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Harvest Home by Altivo Overo

The sun glowed like a dying ember behind the silhouetted trees and rooftops of Westvale. Birds nattered to each other in the dusk as they settled in for the night. The first stars, boldest and brightest, unveiled themselves in the darker parts of the sky as Fennec walked down Main Street toward his friend's studio.

The old fox carried a walking stick more out of habit than need, but now and then he set the tip of it against an unevenness in the paving stones with a gentle clack. The light was nearly gone, but his night vision kept him on course and allowed him to avoid the occasional crack or pothole that might otherwise have tripped him up. His bare paws made only the softest of sounds as he neared his destination. The first light of the rising moon cast a shadow on the scarred wood of Argos' door when Fennec faced it and rapped twice with the heavy head of his stick. He did not wait for an answer, but opened the unlocked door and let himself in, closing it quietly behind him.

The main workshop was unlit and the loom sat silent in the center. He could just make out the work in progress and the shuttle resting on the fell of the cloth as he walked around it carefully.

"Whitey!" the fox called. "Are you about ready?"

A muffled voice, somewhat lower in pitch but more musical than Fennec's own, came from the back of the house. "I'll be right there, Red. Just one minute."

Fennec went to a small desk in an alcove, located where it would be out of the way when the loom was being warped and threaded. He pulled out the stool and sat down.

The fox had time to run a paw over his ears and muzzle, grooming himself by touch alone in the dim room. The high windows that provided daylight for Argos' work were dark now, though the full moon would soon brighten the room again as it rose.

Footpads and the faint click of toenails on the old wood floor announced his friend's approach before the wolf actually entered from the hall on the far side of the studio. Argos was a couple of inches taller than Fennec, and his work kept him supple and active, though in recent years he had found it necessary to wear eyeglasses much of the time. The dim light glinted off his silver-rimmed *pince-nez* lenses as he surveyed the room.

"There you are, Red. Hiding in the shadows?" he asked with a chuckle.

"The whole place is nothing but shadow," Fennec complained. "Frugal as ever, aren't you?"

The wolf didn't answer, but leaned in and nuzzled his friend's ear, sliding a paw under the fox's arm and pulling him bodily to his feet and into a warm embrace. "I'm glad to be home," he said, ignoring the complaint. "I'm even happier to see you."

Fennec leaned into the hug, and in spite of his best effort to restrain it, a faint whine escaped him. The two friends held each other close in silence for a moment. As they separated, the fox growled softly. "I know it was only a month, but it seemed like years. I admit it, Argos. I

missed you. Terribly, in fact.”

Argos smiled. “And I missed you, Red. Busy as I was with teaching and giving exams, every time I paused even for a minute, I missed you. After all these years wouldn’t you expect we’d be tired of one another?”

The fox laughed, but it sounded a bit forced. “I just didn’t have anyone to go for tea with.”

Shaking his head, Argos pulled his friend toward the door by one paw. “C’mon, we’ll miss the start. I won’t even ask you to come live here again.”

Fennec picked up his stick from where he’d laid it across the desk. “Thought better of it at last, have you?” They went out the door and turned downtown toward the new opera house, about a mile away.

“I haven’t thought better of it. I’m just tired of hearing ‘No,’” Argos said as they walked along briskly under the elms. “Really, Red, there’s no need for you to stay in that tiny flat. I have so much room here and no one to share it. When you were mayor and living in the official house, it made sense. Now it doesn’t. I can shift my books to the loft where I used to sleep when Mazer was here. The library would make a larger space for you than you have now, all your own, and no rent to pay.”

Fennec remained silent for a time. The occasional street lamp did little to break up the shadows, but the full moon was slowly climbing above the rooftops and brighter highlights began to appear even in the shade of the trees. Fallen leaves rustled under their paws

occasionally, but the autumn was young and the trees were far from barren.

Argos began to wonder if he had said too much. At last the fox sighed. “Argos, you are the best, dearest, most generous friend I have. I confess I’m tempted to accept.”

The wolf stopped in his tracks and peered hard at Fennec. “Canis have mercy on us,” he exclaimed. “You must be delirious or something. Do you have a fever?” He laid a paw between the fox’s ears in mock concern.

The fox winked one yellow eye. “No fever. I’m just getting old enough that I don’t care what anyone thinks or says any more. Being alone here while you were playing the master for your guild down in Chatton forced me to think it all through.”

They resumed their stroll. “I’ll take what I can get,” Argos said. “We can talk more about this later. I don’t want to miss the play.” He put his arm around his friend’s waist and urged him onward. “You know how much I love Shakesbear. The *Dream of an Autumn Night* is one of my favorite plays too.”

In another quarter hour they arrived at the opera house, and still early enough that the doors to the auditorium were not open. People stood around on the street and in the broad portico, chatting to pass the time. A bobcat with more than a few gray hairs on his own muzzle raised a paw and beckoned to them. It was Hammel, chief inspector of the Westvale police force for many years and coming up for retirement himself soon.

They hurried to join him and his wife Sondra. Argos and Fennec both clasped paws with Hammel and greeted Sondra with friendly hugs. “So you’ve come to get a little culture, have you?” She winked at Argos. This long standing joke between them drew chuckles all around

since Argos was a regular sponsor of the theatre group, and Sondra had sat on the board for the opera house from its founding.

Fennec was the one to answer. “Well, you know, Argos is determined to teach an unimaginative old fox something useless. So here we are.”

“Now, your honor,” Hammel joked, “you know you can’t insult the bear bard by calling his work ‘useless.’ At least, not in the presence of Masterweaver Argos.”

Argos just clucked and said nothing to that. Fortunately, at this moment the doors opened and the cheerful crowd lined up to find their seats. There were no private boxes in the small building, but all four had regular seats at the front of the balcony in the area designated for sponsors. They rarely missed a production, and enjoyed discussing it over food or a drink afterward.

Argos had the aisle seat, so he waited for the others to sit down before he dropped into his place next to Fennec. When the innovative gaslights that illuminated the seating area dimmed, he was surprised to feel Fennec reach over and take his paw. He couldn’t think when the last time was that the fox had made such a demonstration of affection in a public place. Most likely, it seemed to him, it had been when they were both still children in school.

The surprise nearly distracted the wolf from the brief welcoming speech before the curtain went up, but he certainly had no objection to holding paws with a lifelong friend. The fox had always been the one who worried about how such things might look to others.

As the curtains were drawn up and back, Argos did steal a glance at Fennec. The fox’s full attention seemed to be focused on the stage, but his paw said otherwise as he gave his friend

a little squeeze. The wolf settled back in his seat to enjoy the first act combined with the welcome warmth of that touch.

Dream of an Autumn Night is a verse play in three acts. The first act has several scenes that introduce a large cast of characters, developing their interconnections and, in some cases, lack of connections. Were it not for clever versification and imaginative character invention by the author, many of the audience might have drifted off to sleep before it was ended. However, as the curtain fell for the first intermission and the lights came back up, the auditorium was filled with enthusiastic applause. The raccoon who played the Elf Queen came out in front of the curtain for a bow then gestured for silence by waving a large card in her paw and pointing to it. When the audience settled attentively, she read in a clear voice that was easily heard throughout the space.

“Ladies and gentlemen, patrons of this fine theatre, it is my honor this evening to announce the intention of the board of directors to dedicate all of this season’s performances to one supporter, a sponsor whose financial contributions, advice, and frequent encouragement helped bring this building into existence and have nurtured our acting company for five years now. It is our intention to honor Argos Weaver, longtime resident of Westvale and a Masterweaver in the Chatton Guild House, as our patron of the year. In respect of this, we are beginning a new tradition.” She gestured to the wing, and two other actors came out, holding a large wooden plaque with an engraved brass plate at the top and rows of spaces below. The first space had its own small brass plate attached.

“The first name to appear on this plaque, which will hang in the lobby of the house to

honor our best supporters, is that of Argos Weaver. I believe he is here with us tonight.” She scanned the crowd, first on the main floor and then in the balcony. Fennec let go of Argos’ paw and raised his own, pointing to his friend who was trying to hide by scrunching down in his seat.

Sondra leaned across Fennec’s lap and tugged at the wolf’s elbow. “Stand up and take a bow, silly,” she hissed and grinned.

Argos narrowed his eyes and mouthed the words “I’m going to get you for this,” before standing up and bowing to the stage. The audience watched him expectantly, so he stepped forward to the railing at the edge of the balcony.

“Ladies, gentlemen, board members, sponsors, and above all, members of our amazing cast and crew, you overwhelm me. It is not I who should be honored, but each and every one of you for seeing a dream to completion and bringing this house, this stage, and every performance for the last few years to life in the most magnificent way possible. I humbly thank each and every one of you for the part you have played in bringing the finest entertainment and cultural enrichment to our town. That plaque should bear all your names, every single one. Now I pray you, let the evening continue.” He sat down again to a thunder of applause and the small orchestra playing “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow.”

Argos winced at that and covered his eyes, which made Sondra giggle. Fennec put an arm around the wolf and whispered in his ear. “They really do love you, Argos. You know it. Don’t shrink from the praise you’ve earned all these years.” After a pause, during which the applause continued, the fox growled “*I* love you too. Now stand up and take another bow, dammit.”

Argos finally stood up at the railing again, held up his open paws as if for silence, bowed

and turned them palm down as if telling everyone to be seated. He then seated himself again. The noise trickled away enough so that the raccoon on the stage could speak again. “There will be a fifteen minute intermission while we set up for the second act,” she announced. “Feel free to move about or go outside for your comfort. We will sound the bell three minutes before the curtain rises again so you can take your seats.”

Almost two hundred voices erupted into chatter as paws and hooves shuffled up the aisles to take the fresh evening air for a few minutes.

Argos scowled first at Fennec, then at Sondra. Then he turned toward Hammel and said “I suppose you were in on this too, weren’t you?”

The bobcat grinned and nodded, reaching out to take Argos’ paw between his own. “How could I not be?” he asked. “You deserve every bit of it and much more. We knew you’d never accept any accolades if we told you ahead of time, so it was all arranged as a surprise.”

Sondra smiled and added, “Too late for you to refuse it, Argos, dear.” She stood on tiptoe and reached up to kiss the white wolf on the cheek. “Your name should be on a lot more things in this town even though you won’t admit it.”

Argos smiled. “All right,” he said. “I surrender. But I am going to get a blank ledger and ask every cast member, sponsor, and board member to sign it so I can put their position next to their name. It will be displayed in the lobby too, in a glass case, and must always be updated with the signatures of any new participants or sponsors, for all to see as long as the building stands.”

“A fine idea, Argos. We’ll make sure it is done as you wish,” Hammel said with a nod. “Won’t we, Sondra?” He reached up and tweaked his mate’s ear affectionately.

“Stop that, Ham,” she said, pretending to be cross. “Yes, of course we will, if you want it, Argos. It does seem an appropriate way to honor everyone’s contribution.”

Argos laughed. “Let’s add everyone who worked to put the building up,” he said. “From the architect down to the carpenters, plasterers, and brick masons.”

The three minute bell sounded and none of them had made it to the exit. Fennec shrugged and sat down again. “Now let’s find out what the King was plotting behind the Queen’s back, shall we?” he said.

At the second intermission, they did get outdoors for about ten minutes. The park land opposite the opera house glittered with dew under the brilliance of the full moon now risen well above the treetops. A faint strain of dance music from the harvest festival in the marketplace reached their ears.

Hammel cocked his head toward the market field and looked around at the other three. “Are we up for a stroll down there after the play? The weather is fine and I’m sure we could find some wine or a bit to nibble.”

Argos might have declined, but Fennec answered immediately. “Sounds like a good idea. Not that I’m prepared to dance all night, or anything, but some kind of supper would be nice. How about it, Whitey?”

The fox’s gold eyes looked hopeful enough that Argos thought no one could refuse him. There was actually a hint of the young kit from many years ago in them, and the wolf nodded his assent. “Sure, if you’d like to.”

They returned to their seats for the final act, in which all the confusions were resolved

and the relationships between the characters restored. Hearty laughter and applause ended the theatrical amusement, and they found themselves standing on the street in the late evening breeze. Sondra took Hammel's elbow and declared "I'm ready for that snack and some wine before bed. Shall we go then?"

The distant music was still audible, and grew clearer as they walked through town to the field where the monthly markets were held. Torchlight illuminated a temporary dance square to aid the moonlight, which was now almost bright enough of itself to permit dancing and revelry. Tables stood close at hand, occupied by many town residents who recognized the four of them and called out greetings before the group found a vacant space and sat down. A matronly rabbit wearing an apron hurried over. "How nice to have you join us," she began, only to have Argos interrupt her.

"Suzy! We haven't seen you for months. How's the family?" he asked. "Tea time just isn't the same without you at The Warren, you know."

The doe bowed her head to him and laughed. "Annie told me how much rhubarb pie you've eaten this summer, Mr. Argos. I know you haven't missed me that much. The children are at that age where they need me most of the day now."

Sondra chuckled at that. "I don't doubt you'll have them washing dishes and pouring out tea before long," she declared. "They grow up so fast, don't they?"

"Too true, as you say. Billy and Betty are in school now, and Sally will be starting soon. Then I can go back to work for at least part of the day. I'm looking forward to seeing all my customers regularly again."

“And we’re looking forward to seeing you more,” Fennec added. “But surely you aren’t waiting on tables here? I thought this event was always more of a self-service affair.”

“Oh it is that, officially,” Suzy answered. “I’ve been helping out at the food booth, but things have slowed down for the evening I think. We still have plenty of food left. What can I bring you? You’re all honored guests and we’re glad to have you here.”

There followed some brief discussion about sandwiches and chicken pies. Hammel insisted on going with Suzy to the service tables to help bring back the order and she agreed to that, but when Argos tried to pay for the food and wine she refused his money. “We’re talking about leftovers now,” she said with a grin. “I wouldn’t take your money for that.”

The wolf shook his head as she walked off with Hammel. “She certainly hasn’t changed much, even after being married and having three kits.”

“Sweet and generous as always,” Fennec grinned. “Speaking of sweet and generous...” He turned to Sondra, who was watching the dance square as she kept time with her paw on the table. “Could I have the honor of a dance with this poor abandoned lady?”

The orchestra started into an old waltz tune, and Sondra smiled at him. “Why not? They’re probably going to quit for the night very soon.” She accepted Fennec’s offered paw and he deftly swirled her away across the makeshift floor. There were still a few couples circling each other, but the crowd seemed to be flagging a bit. Argos watched wistfully, though he had never been much interested in dancing. The fox clearly enjoyed it and had a lively talent.

Suzy and Hammel returned laden with trays of food and drink, which they set on the table. Handing a glass of wine to Argos, the rabbit said “I hear you got a little surprise at the

theatre tonight. Well deserved, I'm sure, so here's congratulations from me."

Argos nodded. "I wasn't expecting that. It was kind of embarrassing." He raised the glass to Hammel and Suzy and took a sip. "This is very good though."

Hammel was eyeing the dance floor. "I see a sly fox has stolen my lady already," he chuckled. "Suzy, my dear, would you do me the honor of this dance?"

With a sudden twinkle in her eye, the rabbit curtsied. "I'd be delighted, sir." She took the bobcat's paw and off they went.

Argos was left with the cooling supper dishes, though most were well-covered, and his wine. "What is life to me?" he murmured, quoting from the Shakesbear play they had just seen. "Let me be drunk instead."

The little orchestra bridged the waltz into a second by the same composer before they stopped. Argos applauded along with the dancers as the musicians bowed and began to put away their music and instruments.

The four dancers returned to the table, laughing and panting a bit. Fennec took a chair from a nearby vacant table and pulled it over, making a gallant gesture of seating Suzy next to Argos before returning to his own place on the wolf's other side. Argos turned to the rabbit as she sat down. "I'm so glad you can join us. It isn't often that I see you actually sit at the table instead of serving the food. You have been such a dear friend all these years." "It feels a little odd," Suzy admitted. "I'm not sure I should do this, socializing with folks of your status. But you're right, it feels as if I really have known you for so long."

"As indeed you have," Fennec chimed in. "Now tell us about these leftovers, will you?"

What delicacies have you and Hammel rescued for us?”

Hammel interrupted, with the air of a stuffy waiter, standing and whisking a napkin over his arm. “Chicken pies here, rye bread and butter, some pickles, cucumber and cress sandwiches for our discerning white wolf and Miss Suzy. Ale in the tankard, wine in the carafe as you can see.”

“Some service,” Fennec joked. “No mustard?”

Hammel winked and produced a mustard pot from under his napkin, as if doing a conjuror’s trick. “Your wish is my command, sir,” he said with a bow. The others applauded and laughed as the bobcat seated himself next to Sondra.

Everyone seemed to have an appetite after the long evening and the dancing, so they made quick work of the food. As they sat back to enjoy the ale and wine, Hammel looked at Argos. “So we haven’t seen much of you for weeks, Argos. What have you been up to?”

The weaver lapped at his wine before answering. “I was actually out of town, if you can believe it. The Guild asked me to come down to Chatton and do a bit of teaching. They’re trying out a classroom approach in place of the apprentice system.”

Sondra looked interested at that. “And how is that working out for them?” she asked.

“Well, like anything new, it has some tangles and snarls. But the groups were small, only four or five students at a time, and I think we made some progress.” Argos smiled at the bobcat couple. “I’m not sure I’m cut out to be any kind of professor. But I got them through the steps we were supposed to cover and all my students passed their tests at the end.”

Fennec spoke up then, leaning toward his friend. “Will you be going back to teach

again?”

The wolf chuckled. “Not any time soon. Several other masters will be teaching that same group of students over the next year or more. I’ve done my part, and I’m happy to be back home among my friends.”

Fennec let his breath out as if he had been holding it, and the others laughed. “Why Mr. Fennec,” Suzy exclaimed, “we might think you are relieved to hear that.”

The fox looked down at his lap and fiddled with a napkin for a moment. “I am, actually,” he answered and turned toward Argos as he added, “I’ve been decidedly at a loss for what to do with myself while our wolf was absent. I can’t hang about the town hall and get in everyone’s fur there, and though I’ve thought about writing my memoirs I’m not sure anyone wants to read them. Argos has the story to tell. I was just the backdrop.”

Argos reached out and patted Fennec on the paw. “Red, I survived that ordeal five years ago because of you. I wouldn’t be here otherwise. You and Hammel were every bit as important as I ever could have been, and I can never thank either of you enough.” A major dispute over the monthly market had taken place while Fennec was mayor and Argos was chair of the Market Committee. Extremist groups had in fact kidnapped Argos and held him hostage while Hammel and Fennec worked to find and release him.

Hammel cleared his throat at this. “Just doing our jobs, Argos. Though of course we and the rest of the town are glad you escaped. It’s all water down the river now.” He gestured over his shoulder toward the River Twig, downhill from the marketplace.

“It still would have been water over my head without you,” Argos insisted. “In any case,

the hour is late, the moon is high, to sleep we must go by and by.” Another quote from Shakesbear, and with that the wolf rose and began to stack the dishes together.

Suzy tried to protest and he shushed her. “You and Hammel brought the feast, it is only fair that I do my part in cleaning up.”

In spite of that, everyone helped carry the dishes and scraps back to the food booth, where Suzy’s husband and others were busily cleaning up and putting things away for the next day, when the festival would end with a fireworks display on the following evening.

Sondra yawned and Hammel put an arm around her as they stood together under the moon. “Bedtime, as Argos has suggested,” he agreed. “And when shall we four meet again?”

“Surely next month when they do *Life’s Labour Lost*,” Fennec answered. “If not sooner, of course.” Hugs and pawclasps went round the group, and they parted company, with Argos and Fennec going the opposite direction from the rest.

As they drew away from the sounds of the festival grounds, and into the shadows of the elms and maples that lined the streets, Fennec walked close enough to his friend to allow Argos to put an arm around him once more. The wolf did so. “Shall I walk you home?” he asked with a little smile.

“No,” the fox said firmly. “I’m going home with you. That is, if you’ll have me after all these years of foolishness. Let’s find out if we can still stand each other’s snoring.”

Argos laughed. “You never snored,” he said.

“Well, I don’t know that,” Fennec answered. “I was always asleep so how would I find out?”

“I would have told you, of course,” the wolf answered. “I won’t make you go home then. But the only place to sleep right now is in my bed. There’s room, and I’ll be happy to share, but until I move things around and get another bed back into the house...”

The fox put both arms around Argos and pushed his muzzle into the wolf’s shoulder. Surprised by this unexpected gesture, Argos responded by hugging his friend close as they stood in the street shadows.

Fennec sniffled and held on tightly. “I won’t, I won’t cry,” he whispered. “I’m sorry for treating you so badly all these years. I’ve been a stiff-necked fool. And here you are pretending it doesn’t matter at all.”

“But it doesn’t,” the wolf protested. “I understand, I’ve always understood. And if you feel differently about it now, I certainly won’t object to that either, Red. I’ve loved you for as long as I can remember. There was never anyone else for me, there never could have been. That’s just how it was. We’ve had a long night and probably a bit too much drink. Come with me and we’ll sleep and see how the world looks come morning, eh?” He put his paw under the fox’s chin and raised it so their noses met and they shared one breath.

The two of them walked again in silence until they stood at the door of the studio. Argos turned the latch and opened it, extending his arm to guide his companion into the moonlit interior. “Won’t you come into my parlor?” he whispered. “It may seem a cold and empty place, yet you’ve dwelt in my heart for nearly fifty years. And that, I promise, is warm and still strong.”

Once over the threshold, Fennec looked back at the door as his friend closed it firmly. “You still don’t lock that, do you? Even after everything that has happened?” he asked.

“Red, my poor dear, you still don’t understand?” Argos pulled the fox into another embrace there in the entrance hall. The moonlight coming in the windows above them sparked on his bracelet, the one Fennec had given him many years before.

“There was only one thing anyone ever could have stolen from me,” he murmured into Fennec’s ear. “And you stole that many years ago. Fortunately, you’ve kept it safe and still have it with you.”

This was really too much for the fox, as he clung to Argos and began to sob. “You never...” he began, but couldn’t continue. Argos held him close and petted his neck and shoulders. When the storm began to subside, he gently guided his friend through the workroom and into the small kitchen where he eased his friend down onto a cushioned bench.

Fennec continued to sniffle. “Rest here for a minute while I make some tea,” the wolf said, patting the fox on the shoulder. He turned to the woodstove and started to build a fire, using the light of the full moon to guide his work. Only after he set a match to the tinder and wood and it began to catch did he use a straw taper to transfer a flame to the oil lamp on the wooden table. Filling a small kettle from the larger one that sat on a work counter, he placed it on the hob and spooned tea from a tin into the china teapot.

Neither of them spoke a word while this was done and Fennec’s hiccups died away. The wolf sat on the bench beside his old friend and covered a black paw with his larger white one. “That will take just a few minutes to boil,” he said. “No more tears, Red. You’re home at last. This is where your home has always been, even when you didn’t seem to realize it.”

Fennec put his other paw on top of the two that were already joined. “I know,” he

answered. “And I feel so stupid and cruel.”

Argos clicked his tongue. “None of that. You were cruel, yes, but only to yourself. You thought you had a reason for it, and you have only yourself to forgive. I’ve been here waiting for you all along.” They sat in silence until the water began to sizzle and hiss, and then Argos got up to bring out cups, a honey jar, and a milk pitcher from a cupboard. When the kettle sang, he carefully filled the teapot and covered it. “Let’s have our tea and then get some sleep. I think you’ll feel better by morning.”

Stretching his legs out in front of him, Fennec yawned. “You’re probably right. The evening is chilly though and now that the stove is warming up in here it feels nice.”

“Well, we could sleep on the floor here, but I don’t think it’s cold enough to justify that and we’d surely be sorry in the morning.” Argos turned over an egg timer in the shape of a tiny hourglass to time the steeping tea. Silver spoons from a drawer landed beside each cup with a jingle, and he sat down again beside the fox. “Nothing to do but wait now.”

The sand trickled in the tiny glass and the kitchen continued to warm a little more, though the stone floor remained cold to bare paws. Fennec leaned against the wolf’s shoulder and sighed. “I feel better already. I should have admitted the truth to myself long ago.”

Argos patted his friend on the knee and stood up to pour the tea. He added honey, just a bit, to Fennec’s cup and handed it to him. The wolf took his own tea with milk when it was available, and he added that liberally to his own cup.

They sat smiling at each other as they drank the tea and left their cups on the table. Argos picked up the oil lamp in one paw and guided Fennec down the hall from the kitchen and studio,

past the narrow stairs that went to the sleeping loft. The library door was on one side, and the bedroom on the other, with its heavy four poster bed and bureau. The third door at the end of the hall stood open to reveal a tin bath and old fashioned wash stand with basin and water pitcher. Fennec knew there was a commode with a ceramic pot as well, and that Argos preferred to use the pit toilet in the garden. He wasn't surprised, though, when the wolf pointed these out. "Should you need them, they are here," Argos said. "No need to go out in the cold and dark."

In short time both were snuggled under the handwoven blankets. Neither was surprised to find that even after nearly thirty years of sleeping apart, they still fit together like two cubs from the same litter. The lamp was turned low but not out, so that it would serve as some guidance should either need to move about in the night.

Argos was sure that the fox was asleep, and he closed his own eyes at last. Before he could sleep himself, though, Fennec stirred. "Argos?" he murmured, "I've never admitted to you how much I love you. Can you really forgive that?"

The wolf smiled, unseen in the darkness. "Hush now and sleep, lover. There is nothing to forgive," he whispered.

"All right, if you say so." The fox curled up again with his tail over his paws and Argos put one arm over him, possessively.

"I've got you now, Red. We're safe enough," he promised, and they slept.

Eventually the lamp sputtered and went out, as it was prone to do. The room grew very dark, though no one saw it or counted the times the clock struck.

Argos awakened when the pre-dawn moonlight entered the west-facing window. He

could hear nothing but his friend's steady breathing and the sonorous tick of the studio clock. *Saturday*, he thought. *Nothing urgent to be done*. And he slept again, until the moon was gone and the diffuse reflected pink light of the rising sun on the garden wall cast long shadows in the room. The wolf found that his head was now pillowed on Fennec's shoulder and the fox's arms were around him under the blankets. He imagined the contrast of those small black paws against his own white fur and smiled. *No need to disturb him yet*, Argos thought, but even as the thought passed through his mind, Fennec yawned and blinked.

Shifting a bit to free the fox's arm from under his ribs, Argos yawned too. "Morning, Red," he murmured.

"Anything we need to do?"

"Nothing urgent at least."

"Good." Fennec rolled over to face the window and pulled the wolf's arm over him, making soft growling noises. He closed his eyes again.

Normally Argos would have been up, now that he was awake. But the occasion was too rare and he relaxed once more into the pillows, holding the fox against him.

It was only a minute or two, though, before Fennec began to stretch and yawn again. "I see the sun is coming up. Never could sleep in the daytime unless I was ill." He sat up. "Shall I make more tea?"

"Actually I was thinking we might just pop down to The Warren for some breakfast," Argos answered. "Now that the weather is cooling off, I'll bet Annie and her mom have been baking. There might be hot sticky buns or even currant scones."

“Nothing as delicious as just being with you all night, Whitey. But I’m willing to humor you.” A short pause. “Especially if they have eggs.”

The wolf laughed. “You’re incorrigible. But if all those hens’ eggs were allowed to hatch, we’d be overrun with chickens, so I’ll count it as a good deed if you eat one or two.” He pushed the fox toward the edge of the bed. “You have to get up first unless you want me to crawl over you.”

Fennec considered that. “It might not be too bad an experience,” he said slowly. “On the other paw, those sticky buns will get cold and hard. All right. One, two, three...” He slipped his feet off the side of the bed and stood up. “Ack! The floor is cold,” he gasped, and made as if to get back under the blankets.

“Uh-unh. You’re not putting those cold paws on me to get them warm. Move over.” Argos stood up and shook himself. He looked at the fox and grinned. “There’s a brush on the bureau over there. I think you need it.” His own fur was coarse enough that it often settled nicely just from a good shake, so he headed toward the kitchen and the back door.

Fennec was coming out that door just as the wolf came back in. “See you inside,” he said.

By the time the kitchen pump was primed and Argos was pumping water to fill his large kettle, Fennec came back into the kitchen. “Just turn the latch on that door, please,” the wolf said.

“I thought you never locked doors,” Fennec told him, but turned the latch as asked.

“Not the front one, no,” Argos said with a nod. “I’m not sure where the key is for that one, in fact. Mazer never locked it either. But we always kept the garden door locked, especially at night. Just habit I guess. Someone could easily walk in the front, so why would they bother

climbing the stone wall and everything?”

“Because no one would see them coming in that way.”

“You’re right, I suppose. And there’s little in the house to steal. Books and yarn aren’t worth that much.” The wolf chuckled, and gestured at the small pump. “Pump a bit more so I can rinse my muzzle,” he said.

Fennec complied, and Argos ducked his face under the cold gushing water as well as scrubbing his paws. He pulled a linen towel from the rack by the sink and rubbed his face down.

“OK, my turn, I guess,” Fennec said, and Argos pumped for him while he scrubbed, and handed him the towel afterward.

“That is *cold*,” the fox complained. “Makes my nose ache.”

“But it wakes you up, doesn’t it? Mazer always insisted on it.”

Fennec handed the damp towel back. “You still think of her often, don’t you?” he asked.

“I’ll never forget,” Argos answered wistfully. “She was the best teacher, and the kindest friend, generous to a fault and always eager to help. I still miss her. Fifteen years since she retired and turned this studio over to my care, and twelve since she passed on. And in her will she forgave the remaining amount I owed her, too.” He shook his head. “I’ve been trying to live up to her example ever since.”

“As she no doubt intended you to, my friend. I never knew her well, but everything you say rings true. And now you’re the master, teaching apprentices and all. Times change, but things go on.”

Argos changed the subject, his eyes sparkling. “Times have changed indeed, when my

favorite fox agrees to come stay with me.”

Fennec nodded. “And I’ll forgive you for teasing me about it. You were right, I was wrong.”

“Not wrong,” the wolf said, “just stubborn. Now let’s go, before those sticky buns are all gone ahead of us.” He took Fennec’s paw in his own and led the fox out through the studio door and into the morning sunlight. Paws still joined, they walked down the street and on into the rest of their lives, together.

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