

## **“Poisoned Hearts” by Clayton Barnett**

### Prologue

“Will you excuse me a minute? I have to go to the toilet.”

Cat laughed to herself a little; he still had so many Japanese mannerisms!

“Sure, Chris, that’s fine!” She waved over her glass of water.

He walked slowly to the bathroom. Fortunately, no one was there. He opened the port access in his chest and scooped the food into the garbage. While washing his hands, he thought about how tired he was. Best do something about that.

Leaving the men’s room, he spared a look at Cat in their booth, then turned left towards the kitchen exit. Ignoring the protests of the staff, he wandered out back of the restaurant around their dumpster. Ah! A raccoon! Faster than expected, he seized the animal; it squealed a little then grew still. He set it carefully onto the ground, behind the dumpster where the cooks wouldn’t find it. There was a crackle of static electricity as he removed his hands from the little animal.

“Sleep, friend. You’ll be fine by nightfall.” And I’m good for another six hours, Christopher thought.

He slid back into the booth across from Cat.

“You okay? Would you like some coffee?” She asked, concerned.

“I’m fine,” he replied with a smile. “Let’s head out; I need to finish my paperwork for the Department for Monday morning.” Cat reflected on that as she stood with her purse. He was only twenty two, but already in the Bioengineering PhD program here at UC San Diego. But, if he’s such a genius, why does he seem, so... normal? Oops! Lost in thought, she walked right into him.

“Cat? You okay?” He looked down the five inches that separated their faces. She resisted the urge to kiss him, especially after that awful moment on the rooftop a few hours ago.

“Fine! Fine!” She replied. “But, Chris? Why do you smell so musky right now?”

But he’d looked away from her: up towards the muted flatscreen TV. Across the bottom, the news scroll said....

### Chapter 1

They’d only met yesterday afternoon, Saturday, at the San Diego airport. Because of his flight’s unexpected stop in Anchorage, he was now over six hours behind schedule. With no other luggage than his carry on, he strode directly out into the main concourse. He scanned the crowd, looking for the one who was supposed to meet him. Of course, after such a delay, she might have left—

“Christopher!” He heard her before he saw her, as she surged through the crowd. About a half-foot shorter than he, her almond eyes from her Japanese mother sat well on her broad, Slavic face from her Polish father. Her dark brown hair stood out nicely against her lime top. Dressed for the heat, she’d a pair khaki shorts and tan sandals.

"Cousin Katarina," he began, holding his right hand out. "Ufff!"  
She smacked his hand away and gave him a great hug.  
"Cousin Christopher! Welcome to your new home! And call me 'Cat!' Okay?"  
Thinking very hard about not accidentally killing her, he carefully, lightly, closed his arms about her.

"Cat. I am very happy to meet you at last."

Eight hours ago, he was dying. On the long flight from Narita to first Seattle and then onto San Diego, he'd become aware that something was very, very wrong. He kept running diagnostics, trying to discover what: but all seemed well. His power reserves were fine, there were no unusual signals in the plane's cabin. The air was a bit attenuated, but that was of no concern to him. Still, he was getting physically weaker and having more and more trouble concentrating on even simple computational tasks.

"You alright there, sonny?" The older businessman from Hong Kong asked from his left. They'd chatted politely some just after takeoff.

"I... I am unwell. Worse, I do not know why." The man smiled at him.

"First time a flight this long?" Christopher nodded. "Not healthy for a lad like you to stay cooped up in his seat for a dozen hours. Get up and walk around for a quarter hour or so. In fact," he said, stretching, "I may join you! Don't want to end up with a stroke!"

Christopher knew that exercise was not the problem. Still, he did not want to appear rude. Perhaps a simple change of scenery would provide a clue to his malaise. He nodded to the man and rose. His travelling companion did the same, but they set out in opposite directions around the cabin of the 747. He shortly found himself by one of the rear galleys. He looked out the small window in the door as the southern coast of Alaska slid by. He had to squint; now his vision was failing. Had Mother forgot to tell me something about this form and air travel? He was becoming unbalanced....

"Hey, there, sonny? Feeling any better?" The older man asked.

"I—" There was a slight bump from air turbulence. Christopher fell forwards, catching the older man's shoulders. Oooo! What was...?

He looked up to see something that wasn't quite fire nor quite static where he held the other man. To his horror, he watched as the man's face grew hollow, and even his salt-and-pepper hair turned all white. It was only when the man groaned as if he were dying that Christopher jerked his hands off of him. The other collapsed in a heap. Christopher could tell he was still alive, but only just. But he....

"I feel fantastic." He said aloud.

He sat by himself after the emergency stop in Anchorage to get the man to a hospital. He accessed the local broadband to try to figure out what happened. It was late back home, and Mother was not answering any calls. He'd fifty nine messages from his sister, but did not want to be bothered by her right now. As they were reboarding about an hour later, his search and analysis algorithms came back with two words: lifeforce and vampire.

Mother! He quailed in his mind. What has happened to me?!

Chris? Hey...Chris...!

"Christopher!" Cat yelled at him.

"Sorry. Yes?"

"Geez; I get it that you're tired from the long flight, but don't zone out on me like that!" She returned her eyes to the road for the short drive up the highway from the airport to the university. Her tiny car zipped agilely through the light mid-afternoon traffic.

"So as I was saying, you can crash at my place until you find your own," he opened his mouth, but she kept on, "and don't start. Sure, guys, girls; I get it. But even if Aunt Junka did adopt you, you're still my cousin and I'm not letting family stay by themselves in a hotel." She tried to glare at him to make her point, but it melted into a grin. He really is cute, she thought....

"This being San Diego, do you have a place on the beach?" That would be nice, he thought.

"Are you an idiot? Do you have any idea how much that would cost!"

He blinked. He did now.

"My apologies. I am... very young in your home." He dipped his head.

"What an odd thing to say!" Must be some Japanese phrase, she thought. "No worries, Chris!"

No. I do have one, he thought, looking out the window.

"Then I gratefully accept your offer." He said. "Day after tomorrow, Monday morning, I will open a bank account and Mother will transfer funds. I'm sure I'll be able to find a place by nightfall."

She tossed him another disbelieving glance as she exited the freeway.

"I know that things have changed a lot here in SD recently, Chris, but I'd be really surprised if you found a place that quick."

"Then, if I must impose upon your hospitality, please allow me to take the best care of you." She felt her face start getting hot at that. "I am an accomplished cook and would be happy to make your meals."

Her jaw dropped a little as she looked over at him. Was he kidding? No: he seemed to vaguely enjoy looking at the scenery go by. Her turned back and caught her looking at him. He smiled thinly.

"I am so happy to be with you, Cat!"

Driving the last, short distance to her apartment complex, she fought to understand what she was feeling.

They walked up the outside stairs of her block of residence. She looked at his single carry-on.

"Is the rest of your stuff being shipped over, or did the airline lose it?"

He glanced at the bag over his shoulder then regarded her with a slight head-tilt.

"I've two changes of clothes and a few personal items. There is nothing else coming."

Family he may be, but he's still a foreigner. Just shut your mouth, Cat! She thought.

"Fine, then!" She smiled. "This is my place: 214. If you've trouble getting your own place, I can get a spare key—"

"WOOF!"

A huge rottweiler came bounding up the steps behind them. Some distance back they heard a woman call, "Daisy! Wait!" It came right for Cat.

Threat assessment was one of the first things Mother taught him, even though it was part of the Third Law. Cat saw her cousin's form become a blur as he moved in an instant

to tackle the charging dog. There was a small "yip!" from it as – accompanied by a small flash of light - it was suddenly still. Ewww! Was that burnt hair?

The dog was completely still, atop Chris. Just then, her annoying neighbor, Debbie, made it to the top of the steps.

"What did you do to little Daisy, you horrible man!" She cried. Cat bridled at that.

"Since I'm still paying off the visit to the urgent clinic from the last time your goddam dog bit me, I hope he killed her!" She yelled.

Debbie – kitted out like a hooker, Cat thought – took a step back, her hand raised to her mouth.

"How could you say that about little Daisy?!"

Cat would rather have said it was an open secret why the manager let her keep that beast here, but what Debbie did with her mouth was her business. And there were more important things right now. She knelt down to Christopher.

"Are you okay, cousin?" She deliberately called attention to the LEGAL relationship between her and whom the dog assaulted.

For the first time ever, he grinned wide, showing his ordered, shiny white teeth.

"I'm fantastic now, Cat!" He rolled the unconscious animal off of him and embraced her. "Thank you so much for worrying about me! Oops!"

As if suddenly recalling who he was and where he was, he dropped his arms and turned towards Debbie. "Forgive me. I am Christopher Dennou –"

Cat didn't know he'd kept his own surname after Aunt Junka adopted him....

"—a student from Japan. I am staying with my cousin, Katarina for a day. I am very sorry," he bowed deeply, "for the misunderstanding with Daisy. I promise on my life to make amends to the both you!"

Confused by his polite behavior, Debbie sputtered a bit, then said, "I hope you do! Poor Daisy...!"

"She should awaken by nightfall. Shall I carry her into your flat?"

"My what?"

With that over, and safely into Cat's apartment, she cranked up the AC then dropped onto her beat-up couch.

"Just what kind of black belt do you have that includes a Vulcan Death Grip for rottweilers?" She asked to the ceiling with her eyes closed. Something brushed her lips!

"Mother was always concerned that I be able to take care of myself," he said, sitting on the couch, but away from her. What was that, she thought? "If I can defend myself against a human, a mindless animal is of no concern."

"Aren't we the confident one!"

His face dropped. "False modesty is the refuge of the incompetent." He looked at the lengthening shadows in the room and the dusk outside.

"I am tired. Since I cannot sleep in your bed—"

You can't? Ever?

"—I shall be more than comfortable here on the couch. Cat..." He leaned toward her his right hand just inches from her face. He withdrew it. "Thank you very much for being here for me today. Much... much I do not understand has happened." He sat back.

She took a shuddering breath. God help me, she thought, I think I'm falling for him!  
No!!!

"F—fine! We'll make an early start to bed; that way I can show you around the campus tomorrow! That sound good?" She stood up. She had to get away from him.

He again made a little sitting bow. "Thank you, cousin Cat. I am in your care!"

He watched her leave, closing the door to her bedroom behind her. There was no sound of it locking. A data point. The shadows were deeper now. From Daisy, he knew that he'd be fine for at least another sixteen hours. Big dog. None of the Laws extended to their owners, but Mother had also tried to teach him the concept of 'humane.' He did not fully grasp it, so perhaps by practicing...?

Through the door he heard a toilet flush, then the creak of a Western bed. He looked one last time at the fading twilight, then closed his eyes. He triggered his 'dream' subroutine.

Mother....