

Twisted Tails

by Cerine Hero

The pink fox stood there, watching the liquid boil. Her long tail swayed lazily this way and that, minding its own business as she concentrated. The heat was on, and the golden fluid was primed and hot, ready for her to begin the next step of the process. She reached for the ingredients, all kept on the shelf above her. Some salts, a dust of pepper extract, and tavor flake, all to combine into the mixture so that-

“Hero, watch your damn tail!”

Cerine jumped in shock, her heart skipping a beat. She turned around in the tight kitchen and saw her manager nearly stumbling over her long tail, bundled up snug in a cooking wrap like a rat's. Her coworkers all stared at the tall, skinny fox with the ridiculously long tail. Cerine blushed and shrank, at least as much as a big, conspicuous vixen like her even could.

Her manager grumbled and added in, as he walked off, “And get those spicy filets ready, *please?*”

Biting her lip, Cerine turned back to her concoction. She mixed the salt, pepper, and spicy flake into the breading and prepared the raptor filets for frying in the oil. It was the same thing every day here at the little diner in the middle of town. She wore her stupid striped uniform and her stupid little paper hat and fried raptor burgers and fries for customers. It was a job, and it got her out of her aunt's house for a little while every day, at least. While she worked, her imagination often got the better of her and she found herself a thousand miles away. The fox almost never actually talked to her coworkers, preferring just to keep to herself. Apparently that suited everyone else fine, because no one ever really made much effort to talk to her, either.

Hours passed, customers came and went, and the sun began to set. Cerine brought a tray of food to a family of coyotes in the dining room, and with that, her shift was over. She returned to the back, clocked out, and pulled the stupid hat off her head. The vixen gathered her things and headed out the diner's side door, stepping out into a small park in Northend's pedestrian center. The park was sun-dappled as the trees blocked some of the light, letting in tiny shafts of it between their leaves. Streetlights were starting to come on here and there as the day faded to evening already. Autumn was well underway here in the north. Before long, this whole park would be deep under leaves, and shortly after that, snow.

Cerine decided to just head home, but before she had a chance to even get very far, she heard footsteps padding alongside her. A dark-furred wolf had been waiting for her around the corner of the diner, and she jogged to catch up.

“You went out the wrong door!” the wolfess wheezed, struggling to catch her breath. Her shoulder-length hair was tipped with purple dye, laying on top of the black hoodie that hid most of her curvy figure. “I had a whole line ready and everything.”

“Sorry,” Cerine replied, smiling softly. “What was it?”

“Hell, I don't remember,” Megan said, still huffing. “Something about if you were cooking something in those jeans or... no, that's not it.”

Cerine laughed and she started walking again with her friend at her side. The wolfess was one of her best friends, part of their little school circle with the Etsins, who Cerine had known since she was little, and Axis. The five of them had been inseparable during their school years. Of course, after graduation things had begun to change. Work and education had scattered them, with Gray going to medical school and Rachel moving a few hours south to Stonecoast for a job. And Axis was... well, Axis. The dire wolf was a bit of a hermit.

“How was work?” Megan asked, bobbing along beside the longer-legged fox.

“Fine,” Cerine answered, shrugging her shoulders.

They walked through the park quietly, with Megan burying her paws in her hoodie pocket. She

was uncharacteristically silent, too, looking a little discomforted and uneasy. Cerine was quiet, too, but that was certainly characteristic for her. No one else in the park paid the girls any mind. The light sparkled on Cerine's glasses as she walked underneath the shade of a tall tree, and Megan reached out and grabbed her elbow.

"Ceri, hey," she said, still looking down, "I just... gotta tell you something. I wanted to tell you in person, so I was, y'know... waiting for your shift to end."

The fox stopped, turning back to look at her friend. She adjusted her satchel's strap on her shoulder and looked down at her. Not for the first time, she remarked to herself that Megan looked strangely pretty when she was anxious. Cerine wrapped her tail around her thighs and waited for her friend to speak her piece.

"So," Megan said, dragging her claws on the concrete path, "you know I'm getting kinda serious with-

"Yeah."

"Right." The wolfess bit her lip and wriggled. "Well, they got a job."

Cerine's ears perked. "That's great!"

"It's in Selanport," Megan quickly added.

And the fox's ears immediately faltered. Selanport... that was in the Capital province, practically a world away. That wasn't just a few hours down the highway, like Stonecoast. It was a vacation's distance away. Cerine looked at the wolf and how she wasn't making eye contact, and she put the two together.

"So you're leaving," the vixen finished for her.

"Mmhmm..." Megan looked up at her and tried her best to keep herself composed. "It's the right thing for us, I think. They're working on the lease for an apartment right now. It's been in the works for a bit, I just... I put off telling you, sorry..."

"It's alright," Cerine replied. There was a sinking weight in her chest. It wasn't a new weight, but rather one that had been precariously suspended over her heart and just now given a solid shove off the supports it was resting on. The vixen ran her tongue across her fangs and pet her tail at her side.

Neither of them knew what to say next. Unspoken energy crackled between them, as tense as a bowstring. The wind picked up, blowing golden leaves into the air around the wolf and fox. Dark, dyed hair fluttered into the wolf's face. She was beautiful. Cerine had always thought so. Megan opened her muzzle but hesitated. The vixen knew, in her heart, there was something she *should* say, something that might make all these awful feelings go away.

But she couldn't think of what it was, and she hated it.

"I guess I should go pack," Megan said, awkwardly playing with the knuckles on her paws.

And Cerine uttered the stupidest thing she'd ever say: "Okay."

Megan took two steps backwards before turning and walking away. Cerine watched her leave, paws tucked in her hoodie and head held low. The sinking feeling found root in her stomach. Part of her wanted to rush after the wolfess and say something to her, but again... words just didn't come to her, and her feet felt frozen to the ground. Eventually Megan disappeared out of sight, and Cerine closed her eyes, feeling her tears in the cold wind.

It didn't take her long to get home, but it was dark by the time she reached the house on the outskirts. She was still saving up for her own place, hopefully somewhere closer to the town center, because this walk was long. Black paws trudged across the dry grass and she unlocked the door to let herself in. The lights were all off, save for the bluish glow of the television in the other room. Cerine picked up her tail and raised her hindclaws off the floor to not be heard. As she slipped around the den and into the kitchen, she knew she made the right call by the mostly-empty wine bottle on the island counter. In the other room, she could hear voices coming from the television and her aunt's rough snoring.

Hugging her tail across her chest with one arm, Cerine skimmed through the stack of mail,

finding one that stuck out from the rest. It was addressed to her, and had fortunately been in the middle of the bunch so it probably had gotten overlooked. She tucked it under her arm to look at later and crept up the stairs to her bedroom. Dropping her bag by the door, she settled down on the corner of her bed, pushing her game controller out of the way.

And she sat there a long time, looking straight through the envelope in her paws. First Rachel, then Gray, and now Megan... It felt like everyone was leaving her, and she was stuck here. The weight in her chest felt like a ship's anchor tied around her neck, keeping her pinned in this shitty house, choking off the words in her throat, and leaving her to drown while everyone else swam. Tears rolled down her muzzle and dripped from her nose onto the brown paper envelope.

Cerine sniffed hard and looked at the letter. It was hand-written and she didn't recognize the name on the return address. Using one claw, she sliced it open and unfolded the note inside. The text all went in her eyes but right out her ears. The handwriting was cursive and hard for her to decipher with her tear-soaked eyes in the dark, but the words "alchemy" and "apprenticeship" bounced around lazily in her brain. She put the letter on her desk to think about later and then ripped off her ugly work clothes.

She climbed into bed and wrapped her arms around her tail, trying not to let her thoughts wander any further than they already had...

The sky was dead. They killed it when she was young.

It was mid-day as Rienne walked down the pedestrian avenue in the middle of the city, but it might as well have been the dead of night. High noon could only be seen by the faint outline of clouds high above the skyscrapers, illuminated in blazing neon advertisements along their edges and the warm gold of interior lights within the windows. Down on the ground, puddles collected in the street, reflecting the dark-light of holographic billboards for sports teams and their corporate sponsors. Or video programs and their corporate sponsors. Or health clinics and their corporate sponsors. Or just the corporations themselves, cutting out the middleman entirely and just demanding to be adored and obeyed.

The wheat-and-salt-furred vixen had earpieces clipped to her dark ears, with heavy metal music pumped directly inside. The street was crowded, and people eyed her and her loud, old-tech music player, but no one said anything. She was tall, and her bare arms were fairly muscled. The fox had ripped, hand-me-down jeans wrapped up in her golden tail and an old tank top on. She *did* have on her uniform shirt, but she left it in a puddle somewhere back up the street. With the light misting in the air, the thin shirt she had on clung to her body and her damn fur. Rienne adjusted her hip satchel with one paw and ran the other through her short hair, feeling the wet clinginess between her fingers.

She'd been out of the foster system for a few months now. Permanently, this time. They'd given her a small stipend, a half-hearted handshake, and a menial job with the foster agency's corporate sponsor. Rienne worked it for a while, saving money. Today she quit, unable to stomach it another day longer. It was bad enough having that stupid logo hovering over her bed every night, she didn't need it in front of her eyes for eight hours a day, too.

The bus stop at the edge of the unlit auto-road was dark until she got close. Tiny sensors detected her – or her watch – and every wall of the tiny shelter ignited with light and color and music. The various ads for products and services and food she couldn't afford all overlapped each other in a slurry of noise and demands. Gene-therapy, cyber eyes, "real" food... all ridiculous shit. She did eye one ad highlighting a well-muscled jaguar getting bigger as it displayed the different, and more expensive, perk packages of their body-sculpting clinic. She could tell it was CGI, but either way... a nice mental image to put in her back pocket. She turned her eyes back to the completely unlit road in front of her, where automated cars roared by in the dark, practically invisible until the rush of wind blew across her. Holographic tape marked the edge of the walkway for her. It wouldn't stop her from falling over, of course.

Perhaps attracted by the light and noise of the ads, a group separated from the crowd on the street and one of them, a younger coyote with a cocky grin and a swagger, walked up to Rienne. She could see him from the corner of her eye but didn't acknowledge his presence.

"Hey, babe," he teased, glancing back at his friends and grinning. There was a glimmer of light within his eyes that wasn't natural. He pointed at the ad with the jaguar. "You and I could do a little body work together, if you get my drift."

Rienne pulled one of her earbuds from her ear. "Fuck off."

The coyote's grin didn't falter, but his friends called out to him. "Come on, dude. That's fucking ganger trash. Leave it, we're going to be late."

"Feh, whatever," the coyote cursed, spitting on the ground. "I'm not up on my stims, anyways."

Rienne put the earbud back on her ear as the bus arrived, rimmed with green lights so it could be seen from a distance. It came to a halt in front of the stop and Rienne slid her ID card through the slot by the door, and it chimed as it happily accepted her fare and opened the door for her and her alone. A little mascot on the screen beside the reader was animated to take her money and count it out right in front of her, but she ignored it as she stepped inside. There was no driver. The auto-bus just operated in its own little world, heedless of the speeding cars roaring around it and shaking its chassis as they passed by danger-close.

The vixen found a seat and closed her eyes. Her music ran out, but she just listened to the rumble of the vehicle around her.

"A reminder, passengers," a taped message said over the speakers, "this service is slated to be discontinued in the new year due to low performance."

Rienne opened one eye. There were two other people on the bus, shaded in the dark against the harsh light of the neon ad signs along the upper rim of the car.

"We hope you have enjoyed your trips with Venture Busing," the message continued, "now a member of the Cyclo Motor Systems family. Be sure to check out the new models of personal transport coming to a vendor near you and have a happy new year."

Rienne closed her eye again and sighed.

- - - - -

Cerine stood outside a nice townhouse in the middle of town, just a couple blocks down from her apartment. Bitter cold whipped against her gray woolen coat, and she had her tail double-wrapped around her waist and thighs so it wouldn't get battered and blown like a windsock. It wasn't snowing yet, but the forecast had it in the near future, and if the wind decided to come down from the mountains behind the Sylvan Reach, it would carry with it an almost unnatural amount of snow blanketing the town. Some residents hated it. Cerine lived for it.

There was arctic fox someplace in her ancestry, long before her ancestors boarded the flotilla and came over to the Wolfsmark, so the winter red fox wasn't especially uncomfortable as she pressed the illuminated doorbell and waited. The speaker grille right above the button crackled with noise.

"That you, Cerine?" a man's voice asked.

"Yes, Mr. Etsin," she replied, paws in her pockets.

"Give me *one* second... food is almost done."

She waited just a couple moments before the locks in the door clattered noisily and the door swung inwards. Warm air washed across the fox's face and she was met with an equally-warm smile. Standing in front of her was a middle-aged tiger, his fur a steely shade of gray long before the rims of his eyes and the ends of his nose had begun to gracefully fade. His hair was clipped short, and his build underneath his cooking apron was fairly muscular but going to fat. While he wasn't precisely the spitting image of Gray, since he had no coyote in him, it was still easy to tell he was his son's father.

The tiger pulled Cerine inside and pushed the door shut, blocking out the cold. Smiling bright

and as proud, he tugged the fox into a bear hug and then pushed her back to pat her arms. “Look at you! More beautiful by the day, I swear.”

Cerine blushed, dragging her hindclaws on the carpet. “Thank you, Mr. Etsin.”

“For the love of- You're a grown-ass woman, girl,” the tiger admonished, “you can drop all the mister stuff now. I don't need to feel any older than I already am. It's just Hunter from now on, hear me?”

“Yes, sir,” she replied, shrugging off her woolen coat and hanging it on a peg. The tiger's smile faltered slightly as he noticed her skinny figure, but then he turned and headed back to the kitchen. Cerine followed behind him, uncoiling her tail from her legs. Hunter hadn't lived in this house for very long, only moving once Rachel and Gray had flown the coop. Cerine felt bad for him sometimes, living here by himself, which was why she'd accepted his invitation to dinner before the weather shut everything down. Cerine had known the Etsins ever since she was in school, back when their mom was still alive, and Hunter had always been like a father figure for her.

And it wasn't like she had anyone else to eat dinner with, anyways.

Hunter grilled some raptor breasts on a stovetop grill in his kitchen, bowls of salad already made and waiting for once the main entree was ready to eat. Cerine made herself comfortable in the kitchen, keeping a respectful distance so she wouldn't get tail puffs anywhere near the food. The smell was making her mouth water.

“This is a nice house,” Cerine offered, leaning by the table in the dining room, only a few feet away from the kitchen. On the wall was a family photo, showing a happy, blended family of coyotes, a tiger, and a tigypote. Their mom had been a photographer, and the family photo was surrounded by pictures of friends and family. One of them was a picture of Cerine and Rachel sitting together on a fence from behind, paws clasped in the sunset light.

“I like it,” Hunter told her. “I needed something smaller. With Marlene gone and the kids down south, the old place was just... too big.” He paused and worked his tongue around his mouth. “A little much for just me to get around.”

Cerine just nodded solemnly.

The tiger cleared his throat. “Do you mind setting the table for me, girl?”

“Sure,” she replied, skimming the kitchen for the plates and silverware and then setting them out at the table.

“So how are things going with you?” the tiger asked as he flipped the meat over. He eyed the vixen from the corner of his eye as she worked around the table. “You look thin. More than usual, I mean. Are you eating okay? If you ever need food, you know you can drop by.”

Cerine set the last plate down and brushed her hair behind her ear. “I'm doing okay,” she lied, standing upright and subconsciously adjusting her clothes. “I've just been studying a lot.”

“You're still doing the... alchemy thing?”

The fox nodded, crossing her arms under her chest. “Yeah. I'm getting it, but it's... slow. Everything is in thick books and written in old speech, so it's a chore just trying to put it into plain language and then do what it says. I'm just... I'm really close.”

Hunter listened attentively, his eyes on the raptor breast in front of him but his ears pointed towards her. “Have you made anything exciting yet?”

“Uh...” Cerine wriggled her muzzle, baring one fang. “Not really... technically I can't make any actual alchemy stuff until I can create a philosopher's stone. It's like an entrance exam, I guess, and it's what makes alchemy... alchemy. So I'm still practicing all the techniques. Inversion is really... hard to get my head around.”

“Well, if anyone can do it,” Hunter told her, smiling, “it would be you. To be honest, I have no idea what you're talking about. I've never heard anyone seriously talk about alchemy until you did a couple years ago. I always figured it was some backwards Old Kingdom thing or made up in movies or whatever. But if you're this into it, there must be something to it, huh? Guess it makes sense, if I think

about it. Everything's a little weird up here, with the woods and all..."

Cerine felt a warmth in her chest as he offered her praise, but it quickly crumpled under reality. The vixen lowered her head and licked her nose.

"I might have to give it up, though," she admitted.

Hunter looked up from his work. Cerine winced as his striped tail lowered slightly and his eyes filled with concern. She didn't want the attention.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Too late now. Cerine squeezed her eyes shut. "I can't afford it. Trying to find these books is expensive, and so are the ingredients. And the equipment. I can find some useful things in the Reach, but that takes time and I can't do that and have a full-time job all at once. I can't keep up with rent..."

The tiger was quiet. Cerine flattened her ears, waiting for him to yell at her and tell her how she'd messed everything up. That what she was trying to do was dumb. It probably was; a literal fantasy. But Hunter just moved the food from the grill onto a plate, and wiped his paws on his apron as he took it off.

"Let's eat," he told her.

They didn't talk a whole lot over dinner. At least, Cerine didn't. She'd never been especially talkative, and had grown more withdrawn over the last few years. So Hunter talked, and the fox listened. He chatted about Northend weather, and how Rachel and Gray were doing. Gray was set to graduate with his nursing degree next year. He asked Cerine if she took her spear with her into the Reach whenever she went. Of course she did. The meal was perfect, and Cerine had seconds, which the fatherly tiger was happy to give her.

After dinner, the tiger excused himself for a bit as Cerine got ready to leave. Snow was pelting the windows and she wanted to be home before conditions got worse. She had her coat around her shoulders when the tiger was coming back down the stairs, a barely-masked smile on his face.

"Think you'll be okay?" he asked. "I'd be happy to drive you."

"I'll be alright," she answered, loosing her long hair from the collar of her coat. "It's not that far of a walk."

Hunter nodded and opened up his arms. Cerine smiled sadly and hugged him, feeling his strong paws pat against her back. As they pulled from the hug, the tiger ran his paw down her arm until he found her wrist, and then he gripped firmly, holding her paw so he could place a folded bundle of bills in her palm. Cerine's eyebrows shot up as she eyed the money in her paw. Hard to tell from a glance, but it was a *lot*. Her jaw and heart both dropped and she almost fell.

"Mr. Et-" She winced, catching herself. She pushed the money back to him, tears beginning to roll down her pink cheeks. "Hunter... I can't. Please. I'm sorry I brought it up."

But Hunter placed his paw on top of hers and closed her fingers tight around the money with a smile. "Girl, it's yours. Take it."

"I can't..." Cerine insisted. Her heart was burning in her chest. "You are already too kind to me as it is."

Hunter sighed, lifting his other paw up and cradling Cerine's muzzle, making her look him in the eye. "Cerine, as far as I'm concerned, you're family. Especially because I know you... yeah. Anyways. It's yours. Don't you worry about a thing." He lowered his paw and pat the top of her knuckles. "I believe in you. You're going to succeed at this, and I know you're going to take care of everyone."

Cerine blinked. "What? Me?"

"Yes, you," he told her. He chuckled and licked one of his fangs. "Rachel's always... probably shouldn't be saying this, but she's always had a little crush on you."

The vixen blushed. She always kind of knew, but...

"Anyways, that's none of my business," Hunter said, waving his paw in the air to clear things. "I'm just a lonely old cat with no one left to dote on but my daughter's friend. You're a good girl for

giving me the time of day at all. So just take it for me, and do well. Take care of my kids for me. And if you need food, you call me, understand?"

Cerine nodded quickly. Tears were soaking her fur now, and she threw her arms around the tiger, squeezing him.

If she had any frame of reference at all, she would have thought the amber liquid in the glass in front of her was complete trash. But she didn't, so she sipped more of it, wondering what it would be like to drink something with actual alcohol in it. That was a *rich people* thing, and from what she knew there wasn't much of it left. Synthetic products were taking over the market, promising the same great taste but there was no way to prove them wrong. Sunlight hadn't hit the ground in over twenty years. Everything was synthetic now, from the drinks to the food bricks to the people.

Rienne had her tail curled tightly around her bar stool. Getting it stepped on more than a dozen times had made it an instinctive habit to keep it coiled near her body. She didn't even understand how people did it. How much *fluff* did you have to let your foot sink through before you actually realized you were hitting something? Fortunately the actual tail inside the fur was a small target, and the problem was mostly people standing on the fur without realizing it.

The wheat-and-salt fox had her elbows on the bar, eyes half-lidded and tired. Her leather jacket creaked around her muscles as she twisted and stretched. Work, gym, home, repeat. Tonight was a treat, spending some of her credits on a couple drinks down at a hole-in-the-wall bar. Behind her, holo-signs blazed in the windows, advertising the brands available to drink, but the inside of the place was dark and quiet. There was a small stage in the corner, a digital band made of light performing some song from before she was born. The advantage of holographic entertainment was it had a volume slider, and it was turned down to be barely audible over the din of talking and the race projected on the side wall. It was the only advantage.

Rienne finished her drink and pushed the cup away from her. The bartender, a heavysset wolf, came over and took the empty glass before putting down an ID scanner in front of her without a word. The vixen started to reach inside her jacket for her card when something touched her on the elbow. She turned to look and saw metal fingers against the leather of her jacket, and following them up the cybernetic limb, she found them attached to an orange-furred fox. He settled down on the stool beside her and turned the ID scanner towards him with a quick flick of his natural arm on his right side. His own card flashed in his mechanical paw and the scanner beeped happily. Then the card was gone again, tucked away into a hidden compartment inside his arm.

"Can I get you another?" he asked, offering her a wry grin.

Rienne looked the fox over. He was handsome, in a rakish way, and while chromed bits normally put her off, his weren't so... clean. Not a top of the line corporate job. His arm looked modified and refashioned. His white t-shirt was snug around his figure, with the left sleeve trimmed off so that it wouldn't catch in the mechanical parts of his arm. Or maybe it already had. The fox had scars in his fur, little canyons where the fur was parted around his muzzle and neck. His brown eyes were looking her over, too, patiently waiting.

"Sure," she replied with a small smile, twisting herself around to face him. Why not? Tilting her head, she gestured to his cybernetics. "Nice arm."

"Thanks," the fox purred, looking over his shoulder and holding up two fingers to the bartender. Turning back to Rienne, he flashed his fangs. "I think I can say the same but I'd have to get a better look. What do you bench?"

"Enough," she said coyly. The vixen took her refreshed drink and had another sip. "How about you?"

"More on the left than the right."

"I imagine you need a pretty iron-rich diet to see any gains on that thing."

"That's why I only eat the *cheeseburger surprise* bricks. The surprise is metal shavings."

Rienne put her cup down on the counter, struggling – and failing – to contain her laughter. But it bubbled out of her, every giggle dragging stress and fatigue out with it. The joke wasn't even that *funny*, but it hit her just right. She cackled like a mad vixen, drawing stares from other people at the bar. The fox next to her grinned wide as she doubled over on the bar, tears in her eyes as she laughed hard for the first time in ages.

Managing to finally pull herself together, Rienne shoved her stool back and unwrapped her tail from it. She grabbed the fox by the metallic wrist and gave him a tug.

“Come on. I'll give you a better look.”

- - - - -

She couldn't see down the stairs worth a damn. Not with the cardboard box in the way. Cerine took the basement steps slowly, trying to count them out in her head while the sound of her tail going *pofff-pofff-pofff* down the stairs behind her filled her ears. After a moment, her feet found cold concrete and she exhaled. The pads on her feet were cold, and she told herself for the dozenth time today she would need to put in some carpet or at least a rug down here.

Cerine set the box on a folding table in the corner of the basement. Everything else was stacked in boxes, or needing to be assembled. Most of it was her alchemy equipment, ready to be set up in a modest home lab. She'd bought the house almost entirely because of the (mostly) finished basement, because it provided her space to do her work at home. She could set up the equipment in one corner, and a library in the other, and still have space for storing ingredients and potions. She wasn't sure what to do with the space right next to the stairs, but she could figure that out eventually. The fox opened up the box she'd just been carrying. A sparkling, golden, slightly luminescent crystal sat inside of a bed of crumpled paper. It was her philosopher's stone, or alchemy stone. Cerine took it out and set it on a mat on the table, rubbing her thumb across the spot where she'd been shaving off small pieces to use in potions.

After a ton of hard work, study, and tears, she had finally managed to create her own stone. To think that something that many of the oldest books in her collection called legendary and impossible was sitting right in front of her; sometimes it still felt difficult to believe. With it, she was finally a fully fledged alchemist in her own right. And with some more work, it had proved lucrative. Cerine got her start making remedies for the townsfolk, and soon moved into making transformatives. Those she didn't mind charging a decent price for, since they were for fun. A lot of people wanted to try being fat or buff or all kinds of different things for a day.

So did she, when the mood struck her.

Cerine did a little more unpacking before she began to run out of steam again. It was exhausting doing all this herself. She could get the lab up and running tomorrow, and for now, she climbed back up the stairs to the rest of the house. It was nice and quiet, enough that the fox could hear the blood running through her ears. In the kitchen, she had her coffee maker plugged in by itself on the counter, and she ran herself another cup.

While she waited for it to brew, she looked out the back door and eyed the tree line on the far end of the property. It wasn't *quite* the border of the Sylvan Reach, but it was close. Close enough that the alchemist had her spear propped in the corner by the door, just in case. Weird and sometimes aggressive animals came out of the Reach every once in a while, which was why all Northenders learned to use spears for self-defense in school. And being over six feet tall, Cerine had ranked pretty well in her class.

She took her mug of warm coffee and wandered aimlessly around the house. Cerine poked her head into her bedroom, looking at all the boxes still needing to be unpacked with clothes and toiletries. Next to her room was a second bedroom, which she had no idea what to do with. A guest room, she supposed. As she stood in the spare room's doorway, holding her coffee in her paws, she sighed into the

emptiness. She must've been exhausted. Loneliness was nothing new to her, but her heart was feeling it today. Cerine pulled the guest room door shut and finished her coffee, walking back down the hall past the basement door.

Her butt vibrated. Cerine reached back and pulled her phone from her pocket. Rachel was calling her. The fox's eyes widened and her tail wiggled slightly. She slapped the answer button and put the phone up to her ear.

"Hey, Rachel," she greeted.

"Hey, big girl," the coyote replied. Again, over six feet tall. "You all moved in yet?"

Cerine put her mug in the kitchen sink. "No, not yet. Tons left to unpack."

"Well, if I knew sooner I could've come up to help. Gray probably can't get off work no matter what, though. How the hell he finds time to hit the gym, I have no idea."

"Who knows," Cerine agreed, settling on her back on the couch in the living room. "If you did want to come up for a weekend, I'll have a spare room set up..."

"Hey, that sounds fun."

A grin curled on the fox's muzzle and she played with the tip of her tail.

"I did actually want to ask you something," Rachel said.

"Yeah?"

"Actually, heh... I guess I have to tell somebody at some point, but I was just thinking, like... with it being spring, I was wondering if you'd like to come hiking with me and my girlfriend."

Cerine dropped her tail. Her heart, having come up into her throat to listen eagerly, now turned around and fled down into her stomach. "Girlfriend?"

"Mhmm. A couple months now. Honestly, I think you'd love her; she's gorgeous. She's a model – plus size model, which, y'know, doesn't mean all that much difference if you ask me. And she's a city girl, she thinks we were nuts living up in Northend. Maybe she's right. Like, have you still got your spear?"

Cerine bent her head backwards and looked into the kitchen, where the spear was propped beside the door. "Yeah..."

"She thinks that's the weirdest thing. And I'm like, 'Girl, people at the mall wear swords! And they don't even *need* them!' Oh, shit, I need to ask her if she's ever modeled any. I dunno. She mostly does clothes, but you'd buy a sword if a pretty tig- Oh! Okay, so here's the funny thing. I haven't told dad or Gray yet, but... she's a tigyote. Fucking crazy, right?"

"That... is, yeah, crazy..."

"I have no idea how I'm going to tell either of them. It's gonna be awkward." Rachel paused for a moment. Maybe she realized Cerine had gone quiet. "But yeah... think you'd be interested? We'd love to have you come with us. Maybe we could go camping overnight, too. Just the three of us?"

Cerine took a while to answer. She looked up at – and through – her ceiling. "Yeah... sure."

"Awesome! Wow, this is exciting, me and my girls out somewhere together..." Rachel paused a bit, and Cerine wondered what she was thinking. "But it'd be nice if, y'know..."

"Huh?"

Rachel just sighed and Cerine swore she could audibly hear the coyote shaking her head. "Nothing, I was just feeling kinda nostalgic for a second."

Cerine exhaled. "Hey, I should get back to unpacking..."

"Oh, yeah, sure! I just wanted to ask you that. We can talk details soon. Sienna's gonna be excited, too. I told her about you and she's eager to meet you. Anyways, talk to you soon, big girl!"

The fox hung up the phone, forgetting to say goodbye. She dropped the phone onto her belly and just lay on her back for a while, letting her thoughts drift aimlessly in the air around her head as she just existed. In her empty house. Alone.

The rain was getting in her eyes, slicking her hair down onto her face and the top of her muzzle.

It ran black through her gold fur. The rain that came down from the clouds was always black now, like ink. It dribbled from her leather sleeves and soaked her jeans. Rienne felt it in her ears and the beds of her claws.

The crowd roared around her as another brave soul stepped forward to try to humble the fox. The gang had her completely surrounded in the alley. They wanted her to join up, but she refused. She wanted no part of it. Rienne breathed heavily, watching the leopard through the blackened rain. His fur was slick and darkened and his clothes tainted as they soaked through. The big cat had weight on her, and she was getting exhausted. The gang crowded in tighter. They'd take turns beating her down until she gave in. But the vixen was tall, and strong. She narrowed her eyes and turned her gaze sideways just for a moment, glaring at the chromed fox in the crowd, her now ex-boyfriend. The fox squinted back hard at her. Rienne snapped her eyes back to the leopard as he rushed forward.

And she was very, very angry...

She sidestepped a punch and ducked another, lashing out with the heel of her palm and catching the cat's muzzle. His head snapped backwards with his momentum, causing him to stumble and drop to all fours. Rienne reared back and delivered a kick into his ribs. And another. She wasn't fighting fair. She wasn't *going* to. This was going to end only one way, and she was bent on dealing damage like a hellhound before it happened.

The leopard got his feet and came at her again, learning his lesson and having his guard ready. He jabbed, quick thrusts pushing her back until she was near the wall of onlookers behind her. One person grabbed her sopping wet tail and others shoved against her back, shouting curses in her ears. Rienne yanked her tail from their grip and it slung black water into the leopard's eyes. In the momentary distraction, she clocked his muzzle again with a left hook. The leopard flailed wildly with his arms, claws extended. One snagged the fox's muzzle and tore, and she hissed in pain. She tasted blood on her tongue. Snarling, she kicked the leopard again, under his guard, getting him in the stomach and pushing him back and down.

The leopard caught himself on one knee. "Fuck this," he growled, reaching to his ankle and pulling out a switchblade from his pant leg. The slick edge glittered in neon light. Cold lanced through Rienne's veins as the cat glared daggers at her. There was a change in the voices around them, becoming more erratic and uncomfortable, but no one stepped forward.

Rienne reached to her hip and grabbed her own knife. She held it down low, out of sight, her right paw extended in a fist. The leopard lunged, and Rienne kept him at bay with her paw, shuffling back from his swings. She grabbed his wrist and twisted, pointing the blade away from her, but the leopard used his weight on her, grabbing her with his free paw and wrestling her to the ground. He was on top of her, bringing his knife around as he pinned her down with his weight.

The sky flashed as purple lightning lanced from the sky, striking one of the buildings in the block. Lights went dark everywhere as the power overloaded. The leopard howled in the dark and warmth covered Rienne's paw. She kicked him off her, leaving him to writhe on the ground, clutching his side. She didn't stab him; he'd fallen onto her knife as he tried to pin her. But she knew the second the lights came back on things would get vastly more dangerous.

The lights did come back on, but not the way anyone hoped. Green flashed down the alleyway as police cars flared their lights and sirens on the road at the mouth of the alley. Heavy mechanical whirring and the stomping of metal feet echoed in everyone's ears as a living nightmare emerged from the dark, floodlights stabbing through the rain. The mech leveled its cannons as a dire threat while armored officers surrounded it on foot, the speakers in their helmets barking orders and demands.

Chaos exploded. The gang tried to break and run, throwing each other over in an panic in the cornered alley. Rienne climbed to her feet and shoved others out of her way, running for a tall fence in the back. Claws sank into the wood as she hauled herself up, shoving the blade of her knife into a gap in the planks until she could grasp the top. Her muscles burned, but she dragged herself – and her wet tail – over the top, dropping down in a heap on the other side. There was still chaos and noise on the

other side of the fence, and Rienne pulled herself to her feet.

She ran down the alleyways, staying in the dark and putting as much distance between herself and the raid. Eventually her legs gave out, her lungs burning and her muscles tightening in her ankles and her knees. The vixen crawled onto a back stoop behind a storefront shop, panting and gasping in the dark.

The cold fluorescent light above her head flickered on again, shining down unsympathetically on her in the rain and darkness. Her paw was still squeezing her knife handle as tight as it could, knuckles locked into place. It took will and effort to open her grip and let the weapon tumble to her feet. Rienne's shirt was stained with blood. Gathering herself, she pulled off her jacket and ripped off her shirt, ditching it in a dumpster behind the shop. She grabbed her knife from the puddle at her feet and replaced it in its sheath. Then she zipped up the jacket and stepped around the alley and onto the sidewalk beside the remorseless auto-road.

She didn't remember the rest of the night. The next thing she knew, she was laying on her couch in her apartment, half-dressed and fur matted with rain. And she had her knife and its sheath clutched against her bare stomach.

- - - - -

Fuck... fuck... fuck...

None of the clothes she had were big enough. Even her largest clothes were too small. Winter sometimes hit her hard, with a pinch of depression on the side, and she blew up to be relatively chubby, but she'd never been *that* big. Cerine had a huge pile of “will not fit” clothes on her bed, and she was throwing more of them onto it by the second as she emptied her dresser. Finally, she found a pajama shirt that was big enough to contain her tits. It could handle a belly, she guessed. At least for now.

Cerine grabbed the edge of the dresser and heaved, pulling her body upright. She *had* gained weight recently, but it was a little more... localized. The pink fox in the dresser mirror in front of her had a golden cowbell hanging from a black choker on her neck. It had simply *appeared* on her one day, unable to come off no matter how hard she tried. It was like someone was playing a cosmic joke on her, because it simply manifested a little while after her boobs spontaneously exploded in size. Her heavy bust wobbled back and forth under her as she hunched over the dresser. She still wasn't really used to them yet. Apparently she was a “dairy fox,” a rare genetic condition that passed down red foxes. The effects sometimes didn't express themselves until adulthood, and now the fox was struggling to fit into T-cup bras.

As the fox paused to catch her breath, she glanced sideways at the wolf skull mask sitting on her dresser. She'd found it in the woods with Rachel and Sienna earlier this year and had just... never gotten rid of it.

“What are you grinning at,” she muttered, pulling herself upright and bouncing her boobs into a better fit in her alchemically-treated sports bra. Maybe she'd have to soak some clothes in stretch solution as a stopgap, but she doubted that would be very comfortable. Cerine scooped up the possibly-fitting clothes in her arms and stepped out of her bedroom. The guest room door was cracked open slightly, and the pink fox slowly bumped it with a hip to push it open.

She was still trying to get her head around what had happened. Cerine had been trying to work on a weight loss formula. Then she stumbled. Somehow, there were a couple other mixtures involved, knocked over into her mixture, and her dark chocolate snack had fallen in, too. Next thing she knew... there were two of her.

The other vixen was sitting on the edge of the guest bed, wrapped up in a sheet for modesty. She looked almost identical to Cerine, except her fur was a dark, rich chocolate color, with a cocoa powder colored tummy and chin. She also weighed about two hundred pounds heavier. But beyond that, their faces were uncannily similar. They were the same height, and both of their tails were uncannily huge.

The other vixen's hair hung down over her back and shoulders, as long as Cerine's but messier and uncombed. She also looked slightly younger, but maybe that was because she was only a few hours old.

And she was understandably confused. She didn't have a name, she didn't know where she was, and from what she'd told Cerine so far, her memories were a hazy blur of things Cerine knew and experienced. And she was scared, which Cerine could empathize with right now. The chocolate vixen looked up at her as she came back in and brushed her long hair back behind her shoulder. Her eyes were a beautiful emerald green.

"Okay, some of these might work..." Cerine told her, putting the pile beside her on the bed and holding up various garments. "At least... until I can go get you something in your size."

The cloned vixen sniffled and picked up a pajama shirt, looking at it like she knew what it was but it was somehow completely new to her. It looked like it... might fit.

"I'm hungry," the chocolate vixen said quietly.

"Fuck," Cerine sighed, and the other fox shrank slightly. Cerine held her paws out in apology, her fingers trembling. "Sorry... sorry... I'm sorry... Yes, I'm sure you must be hungry by now. I'll... let me go fix something. You try those on, okay?"

"Okay..."

Cerine stepped out of the guest bedroom and immediately diverted to her own room instead of heading to the kitchen. Her brain was boiling. She slid into the bathroom and then the shower stall and pushed the door shut. Here, alone, she sank down to her butt, shoulder deep in her own tail, and she buried her muzzle into her arms and chest. Stress and uncertainty and fear exploded out of her all at once, and she sobbed into her sleeves.

What had she done?

What the fuck was she going to do?

How could she explain this to anyone?

She wasn't prepared for this...

Cerine cried until her skull hurt. She let it all out. It didn't make her feel better, but she calmed down substantially. After what felt like forever, Cerine finally pulled herself back to her feet, dragging her breast-weight upwards with her. She opened the shower door and rest her chest on the bathroom sink as she cleaned herself back up.

But as she did, she heard crying coming from the other room. The fox pivoted her ears and pushed her glasses back up her muzzle. She headed back out to the hallway and swallowed hard before nudging the guest room door open again. The other vixen was there, half-dressed, sobbing into her paws.

"Hey," Cerine asked, stepping over and kneeling down beside her doppelganger. She rest a paw on the humonculus's shoulder. "What's wrong?"

What a stupid question.

"You hate me," the other vixen wheezed between sobs. "I'm just a burden. Why am I even here..."

It felt like ice lodged itself in Cerine's heart. Maybe she hadn't been as quiet as she thought, or the other vixen was simply picking up on her own feelings of stress and it was causing a feedback loop. She grit her fangs and swallowed hard. Pushing herself up again, she sat down on the bed next to the other fox. Awkwardly, she put her arms around her. The vixen looked up at her, eyes red and puffy. It looked like she might, for a moment, pull away, but then her shoulders slumped, and she leaned into the pink vixen holding her.

"It's okay," Cerine told her. "I'm sorry... You're not a burden." She hugged the chubby fox against her upper chest and held her head. "Look, I'll... I'm going to fix some food. And we'll watch a movie. We'll just... calm down a bit. Everything will be okay. Don't worry. I'm going to take care of everything..."

"Okay," the other vixen whispered, and her heart rate seemed to slow.

Cerine let her go, and headed this time to the kitchen, still struggling to keep her strong face on despite everything. She just... she had to. There wasn't any other way to put it than that. She had to be strong. It wasn't like she hadn't had practice before. But as she reached into the cabinet to grab a plate, her fingers instinctively wrapped around just one. She stopped. And manually moved her thumb to pick up two of them.

As she set the plates down on the counter, side by side, she couldn't stifle a smile.

- - - - -

“We've got just one more hour left in the year, isn't that right? What an exciting time. I just can't wait, I've got jitters in my tail, and I hope all of you at home do, too. So sit back, relax, and enjoy the Heaven Homegoods New Years' Eve Show. We've got another episode of Trading Houses coming up right after the break, and plenty of musical guests to follow as we round out this difficult year. And remember, when you're opening up gifts with your loved ones, just think of all the ways Heaven Homegoods can make your next year a heavenly one.”

Rienne's empty stare at the projected image on the wall could've bored a hole through it and into the kitchen. The shows were always the same dumb shit. The message was always about how some *thing* improved everyone's life and solved their relationship problems. Rienne was pretty sure a blender wouldn't make her happy. What was she going to blend? She looked down at her coffee table. There was a plate topped with a waxy yellow block of food that she had cut into slices in the appearance of finger food for the holiday. Beside it was a bottle of “tea” she got from the store, as per tradition. Next to both of those was her cadet hat, laying upside down, and her game console loaded with *StarKnights*, as usual. She rested her elbow on her knee and sighed, letting her eyes close for a minute. Why was she even bothering to stay up...

A boom outside the apartment made her jump. She sat up, twisting around on her couch and parting the blinds with her fingertips. A bright burst of colored sparks flared above the building, the blue motes spinning around one another before fading away.

“Fireworks?” she whispered, furrowing her brow.

She jumped up from the couch and headed to the front door, instinctively grabbing her sheathed knife from the couch beside her and hooking it onto her belt. When she pulled open the front door, she was hit with a blast of arctic wind. It was snowing this year, with thick black flakes covering everything and making the night even darker than it already was. Inches of snow crunched underneath the vixen's foot pads as she stepped onto the high walkway and braced her paws on the rail in front of her.

Down in the space in front of the apartment, a family was crouching around a little hole dug in the black snow. It was an older coyote and two kids bundled in coats beside him. A female coyote was hanging back a few feet, deeply snuggled into a heavy jacket. The father helped the kids load a charge into the plastic tube and then they ran back, giggling, and waited for the firework to go off. It was loud in Rienne's ears as it shot into the air and then burst above the buildings in a shower of red sparks. The kids cheered and clapped happily, tugging on their dad's jacket to do another.

But sirens sounded half a block away, and green flashing filled the darkness where the black snow wasn't coating everything. The police car pulled up on the sidewalk nearby and the coyotes quickly scooped up their kids and rushed out of sight. Rienne watched them go from up above, and then turned her eyes towards the armored officers trudging through the snow to where the firework had gone off. They spotted her – gold against black, obviously – watching them and pointed.

“Hey, you there! Fox!” The officer in front turned up the volume on his helmet. His rifle was held low across his breastplate. “Did you see who was doing this? It's past curfew.”

Rienne scratched her ear. “It was two kids,” she explained, “an opossum and a fox. I didn't recognize them. Don't think they lived here.”

The officers looked around, their helmet lights unable to see much in the blackened snow coating the ground. “Where'd they go?”

“Fuck if I know, I don't have headlights.”

One of them shined their light directly up at her face and she snarled against the bright light. She may have pushed a bit too far with that one, but the police just confiscated the fireworks tube and returned to their car. Rienne blinked the spots away and ran her paw through her hair. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the coyote family creeping up onto the third floor of the apartment building, about six doors down. While the mother unlocked the door and ushered the kids inside, the father raised his paw and waved gratefully to the vixen. She nodded back with a smile and stepped back inside her own dormitory.

Sitting back on her couch, she picked up a piece of the food block for dinner and settled back into the cushions. Chewing on a bite, she thought about the coyotes having fun outside, risking curfew just to be a family for a little while. Rienne sighed, laying her head on the back of the couch and closing her eyes.

Right then, in the dark midwinter, she had no idea of the adventure that was going to await her in the near future, when she'd be whisked away from this gloom and loneliness and thrown into a world of light. But for now, she just tried to ignore the hole in her heart that couldn't be fixed by buying more home appliances.

- - - - -

She set the box down on the bed, listening to the various things inside rattle around inside it. They weren't packed well. She had grabbed things and threw them in without really thinking about it.

Megan paused to catch her breath, huffing softly. Why did this apartment have to be up on the third floor... Wiping her face with the sleeve of her shirt, the wolfess took a break, wandering over to her window and pulling the curtain back. Northend greeted her, all bright and green in spring. It was nice to see her hometown again. She'd been away for what felt like forever at this point. Familiar landmarks were right where she remembered them. Same old busses going around the edges of the inner town, where cars were kept. Megan looked for the school and the old diner. She saw the former in the distance, but couldn't spot the latter. Either it wasn't visible from here or it was gone.

She stepped away from the window, catching a glimpse of her reflection in her standing mirror. There was a fat wolfess in it. Megan wriggled her muzzle and kept walking, going back to the box on the bed. As her paws reached for the flaps, something fell over in the apartment next to hers and her neighbor swore loudly. It was like a jolt running through her body, and she froze, trying to will herself invisible.

Habit. Pure habit. Megan squeezed her eyes shut and slowly pushed the tension back out of her body. She'd come home for a reason. Swallowing, she opened the box in front of her. There were books and mementos in it, along with a stack of picture frames. She tossed a couple with her ex aside, but the one beneath those caught her eye. The wolfess lifted it up and took a look.

There was a... well, a thinner wolfess in it. Megan was never *skinny* but back in high school she was nicely curvy. It was a group photo of her and her old friends, all together and happy in a town park on a spring day. Rachel and Gray were on one side – actually, their mom took the photo, she was pretty sure – with Axis hovering uncomfortably nearby, hating being photographed. Megan was sitting on a stump near the middle, and the wolfess's thumb was sitting on top of a tall, pink stick with the biggest, fluffiest tail she'd ever seen.

Megan sat down on her bed, feeling her belly press like a weight onto her thighs. Nostalgia was flowing through her now, looking at all her friends. She wondered if Cerine was still in town, even after all this time. Maybe they could catch up. But the thought filled her with a hollow feeling. Megan ran her tongue across her teeth and frowned. What could she even say?

She looked at herself again in the photo. The younger wolfess looked happy, and her hair was dyed purple around her shoulders. Oh, right, she used to do that. It matched her golden eyes. She hadn't done anything fun like that in ages...

Megan put the picture down, grabbed her keys, and left the apartment. Who the fuck would stop her now? Nobody. Not anymore. She went down to the corner shop beside her building and skimmed the shelves for hair dyes, finding a nice shade of purple that would look good against her eyes. It had a pretty tiger-coyote hybrid with a colorful streak in her hair on the box, so Megan guessed it was pretty good. With it in paw, she set it down on the front counter, and the raccoon working there looked at it, then up at her, and then shook her head.

“Oh, no, you don't want this one,” the raccoon said, gesturing at Megan's dark hair. “Hang on, I'll get you something way better.”

Megan waited, confused, as the raccoon returned with a homemade-looking bottle. “What's this?” she asked, taking it and looking it over.

“I mean, it's dye, but it's a lot better than the stuff you'd get from brands,” the clerk explained, leaning on her elbows. She had vibrant green streaks in her hair, so she probably knew her stuff. “This is made by the town alchemist, actually. I had her make some up for me then I figured I'd put some in the store. It's incredible.”

The wolfess bared half her teeth, unconvinced. “Alchemist? That's like... fantasy game stuff.”

“There's giant sea monsters and an evil forest and you think alchemy is weird? You sound like you're from the south.”

I used to live next to this 'evil forest,' thank you, Megan thought. “Okay, but who on earth does alchemy?”

“Eh, she comes around sometimes. Really tall, big tail.” She paused a moment as she rung up the dye. “She's one of the, uh... winter red foxes, that's it. Fucking weirdo, though, to be honest. Getting more than two words out of her is a pain.”

Megan's heart stopped. “What... is her name?”

- - - - -

Cerine felt her phone buzzing in her coat pocket, but she just wanted to finish this thought. The fox's claws clattered on the keyboard as she wrote down the formula she'd just tested, and all the results that it had revealed for her. The phone continued buzzing as she wrote up her findings. Then eventually it stopped, letting her finish writing in peace. The fox pulled her chair in closer to the desk, hefting her fat tits and resting them on the surface of her desk to reach over them better and keep typing. A few more paragraphs and she'd be done.

The fox was so engrossed in her work that she didn't hear her phone continue to buzz in her pocket. The quiet, dim basement echoed with the sound of claws on keys. Eventually she got all her thoughts out and finally leaned back into her seat, boobs dragging off the desk and filling into her lap with a wobble. There were seven missed calls waiting for her in her pocket, all from Erin. They spanned the last forty-five minutes.

She even had a text message: *quit working its new years*

Cerine smiled, dropping her phone back into her pocket. She saved her work and turned off the computer monitor. Rising from her chair, the alchemist headed back upstairs, adjusting her hair and her glasses on her muzzle. She left her lab coat on as she opened the door and stepped out into the hallway, smelling the fresh scent of warm New Years' fortune cakes. *Winter Tails* was playing on TV and the lights were hung up around the door between the living room and the kitchen. A large pile of presents was stacked on the coffee table in the living room, and Cerine followed her nose into the kitchen.

There was a spread of food out on the dining table, with two figures happily fussing over it all. The first was a tall, overweight vixen, with chocolate fur and braided hair, wearing a green apron over

her holiday sweater. Erin was pointing out all the dinner treats, a happy smile on her face, to their guest. Her enormous tail excitedly swept back and forth across the kitchen floor, and she looked up to see Cerine hovering in the doorway to the kitchen. She shot her sister an exasperated look with a smile, paws on her hips.

The other figure was shorter, not quite as round as the fox but filling her clothes with more than a little healthy winter weight. Dyed purple hair spilled over her shoulders, and she picked up a dusted jelly dough knot. As Erin looked up, the wolfess perked her ears and turned around. Megan barely had time to swallow her bite of food before she found herself buried in vixen, arms around her waist and her chin propped on top of a heavy bust. The chubby wolfess's tail wagged excitedly as she pressed her lips against her girlfriend's and sank into her.

"I didn't know you were here yet," Cerine told her, grinning and running her fingers through the wolf's dyed hair.

"Well, you don't let me down there," the wolfess shot back, "and we apparently can't get you to come up!" She pushed the rest of her snack into her muzzle. With her paws full, she was defenseless as the vixen grabbed her belly and squeezed it, forcing her to squirm and dance out of reach to avoid being loved on physically any more. Gulping down her mouthful, she hissed, "Quit that!"

"No," Cerine replied, winking. She scooped up a treat of her own before looking up at Erin. "Is Rie here?"

The chocolate vixen nodded. "Yeah, I picked her up earlier, so she's... somewhere." She bit her lip and turned back to arranging the dinner spread. "She was pretty quiet, though, so..."

Cerine raised an eyebrow. Not like her, she thought. "Alright. Megan, help out Erin for me, okay?"

"I already was, but sure thing."

The pink fox turned around and stepped back into the doorway between the kitchen and front room. It was a little dark in there, and she must have missed Rienne earlier. The gold-furred vixen was standing by the front windows, looking outside into the heavy blizzard piling white snow against the house and the cars. Her body language was hard and guarded, and she had on a black tank top and torn jeans, the tension in her well-muscled shoulders and triceps plain to see even in the dark. Cerine walked around the coffee table and stood beside her golden "sister," curling her own tail around hers by way of greeting. Rienne's ears perked and she glanced sideways at the dairy fox beside her. Her face was an uncanny mirror of Cerine's, fur and eye color aside. They looked even more alike than Cerine and Erin did. By now, they'd been able to get used to it, and it didn't really bother any of them anymore.

"Hey," Rienne said, quietly, offering a small smile.

Cerine held up the dough knot she'd swiped from the kitchen. The golden fox took it and exhaled.

"I was trying to resist," she sighed. "I've jigged every New Years' since I... got here."

"It's a holiday, pig out."

Rienne shook her head with a smile and ate the treat.

Cerine watched the snow fall outside for a moment. "Are you alright?"

Her sister closed her eyes and inhaled, swelling out her muscular chest. "Yeah." It was a lie. Cerine knew it, because it was exactly what *she'd* say. "It just gets to me sometimes, thinking about everything from... before. I had a nightmare the other night and thought I was back there."

"Back in your... city?" Cerine asked, cutting her gaze sideways towards the other vixen with the shorter hair, smaller chest, but identical face.

"Yeah." Rienne looked down at her watch, her only belonging she'd brought with her aside from her knife. The black face of the device on her wrist had never turned on again, but she wore it all the same. "I think I'm forgetting a lot of it, but then it all pops back up in the middle of the night. And it makes me think about everything now, and it just feels... I don't know, weird."

"Weird..." Cerine rolled the word around her muzzle and let it hang in the air for a moment.

“Everything is weird now. I'm a cow, my clone is cooking dinner, I turned my girlfriend into a werewolf, and I'm standing beside *myself*.” Cerine snorted a laugh. “I don't think I could write anything dumber if I tried. Or maybe I could: 'Welcome to Northend, land of the fucking weird.’”

Rienne snickered, wrapping her arms tight under her chest again. “I guess.”

“But,” Cerine breathed, adjusting her glasses, “my life was just... nothing before I had any of you in it.” She reached over and placed her paw on Rienne's shoulder. “So I'm glad you're here with me.”

The wheat-colored fox's mouth curled slowly across her muzzle. Her chest hitched, first with a sob, and then a laugh. Rienne squeezed her eyes shut and looked down, sniffing hard. Cerine pulled her “sister” down into a hug and held her tight as the snow fell outside, twisting their tails together affectionately.

From the kitchen doorway, four eyes were watching them from a distance. “It's a New Years' miracle,” Erin whispered, giggling. Beside her, Megan just rolled her eyes and munched on another treat.

* * * * *

A big thank you to all my Patreon subscribers! You guys are making this possible!

Bronze Supporters

Caberea Alaskas Cobalt Commanding_Offurcer DatSquishCat Dymios D Gonkulous
Embiggening Productions Ivy mikefoxtrot MoffThePanda moxiclean Nothing_to_see_here
Poshkip Prairie SpicyPaint srd12 Teres The Mighty Helix Zeata

Silver Supporters

Benjamin Carjack Attack ChocEnd Ghost Fox Helinon
JT Kozani mawzNpaws Mechafox Muttcakes Mrben277
Rogue Wolf Shifter55 SphericalNathan Sprectra

Foxyfriends

DashRaptor Foxxel Indigo Jack