

Into the Reach, pt. 5

by Cerine Hero

Rachel was the first to reach the camp again. When they heard the roar, uncomfortably close to where they were sunning themselves by the natural pond, the coyote, fox, and wolfess all jumped up and pulled their outerwear on. Being the most athletic and a natural runner, as well as worried for her girlfriend who was somewhere alone on the trail, Rachel dashed off as quickly as she dared in the waning sunlight, trying not to catch her toes on an upright root or a loose rock.

Unfortunately, she was rushing so quickly, and focused so tightly on trying to find Sienna, that she dashed right past a brace of snapped branches and claw marks gouging the earth midway down the trail towards camp. A minute later, Cerine also failed to notice the damage left in the monstrous forest beast's wake, struggling to hold her chest as she jogged down the trail. But behind her, Megan had to pause to catch her breath. The overweight wolfess bent at the waist, bracing her paws on her knees, and panted as she looked down at the earth. She perked her ears at the sight of the long, narrow furrows in the mud, and she turned her gaze towards the deeper forest. Cerine had already run ahead, and Megan couldn't even see her tail fluttering in the sunset light ahead.

So the wolfess turned and ran into the deeper woods, her body rapidly ballooning with muscle underneath her elastic clothes and golden light glimmering in her eyes.

But back on the trail, Rachel charged into the open campsite, spinning around as she looked for Sienna. The tigycote was nowhere to be seen – but if she didn't come to the campsite or run back to the pool, where would she have gone?! The coyote clutched her head between her paws, feeling her heart race in her ears. Worried thoughts stabbed into her brain like it was a pincushion. She paced back and forth, trying to calm herself and think, but there was nothing but useless noise squealing between her ears.

She heard a rustle at the trail head behind her and saw Cerine trudging into the open, breathing hard and trying to fan the top of her ill-fitting shirt. Behind her dragged her long, still-damp tail. She paused and stretched her back, grimacing. A bikini top was not suitable for heavy exercise for her. Rachel rushed over to the vixen, stopping to peer back over Cerine's shoulder at the empty trail behind her.

“Where's Megan?” she asked, pointing past Cerine.

The fox perked her ears and turned around, looking backwards along the trail. There was, in fact, no wolf behind her. “I don't know,” she replied honestly, her voice characteristically flat and distant.

A spike of anger surged through Rachel, tightening her muscles and coiling inside her until it threatened to burst out. She released the frustration on the closest thing to her, shoving both of her paws against the fox's chest. Cerine staggered back under the hit, her tail flicking and sweeping behind her to help keep her balance. A flicker of surprise crossed her face behind her glasses.

“You lost Megan, too?” Rachel blurted out, balling her fists at her sides. “They're both out there and we have no idea where, and that's all you can say?”

“She must have seen something,” Cerine explained. Her words were calm and measured, and that just rankled the strung-out coyote even more.

“Do you even fucking care?” Rachel hissed, shoving Cerine's shoulder again. The fox was ready for it this time, and she narrowed her eyes as she braced her feet against the push. “How can you talk like that when they're in danger? Whatever that thing is that's out there, it could-”

“I'm trying to think.”

“Then think harder, dammit!” the coyote yowled, thrusting her face towards the vixen. Her tail was completely stiff, the fur standing fully on end, as she felt fire burning through her entire body. She was overworked, and agitated, and needing to burn out all this energy by doing something, and Cerine was just *standing there*, doing nothing!

Or, at least, she was. As the coyote pushed further into her space, getting more aggravated, the vixen suddenly twisted and the back of a black paw smacked her across the muzzle. Rachel's head swiveled around from the surprising force of the slap, and she stumbled backwards, nearly tripping and only keeping her feet by falling onto all fours. As she peered down at the grass beneath her toes, the coyote felt the throbbing pain where her fang had bit her lip. It was like a lighthouse spearing through her angry, frightened thoughts. Clarity and shame in equal parts peeked through the clouds, and Rachel pulled herself back upright, looking up at Cerine with her muzzle held low and her ears pinned back. The pink fox's face was as hard as slate.

"I'm worried about them both," Cerine explained. Even now, her voice was cold and even, not letting anything from the inside slip out. "I need you to get yourself together. And I need you to trust Megan. If she found Sienna, then they are both okay."

"Megan is just—"

"Rachel."

The coyote winced. "Okay. I'm sorry."

Before she knew it, Rachel found herself wrapped tight in the fox's arms, pulled in close until her muzzle rest under Cerine's chin. The fox's huge bust was squished between the two of them, keeping them firmly apart but making the hug no less intimate. The coyote exhaled slowly as she held Cerine's elbows, taking the hint to calm herself. The roiling clouds of fear and apprehension were pushed down, just out of sight, where she could manage them.

"Go grab your spear," Cerine told her. "Then we'll look for them."

Rachel's ears perked up. She could do that! The coyote untangled from the fox and looked around, trying to find where she had last set her spear. It was still leaning on the tree since last night. She rushed over to it, scooping it up and feeling its reassuring weight in her paws. Rachel pulled the orange sheath off the end, and the metal spearhead caught the setting sunlight, glowing like fire.

While Rachel got her spear, Cerine took the opportunity to get her own things. Like her alchemy satchel, which she threw over her shoulder, and pants. The fox poked around in the tent until she found last night's pair, quickly pulling them on over her bare legs and bikini bottoms. But as she turned to climb back out of the tent, she felt something tug insistently against her thoughts. Cerine frowned and looked back into the tent, squinting against the dying light.

That wolf skull mask she'd found out here years ago was looking back at her. It was sitting — for some reason — out in the open between the bedrolls, actually somewhat closer to Sienna's sleeping bag than her own. Cerine didn't know why, but she almost felt like the thing was *looking* at her. Those blank eye sockets were communicating a single thought to her: "Take me with you."

She reached out with her paw and grabbed the skull, tucking it into her satchel.

It was beginning to rain. The pattering drops hit the two girls' ears and their muzzles. Sienna instinctively reached up and covered her head with her paws, feeling the droplets soak through the striped fur on her forearms as her big sleeves fell down to her elbows. Megan's fur was thick and shaggy in her were-form, and it took her longer to notice the rain. When she did, she instinctively shook herself, causing her coat to look even fluffier. The air filled with the sounds of hissing steam as the raindrops struck the lit braziers on the wall to either side of them.

The two of them had been debating what to do about the weird mansion in front of them for several minutes. It was eerie, and unlike anything they'd ever seen before. Megan had lived in the southern provinces for a long time, where the Wolfsmarkers had first settled, and even she said that it didn't look like any old buildings she'd ever run into. But on the other hand, standing outside in front of the gate was inviting a hungry beast to come looking for them again, and the wolfess wasn't sure if she'd be able to handle pushing herself that hard again.

The rain finally decided the issue for them.

Sienna went first, walking across a small bridge over a pond in the courtyard. The surface of the

water rippled strangely as water droplets hit it. Behind her, she heard a creak from the old, worn wood making up the bridge's planks as something like seven hundred pounds of wolfess followed her. On the far side of the bridge, Sienna's feet crunched in coarse sand, which seemed odd. Where had sand come from in the middle of the mountainous woods?

But she pressed on, making for the veranda in front of the house. Taking a few cautious steps up the smooth wooden slats, she walked underneath the ridged roof and its criss-crossed support beams underneath. Where the beams met, a small chain was wrapped, suspending a cage made of twisted branches with a glowing light inside. At first Sienna thought the lights were candles, but they... weren't. And she wasn't sure what they actually were.

Megan climbed in behind her, ducking slightly under the roof as she stood eight feet tall without counting her ears. The wolfess moved around the hanging lamps, still feeling the floorboards flex beneath her weight. As she stepped in, the rain began to fall more forcefully, running down the channeled roof tiles in thick streams on either side of the veranda. Sienna exhaled as she watched the rain come down, just admiring the simple beauty of it despite the strangeness.

"It's lovely," Megan whispered, as if she'd read the tigyote's thoughts. "If a little... spooky."

Sienna raised her eyebrows. "Didn't you say you liked things a little spooky?"

"I-" the wolfess stammered, licking her nose anxiously. "Y-yeah, I did."

"Happy now?"

Megan just tried to offer her best smile, which was adorably full of huge fangs. She tried standing upright again only to find her head in the rafters above. The werewolf sighed and knelt down in a crouch, almost even in height with Sienna now.

Sienna, however, wasn't as thickly-furred as her new friend, and the rain brought with it a bitter cold in the air, making her shiver. She folded her arms into her sleeves, but that did little to help with her ears or her bare legs. The veranda was exposed, open to the wind and storm, with little of anything in the way of anywhere soft or warm to sit. The tigyote turned around and eyed the large double doors leading into the manor and the gorgeous relief carved into the wood. She walked over to the building and took a look over the artwork, admiring the two figures on the doors.

From a distance, she had thought that the relief carved into the door depicted two people dancing. Up close, she realized they seemed like they were fighting, and her mistake was probably because the stylization in the art was odd. It wasn't realistic in any sense. But if she had to guess, the figure on the left-side door was a wolf. Or maybe a fox or a coyote, but something told her it was a wolf. The way it was carved and the expression on their face made them look violent and cruel. The wolf was holding a axe of some kind in their paws, and they had ancient armor on their body. A symbol of wind was flowing out from their open muzzle. But the most interesting detail were the wolf's eyes, which were hollowed out in the wood and set with blue gemstones that glimmered in the light. Sienna didn't even know what the figure on the right hand door was supposed to be. Their paws were wrapped in fire, and they were wearing some kind of ritual mask, it seemed, with flames coming out of the eye sockets. From the way everything was drawn, the tigyote couldn't quite tell who was supposed to be the good one and who was the bad one. Maybe the artist didn't want to say either one was heroic.

Sienna stared at the gemstone eyes of the wolf carving again, tilting her head. "Hey, Megan."

The wolfess turned her attention away from the rain. "Hm?"

"Come here. The wolf on the door... looks a bit like you. Not the face, but the eyes." She gestured towards Megan's glowing eyes. "They're like your eyes right now, if yours were like, citrines."

Megan blinked, her eyes disappearing into the darkness for a moment before appearing again, glowing bright. She looked over the wolf on the door as she hunched over closer to the tigyote. "Is this like... telling some kind of story?"

"I don't know," Sienna replied. "I just know it's probably warmer inside there than it is out here."

"Well, okay." Megan stood up to her full height again and braced her paws on the door. Muscles

flexed and tensed as she put her weight against the door, but nothing happened. The wolfess pushed herself back to her full height and shook her head. "It's locked. Or barred. Something."

"Figures," Sienna mumbled. "Maybe there's some kind of puzzle to-"

Her voice trailed off as she saw something move out of the corner of her eye. The tigyote turned and looked towards where the veranda walkway wrapped around the side of the wall. There was a quick flash of something moving around the corner, a glimpse of white and silver-green. Sienna stiffened and backed up against Megan's flank, her eyes going wide.

"Did you see that?!" the tigyote hissed under her breath.

A paw clutched her shoulder tight as Megan turned to look where she was facing, golden eyes piercing the gloom. "No, what was it?"

"Something moved around the building."

The werewolf's hackles raised around her top and she stepped around Sienna, padding over to the corner and peering around the side. Sienna moved around behind her, looking down the length of the walkway. Deeper in the manor, where there were other buildings connected by covered paths, a robed figure seemed to float towards a smaller building set aside from the main one. They couldn't make out much of its shape from the rain, but there was a glow around the robe, and their face was obscured from view. As they watched, the figure vanished again around the side of the other building.

"It's a person," Megan whispered. "Think they live here?"

"I guess," Sienna replied. "Maybe we can go ask."

"Uhm... you first," the werewolf replied, shrinking back. "I'll be right behind you."

Sienna bit her lip and shot the much, *much* bigger wolfess a look before deciding to push forward. The rain was splattering the gardens right beside the walkway, splashing onto her feet and ankles. She could hear the pinging of ice crystals against the wood and rocks now, and Sienna's breath puffed in the cold air. The temperature was plummeting. It wasn't this cold in the forest before, even if it was early spring.

At the outbuilding, the two women found another door leading inside. This one was far less opulent, lacking a carved ornamentation on the front. But it felt more ominous for the absence of anything in its stead. A heavy weight seemed to settle on Sienna's body as she stepped closer, Megan right beside her. They shared a quiet glance and then the werewolf stepped forward, pushing against the door. Old wooden hinges ground in the night air and Sienna lowered her ears against the noise. Dust and wood rot stench came out from the inside, reeking and burning their noses. She instinctively moved behind Megan, laying her paws on the wolfess's lower back as she peered around her side and into the room beyond.

If she had hoped for something cozy and comfortable to wait out the night in, she didn't get it. The inner chamber of the building was a large room, like a shrine, very open and broad with woven mats covering the floorboards. There were more lanterns inside, all lit and swaying in an unseen breeze. Their light, filtered through the branch cages, illuminated the room in strange ways, casting shadows on all the objects on the floor.

It took Sienna a moment to realize what she was looking at. There were weapons and broken pieces of armor on the floor. A strange-looking sword was stabbed through the mat and the floorboards in the middle of the room, surrounded by a helmet fitted for a canine face and a broken bit of body armor, whatever that was called. Nearby lay an axe, its haft snapped and the wood brittle and decaying. The axe reminded her of the one the wolf on the door was holding. Some people had fought here a long time ago.

"Whoa," Megan breathed, grabbing the door frame and pulling herself inside.

"Are you seriously going in there?!" Sienna hissed, holding onto the werewolf's tail. "There's... dead people!"

"I don't see anyone," the wolfess replied. "Just stuff on the ground. Come on. This is kind of cool."

“What about the person we saw?”

The wolfess looked around the room, but there was no one else inside. “Uh... if you see them, could you talk to them?”

Megan confused her. The tigyote gathered her nerve and crossed the threshold into the building, feeling slightly warmer just being out of the rain and breeze. But still, Sienna kept to the edges of the room, where the bare wooden floor rest behind a line of support beams holding up the arched roof. Megan, tired of having to duck underneath the overhead beams, began to shrink back down to her normal size. Her companion watched, eyes wide, as the wolf's fur seemed to magically trim down, and her muscles deflated underneath a chubby physique that spilled around her stretchy workout clothes, with her belly in particular plumping up in front of her as the rest of her shrank. With her attention fixated on exploring the creepy building, she didn't seem quite so anxious about being bare-tummied in front of Sienna now. Golden eyes dimmed until they looked normal once again, and the wolfess ran her tongue around her less-dangerous-looking fangs.

Megan walked into the center of the room, the old, decaying mats crackling under her toes as she knelt down and poked at some of the armor pieces on the floor. Sienna let her explore, turning and looking at some of the ritual-looking objects hanging on the walls. There were wooden sickles – which couldn't possibly have seen any real use, right? – alongside ruined papers fixed to the walls beside a light bookcase with bound tomes, but the humidity in the room from water seeping in through the roof had decayed them beyond legibility.

Sienna left the books alone and turned towards the head of the room. There was an alcove there, with a wooden altar sitting within. One of the lanterns hung just above it, glimmering eerily. Behind the altar rest a white robe on a wooden rack, similar to the one that the figure they'd seen earlier was wearing. The sight of it filled Sienna with trepidation, but despite the strangeness, the tigyote found her feet walking towards the altar anyways, crossing over the mats until she was right before the waist-high table. There were more strange-looking objects arranged on the table itself. A large chunk of metal was polished on its flat face until it shined like a mirror. On the other side was an incense burner, long unused. But the object in the middle was what caught Sienna's eye.

There was a wooden box, the hinges rotted and falling apart and the fallen-off latch laying on the floor by her feet. Sienna didn't tell her paws to lift off the lid, but they did, and she set it aside so she could look within. Sitting on a damp-ruined cushion was a mask, shaped to fit a canine face. There were holes for the eyes, but nothing else, except it left the jaw open to move underneath. She guessed it was made of wood, but it was definitely thin for something wooden, and the white paint on the surface of it was glossy and impeccable. Maybe it had some kind of lacquered coating.

And despite herself, Sienna felt a sharp and insistent urge to lean down towards it. Tucking her sleeves in against her thighs, she rest her paws on her knees and leaned forward until her nose was almost against the curved, white surface of the mask. She peered through the empty eyes at the cushion underneath. And she exhaled, her breath caressing across the mask's gentle curves.

Embers of white-green fire sparked to life within the eye holes. Instantly, a flash of recognition lit up in Sienna's thoughts – first, she recognized the color from earlier, but there was another memory, hazy and useless, lingering in the back of her mind where she couldn't reach it. Outwardly, the tigyote squealed and stumbled backwards as the mask began to levitate under its own power and rise out of the box. Megan looked up from where she was poking at the axe head, seeing Sienna sprawled on the mats.

“What happened?” the wolfess asked. “Are you alright?”

Sienna pointed at the mask floating in mid-air and the wolf finally noticed it. Her yellow eyes widened in alarm and she sat upright on her knees. They both stared as the wooden rack holding the robe behind the altar buckled and snapped, the wood splintering into pieces and falling to the floor as if something large and invisible was pushing its way out from within. The robe shifted and swirled, enclosing around a feminine shape, with the floating mask forming its “face.” Flames brightened within the eye holes, with blazing sparks of silver-green peering towards the two of them. From the flowing

sleeves and beneath the hem of the robe extended the graceful limbs and tail of a slender fox, fully translucent and shimmering as if wet with slick, silver-green light.

A voice like rustling leaves across snowy grass reached Sienna's ears. The whispering became more insistent as the figure hovered over the table, paws spread wide in welcome. Panicked, the tigyote scrambled to back away, kicking up dust from the rotten mats beneath her. But the figure just held her paws out towards her, palms up, like a mother calling a child.

"My girl," the whispers said, finally coalescing into words she could understand. "Why are you afraid? Come here. Let me embrace you. You desire so much. I can give you everything."

Sienna couldn't tear her eyes from the burning embers within the white mask. But out of the edge of her vision, she saw a dark gray figure ballooning outwards with muscle. Megan was on her paws and knees, rapidly transforming into her were-form, eyes shining bright against the greenish glow coming off the spirit. The wolfess howled threateningly, coiling up as if to leap, but the masked being simply extended a paw in her direction.

The mats beneath Megan's paws turned to mud and sand, and her fingers sank down into them up to her forearms. The werewolf struggled to pull them free, muscles bulging under her thick fur, but she could only feel herself seem to get more stuck as she struggled. With the wolf neutralized, the floating figure turned back to Sienna, gesturing again at her with her paws. The tigyote's breath rasped in panic, and her paws trembled. She looked around for anything that could help her, and her eyes fell on the sword stabbed into the mat just behind her head. As much as everyone teased for her being a city girl, and she didn't understand the Northenders' fascination with spears, Sienna really had some familiarity with swords. She'd posed with them multiple times for work, and knew how to hold one.

Swinging it was something she planned to figure out in the next minute or so.

Sienna leapt to her feet and wrapped her shaking fingers around the decaying cord wound about the handle. With a grunt, she wrenched the tip of the sword free from the mat and then held it out protectively in front of herself, pointing the blade at the ghost. The hybrid felt empowered, squaring her shoulders and inhaling deep.

But the headless figure just pointed a shimmering finger at the sword, and the metal blade instantly warped and decayed, turning to rust and breaking into pieces. Sienna was left holding a useless handle, also coming apart in her palms as she squeezed too tightly, and all her boosted confidence equally crumbled away. She stood, frozen, as a glowing paw gently caressed her face. The tigyote was transfixed, looking at the burning eyes within the white mask just inches from her own nose.

"Your breath burns with envy, my sweetness," the ghostly being whispered, the words flowing into Sienna's ears from nowhere at all. "Surrender yourself to me, and I will give you everything you desire."

Thoughts were pulled up in her mind like the gentle fingers brushing along the bridge of her muzzle were thumbing through a filing cabinet. Sienna had so many thoughts and desires floating unfulfilled in her head. She wanted attention. She wanted love. She wanted to get very far away from here right now. But the thoughts kept coming, until a different one was pulled forth. Sienna could see in her mind's eye a pink fox sitting in front of her, grinning playfully with her hair down over her face, her breasts swollen so, so large with milk. She wanted the fox. But she also wanted to know what it was like to be her. To be like *that*. She'd told Cerine so, and Cerine had just magnified that desire more and more, teasing her about it. The memory pulsed strongly in her mind.

Sienna exhaled slowly, feeling her toes lift off the floor. Her breath touched the mask again, and the ghostly vixen tilted her headless visage in curiosity.

"You beautiful girl," she whispered, "now that I can give you. Just relax, enjoy, and become mine..."

The tigyote could see the roof coming closer. Below her, Megan was still struggling against her stuck paws, shouting sputtered demands and curses. Sienna couldn't hear her. A flowing ribbon of

silver-green mist trailed outward from the white mask in front of her, drawn into the hybrid's muzzle as she inhaled. Sienna's eyes shimmered green, glowing from within with pale light. And within seconds, she felt her bikini underneath her clothes begin to grow tight. The crossed straps over her back tightened and the shoulders began to pull down on her neck as her one-piece filled up with growing breasts. She was getting bigger... and bigger...

It was exactly what she wanted.

Flakes of snow fell onto her outstretched paw.

Rachel wasn't dressed for the cold, being in a light t-shirt and swimming trunks still, but she was able to ignore it as best she could. She had way more to worry about than the frosty ache in her ears and the tip of her nose. As she and Cerine trekked into the forest, night had fallen on them quickly, necessitating Cerine to pull an alchemical lantern bottle out of her satchel. The gold glow of the light inside illuminated the falling snowflakes around them. The clouds had come upon them suddenly, almost preternaturally, and the temperature had dropped drastically in minutes.

The coyote had kept walking until she realized the light was fading behind her. She stopped, butting her spear against the ground, and looked back to see Cerine inspecting the broad leaf of some kind of bush beside the trail. Again, frustration started to coil up in her chest, but she manually pushed it back down with a force of will.

Exhaling slowly, Rachel said, through her fangs, "Cerine, I promised to be calm and patient. But I need you to stop looking for herbs and help."

The fox looked up – not at the coyote, but at the trees above her. She was firmly lost in thought, her tail slowly curling behind her. "I don't recognize these plants."

"You-" Rachel forced herself to exhale again. She looked at the alchemist, then the plant, and then back at her childhood friend. "Okay. What does that mean?"

Cerine didn't answer immediately. She peered up at the treetops and the dark, almost completely overcast sky above, squinting against the snowfall. Rachel looked up, too, and saw what Cerine was looking at. In the gaps between the clouds, the stars were in the wrong places.

"The forest is folding," the vixen explained.

Rachel felt like she'd just been given something very large and heavy to hold and she didn't want it. "And what the fuck does *that* mean?"

"Don't worry about it," Cerine said, shaking her head and walking forward along the trail with Rachel. "We just... need to keep going."

"Okay, *this* is what Sie was getting mad about."

"I know." Cerine sighed. "I can try to explain later, but right now I can't."

"Fair enough, let's find our girls."

Cerine trekked further along the trail, with her bottled light held out in front of her. Rachel kept right beside her tail, spear shouldered but ready if she needed it. The snow was falling gently around them, covering the treetops and the ground in front of them with white. The trail was slowly disappearing, but Cerine didn't slow down. The coyote had no idea where they were going, but Cerine seemed intent, like she was certain which way to go. The fox knew the woods better, and if there was something weird going on, then Rachel decided to trust her.

Her trust paid off.

In the flurrying snow, they saw a flicker of light ahead as they round a small rise in the earth. The trees parted and before them stood a high wall. Its gate lay open, and two braziers on either side of it guttered with dim fire, almost extinguished by the precipitation. Beyond the gate lay almost complete darkness, with the barest hint of an arched roof in the darkness. Cerine stalked closer to the entrance, seemingly not too concerned about the presence of an artificial structure so far into the Reach, and held her light up to illuminate the outline of a veranda surrounding a large manor.

"Cerine," Rachel asked, keeping her voice down low, "is this another thing you can't explain

right now?"

"No, this is something I can't explain period."

"Okay, just checking."

"But we're here for a reason. The forest brought us here."

Rachel gave the vixen another look, squinting sharply at her. "Meaning... Sie and Megan are here?"

"Let's find out."

That was all the incentive Rachel needed. She leapt forward in front of Cerine, crossing the bridge and hopping up the veranda steps, feeling the old wood against her bare feet. It was cold, but at least she wasn't walking on snow anymore. The alchemist followed behind her, going slower and more methodical, looking around the grounds with her light. Rachel found a door at the front of the manor and gave it a shove with her shoulder to no luck. It was stuck fast.

"Hey!" she shouted, taking a couple steps back from the door. If Megan and Sienna were in there, they'd hear her. "Sienna! Megan! We're here!"

She heard a voice come from somewhere in the dark to her right. The voice was familiar but deep, and straining with effort. "Rachel! Come quick!"

Cerine's ears perked up at the sound of the voice. "That's Megan," she explained, holding her satchel tight to her hip and beginning to jog as fast as she could.

The athletic coyote was faster than her, though, and charged forward first with her spear held tight against her chest to keep it from smacking the support beams for the roof. Around the corner, she found a walkway leading to an outbuilding, and once she got closer she could see through its open doorway. Silvery-green light was shining from within, and a charged presence was making her fur stand on end. But she rushed towards the light, leaping through the open doorway and finding herself in the center of a large, open room.

She had to quickly take stock of what she was seeing. First she saw Megan – or someone who looked a *lot* like Megan, only much bigger and buffer and with wild, glowing golden eyes – on her paws and knees, her body starting to sink into a tar-like sludge on the floor around her. Then she looked up and noticed Sienna hovering in mid-air in the center of the room, in front of a strange being made of light and a robe and mask, from whom the bright glow was coming from. The spectral fox was doing something to Sienna, with glowing mist flowing from the mask to the tigyote's face, and Rachel couldn't help but notice that her girlfriend's folded shirt had burst open, and her breasts were huge and swollen under her swimsuit beneath. Tan fur was bulging around the straps and the material, and it wouldn't be able to hold much more.

Cerine jogged in right behind her, nearly out of breath, leaning against the door frame. She, too, looked up and saw Sienna and the strange other creature, and her jaw dropped open. The alchemist dropped her light bottle and began digging in her alchemy bag. But Rachel was already ready. She tossed her spear into the air above her shoulder and snatched it again in an overhand grip, ready to launch. Taking aim, she slung her body forward, sending the spear hurtling towards the masked being's form. The throw was true, and the spear pierced completely through the robe, flying through the air to hit the wall and stick fast.

But that was all it did. Now there were two holes in the robe, through which silver-green mist seemed to flow out of, and the figure simply turned its mask towards her, the fires within the eye holes flaring brighter.

"You've come to take her from me," a hissing voice whispered. "She is mine."

"She doesn't belong to anyone!" the coyote barked back, balling her fists at her sides. "Least of all whatever the fuck you are!"

Cerine shot her gaze towards the wolfess. "Megan, are you okay?"

"I'm okay!" the werewolf answered, nodding. "Help Sienna!"

The ghostly being turned from Sienna and pointed her palms outward towards the coyote and

fox. The air seemed to warp and pinch in front of them, and then it exploded forward in a distorted wave of pressure. Cerine ducked back behind the door and mostly weathered the impact, feeling her hair and her tail get pulled by the shockwave. But Rachel was closer and had nowhere to dodge. The blast whacked her in the chest and knocked her back against one of the pillars, where she slid down to her knees and fell face-first onto one of the straw mats, out cold.

Megan howled, finding new strength in her arms. She pulled and twisted and wrenched herself loose from the muddy bog the ghost had formed beneath her, rushing on all fours to scoop up the coyote and hold her safe, bringing her back behind one of pillars. Nearby, Cerine pulled out something from her bag, yanked a safety fuse free, and threw it at the ground. It was a brace of flash-crackers she'd brought to scare off animals, and they burst when they landed against the straw mats, creating bright light and noise and giving off thick smoke. The robed apparition sent out a psychic howl as she was clouded in smoke, disrupting the silver-green mist of her body and the channel she was sending towards Sienna.

The fog was thick and distracting enough for the vixen to rush forward, finding Sienna's hips in the dense smoke, and begin pulling the tigyote down towards her. There was resistance, and the hybrid's body was limp as she hovered in mid-air. In the smoke, her eyes were glowing a bright green, the same color as the other creature. But Cerine kept pulling, and eventually it felt like something gave, and the greenish light vanished from Sienna's eyes. The tigyote fell backwards onto Cerine, and both of the extremely buxom women went sprawling backwards onto the floor, landing in a pile with the fox pinned underneath the now very well-endowed hybrid. Cerine's satchel tumbled off of her shoulder and skidded across the smooth wood to rest just out of reach. The flap spilled open and a handful of bottles rolled free, alongside the bone mask, its fangs thumping into the wood near the fox's arm.

"How dare you!" the ghost screeched, swirling and thrashing as she tried to escape the smoke filling the room. Flashes of silver-green filled the cloud, fuzzy and indistinct. The white robe fell away from the creature's "body," and only the mask was left, bobbing side to side. "She was mine! She was giving herself to me! I am so *hungry!* Just let me feast!"

Suddenly, the smoke expelled from the flash-crackers began to suck inwards, drawing together into an orb above the ghostly creature's mask. The room cleared, and the silvery outline of the fox behind the mask drew the condensed smoke orb above one of her paws.

"Idiot mortals!" she howled, her ethereal voice shaking with rage. "If you won't be mine, then choke and die!"

An entire bookcase came flying towards the ghost as Megan picked it up and heaved it across the room. The spirit's mask swung in that direction and she held out her paw, shredding the books and wooden supports into tiny, fluttering pieces that then flew backwards at the wolfess, covering her fur and all-but encasing her body in strips of paper. Megan whined and fought back, but she was overwhelmed, constricted by a tightening swarm of paper that her claws couldn't tear enough to burst free from. Once the wolf was distracted, the ghost turned back to Cerine, pulling herself loose from under Sienna, and crawling towards her satchel.

The ghostly being threw the smoke orb in her direction. Cerine felt the wind of it striking her back, and the orb burst into a cloud so thick she couldn't see anything. It burned the inside of her nose and made her eyes water. She fumbled, blindly, in front of herself until fingertips closed around something solid. She picked it up, bringing it close to her face, and found it was her bone mask. The fox thought of tossing it aside, since it was useless, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. An impulse formed in her thoughts, pushing forcefully past her filter and into the most primitive parts of her brain:

Put.

Me.

On.

Cerine did as she was told, squeezing her eyes closed. The mask fit easily over her face with her glasses lost somewhere in the dense smoke. Once the bone touched her fur, the mask clung tightly to

her body, and she felt a sudden jolt of energy rush through her. The buxom fox's back arched, and she dug her claws into the wood beneath her. She felt her senses dimming and dulling as another presence let itself into her thoughts, a familiar and strong psyche that she recognized but couldn't place. Their touch against her ego was reassuring and dominant, and they easily took over, letting the vixen tumble backwards into sleep. Everything was okay now...

Flickers of red-orange light began to glow within the compacted smoke as Cerine's body stood up on their feet, a dark silhouette within the cloud. Their outline began to warp and bulk, expanding with mass and muscle as two bodies combined to share the same space. They grew taller and wider, their outfit ripping around thicker fur and a powerful shape, feminine but *huge*. Sweeping their tail around to the side, the figure turned about, revealing a pair of smoldering embers that shined within the smoke. The small fires blazed brighter, growing in intensity until they swelled to fill the skull mask's eye sockets. They shifted in hue until they were blazing blue flames, two souls united in strength.

The figure swept their arm and the smoke parted. Standing tall was the fox, almost doubled in size, with blackened stripes running across their pink fur, from their shoulders down to their long tail, visible underneath their half-torn clothes. They regarded Sienna, laying at their feet, then turned to glance at Rachel in the corner and Megan wrestling with the constricting papers smothering her. With a flick of a paw, the papers ignited in blue flame, turning to ash around the wolf's body in an instant. The werewolf scrambled to her feet, putting her back to the wall, and her golden eyes went as wide as full moons as she stared in complete awe at the being in front of her.

"C-Cerine?" she whimpered.

The huge fox spoke with Cerine's voice, but tinged with something else, masculine and otherworldly. "The wolf. It is good to finally have a face to put to the feelings." They pointed down at Sienna. "Take care of her for us."

Megan pinned her ears back, momentarily stunned. But she shook it off, rushing forward to scoop up Sienna and awkwardly tuck her underneath one arm. The limp tigyote's chest was already beginning to return to normal, but she was still heavily unbalanced. Megan limped over to Rachel and scooped her up, too. The coyote grunted and began to stir as the werewolf tossed her over one shoulder, pulling both of her friends out of the smoky shrine.

The ghostly being hissed in irritation, turning her fiery gaze upon the fox. "Lykos," she snarled, causing the wind to swirl within the shrine and surround the two of them in smoke. "You have *bound* yourself. I can see the bond at her neck."

Lykos-within-Cerine took a step forward. "Hanathe. You hunt among claimed prey."

"I did nothing to your bond!" the ghostly vixen screeched, backing away. "The hybrid! She was willing! She is full of desire!"

"I know," they replied. "I have seen within her dreams. They are all *mine*, Hanathe. You will not harm them."

"Binding yourself, fighting over witless mortals like these," Hanathe hissed back. "You feed on scraps, begging the mortals for wishes to fulfill. You shame us, Lykos! Shame! You forget what it means to hunt! Just take one of their souls and remember! And give me one!"

"I am tired of your mewling." The fox raised their paw and blue flames swirled around their fingers. "Go back to Aristalle, Hanathe."

"No, Lykos, wait!" the ghost begged. "Just one! Let me have one! I'm so hungry! The coyote, let me have her, she wants to be a-"

A rush of blue soul-flame surrounded Hanathe's form, burning away the silver-green mist that made up her body. When the fires burned out, the white mask, unblemished, tumbled to the ground and lay face-down upon the rotten mats. The silver-green embers faded away within, hiding from the bound demon and its pet.

The shrine went quiet and still, the smoke slowly seeping through holes in the roof and the open doorway.

Lykos-within-Cerine inclined their head, raising a paw up to grip the mask upon their face. As they pulled, the blue fires within the eye sockets dimmed down to red-orange embers again and then nothing at all. Their body shrank and slimmed, with the stripes fading into seamless pink and white in the fox's coat. Finally, the mask came off with a sudden *jolt*, and Cerine's eyes opened. She blinked, unable to focus on anything but the inside of the bone mask right in front of her muzzle. The vixen staggered once, let the skull mask tumble from her grip, and then fell backwards, landing hard on the wooden floor and blacking out.

Soft light and bird songs brought the fox back to wakefulness. She opened her eyes and sat up in her sleeping bag, feeling her bloated breasts shift heavily across her torso. She felt fuller than usual. Cerine pushed messy, white hair from her muzzle and looked around. She was in the tent, but it was well into morning, and she was alone. Typically she and Rachel would be the first ones up, and she'd have to pull Megan out of her bag. Glancing around, the fox found her glasses sitting on the ground just within arm's reach, right next to her skull mask, glaring emptily at her like usual. Cerine put the glasses on her muzzle and yawned, trying to stretch as best she could inside the tent.

The flap pulled open and a gray muzzle poked inside. Megan, already in her hiking outfit again, let herself inside, sat down on her knees beside the fox, and threw her arms tight around her neck, snuggling in affectionately.

“Wha-” the bleary vixen mumbled, trying to embrace the wolfess back. “You're being cuddly.”

“Yeah,” Megan replied, biting her lip as she leaned back. “Not like you to sleep in!”

There was something... off about Megan's tone, but Cerine ignored it. “My brain's not fired up yet. What... day is it?”

“Time to head back,” the wolfess replied, sitting on her knees. “We're all ready to go. Just waiting on you so we can get the tent packed and stuff.”

“Alright,” Cerine groaned. “Let me just... get some air and clear my head real quick.”

“Sure.”

The wolfess moved aside in the tent and let Cerine awkwardly clamber out, dragging her very long tail behind her. Once she was alone in the tent, Megan exhaled slowly, licking her muzzle. Out of the corner of her eye, she glanced at the skull mask sitting at the rear of the tent. Slowly, she pushed herself over to it, sitting in front of it on her knees and rubbing her paws together anxiously.

“Um, I... don't know if you can hear me,” she told it. The mask just sat there, impassively. “And I don't know what you are, but I know it was 'you' talking to me back there. So, uh... I just wanted to say... thank you.”

Megan leaned down over the mask, hesitating. She brushed her hair back behind her ears and then quickly left a kiss on the brow of the skull – and immediately regretted it. She sputtered and retched, unsure why on earth she decided to do that. She needed some milk to wash that down, and she knew where to get plenty of it.

Once Cerine was up and ready and everyone who wanted breakfast had their fill, the four of them decamped and began their trek back towards Northend. The trip was mostly downhill now, which was great for their tired feet and backs. Cerine walked with Sienna again, holding her paw as they just quietly enjoyed the sunlight in the trees and the warmer air. They were both lost in their own thoughts today, which was fine.

Behind those two, Megan made her way up to Rachel and snatched up her paw and forearm. The coyote grinned at her and reached over to pull the wolfess's head against her, scritchng eagerly under her muzzle. She didn't have her spear with her, a point that neither Sienna nor Cerine had picked up on yet.

“There's my big girl,” the coyote teased. She hooked her arm around Megan's and pulled the wolfess closer. Rachel looked forward along the trail at the fox and tigyote and ran her tongue across her teeth in thought. “I can't believe I was out cold for the best parts. I totally would've been into super

Cerine.”

“It was something,” Megan told her, a wry grin on her muzzle. “I don't think Cerine remembers much of anything from yesterday, either.”

The coyote uncomfortably cleared her throat and nodded. “Ah, well... good. Yeah.”

“Do you think we should tell them?” Megan asked.

Rachel shrugged. “Maybe some day. I think... I have to figure out what the fuck any of it was, myself, before I can start to explain it.”

“Me, too.”

When they reached the clearing at the old farm where their cars were waiting for them, their trip officially came to an end. The four of them shrugged off heavy packs into the trunks of their cars and stopped for one last round of hugs and, for a few of them, affectionate kisses. Rachel and Megan, now that they had service again, traded numbers on their phones and promised to keep in better touch with each other. The coyote already was making plans to steal the wolfess away for a weekend or two. Megan tepidly agreed, wondering how much coffee she'd need to keep up with the coyote alone.

Sienna held Cerine's paws. Licking her nose, the hybrid looked up at her and said, “Thank you for everything this weekend.”

“For what?” Cerine asked, smiling softly.

“You know, for looking out for me and making me feel better. Letting me vent.” She pulled one paw loose from Cerine's and pat at the fox's breasts. “And. Y'know. All this fun.”

Cerine snickered. “I didn't do anything I didn't want to do. And some things I wanted to do for a long time.”

The tigyote smiled and nodded. “I know. Maybe soon we can have that nice, cuddly night indoors we talked about.” She bit her lip and subtly puffed out her chest, reminding Cerine what *else* they talked about for that night.

“I'd love that,” Cerine answered, fixing Sienna's hair sticks for her and leaning in to press a kiss to her lips. The tigyote held her face and kissed her back, chuffing happily. Cerine leaned back upright with a grunt, hefting her chest-weight. She looked to her side and saw the wolfess there, waiting for her turn. The fox teased Megan's ear the way she liked and pulled her in for a kiss, too, as Sienna watched, smiling.

When the two of them parted, the tigyote took Megan's paw and pulled her over. The stunned wolfess was unsure what to do when the curvy hybrid wrapped her arms tight around her and squeezed before planting a kiss on her cheek.

“Thank you, too,” she told the wolfess.

“W-what for?” Megan asked, biting her lip.

Sienna blinked and thought about it for a moment. “I don't know... I just think I owe you.”

“Mother moon, you three are going to be the death of me!” Rachel groaned sarcastically, walking past and thumping the trunk hood shut. “Come on, babe, I want to get home before nightfall. Plan your orgy in the car.”

Sienna sighed and rolled her eyes, smiling away from where the coyote could see. “Some days I feel like I have a boyfriend,” she sighed under her breath.

Cerine just smiled.

It was a long ride home. Northend and Stonecoast were “close” on a continental scale but the drive was still hours of nothing to look at but farmland and forests. A couple little towns dotted the space between, but nothing major. For the first hour, Sienna and Rachel talked about the fun they had on the trip. They even comfortably shared some of the feelings they were having for the fox and the wolf, and reassured each other they had the freedom to explore them. But after a bit, they ran out of words, and sat quietly together.

Sienna watched the trees zoom by out the window. Her thoughts were wandering backwards up the road to the north. It didn't help that every bump in the road made her hyper-aware of her large chest. She really wanted to indulge in what Cerine had teased her about. The tigyote told Rachel about it a little bit ago and the coyote didn't quite understand the feelings behind it. She was small-chested and the idea of wanting hers to be bigger had never crossed her mind.

So Sienna turned her attention back inwards. Something was awake inside her, between the fox's teasing and making herself grow to an absurd size, and the tigyote's own stirring desires. And maybe something else, yearning at her to *change* things. Sienna just wished they had one more day to chill at Cerine's place before heading back home, so she could get all these feelings out.

"I'm hungry," Rachel suddenly announced. She flicked the turn signal and got off the highway, heading to a small roadside market that looked like it had been plucked out of sometime decades ago. The car trundled to a stop in one of the parking spots and the coyote unbuckled her seatbelt. "You want anything, babe? I think we've earned it."

"No, I'm okay," Sienna replied, her voice distant.

"I'll get you a candy bar anyways."

As Rachel headed into the store, Sienna leaned her head against the car window. Idly, her mind wandered away, picturing Cerine's place. She'd been there a couple times, mostly for gatherings at her pool with the others. But never just to... be there. That's what she wanted. To just relax, let her hair down, maybe get in a private swim with-

Sienna noticed the glow in her eyes reflecting in the window in front of her right before they hit their crescendo, shining bright like silver-green stars, and-

"I'll have dinner ready when y'all get back, don't worry," Erin was saying, stirring the pot on the stove. "I just got back a couple hours ago, myself, and picked Rie up. Yeah, I bet – you haven't had a decent meal in days. Remind Megan she has to eat *real* food sometimes, too. Oh, is she right there? Alright, tell her I said I love her, too."

Erin snickered and hung up the phone, tucking it into her apron pocket. The obese fox sniffed her stew and smiled, swishing her tail back and forth behind her. Maybe a little more paprika...

A sudden flash of greenish light sparked outside the kitchen windows, followed immediately by a thunderous splash. Erin looked up from her cooking and wandered over to the sliding glass door to look onto the back patio. Someone was flailing in confusion in the pool.

"Oh, for the love of-" she swore, putting her paws on her hips. "Not again!"

"Not again what?" Rienne mumbled from the couch in the living room where she was sleeping. The golden fox raised her head up and looked around, blearily.

"Nothing," Erin replied, even as she opened the sliding door and walked out onto the patio. The figure in the pool was pulling themselves onto the edge, bracing on their elbows and hacking up water. White hair lay wet and lank across their features. When they saw Erin coming, they looked up and pushed their hair back from their face.

The heavy fox stopped in her tracks, blinking. "Oh, Sienna? Hi." She tilted her head. "Weren't you supposed to be heading back home...?"

A very wet and very confused tigyote snorted water from her nose as she looked around. She was at Cerine's house. In her pool.

Somehow.

Sienna looked up at Erin and raised her eyebrows. "Um... can you call Rachel for me?"

* * * * *

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