

Chapter 42

It was strange having so many furs in their house, but then again, they were all more than welcome to be there.

Having Hannah in the house was definitely interesting, at least for him. He'd wondered if she'd be as pushy as usual in the house, but it turned out that she was quite a bit less pushy being their guest rather than them being a guest in her house. She did take over in some ways, such as pushing Jessie out of her own kitchen, but all in all Hannah was a very polite houseguest.

But Hannah was the only permanent fixture among a swirl of visitors. In the three days since Jessie had delivered, the Brightons, Rick and Martha, Vil and Kendall, and quite a few others had cycled through the house day after day to see the baby, visit her parents, or just hang out. Some visits were quick, such as John and Winston's. Both of them were very busy and couldn't make protracted visits, and had to return to their jobs the day after the delivery. Harry and Michael as well had to leave, one to go back to work and the other to return to school, the day after their father left, leaving Abigail with only Kendall for immediate family around her. Clancy had managed to come down to see Laura, but he went back home the next day because he wasn't feeling all that well. Suzy too came down to see Laura overnight, but she was about to embark on a business trip before the delivery and didn't have any extra time to visit.

It was most certainly a magnitude shift in their lives. He knew that Laura would become the absolute core of their family, the hub around which all other activity revolved, and he was a bit surprised just how true that turned out to be. Nothing really had been done in the house since before they went to Boston that didn't have Jessie's impending birth in mind, and now that Laura and Jessie were separate, all that attention had shifted from Jessie to the baby. In the three days since the birth, Kit could barely have a single thought in his head that didn't directly or indirectly involve his little girl, and those few that escaped Laura's grip were about her mother, her beautiful, gentle, perfect mother.

For her part, Jessie had adapted very quickly to the idea of no longer being the most important femme in the house, and had done so with grace and enthusiasm. She shared Kit's devotional love to their

daughter, and she had picked up quickly the core change in her daily routine to bring Laura into her life. It had only been three days, but already a pattern of sorts had surfaced. Laura was remarkably mellow for a newborn, and didn't fuss very much. She made few sounds, and those sounds were always quite serious, almost as if she were too dignified to babble or gurgle, but when she was hungry, the entire house knew it. She didn't cry so much as make a fussy sound, and that sound ceased the instant she was held to Jessie's perfect breast. She made that sound first around two in the morning, and Kit honored his promise to wake up and stay up with Jessie while she fed their baby. After Laura was satisfied, all three of them went back to sleep, at least until about seven. Kit usually woke up about then because work waited for no one, and he'd gone back to work the day after Laura was born, showing up in the afternoon on his day off to get some work he'd neglected done and resuming his schedule the day after that by taking Sunday off. And this was where Hannah had disrupted their daily lives, for every day since she arrived, he'd come downstairs to find her in the kitchen, cooking. She had learned very quickly when Kit woke up, and made sure to have breakfast all but waiting for him when he came downstairs. Kit didn't think she needed to cook for him, but it made her happy, and he wasn't going to push things. Around eight or so, Vil and Kendall would show up, and Abigail would arrive only about ten minutes later, and they stayed all day both days. Saturday, Winston and the Brighton boys were with them all day, but he had to return to England and Singapore. John was with them all day Saturday and most of Sunday, but he too had to return to work, since he had to teach a class at 8:30 Monday morning and he was out of vacation time. Vil and Kendall too had to return to Boston by Monday, so by Sunday night, the only one left in the house outside of them were Hannah and Abigail, though only Hannah was staying in their house.

Over the weekend, they were together, adapting to the idea of being a family. They kept Laura in a rolling crib downstairs while they were awake, keeping her close but also keeping her in the den so the bustle and noise of a filled house didn't wake her up. She'd wake up about every four hours or so and demand to be fed, but outside of that and being awake when they changed her diaper, she slept almost all the time. This was normal Kit had come to find out. Newborns slept almost constantly

just after being born, for their bodies were focusing on growing. She was active before and after feeding and before and after her diaper changes, almost like she was exercising, then she would go back to sleep. After the day was done, they moved Laura to her crib in their room, where they intended to keep her for about two weeks before moving her to her own room. They'd intended to keep her in the room longer, but both Hannah and Doctor Mac told them that the faster Laura adjusted to being alone at night, the less trouble it would cause both her and them. Hannah and Abigail spent nearly as much time teaching Kit and Jessie about how to care for an infant as they did anything else, and both of them proved to be quick learners. Between what they were taught in the hospital and what the matrons taught them, by Sunday night Kit felt completely comfortable picking up and holding his daughter, changing her diaper, and had bottle fed her twice

But Kit and Jessie weren't the only ones who wanted to learn. Vil seemed quite acutely attentive when the two older femmes taught the new parents the tricks of the trade, and she too learned how to pick up and care for an infant. Kit didn't miss that, not one bit, and neither did Jessie. Both of them giggled a bit over it that night in bed, for Vil was demonstrating her intentions like blaring trumpets. She may be the CEO of a multi-billion dollar conglomerate, but her primary goal from the day of her marriage onward was to get pregnant and have a baby. Luckily for Kendall, that was what he wanted as well, else going to bed with her might be something of a chore.

All during the weekend, they were either constantly visited or they hosted family members. Abigail would come over as soon as she woke up and stay all day, as did Vil and Kendall. Lupe and the complex gang also found just about any reason to step over and visit, spending a few minutes cooing at Laura and the rest of the time in the living room chatting it up with the Vulpans and the Brightons. Mike and Janet both also showed up, and they took enough pictures of Laura in her crib to wake her up with the flashes and put her in a fussy mood, which got both of them coolly banished to the living room. Thank the Lord above, Laura seemed to not like excessive media attention, a trait that would make her get along very well with her parents.

That morning, Kit woke up to go to work and again found Hannah

in the kitchen, fixing him a plate of Texas Mash, a local breakfast dish that was basically an omelet's ingredients scrambled into eggs instead of made into an omelet. "Morning, dear," she told him, setting it on the kitchen table for him as he padded in.

"I don't think John will appreciate you calling me that, Hannah," he teased lightly.

"Sit and eat your breakfast," she barked commandingly, which made him laugh and exaggerate his dash to the table. Hannah sighed and shook her head, but chuckled despite herself. "Are you going to work?"

"For about two hours," he answered. "Jessie has an appointment at the hospital at eleven, so I'll be back around ten thirty to take them. I need to have a little chat and training session with Julie."

"Trouble?"

"No, not trouble per se. It's just that she was hired while I was up in Boston, and I wasn't here to train her to our archiving system. Pat understands it, but he's not a very good teacher," he chuckled. "So me and her are going to go through it this morning."

"I don't think I met her."

"She didn't come when Laura was born, she has this idea in her head that she shouldn't attend things like that until we get to know her. Silly, but she's a very, well, *proper* young lady."

"Sounds like a good girl."

"Just a little insecure," he countered. "She's never really talked to Jessie, and didn't know how Jessie would react to a total stranger coming to the hospital."

"Ah, when you say it that way, you can at least understand her trepidation."

"She'll lose it quickly," he chuckled. "It's Rick's fault more than anyone's. He's the one that sent Julie and RJ to San Antonio for that piece he's doing, and they've barely been in the office since we got back. They barely got the chance to so much as say hello to us when they got back before Jessie went into labor. Jessie didn't even realize we had new furs in the office until the day before Laura was born," he chuckled. "I've been working with Julie over the phone and Skype since she was hired, but Jessie totally forgot Rick hired them."

“Why did he send a researcher to work with a reporter?”

“Because Julie’s more a researcher than a writer, and he wants her to get exposure to the rest of the business. Though, we’re getting so big now, I guess everyone doesn’t really need to be a jack of all trades anymore.”

Jessie padded into the room, yawning, and Kit stood up and kissed her on the cheek. “Morning, ball and chain,” he teased.

She laughed. “Morning, pain in the butt.”

“Laura still asleep?”

“Yah, I wanted to sleep but Mom’s cooking smells too good,” she said with a smile at Hannah. “You going into work?”

He nodded. “I’ll be back in time to go to the appointment. I need to walk Julie through the archiving system.”

“Well, don’t forget,” she told him.

“Like you’ll let me forget,” he retorted. “Besides, I’m too afraid of Doctor Mac to not show up.”

She giggled. “So, now I know who to call when you need to be *punished* punished,” she noted lightly.

“That’s what she’s for,” he countered, pointing at Hannah.

“Don’t make me spank you, Kit, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, we Williams cats are not afraid of Vulpans,” she warned, which made him laugh.

“Duly noted. Lemme get dressed and head in.”

He couldn’t resist spending a good five minutes just watching Laura sleep after he got dressed, then he kissed the femmes goodbye—getting swatted by Jessie for daring to kiss her mother on the cheek—and headed into work. Rick was the only one in the office when he arrived, and he stuck his head into Rick’s open office door. “Hey boss,” he called as Rick stared at his computer monitor. “When did you get here?”

“About two minutes ago,” he answered. “Get any sleep last night?”

“Sleep isn’t the problem, Laura’s actually pretty quiet,” he chuckled. “The problem is Jessie waking up every hour to check on her when she doesn’t need to be checked on.”

“Typical new mother reaction,” Rick chuckled. “Just let her settle down some. Doesn’t Jessie have a doctor’s appointment today?”

"Yeah, I'm just in to go over some things with Julie before she goes to San An."

"Today should be the last day they have to go. RJ's almost done with his interviews. But, they always leave really early, so I'll just send Pat with him today."

Julie was almost always a half hour early, according to Rick, and she proved it by coming in about ten minutes after Kit arrived. Julie was a fellow Yankee but in name only, for she was born in Vermont and her parents moved to Austin when she was five. She was also a mixed breed; her mother was a New England red fox and her father was an Acadian wolf, which gave her a husky yet surprisingly attractive appearance. She had pattern fox markings, but she had a broad, stocky muzzle and a shaggy-furred tail that had a black tip. She was sturdy, maybe a little husky, but she was not in any way fat. Some jokingly called fat furs "big boned," but in Julie's case that was a pretty accurate description. She was an inch taller than Jessie and had a proportional figure for anythin, slender femme, she was just taller and a bit huskier, almost like a Nordic wolf rather than an Acadian wolf. She was also deceptively strong, and had played softball while in high school and college, so she was pretty athletic. Kit had rather liked her when he interviewed her over the phone, because she reminded him in some ways about Jessie. She had the same kind of old-fashioned propriety. The fact that she always dressed in ankle-length skirts reinforced that concept of her to many. The truth, however, was actually quite different. She was very proper to strangers and dressed modestly, but once someone got to know her, she was witty, sharp, and a trifle bit naughty, but never dirty or improper. Abigail would find Julie to be a wonderful femme.

"Morning, morning," she called to them as she looked into the office. "Kit! Welcome back, boss!"

"I should say welcome back to you," he chuckled, standing up.

"Julie, you're staying here today, and I'm sending Pat with RJ," Rick said.

"No problem, boss," she nodded. "I'm almost tempted to ask what I did wrong," she smiled.

Kit chuckled. "It's what Pat did wrong, not you," he answered. "He didn't train you right about the archiving system. We're gonna fix that this

morning.”

“Oh, okay. Lemme get my stuff organized so Pat doesn’t have any trouble.”

In that respect, the three of them almost shared the same brain... which was another reason why Kit picked her. Kit could pick up almost anything Pat was working on and know exactly what he was doing, where he was, and usually how much work he had left, as could Pat with him. Julie had proved during her interviews that she could do the same. Using their notes, any of them could pick up where another left off if they swapped jobs going only by their notes and work.

After about twenty minutes, they got started. It was a bit different working with Julie in the office rather than over the phone or Skype, but it was much better. Julie took the chair Kit had behind his desk most often occupied by Pat, and they went through the archiving system thoroughly. The office filled up as the two of them worked, and Kit had to wave off multiple attempts by the gang to talk to him on his first day back, since he wanted to get this done before it was time to go to the doctor’s office. Julie was very smart, and she quickly picked up where she’d been making her mistakes, things Pat hadn’t taught her very well because Pat wasn’t a very good teacher.

They started at around 8:30, and they were done by 10:00. Julie had corrected her mistakes quickly, and they had a good fifteen minutes to just prattle. Julie was a modest young lady to strangers, but she had a barbed sense of humor, and their talk quickly degenerated into gossip as she told him all about some covert flirting that had been going on between Mike and Janet. “I think they’re on the verge of dating,” Julie noted in a conspiratorial whisper as Janet passed in front of Kit’s door, pausing to wave to them.

“I don’t see anything wrong with that,” Kit chuckled. “But I have a minority view around here.”

She chuckled. “You’re one of the old males now, boss,” she winked. “You need to gray your chin and wander around lamenting about the old days, then snapping at us that we’d have never made it back in your day.”

“Watch it, little missy, you’re only a year younger than me, and you dress like an old lady already.”

She laughed. "Leave my skirts out of this!"

"Oh no, there are no out of bounds in war," he retorted. "That reminds me. You busy tonight?"

"Not particularly."

"Good. Six o'clock, my townhouse. Bring wine."

"Boss! Are you asking me out? And you just had a baby girl!" she gasped in mock astonishment.

"You need to get to know Jessie so you don't have to think you're not the same as the rest of *them*," he answered, motioning towards the door.

"So, you want me to become a drunken reprobate?"

Kit laughed. "Yes, time to seduce you to the Dark Side."

"Ohhhh, you're gonna seduce me. I'm all aflutter."

"Go finish Pat's project," he told her curtly, but he was grinning.

"Yes, boss," she answered flippantly, then bounced up from the chair and all but skipped out of his office.

Yeah, Julie was gonna fit in perfectly around here.

But he wasn't done yet. He called RJ's Blackberry as he got ready to leave. "This is RJ," his bass voice intoned.

"RJ, it's Kit. When are you getting back from San An?"

"We're almost there now. I have one interview to do, and we're coming back," he answered. "So maybe around two or three."

"Good. You busy tonight?"

"Not really."

"Why don't you come to dinner at my house? You need to get to know Jessie, and she'd love to talk with you."

"And you can show off your daughter?"

"Well, that too," he said honestly. "Six o'clock good?"

RJ chuckled. "Sounds good. I'll be there."

Kit hurried home after hanging up, where Hannah and Jessie were already getting Laura ready for her first trip out of the house since coming home. To his surprise, Sylvia was there as well, holding the baby bag Jessie had decided to carry when taking Laura out. "Your furniture arrive yet, Sylvia?"

"Ja, Herr Kit," she answered.

"Need help getting it set up?"

"Nein, the boys helped me."

"The boys?" he asked.

Sylvia smiled slightly. "The wolf, Krichek, and Barnett. I made sure to make them rearrange the living room five times before settling."

Kit laughed. "Keep 'em on their toes, Sylvia."

"Always," she murmured.

"What are you doing over here? Just visiting?"

She shook her head. "*Fraulein* Jessie never leaves the house without an escort," she answered. "Nick's rules," she added quickly. "He felt it was safe to allow you to leave the house alone because you aren't overly distracted, but since *Fraulein* Jessie has the baby, he felt that she needed extra eyes with her at all times."

"You know I'll never complain a bit when it comes to keeping my Jessie safe," he assured her.

"Good," she nodded.

"You made it on time, handsome fox," Jessie noted as she came into the room holding Laura in a clever little handled carrier, their daughter safely tucked in with a blanket over her, already asleep.

"And have Hannah skin me if I'm late, then face the wrath of Doctor Mac when we get there? Please," he snorted, which made Jessie giggle. "Oh, by the way, love, I invited RJ and Julie over for dinner tonight so you can get to know them."

She laughed. "Then we're gonna be crowded, because I invited over Amanda, Luke, and David, and Abby said she'd be over after our appointment!"

"We have a big table," he shrugged. "I'll do the coo—"

"Aaaat!" she barked, pointing at him. "You can't keep me out of my kitchen anymore! I'll cook!"

"Alright, alright, I know better than to get between you and your favorite toy."

"That's right," she said, blowing him a kiss, and making Sylvia snort to suppress a chuckle.

Hannah accompanied them as they piled into Jessie's van, her mother watching carefully and only giving advice once as Jessie and Kit placed Laura in her car seat. Kit drove them to Doctor Mac's office, for one of their last month of appointments with her before Jessie was referred to

a general practitioner who was well versed in post-partum femmes. Laura had already been referred to a pediatrician, a doctor named Assan Sahib, and Jessie was supposed to schedule an appointment for Laura this morning. Hannah and Sylvia were stuck in the waiting room as Doctor Mac examined both Jessie and Laura, checking Jessie for any complications after her delivery and checking Laura to make sure she was alright and developing normally. But, to Kit's delight, both mother and daughter were rosilily healthy, leaving Doctor Mac to nod approvingly when she scribbled on a chart. How she wrote with those claws mystified Kit, but then again, he was equally amazed she could do her job as an obstetrician without clawing up her patients. "Next appointment is Thursday, same time," she told them. "Did you call and schedule your first appointment with the pediatrician I recommended?"

"This morning," Jessie answered with a nod. "Our first appointment is tomorrow."

"Good. You'll like Doctor Sahib."

"I hope I can understand him."

Doctor Mac chuckled. "He's from Brooklyn, hon, son of immigrants. He's also the best pediatrician in Austin. I think you'll like him."

"As long as he keeps Laura healthy, it's all good," Kit said simply.

As Jessie carried Laura out of the exam room, Hannah and Sylvia stood up. "How did it go, Jessica?"

"Just fine, Mom, we're both healthy."

"Disgustingly healthy," Doctor Mac added, which made Jessie giggle. "Confirm the appointment with the receptionist, and I'll see you on Thursday."

"Sure thing, Doctor Mac," Jessie answered. "Have a good day."

"Two new patients today. Two new husbands to train," she grunted, which made Kit laugh.

"Get out the whip."

"I may need it."

"Whip?" Sylvia asked.

"Doctor Mac has certain standards she expects out of the husbands," Kit explained as Jessie talked to the receptionist, a rather perkypoodle. "Things like showing up at the appointments with the wives.

being engaged and involved with the wife's pregnancy, that kind of thing."

"Ah. I can see why she may need a whip."

Kit had his family back home by one, and he returned to work to finish out the day. He still felt a little scattered, and had to really focus to get things done, since he constantly started musing and daydreaming about his new daughter, about his new family, and all the plans he had for them. He also had to chuckle a little ruefully when he checked his bank account, now full to overflowing with Vulpan money.

Odd how suddenly having a daughter to care for could change a male's morals. A year ago, Kit would have simply shipped that money right back to Vil, and done so with a few very ugly words to her about her meddling. But now, with Laura laying in a crib back home, he found that his towering morals about making it on his own, without any help from his sister or family, were wavering *slightly*. Kit still wanted to make it on his own, to prove to himself and his family that he could be successful, but he now had more than just himself and Jessie to consider. He had a daughter, he had a baby, and that single fact made that money sitting in the money market account look much less threatening and ominous. He would not use that money in the business, but he would keep it in there *just in case*.

He tended that bit of business after getting settled back in. He called the bank and discussed the available options for trusts, for he fully intended to take most of the money Vil had tricked him into taking and put it in a trust for their children. That money was not his or Jessie's, it belonged to their children, and he intended to keep it separate from their money. Vil may have managed to push money at him beyond what he wanted, but she was going to learn that that money was only his for as long as it took him to deposit it into a trust.

He settled on one of the bank's blind trusts, that would stay open-ended so that when they had more children, their names could be added to it. It also had attractive options, reasonable fees, and no penalty for early withdrawal so long as the trust had over \$100,000 of total balance and they took out no less than 10% of the balance, which also wouldn't drop the balance under \$100,000. Given that about \$400,000 would be going into that trust per year until Kit freed himself of Vil's claws and resigned from the board, he felt that it was the trust with the best options.

He called Jessie, and she reluctantly left Laura with Hannah as she met him at the bank. The manager went over all the details for Jessie's benefit, and in about an hour, they had the trust opened with an initial deposit of \$125,000. "And, there we are," the thin white mouse manager noted as Jessie signed the forms. "When you receive your quarterly deposit from the Vulpan company, all but thirty thousand dollars of it will automatically be deposited into the trust. In addition, all but two hundred dollars of your weekly deposits will be deposited in the trust, Misses Vulpan."

"That's exactly what we want," Jessie said.

"Yep, that way I don't have to come down here every three months and mess with this," Kit agreed.

Kit walked Jessie out of the bank, into a hot but dry later summer day. "No separation anxiety?" he asked with a chuckle.

"*A little*," she admitted, then she giggled when he patted her on the shoulder compassionately. "This is the first time I've left her alone."

"She's not alone, Hannah's with her."

"You know what I mean," she replied.

"You'll live," he grinned.

"Mom's throwing me out of the house tomorrow," she protested.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she called Sheila and told her to come get me after class tomorrow and take me out, without telling me!" she told him. "She told me to go play golf!"

Kit laughed. "Now that's the Hannah I know and love. Any reason why she did it?"

Jessie's cheek fur ruffled slightly "She said I have to remember that there *is* life outside of Laura," she answered. "She said I should still do my hobbies, and that she knows me and I wouldn't take a single foot outside unless she makes me."

"That seems only healthy to me, love," he told her calmly. "You *do* need a little time to yourself, and as long as you feel recovered enough to go play some golf, it'll be good exercise for you."

"I think so. I'm still just a tiny bit sore," she told him.

"You can't spend every waking moment with Laura, if only because it prevents me from subverting her and making her a daddy's

girl."

"Cheater!" Jessie accused with a giggle.

"I never pretended to be fair," he grinned. "So, tomorrow you and Sheila and Ally can hijack Sam and go play a round, and me and Laura will be there waiting when you come home." He glanced at her. "And she was right that she had to kick you in the butt to get you out of the house."

"I can't help it," she laughed as they approached Jessie's van. "I love her so much, I don't want to leave her for a second."

"Hey, where's the sympathy for me?" he challenged. "I have to go earn us a living, you treacherous femme! You just sit home and get all the time in the world with our daughter and spend my money!"

"Just the way it should be," she said primly. "That's the only reason I married you, after all."

"You cheap little gold-digger," he accused, then she laughed when he tickled her. "I'll deal with you when I get home!"

"So brave when he's in public," she taunted as she unlocked her van. "We'll see how brave you are when I have a pillow handy!"

"You'll see," he waggled a finger at her. "Need me to bring anything home?"

"Nah, I'll pick it up myself on the way home. We're having lasagna."

"Sounds good. Remember, you're feeding nine."

"More like twelve, since someone's bound to crash dinner," she amended, to which he could only chuckle and nod in agreement. "I'll enjoy it. Finally, allowed back in my own kitchen!" she exclaimed, kissing him on the muzzle. "See you at home, handsome fox."

"I should be home on time, pretty kitty. Drive safely," he told her as he helped her into the van, then closed the door for her. She blew him a kiss after starting the van, put on her seat belt, and he watched her pull out and onto the street. And just behind her, Barnett pulled out of a parking spot driving a Toyota sedan, probably an Altima or Camry, waved to Kit, then followed her out.

Nick was serious about not letting Jessie go *anywhere* without an escort. And it was darn considerate of him not to have Sylvia follow her around all the time, to make her feel like she was under constant scrutiny. Jessie may not even be aware one of the guards was following her, and Kit

rather liked that idea.

Kit ended up simply bringing RJ and Julie with him when he left work, having them follow him back to the townhouse. He could see that Abigail was already there when he parked behind his Pathfinder, for she was sitting on the front porch with Hannah, sipping a glass of wine as the two matrons talked. "Hannah, Abby, I'd like to introduce RJ and Julie, from work. Guys, these are the evil mother-in-laws, Hannah and Abby."

"I'm not evil, I'm just a nagger," Abigail said cheekily as she stood up. "Nice to meet you, duckies! Kit's friends are my friends."

"That's a lovely dress, Julie," Hannah said as she took her paw. "Quite proper."

"I'm just a proper girl, Misses Williams," she said with a bright smile, showing off her long fang-like canines.

"It's the proper ones that cause the most trouble," RJ noted dryly to Kit.

"Tell me about it, I'm married to one," Kit agreed with a nod, which earned him a tart look from Hannah.

Julie was in her pattern "wait and see" mode when they went in, being friendly but a little quiet, feeling things out as Jessie talked to her and RJ, then showed off Laura to them. RJ, on the other paw, was asking about a thousand questions of Abigail, trying to learn what it was like for her to be the wife of one of the most powerful foxes in Britain, the venerable and formidable Winston Brighton. RJ even referred to him as such, which made Abigail burst into laughter. "If you called him venerable, he'd box your muzzle for being cheeky," she told him. "He's only fifty-four, RJ. A fox doesn't *have* to be old to run a company, you know."

"If you called MI venerable, she'd have one of her panthers brain you," Kit added, which made Julie laugh, then quickly cover her mouth with her paw and look a bit contrite.

"Besides, Winston gets enough of that from his sons," Kit said lightly.

"Part of the eternal Brighton War," Abigail laughed. "It starts when they start pecking at each over their football teams, then it descends into pranks and names. Never live in a house where all the males support different football clubs, Julie dear. It's a recipe for disaster."

"That's your fault for not pushing *your* team at them when they

were young and impressionable,” Kit noted.

“Yes, John made sure to *infect* our daughters with their love for the Bengals at a young age,” Hannah agreed.

“And you don’t cheer when they score a touchdown,” Kit teased.

“It’s cheer or sleep on the couch,” she retorted, which made him laugh.

David, Luke, and Amanda arrived about a half an hour later, and Jessie waited not five seconds to proudly show Laura off to them. Amanda held the infant while the two instructors took pictures and cooed at her, then she carefully gave her back to her mother. “Well, now that my maternal instincts are mollified,” she laughed. “I haven’t held a baby like that since my son got too big to fit in the crook of my arm.”

“How goes training the clueless?” Kit asked as Jessie scurried back to the kitchen after placing Laura in her crib.

Luke laughed. “It’s not that bad. We’re not training quite as many as usual thanks to the recession, but there’s enough traffic to keep me off the unemployment line.”

“Sad to say,” Amanda sighed. “Word is they’re going to consolidate the factories. Close the Columbia factory and move it to Kansas. They say it’s costing too much to run factories halfway across the country from each other. They want to move the four hundred production into the prop factory.”

“They’re not discontinuing the four hundred, are they?” Kit asked in concern.

She shook her head. “No, they sell too well for them to drop it. But, rumor is that they might suspend the production of the Columbus until the market improves. That might be a good idea. I’d hate to see them shelve the program, but if there’s no market for them when we start building, it’s best not to spend the money on the program now. Just wait until the economy rebounds and restart the program.”

“Yeah, sounds smart,” Kit agreed. “Just hold off until you can sell them.”

“At least the Vulpans are keeping us in the black,” Amanda laughed. “We sell two four hundreds to you and your cousin, and Vilenne bought two CJ ones and a CJ three for the shipyard. We should be making delivery of the first one in about two weeks.”

"I figured that was coming," Kit chuckled. "I wonder why she bought three, since she already has two jets."

"From what I heard, she's basing two of the jets in Boston, and one in New Orleans," she answered. "Not that that's really my department, since I'm the training manager, but word gets around. It's easy when we're all within a hundred miles of each other and most of us have pilot's licenses," she chuckled.

"She's giving Terry a jet," Kit reasoned. "I guess he needs one, since he's on the board. He'd need a way to get back to Boston when he's needed and not have to wait for a jet to come down from Boston, and board execs don't fly commercial," Kit snorted. "She probably gave him the CJ three."

"I wouldn't want to make that trip in a CJ one over and over," David agreed. "That's a long trip in a one."

"Enough with the shop talk," Abigail said. "Us normal furs have no idea what you're talking about!"

"Oh, we can fix that for you, Misses Brighton," Amanda said with a wolfish smile. "You say the word, and I'll have David here personally train you up for your own pilot's license."

"So you can sell me a jet, eh?"

"Well, wouldn't you want to buy what you learned in?" she asked with an innocent smile.

"Clever girl, I wasn't born yesterday! I was born last week, but could talked into being born yesterday when it comes to pawbags," she said in a surprisingly close imitation of Kendall's airy demeanor.

"Quit trying to sell everyone in this house a jet, Amanda!" Jessie called from the kitchen. "And someone come set the table, dinner's almost ready!"

RJ shifted his grilling of Abigail to grilling just about everyone around the table, his reporter's instincts going into overdrive as he tried to sniff out anything he could turn into a story, but that stopped after about his third bite of lasagna, when he realized that it was *good*. They enjoyed Jessie's first uninterrupted meal cooked in her own kitchen, and she went out of her way to make it as sumptuous as possible. "Oh dear, Jessica, you outdid yourself," Abigail said with a contented sigh as she finished dessert, which was a mousse recipe taught to her by the Stonebrook

chefs.

"Thanks, Abby," she said, then she laughed when Laura started fussing from the den, placed in there so the noise wouldn't disturb her. "At least she let me eat a hot meal," she said as she stood up. "I'll be back in a while. It's time to bring her back out anyway."

"She's just unhappy she missed this meal," Julie told her.

"Too bad there's so much left over," Amanda noted.

"Yes, you can take some home with you," Jessie said as she pushed in her chair. "And there's a big box of pastries for you to at least pretend to take back to Kansas with you. I doubt any will make it out of Texas."

"Dang, she knows us too well," David laughed.

"Hey, it's our treat for actually coming down here," Luke added.

"We put in the miles, that means we get the goodies."

"How are those two doing, by the way?" Kit asked curiously.

"Marvelously," Luke answered. "Sheila plays a lot, but she learns quick and she's honestly interested. I think Dave has too much trouble keeping his eyes on the MFD to really teach Allison very much," he said with a sly look at his partner. "We flipped a coin for who gets to train Allison, and he cheated."

"Not that it matters, she's taking her qualification ride tomorrow," he answered. "I think the fact that *my* student is going to be qualified *days* before *your* student demonstrates just who is doing the better job."

"Allison has a very good reason to be certified as fast as possible, since that's her ticket to New Orleans," Kit mused. "I'll bet money that if you certify her by noon, she'll come beg to borrow our plane, then be in New Orleans by six."

"She has relatives there?"

"Terry is there," he answered. "My cousin. They're dating. The entire reason she learned to fly was so she could fly to New Orleans and see him, since he's very busy and doesn't always have time to come here."

"That sounds like there might be another wedding in the Vulpan family soon," Julie noted.

"I'd be shocked if there wasn't," Abigail said. "You can tell by looking at them that they're mad for each other."

"I can hear the screams from Boston already," Kit said with a dark

chuckle.

"Why is that?" Julie asked.

"Alison isn't the *right type* for a Vulpan, Julie," Kit said scornfully. "She's not rich, she's not from an established family, and they disapprove of her. The only thing they see as a saving grace is that she's a fox. If another Vulpan married outside the breed, I think they'd have apoplexy."

"Just goes to show that background doesn't make the fur," Abigail said sagely. "I've never met a smarter girl than Ally, except maybe Vil, but that's a serious toss-up. She'll do well with Terry. That boy is just too smart for his own good, he needs a femme that can shake his tree when he gets too smug."

"Enough talking about my dysfunctional family," Kit snorted. "How have things been in Kansas?"

"Fine, fine," Amanda said. "We still have a waiting list for training, so that means we're still selling planes, so that means at least we keep our jobs," she laughed. "I need to get you and Jessie on the schedule, though. When in November are you coming up?"

"Oh, I dunno, we haven't really talked about it yet," he answered.

"Have you been studying your manuals?" David asked.

"When we can," he answered. "Jessie's been studying more than me," he admitted with a rueful chuckle. "Then again, she had all kinds of time. After we got back from Boston, I had work, and she just sat around the house doing nothing."

"Ducky, she's gonna whack you," Abigail laughed.

"Oh, I know," he grinned. "It's about time she needs to punish me anyway," added dryly.

Jessie brought Laura out from the den after feeding her and let everyone gawk and coo and pay attention to her, and Kit got the rare opportunity to hold his daughter for more than a few minutes as Jessie got settled on the couch. "Alright Jessie, you need to pick a date for your commercial," Amanda announced after they sat down.

"Oh, I don't really know," she answered. "Laura will be close to two months by then, so I think she'll be old enough to handle the transition."

"Are you ready?"

"You mean have I been studying? Yeah," she answered. Aivina Kit

a cool look. "I had to do *something* while sitting around doing *nothing*, you know."

"Busted," David laughed.

"I'm holding Laura, she won't dare hit me."

"You won't be holding her long," Abigail noted.

"I'll just hold her hostage until Jessie forgets all about it. She's flighty, all I have to do is dangle a shiny trinket to save myself. It's a cat thing, I think."

"Oh really?" Jessie asked with an edge in her voice.

"Yup," he answered with a sly smile. "You'll even forget about this conversation."

"I think you forget there's more than one cat in this room, young male," Hannah noted sharply.

"I think we need to give him a bigger shovel," Julie giggled.

"Nah, popcorn," RJ answered, which made Julie laugh.

"Actually, I think this is part of his clever plan to gently push us all out of here so he can have his daughter all to himself," Amanda said with a light smile. "And he has a point. It's getting a little late, and I have an appointment in the morning to finalize the sale of a CJ one to AAIA."

"They're going through with it?" Kit asked.

She nodded. "Yup. They might even call you to see if you wouldn't mind doing a little instruction from time to time," she told him. "You're one of only three certified CJ one flight instructors in the Austin area. At least right now," she chuckled. "AAIA's sending three of their CFAs to Kansas for training."

"Lucky dogs, I bet they fought over which three get to go," Kit noted.

"Not entirely, since AAIA is making *them* pay for the training," Amanda said.

"Wow, and they're standing for that?"

"I guess they are, since half of what I'm doing down there tomorrow is putting their CFAs on the schedule. And only two of them have to pay. The third is going as the free pilot trainee."

"How much will it cost them?" RJ asked curiously.

"The CJ one rating program is two and a half weeks, and costs seven thousand dollars," Amanda answered.

"Wow. that's a lot."

"That's about average for a small jet rating. If they were training to the ten, it would be twelve thousand."

"Well, the ten's not for the meek," Kit noted, staring down at his daughter, who was falling asleep. "It's for serious pilots only. And I think it's time to put a certain someone down for a nap."

Laura's needs also broke up the party. Jessie boxed up the leftovers for the Cessna gang, and they all said their goodbyes and went back to their hotel. RJ and Julie hung around about half an hour longer, talking with Jessie, then they too said goodnight and went home. Kit cleaned up after they were gone, as Jessie and her mother were talking in the living room, and Jessie caught up to him in the kitchen as he was washing the pans too big to fit in the dishwasher. She looped her arms around him and hugged him around the waist, putting her chin over his shoulder. That wasn't that hard for her to do, since she was only about three inches shorter than him and could get her head to his level by standing on her toes. "So, I wonder what I should do since I do so little around here," she said in a barbed voice, digging her claws slightly into his lower stomach.

Kit laughed. "I've been far too good lately, and needed to find some reason to be punished. Laura just makes me too respectable," he surmised as he rinsed the pan.

"Well, I think I can find a suitable punishment for a naughty fox later tonight," she breathed near his ear in a manner that made his tail threaten to stand straight out. It had nowhere to go, though, so it jammed up against her hip and made her laugh.

"Feeling well enough?"

"I'm not sore anymore," she said huskily, "and maybe you wouldn't be naughty if I saw to a few of your male needs."

"And a few of your female ones," he teased lightly.

"It's your duty as my husband to see to those needs, and you, sir, have been slacking on the job!" she declared, caressing his stomach, almost kneading her claws against his fur. "You should have sensed that I've recovered and been there, but noooo, you were too busy being a bad boy to be sensitive to me!"

"Digging your own grave," he teased in a singing voice.

"We'll see who's digging who's grave tonight," she whispered.

Jessie gave him motivation to turn in far too early for Hannah not to be a little suspicious, and it was certainly a little...awkward. Neither of them had really considered the thought that Laura was *in the room* with them when they put her down for the night and climbed into bed, and Hannah and Abigail's insistence Laura be in a room of her own suddenly made a lot more sense. But, urges overrode propriety.

Jessie woke him up an hour before he was supposed to be up. She was all but laying on his back, a finger unerringly tracing the scars on his back and her head and muzzle nuzzled in against the back of his head. She was purring in contentment, and it was that purring that awakened him. It was one of the sounds she made that instantly got his attention no matter if he was awake or asleep, and he was content to just lay there and listen to that wonderful music.

Jessie, however, was just as sensitive to him as he was to her. She knew he was awake, but didn't say anything, just kept stroking the scars over his back with her fingers. He laid there and submitted to her tender attentions for nearly fifteen minutes before she finally spoke. "Morning," she whispered.

"Morning love," he said quietly back. "Feeling alright?"

"Just fine, no soreness, no pain," she answered. "Sorry I woke you."

"You can wake me up any time, silly kitty," he told her with a low chuckle. "Especially when you're feeling kittenish."

"I'm going to hold you to that," she whispered, nipping playfully at his damaged ear.

"Oh, are we feeling frisky?"

"Not really, I've just missed snuggling. We haven't really snuggled much since Laura was born."

"Exhaustion and your mother," he chuckled, worming under her until he was on his back, and she settled into his arms. "But we'll find some couch snuggle time tonight after you get back from golf, I promise."

"Golf, yeah," she said. "Mind if I'm late getting in?"

"Not at all. An idea?"

"There's that public course down in New Braunfels. Remember it?"

"Oh yeah. So, my pretty kitty's feeling the flying bug biting her butt.

eh?"

She giggled. "I haven't flown the plane for a while. I hope I'm not rusty."

"You should have plenty of time," he told her. "Sheila might have to bow out of her flight training after school today to do it, though. And if Allison passes her certification, you know she's gonna fly to New Orleans as soon as Dave signs the form, in *our* plane."

"Well, New Braunfels is only like fifty miles from here so we can drive, and I think I'll see if Sam and Kevin want to go. Sam's pretty good, and Kevin's been talking about learning. May as well get him started. It'll give them something to think about other than the wedding," she grinned. "Unless you want to go, that is."

"Nah, I'll stay here with Laura and work on making her Daddy's girl," he answered, which made her giggle. "I like golf, but my back doesn't."

"I said you're actually really good at it."

"I'm not bad, but like I said, my back starts twinging by the fifteenth hole."

"Well, think you can play nine holes with us this weekend? You've never once came to play golf with us, not even to just watch."

"Never?" he asked in surprise.

"Not once," she answered.

"Well, we'll fix that," he told her. "I can probably handle nine holes. What, trying to keep me away from Laura?"

She grinned at him. "Keeping you from spoiling our daughter," she winked in the darkness. "Besides, I want to play golf with my husband," she cooed, kissing him languidly on the muzzle. "Even if you only golf for two holes and then drive me around in the cart afterwards."

"Oh, so you just want a chauffeur," he retorted, putting his paws on her sides and tickling her, which made her giggle and writhe atop him.

"I want to spend a little time with my husband doing something we both like to do," she answered. "I know your back won't let you play a full round, but that's no reason to play a *little* and quit before it starts hurting. Just promise that you'll stop if it hurts, Kit. And I mean *promise*."

"My word as a Vulpan, I'll stop if it starts to hurt," he answered immediately.

“Good enough for me,” she said, giving him a long, lazy kiss. “It keeps me off the tennis court.”

“Ha, I knew you had ulterior motives!” he accused.

“Too late, you’re playing golf instead of beating me up on the tennis court now,” she teased.

“Can’t even beat a cripple, you’re such a pathetic tennis player,” he taunted.

“Oh, you’re getting it now, buster,” she giggled, and they woke Laura up as they wrestled on the bed, laughing. Laura gave a fussy sound that quelled both of them instantly, and they looked over in the darkness to her crib. “Uh oh, we’re being scolded,” she giggled as she got out of bed and went over and picked her up, calming her.

Kit yawned, watching his wife comfort their infant, and for a moment he felt as if life was complete. This was all he had ever wanted out of life. Not a wife, not money, not really even a child...he had always wanted a place where he knew he *belonged*. And that was this place. With the love of his life, the first of hopefully many children to come, a good job he enjoyed and the potential to spread his Vulpan fingers through the business world of Austin and eventually take control of it—he was a Vulpan, after all—and the opportunity to prove to himself that he could make it on his own, this was where he belonged. This was what he always wanted out of life.

He was an Austin Vulpan.

Jessie looked at him, and as usual, her sensitivity to him told her that he was having weighty thoughts. She smiled at him, bouncing Laura in her arm, then she sat on the edge of the bed. “Look at her, my handsome fox,” she whispered. “If we ever did one thing right in our lives, it’s right here. She’s going to be special. I can feel it. I don’t know how or why, or what she’s going to do, but she’s going to be so special.”

“I think you’re right,” Kit breathed, putting his arm over her shoulders. “How can any child of Jessica Vulpan be anything but special?”

She gave him a heart-melting look, and leaned against him. “I love you, Kit.”

“I love you more, Jessie.”

“Not possible.” she said with a slight smile, glancing at him.

"Because nobody on Earth could love anyone more than I love you."

"Well," he said in a slightly teasing tone, then he chuckled and kissed her on the cheek. "I won't challenge that declaration, if only because it makes me feel good."

She kissed him, then stood back up. "Well, I'm up and I'm not really sleepy," she complained. "May as well start breakfast."

"I'll be down in a bit," Kit told her.

"Any requests?"

"Pancakes?"

"I'll have a stack ready for you," she told him as she picked up her robe from the back of the vanity's chair, then pulled it on as she started for the door.

Kit dozed a little, then went down for breakfast, bringing Laura down with him. To his surprise, both Abigail and Sheila were at the kitchen table with Hannah, and Sheila was chowing down on pancakes. "What are you doing up so early?" Kit asked her as he placed Laura in the rolling crib by the table.

"Big day today," she grinned in reply. "I have my first project in culinary arts today. We have to plan a menu."

"Wow, already? I thought they saved that kinda stuff for the later semesters."

She shook her head. "Half of it is learning the business of being a chef," she answered. "And stuff like multitasking. They don't just teach me how to cook, they teach me how to cook three things at once while listening to a waiter bitch."

Hannah gave her a frosty look. "Watch your language, young lady," she warned.

"You're guarding a glassless window there, Hannah," Abigail chuckled.

"I'm a bad girl, Hannah," Sheila grinned shamelessly at her. "You'll never change me."

"You'll find out how wrong you are," Hannah retorted.

"It's your gray hair," Sheila shrugged, then she glanced at her watch. "Shit, I'm late!" she barked, jumping up quickly. "Later cousin, thanks for the pancakes Jessie, and bye old femmes," she said as she rushed out.

"Where are you going at seven in the morning?" Kit called after her.

"Working out before class, won't have time after!" she shouted as the door opened, then slammed shut.

Hannah looked a bit miffed, but Abigail just laughed. "She's a plucky one, daring to call us old," she grinned. "I think we have to take little miss young thing down a peg or two, Hannah."

Hannah gave her an ominous little smile. "What do you have in mind?"

"Not sure yet, but I'll think of something," she answered, then she looked at Kit. "Say, do you have a key to her apartment, Kit dear?" she asked, which made Kit laugh.

"Actually, I do," he answered.

"Alright, that opens up the possibilities," Abigail grinned, which made Jessie splutter, then start giggling over the stove.

Around two, David called and told him that Allison was taking her check ride. At around four, he called back and told him that she passed. "I thought I was check riding someone who'd owned that plane for ten years," he chuckled as Kit was letting Julie and Pat argue over a piece of research Julie did. "That girl is almost frighteningly intelligent, Kit."

"That's why she's perfect for Terry, who's an honest-to-goodness genius. So she's certified?"

"Yup. I already filed the paperwork with her insurance carrier, so she's certified in a four hundred."

"Which means I should get off the phone because I'm about to get a begging phone call."

"You should hear the call waiting beep any second," David answered with a chuckle. "She said she was going to fly there if she passed, and since she won't get the plane til next month, yours is the only one around."

"I feel sorry for Sheila. She more or less bought that plane, and if she gets to fly it once a month, it'll be a miracle." He then heard the call waiting beep. "And there she is."

David laughed. "Well, make her beg for it."

"I can do that." He ended his call with David and picked up. "Ally," he called.

She laughed. "He ratted me out, didn't he?"

"Yup."

"Well, I'm flipping him off as we speak," she told him, which made him laugh. "So, Kit, seems I just got my four hundred rating, and our plane isn't here yet," she trailed off hopefully.

"Yes, you can borrow the plane," he said, which made her give a happy little squeak. "Meet me over by our parking spot so we can at least go over my plane. It has a few little quirks you need to know about."

"Sure thing. I'll be waiting for you."

He hung up and got his juniors' attention. "I'm leaving a bit early, you two have your epic battle and tell me how you want to do it when I get home. Aly passed her check ride, and I'm letting her borrow our plane to go to New Orleans tonight."

"Cool, tell her grats from us!" Pat said with a smile.

After walking Aly through the little things unique to his 400, he watched her take off without a single worry. If David said she was certified, he had no worries at all that she would bring the plane back in one piece. After sending her off to see Terry, Kit ended up watching Laura, which he was actually looking forward to doing, while Hannah pushed Jessie out of the house. Allison had probably landed in New Orleans by the time Jessie left, so she ended up taking Sam, Kevin, and Sheila to play golf at that public course down in New Braunfels while he got his chance to subvert Laura to his camp. Hannah and Abigail just seemed amused as he kept hold of her most of the time, cooing to her, holding her gently as she slept, feeding her, then parking himself on the couch and spending nearly an hour just looking at her, in gentle-eyed wonder.

She was feeding again when Jessie got home, her golf bag on her shoulder and looking maybe just a touch tired. "Hey, handsome fox," she smiled as she set the bag in the foyer. "How is she?"

"Just fine, and I'm stunned you didn't call once an hour to check up on us."

She laughed. "Sheila took my phone the first time I tried," she admitted, which made Kit grin at her. "You're still here, Abby? Did he at least remember to cook dinner for you?"

Abigail grinned. "He hasn't so much as put her down once since you left," she retorted, giving Kit a sly look. "Hannah was the one that

cooked dinner."

"Kit!" Jessie declared.

"Hey, you have her all day, and she's asleep most of the time when I get home," he said defensively. "How can I make her Daddy's girl if I don't get bonding time?"

Jessie just laughed helplessly. "Well, put her in her crib. You have a promise to keep."

Hannah and Abigail decided to leave them be, and they truly appreciated it. They snuggled on the couch with Laura in her crib by the couch, the lights low, no TV, no radio, just them enjoying the nearness and touch of the other. They hadn't done any real snuggling since Laura was born, and in a way it felt like they had come full circle, back to that first night they snuggled on his couch in his old apartment, an apartment that now no longer existed, with his piecemeal furniture. He could spend hours, days, just nestled against her and listening to her purr. But Jessie was tired, and she fell asleep not long after they started snuggling. Kit just put his head against hers and held her close, until he dozed off himself.

"I think they're asleep," Abigail whispered as she looked in from the dining room.

"Jessica stopped purring, so I know she is," Hannah answered.

"Quite the couple, aren't they?" the British fox asked as they went back to the kitchen and their game of rummy. "You can't look at them and not see the love there."

"I find it hard to believe I objected to their wedding," Hannah said ruefully. "I didn't believe they'd ever stay together more than a year."

"I guess they acted differently back then."

"No, pretty much the same," she admitted with a chuckle. "I didn't doubt that Kit loved my daughter, but I didn't believe it would last."

"And now?"

"They'll still be married in eighty years, if they live that long," she predicted. "I'm happy I was proved wrong."

"That's true love in there on that couch, Hannah," Abigail smiled. "Laura's going to be such a lucky girl, raised in this house." She elbowed Hannah lightly. "Maybe that's why Jessie turned out so good, because her parents have the same thing she does," she grinned. "I think true love runs in your family."

Hannah blushed slightly. "Oh, go on with you," she retorted, sitting down at the small table. "Like you don't talk about Winston every other minute."

She laughed. "I'd love him even if he wasn't a billionaire," she winked. "What was it like for you, marrying into the Vulpan family? I'm sure it was a shock."

"It was, but not because of money. Remember, Kit doesn't really have his family fortune. My shocks came from how they treated him, and how they still treat him. That boy would bend over backwards for a family he hates because he's still loyal to them, but they treat him like garbage."

"He's loyal to VI, Hannah, and not a single other Vulpan," Abigail answered. "She really needs to work on him, though."

"Over what?"

"They shouldn't be living in this *apartment*," she said. "They should be in a nice house with a big yard where their kids have plenty of room to play."

"I thought you liked this apartment."

"Oh, it's nice, there's no doubt about that, and it'll do so long as they only have Laura. For a family with one child, this townhouse is ideal. But I have no doubt I'll be back here about this time next year to welcome my second grandchild into the world, and a large family needs a good house with a large yard so the kids have plenty of space to play. One child could do well here, but they're going to have at least five, and so they need more space. They should move while they're still small, so they can be all settled in by the time their family gets big. This place will certainly do until we talk them into a house."

Hannah smiled. "I do believe that we have some common ground here, Abby," she declared. "Five, you say?"

"*At least*," she answered. "Big families run through Kit's side of the family. I think they might have as many as eight."

"I was thinking four. Martha thinks they'll have three."

"I smell a wager coming," Abigail grinned.

"I don't bet with someone who can buy my entire state, Abby."

Abigail laughed. "Clever girl," she grinned. "Now deal."

Kit had more than one mission the next morning, at least after he got all the assignments worked out. Barry had dropped five different

research projects on them, ideas for upcoming articles that RJ and Paula would be writing while Barry and Lilly kept working on the Election Special, which was coming down to the wire, so Kit put two each on the juniors and did the hardest one himself, which took him the majority of the morning. After lunch, he sat in with a meeting of the department heads about future plans, then he exercised a little boss leeway to do some private research...country clubs.

Jessie was getting more and more serious about golf, and it was about time to let her play on a nice course. Country clubs could be pretty expensive, so the objective of his research was to find the nicest club with the best perks and most acceptable rules that had the most optimal fees. Austin wasn't the biggest city in Texas, but it probably had more rich furs in it than Dallas and Houston, so they had 12 different country clubs scattered in and around the city. All of them had websites, and all of them had contact information, so he spent the afternoon calling around, investigating club rules and services, and looking at pictures of courses. Of course, those pictures always put a course in its best light, so the only real way to check them out was to look at them...and Kit could do that from the air. He first called Allison to make sure she was back in Austin, and after making sure she'd brought back his plane, he left work early to get his keys from her at her house. He'd never been inside her house before, but he knew where it was, and he'd stopped by a few times. She met him out by the curb, looking very happy. Now that she'd finished her flight training, Allison really didn't have much to do. She was graduated, and really didn't *need* to work. "When did you get back?" he asked.

"About ten," she answered. "Your plane flies like a dream."

"Thanks. I kinda need it."

"Oh? What are you up to?"

"Gonna overfly some of the golf courses around town. I'm looking into a country club for Jessie."

"Ohh, want a copilot? I'll get a membership wherever you do. Sheila and Jessie are getting me into golf too," she laughed.

"Sure, hop in," he told her.

They drove down to Bergstrom and chitchatted about nothing in particular, her telling him about her date with Terry the night before and her staying at a hotel overnight before flying back, at least until he brought up

her future plans. "I haven't really decided yet," she answered. "I was going to find a job as a chemist somewhere around town, there are plenty of places that are hiring, but if I get a job, I might not be able to go see Terry," she hedged.

Kit laughed. "You are so hopeless," he teased. "Terry really has your leash, doesn't he?"

She gave him a little glare with that gorgeous face of hers, then she laughed ruefully. "Hey, it took a lot of time and courage to finally find a male that accepts me despite my past," she said.

"Well, if you don't feel like getting a *real* job, maybe you can help," he mused. "Me and Lupe started a real estate company, you know."

"Yeah."

"Well, from time to time I'll need someone with a good eye to go out and look at houses. Feel like being an errand girl?"

She grinned. "Well, since you're letting me borrow the plane, I *guess* I can help out a little," she winked.

"Just mind that Lupe might go with you," he warned.

She laughed again. "I can handle Lupe," she replied in a calm voice. "I have Alice's number."

Kit looked at her maybe half a second too long for him to be driving, then he burst out laughing. "How did you get it?"

"Jessie gave it to me," she said in a purring tone. "I know how to deal with pushy flirts, Kit. I go for the throat."

"I should say so," he laughed. "But you can do me a favor and call Jessie and tell her we're going on a quick spin around. If she finds out me and you were out alone, she might get the wrong idea."

"I can do that," she nodded, digging for her cell phone.

Judging a golf course from the air wasn't the best way to do it, but it at least let them a good idea of its layout and see how well it was maintained. They traded off flying, as Kit flew them to each course, then Ally took over so he could check it out with binoculars. Going by what he'd already researched, he'd narrowed his search down to five clubs, two very close to town, two near the lake, one on the south side, and one up near Georgetown. Allison looked as best she could while she was flying, pointing things out, until they'd checked out the last club up near Georgetown. Kit let Ally fly the rest of the way back as he went over his

notes. "Looks like Oak Lake is the winner," he said. "Abit more expensive than the other four, but they have more amenities and their course looked pretty good."

"It looked pretty hard."

"You don't expect to get good playing on easy courses," he scoffed. "Besides, the harder courses are better maintained."

"That Vulpan superiority is starting to ooze out there, Kit," she teased.

"Yeah yeah, excuse me if I expect the best," he replied with a light smile. "So, what's Sheila saying about her birthday? It's just a few days off."

"She was wondering if you remembered," Allison chuckled.

"I've been waiting for her to tell me where she's having the party."

"Parties," she corrected. "She's having a tame one in the community center there at Westwood, then she's having a big bash at the Top Hat."

"Naturally," Kit grunted, which made Allison giggle.

"She's inviting most of her cousins to the Top Hat party," she warned. "She's even invited Terry, but he's not sure he can make it. That's why she hasn't really told you about it yet. She doesn't want any friction between you and them. She did tell VI that she invited the cousins down, though. She said she'd get in a lot of trouble if she did that and didn't warn VI."

"Well, she's thinking ahead, I'll give her that," Kit noted, then glanced at her. "So, going back to the Top Hat, eh? Sure you can do it?"

"I can manage," she said calmly. "I look a lot different with my clothes on, you know."

Kit spluttered, then started laughing.

Allison landed them and they tied down the plane, then he went home after dropping her off at her house. He got in just as Laura was being fed, so he got in some baby cuddling time after feeding, as Hannah cooked dinner, enough to feed six. Rick and Martha were going to come to dinner, and Hannah wanted to cook for them. Kit opened his laptop and went over his research one more time, as Jessie came back in after putting Laura down for a nap. "So, what did you have to do that Ally had to fly you around?" she asked.

"Looking at golf courses," he answered. "Since you're getting into golf so much, it's about time to join a country club, so you can play on a nice course that's not so crowded you're either hitting balls at other golfers or ducking them yourself."

"Why, that's sweet of you, handsome fox," she said, kissing him on the top of his head. "Why did you need the plane for that?"

"I wanted to look at the courses," he replied. "See how they were laid out and how well maintained they looked."

"Oh. Always thorough," she teased, pinching his injured ear.

"I'm a researcher, Jess, we define thorough," he replied lightly. "I also blackmailed Ally into helping us with the real estate idea, go out and look at houses. She's got a sharp eye. Once we show her what to look for, she'll pick us winners."

"Blackmail?" Jessie laughed.

"Hey, she's using our plane. Vulpans *never* do favors for free," he replied flippantly. "There's always a hook in it somewhere."

"And here I thought you weren't like Vl. You two are just the same!" she declared lightly.

"Face it, love, you married a pirate."

"At least he's a handsome pirate," she replied, patting his shoulders. "And he's going to make us rich someday, all on his own, without Vl helping him!" she added, kissing him on the top of his head, then scurrying off to the kitchen to help cook.

Kit chuckled, happy that she had such confidence in him, and also happy that she *got it*.

Sheila crashed in on them after she got out of class, dropping her bookbag by the door and coming to the den, where he was finishing up some work. "Ally said she ratted me out," she declared.

Kit chuckled as she looked up at her from his desk. "I was wondering if you were even having a party," he said. "Four days away and not a word!"

"I had to make the arrangements, but it's on now," she answered. "A tame family party in the community center after class, then the *real* party over at the Top Hat."

"How many cousins are coming?"

"Just about all the Party Pack but Marv. she's over in England right

now, my brothers, and Danny,” she answered. “Terry said he’d try to make it, but he’s not sure. He’s buried up to his ears in work over there right now. I asked Dahlia to come, but Uncle Tom won’t let her,” she frowned. “I think it’d be good for her to take a trip, have a little fun. Chrissy’s coming too.”

“Chrissy? You’re taking a sixteen year old into the Top Hat? Sarah will blow a fuse when she finds out!”

“Oh, get off it, cousin, you know she’s nowhere near a virgin,” Sheila protested. “And what kind of sister would I be to snub her? She’s old enough, at least by Vulpan standards.”

“I’m not coming anywhere near this one, Sheila,” he warned. “When Sarah finds out, it’s your head.”

“Mom won’t care,” she shrugged. “She was doing even wilder shit when she was fourteen. Anyway, I only invited Muffy and Terry to the community center, since Laura will be there. Them and all our friends here in Austin.”

“At least you thought ahead that much,” he noted.

“So, wanna go to the *real* party after the one here?” she asked with an outrageous grin. “You and Jessie?”

“Don’t ask that around Hannah, or she’ll whip you,” he warned.

“Why do you think I’ve been keeping it secret?” she asked with a laugh. “I’m not tangling with Hannah, nuh-uh.”

“Well, you have the sense to be afraid of Hannah,” he noted, which made her laugh again. “So, Ben turned you down, eh?”

She glared at him. “He has a game on Saturday!” she said, a bit sharply. Sheila’s birthday was on Friday, exactly one week after Laura’s, so that was true enough.

“And he still turned you down despite that,” he surmised.

“Oh, bite my furry ass, Kit!” she barked, which made him laugh as she stormed out. That girl would never learn. Having a wild party at the Top Hat would just tell Ben that she was nowhere near ready to commit to him, so he’d just keep his distance from her. Sheila was actually pretty bright, but she was still too selfish to think that she’d have to seriously change if she even wanted a chance to date Ben.

But, that was her problem. Jessie had told her what she had to do. If she wasn’t willing to do it, she had no one to blame but herself.

Dinner turned out to be more than just Rick and Martha. Nick and Sylvia dropped by to talk to them, but ended up staying for dinner themselves. The guards had done exactly what they said they would do, they melted into the background, but they were always there, and they always ensured that Jessie never went *anywhere* alone. Either Sylvia went with her, or one of them quietly tailed her from a discreet distance. Kit felt very safe and comfortable with them in the complex, ready at a moment's notice in case there was trouble, but also just there to hang around with. Kit rather liked all four of them. In the weeks since they'd been home, they'd fully integrated into the complex and into Austin, and Nick was again more or less in the middle of everything, one ear with the police and the other listening to the city. Sylvia remained the other primary "visible guard" outside of Nick, and Barnett and Krichek had melted into the background, always close by if they were needed and working their own angles. Barnett was gaining a foothold with the tech-heads and computer geeks in Austin, since he was so skilled at computers and electronic systems, and was watching the internet for any chatter or sign that there was a threat incoming against the Austin Vulpans. Krichek was making very discreet connections with Austin's criminal element. Not to commit crimes himself, but to listen for anything that might threaten Kit and Jessie. Krichek's father was involved with the Russian mob and he'd been in America long enough to know how to go about such things, so he knew how the underworld worked. Krichek was the ear on the dark underbelly of Austin, Nick kept his ears open to the police, Sylvia concentrated on protecting them, and Barnett used his skills and growing contacts to keep an eye on Austin's cyberspace.

"I was wondering if you two were still around," Martha noted as Nick sat down at the table.

"We're good at hiding, Martha," Nick grinned back. "Even someone as big as me."

"It's called blending in, Martha," Sylvia said mildly. "I still escort *Fraulein* Jessie around if she needs to go out and she's alone, but we try to be as unobtrusive as possible. If anything, I'm an extra pair of paws for the baby."

"But packing a pistol somewhere in those stylish, form-fitting clothes of hers." Nick smiled at her.

"Nowhere you will find it, wolf. Not if you want to keep your fingers," she replied, which made Kit laugh. He had no doubt both of them had at *least* one pistol on them at that moment. Kit himself still gritted his teeth and strapped on his own Glock every morning, never forgetting the fact that it was Rick's concealed carry permit that had saved his life. He hated carrying that gun, but he'd do it to protect himself and his family, if it came down to it.

"Well, since you're here, Nick, we've decided to join a country club, so Jessie has a nice place to play," Kit told him.

"Ah, which one?"

"Oak Lake."

"I'll go up and look it over tomorrow," he nodded. "Talk to their security, you know, do my job," he smiled. "I'll call you tomorrow when I'm done. So, when are you going skeet shooting again?"

"Not with you, I'd like to look like something other than an idiot," Kit called, which made him grin.

"You've gotten quite good at shooting trap, *Herr* Kit," Sylvia protested. "I think you'd do well on a skeet shooting range now."

"Listen to you two, pretending we don't have a baby!" Jessie laughed.

"They're talking sense, dear," Martha said calmly. "You don't just drop your life after your baby's born. Yes, your life revolves around Laura, but you need time for yourself as well. You'll burn out quickly if you stop doing what you love thinking you have to spend every waking moment watching after her."

"I know, it's just not easy," she said, her cheeks ruffling a bit. "When we went golfing, Sheila took my phone so I couldn't call and check up, and I felt so...I dunno. A little afraid that something might happen."

"That's new mother syndrome, dear," Martha said with a smile. "Trust me, you'll learn how to trust Laura with your husband. Though I know how hard that can be," she added, glancing lightly at Rick.

"Hey now, all our sons lived to adulthood," Rick protested. "Sure, I mighta addled Brian a little, but that was his fault."

"I come home and find them playing some game that involved them breaking my lamp," she noted.

"She never lets me forget that lamp," Rick complained.

"It's how we keep you males under control, Rick." Hannah told

him with a slight smile.

Abigail joined them near the end of dinner, blowing in like a cheerful tornado. "Hello duckies!" she called as she came into the dining room. "Damn, I was trying to get here on time," she said. "I've had the longest day!"

"I was wondering where you'd gotten off to, Abby," Kit chuckled. "What happened?"

"The furniture they delivered for the pool deck was all wrong!" she complained. "I've been getting it all straightened out. These Texas furs can be so dense!" she complained, looking right at Rick and Martha as she said it.

"The door's right over there, Abby," Rick told her with a slight smile.

"Anyway, that was the last of the furniture, and I've been getting it all arranged just so. The house is all together now, and it looks smashing! You need to come over and see it!"

"I think we can swing that tomorrow," Kit said, to which Jessie nodded. "We'll take Laura. Her first trip outside the house that doesn't involve the doctor."

"Sounds lovely!" she beamed. "I had a nursery installed just in case you came over, so she'll have a nice place to nap while I give you a tour. Hopefully, Kenny will give me a little something to put in that nursery himself," she added.

"I'm sure Mi's making him work," Kit chuckled. "She's dead set on getting pregnant."

"Trapped in a house with a militant femme. We should send him some consolation cards or something," Nick grinned.

"Mi has him pretty much well leashed, I noticed," Abigail said with a cheeky smile. "Just where a male should be!"

"Hey now, Abby, I think we might have something to say about that," Kit protested.

"Hush, slave," Jessie chided him with a wink.

"Charlie's still spreading the stories back home," Abigail laughed. "Kenny's gonna murder him when word gets back across the pond what he's saying."

"I hope they put that on pay-per-view. it should be a fun fight." Kit

noted, which made Rick and Nick laugh. "Kendall has one hell of a right hook."

"I dunno, Charlie was in the army, so he's probably tougher than he looks," Rick speculated.

Sheila came in without knocking, as usual, carrying her backpack. "Hey!" she called from the living room, then she came into the dining room. "Hey guys," she called. "Glad to track you down, Abby," she grinned at Abigail. "I'm having my birthday party in the community center on Friday afternoon, after I get out of school. So, you're invited."

"A party, eh? And how old will you be?" Abigail asked.

"As old as my driver's license says I am, Abby," she winked.

"Twenty," Kit supplied. "As in still not legal."

"Pft, I'm a Vulpan, my name is all the legal I need," she snorted. "Anyway, it's gonna start around two, and just about everyone's invited. I didn't want you to think I snubbed ya," she grinned.

"Well, I guess I can make it. If an old femme like me won't drag down your party," she replied lightly.

"That's why I'm having the tame party here, so you old fogeys can keep up. The *real* party will be somewhere else that night," she replied with a smile dripping with sweet, honeyed venom.

"Listen to this," Martha declared, giving Sheila an amused smile.

"I know you can go all night, Martha, but Abby? She'd keel over by ten, and I won't be responsible for murder," she dug.

"I'm so glad you think so, ducky," Abigail chuckled.

"Anyway, I got stuff to do, plans to make. I'll see you guys on Friday. Two o'clock, don't be late! Later guys, later old femmes!" she called, then rushed right back out.

"That girl needs a serious reality check," Abigail said, her eyes narrow and deliciously wicked. "So, Kit, what's this other party about?"

"She invited a bunch of our cousins and probably the younger furs she knows around Austin to the Top Hat," he replied. "From what I've heard, she rented the whole place for the night. Knowing Sheila, it'll be the epitome of debauchery and excess."

"Oh really?" she asked brightly. "And where would this place be?"

"I know where it is, Abby," Nick told her.

Abigail gave him a long look, then a malicious smile graced her

muzzle. "Nick, ducky, how'd you like to do a little job for me?"

Nick laughed, glancing at Kit. "I'm already under contract, Abby."

"Oh, I'm not going to steal you from Kit, he needs you," she replied. "But I think a male like you has just the connections I need to take Little Miss Young Thing down a few pegs. So, why don't we go take a trip to this Top Hat place?"

Kit laughed, giving Nick a smile. "Go ahead," he told him. "She'll nag us into it anyway."

"Hannah, Martha, get your purses, girls. We have a mission," she declared, standing up. "The Society of Old Bats must avenge this insult!" she cried, thrusting a fist into the air, which made Jessie almost fall out of her chair laughing.

"This sounds interesting," Martha said with a light smile. "I'll call when I'm ready to be picked up, dear."

"Have fun, love," Rick told her with a chuckle.

"A chance to get back at Sheila? I'm in," Hannah declared, standing up.

The three femmes filed out with Nick, leaving Rick, Jessie, and Sylvia to finish dinner. "Why do I get the feeling that this is gonna be memorable," Rick noted, taking another bite, then chuckling.

"Because Abby's a lot more dangerous than Sheila thinks she is," Kit replied, which made Jessie go right back into peals of laughter. "I get the feeling that Sheila's party is going to be unforgettable, and not for the reasons Sheila thinks."

"*Fraulein* Abigail is rich and smart, and she has a very quirky sense of humor, like most of the Brightons. That is not such a good combination for Sheila," Sylvia noted.

Laura started to fuss from her crib by the table, and Jessie was there before she had much of a chance to get going. She picked her up and cooed to her, rocking her in her arms a little, but when she continued to fuss, she looked at the clock. "Oh dear, someone needs a new diaper," she told Laura in a gentle voice. "And I think it's about time Laura had her own dinner, she'll probably get hungry before I finish changing her," she told them. "I'll be upstairs, love. Mind keeping my dinner warm?"

"Sure thing, pretty kitty."

"Sylvia, tomorrow, find out from Nick what Abby has up her sleeve."

Kit said after Jessie left. "Not that I'm going to stop her, but I do want to know what's going to happen before it happens."

"Certainly," she nodded. "I'll stop by your office tomorrow afternoon."

"Works for me."

Kit more or less put the party in the back of his mind the next day, because work called, and not all of it was the magazine. Allison had started her first day as roving real estate appraiser, stopping by his office that morning with Lupe as they went over a few properties he'd found that were on the verge of foreclosure that fit the model Kit had made: owned by more or responsible furs who could make the payments if he bought the houses and rented them out, and were in dire straights basically through bad luck. Lupe and Allison headed out in her beat-up old Camry, her puttering car, then Kit did some real magazine work before lunch. After the department head meeting Rick had after lunch, he started investigating his other idea, T-hangars. There was a massive shortage of T-hangars, and even with the impending financial downturn that Kendall was predicting, furs with planes still needed places to put them. His movement on that idea wouldn't be until after he saw if Kendall was right, where he might be able to pick up some cheap real estate abutting an airport and convince the airport to allow him to run a taxiway from their network out to his T-hangars. The other option was to find enough empty area in an FAA approved area and build his own T-hangar complex, and just pave a long enough runway for pilots to take off and land there.

He certainly had the time. Between Pat and Julie, he really didn't have all that much research to do anymore. There was enough to keep two researchers hopping, but not three. They did the majority of the routine work, and he did the most important research projects, picked up whatever slack when the work overflowed Pat and Julie's in-boxes, and focused on what Rick called the management aspects of the magazine when he got his research done.

Sylvia came in as he was checking out stand-alone hangar location options, which were mainly in the ranch country south and east of the city, and she just couldn't help but smile. "Uh oh."

"*Fraulein* Abigail is a *monster*," she declared, which made Kit burst out laughing.

"Close the door," he told her. She did so, and sat at the chair behind his desk, leaning against it and giving him a wolfish smile. "Alright, what's she going to do?"

"Scare Sheila half to death," she replied. "She asked Nick to find some burly, scary-looking males in the profession that are between contracts for a quick and easy job. She intends to have them raid the Top Hat while dressed as SWAT police."

Kit bent over, he was laughing so hard, then looked at her. "That's a bit illegal," he noted.

"She doesn't really care," she replied. "And she's already arranged it with the owner of the Top Hat. The club will know it's coming, so they don't panic. They intend to raid the club about two hours after the party begins, looking the part all the way down to badges and uniforms, and they will do it professionally. You know, blocking all exits, rounding up everyone, acting like cops. Then, after everyone is suitably shaken up, *Fraulein* Abigail will show up and simply call them off and join the party herself."

Kit just couldn't help but laugh some more, then he wiped his eye as he finally got control of himself. "That femme is the devil," he declared. "I knew I liked her!"

"She is an evil femme, but that's part of her charm," she murmured, which made him nod vigorously while trying not to laugh again. "Oh, she intends to have our comrades video the entire thing, which she'll give to Sheila after it's over. I'm sure she'll give you a copy as well."

That sent him right back over the edge. Sylvia started laughing herself when he just couldn't control himself, pounding his fist on the desk and knocking Jessie's picture over. "Oh God, the Vulpans attending the party are going to have a cow when they find out it was a joke!" he wheezed. "Vulpans aren't used to being made fun of!" Then he went right back to nearly maniacal laughter.

"There might be some friction with your family's elders, but what can they do?" Sylvia shrugged, which made Kit laugh harder, and her join in.

This, Kit knew, he had to keep secret, after he got control of himself. He sent Sylvia back to the complex so she could return to her duties of being nearby for Jessie. A plan like this was complicated, and

the more who knew about it, the better the chance it could go wrong. It was pretty mean, and it would probably cost Abby a few tens of thousands of dollars to hire a raiding party of mercenaries and outfit them in Austin-style SWAT uniforms, but she was rich and could afford it. But still, the sheer audacity of it, hiring mercs to crash someone's party, that was just *mean*. Brilliant, hilarious, but *mean*. His respect for Abigail went up a few notches, as well as a bit of healthy fear.

There was one femme that did need to know, however, if only so she could weather the storm when the furious elders got wind of what happened to the kids. He called Vil at work, and to his surprise, it was Kendall that answered the phone. "Oi Kit," he called lightly.

"Where's Vil?" he asked.

"In the loo, she'll be out in a minute. We were about to go home."

"What are you doing at the office?"

"Picking her up. We're going to theatre down in New York tonight. Part of my coddling for when basketball season starts," he said eagerly. "I have season tickets at half court now, the seats right beside the Vulpan family seats."

"Who did you have to kill to get those," Kit chuckled.

"It wasn't cheap," he said seriously. "But I didn't want to tie up the Vulpan seats and infuriate your family with me being there every single game, so I bought my own. So, our families now control about half that row, your six and my four," he said with a laugh.

"Every single game? Uh oh," he noted.

"We've already had that fight, and I won," he declared triumphantly. "And Vil will be there with me as much as she can. She knows how much I love the Celtics."

"So that's why you married Vil. Because she lives in Boston."

"She wouldn't have been half as attractive if she lived in New York," he replied, then he cried out. "Ow!"

"Is that so?" Vil barked in the background, and there was a commotion that made Kit laugh. "Hey bro," she finally said into the phone.

"Stop beating that poor male or he'll get an annulment," Kit teased.

"It's his own fault, being such a weenie," she replied, which caused Kendall to make some indignant remark Kit couldn't quite make

out. So, what's up?"

"I'm calling to give you a warning," he said, then he explained what Abigail was going to do. Vil broke down in helpless laughter after he explained it, and it took her a couple of minutes to get her composure back.

"Dear God, I love that femme," she finally said. "I'll handle the outrage up here, but I want a copy of that video!"

"I'm sure she'll pass them out on street corners if only to further dig on Sheila," he chuckled. "Our cousin bit off more than she could chew this time."

"It's good for her, it teaches her that there's such a thing as the real world," Vil said dryly, which made Kit laugh. "Hate to cut it short, bro, but we gotta go. We're going to New York for a show."

"Ken told me. Have fun, sis."

"You know it. I'll call you tomorrow."

Kit hung up the phone, and just had to smile to himself. It was going to be an *eventful* weekend.

Friday arrived, and Kit almost couldn't keep still. He went in that morning to get the paperwork done and handle all the end of week stuff with Rick, who also came in early on Fridays. Rick knew, of course, because Martha told him, but they'd kept it completely quiet outside of them. Jessie didn't even know. The two of them plowed through all the figures and reports, then Kit left to go up to Oak Lake to finalize his buy of the country club membership. It was pretty expensive, but it had the most bang for the buck, and besides, it was for Jessie. And what Jessie wanted, Jessie got. They gave him a tour, explained their rules, and after they treated him to lunch, he agreed to a one year membership for him and Jessie. The manager all but fell over himself when he realized that Kit was a *Vulpan*, since the upper crust rumor mill told everyone in that tax bracket that Vulpans had started colonizing Austin, and it was a matter of prestige for Oak Lake to land a Vulpan member. Snobby country clubs used the worth and social reputation of their members as measuring sticks, and Oak Lake was one of the swankier country clubs in the city...but despite that, they had reasonable fees for what services they offered, an excellent golf course, and all the little perks that a member expected for his considerable membership dues. Such a member would attract other members, and that was more profit for the country club. The fact that Kit

had joined would bring Sheila, and possibly Terry as well, who would probably join just for a nice place to play while visiting Austin.

They shook paws, Kit was issued membership cards and parking decals for himself and Jessie, and that was that. He and Jessie were now members of Oak Lake, and were granted access to their numerous and excellent services and facilities, from their small on-site gym to their hot tub to their restaurant, and had unlimited access to their excellent golf course, a course so good that it had hosted four PGA events over the last ten years. He bought the club package that included unlimited course access without additional greens fees, because he never wanted Jessie to have to pay a dime for anything but refreshments when she came here to golf. She wouldn't have to pay for herself, and she wouldn't have to pay for four guests who golfed with her, though any guests past four did have to pay a much reduced green fee; none of their packages offered greens fee waivers for guests past two. It was expensive to get the four guest option, but since Jessie often golfed with three others, it was more or less mandatory so Sam could golf with Jessie and not have to cash out her savings bonds to pay the pretty steep greens fees at Oak Lake.

He called her on the way home and told her the good news. "So, now you can take Ally and Sam to a *nice* golf course the next time you go," he told her. "You can take up to four guests and you don't have to pay greens fees."

"Ohhh, I'll have to drive up and look at it before the party!" she declared.

"Heck, call Sylvia and have Hannah watch Laura, I'll turn around and meet you there so you can get a tour."

"Okay!" she said enthusiastically.

Jessie's van arrived at Oak Lake about half an hour later, and Sylvia got out of the passenger's side and waited just by the driver's side for Jessie to get out and lock her van. Sylvia padded along just behind them, a quiet and reassuring presence, as Kit went back in with her, the manager just happened to meet them in the lobby of the clubhouse, and he happily gave Jessie her own tour of the clubhouse and grounds. The manager basically fawned all over Jessie, and she endured it with a good-natured smile, though being treated like that never failed to make her a little uncomfortable. "We have a PGA level golf course. eighteen holes. par

seventy-two, which I'm sure you'll enjoy," he said. "I'll get us a golf cart and take you on a drive through it."

"How long are you open in the winter?" she asked.

"We stay open year round, Misses Vulpan, though the course does close for three weeks in late January and early February for major maintenance, landscaping changes, and course alterations," he answered. "Outside of that maintenance, the course is open seven days a week, from noon to dusk Monday through Thursday, and from seven a.m. to dusk on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. We can, however, arrange to have the course available for a morning tee time on weekdays by special request, as long as you submit your request at least seven days before your planned tee time."

"Guess you have to rearrange the lawn mowers," she noted.

"Just so, ma'am," he nodded. "We do most of our landscaping and divot repair before opening, but if we can arrange it, we can work around golfers when a member requests a weekday morning tee time."

"So, when I want to golf, do I schedule a tee time or can I just show up?"

"Both work, ma'am," he told her with a smile. "If you know your tee time, you're welcome to make a reservation so you can bypass the walk-on line, if there is one. But you're welcome to walk in at any time and play a round. You might have to wait, sometimes we do have a few too many golfers show up at once, but you never have to wait long to get to the tee. That's a promise," he smiled.

Kit played with his Blackberry as the manager did the second tour, not paying much attention, but Jessie was very impressed with the course, if not a little intimidated by how hard it looked. "The objective is to have fun, Misses Vulpan. And you can always just not keep score until you get better," he winked.

She laughed. "I might have to. I think my first score on this course might be three hundred."

"We won't tell if you won't."

"Deal!" she giggled.

They were there so long that it was time to go to Sheila's party when they finally left. She invited a whole lot of furs, so the community center's deck was packed. Everyone from the office, most of the girls from

the sorority, and a lot of furs from Sheila's classes over at U.T. were there, and there was plenty of catered food and lots of beer. Dan was there, Mickey got there about an hour late due to work, and Kevin managed to pop in right at the tail end, but Kit spent most of the time trying not to laugh every time he looked at Sheila, knowing what was coming, which irritated Jessie quite a bit. Abigail showed up near the tail end as well, all happy and bubbly smiles, but the knowing smirk she shot at Kit as Sheila opened her presents made him burst out laughing.

"What? What is going on?" Jessie demanded.

"I'll tell you after the party. I don't want to ruin the surprise," he replied.

There were a few crashers at their party as well. Just after Sheila finished opening her gifts, Muffy arrived, waving frantically and running up. "Where's Laura, I wanna see her!" she declared.

"Hey, this is my party, bitch!" Sheila protested, then she laughed and hugged her cousin.

Jessie couldn't resist showing off their daughter, so she picked her up from her stroller and held her gently. "This is little Laura," she cooed. "Laura, this is your second cousin Muffy."

"She's adorable!" she gushed. "The pictures I saw just don't do her justice!"

"Who showed you pics?" Kit asked.

"Vi," she answered with a smile. "She has a huge album she pulls out anytime anyone asks. Mom demanded a DVD."

"Your mom? Ruth?"

"Yeah, she thinks Laura is just a little dollbaby," she laughed. "Dad thinks she's cute too."

"I'm not sure I like the idea of Brian and Ruth wanting pictures of my daughter," he said darkly.

"Oh, lighten up, Kit!" Muffy protested. "Mom and Dad like you, what's wrong with them thinking your daughter is cute?"

"The fact that she's the first mixed breed in the family, maybe," he replied immediately. "I just don't like the idea of about *anyone* from the family outside of you, Sheila, Terry, and Vi showing any interest at all in my daughter."

"Well, loosen up and given at least some of us a chance," she told

him.

The other crasher was Terry. He arrived and immediately gave Allison a hug, kissed Sheila on the cheek, then came over and gave Jessie a kiss on the cheek. "Alright, trot out the kidlet," he demanded.

Jessie laughed, but she did again pull Laura from her stroller and present her to Terry. Terry smiled down at her, then put a very gentle finger under her paw, holding it up. "She's so tiny," he mused.

"She's a newborn, she's supposed to be tiny, dink," Muffy teased, nudging him.

"How much hell has she made out of your life, cousin?"

"Not much at all, she sleeps most of the time," he answered. "The hell comes when she works out of her sleeping phase and gets more active."

"Getting much sleep, Jessie?"

"Three hours at a time," she laughed. "Laura wakes up about every four hours and wants to be fed. She's got her own little schedule, and we all live by it."

"That's the way of babies, just taking over everything," he said sagely, carefully removing his finger from under her paw and letting her snuggle back down and close her eyes, content in her mother's arms. "I'm glad I got here early enough to see her."

"How's it going at Avondale?" Kit asked as they all sat down.

"Pretty smoothly now," he replied. "I've got their departments reorganized to be more efficient, and they're starting to learn the system. I'm still having small problems with the union, but they're about one step from falling apart."

"You busted them?"

"They busted themselves," he answered. "Once the workers saw the pay scale, pension, and health insurance plans we offered, they basically revolted against the union. The union told them to vote no on the contract, but it passed with ninety percent. The union wanted it all, wanted to strike and hold us hostage until we caved in, but now the workers see that as long as they live up to our expectations, they'll get paid even more than they did under their last contract."

"Money can do it every time," Kit chuckled as Jessie carefully put Laura back in her stroller.

"Well, the union's teeth were pulled, but they're still trying to make noise. If they're not careful, though, they'll see a mass exodus. Furs are starting to get used to the new routine, and though they don't like the new training and new QA inspectors, they don't mind the paychecks."

"Hey, this my party, dweeb, stop spending all your time over there!" Sheila called sharply to Terry, which made him laugh.

"Queen Sheila calls," he said with a slight smile.

The party wound down, and only when Kit got Jessie back home and behind closed doors, he told her Abigail's plans. It made her collapse into helpless fits of laughter, so loud that it woke up Laura. "I can't believe she's going to do that!" she squealed in mirth.

"Where Abby's concerned, I would," he laughed.

Kit stayed close to the phone that night, quietly counting down the hours, then the minutes, and then he got the phone call he was expecting at about 11:00. It was Nick, and he was laughing when Kit picked up the phone. "So, how did it go?" he asked.

"Oh God!" he laughed. "I was watching from the control van, it was classic! Just classic!" he rumbled. "The mates had them all but peeing their boxers! They put everyone in the lounge and made them sit there for nearly twenty minutes, never said a word, scared the ever-lovin' crocpiss out of 'em. A few of your cousins tried to bribe them, and every time they did, they just pulled out pawcuffs like they were going to cuff 'em and ship 'em off to jail. Then Abby strolls in and calls them off, looks right at Sheila, and asked her if she was about to keel over. The music started back up, and all the mates started dancing right there, holding their PDWs and in their SWAT uniforms! You shoulda seen the look on Sheila's face when she realized it was all an elaborate set-up, she looked right ready to go on a rampage! It was absolutely classic!" he wheezed, then started laughing again.

"Dude, I want a DVD as fast as you can get it here," Kit told him, laughing himself.

"I'll have it in your paws in an hour, as soon as I compile all the video and edit it," he promised.

An hour later, said DVD was in Kit's paws and being loaded into the player. Nick and Sylvia stood behind the couch, Nick in a black paramilitary uniform and Sylvia in a tee and jeans. "I think I got a good edit on it,

I took it from the three cameras the mates were using. I got most of the looks of horror," he grinned hugely. "And there's a good one of Sheila whining like a little girl as she was put in the lounge. Sheila's going to be pissed for years."

"Just goes to show, never mess with a billionaire with time on her paws," Sylvia murmured, which made Kit laugh.

The laughter reached uncontrollable proportions as they watched the DVD, as he saw his cousins rounded up by big males in black uniforms just like Nick's, big SWAT patches on the chest and shoulders to make them look real, and all of them armed with submachine guns, just like a real SWAT unit would be. His cousins looked shocked, flabbergasted, scared out of their minds, or drunkenly indignant as they and the other guests and club workers were rounded up, and it was more hilarious to see the calm looks on the club workers, since *they* knew it was all an elaborate joke. Then Abigail struts in, dressed to the nines in a glittery party dress, calls off the mercs, and looks right at Sheila. "Who's the one keeling over now, ducky?" she called with a wicked smile, then she snapped her fingers. The DJ started the music back up, and all the mercs started dancing in place. And just like Nick said, the look of horror on Sheila's face turned to indignation when she realized she'd been had, then she got furious, shaking her fist at Abigail, who was dancing with a merc Kit knew, it was Donny from Stonebrook. The Vulpans slowly started to realize it was some kind of joke, and not a single one of them except for Terry looked amused at *all*. Terry just leaned back in his chair, watched Abigail a minute, then burst out laughing.

"*Herr* Kit, your stepmother is almost good enough of an actor to be German," Sylvia murmured, which made Kit almost fall off the couch laughing.

"She's certainly somethin'," Nick agreed with a big grin.

"Oh, there's going to be a reckoning for this," Kit laughed. "But it won't be until Sheila feels brave enough trying to take on Abby."

"Then it'll be a few years," Jessie giggled. "I think the Vulpan-Brighton war just begun."

"Oh yeah," Kit agreed, then he laughed.

Kit knew he was going to get a visit that morning, so he got up early enough to unlock the door and started breakfast as Jessie fed Laura.

And sure enough, Sheila barged in without knocking and stalked into the kitchen. Kit took one look at her, still in the clothes she wore the night before, her hair all out of place, and he almost dropped the frying pan on his foot laughing.

"You...you **KNEW!**" she screamed at him.

"Yup," he replied, smiling at her, then laughing again. "I had to warn VI so she didn't think something went terribly wrong and Nick had let a bunch of maniacs into the city. Speaking of Nick, he dropped off a wonderful DVD of Abby's night out with the girls."

"That BASTARD!" she screamed. "I'm going to get her for this, I swear I will! Even if it takes me a hundred years!"

"Are you sure you wanna tangle with her again, Sheila?" Kit asked, then he sputtered and laughed again. "I think you've learned not to call Abby old, haven't you?"

"That bitch! She almost scared the piss out of me!" she complained. "And Joy nearly had a seizure!"

"Oh come on, cousin, it was funny," he told her.

"I'm so glad you think it's funny, she didn't do it to *you!*"

"I'm not dumb enough to be sassy to her, either," he replied.

"Besides, you *know* what the Brightons are like, Sheila. Does it surprise you she'd prank you?"

She looked about beside herself, then blurted out in helpless laughter. "That crusty old bitch! I'm gonna get her, I'm gonna get her, and I'm gonna get her good!"

"Did the party go on after Abby's little stunt?" he asked.

"Sorta. A few cousins left, but enough stayed around to get drunk with me so we could forget about it," she answered, which made him laugh again.

Abigail sauntered in, wearing a Texas tee shirt and a pair of slacks, and she gave Sheila the biggest smile Kit ever saw on a femme. "Why hello, Sheila! I'm so glad you invited me to your party last night, I had so much fun!"

Sheila glared at her, then gave her a grudging smile. "I'm gonna get you, you old battle-axe!" she declared.

"Go right ahead and try, ducky, my purse is bigger than yours," she replied easily, which made Kit burst out laughing again. That earned him a

punch in the shoulder from Sheila, who then stalked out with as much dignity as she could muster.

"Abby, you are one mean femme. I love you," Kit told her.

"I'm so glad you enjoyed it," she winked. "I've already sent copies of the DVD to Kenny and Winston. I'm sure they'll get a good laugh out of it."

"I don't think my aunts and uncles will find it very funny, but it was worth it," he said.

"They need to take the steel rods out of their butts anyway," she shrugged. "So, what's for breakfast?"

As much as they loved having Abigail in town, and as much fun as her little joke with Sheila was, the needs of her own family took hold of her after they held Laura's two-week birthday celebration. She'd said she would be around for a couple of weeks, so after two weeks, she was preparing to return to Britain. She was going to stay to attend Sam and Kevin's wedding on Monday, but was planning on flying home on Monday evening, after the reception.

Kit was sad to see her go, and was surprised when Hannah told them that night that she too would be leaving to go home. "I was here to teach you how to take care of Laura. Well, I don't need to teach you anymore," she announced. "I'm confident you will do just fine, and I would like to go back home," she smiled. "I'm sure John has completely destroyed the house by now. I should have never left him alone this long."

Jessie laughed. "How are you doing getting used to the empty house?" she asked.

"It's been a challenge," she answered honestly. "The house is so quiet now. No loud music blaring from upstairs, no weights crashing on the floor, and John says that watching away games just isn't the same. Ben and Jennifer do come down for home games, though."

"Gotta enjoy those awesome seats VI gave him," Kit chuckled.

"I think that has something to do with it," Hannah agreed. "So, I'll be leaving on Wednesday, so I can stay to babysit Laura while you go to the wedding. By then, I expect to see you find a competent babysitter for when you need one."

"Oh, I think Martha will cover that," Jessie laughed. "She already said she'd watch Laura for us if we needed it, and I feel safe leaving her

with Rick and Martha. But, we do owe Ben something.”

“I’m smelling a road trip,” Kit noted.

She giggled and winked at him. “We missed his first game, and we owe him a game. So, how about this. Mom, we’ll take you home in our plane while we fly up to see him play. We can leave next Friday, if you can wait around for another week, watch him play on Saturday, and come home on Sunday after the Bengals game.”

“I like that idea,” Hannah said immediately. “When is his next home game?”

“Saturday,” Kit and Jessie said in unison. “But next Saturday is also a home game,” Jessie added.

“It’s a home Bengals game as well,” Hannah mused.

“Yeah, I’ll be up in the skybox with Laura,” Jessie said. “But I’ve missed going to the game. I’d like to see one.”

“I can swing a day off from work, and I like the idea of you logging some cross country hours,” Kit agreed.

“I should be in the back with Laura,” she said. “She’ll need to be fed.”

“That’s what bottles are for,” he replied immediately. “You need to log the hours, so you’re flying.”

“But—“

“What, you don’t trust me or your mother?” he asked pointedly.

She gave him a slightly annoyed look, then laughed ruefully. “You just want more spoil time.”

“She *will* be a daddy’s girl,” he declared without a whit of shame.

Laura was still the focus of their lives, but the outside world had slowly started working its way back into their routine. Sam and Kevin were going to be married next week, and that was very important to Kit and Jessie, since they were in the wedding party, and everyone was starting to gear up for the wedding. They’d attended two rehearsals after getting the news that Abigail and Hannah were leaving, and Sam had a bridal shower on Thursday, followed up by a bachelorette party on Friday night. Kevin had deliberately gone out of his way *not* to have a wild party like Kit’s, and they were going to hold his bachelor party in the community center at the complex on Saturday night. But, Lupe being Lupe, he did arrange for a few strippers to be there. “It ain’t a bachelor party without naked femmes.” he

declared to Kit after telling him about it.

"Yeah, and if Sam catches Kevin with a naked femme, she's going to do something to him," Kit chuckled. "She's going to be right across the street, Lupe."

"Ain't my fault he's whipped, brah," Lupe grinned.

"Lupe, someday Alice is gonna show us her leash."

Lupe laughed brightly, slapping him lightly on the shoulder. "I got Alice under control, brah. Trust me."

Hannah did help them out by babysitting on Saturday morning, because Kit owed Jessie a round of golf. Sheila was busy that night, and Allison was again in New Orleans in their plane, so Kit and Jessie asked Sam and Kevin to go, to help them take their minds off their impending wedding a little bit, to have one relaxing afternoon before the chaos began, since they were going to be married in two days. It did require a little next-day air, though. Kit had had a set of golf clubs at Stonebrook before he was disowned, and while he had outgrown them, he was sad to say that his father's clubs were just about perfect. They were top of the line Callaway clubs, and had been gathering dust in the basement for years. Clancy overnighted them down to him, and Jessie had signed for them and pulled them out of the box about an hour before he got home from work. "Whose are these?" she asked him.

"They were my father's," he said with a dark look as he pulled the driver out and took hold of it, finding that it was pretty much well perfect. He was almost exactly the same height as his father. "Well, they were sort of, that is. My dad never even touched these. He bought them just before he found out his heart was bad, so Vil says, and they literally went into storage without ever being taken out of their shipping box. If I knew he'd used them, I'd take them out back and melt them down in the barbecue pit."

"Callaway. Is that a good brand?"

He nodded. "Eagle is just as good, though."

The doorbell rang, and Jessie went over and opened it as Kit pulled the bag out of the box, the original Callaway shipping container. Clancy had just dusted off the box and had Fedex throw new shipping labels over the old ones. "Hey Jessie, hey Kit," Sam called as she came in. "You bought clubs, eh?"

"They were at Stonebrook, been sitting in the basement for about

three years,” Kit answered, seeing that they were didn’t come out of it free and clear. The rubber grips were a tiny bit dried out from being stored in the box for so long, but they’d do. “Which course are we going to?”

“Lakeside,” Jessie answered. “It’s pretty nice.”

“I really need to look into getting you a country club membership, pretty kitty. Private courses are much nicer.”

“Kevin ready?”

“He’s getting our clubs,” she answered. “He said you’re doing this on purpose to make him look stupid.”

Kit laughed. “We all start somewhere.”

“He said he needs to learn, since lawyers are supposed to play golf,” Sam grinned.

“Doctors too,” Jessie reminded her.

“He any good?”

“He’s about as good as me,” Jessie answered.

“Then this should be easy enough,” he said with a slight smile at her.

“That’s starting to sound like a bet,” Jessie challenged.

“Only if it’s nine holes.”

“We’ll see after nine holes, then,” she winked.

Kit packed the golf bags while Jessie and Hannah cooed a bit over Laura, then he got his turn when Kevin got home. “We shouldn’t be gone too long, Hannah,” he told her as he kissed Laura and put her back in her crib. “Want us to bring you anything back?”

“I’ll have a late lunch or early dinner waiting for you when you get home,” she answered. “Just call when you’re getting close.”

“Thanks, Hannah. And thanks for watching Laura for us.”

“I told you, dear, you do need a little time to yourselves from time to time. After I leave, I had better hear Martha telling me she’s babysitting at least twice a month.”

“That’s how you did it?”

“As well as we could. We tried for once a week, our weekly date night. Sometimes we managed, sometimes not. Just because you have a child doesn’t mean you shouldn’t keep working on your relationship, dear.”

“Then I’ll be guided by you, Hannah, else you might spank me.”

“Oh, go on with you.” she retorted, whapping him lightly on the rear

as he danced away.

"I get spanked anyway, even for doing the right thing! It's so unfair!" he said teasingly as he hurried to the door.

Sam and Kevin had their own clubs now, but Sam's were used clubs and Kevin's were new, but he only had about eight clubs in the bag, which was used. Sam had found a good deal on a set of very well maintained used clubs that fit her, but Kevin was buying his set one club at a time, filling a used bag with them. It would have been cheaper in the long run to buy a set, but he couldn't afford a full set, where he could afford the absolute minimum number of clubs he needed to golf at least without embarrassing himself. He only had two drivers, four irons, a pitching wedge, and one putter in his bag, where the standard set was three or four drivers, nine irons, two wedges, and one or two putters. Kevin and Kit loaded their bags in his Pathfinder, and then after waving goodbye to Hannah, and seeing Nick and Krichek quietly pull in behind them in Nick's Expedition, they were off to Oak Lake, their first golfing trip to their country club. "How much practice have you had, Kev?" he asked.

"I've been going down to the driving range during lunch," he answered. "At least when I can. Delores plays too, and I've actually gone down with her and emptied a couple of buckets after work as we talked about one of my cases. I can hit the ball just about every time, it's just making it go straight that's the trick."

Kit chuckled. "It comes with practice," he assured him as he put Jessie's bag in the cart. "I used to play with Vil a lot when we were kids."

"She's good?"

"She's very good," he nodded. "Terry's the best golfer in the family, but Vil is no slouch."

They had a reserved tee time, but there wasn't a line waiting to walk on either, so they went basically straight from the truck straight to the tee, after warning Sam and Kevin that they were going to play a PGA level course, so it was going to be difficult. "So, two more days," Kit said teasingly.

"God, you were so right," Kevin laughed. "All I can think of is why aren't we married yet?"

"Told ya," he grinned. Kit felt a little sorry for them. Because Sam was in school and Kevin was still proving himself at the firm, they had

almost no time for a honeymoon. They were also very tight on cash. Sam's parents had paid for the wedding, and the reception was being held in the community center to make it as cheap as possible, but Kevin had no money for a honeymoon even if he did have the time off work to take Sam somewhere. Their honeymoon was going to be a weekend down in San Antonio a good four days after they were married. Sam didn't mind, though, because she knew that they didn't have either the time or the money for anything serious. After they were earning money, they'd make up for the lost honeymoon with some extravagant vacation.

The demands on a first year associate were harsh, and little leeway was given. Kevin had to all but beg to get the day off for his wedding, and they expected him right back at work on Tuesday. If he wasn't one of their most promising rookie associates, they wouldn't have even given him that.

"Sounds good," Kit said as Jessie hurried out of the office and waved them forward.

Kit let the others tee up and go first after they waited their turn, and gave the couple playing ahead of them enough time to get down to their balls and hit them forward. Jessie teed off first, and Kit was pleasantly surprised to her drive a very nice shot, a good 150 yards and almost straight down the fairway, her ball landing close to the left rough. He knew from Sheila that Jessie had some natural talent on the links, but seeing it was a surprise. Sheila said that Jessie had a nice drive, but her short game and her putting were her weaknesses. Well, Sheila was right about her drive.

"Wow, way to make me feel like packing my bag and waiting in the bar, Jessie," Kevin laughed as he stepped up to take his turn. He managed a fairly decent shot for a new player, which meant that his ball went further than Kit expected, and was solidly in the rough. Sam's ball ended up close to his, since she was just learning too, and then Kit teed up and felt them watching. He hadn't golfed in years, but he remembered enough to send the ball down the fairway, rolling to a stop near Jessie's ball.

"I've been playing longer and have had more practice, Kev," Jessie winked at him. "Don't worry, I'm sure you'll be a golfing lawyer real soon."

"Delores plays, and she's pretty good," he said as they got into the golf carts.

It had been a long time since he'd golfed, and it came back to him much faster than he expected. He three-putted the first four holes, but managed to two-putt the fifth, and actually pulled double bogey on the par 4 seventh hole, the lowest score of any of them thus far. By the time they reached the back nine, Kit's back actually felt pretty good, and he was already 37 over par...which was the best score among the four of them, and Kit felt proud of it since it was such a hard course. Jessie was four shots behind him, and Sam and Kevin weren't even keeping score. Sheila was right about Jessie's game, though. She did drive a nice ball, able to hit a much straighter drive than most other beginners, but once she was within 50 yards of the hole, she started having trouble. This wasn't unusual for starting golfers, though. But what was unusual was that Jessie could chip better than she could putt.

"Back alright, love?" Jessie asked as they rode the cart over to the tenth tee.

"Doing fine, pretty kitty," he answered. "And you're four strokes back."

She laughed. "I'll win when you quit," she winked.

"Oho, that sounds like a challenge."

"Only so long as you don't hurt your back trying to finish," she warned seriously.

"I won't do that."

"Alright, then, it's a challenge, handsome fox," she grinned.

The last time he tried to play golf, almost two years ago, his back started hurting around the tenth hole and forced him to give up not long after that. But unlike the last time, his back didn't even start twinging until they got to the 17th hole, a long par four. He felt it when he made his initial drive, the torque on his back, but he knew he could finish out. Maybe two years of healing and exercising his back playing tennis had helped mitigate the pain-inducing motion of swinging a golf club. Jessie actually managed to pull par, jumping up and down and squealing in delight when she sank her second putt. It was her first ever par, and they all applauded her for her achievement. She'd managed to pull within one stroke on the eighteenth hole. "Down to the wire," she grinned, putting her paw on his

lower back. "Doing okay?"

"Twinging, but no pain," he reported dutifully. "I'll be able to finish so long as I don't put ten strokes down."

"Good. I'll give you a nice massage when we get home...if you let me win, anyway."

He laughed and nearly drove the cart off the path. "Such blatant bribery!"

"I'm not bribing you, I'm offering you a deal," she winked at him. "You give me something, I give you something. It's a fair trade," she said in a completely insincere serious voice.

"I have *got* to keep you away from VI," he complained as they stopped after the very short ride from the 17th green to the tee area of the 18th hole.

The 18th here was a par five, and Kevin winced when he saw that the green was behind a pond. The five water hazards on the course had punished Kevin severely so far. "What is it with golf courses and ponds?" he complained.

"At least you're brave enough to go after the balls," Kit chuckled, looking at his damp feet and slacks.

"At twelve dollars for a little box, you're damn right I'm going after the ball," he retorted instantly, which made all of them laugh.

By the time they finished, Kit's back felt alright. A little twingy, but alright. They'd had a good time, and Kit was glad that Jessie had really enjoyed the course despite the fact that it was so hard. "That was fun," Kevin said as they walked off the 18th green, back towards the car. "I felt like an idiot most of the time, but it was fun."

"It's a PGA level course, Kev, you did just fine for your first time playing it. And someone owes me a little something for losing," he said lightly to Jessie.

"I'm a femme of my word. I promise not to be mad at you for beating me at golf," she grinned, which made him laugh helplessly.

Kit drove them back home, and after Sam and Kevin headed back for their townhouse, Jessie headed in as he got the clubs. His phone rang, and he saw that it was VI. "Hey sis, what—"

"I'm *PREGNANT!*" she screamed in deee. so loud it hurt his ear.

"I'm pregnant, Kit! I'm gonna have a baby!"

Kit laughed in delight. "Congratulations! You two certainly didn't waste any time," he teased.

"I just found out this morning! I realized I missed my period and a doctor came over and gave me a test, and I'm pregnant!"

"I'm so happy for you, sis! Have you told Kendall yet?"

"He's right here, goof! Put Jessie on, I gotta tell her!"

"She's inside, lemme head that way. So, that was fast," he noted again.

"The doc said we must have conceived during the honeymoon or immediately afterward," she replied, calming down just a little bit. "I just can't believe it! I need to get the best obstetrician I can find, we need to start making plans! I'm so happy, I'm just beside myself!"

"It's easy to tell," he laughed as he went in. "Jessie! Vil needs to talk to you!" he called.

She came out of the kitchen, the smell of some kind of beef or meat heavy in the house, and took the phone from him. "Hi Vil!" she called cheerfully. She listened only a second, then screamed and actually jumped up and down in place a few times. "Oh my god! That's so wonderful!" she gushed into the phone. "I'm so happy for you, Vil! When did you find out?"

Jessie wandered off with the phone, her tail slashing behind her as it tended to do when she was happy, and Kit could just lean against the doorframe and chuckle. Vil hadn't wasted any time getting pregnant, and now that she was, things were going to both settle down and heat up in the family. An heir had been secured, and that heir would eventually own both companies...and become one of the most powerful furs on Earth in the bargain. That was a lot of pressure to put on a kid, but he couldn't doubt that his impending niece or nephew would ever want for love from Vil and Kendall. He was happy for her, for he knew exactly what kind of happiness and joy would soon come into her life. The anticipation during pregnancy, then that beautiful day when she got to look her baby in the eyes for the first time, and all the love and contentment and joy that she would feel the entire time. The fulfillment that came with having a child was a wonder and a joy unlike anything other in the world, and he was so totally happy that his sister was about to experience that fulfillment herself.

As usual, Vi got what she wanted, quickly and efficiently. Though, he was fairly sure that Kendall hadn't minded the chore of getting her pregnant all that much.