

JAKE'S DOWNFALL
a short story by Alexis Morgan
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It had been one of those days, one of those weeks, in fact. Jake figured if he kept his head down and his fingers on the keyboard he stood a good chance of getting the supply order done on time. That would make Jarvis happy, and when the head honcho was happy, Jake's life flowed more smoothly.

With that in mind, he ignored the slow shuffle of footsteps heading his way. He paid no attention when Chase dropped down in the chair next to Jake's desk with a heavy sigh. He also ignored the second sigh and made sure the third one drew no response at all, hoping Chase would take the hint.

It was a losing battle. Obviously his young friend had something on his mind and wasn't going away until he shared. His fourth sigh came equipped with a tapping foot. Jake ran up the white flag and surrendered. He wasn't going to get anything else done until he let the Paladin trainee vent. However, years of experience had taught him that commiserating was thirsty work. He hit Save and stood up.

Chase finally spoke up. "Jake, I-"

Jake immediately cut him off. "Hold that thought, Chase. I'll be right back."

He headed down the hall to the kitchen and poured himself a fresh cup of coffee. Then he snagged a sports drink for Chase along with a handful of cookies for each of them. When he got back to his desk, Chase was leaning forward, elbows on his knees, while he stared down at the floor. There was definitely something wrong.

Back when Jake had first crossed paths with the young Paladin, Chase had been a ticking time bomb on the verge of exploding. Both Jake and Jarvis had invested a lot of time and effort teaching Chase how to control his temper while honing his Paladin gifts at the same time. Whatever had him tied up in knots must be something serious. There was only one way to find out.

Jake set the sports drink and half of the cookies next to Chase and sat back down. "Okay, kid, what's up?"

"Nothing."

Yeah, right. Before he could call him on the lie, it occurred to Jake that this was the time Chase normally worked out with Court Cahill. The older Paladin had been friends with Chase's father, a Paladin who had died one too many times several months before Chase was born. His mother had never known anything about the Paladins, so Chase had grown up thinking his father had taken off on both of them, not caring that he'd broken his mother's heart or that he'd had a son.

The bond between Court and Chase had formed fast and solid. Their relationship had gone a long way toward healing the emotional wounds from Chase never having known his father. Although it was Jarvis who had recognized Chase as a Paladin, he'd been just as glad to have Court take over mentoring the teenager. As the head Paladin in the region, Jarvis already had enough on his plate without having to ride herd on his future brother-in-law.

"So where's Court?"

Chase finally looked up. "He blew me off this week."

Jake sipped his coffee and frowned. "That's not like him. You know he wouldn't have done that without a good reason. Something unexpected must have come up. Something important."

Chase rolled his eyes and slouched back in the chair. "You might say that. Turns out Court has a daughter. I would've thought he'd have mentioned that somewhere along the line. Her name is Whitney Cahill."

Jake had been about to take another drink of coffee, but his hand froze in mid-motion. He slowly set the cup back down, looking around the cavern as he did. Had the floor of the cave just rippled and rolled beneath his feet? An earthquake maybe? But no, everyone else was walking around doing business as usual.

Then he realized that Chase was staring at the white-knuckled grip Jake had on the edge of his desk. Jake took a slow breath and forced himself to relax.

He tried his best to sound normal. "Actually, as I recall, she used to go by Whitney Lord. Her mother and Court were married for a short time years ago. They divorced when Whitney was still in grade school, and Whitney eventually took her stepfather's last name. I heard she used to visit Court during the summer, but it's been awhile though."

He pretended to have to think about it. "I'd guess the last time she spent any time here was about around seven years ago."

Actually, it had been six years, eight months, and a handful of days. Not that Jake was counting.

The young Paladin grinned and gave Jake's hands another pointed look. "I take it the two of you have met."

What could Jake say to that? Yeah, they'd met back when she'd just turned eighteen, and he'd been a much older twenty-one. Not that much time by the calendar, but a world of difference in life experience.

Whitney's mother hadn't been able to live with the constant strain of the Paladin lifestyle. She'd divorced her husband and moved out of state taking their young daughter with her. Whenever Whitney had come for a visit, Court had wisely done everything he could to protect her from the harsh realities of his life.

Once she'd reached her teens, her visits had become less frequent. Then right before she started college, she'd shown up on Court's doorstep and moved in for the summer, wanting to spend some quality time with him. Although her mother wasn't happy about the situation, there hadn't been anything she could do about it. Whitney settled in and took a job at a local drive-in burger joint to earn money for college in the fall.

That's where she and Jake had crossed paths.

It was lust at first sight. She'd flirted with him every time he'd stopped in for a burger. He'd known from the first that she was younger than he was by three years, but he couldn't seem to stay away. He'd eaten a whole lot of burgers and fries in those few weeks.

Finally, he'd given in and asked her out, and that was that. They saw each other every chance they got. He let her think he worked for the local utility company and was on call to account for his odd hours and frequent disappearances.

He'd really hated lying to Whitney, but then they'd both had their secrets to keep. She refused to let him pick her up at home, always meeting him someplace. It never crossed his mind that she might be connected to one of the Paladins. Back then, Jake hadn't been part of the Missouri contingent for very long and barely knew Court, much less that he had a daughter.

It had been a long, hot summer, and not just because the temperature hovered in the high nineties for most of it. Hell, he still had dreams about the time the two of them had spent together. Most were centered around the old swimming hole and skinny dipping. Jake had dated his fair share of women since, but none had ever made him feel the same rush of heat and need that Whitney had.

A hand waved in front of his face. "Yoo-hoo, Jake. Are you in there?"

He blinked twice and shook his head. How long had he been lost in the past? Long enough to have Chase laughing at him.

"Shut up, Chase."

"I didn't say anything."

Jake gave him a disgusted look. "Yeah, but you were about to."

As usual, the kid had more guts than good sense. "So just how well did you know Court's daughter?"

Oh, yeah, like he was going to answer that one. "Don't you have something better to do than to pester me?"

"Nope, like I told you, Court didn't have time to work out with me today."

"Then go home."

Chase crossed his arms over his chest and shrugged with a smug look on his face. "Sorry, I can't. I rode in with Jarvis because my sister needed my truck. Hers is in the shop. You're stuck with me."

Great.

"I've got this report to finish before lunch. If you're going to sit there, at least be quiet."

He opened his file and did his best to concentrate while images of water-slick bodies danced through his head. The silence lasted all of two minutes when Chase let out a low whistle. "Uh, Jake."

"What now?"

Chase's eyes were focused on some point over near the elevators that let up to the ground level. A smile slowly spread across his face. "I hate to tell you this, but Court's headed this way, and he's not alone."

There were times in a man's life that he knew on a gut level would change him forever. Jake took one look back over his shoulder at the stunning brunette standing with Court, and he knew--just knew--nothing would ever be the same again.

Whitney coasted to a stop. Her father didn't notice at first, but when he realized she'd fallen behind he stopped and gave her a puzzled look.

"Is something wrong?"

She forced a smile. "No, Dad, I'm fine. This place is . . . amazing." A true enough statement, but not for any reason her father was going to like.

"Yeah, it can be a bit overwhelming at first. Take your time looking around."

She did exactly that, watching the dance of colors in the barrier, studying the general layout of the place, making note of the location of the exits. And doing her absolute best not to stare at the handsome man over in the corner: Jake Beck.

One look in his direction had her heart fluttering and her palms sweating. Drat him anyway! Couldn't he have gotten uglier or pudgy? But no, if anything, he'd improved with time. He stood up, moving with that same easy grace that was second nature to every Paladin she'd ever met.

And Whitney had met a lot of them recently. Much to her mother's horror and her father's resigned acceptance, she'd studied to become a trauma nurse and then applied to the Regents for a job. She'd been assigned to one of the facilities in California, but when an position opened up here in Missouri she'd requested an immediate transfer.

She'd been telling herself that she wanted to be closer to her father and that was true as far as it went. The other reason was standing across the cavern with a shocked expression on his face. Good. She didn't want to be the only one who felt like the world had just shifted on its axis.

Court spotted the two Paladins and smiled.

"Whitney, I don't want to overwhelm you with introductions, but I'd like you to meet a couple of my friends. One of them is Chase, the new recruit I was telling you about."

Her dad charged across the cavern straight toward Jake and the young Paladin standing next to him. As tempting as it was to bolt back upstairs to the medical labs, she wasn't a coward. She'd known she'd cross paths with Jake eventually. Better to just get it over with.

She caught up with her father and let him do the introductions. "Honey, this is Chase. His father was a good friend of mine."

She held out her hand. "Nice to meet you, Chase. I've heard good things about you."

He gave her hand a quick shake. "Miss Cahill."

"Please call me Whitney." Cute. He was still young enough to blush.

Court then nodded toward Jake. "Whitney, this is Jake Beck. If you ever need any help with computers, he's your man. There's none better."

"I'll keep that in mind, Mr. Beck."

She wasn't sure what she'd do if he offered to shake her hand. The last time she'd touched Jake, they'd been down at the swimming hole when they'd . . . No, it was best not to think about that. Not now with her father standing right beside her. It was bad enough those memories had haunted her dreams ever since that summer.

"How long are you going to be in town, Miss Cahill?"

Her dad shot Jake a puzzled look. "She's here permanently, Jake. She's the new trauma nurse."

Jake's expression turned to stone. "Really?"

She nodded. "Really."

The resulting silence stretched tight and awkward. Then the Klaxons went off. Chaos broke out and total chaos ensued.

Jake's usual first instinct was to grab his sword and head right for the barrier at a dead run, ready to stand and defend. This time, though, he immediately grabbed Whitney and all but dragged her toward the nearest exit.

He heard Court shout something, but he ignored him just like he ignored Whitney's efforts to pull her hand free of his grasp. The blare of the Klaxons made it impossible to understand anything either of them were saying anyway. All that mattered was getting her out of the line of fire and quickly.

He considered and rejected several options, finally settling on the staircase off one of the back tunnels. It would take her up to the main level where the medical facilities were located. With all the Paladins pouring into the cavern, it was like swimming upstream. Jake used his body to break through the flow and tugging Whitney along in his wake. They were slowly making progress until he ran right into Jarvis.

"Where the hell are you going?" Jarvis asked, but then he spotted Whitney peeking at over Jake's shoulder. "Oh, crap. Get her out of here."

What the hell did he think Jake was doing? "Save me a place. I'll be right there."

Jarvis nodded and rejoined the throng. The sound of swords clashing was already echoing down the tunnel from behind them. Finally, the two of them finally reached the staircase. Jake used his security code to override the lock on the door that prevented stray Others from gaining access to the surface.

"Get upstairs and stay there."

Whitney's dark eyes stared up into his as she touched his cheek with her fingers. "Be careful, Jake, and watch out for my dad."

He caught her hand in his and pressed a quick kiss to her palm. "I will. We'll talk when this is over."

She swallowed hard, but then she nodded and disappeared up the stairs.

Whitney did a couple of stretches to ease the stiffness in her back. She'd flown in that morning on a red-eye and was really feeling the lack of a decent night's sleep. At least the onrush of new patients had slowed to a trickle. So far the injuries had been mostly superficial: cuts, bruises, a concussion or two.

She'd been assigned to do triage, basically directing traffic, making sure the more serious wounds were treated first. Jarvis Donahue had passed through a few minutes before to let the medical staff know that they could expect the last of the wounded to arrive shortly. The mop up

campaign was almost complete, and the barrier had already been restored. So far, it appeared to be stable.

The doctor in charge walked over to where she stood watching the elevators. "Well, Whitney, you sure hit the floor running. I know you weren't officially on duty, but we really appreciated the extra set of hands. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I was glad to be of help."

Anything to keep from having too much time to think about her father and Jake down below fighting for their lives. That was hard, but being close enough to know how they were sure beat living half a continent away and always wondering, always worrying.

"Miss Cahill, there's a call for you on line one. It's your dad."

"Thank you." She smiled at the orderly as she picked up the phone. "Hi, Dad. What's up?"

"Whitney, I just wanted to let you know that I'm okay, but I have to stay on duty to replace a couple of guys that Jarvis sent home. I'm not sure when I'll be done. I know I promised to take you out to dinner."

"Don't worry about it. I'll catch a ride back to the house with someone and finish unpacking. It's been a long day for me, too. We can do dinner another night."

"Sounds good. See you at home."

She hung up, wondering who might be able to drive her home without having to go too far out of their way. When she turned around, the same orderly was hovering nearby.

"Can you take one more patient, Miss Cahill?"

"Sure thing, but please call me Whitney."

"Will do. He's sitting over there. We'd offered to take him to one of the other labs, but he asked for you specifically."

It almost had to be Jake. Besides her father, only a handful of people knew her by name, and few of them were Paladins. But instead, she spotted Chase sitting on the exam table in the corner with a bloody bandage wrapped around his forearm. He offered her a shaky grin.

"Hope you don't mind cleaning up my arm for me, Whitney. Court sent me to you. I was with him when Jarvis asked him to stay on. Since I don't have my truck here, he was going to ask Jake to drop me off at the farm when he takes you home. It's right on the way."

"Not a problem, Chase. Now let me see what you've got there."

As she peeled back his bandage, her mind spun in circles. She'd really prefer not to be alone with Jake, not when she was running on empty. There was no way to avoid it, though, not without making a scene. For now, she'd concentrate on her patient. She'd deal with Jake later.

"This isn't too bad, Chase. You won't even need stitches."

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The man in question was down below washing up. He figured it was no accident that Court was at the next sink, staring at Jake in the mirror. Damn, he so didn't want to do this now. Or ever.

"So about you and my daughter. I'm guessing today wasn't the first time you two have met. Care to explain?"

Damn it, how had he found out and how much did he know? After all, it had been almost seven years since Jake had last seen Whitney, and Court had never said a word in all that time. Jake dried his hands and face before answering.

"It was a long time ago, Court. And in my defense, I didn't know she was your daughter at the time." Honesty made him add, "Not at first, anyway."

Court crossed his arms over his chest and studied Jake with that same killer expression on his face that fathers always had when confronted with a daughter's boyfriend. "Damn it, Jake, she was only eighteen that summer."

"Yeah, and I was only twenty-one. Both of us were still kids that summer, Court. I hadn't been stationed here all that long, and Whitney was only visiting for the summer."

Court's eyebrows snapped down low, his dark eyes obsidian hard. "Oh, so you were just out for a good time?"

Okay, the ice was getting pretty damn thin here. Jake did his own share of glaring right back at his friend.

"No, that's not how it was, Court. Not with Whitney. She was special."

"Did she know what you were?"

"Not at first, but she eventually figured it out. I had told her I worked for the utility company and was on call all the time. She never volunteered what her father did for a living, either. Looking back, I should've figured it out sooner because she'd never let me pick her up at home."

"Did you hurt my daughter?"

No more than he'd hurt himself. Jake so didn't want to be having this conversation, not when he hadn't yet spoken more than a handful of words to Whitney herself. Hell, up until today he hadn't

been sure she would even remember him. But one look into those dark eyes so like her father's, and he'd known for a fact that she hadn't forgotten that summer any more than he had.

"Court, I understand where you're coming from and that you're her father, but Whitney is all grown up now. If she wants to tell you about . . . things, that's her decision. I was just starting out as Paladin and learning what all that meant. She was leaving for college in a few weeks, her life full of possibilities. I did the only thing I could do at the time--I broke things off and let her go even though it damn near killed me."

He wadded up his paper towel and tossed it in the trash. "That's all I'm going to say on the subject, except to add that she was special then and that hasn't changed."

He must have said something right because some of the tension in Court's stance eased slightly. "See that you remember that, Jake, or you and me are going to have more than words."

"Yes, sir."

"Just so you know, I sent Chase upstairs to get his arm bandaged and to tell Whitney you'd be driving her home. Don't blow it this time, Jake. Most men never get a chance for a do-over in their life."

Then he walked away, leaving Jake standing there with his jaw on the floor.

An hour later Jake dropped Chase off at home and then drove straight to the place where all of this had begun. Whitney hadn't said a word until it was time to order. The two of them picked up their burgers and shakes and automatically headed for 'their' table, the one where they'd spent so many hours that one magical summer. To the sound of cicadas droning overhead in the trees, they ate their dinner and let the day's tensions slip away.

"Man, these burgers are every bit as good as I remembered." Whitney finished off the last bite and then reached over to snatch a couple of Jake's fries.

He immediately jerked them back out of her reach. "Darn it, woman, I told you to order your own. Obviously some things never change. You stole most of my fries that summer, too."

She looked totally unrepentant as she gathered up their trash. "That's why you always ordered the jumbo size, so we could share. Although, I've got to say it's a good thing I don't eat like this all the time. I'd never fit back in these jeans."

Jake liked how her jeans fit her just fine. She'd filled out a bit since he'd last seen her. The added curves were all the right size and shape, the kind a man wanted in the woman he took to his bed. At least this man. And, damn, Court would have Jake's head for thinking that way when Whitney hadn't even been in town for twenty-four hours.

"Want to go for a walk along the river?"

Whitney didn't hesitate. "Sure, why not?"

It seemed only natural to hold her hand as they made their way down the path toward the water. Old habits die hard, but this was more than just reliving an old memory. Being with Whitney felt like he'd found a piece of himself, one that had been missing for too long.

Did she feel the same way? He didn't have the guts to ask.

Maybe if he danced around the subject a bit, coming at it sideways, she'd tell him.

"So you took the job here to spend more time with your dad."

"Partly." There was just a hint of a smile playing at the corner of her mouth.

He tried again. "I heard the docs saying you were great at triage. I'm guessing that's why you came to work for the Regents."

"Partly." The smile was a little more obvious this time.

Okay, this was getting him nowhere. "Why else would you have moved from Los Angeles to a small rural town like this one?"

They'd reached the river. The sound of the water rushing and babbling over the rocks always soothed him. Well, not always. Right now he was tied up in one big knot as he waited for Whitney to answer.

She stared at the water drifting by. "It's true I moved here to be near Dad."

Her mouth curled up with a small smile. "But this place has one more thing that Los Angeles never had, Jake, and that's you. I came back to find out if the reality was every bit as good as the memories were."

Okay, so maybe they were on the same page here. Feeling the old pull but not sure how far to trust the feeling. "How do you suggest we find out?"

She studied him from top to bottom. "I figured we'd start off with a kiss and go from there. Are you up for that?"

He was up for way more than that, but it was too soon, too fast. Instead, he tugged her into his arms, loving the way her lush body fit against his. As he settled his lips over hers, she sighed softly, and parted her lips in invitation. He groaned because she tasted like everything that was good and right in this world.

The kiss lasted an eternity and not nearly long enough. Hands touch and teased, their bodies pressed together as close as layers of clothing would allow. Finally, Jake eased back, allowing both of them to draw a ragged breath.

When he could think clearly enough to string some words together, he asked, "Well, what's the verdict? Did that measure up to the memory?"

Her smile was all the answer he needed. "I'm thinking we'll have to devise lots more experiments to be sure, but I'm optimistic about the outcome. I know this much, though. This is where I'm supposed to be, right here in your arms."

The knot in Jake's chest disappeared completely. "I'm glad you feel that way because I don't think I'm strong enough to let you walk away, not again."

She snuggled in closer. "Don't worry. I'm not planning on going anywhere."

And as Jake stared down into her pretty face, he saw his future looking back at him.