

Twice as Much Fox, pt. 2

A Story in Arvos

by Cerine Hero

Zaress felt something jump on top of her in the middle of the night, startling her awake.

Whoever it was, they were pretty light, so her first instinct was to grab Mito by the waist and toss her, but it wasn't Mito. The drake blearily opened her eyes as she growled, seeing a wild mane of white hair framing a pink face above her. There was a vixen – a very slender vixen – on top of her in the bed, and she was glowing brightly in excitement. She was also very naked, which all in all was not a terrible surprise to be woken up by. Zaress blinked and slid her hands up Cerine's skinny arms to her shoulders.

“You actually did it,” the drake whispered, smiling and holding the fox's jaw to pull her down into a kiss, but the vixen resisted.

“I did,” Cerine explained, “but not without, uhm... some complications.”

Zaress narrowed her slitted eyes. “What does that mean...? Why do you reek of chocolate?”

“Well, I made an elixir that took all the fat out of me.” Cerine looked down at her breasts and hips. “Or most of it. I do still seem to have some curves. Might get you to help me bolster these back up some...”

“Focus.”

“Right. Fuck. Yes.” Cerine sat her butt on Zaress and rubbed her muzzle, her eyes distant, as if she was trying to put her words together. “I may have... uh... accidentally... made a humonculus.”

Zaress lowered her eyebrows. “A what?”

“An alchemical person. She's... in the lab. That's where all the fat went. A bunch of my experimental elixirs for trying to lose weight fell over into my cauldron, where I was making some bases. And when I went to go reduce the heat on it, because it was boiling, I fumbled the chocolate you gave me into it. Then... I don't know what happened, the whole damn thing blew up, because an obese vixen burst out of it! And this is the weirdest part... she looks just like me. Mostly. Her fur is brown.”

The drake just stared blankly at the fox. “Your fat turned into a person...?”

“Let me explain better.”

Half an hour earlier, in the lab, Cerine was busy scrambling backwards across the chocolate-covered stone floor in order to get far away from her doppelganger. The fat vixen, similarly, was just as shocked as she was, if not more so, but she wasn't doing as good a job at backing away. Her fur was extremely slick with chocolate, and she jiggled heavily from her excess of fat, so she didn't get very far.

It was weird enough that someone had exploded out of Cerine's cauldron. It was much stranger for that person to also be *her*, in most ways. Except for her fur and eye color – and their sizes, now – the other vixen looked just like her. She had Cerine's long hair, even though it was brown, and their tails and muzzles were the same length.

“What do you mean I'm you?” the fatter vixen asked, gulping. She blinked and looked all around herself, taking in the alchemy lab. She even *sounded* like Cerine. “Where... is this? How did I get here?”

Cerine held up a paw, rolling herself up onto her rump and struggling to pull her way-too-large pants back up after scooting over the floor. “Wait. You came from somewhere else? Where was it?”

The other vixen's mouth opened to answer, but she hesitated. Her brow furrowed and she looked frightened. “I... I don't know. I feel like I was somewhere, but when I try to think of it, I can't picture it. I can't picture anywhere.” She pushed back her wet hair with a fat paw and looked around some more. “But this place... *feels* familiar, I guess, if I think about it. Where is this?”

“This is my alchemy lab,” Cerine answered. Slowly, she pushed herself to her feet and took a careful step towards the big vixen. The brown-furred fox was scared, and Cerine felt an urge to comfort her. Maybe it was just her nature, but part of it felt like... responsibility. “I'm not sure why you'd find it

familiar, unless you studied here back when the school was open. But that was a decade ago. Do you know alchemy?"

"I don't... think so."

"Maybe we should start simpler," Cerine said. She extended one black paw and held it out towards the fox. The other vixen took it and together they hauled the quarter-ton woman up onto her feet. "There's a couple seats over here you can sit on. I was using them before I... uh, slimmed down."

The other vixen waddled over to the chairs and sat down. She was still nude, and blushing, she cupped her arms around her bare breasts to hide her nipples. Cerine barely even noticed before the vixen covered herself. She was too distracted by the strange circumstances, and to be perfectly honest, the vixen was just her own reflection in the mirror for the last week or so, ever since they'd come back from their latest adventure in the wild. It was just odd seeing herself in brown and tan instead of pink, white, and black.

"What's your name?" the other fox asked before Cerine could get a chance to.

"Why don't we start with yours first," Cerine countered.

"I... don't know. I have one; I'm trying to think of it. But nothing's coming."

"Is it another you 'feel' kind of thing?"

"Yes. That's it. I swear I've got a name, but... I don't know what it is."

Cerine rubbed her chin. The wheels were turning in her head. She pat her chest, looking directly into the other vixen's green eyes while she said, "My name is Cerine."

The other fox blinked and furrowed her brow. It was almost a look of recognition, but... not quite. "That's a pretty name. I feel like I know it. It makes me think... no, I don't know."

"Do you have family? Anyone I could contact?"

She looked like she was going to say both yes and no, and then shook her head. "I can't think of anything. What's wrong with me?"

"You might have amnesia," Cerine told her, rocking back and forth across the balls of her feet, "but I want to look something up first. While I do that, here. You wear all these. They don't fit me at all, but I suspect they'll fit *you*."

Cerine pulled her baggy clothes off and handed them over to the brown fox. They were mildly stained with chocolate from the cauldron, but so was she, so it didn't make much difference as she got dressed with Cerine's help. The alchemist wrapped a padded, protective coat she kept around for mixing volatile chemicals around herself as she looked through the books on her desk. Where did she put it... there it was: the *Alchemis Arcanus*. A book of occult and supposedly magical alchemy compositions, but it might just actually have some insight on what Cerine was suspecting. The obese vixen watched over her shoulder as she flipped through the pages, looking for something she'd read a long time ago.

"What is all that?" the big vixen asked, leaning in a bit more and inadvertently pushing some of her weight against Cerine's side.

"It's alchemy," Cerine explained, "or, well... this isn't *real* alchemy, it's nonsense. I think. But I'm looking for..." She flipped the page again and found it: an treatise on humonculi, living things created by alchemical means. Back when she first got the book, she'd skimmed this section, believing it all to be ridiculous, but with one possibly standing right next to her, it was worth re-reading.

According to the text, humonculi were created by mixing either bits of constituent matter of life, which was a list of nonsense ingredients, or a bit of a person's form, into a brew. The exact formula seemed to be more speculative and flexible than distinct, which Cerine considered to just be speculation on the text's part, but it went on to explain that the creation of a humonculus from a person's being was extremely dangerous, as the brewing of the humonculus would siphon off a great deal of the subject's body mass, typically resulting in death. Cerine, fortunately, had plenty to spare, and since her weight-loss potions had been mixed in accidentally, that was probably why the vixen was made entirely out of her adipose tissue. The chocolate falling into the cauldron made up the rest,

explaining the peculiar color of her fur and hair.

Cerine read further, curious to see what a humonculus's mental state was. She'd assumed they would be mindless, and she was right – for constructed humonculi. For a clone, like the obese vixen, it claimed that they inherited their creator's *spirit*, if not their conscious knowledge. That explained why she thought she could remember things. She had Cerine's personality and conditioning, but not her memories.

“Did you find out anything?” she asked, startling Cerine out of her reading. “Oh, I'm sorry! You were just... reading for a while, and I'm curious, too.”

“It's okay,” Cerine replied, rubbing her muzzle. “So I'm not exactly sure how to start explaining this, but I created you.”

“...Created?”

Cerine turned and directed the vixen's attention towards the shattered parts of her cauldron on the floor. “You came out of that a little bit ago. And all of this-” she poked the vixen's belly through her tunic “-was mine. Here, you can read this if you want. I can't promise it'll make a lot of sense, but it should explain it.”

She pushed her book over to the obese fox, who took it and started to look over the text. Cerine felt bad for being surprised that she could read. Well, that was good, at least! Maybe she had all of her subconscious knowledge. She was probably pretty sharp, once she was less utterly confused.

“Actually, why don't you wait here,” Cerine told her, putting a paw on her shoulder.

The heavier fox looked at her, green eyes going wide. “You're going to leave me here?”

“Just a second! I need to tell everybody else about you. So I will be right back, and I'll have Zaress with me, so we can discuss what we can do about you.”

Cerine stood up from the desk and trotted away, her tail swishing from underneath her padded coat. She left the lab, leaving the brown vixen to sit alone on the two seats necessary to prop up her backside. The fox wished she knew what was going on. Her head spun from what Cerine told her.

She was... made? That couldn't be right, she was from... someplace. Try as she might, she couldn't remember anything from before now. Even focusing all of her thoughts on trying to think of her home, she could barely yield some blurry images of tall trees and other foxes. There was... snow? But that was the most she could get. She couldn't even recall the place's name. Or her own name.

The vixen read the book, like Cerine suggested. She read about humonculi, how they were created, and what they were. She learned they were alchemical life-forms, but hardly any different from any others. At least, the ones made like her were. She both did and didn't understand the language in the book. Some of it made sense without thinking about it, but if she stopped and tried to remember what those words meant, they fluttered away. Cerine didn't seem to think too highly of the book, either way, so the vixen pushed it away and held her head in her paws. She was getting a headache trying to think about all this. Maybe some air would do her good. Cerine asked her to stay put, but she wouldn't go far.

She hefted her weight off the seats and waddled over to the door, feeling her immensely fat body jiggle with every step. That was another confusing thing Cerine said, that all this fat had been hers. What did she mean by that? These were her clothes, too, and they'd been so big and baggy on her when she first saw her. But as far as the vixen could figure, she'd always been this big. Okay, she really needed air. The lab was stifling and smelled way too much of chocolate.

The fox pulled open the door and stepped out into an old building, like a schoolhouse or something. There were stairs leading up on one side and a hallway on the other, and more doors than she could count. Which one led outside? The one on her left. She took two steps towards it before halting in her tracks, wondering how she knew that. She'd never been here before in her life.

“What's that smell?” came a male voice, descending the stairs. The vixen squeaked in alarm, turning to see a muscular coyote-tiger mix coming down the steps. He was stripped to his waist,

wearing only a pair of brown trousers to cover any of his striped, gray fur, and his hair was pulled back into a ponytail. The hybrid looked bleary-eyed at the fox for a moment before blinking. “Cerine? Did you dye your fur? By the gods, that chocolate smell is...”

“I’m not who you think,” she stammered, panicking.

“You’re- do what?” the tigyote asked, rubbing his face. “What are you talking about?” He squinted and leaned in closer. “Why are your eyes green? What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry, I- I have to go,” the vixen said, grabbing the doorknob. Confused, the tigyote reached out a paw to try to hold on to her forearm, but the vixen yanked open the door and squeezed her bulk through it, bouncing as she disappeared into the night.

Gray stood in doorway, still half-asleep and very confused.

Cerine stepped out of her bedroom, admiring how her clothes fit for the first time since... well, pretty much since Mito had joined them. Zaress was waiting for her in the hallway, and the powerfully-built drake smiled as Cerine stepped out in a tight, unlaced top and well-fitting leggings.

“That’s a welcome sight,” the bigger woman teased, her tail swaying beside her. She was still in the dark wraps that she wore for undergarments. It wasn’t uncommon for the drake to simply wear them in lieu of other clothing in the guildhouse.

Cerine inclined her muzzle. “I thought you were liking the jiggle.”

“Variety is nice,” Zaress answered. She hooked her chin towards the stairs leading to the ground floor of the guildhouse. “Speaking of which, let’s go meet the other you.”

“She’s not me,” Cerine explained, again, as she led the way towards the stairs. “She just *looks and sounds* like me, because we have the same body structure and vocal chords and... stuff.”

The vixen took the stairs two at a time, a huge difference from her ungainly waddling down them before, when she couldn’t even see where she was putting her toes at all. A chilly draft blew past them as they reached the entrance hall of the guildhouse, finding a shirtless Gray standing slack-jawed in the open doorway. He heard the thumping of feet coming down the stairs and turned, double-taking and stumbling backwards as he rest his eyes on the pink vixen.

“Wait, wait! Stop!” he shouted, his voice strained and his face contorted in confusion. He looked the fox over from ear to tail, taking in her pink fur and slim figure. “Okay, there are *two* of you running around here and neither of them are the you I saw this morning. One of you is big and the other is pink. So we’ve got at least one intruder, maybe two.”

“Shut up, Gray,” Zaress growled, walking past him and looking out the open door. “Think I wouldn’t recognize Cerine just because she lost weight?”

The tigyote tensed, his hackles rising, but Cerine grabbed him by the shoulders. “You saw her?”

“I saw... somebody,” he answered, shaking his head. “I heard voices and commotion, and then smelled chocolate, so I got up to see what was going on. She was down here, and I thought she was you, since... big... but she had brown fur and hair, and she said she *wasn’t* you and then ran off.”

Cerine’s eyes widened and she looked at the open door. “She ran off?! What did you say to her?”

“I was trying to figure out who she was!” he sputtered, throwing his paws in the air. “She was acting odd, so I tried to stop her.”

“Shit,” Cerine swore, poking her head out the open door and looking around. “You must’ve scared her. She’s really confused.”

“Didn’t we have a conversation a couple months ago about bringing strangers into the guildhouse?” Gray asked her.

“Not now,” Zaress told him. “We have to find her.”

Cerine nodded emphatically. She double-checked for her ring on her paw, and then stepped out into the cool night air. She looked up and down the streets. There was no sign of the big vixen, but it was also still a ways before dawn, and she couldn’t see much by starlight. “Zaress, I need your help.”

“What about Mito and Sarelina?” Gray asked, following the drake out of the building and shutting the door.

“Mito is still huge for a couple more hours,” Cerine reminded him, “and Sarelina's asleep. Better if we just go now. Look, we'll find her real quick and then when we get back, I'll explain everything, okay? Trust me, I know she couldn't have gotten too far...”

The three of them, in their various states of dress, began to explore the docks district, looking around the mostly-abandoned buildings and wharves for any sign of the brown fox that they could. Despite the streets being empty except for a few wandering drunks and the extremely rare and understaffed guard patrol, which they avoided, it was hard to find anything of note.

“So, what, is she your sister? Cousin?” Gray asked, walking side-by-side with Cerine down an alley between two disused warehouses.

“I said I'd explain,” she told him. “It's too much to get into right now.” A sharp whistle cut through the air and they stopped, turning to look in its direction. “That's Zaress. Come on.”

They rushed back the way they'd come and took a different turn, heading towards the back of the warehouse beside them. Zaress was there, kneeling down beside a hatch that led to the city's waterway system. As they got closer, Cerine saw that the metal hatch had been rent open from within by incredible strength, with the lock laying in pieces nearby. But that wasn't what Zaress wanted them to see. The drake was pointing with two fingers at something a couple feet away from the open hatch. Cerine got close and squatted down. She smelled it right before she saw it: tangy copper, with underlying notes of chocolate.

“Blood,” she gasped.

“It's still warm.” Zaress gestured towards the warehouse. “It leads that way.”

Gray looked into the open waterway hatch, frowning his brow. “What in the gods' name could have done this? A minotaur would have trouble breaking this from the inside...”

Zaress's eyes narrowed as she stood, taking the lead as they followed the blood trail to the heavy, sliding bay door of the warehouse some yards away. It was ajar, and a bloody pawprint stained the edge of the door. The drake stepped in first, balling her fists. Cerine tried to pass her, but she threw out an arm and blocked the vixen from getting any closer. Over the top of the drake's arm, the fox gasped as she saw her doppelganger huddled in terror in the back corner of the warehouse, being menaced by a slow, prowling, quadrupedal creature with skin or scales or whatever as black as pitch. It glistened darkly as it passed through a patch of moonlight from a window in the ceiling. That was the only thing making it stand out against the gloom inside the warehouse. The brown vixen was whimpering, trying to push herself completely into the corner while she clutched at her leg. Blood was running across her fingers.

“What is that?” Cerine gasped, and, to her chagrin, the monster turned a horned head around towards the noise and looked at her. Glowing violet eyes, slitted like a reptile's, glared at her and it turned, beginning to stalk towards the group. “Shit...”

“Stay back,” Zaress said, firmly. “It's a scalehound.”

Gray's ears perked, and he reflexively flexed his shield-paw, even though he was unarmed. “A what?”

“A lesser dragonkin,” the drake said, her muscles tightening as she stepped forward to challenge the creature.

Cerine turned to Gray and her sword materialized in her open paw. “We'll distract it. You get to her and do what you can.”

He nodded. “Alright.”

The scalehound pounced on Zaress, but she was ready for it. Planting her feet, she grabbed the beast from the air by its neck and leg and wrestled it to the ground, where it flailed and snapped at her arms with finger-length fangs. The drake was still mostly exposed, but the scalehound's teeth scraped and scratched across her scales instead of getting purchase. At least, her scales protected her where she

had them; the scalehound's fang drew blood on her forearm when it found softer skin. Zaress pinned its belly with one knee and raised a fist up above her head, dropping it like a smith shaping metal.

The violence of the impact shook Cerine's guts. The stone flooring of the warehouse cracked as the scalehound's head smashed against the ground. Rarely had she seen the drake bring her entire strength to bear, but, despite the power of the blow, the scalehound continued fighting. It clung its back legs around the drake and flipped her, trying to bite her throat. Zaress still had a grip on the monster's neck, however, and raised it up until her arm was locked stiff.

Cerine circled around the fight, putting herself in between the two wrestling dragonkin and her doppelganger. Gray slipped past behind her, kneeling down beside the brown-furred vixen. Swallowing, the alchemist, without any of her creations – save *one*, at least, laying behind her – gripped her sword with both paws. As Zaress raised the drake up high with her arm, Cerine saw an opportunity. She rushed in, sword held high, and chopped downward with intent on cutting through the creature's spine.

There was a shower of bright sparks that flashed in the dark as her sword did little more than dull itself across the scalehound's armor. She might as well have been trying to saw through a fully-armored arbitrator. Her blow did little in the way of impact, either, as the fox lacked much physical strength. As her sword skipped off of the scalehound's back, the monster wrenched its head around to glare at her, violet eyes shining menacingly. It whipped its tail across the floor, knocking Cerine's feet out from underneath her. She fell backwards onto her rump and backpedaled quickly.

The distraction at least provided Zaress with the opportunity to punch the scalehound under the jaw with her free hand. The creature snapped backwards, rolling across the ground before it found its feet. It shook its head vigorously to shake off the punch and then glared at the fox, identifying her as much easier prey – just like the fleshier one. Its slitted eyes widening, it lunged itself towards Cerine. Crying out, the fox held her sword in both paws like a spike to try to intercept the attack, but it didn't come.

Opening her eyes, Cerine saw that Zaress had grabbed the scalehound by its tail. The monster gouged the stone floor with its claws as it attempted to scabble towards Cerine, biting at her feet with powerful, fanged jaws. Zaress rose up to her feet, yanking the scalehound backwards, and then she spun about. The creature was lifted into the air by the force of her swing, and then she hurled it – directly into a tree-trunk-thick support beam holding up the warehouse's roof. The beam splintered into pieces from the impact, and the scalehound went completely through it, slamming against the wooden wall of the warehouse with what remained of its momentum. The entire building shook, and dust rained down like snow from overhead. The monster lay against the wall, unmoving.

Even though the chaos was over, Cerine's heart was still pounding. Her fingers were numb, and they stayed locked tight around the grip of her sword. Slowly, she pushed herself up to her feet, wrenching one paw off the sword, and followed Zaress over to where the scalehound lay. Fragments of wooden pillar were strewn everywhere. The drake approached the fallen monster cautiously. She kicked its claw with a foot. When it didn't move, she turned and nodded towards Cerine, who approached, panting lightly.

“Are you okay?” Zaress asked her.

Cerine nodded, her eyes still on the scalehound. “I'm fine. You?”

“Just some cuts.”

“I'll get you something when we get back,” Cerine replied. She knelt down and looked at the dead beast. It was much more dragon-like than Zaress, overall, completely swathed in black scales from face to tail, with sharp ridges starting from its brow and running along the top of its head. “What is this? Another creation of the dragons?”

Zaress shook her head. “No. They're just lesser dragonkin, animals with dragon blood. They were dangerous if we found them out in the wild, but it was rarely more than one.”

“What's one doing here in the city, then?” Cerine asked her. “Did it come up through the

waterways?”

“I have no idea.”

Cerine looked it over. “What kind of dragon has black scales?”

“I don't know.”

The fox looked up at Zaress, who just shrugged in futility. She looked just as confused and lost. From what she knew, water drakes had blue-green coloration, earth drakes like Zaress were neutral, sandy tones or brown, and air drakes supposedly were cloudy gray or white. No one knew what fire drakes looked like. Maybe this creature was a fire scalehound? She didn't know if other dragonkin followed the same patterns as drakes. Apparently Zaress didn't know *too* much, either, and Cerine could tell if the drake knew more than she was letting on.

Gripping her sword firmly in her left paw, Cerine found a spot where the scalehound's coat had been weakened in the fight. She slid the edge of her sword underneath the scales and twisted until one of them popped off into her waiting paw. This could be useful to study later, or to show an expert. Standing up, Cerine withdrew her sword back into her ring and then tucked the scale down the front of her tunic.

“Alright,” she said, turning and looking towards Gray and the other vixen. “Let's see how she's doing.”

Zaress remained at the warehouse's open door while Cerine trotted over and knelt down with the others. The brown-furred vixen whimpered painfully as her doppelganger came within reach, pulling her into a crushingly-soft hug. Cerine blushed and hugged her back, letting her release all of her pent-up fear and anxiety with chocolate-scented tears.

“How is it?” Cerine asked the priest, who was still inspecting her leg.

“She'll be okay,” he told her, nodding. “Just some lacerations on her calf and thigh. No major blood loss; no venom insofar as I can see. We get her back to the guildhouse and then I can bandage up her leg. If you've got some of your regenerative elixir handy, she'll be walking in a few hours.”

“I can make some.” Cerine wriggled about in the suffocating bear hug as the massive vixen clutched onto her like a stuffed toy. “Did you... already get this treatment?”

“Nope. She was saving it for you, apparently.”

“I shouldn't be surprised. Zaress! Little help?”

“So she's you.”

“No.”

“She's like... your sister?”

“No.”

“She's not like... your daughter, is she?”

“Koleo's balls, no.”

“But if she's made from you, that sorta makes you related, though, right?”

Cerine massaged her brow in frustration. Everyone was gathered together in the guildhouse's dining hall, and most everyone was conscious. Zaress had nodded off in her seat a little while ago, her chin propped up on top of her bandaged arms. Cerine's restoratives were effective, but they also diverted a lot of the body's resources towards healing injuries, leading to drowsiness while they worked. She hadn't given any to her doppelganger yet, since Gray was still applying medicated bandages to her leg. They'd turned one of the tables into a makeshift examination table so the tigyote could properly tend to both the drake and vixen. The humonculus, for her part, rest her head on a pillow brought down from upstairs and listened quietly while Cerine tried to explain the situation to Mito and Sarelina.

Since it was already dawn by the time the party got back to the guildhouse, Mito was already awake and back to her slim self. She'd been a non-stop fountain of questions since first laying eyes on both the huge vixen and the skinnier Cerine, but the alchemist told her to wait until she could explain to

everyone at once.

Which was what she was trying to do now. Cerine paced back and forth in the dining hall while Mito sat on one of the barstools and Sarelna leaned over the counter. The matronly horse was still in her nightclothes, but Mito was dressed and ready to go, like always.

The fox was holding her copy of *Alchemis Arcanus* in her paw and jabbed at a section of text. “It says here that a humonculus's physical form is made of the... *vitalis* that was used to give them life. That would have been my chocolate, I think. It's food, and it's made from seeds. About as good as you could get, I think.”

Sarelna raised an eyebrow. “Then how does she look like you?”

“Okay, so if she's *made of* chocolate, then some of my hair or whatever was the schematic for *what* to make. The recipe sculpted another me out of chocolate. Then my experimental weight-loss potions that got mixed in caused it to siphon all my fat to, hm, fill her out.” Cerine stopped and rubbed her flat belly. She'd only gained some of that weight naturally. The rest she'd put on just a few days ago, when they stole a water-stone from a dragon's hoard and it caused her to bloat. “Hm. I can't really rule out that some fey world-magic was also responsible in there somewhere. Insofar as *that* goes, I can't explain anything.”

Mito rocked on her seat. “What's her name?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Iunno... like, you made her? I figure you'd name her.”

Cerine sighed. “She's not a pet. She's a person.”

The other vixen sat up with Gray's help, resting her arms on top of her large belly. The table bent slightly with her weight on the center of it, but she wasn't ready to stand on her leg yet. “I don't know my name,” she explained, speaking softly. “I don't... think I have one. Sometimes I can imagine things, like memories, but they're very foggy and vague, as if there's a mist over them.” She rubbed her paws together and licked her nose. “I understand those are Cerine's memories. All I feel are vague impressions. I almost feel like I know you all, but I can't remember from where. Earlier, when I ran into the city, I did it because I thought I knew my way around. But once I was actually outside, I realized that I didn't know anything. The next thing I knew, I was wandering down that alley and the... dragon creature burst out of the ground and attacked me.” She swallowed, looking remorseful as she dipped her muzzle down towards the floor. “I'm sorry. I put you all in danger.”

Gray put a paw on her forearm and squeezed lightly. “I apologize for frightening you earlier. You did nothing wrong.”

“And danger is kind of what we do,” Cerine told her. “If you think that was bad, Mito and I were chased by an *actual* dragon not too long ago.”

The other vixen's eyes went unfocused for a moment, and she seemed to mouth a word, but then she shook her head. “I can't quite remember it.”

“It's weird enough that jogs your memory at all.”

Mito tilted her head. “Do you think Cerine's memories will come back to her eventually? That would be odd, having someone around who remembers your life like it was theirs.”

“I don't think they will.” Cerine put the alchemy tome down on the counter and crossed her arms. “The book was pretty mum on anything *after* the humonculus would be made, which makes me think the authors were never actually successful in making one. Seeing as how *most* alchemical practitioners think it's bunk, I'm not sure anyone's ever done it, and I did it by whacking my head on a table.”

Cerine suddenly remembered that she made a regenerative serum for the vixen, too. She turned and picked it up from the table behind her and walked over to where the chocolate fox was sitting, offering it to her. “Here. Drink this when you're ready. It'll make you sleepy for a few hours while it works but you'll be alright. And, erm, Zaress is asleep, but I think we can take you up to a room if we work together.”

“Thank you,” the vixen told her. She took the serum and drank it, blanching at the flavor. “Eugh... I knew it was going to do that.”

Sarelna sighed loudly, tapping a hoof on the floor. “So we need to address the most important question: What are we going to do with you?”

“I... don't know,” the brown-furred fox replied, wiggling uncomfortably.

“We can't throw her out,” Cerine said, a little sharper than she meant to. Recollecting herself, she crossed her arms under her chest. “We'll think of something.”

“Yes!” Mito clapped. “More pretty foxes. Is it... weird if I wanna just like, snuggle in-between you both? Like, your fur is so soft anyways, and I could have a blanket and a mattress...”

The chocolate vixen blushed rusty red while Cerine buried her face in her paws.

The other fox was helped to a room before she was too out of it to move efficiently, and things began to get back to normal. Cerine spent several hours cleaning and mopping her lab with Mito's help, collecting the broken fragments of her cauldron and disposing of them. There was still a distinct chocolate odor in the lab afterwards, so she left the door open to hopefully air it out.

Once she was done, the vixen was nearly dead on her feet. Between not sleeping in her own bed last night, everything that happened this morning, and now prepping her lab for use again, she was exhausted. Cerine took her leave and went up to her room to nap, throwing herself onto her bed and passing out almost instantly.

She was asleep for several hours before she heard a creak from the floorboards next to her bed. “Mito?” she grumbled, nuzzling her face deeper into her feather pillow. She was proven wrong when a very heavy weight settled on her bed, making it bend slightly. Opening her eyes, she saw the very wide vixen sitting there, looking at her. “Oh... hello.”

“May I?”

Cerine rubbed her face, her brain still not yet fully awake. “May you what?”

“Stay with you.”

“Uh... sure.”

The brown vixen nodded and then rolled herself over to lay with – or mostly on – Cerine. The slim, pink fox coughed lightly as a weight more than three times her own came to rest on top of her. So this was what it felt like to be on the other end. “Gray and Mito probably wouldn't mind you keeping them warm, too.”

“I wanted to talk to you.” The chocolate-brown fox laid her head on Cerine's shoulder, with her plump muzzle laying on her chest. “I woke up a little bit ago and started thinking. You really... aren't going to just get rid of me, right?”

Cerine frowned. She put her arms around the fox's shoulders and held her tight. “No. I promise that I'll take care of you. I owe you that much, don't I?”

“Okay. I trust you.”

She was quiet for a little bit. Cerine could feel her heart beating softly as they lay together, and she gently rubbed the big vixen's back. Cerine pitied her a bit. She'd had a rough day. Not even an hour under her belt and something was already trying to eat her – probably because she smelled like food. It was little wonder she wanted to be with the only person she knew.

“What did you think of the others?” Cerine asked her, running a paw over her hair.

“Mm... I'm not sure. It's weird thinking I know them, but I don't. The serious guy is cute, but he seems distant. The ungol lady I don't know about. The mustelo seems fun. And the dragon lady-”

“Oh, don't call her that.”

“Sorry. Um... the... drake, yeah? She's scary.”

Cerine snickered. “She can seem that way. But honestly, she's the softest out of all of us. If you ever need help, go to Zaress.”

“I'll remember that,” the other vixen said. She smiled and laughed a little, too. Cerine grimaced

at hearing her own laugh come out of someone else. The vixen shifted her weight and sat up, looking down at Cerine. "Are you... sure we're not the same? It's just stuck in my head. I don't even know if I'm real."

Cerine sat up, too, swinging her legs over the edge of her mattress. She held the other vixen's face in her paws. "I'm me. You're you. We aren't the same person. You might be based off of me, but that'll change. Here, look." Cerine stood up and lifted up her shirt. She twisted around and pointed to a spot on her waist, where there was a thin gap in her fur. A few years ago, she'd gotten a cut there. Not significant, but it ended up leaving a scar anyways. "I bet you don't have that scar."

The other vixen tugged on her clothes. Her waistline was much larger than Cerine's, but try as they might, neither of them could find the spot where the scar should have been. The brown-furred vixen blinked and tilted her head. "So... my leg... Is that going to scar?"

"Probably, it was a pretty deep cut. It'll still be a while before that heals up completely. But then yes, you'll have something I don't. Something to call your own."

The vixen smiled as she tugged her tunic back down. "I think I know what I want my name to be."

"Go for it."

She tapped her claws together, blushing. "Erin."

"That's pretty," Cerine told her, grinning. She was still tired, so it took her a moment before the realization dawned on her. "Oh... you just took the first letter off my name."

"I did," Erin replied. She looked sheepish for a moment before continuing, "Because I was part of you."

Cerine lowered her shoulders as she nodded and ran her tongue across her teeth. "Cute... is this what dealing with me is like? I'll have to ask Zaress..." She clapped her paws together. "Well, Erin, we've got plenty to talk about, but I'm still sleepy. So if you want to stay with me, I'm going to use your belly as a pillow."

Night had well fallen before Zaress slipped out of the guildhouse. Her arms, still wrapped in their bandages, itched from the tight bindings and her healing skin. Wouldn't be too much longer before she could take them off. Dragonskin healed well, but she'd have a couple more marks and knicks at least to show for protecting her friends. There was no amount of scars she'd take if it meant Cerine and the others were safe.

There was a cool wind blowing out over the sea tonight. The seasons were beginning to change, bringing chillier weather that she found uncomfortable. She hated the cold as much as being buried in clothing. Puffing smoke, she put the temperature out of her mind and made her way back to the warehouse where they'd found the scalehound.

She was only a little surprised to see it was gone without a trace. It could have been anyone: a passerby smelled it and took on the duty of disposing of it, someone dragged it off to sell its parts, arbitrators could have been called. But she didn't think those were likely. A scalehound sighting would have been a buzzworthy event for the city. And if arbitrators were active in the area today, they'd have known it. Sarelina's contacts would have told her.

Zaress stalked back towards the waterway hatch they found that morning. It was still open, barely clinging to its twisted hinges. She knelt down in front of it, peering into the dark, as if there'd be something to see. A foreboding air filtered upwards through the open hatch and Zaress felt her muscles tighten.

A scalehound with black scales and glowing purple eyes was very, very strange.

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