual. It could be fun.”

Before Timmy could object, Gina strolled up to them. She looked tired.

“Hey,” she said to Timmy.

“Aren’t you going to introduce me to this lovely lady,” Nero said with a hunger that made Timmy flinch.

“Gina, Nero – Nero, Gina.” Gina gave Nero one of her professional smiles. Timmy held onto his laugh at Nero’s glazed smile. Gina really did know how to seduce just about any man. Her smile turned to a sneer as Louise came up behind Nero.

“Whatcha doing, baby?” she asked, returning Gina’s sneer.

“I promised my lady a nice dinner at the Four Seasons,” Nero said, his eyes never leaving Gina. “You two are welcome to join us in our room after dinner.”

“It’s Saturday night and I’m working. Sorry,” Gina said with mock disappointment.

“Timmy? You gonna join us after your shift?”



“Okay.” Timmy blushed at his inability to say “no” to Nero. If Gina disapproved, she didn’t show it. Fortunately, Timmy’s coat covered his excitement at the prospect of being under Nero again in a sweating stupor.

“Later then,” Louise said, dragging Nero down the street.

“They are bad news, Timmy,” Gina said after they left.

“I know,” he said and told Gina about his meeting with Buzz.

“Sounds interesting,” she said. “But I can’t make it on Christmas Eve. Tami and I have our own tradition of trimming the tree. You’re welcome to join us.”

“We’ll see,” Timmy said, surprised by his relief at her not wanting to join him. This way, he could go with Nero and Louise. Screw Buzz and his group.

## 20. CONFRONTATION

*Resistance to change is natural. However, the only consistency in the universe is change, which means there's a lot of resistance. It's the same old story. Overcoming resistance requires conflict, confrontation and resolution. When cowardice is part of the equation, the lingering effects of the experience can be ugly.*

Oh, shit," Liz exclaimed as we pulled into the parking lot of Sandpoint.

"What?" John asked.

"It's that Animal Control guy. He may be out of uniform, but I'd know those freckles anywhere. Maybe this wasn't such a great idea."

"But Rover and I need a walk. At least I do."

"You're just avoiding Sarah, your bride-to-be."

"Can you blame me?"

"No. Her hormones have turned her into a lunatic. Thank God she was too busy making you Christmas to join us."

"But it's only Christmas Eve. Besides, she's making it for you too, Liz. I know you're Jewish, but Sarah doesn't discriminate."

"Sometimes I wish she did," Liz said. Sarah didn't disapprove of her kidnapping John. They'd be out of her way while she turned her apartment into a Christmas tree and cooked until her hands were raw. And then they'd have to do all those Christmas rituals. Liz knew some of them were meaningful, but they also seemed goofy. Nina's explanation of where some of the rituals came from made Christmas seem even more ludicrous. Hanukkah is much more civilized, Liz thought. Like so many Jewish holidays, we celebrate having been victims. Besides, Jews are do-gooding all year around, not just because Santa Claus is coming to town.

"I had no idea I was marrying a Christmas junky," John said. Liz had tried to

warn John that he'd better get it together for an all-out Christmas because Sarah wouldn't settle for less. He had only laughed.

"Look, the Animal Control guy is waving at us," John said.

"Sorry, puppygirl, but this doesn't look good. Wait -- there's Nina and Puck."

"She's talking to that guy even though her dog's running around without a leash."

"Maybe we should check this out. Rover, you stay in the car." Her gut told her there was no problem because the Animal Control guy was their ally, but she didn't trust her knowledge, especially after he vanished before their eyes, scaring David away. She could tell John was disappointed that he wouldn't have her to himself. He obviously wanted to talk to her about something.

John and Liz walked over to where Puck ran circles around Nina and the Animal Control guy.

"This is it," Nina announced, pointing to Bo's truck as it pulled in next to my car. "Where's Rover?"

"In the car. I forgot her leash."

"Fuck her leash, get her out here," Nina exclaimed.

"I see I have trained you well," the Animal Control guy said to Liz with a smile before turning to Nina. "I'll be back when you need me." He walked off into the trees. Liz pretended she didn't see him vanish in mid air again, nor did John seem to notice. She turned back to ask Nina what that was all about, just in time to see Rover jump out the window to greet Shakti and Gandhi. That was a first for Rover. Bo opened the door of his truck for a striking bald-headed woman who moved like a panther, assessing her surroundings as though she were in danger. Bo pushed the back seat forward to retrieve the bird costumes he'd made for the All Dog All Hallow's Eve Party.

"You really want me to haul this around while we walk the dogs?" The new voice startled me.

"Liz, this is Charlie, my ex. And this is Bamba, his pet drum." Charlie held a drum that looked like it had been carved out of a tree trunk.

"Speak for yourself," he said with a sneer.

"All right, it's my pet drum. And yes, you're supposed to take it with us."

"I promised I'd be good so I'll be good. I'll even carry your djembe which is far too good of a drum for your needs. But this 'you're supposed to' business is bordering on stupid."

Liz felt nauseous all of a sudden. Nina's "supposed to" reminded her that the real reason she'd dragged John to the park on Christmas Eve just before dusk was because she felt an irrational compulsion to do so. If she were the only one who felt that way, she might not feel so out of control. But John felt compelled to come too, even if the compulsion coincided with his need to flee what looked like it would be the most ostentatious Christmas Sarah had yet to invent. She felt like she wasn't quite in her body or that she wasn't the only one in it. She watched herself go to her car and open the trunk, grabbing two flares. Before she could question her own actions, Rover ran over and licked her hand affectionately

before running off to greet Sookie, Adagio and a woman who was an older version of Sookie. The woman hadn't aged well, but she still had fire in her eyes. She and Sookie carried flutes.

"We're all here," Nina said.

"Except for David," Liz said sadly.

"He'll be here," Nina said. Before Liz could say anything, Bo walked up with the beautiful woman in tow. He introduced her as Angelica. Her shaven head emphasized her high cheek bones. If Bo hadn't told them about her, Liz wouldn't have been able to guess her family origin. Her scrutiny made Liz feel like she had no clothes on. Angelica noticed her discomfort and smiled broadly. Liz returned the smile.

Silence followed their introductions as they looked at the items each of them carried. Sun-Yee stood so that Sookie blocked her vision of Bo. Liz was surprised to see her after what Sookie had said on one of their walks about Sun Yee's irrational fear of African-Americans. On the other hand,

she thought, if they shared my need to be here, nothing else would matter.

"Perhaps you're all wondering why we're here," Nina said seriously.

"That's an understatement," Charlie said, shifting the heavy drum from one hand to the other. The dogs, who had been running around the parking lot, joined the circle of humans and sat attentively. Even Puck sat alert and motionless. The non-dogpeople looked surprised. Liz knew if she were looking at them from a distance, she'd think they looked like a pretty weird group. It would have felt exactly right except for missing David, Judah and Rachel. Liz looked over at Bo, assuming he would take over as leader of the pack.

"We are a Masterpack, as you've all come to know," Nina began.

"And you're top dog, right?" Charlie was getting on Liz's nerves.

"Yes, I am," she said with a defiant look on her face that made Charlie flinch. Of course, Liz thought, how silly of me to have assumed otherwise.



“Someone is missing,” Angelica said.

“David weenied out,” Liz said.

“He’ll be here later,” Nina said. “I hope.” Liz thought Nina projected more confidence than she really felt. Perhaps it had something to do with her conversation with the mysterious Animal Control guy.

“What did the Animal Control guy say to you?”

“He was here?” Bo asked with less surprise and more relief.

“He told me we had work to do,” Nina answered.

“On Christmas Eve?” John asked. “What kind of work?”

Nina ignored him and asked, “Does everyone have their tools?” Liz looked at the flares in her hand and shrugged. Bo and Angelica had the bird costumes in hand. Sun Yee and Sookie carried their flutes. Charlie had the drum. Nina had a plastic bag filled with something in her hand. Only John stood empty-handed. They all looked at him.

"I had no idea this was going to happen," he said. "I don't have any tools per se."

"What's in that canvas bag in the back seat?" Liz asked, recalling how Rover's nose seemed glued to it until they crossed the boundary to the park.

"A new net an old friend gave me for Christmas. I don't remember bringing it."

"Get it, please," Nina said.

"But--"

"Please." The canvas bag was heavy but light enough for John to carry.

"I've been told there's a group doing a ritual on the other side of the park."

"Pagan alert, pagan alert" Charlie said with a smirk.

"No, they're Satanists of some kind," Sookie said as though she were channeling her mother – her other mother.

"Yes, that's them, the Christian scum," Nina said.

"They're Satanists, not Christians," John said.

"Satanists are a type of Christian," Nina responded. John opened his mouth, shut it and shrugged.

"There will be danger tonight," Angelica said softly.

"Is that why were you talking to the Animal Control guy?" Liz asked.

"He's not exactly Animal Control," said Nina. "He'll join us later on. Did everyone dream last night?"

Liz noticed the black circles under everyone's eyes, reflecting the fatigue she felt. She'd painted over another four canvases with red and outlines of both dog and human body parts. She was thankful they were all new canvases; however, she'd had to give up painting the portrait. The details of her red collection were illusive, but certain images eerily stood out. The looks on the faces of the others told her they probably felt as weird as she did.

Nina opened the plastic bag. She handed each of us a red plastic catsup bottle like the ones used in fast food joints.

"Are these supposed to be weapons of some kind?" Charlie asked, inspecting the bottle.

"Put them in the waistband of your pants or in your pocket. We will need them and no, I don't have a clue why," Nina replied. "I know you're weirded out by this, but so am I. I'm just going with my gut – and the Animal Control guy."

"I've got my piece in the car," Bo said.

"No guns," Nina commanded.

"What are we supposed to do?" Sookie asked. Her look of fear reflected my own.

"I have a plan. Or should I say I have the inkling of a script and a few ideas on how to put on a show for our friends over there on top of the hill." Looking where she pointed, I could see smoke from a small fire. A chill went up my spine and made me shiver. "I guarantee our show will be a whole lot more interesting than theirs," Nina added with a sneer that spread throughout the group to even the dogs.

"And here I thought you said you'd never let Puck perform in one of your productions," Liz said.

"I lied," she said. As they laughed out loud with a little more gusto than the comment warranted, Liz could feel the tension lighten just a little bit.

"Is this supposed to be a musical?" They laughed and the tension lightened a lot. Maybe Charlie wasn't so bad after all.

"I guess so," Nina said.

"Woof," Gandhi barked.

"He's right," Angelica said, "Let's hear the plan." It didn't occur to Liz until much later that when Gandhi spoke, they all knew exactly what he meant to say.

As Nina talked about her vision of what was to come, Liz found herself lulled by Nina's voice more than her words, yet she understood, drifting into an altered state. She knew Puck was scared. Rover was determined, her confidence reinforced by things Bob had told her. Bob the cat? Gandhi and Shakti stood watch. Adagio focused her energies, preparing to run like

the wind. Sun-Yee was uncomfortable with Bo, but there wasn't anything anyone could do about it. Bo sensed her discomfort, but took it in stride. Music ran through Charlie's and Sookie's minds, Sun-Yee periodically joining in. Angelica was at peace, infusing the group with a strength of purpose. They all seemed to listen to Nina with the same distracted concentration.

The only reason Liz knew Nina had stopped speaking was because they all started walking. Sometime during her speech, Bo had adorned his beasts with the feathered cloaks.

At the base of the hill, they parted company. Sookie, Sun-Yee, John and Liz, followed by Rover and Adagio went right. Nina, Bo, Angelica and Charlie went left followed by Puck, Shakti and Gandhi. The clenching in Liz's stomach released as they walked. They were a Masterpack. Anything else was irrelevant.

The sun took its time setting on this clear cold afternoon. It was only 4:30. The moon was rising -- a full moon that hung in the

sky like a ball ready to be thrown and fetched. The part of her that was Liz, unique and individual, rose to retrieve the moon while another part merged with the Masterpack. They were one, able to communicate in ways previously unknown to them. Without thinking, they all opened their mouths and howled at the moon. Their voices, dogs and humans together, rose to reach the moon, reinforcing their singular purpose. These Satanists -- and whoever else meant danger -- would not hurt another living being.

\* \* \*

Timmy wasn't sure where Nero got the three dogs or how he'd gotten three large crosses onto the hill at Sandpoint. Nor did he care. Nor did he let numbness give way to emotion of any kind as Louise fawned Nero with an affection Timmy refused to acknowledge he missed. Gina excited him and that's all that mattered, even if her

performance in bed was more predictable and Louise's more risky.

In his long coat, the machete hung hidden from anyone who cared. It took every ounce of concentration Timmy had to not fantasize how he could carve these doggies slowly into oblivion and retain the maximum amount of blood in the process. All in good time. Meanwhile, Nero wanted him to help build the fire. He was tired from lack of sleep due to Gina and his nightmares, but he did as Nero bade him.

Timmy had always loathed Christmas. It was the only time of year his parents pretended they were a family. It didn't matter that he and his sister despised the silly rituals of tree-trimming, singing and eggnog ingesting. They'd have blown their parents off years ago if it wasn't for the presents. It was the one time of year his parents took joy in their children's pleasure. Actually, they competed for it, each buying presents on their own and assessing who beat whom when it came to Timmy's and Ashley's happiness. It got so Timmy and



Ashley decided ahead of time who would win each year. Daddy usually lost, mostly because this meant he'd end up taking enough drugs to calm himself afterwards. If he won, Mummy turned into a nastier than normal drunk. How she managed to cook up a feast was beyond him.

Suffice to say, Timmy was more depressed than usual. Nero had found the scotch and drank it with Louise. The maid or someone else stole the coke spoon and at the last minute, he gave all the condoms to Gina for protection from her clientele. He thought of bringing Gina home for Christmas, but the microscope his parents would use to scrutinize her would be worse than any of her johns.

"Don't get lost in the flame, Timmyboy," Nero said. Timmy was thankful for the interruption of the mindfuck he'd started inflicting on himself. "We're here to get outside of ourselves, beyond our individual selves, grab a shitload of power, and take it in. You watch, Timmy. What we're doing here will put Buzz to shame. He knows shit.

Bring some nice sharp edges?" Timmy proudly opened his coat and revealed the sharp curved machete. "Nice, Timmy. Good choice." Timmy's heart swelled. Nero knew how to make him feel worthy. "Let's say you and I have a private celebration after tonight's ritual," Nero said as he reached down and grabbed Timmy's balls. Timmy's stomach turned to acid and he choked on his bile even though he could feel his pants tighten against Nero's hand as it stroked him. How could he ever say no to Nero? His nausea and heightened anxiety told him it would be a good thing, but he wasn't gay or even bisexual. He stashed the idea away along with all his other denials.

As he disrobed for the ritual, Timmy could hear the voices that had imprinted themselves on his mind during his last visit to the park. There were so many, he couldn't understand any of them. He only knew that a pack of dogs was close by. He turned his attention to the bushes behind him. The same guy in uniform Buzz had talked to at

the coffee shop smiled and waved at him before disappearing.

"There are other people here," Timmy said. Nero's face was buried in Louise's crotch so Timmy couldn't be sure if he heard. "And other dogs."

"It's Christmas Eve," Louise moaned. "No one's here."

"I hear them," Timmy said.

"Join Buzz's circle, Timmy. It's time."

"Don't stop, Nero," Louise panted. Timmy left them.

\* \* \*

Buzz really knew how to throw a ritual. Timmy was impressed as he left Louise and Nero to join them. The circle was outlined by three six foot crosses planted upside-down into the ground. The dogs tied to each cross had barked themselves out. The altar was incredible. Buzz brought a bunch of his weird stuff -- a skull, black candles, statutes of gargoyles, a silver goblet, a dragon incense burner and, to Timmy's delight, three

athemes. Included was the knife with the serrated edge that Timmy had drooled over. A small fire was burning in the middle of the circle. On the Yule log each member of the group would write wishes and curses in the blood of the dogs. It would then be burnt as an offering. Timmy hoped after draining the blood of the dogs, they'd burn the carcasses on the crosses.

Timmy wanted to believe that his betrayal of Buzz was the right thing to do. After all, Buzz had betrayed him and, as Nero said countless times, turnabout was fair play. Not that fairness was really an issue. But for reasons he couldn't articulate, Timmy still wanted Buzz's approval.

Timmy couldn't hear Nero and Louise in the bushes, but that was no surprise.

After teaching them some Latin chant, Buzz separated them into three groups. The inner circle consisted of Buzz and his closest followers. The next circle consisted of other familiar faces. The outer circle – the one that included Timmy – was largely friends or wannabes. Timmy accepted where he stood.

Still, he longed to be in that inner circle and part of something darker, more powerful and greater than he.

They started at a walk moving counter clockwise or widdershins in their respective circles, chanting the Latin words. No matter how many times Buzz explained the literal translation, Timmy would forget. But he liked the way the words fell off his tongue.

Their pace and tempo increased until they were practically running. The words started running together. Unaware of how they got there, Timmy found himself raising a yell or scream or maybe a howl to the full moon over them. He felt a piece of him join with the group and form what he could only describe as a funnel of power that infused each of them.

\* \* \*

How could she? We're at the park. I don't belong in the tin can. Not when the Masterpack is coming together to do something important. Now that we're finally

here, I know that Bob is right. He says there's more going on than I'm able to comprehend. I don't like being stuck in the large tin can. I'm really a good dog, but anger and frustration inspire me to jump through the window.

Masterdog finally wanders over even though I'm already out and opens the back of the large tin can. She pulls out two funny smelling bones. I can taste her fear. I lick her hand to reassure her. I see Bodog carrying the birds for Gandhi and Shakti to wear. I know this is serious, but it's also going to be fun.

We run around the blacktop while the bipeddogs stand in a circle. Usually Masterdog doesn't let me run around, afraid a large tin can will run me over. Like I'd really let that happen. Puck is especially anxious. Ninadog hasn't taken him out for a while. I try chasing Adagio when something tells me to join the group of bipeddogs standing in a circle. The other dogs get the same message and we sit at their feet.

I know my way of thinking and being has changed since meeting the Masterpack, but as we sit listening to Ninadog, our topdog, I feel a door inside my mind open. It's the same feeling I get when Masterdog opens the door to let me out first thing in the morning, except that this time, I don't have to pee. I like this feeling. As the door opens, so does the intensity of my awareness of the thoughts and intentions of everyone in the Masterpack. What a rush.

As Ninadog speaks, I look over at Bodog. All this time I thought he was the topdog. I was wrong. I can feel Ninadog's words speak notions of what is to come. I look around. Everyone else seems to share these notions.

As we walk up the hill, I remember an exchange I had with a huskydog I met who told me he was part of a Masterpack. They lived in the snow and together dragged flat trees behind them on which their Masterdog sat. The huskydog told me about what it's like to be part of a Masterpack, but I never believed him. After all, it's not like we're wolves. We're far more civilized than wolves.

Except for huskydogs. They're barely dogs. Yet as we walk around the base of the hill, I understand the joy he must have experienced when he was part of his Masterpack. I also sense there is danger ahead. Dark ugly danger.

I'm used to hearing snatches of thoughts from other dogs, but never have I understood so well the nature of the bipeddogs. Their thoughts are incredibly complex and fascinating.

Before I can think more about it, I look up at the moon. It draws my spirit and I howl to let it rise to the moon, bounce off and return to me tenfold, combining my spirit with the spirit of the Masterpack, an identity unto itself of which I am only a small part.

\* \* \*

Despite the fact her juices were flowing from Nero's talented tongue work, Louise felt raw and sore with each new thrust. Nero rarely went this long and his small cock



was usually easy to accommodate for a long period of time if he did. The blanket beneath her did not protect her from the small sticks and stones that pierced her backside. Yet the pain was divine. She could feel her teeth grabbing onto the hand Nero held over her mouth. Usually noisy when fucking, Nero had gagged himself with a scarf and her with his hand.

The chanting in the background made her dizzy. She knew only too well the invocation of those words. Nero was right. They could easily grab the power of Buzz's little group if they could time it right.

Sure enough the increased tempo of the chants matched Nero's thrusts and her rising excitement. At the peak of their howling she could feel both she and Nero reach orgasmic ecstasy. She bit Nero's hand, breaking the skin, blood oozing into her mouth, salty and sour, taking her over the top in ways she'd never felt. The howling seemed to be in stereo, so powerful was their ritual consummation.

\* \* \*

“You can’t afford to think of him as your brother,” the freckled officer had reinforced when he first arrived at the base. Gary knew he was right but that didn’t make his job any easier. He looked around the cozy yet sterile room the naval base had given him. His team would join him with the click of the button on his walkie talkie. These were no toys. They had been digitized to use a frequency outside the range of normal walkie talkies or cell phones. Gary often said they were only for those who walked the talk. A knock at the door brought him out of his musings.

“Dogs are allowed?” David asked. “You sure?”

“Tonight they are, bro,” Gary said.

“You mean afternoon,” David corrected with a sly smile.

“These long nights always throw me off.”

“You mean short days.” Gary could see David was in one of his moods. Usually Gary would argue for the sake of arguing,

knowing David needed to fight his way out of whatever was bothering him. But tonight -- today -- they didn't have the luxury of such transitions.

Before Gary could act on this thought, from across the flat grassy expanse that rose in outside the fenced dogpark, the sound of howling by both humans and dogs was unmistakable. It almost sounded unreal. Gary and David exchanged a glance.

"Get your team and let's scoot," David said. "It's time. I'll be right back -- gotta get something out of my car." Gary tried not to be surprised by his brother's sudden understanding of their situation. As he flicked the switch on his walkie talkie he watched his brother race to his car parked 50 feet from the building. The moon illuminated his trek and for a second there, Gary thought he saw his brother talking to the freckled consultant.

"Do you two always dress alike?" one of his men asked. For the first time, Gary realized both he and his bro wore the same black pants, white T-shirt and black leather

jacket. He couldn't remember a time they'd worn the same clothes -- at least not since playing pranks in high school. Gary frowned when he realized he hadn't changed into his usual blacks like the rest of his team.

Gary was briefing his team when David walked up to him and handed him what looked to be a pair of angel wings and a halo. Gary nodded and took the items. His team said nothing, used to dealing with peculiar actions on the part of their commander. David, however, couldn't help but giggle.

"Gary, I had no idea men in black really existed."

"We don't," Gary said. His team laughed quietly. "I don't like it that you have to be a part of this, bro."

"Me neither," David said. "But this is something that won't be covered without me. Last night's nightmares told me that much. Besides, my friends are out there."

"You think?"

"I know."

"Then let's head out, boys and girls."

\* \* \*

Liz hated the waiting, but knew they had no choice. The fortitude of their canine companions impressed her the most. She'd never seen them stay in one place for so long. Perhaps they also found the show on the hill pretty damn amazing. She tried to ignore the upside down crosses to which three dogs were leashed. Their fear was practically palatable, their thoughts more chaotic than the dogs in the Masterpack who were as focused and intent on the perfect timing of events as she was. She could even sense David, Judah and Rachel. The relief upon their arrival had silently given the Masterpack courage. She sensed they were outside the park, but on their way with reinforcements, whatever that meant.

Liz was most taken with the stillness projected by Bo's friend, Angelica. Never had Liz felt such focus and strength from another human being. Bo was pretty damn close, but his stillness was fringed with

fretfulness. Fortunately, Shakti and Gandhi were by his side, their stillness consistent with how they were most of the time. Rover is right, Liz thought, they are the guardians of the gate, even if what's beyond the gate is a complete mystery.

Nina projected a sense of bottled up energy waiting to explode. The power of her control was humbling. Charlie was flat out uncomfortable but, in spite of himself, he trusted Nina completely. Liz was shocked by Puck's ability to restrain himself. He felt like a spring waiting to be sprung. The fact that Liz knew these things while there were on the other side of the hill did not faze her.

Music soothed the minds of Sookie and Sun Yee. They seemed to harmonize in their minds. Adagio surrendered to the harmony, imagining himself running with the music in his head. She felt John's hand on her shoulder, a goodness infused with a curious kind of joy ran through her body. Of all of them, Rover seemed the most worried, as though she carried the anxiety of the Masterpack on her shoulders which, when

Liz let herself acknowledge it, she did. Liz wanted to comfort her best friend, but knew she could not.

Liz watched as the main guy – the head priest – used a rather fancy knife to gently nick the fingers of each of those who sat in the 3-tiered circle. One by one, the participants would rise and touch a bloody finger to a large log near the fire. Something about one of the guys on the outside of the circle looked familiar, but she couldn't place him. To the surprise of all, following his touch to the log, he opened his coat and drew out a machete. Liz could feel her stomach drop.

“Stay calm,” a voice whispered in her ear. She turned to see the fading image of the Animal Control guy.

\* \* \*

Timmy tried not to be daunted by the look of rage on Buzz's face when he raised his machete, giving Louise and Nero the signal. His body clenched in resistance to his

actions. Perhaps his body knew that undermining the ritual was a bad idea. Buzz said he would let him come back. Maybe Nero was wrong.

Before he could dwell on the pain that made his heart clench, the fireworks went off. They weren't like the 4th of July, but they were still pretty cool and lit up the sky. And they were loud. They were so loud, Timmy didn't hear Louise and Nero screaming as they danced naked around the stunned participants in Buzz's ritual. Timmy could feel the power of the ritual shift. The energy seemed to focus on the machete so that Timmy had to struggle to keep control over it as he waived it over his head. Maybe heads would finally roll, he thought.

\* \* \*

The three dogs attached to those strange trees whine like babydogs. I try to extend my Masterpack consciousness to them, but they're too busy crying to themselves to connect. Dogs can be way too self-pitying



when their fight is gone. It makes me very sad. Everyone else in the Masterpack is either focused on whatever those weird bipeddogs are doing or upon one another. The bipeddogs act like they've never felt this way before. Now that I think about it, maybe they haven't. Is this what Bob has been trying to tell me?

My thoughts are interrupted by the strange lightning and thunder. The lightning is okay, but the thunder echoes throughout my entire body. Puck and Adagio don't like it either. We shake in response, unable to move. I can hear reassuring messages from Gandhi and Shakti, but they don't help. Even when Judah and Rachel tell us they're almost there, I find no comfort.

I sense Bo and Angelica taking action. When Shakti and Gandhi move in and out of the bushes wearing their bird disguises, my fear turns to curiosity. Even though I know they are Shakti and Gandhi, all I see are big birds. I much prefer focusing on birds than on the thunder. Puck and Adagio feel the same way.

The bipeddogs on the hill see the Shakti and Gandhi birds move in and out of the bushes. They are afraid -- as well they should be. Except for that bipeddog with the sharp thing. I know he wants to use that sharp thing on Shakti and Gandhi. Lucky for him he doesn't leave the circle. If he had, I would be on him in a second, the rotten cur. He may be bald now, but I remember his smell from the day he and some of the other bipeddogs tried to pupnap Spot. He's also the one who stole my costume from Masterdog -- not that taking away that costume was such a bad thing. Still, if there was ever a bad bipeddog, it would be him. With the exception of the two bipeddogs who smell like mating. They are worse. Masterdog and the other bipeddogs remember some of the others from someone watching Aaron Bell.

"Leave it," the bipeddog-with-no-smell says inside my head. I obey. I'm a good dog.

\* \* \*

Gary, David and the MIB's looked up at the lights in the sky near the hill at Sandpoint Park. Gary's knowledge of the difference between firecrackers, car backfires and gunfire reassured him no one had been hurt – yet. With all the various factions of civilians – one good, two bad – the potential for chaos was high. And yet he knew that somehow, it would be covered.

With a nod, Gary instructed his team to pick up their pace. David turned to him and smiled, his dogs scurrying at his heels. Gary smiled back. It felt good to be in sync with his bro, so good he growled along with his bro and the dogs. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the raised eyebrows of his team as they too started growling.

\* \* \*

Liz watches the machete. Thanks to Rover, she now knows where she'd seen the man before, although the pupnapping thing was a surprise. From the other side of the hill, she hears Gandhi's low growl. The other

dogs join in. And then the humans add their own growls. The unnerving sound coming out of her own mouth sends chills up her spine.

The sound puts even the man waving a machete into a state of stun. They'd better freeze, she thinks. Sookie and Sun Yee step out from behind the bush to play their flutes. Their sound is purposefully mismatched and creates a similar response to what happens when someone scratches the blackboard with their nails. And yet it is beautiful.

The only movement is that of the naked infiltrators on one side of the circle and the high priest on the other side of the circle. Everyone else is seated except the machete man. Her growling with the Masterpack tickles her throat a comforting tickle.

\* \* \*

Timmy is frozen by the sound of the flutes, his breathing close to a pant.

“Timmy, chaos without control is meaningless,” he hears Buzz say. “Power comes from control, not random acts of madness. Keep your control.”

“Don’t listen to him, Timmyboy,” Nero counters. “You’ve seen what we can do with the power of chaos. Control is a myth. Buzz is wrong.”

Timmy remains frozen, torn between Buzz and Nero. At the same time, he's elated by their fighting over him. He's never felt so important, so wanted.

“Timmy, we need you,” Louse says, wriggling her body sensuously, tweaking her erect nipples.

“We do, Timmyboy.” Nero strokes his erection. Timmy feels himself getting hard.

“Timmy, he offers you an illusion of power through sex which isn't even true sex magick,” Buzz says. “Don't let him be the one in control of everything, commanding you to obey.”

“Buzz is no different, Timmy. He's a user and gets off on having supplicants.”

“Nero has slaves, not supplicants. Do you want to be a slave, Timmy?”

Timmy is confused. He loves Nero -- his touch, his strength, his love of the good things in life. He also feels his deep need for Buzz’s approval. The thrill of being fought over is being replaced with an inner conflict that threatens to tear Timmy apart.

\* \* \*

That sound. That awful sound. Like dying birds. And it comes from the shiny sticks Sookiedog and her motherdog carry. I much prefer the booming sounds of Ninadog's mate as he pounds a small tree. And here I thought he was a useless excuse of a bipeddog.

What am I supposed to do? I have nothing to do.

"Not true, Rover."

The bipeddog-with-no-smell, pats my head. Together we slowly walk to where the evil bipeddogs sit stunned and paralyzed -- for the moment, anyway. They watch the

struggle between the four who stand. Sookiedog and her mother walk with us, still making dying bird sounds with their sticks. Adagio is there too -- he seems to like the sound, crazy dog.

I can sense Puck. He drags those blankets the evil bipeddogs must have taken off. He struggles as he takes the cloth deeper into the bushes, the silly cur. These blankets are heavier than socks, but Puck is determined. I hope he knows what he's doing.

"He does," the bipeddog-with-no-smell says. I lick his hand and he disappears. I wish I could disappear like that.

Masterdog is still in the bushes with Johndog. Ninadog, Bodog and their littermates are joined by Judah and Rachel on the other side of the circle of bipeddogs. Our growls are softer but still in our mouths. Even the dogs roped to the strange trees growl. Yet we wait. All this waiting is making me very edgy.

“You’ll have your time, Rover,” the voice of the bipeddog-with-no-smell says and I relax just a little bit.

\* \* \*

Gary wants to feel stupid wearing angel wings and a halo with a large black dog in a bird suit standing next to him, but he can’t. It’s part of the plan, although whose plan it is, is beyond me, he thinks. He had instructed his team to stay on alert but take no action.

David, his halo and wings glimmering in the moonlight, flanked by the other black dog in a bird suit, stepped out from behind the bushes on the other side of the hill.

The man dropped his machete. The naked man inched towards it as David ran back into the bushes. Gary could see the naked woman preparing to retrieve the weapon as well.

“Leave it,” Red said to the naked figures. Gary wanted to be surprised at seeing the freckled man in an Animal Control uniform



but isn't. Instead, he took this as a cue to emerge from the bush with the black dog by his side.

"One angel is a terrible thing to waste," Gary proclaimed. "Wasting two is tragic." The shock of seeing the same winged man flanked by a large black dog in a bird suit on the other side of the clearing took the naked couple off guard. Gary scooted back into the bush as David emerged.

"Your evil Lord has no power here. That means you have no power. You sit naked before the guardians of the Almighty. Pray for forgiveness." The naked man isn't moved to pray, nor is anyone else, but the four who were standing do find themselves kneeling and whipping their attention back and forth between the two sets of twins. As Gary and David continued their game of pop-up Gary knew that like him, his bro sensed when their audience got restless enough for them to stop playing with their heads.

\* \* \*

Something about the scene, complete with music, made Liz feel like she was watching the filming of a B-movie. She knew she wasn't completely in her body, but that made sense since this didn't resemble a reality she'd ever known. It was too weird. The looks on the faces of those seated made her want to giggle, but she didn't. At the nudging of Rover when the angel theatrics were over, she struck one of the flares she'd been carrying. She threw it into the coals of the fire at the center of the circle which had almost burnt out. She couldn't have aimed it better if she tried. The flare ignited the fire with a brief but colorful explosion.

She ignited the second flare. Rover grabbed it from her and ran clockwise around the circle while Bo and the now wingless and haloless Gary and David pulled up the reversed crosses. The dogs escaped with the ropes hanging around their necks, out into the bushes and towards the outer edges of the park. At first Liz figured they'd all run home, but she can feel them

making a deliberate circle around the park's perimeter.

Liz and John ran back to where the net was still folded inside the canvas bag.

\* \* \*

“Timmy, time to grow up and kill your father.” Timmy was jolted out of his reverie by the voice of Nero.

“No, Timmy. It isn't me you want to kill. Nero has turned you into his whore. It is him you want to destroy.”

Timmy knows he isn't all that smart, but he's smart enough to realize they really haven't been fighting over him at all. They were using him to fight each other. Timmy hated the idea of being used. He'd been used by everyone he ever knew -- his parents, his sister, his employer, Buzz, Nero, Louise -- even Gina used him for a place to sleep. Never again.

Timmy stood up with the machete, swinging wildly, challenging any resistance. The supplicants of Buzz panicked when they

saw blood flow from the arms of a few of the inner circle who try to shield themselves. No one was completely debilitated, so they all got up and ran in different directions. The dogs took off too. Buzz, Nero and Louise stayed with him. A few stragglers crouched by the bushes, curious about what would happen next.

The big black guy swung one of the crosses in his direction. Timmy wanted to slice it up and then slice up the nigger, but knows that as sharp as his machete is, it could easily get stuck in such a large piece of wood. The two angels also wielded crosses. One of them talked into a walkie talkie.

Timmy heard the fat woman yell something. Her voice made his bones ache. Timmy was beside himself with rage. The sound accompanied by the betrayals fueled the fire that burned inside of him.

\* \* \*

Go, I hear Ninadog command. I notice the bipeddogs who run around the park have no sharp edges. And they are more afraid of us than we are of them. I don't have an instinct to herd sheep or goats. Instead, my instinct is to run circles around danger until they are paralyzed. I don't know why that would work, but evidently it does. In this case, I rely upon Judah and Rachel to best understand herding. Nor are we herding sheep or goats -- we herd the evil bipeddogs. At least we have the help of the dogs who had been pupnapped. Still, rounding up all the stragglers is no easy trick.

One evil bipeddog climbs inside a deserted doghouse on stilts. I keep him inside but only because I have no way of getting in. I can't imagine what the purpose of this doghouse could be. Another bipeddog mystery. I would have to ask one of the bipeddogs when they are more available. At the moment, we are all focused on our specific tasks.

Adagio appears beside me. Unlike me, he is able to leap up into the doghouse. I sense

his dominance and can smell the bipeddog's fear. Adagio bares his teeth. I see the image in my mind. I had no idea he could be so aggressive. The bipeddog doesn't move. Finally, Adagio circles around and sinks his teeth into the bipeddog's butt. The scream of the bipeddog makes me smile -- especially when I see him leap off the doghouse and head up the hill. Adagio is pleased with himself. I'm pleased with him too.

Before going up the hill, we watch Judah and Rachel try to round up four particularly stubborn bipeddogs. They're trying a strategy that would probably work under other circumstances but not here -- at least, not without the help of me and Adagio. I growl at one of the bipeddogs who stares at me but doesn't move. When Rachel is in place, I start barking and baring my fangs. The bipeddog tries to back up but falls on the ground. We keep doing this to each of the four until they start running up the hill rather than trying to take the road that leaves the park. It doesn't take long, but it sure is fun.

The four of us follow the bipeddogs up the hill.

\* \* \*

Although it isn't usually like Gary to force his team to back off from an altercation -- especially one as dangerous as this -- he also feels he has no choice. He, David and the big man use the crosses to corner the two naked whackos, the mad machete man and the ringleader. They're so busy yelling at each other they hardly notice they are cornered. Somehow, Gary felt the dogs rounding up the stragglers who fled from the machete. He also sensed the others of David's friends doing something in the bushes. His team is antsy, but that's their problem.

Gary takes stock of David's friends who emerge from the bush. The big guy looks like he can take care of himself. Same with the exotic woman. Her movements are elegant and extraordinary. The heavier woman would take on the high priest, although it

wouldn't be a physical fight. He sensed she had more power and control than anyone else present, although he didn't know what that meant. Come to think of it, his need to keep his team at bay came from her. Gary stopped thinking. It was getting in the way of his instincts.

\* \* \*

Liz watches the events on the hill while she and John unfold the net. She is so distracted, John does most of the work. Liz knows that the dogs and followers of the high priest have disbursed, although she can also sense them being herded back. Still, she feels very vulnerable without a dog or two close by.

She watches as Nina, Charlie and Angelica emerge from the bushes, Angelica dancing to the drumming. Her movements are precise, resembling those of a martial art. Yes, Angelica's voice echoes in her mind. Even the machete man is entranced. Her image blurs when she spins. One minute



Angelica is moving the next minute she stands over the supine body of the naked woman. Dead? No, paralyzed, Angelica's voice says in her head.

The naked man finally takes his attention away from Angelica and notices his woman on the ground. Liz thinks he'll charge Angelica, but he smiles at her instead. The smile makes Liz nauseous. Angelica shares her feelings, as do the others in the Masterpack.

Bo drops the cross and tackles the naked man from behind. They struggle, the naked man resorting to biting and hair pulling. Bo seems to have the upper hand until the naked man knees him in the groin. Just as the naked man is about to charge Bo with his head, Shakti and Gandhi blindside him, knocking the naked man to the ground. Liz has never known the two Rottweilers to get so angry and she wants to laugh because they still wear their bird suits, but they growl until the naked man stops moving, refraining from attacking him due to their

training. As Shakti bares her teeth and Liz can see drool drop on the man's erection.

At the same time, David and Gary use the large crosses to poke and prod the machete man. Thankfully, the machete remains on the ground. The machete man isn't as irrational as before, calmly fighting off the crosses. Liz knows David and Gary try to tire him out, concerned the man will explode into another tirade of rage if the high priest and naked man egg him on again.

Meanwhile, Nina and the high priest eye one another. Charlie, Sookie and Sun Yee continue their background music.

"Your power has been disbursed," Nina says with a smile.

"Only that which we were conjuring tonight," the high priest says with an unnerving confidence. "Power is accumulative and I have accumulated quite a bit of it -- enough to deal with the likes of you."

“What about your supplicants?” Nina asks. Liz is amazed she can appear so calm. “They are not here to feed you.”

“I don’t need them,” he laughs. Liz tries not to be concerned by Nina’s agitation. “You are way out of your league, little lady, although I’m impressed by your ability to convince your friends you have enough power to deal with me.”

“We work in concert.” She says. The machete man stops playing or being played by the twins and all three look over at the high priest.

“Timmy, this guy doesn’t care about you. Power is all that he wants,” Nina says.

“You know that’s not true, Timmy,” says the high priest.

“The bitch is right,” the naked man says, still pinned by Bo’s dogs. “Buzz only cares about Buzz. Do you want to know the real reason he kicked me out?”

“Why?” Timmy asks.

“Tell him Buzz,” the naked man says.

“Tell him what, Nero?” Buzz answers. “That you were so possessive of me you couldn’t contain yourself?”

“Me, possessive? You ran my life. You told me when to eat, when to laugh, when to shit.”

“And then someone new showed up,” Nina says. “And all of Buzz’s attention went to him or her.”

“You refused to grow up, Nero, and I was ready for companionship, ” says Buzz. “Everything changes.”

“I’d have thought you’d consider a bond of blood more important than any other bond. And you know I’m not talking about this blood,” Nina says, grabbing the chalice from the altar and dumping its contents onto the ground.” Buzz tries very hard to hide his surprise. Nero starts laughing like a madman.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” says Buzz, his confidence taken down a notch, “Put that back on the altar, please.” Nina obliges.

“Liz,” John whispers. “Grab the net.”

“Do not let anyone spill any more blood,” the Animal Control guy says, grabbing onto the net. Liz feels her stomach drop.

\* \* \*

“Hey Timmy,” Nero said. “You know all those things you said about your dad? Mine’s no better. In fact, he’s worse because he pretends he is better.”

“Timmy, don’t listen to him,” Buzz said. “He doesn’t care about you, he only cares about himself. You’re the son I never had, Timmy.” Timmy felt his heart warm to Buzz’s affection.

“And me, Buzz?” Nero said. Timmy wanted Nero to shut up and leave them alone. Soon he’d charge the two goofballs who poked at him like an animal. Then he’d go after the others of this weird group and cut them up. Buzz would approve, he was sure. “Hey Timmy, you may be the son Buzz never had, but I’m the son he did have.”

“He already knows that, Ethan,” Buzz said as though he believed it. In truth,

Timmy was stunned. “Timmy isn’t like you. He isn’t a complete fuck-up who has to get bailed out of every mess he makes. Ethan, you can’t function in the world without me protecting you. I used to blame myself, but not anymore.”

“I’ve covered for you too, Dad.” Timmy could feel his world crumbling. No, he thought, if everything falls apart with Buzz, Nero will take me back.

“Ethan, you don’t want go there.”

“And until now, you’ve always had some kind of leverage over me. But no more. Did you know I quit Boeing? That’s right. I did.”

“It doesn’t look like you’ll be able to live off your father this time, Ethan,” the big bitch said. Timmy wished the others would stop making that awful noise. The flutes made him uncomfortable and the drumming gave him a headache. He needed to think.

“Not this time, daddeo.” Timmy senses Nero’s pride and need to hurt his father could override his common sense. “Your new son and I -- we have enough money to last a good long while.”

“Nero--” Timmy tried to reach into Nero’s mind and warn him not to speak.

“What did you do, Ethan?” the bitch asked quietly. “Rob a bank?”

“Better,” Nero said. Timmy shook his head at him. “An armored car.”

“You’re stupider than I ever imagined,” Buzz snarled. Timmy couldn’t tell if he was disappointed or jealous.

“What the fuck, daddeo?” Nero said. “You piss me off any more and I’ll offer the feds evidence that proves you’re the one who did it.”

“Me?” Buzz looked genuinely surprised.

“Believe it or not, I’ve missed you, daddy,” Nero said. “I’ve missed our times together. Timmy, you’re good, but no one can do what my dad does.” Timmy shivered. He knew if somehow Buzz and Nero made their peace, there would be no place for him -- none that he would find acceptable. Damn them, he thought, the two of them could go fuck themselves and one another -- Louise too.

Before he could think more about it, Buzz's people came running up the hill, dogs behind them. Buzz took advantage of the diversion, grabbed Timmy's machete and ran towards Nero. The two Rotties just walked away, allowing Nero to up and run. Angry at what looked to be a hopeless future, Timmy shoved the large crosses out of his way and ran after his machete.

\* \* \*

When Adagio and I reach the top of the hill, the topdogs of the bad pack of bipeddogs run for the bushes. At least John dog, Masterdog and the bipeddog-with-no-smell are on the other side of the hill. Ninadog sings out again and we do her bidding, running behind the three bipeddogs and barking, herding them towards Masterdog and other bipeddogs in the Masterpack. I don't like it one bit. Masterdog could be in danger.

"Good dog," I hear both Masterdog and the bipeddog-with-no-smell sing in my mind.



I want it to make me feel better, but it doesn't. At least there's no more pounding or dying bird sounds.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see another pack of bipeddogs in black. They herd some of the bad pack of bipeddogs. This gives me an incentive to herd the last three bad bipeddogs. Maybe it'll be their turn to go to jail.

Adagio and Puck run in front of the three bad bipeddogs to slow them down. Judah and Rachel run in and out of their legs, the silly dogs. Shakti, Gandhi and all the other dogs run right behind me. All at once I can see the thing Johndog brought with him fly in the air.

"Grab with both hands," John sings. All of the bipeddogs take a handful of knotted ropes. At least the bad bipeddogs will go to this portable jail.

"Lift," Nina commands.

The portable jail rises into the air and falls down again.

"Again," Nina commands. They lift the portable jail again, and again. Finally they

let the portable jail drop for good. Whatever it was that was missing from Masterdog, re-enters her body. That's the good news. The bad news is that the bad bipeddog who stole my costume edges out of the portable jail and grabs the sharp stick. Puck and I are on him. I growl and Puck nips his ankles.

“Leave it,” Nina commands. I obey and run over to Masterdog, but Puck ignores her, enjoying his torturing of the bipeddog. All of the bipeddogs of the Masterpack yell at Puck, but he ignores everyone. The bad bipeddog swings the sharp stick and I see a piece of Puck's beautiful tail fly into the air. Puck's screams echo inside our heads. The bad bipeddog laughs. I want to attack, but something holds me back – it holds all of us back – but not for long. At Nina's command the core of the Masterpack runs a circle around the man. I can smell it before I see the red gooey stuff the bipeddogs spray over the bad bipeddog. It stinks, but the bad bipeddog is so surprised he drops the stick. I run in, grab it, and run to where the

bipeddog-with-no-smell stands. I can't tell if I'm running to him or away from that smell.

Davidog's littermate grabs the bipeddog who is dripping with red goo. The other bipeddogs – including the pack in black – make that yuck yuck sound. A moment before, I would have understood why they make that sound. We had been connected the way dogs should be connected. But now they confuse me again. This makes me sad - - the other dogs share my sadness. Even Shakti and Gandhi are sad. I can only blame that red goo. It took my Masterpack feeling away.

Me and the other dogs of the Masterpack mope back to the tin cans – except for Puck. Nina dog carries him and his piece of tail. Fortunately, Puck isn't in too much pain. The dogs who had been tied up try to make us feel better, but they don't understand.

\* \* \*

“Will we make tonight’s news?” David asked Gary as they walked back to the parking lot.

“Nope,” Gary said. “It’s covered.”

“Does this happen to you all the time?” David asked. Gary could sense his brother’s struggle. Battling the bizarre was new to him.

“Yes and no, bro.” Gary answered. “I’ve seen a lot of strange things, but mostly they are born in the sick psyche of some whacko. On nights like tonight, I get to see good prevail and I’ve got to admit, it’s damn refreshing.”

“How am I to explain this night to anyone else?”

“You won’t,” Bo intruded, although Gary welcomed his joining them. “You’ll find a way to live with it without talking about it.”

“Even with you guys?” Gary felt bad for his brother but had no words of reassurance. The others of David’s friends had caught up and walked with them, except Angelica. She walked with his men,

talking quietly with the ketchup covered Timmy.

"Can someone tell me what the hell happened?" Charlie asked.

"Didn't you feel the change when we lifted the net?" Sookie asked.

"I did," Sun Yee answered smiling and squeezing Bo's bicep. He smiled back but didn't touch her, savoring the lingering effects of the rare connection they shared.

"Nice work," Bo said to Nina.

"A little pagan, wasn't it?" David asked.

"Call it what you want, it worked," Liz said defensively.

"I wasn't being critical, honest," David said.

"But what happened?" Charlie pursued.

"The evil of our friends was disbursed," Bo answered.

"How?" Sookie asked.

"Does it matter?" asked Sun Yee.

"Their communal evil may have been released, but they still have to battle their individual," said Nina.

“Fortunately,” Gary said, “they’ll battle that within the confines of a prison cell.”

“But for how long?” Bo asked rhetorically. Gary shrugged.

“They really need to be in a nuthouse,” Liz said.

“Can’t say as I feel all that sane myself right now,” said David.

“You will,” Angelica said, joining them. “You’ll feel saner and more whole than ever.” Gary smiled to himself. She was wrong, of course, but he sensed she knew that and preferred to speak words of reassurance rather than reality -- for the moment, anyway.

“I’ll buy that,” David said. “But then, I’d buy just about anything right now. How’s Puck?” David asked.

“He’ll be fine,” Nina said. “He’s still got half a tail and now maybe he’ll halfway behave himself.” Gary admired her seeming nonchalance. The last thing he needed right now was a hysteric.

“What’ll happen to them?” Nina asked Gary. His team had rounded up all who had attended the evening’s events.

“Most of them will be debriefed, scared out of their wits and sent home. We’ll hold onto Buzz a little longer. Their rituals were bloody but only dogs were involved – no offense, meant. Hopefully we can get him on racketeering charges but that’s because he’s been busy doing other things I can’t talk about. The other three won’t see the light of day. Robbing an armored car – especially when it includes murdering a courier – is frowned upon.”

“Their father-son relationships,” Sookie piped in, “were very ... complex.”

“Not my bailiwick,” Gary said with a smile.

“I’m glad it’s over,” Liz said.

“So bro,” Gary said. “Wanna spend Christmas together? We’ll be processing these folks tonight, but tomorrow I should be free.”

“And you never sleep?” David asked.

“Hardly ever,” Gary said.

“I play at midnight mass tonight, so don’t make it too early.”

“You’re invited to my house for Christmas dinner,” Bo said and handed Gary a card.

“Bo Britches? For real?” Gary was surprised for the first time that evening.

\* \* \*

At the parking lot, they formed a circle. Liz didn’t know how long they stood together reaching out for something that wasn't there, but it didn’t matter. They each grieved at losing that special connection of the Masterpack, but had also re-embraced pieces of themselves. Well, almost. Something was still missing. Their circle broke when the headlights of an Animal Control truck pulled up. Liz could feel each dogowner stiffen with anxiety.

"Not to worry," the familiar voice of the freckle-faced Animal Control guy sounded in her head. She looked down at the leash in her hand that connected her to Rover.



"We got a call about some lost dogs," a large woman in uniform said.

"They're the ones off-leash," Nina said, stifling a snicker. For some reason this struck Liz as hysterically funny and she started laughing. Everyone did. Except the two Animal Control officers who gathered together the three mutts the Masterpack had just saved from extinction. Or maybe they hadn't. Middle-aged mutts aren't all that popular at the pound's adoption service.

"That's amazing," the thin man in uniform said. "They're all micro-chipped. What the hell happened here?"

"Allow me to explain," Gary said, walking off with the Animal Control officers.

"What do you say we call it a night?" Nina said.

"Shouldn't we do our own debriefing or something?" David asked.

"Later," Bo said.

"Some experiences are about the moment," Angelica said soothingly. "Analyzing them won't change them or make them any clearer."

“Like theater,” Nina said.

“Or music,” Charlie said. Sookie and Sun Yee nodded.

“But--” David started.

“Some things are understood in here,” Angelica said pointing to his heart, “not up here,” pointing to his head. “Let this one be, David. Besides, you have to prepare for mass, yes?”

“I really want to thank you all,” John said.

“For what?” Nina asked kindly.

“I’m moving away from Seattle and was afraid I’d leave without an anchor to bring me back.” Liz understood and could see the others did too.

“Will everyone be here for the memorial, day after tomorrow?” Nina asked, even though they all already knew the answer. “Good.”

Silently, they all loaded up their dogs. The memorial seemed like an eternity away. At least everything was prepared. Part of the preparations resulted from an unspoken

understanding, Bo and Nina supplied the rest.

Outwardly, John and Liz shared in Sarah's enthusiasm over the birth of a baby. Inwardly, they celebrated something else entirely, exchanging secret smiles of understanding. But it didn't matter because the joy they shared with Sarah made them all feel good. Even Rover was happy. Liz could tell Sarah was especially pleased by Liz's acceptance of what was to come and Liz could honestly tell Sarah it was the best Christmas ever.

\* \* \*

When we get home, Bob won't talk to me. He says he wants to wait to talk to me until it's only me inside my brain. I don't understand, but he won't even explain. In truth, Bob's an obnoxious catdog. Why do I give him so much power? Why am I even thinking this way?

Bob's right about one thing. My brain doesn't quite feel like my own. I still feel

connected to Masterdog and the other members of the Masterpack in a strange yet familiar way. At Sarahdog's house, Masterdog, Johndog and I periodically exchange knowing looks. Reaching out, I sense Puck's misery through his drugged dreams. Ninadog and her two mates coo over him. Bodog, Shakti and Gandhi try to push joy through a thick layer of sadness, while Bodog's daughters tear paper off boxes. Angelicadog and Bodog's other mate more successfully let joy fill their natures. Judah and Rachel play quietly on Daviddog's bed. Daviddog makes beautiful shining sounds by fingering shiny black and white bones in a large room warmed by many singing bipeddogs. Garydog looks out at the park and up at the stars in wonder. Despite our personal feelings, we all share a sense of satisfaction and sadness. I know the connection of the Masterpack is slowly fading -- the bipeddogs have blocked me out of their thoughts already. Such is the life of a dog. Such is the life of a Masterpack.

## 21. HOLIDAY RITES

*Faith drove the Masterpack – that and a few other incentives. Sebastian the cat, the twins’ parents, Marta, Bo Jr. and Jung Ja couldn’t be prouder and join in celebrating the ritual joys of the season. The best part is that it’s finally my turn.*

“You look tired and happy,” Nina said to Cathy as they walked through the park. Nina knew if she didn’t go back the next day, she would never go back. Puck’s tail curl was gone, but the vet said he’d be fine. They would pick up Charlie from his coffee house on the way back. Luckily it was open on Christmas Day. Delta, Nina knew, was glad to have time to herself at home. Nina also knew Delta only pretended Christmas was just another workfree day. Over the years they’d created their own rituals. Cathy and Charlie fit right into their quiet day. Besides, the house wreaked of slow cooking Thai

dishes. True to his word, Charlie was cooking a feast.

“My brother throws quite a Christmas Eve party. We were up most of the night,” Cathy said.

“What do they do Christmas day?”

“He’ll sleep off his previous night’s fun,” she said. “My brother never could hold his drink. A family tradition, if you know what I mean. Besides, I really wanted to spend today with you.”

“Gotcha,” Nina said with genuine compassion.

“Charlie needed this -- coming to Seattle and seeing you.”

“Last night was not on the original agenda, I assure you,” Nina said with a smile. Puck was subdued, the park deserted, allowing Nina to focus less on her surroundings and more on their conversation.

“Yes, I know,” Cathy said with a warm smile. “So tell me about this mysterious Animal Control guy.”

Nina flinched with surprise. Perhaps she had underestimated this woman -- or overestimated. "He's a mystery."

"Nina, whatever he was or is, he recognized you as the leader of the pack." Underestimated, Nina thought. Cathy continued: "Maybe it's because I'm from California, I don't know. But rather than see curious phenomenon as delusional I choose to see them as real and work from there."

Nina was beginning to like this woman. In her heart of hearts, the mystery of their guardian itched her psyche. "He appeared for each of us."

"Charlie included."

"You mean last night?"

"No. He woke up this morning and remembered he'd seen him driving a bus in San Diego."

"Holy shit."

"I suspect he's more than that, Nina."

They laughed quietly. "Cathy, I appreciate your concern, but I don't have any answers. I'm also not worried about having no answers."

“Fair enough. You have a context where you put him so that his existence doesn’t nag at you?”

“Nicely said, yes. He was our guardian angel. Liz calls us a Masterpack and, well, maybe he’s the true leader.”

“No, you are the leader,” Cathy said. Nina knew she was right, which didn’t make her feel all that confident. “You’re a worthy leader, Nina.”

“How would you know?” Nina tried to hide her irritation.

“Charlie probably didn’t tell you that my specialty is industrial psychology. I look at the individuals in groups, the relationship dynamics and help shape an effective team to maximize efficiency. Sorry if I sound like a formal presentation, but I’m tired.”

“No problem.” Nina had definitely underestimated this woman.

“I love Charlie,” Cathy said. Nina was jolted by her tangent. “I also know he’s one of those people who needs to stay out of groups because he translates leadership into an unworthy authority. When he’s not the



leader, he rebels. I'm sure you already know this."

"Yes, but not articulated so well," Nina said. She was glad the park was deserted. Cathy's words set her mind on low spin.

"Anyway, many of the CEO's I know have talked about a voice in their heads or a symbolic object on which they unburden themselves so they can do their jobs."

"Do they claim these objects talk back?"

"Sometimes, although no one else is privy to these conversations."

"So you're saying the Animal Control guy is a mass delusion of our Masterpack so that I could lead it better?"

"Slow down, Nina."

"Do tell." Nina sense Cathy struggling and backed off. She couldn't be sure Cathy was rationalizing Nina's relationship with the mysterious Animal Control guy Nina or for herself.

"I'm beginning to think the voices of these folks I work with may actually be real - not unlike the Animal Control guy." Nina was stunned. Despite years of dancing for

the gods, she had never taken her rituals all that seriously -- they more resembled affirmations and a unique type of theater.”

“That’s scary,” Nina said. Cathy laughed. “The ‘that’ to which you are referring could either be the idea or me. Hopefully the former,” Cathy said. Her laughter was infectious and besides, Nina needed a release.

On the drive home, Nina felt lighter. Over Charlie’s exquisite cuisine, they laughed and talked. Even Delta relaxed for the occasion.

“What should I do?” Charlie helped Nina with the dishes while Delta and Cathy talked in the other room. The night was filled with surprises. Not even Charlie’s whining about wanting to be a full-time musician brought down the energy of the evening.

“Cathy’s right -- open a music store.”

“But my heart says start a band.”

“Your heart also led you to Cathy for a reason.”

“You didn’t proposition my fiancé, did you?”

“Charlie, Cathy is a terrific woman who adores you,” Nina said. “And I’m not going to get hooked by your usual crap -- not tonight. Open the store and see who shows up. There’s no reason you can’t get a band out of it.”

“Oh,” Charlie said. “I never thought of it that way.”

“That’s what Cathy has been trying to tell you,” Nina said kindly.

“You really do like her, don’t you,” Charlie said. Nina smiled at his need for her approval.

“Yes, Charlie, I do.” They were interrupted when Delta came bursting in.

“Charlie, you’ve got to come with us to the memorial tomorrow,” Delta said. Nina was surprised by the warmth in her request. She looked over at Cathy who winked a conspiratorial wink.

“Huh?” Even Charlie was taken aback.

“The Masterpack has all lost someone close to them,” Nina explained. The memorial sounded interesting to him, but

the icing on the cake was mention of the Seattle Symphony brass section attending.

“Can I borrow Bamba?” Nina loved that he wanted to play her drum and hoped his expertise would somehow rub off onto her, although she knew better.

“Of course,” Nina said. “But are you willing to drum with the rest of the circle?”

“Of course,” Charlie said. Nina was reminded that she and Delta had a few more preparations to do. Fortunately, a weary Cathy and the excited Charlie left soon after.

“That Cathy is too good for Charlie,” Delta said as they sat down to work on a final draft of the memorial ritual. “But I’m glad she’s part of the family. She even asked me to be a bridesmaid at their wedding.” Nina was so relieved she could hardly focus. However, Marta’s death still nagged at her enough to demand her full attention.

\* \* \*

“I’m glad what I’ve felt all along has a basis in reality,” Jane said. Sookie had

finally decided Christmas was a good time to tell her children about their grandmother. Jane was still living at home but spent most of her time at work. High tech companies demanded long hours.

“I’ve known for a long time,” Ty said with mischievous smile.

“How?” asked Sookie.

“Grandpa told me.”

“When?”

“At your wedding,” he said. “But he made me promise not to tell anyone.” Sookie didn’t want to disrupt this rare family gathering by getting angry. Ty rarely visited since moving to New York City. It seemed he had a knack for managing large stock portfolios. He came to visit with Danya, a beautiful Scandinavian model who was surprisingly intelligent.

“Ty told me,” Jake said. Her stepson had failed as a rock musician but picked up freelance work as some kind of go-to-guy for a production company that did commercials in L.A. It wasn’t all that glamorous, but it did underwrite Jake’s love of music.

“How could you--” Sookie started. Fortunately, Ty interrupted.

“Mom, you know grandpa was a total sexist. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but it wasn’t because I didn’t trust you. It’s because I wanted to show I was worthy of trust.”

“Your son is one of the few honest stockbrokers I know,” Danya piped in. Sookie appreciated her style.

“Mom, you have to admit -- you’ve always acted like Sun Yee was your mother,” Jane said. “And if Ty and Jake want to take after our male chauvinist grandfather, that’s their problem.”

“You’re just jealous,” Jake said with a snicker. Sookie and Ron smiled as their three adult children regressed to an earlier time, poking fun at one another. When Ty picked up his bowl of milk left over from eating cereal and looked ready to turn it into a weapon, Ron had them leave the table. Desmond and Sun Yee would be there any time now and Sookie wanted to keep their house presentable.

Sookie tried not to cry when Jane gave them each a copy of a parable she'd written, modeled after an old Korean folk tale that focused on the story of their family. Sookie was so inspired, she talked Sun Yee into helping her talk about the previous night's adventure in the park. The stunned look on the faces of her children made her happy. Ron and Desmond remained stoic.

"That is too cool, mom," Ty said with pride.

"Mind if I write about it?" Jane asked. "Granted, that Animal Control guy thing is a little too weird."

"Oh I don't know," Jake said. "Don't we all have guardian angels?" They laughed. "I'm more interested in knowing more about the MIB's."

"I never could get into dogs," Danya said sheepishly.

"Me neither," said Sun Yee. "But this was more than a pack of dogs. And these dogs seemed okay -- certainly nicer than that group of people. I had no idea people like that existed except on television."

“My mother warned me,” Sookie said without thinking. She could feel her old fear of genetic inheritance threaten to surface until Sun Yee touched her hand.

“Why don’t you go ahead and set up dinner,” Sun Yee said. “Sookie and I will be along shortly.” Happily, Desmond led the kids into the kitchen, leaving Sun Yee, Sookie and Ron. “I know you’re confused, Sookie. Losing your mother can make you a little unstable for longer than you thought possible,” Ron said gently.

“I too understand your loss,” said Sun Yee.

“But you’re here.”

“Perhaps, but Jung Ja is gone.”

“Don’t fight it, Sookie,” Ron said. “Your grief is real even if the truth has changed.

By the time the turkey was on the table, along with the other yummy dishes that would accompany it, Sookie was ready to join in the celebration. She was especially touched by the willingness of her entire family to attend the memorial the following day.



\* \* \*

“You and your brother are so different,” Angelica said. David had rarely heard these words and couldn’t help but smile. It was a chilly day, but relatively dry. They sat outside on the terrace. Melinka had kicked them out of the kitchen so she and her younger daughter, Jana, could finish what would obviously be a delicious feast, judging from the smells. Gary and Bo had gone into the living room to talk military.

“Angelica, what happened last night? Who are we?” David figured that the only other person besides Liz who would be willing to talk about it was this beautiful bald sprite of a woman.

“What do you think happened?” she asked back. Before he could think about it, David answered.

“On the surface, it probably looked like nothing.”

“Those men with your brother didn’t seem to think so.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Angelica’s smile made her entire face glow. “What do you believe was under this surface?”

“The oldest battle of them all -- the one between good and evil.” As David said it, he felt it rang true. Angelica smiled at him again. “What?”

“I saw it differently, but chances are we are both correct.”

“Tell me.”

“Sometimes we are pawns for energies or entities in the universe that we cannot comprehend because we are participants and without objectivity.” David hadn’t expected this answer -- he figured she’d talk about karma and dharma. “Take the Animal Control officer.”

“Liz thinks he’s the guardian angel of the Masterpack.”

“But what does that mean?”

“He appeared when we needed him, he brought us together.”

“But why orchestrate a confrontation?” Angelica asked. “Why didn’t he approach

Timmy, Buzz and Nero directly and do whatever he had to do to help them see their own evil?”

“I don’t have an answer. Do you?” David was aware that he wanted an answer more than he thought he did. The events were unsettling.

“No.”

David sighed in despair. “Perhaps it isn’t the right question to ask.”

“Great. I fail at accepting, knowing and asking questions.” Angelica laughed. David didn’t see the joke and continued: “Why do you think you were chosen as it were to participate in this Masterpack?”

“I don’t have an answer for that either.” David felt dejected and unsure. “But the question does inspire an opinion. All of you who comprise the core of the Masterpack share many things.”

“Like losing someone we love?” David could feel himself getting cranky. Fortunately, Angelica either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

“There’s that. There’s the nightmares and the dogs. But I’m thinking more along the lines of the nature of your beings.”

“You’re losing me.”

“No, I’m not.” David tried not to let her smile infect his misery. “You all share a power of conviction, of belief in something larger than yourselves.”

“But a lot of people have that.”

“But do they share nightmares or a curious sense of being part dog when running with the Masterpack--”

“You sensed that too?”

“Yes. I couldn’t read your thoughts, but I understood what you were thinking. I felt the same way about the others, including the dogs.”

“And that doesn’t freak you out?”

“David, let go of that freak out feeling. It means nothing.”

“You’re saying what I feel means nothing?” Angelica remained stoic and silent. David wanted to let go of whatever this something was, but was unable to do so. He was only beginning to admit that the

real reason he didn't want to let go was because then he'd have to let go of the Masterpack.

"Leave it, as you dogpeople would say." David couldn't help but laugh. He laughed harder than the joke deserved, but in his laughter he saw how silly he must look, grasping at straws as though they held the answers, which made him laugh even harder. He laughed so hard tears came to his eyes. Before he knew it, his tears became those of intense sobbing that seemed to originate somewhere very deep inside of him. Angelica reached out and held him as he cried. "You're a good man, David. A strong man. Your parents would be proud. And you've helped me in ways you cannot know."

"Tell me," David said. He hadn't stopped crying, but wanted to hear some good news for a change.

"My son is a few years older than you. He wants me to move closer to him. I don't like the idea of living in Los Angeles, but perhaps there are still some quiet places close by. Bert is nothing like you, David, but like you,

I may be able to be there for him when he needs me. Thank you, David.”

David felt tired, but lighter as though he'd dropped a heavy weight, which he had. Over dinner, he was quiet but attentive. The food was as delicious as the smells had portended.

There was a knock at the door halfway through the meal.

“I'm sorry I'm late, Daddy.” It wasn't only that she was beautiful. It was more than that.

“This is Thandaika who is making the rounds of everyone except her family on this rare visit from graduate school,” Bo said.

“Oh Daddy. I'm here now. As it is, I've spent most of the day debugging an application that--”

“Sit down and join us,” Melinka said.

“We can make room for you here,” David said without thinking. Smart, funny and a geek, he thought to himself.

“You must be David,” she said. “My dad's told me about you.” Out of the corner of his eye, David saw Melinka and Bo exchange a

smile and took it as approval. Even Gary winked at him. For the rest of the evening, he gave his full attention to Thandiaika and she to him as they talked about software and themselves.

\* \* \*

“Your parents didn’t die in a car accident, did they,” Bo said. He was surprised he was enjoying his chat with Gary. He knew his experiences with the military were incredibly different from Gary’s. Fortunately, Gary knew this too. But some things remained consistent. At first, Bo was afraid talking about such things might force those old unwanted strong and volatile emotions to reawaken and threaten his way of managing his life. But time had healed him in many ways and the previous night’s events had already done some reawakening.

“No, they didn’t.”

“And you can’t tell your brother.” Bo could see Gary’s inner turmoil.

“Hiding things from David is the worst.”

“Gary, your MIB’s or whoever those guys were revealed themselves to be real and yet you managed to avoid taking action to cover up their existence to our Masterpack.”

“Of which I am a member.”

“Like or not, you’re a member of both.”

“Bo, are you giving me permission to talk? Is that what this is all about?”

“Nina is head of the Masterpack, but Shakti and Gandhi come next. And yes, they give you permission.” Bo smiled a genuine smile. “Practice on me if you like. Or not. Your call.” Bo could see Gary’s struggle. “When I was in Iraq, my CO came up with a winner of a strategy that made me sick. We’d be watching a village of filled with Taliban soldiers. He’d take a small incendiary device and stick a lollipop in it. One of us would grab a kid from the village. Our CO was great with kids. He’d get the kid to stop crying and then gave him the lollipop. Fifteen minutes after sending him back to his village, we’d have taken cover and the entire village would blow.”



“My team hasn’t done things that are outrageous,” said Gary, “but we’ve seen things that defy the mind. My dad and mom were stationed in Israel, but traveled all over the Middle East. Dad pretended to be an arms dealer. For the most part, the Palestinians and Arabs were okay to deal with. Hamas was the most unpleasant, although only one of many unpleasant groups of extremists. Dad was used to fanatics, but this one guy was obviously more motivated by madness than righteousness. Like many madmen he had that extra something that allowed him to see my Dad for what he was. The car bomb was so intense they couldn’t identify the bodies, which was good for us. We didn’t have to acknowledge their deaths and blow their cover. But there was no reason for them to have died that way.”

“Senseless death.”

“Yes.”

“Gary, I’m sorry. I also know David can handle it. Don’t underestimate him.”

“I suppose.”

“Gary, covert ops can drive a man to a kind of loneliness that is unnatural.”

“When Dad was alive, we’d talk all the time. I miss him.”

“So talk to David.”

“But--”

“The fact that he’s non-military is a good thing. Trust me. He’s tough, your brother. I know that for a fact. Yes, he has his moments, but he comes through.”

“I’ve thought about talking to my wife.”

“Don’t. You could be biting yourself in the ass. Brothers are forever, wives may or may not be.” Bo saw Gary smile for the first time that evening. He was so like David, yet so different.

“Dinner,” he heard Melinka call. Thandaika was her usual late self. He would have called her cell phone, but knew she’d only get mad at him. In truth, he missed her. Stanford wasn’t all that far away, but a life in the Silicon Valley turned her into a virtual stranger. It was as though she spoke a foreign language. Thankfully, Jana was at

the U.W., although Bo couldn't quite figure out what a degree in history would mean for her future.

When Bo saw the flicker of connection and electricity zap Thandaika and David, he looked over at Melinka's I-told-you-so smile. Maybe there was hope after all.

After a wonderful dinner, Angelica got him to volunteer with her to do KP. Gary left early, Jana went to see friends and David and Thandaika continued their vibrant conversation over Thandaika's laptop.

"L.A. isn't so far," he said happily.

"You'd be welcome any time," Melinka said. Bo was please at how well Melinka and Angelica got along. "We think of you as family."

"Me too, Melinka," Angelica said. "I must admit I was a little worried about meeting you. I wanted you to like me and not feel--"

"Threatened? Life is too short for that," Melinka said.

"That it is," Angelica said. "And family is why I will move to California. My son is an adult, but I'm still his mother." Bo felt his

heart rise to his throat. "I can only vaguely understand your loss, but the universe has its own rules."

"Bo, Jr. --" Melinka started, but couldn't finish. Angelica held her as she wept quietly. Bo's eyes flowed with tears but he continued focusing on the dishes and warm water. He grieved more for Melinka than Bo, Jr. whose sudden death he better understood.

"Tell you what," Angelica said. "I'll finish cleaning the kitchen if you two promise me you'll spend the next hour talking about Bo, Jr., regardless of how you feel."

"We've been doing that and--" Bo started.

"No, you haven't. And for good reason. You've lost your son and have needed to talk about yourselves. And you'll continue to do that which is a good thing. But for this one hour -- an hour you may revisit on other Christmas holidays -- take the time to talk solely about him. Think of it as your gift to him. No more talking to me, off with you. I noticed the coffee and desert place down the street is open tonight."

"But--" Bo started again.

“No buts.”

“Can I at least take a leak?”

“Only if you must.” Angelica’s tone made them giggle.

By the time they returned, Melinka and Bo fell into a comforting silence. The house was empty except for David and Thandaika who continued their animated talk, now without a laptop in front of them. Angelica had cleaned the entire kitchen. A note on the refrigerator said she’d be back late but looked forward to preparing for the memorial.

Bo made slow and quiet love to his wife before falling into a deep dreamless sleep.

\* \* \*

The one day Liz looked forward to hanging out with some of her co-workers was Christmas. Like her, they were Jews who had usually spent Christmas at the movies and then going out for Chinese food - or some facsimile thereof.

The movie barely held her attention, which was fine. She had a lot to think about, the previous night being the most astonishing. The activities at the park were one thing. She had questions, but she also didn't feel compelled to ask them. It had been unusual to say the least, but also satisfying and, somehow, right. The hardest part was giving up that unusual bond she had felt with the other members of the Masterpack.

Her astonishment was in reaction to the events that followed. She and John said close to nothing on the drive to Sarah's house. The MIB's had helped wash off the net and folded it per John's instructions. Sarah had greeted them warmly although they could both see how their delayed return had stressed her out. One look at them and the stress was replaced by relief. They'd called on David's cell phone from the park, but Liz knew that for Sarah, seeing was believing.

Liz melted into the joy of the evening, as did John. They exchanged gifts. Liz had

gotten John a wood frame carved with fish. It was funky, but fun. She gave Sarah a mobile she'd made with all kinds of crazy things for the baby. She knew Sarah would love it. From the two of them, she received a very expensive set of paints she'd been eyeing and a set of fine pots and pans. They gave Rover a giant rawhide bone. Liz was overwhelmed and pleased.

Over coffee – decaf, of course – Sarah shocked them both.

“I don't want to leave Seattle,” she said. While Rover quietly gnawed her bone, Liz could sense John's relief matching her own.

“So we'll stay,” John said casually.

“Even after all the planning?” Sarah said sheepishly.

“Sarah, I can do my job anywhere. In fact, I have more contacts here than in Boise. Besides, tonight kind of changed things.”

“Don't look at me,” Liz said. She'd deliberately said nothing. They'd avoided talking about what happened, upstaged by Sarah's planned activities. But now that they

were over and Sarah had shocked them back to reality, John told his version of the evening's events. Surprisingly, they were close to Liz's version.

"This Animal Control guy -- did he have freckles?" asked Sarah. Liz and John nodded. "I've been having dreams -- not nightmares. And, well, I've always been something of a lucid dreamer."

"You have?" John asked.

"She could write stories," Liz said. Sarah usually told her about her dreams, but this was new. Perhaps she had eclipsed Sarah's desire with her own tales of nightmares shared by John.

"The Animal Control guy -- I think he's been in my dreams. But that isn't the weird part."

"It isn't?" Liz asked, wondering how much more weirdness she could take.

"I can't be sure, but I think he's our child," she said, rubbing her protruding stomach. "Liz, you had an abortion, right?"

"When I was 19, yes."



“I get the impression he was your child too -- well, not a child, the soul of a potential child. But he chickened out of life.”

“You’re saying he made the choice, not me?” Liz was stunned. She’d harbored a secret guilt about having had an abortion. She was pro-choice all the way, but it hadn’t made her choice any easier.

“That’s where it gets fuzzy,” Sarah said petting Rover. “I know they’re just dreams, but after hearing what you three were up to while I slaved over a hot stove, I can’t help but wonder.”

“So Liz, you gonna be our child’s godmother?” asked John. Liz looked to Sarah, assuming by the look on her face that they’d already discussed this part.

“Of course,” she said. “So you’re really not moving?”

“I guess not,” John said, staring lovingly into Sarah’s eyes.

As the movie continued, Liz pondered the future. She could hardly wait to be a godmother. And John and Sarah were staying in Seattle! What a remarkable set of

events. Her thoughts also moved towards the mysteries of the unborn. At a moment appropriate to the climax of the movie, Liz felt tears wash her face -- grief mixed with joy.

A few of her co-workers had invited other Jewish friends. At dinner, the woman sitting next to her, Sophie, happened to be an art dealer. They talked art and only when she opened her cookie that read, "Anything is possible, so get off your ass and go for it" did Liz bring up her own work. For reasons she couldn't articulate, Liz found herself talking about the work of her nightmares. She also told Sophie she was considering torching them as part of the memorial she'd briefly mentioned. She didn't want to sound to crazy so she only told part of the story of the Masterpack.

Liz wasn't quite sure why Sophie was so fascinated by the darkest parts of her story until Sophie said, "That's very strange. I have a wealthy buyer looking for dark work. He's collected some of the darker works of

Dali and Geiger. Lately, he's been pushing me to find a new artist with a body of work."

"He doesn't have freckles, does he?"

"No. Why?"

"No reason," Liz said. "But all I have are a few paintings and my sketchbook. And I don't think I'll do more than that."

"Unless you have nightmares again," Sophie said. Liz was a little put off by this woman's enthusiasm over her potential pain, but opted for setting it aside.

The woman was relentless and insisted on following Liz home to check out her work. Liz didn't know whether to laugh or cry with relief when the woman left with a couple sketchbooks and the paintings she'd planned on burning the next day. More curious was the fact that Rover hadn't even tried to sniff her.

\* \* \*

I knew it all along. Sarahdog, Johndog and Sarahdog's litter will stay. Well, maybe I only discovered it when we were all part of

the Masterpack, but I really wanted them to stay. Bob says he doesn't care and he probably doesn't. But I do. It makes Masterdog so happy.

Our adventure the night before sits well, even if I don't remember a lot of it. Bob wanted to hear every detail when we got home, so I told him. Since then, my memories have gotten foggy which is fine because memory is overrated.

While Masterdog goes away in the large tin can, I sense Puck is healing, Shakti and Gandhi are settled back, Judah and Rachel wonder where Daviddog is but aren't too worried and Adagio basks in the warmth of his familypack. I reach out for the bipeddogs, but sense nothing. The images from Masterdog are fainter than they were, but I sense she is happier than she's been in a long time.

I wonder what is making her so happy until she comes home with that funny-smelling bipeddog. I avoid her because her smell reaches me from across the room. Besides, she yelps like a babydog over those

mud-coated movable walls. She even takes them away with her. Masterdog is overjoyed. I am too, but I don't know why. Oh well.

## 22. THE MEMORIAL

*The veil between life as a human and not-life as a human gets very thin during grief and pregnancy. With vulnerability comes greater understanding. The Masterpack saw me as the one authority to whom they must pay attention. Others saw me as someone else. Together we fought that age old human battle of good versus evil – concepts that are less significant for non-humans, but becoming more important to me.*

It was hard to believe they hadn't spent months planning it. Upwards of 50 people met at the boat launch area to walk the quarter mile down the road to where Bo's caterers were setting up. People milled in clumps. Liz stood with Sarah and John, not having invited anyone else, with Rover at her side. They had all agreed to leash their dogs as did other park regulars who Nina had invited.

David with Bo's daughter, Thandaika, by his side, stood proudly while a gaggle of geeks – probably Microsoft employees -- fawned over Rachel and Judah. David hardly noticed, he was so entranced by Thandaika, and she with him. Liz was happy for him although a wee bit jealous. Sookie and Adagio stood with most of the brass section from the Seattle Symphony who either tuned their instruments or talked quietly, as if they were backstage. Sun-Yee held the arm of a uniformed man who must have been her husband, Desmond. They talked with a group primarily consisting of Koreans. Liz expected Nina to be doing last minute preparations at the altars, but she stood with Puck amongst a group of women. Charlie and his wife stood on the fringes of the group. Bo chatted with his family and what looked to be his some of his employees – who he also treated like family. Angelica fit right in with Gandhi and Shakti, their stillness almost palatable. Next to her was a beautiful if not overly made up young woman who looked around sheepishly, like

she wasn't used to being seen during daylight.

"Do you have Sebastian?" Nina asked, appearing at Liz's side holding a handful of balloons. Liz held up the small plastic jar the vet had given her. "We can wrap the string around this rim here. It's a light plastic, so it should work out fine with two balloons.

"Good idea," Liz said, unsure of what was to happen, but confident it was the right thing to do. Nina wrapped the string.

"When I say release, let go of the jar," Nina said before moving on to Sookie. Sookie tied a balloon around what looked like a wedding ring. Nina gave Bo four balloons to attach to a beautifully hand-carved wooden box. For herself, Nina tied four balloons to a black ceramic plate. She gave Liz the remaining one balloon to hold. When Nina held up the plate for her women to see, they cheered. Someone with a strong and sure hand had painted the name "Marta" with a pink fluorescent glaze. Sometime during the applause, David joined them.



"What about you, David?" John asked him. "Anything symbolic of your parents would be appropriate. Nina gave me your balloon to hold."

"Gary said he'd cover it," David said. "He covers just about everything, my big bro. What a guy." I couldn't tell if David was being sincere, sarcastic or a combination of both.

"I wonder who belongs to this balloon," Nina said, taking the balloon back from Liz.

"Couldn't it just be an extra?" David asked.

"It could be, but it isn't," Nina said with conviction. "I know someone else is supposed to have it."

"Nina, this is Gina," Angelica said. "She was a working girl and a friend of Timmy's. Perhaps the balloon belongs to her."

"Why?" Nina asked.

"I fell in love with a sicko," Gina answered.

"Timmy told me where to find her," Angelica said. "Last night I went downtown, just as the police were inventorying Timmy's

room at the hotel where he lived and worked.”

“He was on the road to being a serial killer,” Gina said. Her sharp edges demonstrated her ability to have survived the streets. “The closet in his room was filled with dried pieces of dead animals.”

“She will bury her old life and come with me to California.” Liz was surprised until she remembered Bo telling them that Angelica had been a prostitute in Viet Nam.

“For you, Gina,” Nina said with a genuine smile.

“Look,” David said, pointing to a small regiment of marines, complete with guns, marching toward us. The MIB’s now wore their formal uniforms. Gary lead the group holding a silver star of David with eight balloons attached. The Animal Control guy followed, walking a few feet off the ground, and waving at all of them

“Who are you waving at?” Spot's owner asked.

“My Bro.” David and John laughed knowingly.

They shifted to let the marching marines slowly lead the procession. Shakti, Gandhi, Bo and his family led the way. Sookie and the other musicians broke out into a rich and sultry blues that vibrated deep inside their bones. Rover and Liz took up the rear following John and Sarah who led the remaining dogpeople and other attendees.

Liz hoped everything was still in place at the end of their walk. Fortunately, she hadn't had a lot of time to fret and she was still buzzing from the previous night's event. The woman said she'd call within a few days to negotiate price.

Liz hadn't expected the procession to be so moving, so evocative of emotion. Maybe it was the music or maybe it was a peculiar sense of community, but Liz found herself weeping quietly as they walked, clutching Sebastian to her chest to prevent him from flying away.

The marines stood at attention at the edge of the water away from where they had set up the altars. The choir stood waiting. Some of them improvised with the other

musicians in various blues classics. They weren't half bad. Everyone else stayed with their group, surrounding the various altars. Bo had given Liz the yards of fabric she had draped over card tables. Each altar was filled with pictures and mementos the Masterpack had provided earlier in the day. It was Liz's job to make them look good. The flowers she added gave each altar a poignant vibrancy. Judging from the looks on the faces of the attendees, Liz had done well.

On each table Liz had mounted a simple shelf on which Nina had put small ashtrays of incense. Everyone in the Masterpack supplied their own candle holders and candle sticks. Each group lit the candles and the charcoal that sat in the ashtrays, sprinkling incense on the glowing embers. Attendees added personal items and designed them accordingly. Liz felt proud to have offered a foundation from which each group could build their own memorial. Each altar was beautiful. Angelica surprised her by taking pictures.

As Sebastian's champion, Liz expected to adorn his altar all by herself. She was shocked when people from the different groups of mourners placed pictures of their now deceased cats onto the altar. The final picture was that of a cat who greatly resembled Sebastian.

"Hippocrates was my best friend," my vet said. He smiled at Liz before rejoining a man who was as handsome as he. The man gave him a warm hug. Liz hadn't even noticed them earlier.

Bo led everyone down to the beach where Charlie and a bunch of others pounded out dynamic polyrhythms on different types of drums. Some of the symphony people and the choir grabbed spare rhythmic instruments and joined in.

After a quiet poem and prayer, Nina called out, "Fare-thee-well," She released the ceramic plate with balloons, setting them free.

"Fare-thee-well," the women sang out. Liz's heart skipped a beat at the sound of gunfire. The marines were crack shooters,

hitting all four balloons but leaving the plate intact. It dove into the water a surprising distance from the shore. She could feel a sigh of release come from all who witnessed the event.

Bo stepped up next. He too recited a combination poem and prayer. Liz realized she had no idea what she would say about Sebastian. The thought fled her conscious mind, too captivated by the flight of the carved box and the way it opened as the balloons were shot, coating a surface of the lake extending almost 15 feet with the ash of Bo's beloved son.

Sun-Yee and Sookie were next, although Sookie did the talking. Liz didn't understand what she said because she spoke Korean, but her intention was clear. The wedding ring made a gentle splash as it hit the water.

David grabbed Liz's hand and led her down to the beach. John took Rover's leash.

"Do you know the kaddish?" he asked.  
"Gary hoped you would."

"Yes, I do," she said. It had been years, but some prayers never leave one's psyche.

Gary handed David the silver star. David said a very few words before releasing the star. Liz recited the kaddish, the Jewish blessing for the dead, while the star rose into the sky. The shots took out all the balloons except one. Gary pulled out a gun from somewhere and shot the final balloon. The star plummeted to the water before sinking below the surface.

Holding Sebastian, Liz nervously turned around, unsure of what would come out of her mouth. "Sebastian's life opened my heart to unconditional love and the need to nurture. His death opened my heart to pain and loss and the need to reach out to others for comfort. I shared my grief with members of the Masterpack and they shared theirs with me. We attained a sacred trust that allowed us to reach past our personal feelings and make a difference. Thank you, Sebastian. And thank you, Masterpack." Liz felt a part of her join with the plastic that rose into the air, not unlike the piece that had risen to join the moon that strange night only a few days ago. More surprising, she felt

something else take its place, infusing her with something she thought she had lost forever. Rover barked happily as though she understood. When the shots fired, the jar seemed to fall in slow motion. Liz could see it bob with the gentle waves. The current drew the jar towards the center of the lake.

Nina walked Gina forward. "Gina has come to bury her old life and be reborn." Gina let go of the balloon, her face stoic and impossible to read. They stood in silence as the air currents took it higher and farther until it blinked out of sight.

Liz floated through the rest of the afternoon. She ate some of the fish John had supplied the caterers, but didn't remember much. She did remember snatches of conversations she had with all sorts of people -- people she wouldn't normally have an opportunity with whom to talk. She argued art and technology with a purple-haired young man whose pants were so low, she had to resist the urge to pull them up. One of the trumpet players talked about growing up in San Francisco. A friend of



Sookie's son even asked her out. Mostly she wandered around with Rover, as though, like Gina, she had been reborn and was seeing everything for the first time.

It was getting dark by the time everyone left, although it was only 4:30. They loaded up John's van with the tables and said their goodbyes. Liz was greatly relieved she hadn't driven to the event. She was in no shape to function, let alone drive. She fed Rover and Bob and then went straight to bed. The next morning, she couldn't remember details, but knew she had dreamed normal dreams. Bob even purred and rubbed up against her while Rover barked to be walked. Back to normal.

\* \* \*

While Masterdog sleeps, I tell Bob about the day. He thinks it's all stupid, but appreciates the sentiment. I ask him about what happens after you die, but he ignores me. No big deal.

The next day, I bark at the scratching I hear on the other side of the fence. All I know is he's a babydog and he's lost. I try to comfort him, but he cries any way. Something about his smell makes me want to keep him close. Bob climbs over the fence to get a better look at him. The babydog doesn't try to chase him. Bob likes that, which means the babydog can stay if Masterdog will let him.

When Masterdog finally comes home, the babydog is sitting on the porch, right where I tell him to sit. Bob and I had prepped him so Masterdog will let him join our family pack. No one could replace Sebastian, but we both felt we needed another member. I hear her singing at the babydog in a way that tells me she likes him. Unlike me, he has nothing around his neck. His skin dances all over his body, but I know he'll never grow up to be as tall as me. I like that. He smells like a babydog and is respectful of the dominant dog -- me. He even grooms my ears. This very well could be the beginning of something good. Lucky us.

\* \* \*

A new puppy was only the beginning of the changes in Liz's life. A few days after the memorial, she got a call from the art dealer. Liz was shocked when she heard the opening bid was \$100,000. Liz wanted to say yes, but the woman convinced her they could get ten times that amount.

Needless to say, Liz quit her job and bought an old warehouse in Ballard, a community close to downtown Seattle, the Puget Sound and Lake Union. She had her own living space and studio space, and rented out the rest to other artists. What they paid practically covered her mortgage with the added bonus of becoming her good friends. She built a fence for the dogs that enclosed a small lot with a large evergreen. A newly official dogpark was only five minutes away. Rover, Fido and Liz made many new friends, although Liz tried to go down to Sandpoint at least once a month. It wasn't far away, but required cross-town driving.

Sarah and John bought a small farm half an hour's drive out of the city. Liz was thrilled at participating in the christening of Sebastian, their son.

Liz felt a vague sense of emptiness that was once filled by the Masterpack. Sometimes she'd bump into Bo, David or Sookie at Sandpoint. But in the last year, their lives had also changed dramatically. Bo re-immersed himself into Tibetan Buddhism and worked towards becoming a priest. David quit Microsoft to work with a promising company designing games. He and Thandaika were talking about marriage. Bo pretended he was thrilled, but Liz sensed he had his doubts. He mentioned that in Angelica's care, Gina was getting her GED. She had a terrible crush on Bert, but fortunately for Angelica, he wasn't interested. Sookie left the symphony and enrolled at the University of Washington to get a degree in educational psychology. She and her husband were thinking about opening some kind of healing center in the San Juans. Nina and Delta moved to New

York where Nina started directing off Broadway plays. Delta was three months pregnant. In an email, she told Liz they were moving back, mostly because Seattle was a better place to raise kids, but also because Nina had been recruited to head the Seattle Arts Commission. Liz hoped their daughter and Sebastian would be able to grow up together. Some of Liz's pack mentality had not diminished since the Masterpack.

\* \* \*

I like having a baby brother. I can't remember what it was like before Fido showed up. We'd play all day and night if it were up to him. Fortunately it's not. Our new yard is bigger, but it too has a humungous tree. Masterdog even set aside an area filled with sand. We dig craters like you wouldn't believe.

Bob also has a new buddy, although he still pretends he hates her. Golda belongs to one of the other bipeddogs. She's smaller but even nastier than Bob. She's head of the

household now. No matter how many times he hisses, I know Bob adores Golda. I caught him sleeping with her once. Fido likes her too and tries to play with her. It's all very amusing. Life is good.

I can't sense how Puck is doing because he moved so far away. However, I figure he's his usual self and may even come back. How could he not after what we did together, whatever that was. I don't hold the details, only the connection. The dogs of what was once our Masterpack feel the same way, even if their Masterdogs have made huge changes to their lives. All that change has got to be exhausting, although less so for we dogs. Such is the life of a bipeddog.

My life is very full: friends from the Masterpack who we still visit at my favorite park; a house full of family, complete with dogs, catdogs and bipeddogs; and a community of dogs with whom Fido and I play with at the park near where we live. I miss that special connection I had with the Masterpack, but I also know a new masterpack could form if needed. At least

that's what the bipeddog-with-no-smell told me from Sarah's tummy. Masterdog never sees him as he was. Sarah suspects, but John laughs at the idea. However, I know who Sebastiangod really is. He talks to me. Lucky me.