

The pair emerged from Melissa's bedroom at the first shout from downstairs, Freddie in front with the lanky cat attempting to flatten the fox's hair to hide any evidence that they'd done more than measure each other as she followed along behind. The bouquet of aromas that had been intensifying over the course of his presence in the house grew stronger and stronger with every step the vulpine took, his mouth beginning to water at the prospect of what awaited him. He still couldn't quite pick out any particular scent beyond that of chicken, but the mystery was solved as he stepped foot into the dining room: a plate bearing a large breast of chicken sat expectantly in front of each of the four chairs, mushrooms and tomatoes were scattered liberally over each while a good deal of the zesty juice it had all been cooked in spread across the pale porcelain. In the centre of the table sat two large bowls: one contained an abundance of vegetables while the other sported plenty of pasta for everyone's delectation.

Mrs. Chambers was already seated on the far side of the oblong table. She smiled as her daughter entered the room with the fox silhouetted in front of her considerable figure. "Have a seat, Freddie," she said, indicating the one opposite her. Returning her smile in thanks he sat in the proffered chair, Melissa wordlessly claiming its neighbour.

"A little wine for Monsieur?" offered Mr. Chambers as he entered bearing a bottle of Shiraz in one hand, Riesling in the other. The pair shared a chuckle as Freddie accepted, gesturing to the white. The elegantly greying feline filled the fox's glass with a generous measure of clear, yellowish liquid before splashing some red into both his and his wife's glasses. "After you, Freddie," he said, nodding towards the large bowls as he took his seat.

"Aren't you having anything to drink?" the fox asked as he passed the pasta to Melissa after having loaded his own plate, then accepted the other bowl Mrs. Chambers was passing to him. He was quite certain that his now-girlfriend would have turned eighteen several months ago, so legality surely couldn't have been the reason for her empty glass.

"Oh, I don't drink," Melissa replied with a dignified air, piling rather more pasta onto her own plate than Freddie had. She didn't elaborate as she introduced a substantial helping of broccoli and carrots to her meal, but the vulpine thought he caught a brief glimpse of her shooting a look at his glass.

The table soon descended into relative silence but for the sounds of cutlery on plates, contented chewing, and wine being sipped. After having sent his serving of vegetables to their fate, Freddie had started work on the pasta. It seemed the tightly curling spirals had been cooked to perfection in garlic and herbs, flavours which matched perfectly with the citrusy juice clinging to each little piece he raised to his lips.

"So, what's brought you back to us, Freddie?" Mrs. Chambers asked as she lowered her near-empty glass. Freddie began to explain about his parents' publishing business, their desire for expansion, and how he'd taken on the responsibility of running the new office that was already in the process of being set up in the town's primary commercial district. In between giving his answers, he started to tuck into the chicken breast: the star of an already sumptuous meal. The flavours of tomato, mushroom, garlic, and lemon were all expected, but the added kick of Cajun spice brought a whole new dimension to the dish which he could not find a single fault in.

"You'll be with us for a good while, then?" she pressed him.

He responded with a nod, swallowing his mouthful of chicken before speaking, "That's the plan."

She beamed across the table at him, her delighted smile only marred by a fleck of green stuck to a front tooth. "That really is excellent news, isn't it?" she looked to her husband and daughter who both nodded in agreement, Melissa doing so with particular fervour and a rub of her large foot against the fox's smaller one, "If you ever need help with anything, or just want to have a chat, I'm sure one of us will be around to oblige; you're practically part of the family, after all!"

"Thanks, Mrs. C," he said once again, returning her smile.

Dinner concluded with two empty serving dishes and four plates which had practically been licked clean. Freddie stretched and rose to his feet, but his offer to help clear the table was waved away by his hosts who instead insisted that he stay for dessert which was to be served in the comfort of their living room. As such, he soon found himself sat on the couch with Melissa clutching a small ramekin of homemade chocolate mousse, flanked by her parents who were seated in matching armchairs. The TV hummed away softly, an evening news bulletin providing background noise to the idle chat and the sounds of four spoons clinking against glass as they sought out helpings of creamy, chocolatey goodness.

Freddie felt very much at peace as he scraped the last few morsels from his ramekin: despite a decade of absence, he'd been welcomed back into the fold without a moment's hesitation, and he'd landed himself a girlfriend barely an hour after he'd stepped out of his car. A warm and fuzzy sensation spread to the very tips of his fingers and toes as he thought about his first evening back where it had all started for him.

However, such pleasant feelings seemed not to be conducive to continued consciousness: his head drooped sideways onto the point of Melissa's shoulder and a barely stifled yawn escaped his lips.

"Looks like there's a little fox in need of his bed," came Mrs. Chambers' motherly voice, clearly unconvinced by his attempts to appear alert, "I'm sure you had a long drive to get here, so why don't you treat yourself to a bath?" A more pronounced yawn accompanied his nod of agreement.

He felt his ramekin and spoon being eased from his hands, their grip instead being filled by a much larger pair of appendages that helped him to his feet. He looked up to see Melissa standing over him with the softest of smiles playing on her lips.

"C'mon," she murmured, leading him back upstairs again, this time with gentle care rather than exuberance. She steered him into the bathroom, parking him by the towel rail while she began to fill the tub. She didn't turn to consult him as she began to add liberal amounts of blue liquid to the rising pool, not that Freddie minded: the veritable mountain range of bubbles that began to form on the slightly steaming surface of the water brought a fresh smile of contentment to his face.

Once the tub was nearly full to the brim, Melissa straightened from her crouched position and faced him, wiping her hand dry on her shorts. "Hop in while I go find you a towel, then I'll get your bed ready for you."

"You don't have to do th--"

"Gotta take care of my little man, don't I?" she said, one long finger pressed to his lips. She removed it once he'd nodded in compliance, bending down to reward him with a tender kiss to the top of his head.

"Thanks, Melissa," Freddie breathed as she left the bathroom, pulling the door to behind her.

He leapt from his clothes as quickly as his sleepy state allowed and slid into the pool of blissful, aromatic perfection, not wanting to be discovered in his size-small birthday suit, not even by his new-found girlfriend.

He felt himself relaxing as soon as he was up to his shoulders in the water which was on the hotter side of warm, scented bubbles pillowing around his neck so that he was barely visible in his aquatic paradise. He could hear a soft crackling around him as the air pockets already began to fade, but there would still be more than enough for him to enjoy a proper soak in their company.

The door opened again and Melissa re-entered the room, a light grey, pristine-looking towel draped over her arm. "Comfy and cosy?" she asked as she hung it on a free rung of the towel rail.

Freddie nodded, blowing lightly on the bubbles to his right to create a gap through which he could see her more clearly. "Very much so," he replied, his head tilting further and further back as she approached.

A warm smile adorned her features as she crouched down by the tub. She placed a hand tenderly atop his head, stroking one of his ears with a thumb. "I'll go make your bed now. You get yourself nice and relaxed, clean, and fragrant, 'kay?"

He nodded once more, saying again, "Thanks, Melissa."

She leaned in close, her lips pressing against his forehead for a second. "Love you, little guy," she whispered, to which he could only smile. Then she scooped a handful of bubbles from the mountain that bobbed before the fox's face and piled them on his head like a perfumed powdered wig. They shared a brief chuckle, then Freddie closed his eyes to bask in the warm water. He heard the door close softly, leaving him alone with his bubbles.

Freddie took to soaking in Melissa's absence, feeling his crown of suds gradually collapsing into an indistinct mess atop his head and wetting his hair in the process. He allowed his mind to wander as he sat there in the soothing water, his eyes still blissfully closed as the day's events replayed in his mind's eye (along with a few completely random and unrelated thoughts as his brain found tangents to explore): he was seeing the new Melissa for the first time all over again, now she was lifting him onto her desk chair, now he was wrapped in her arms... But now he was having dinner with the family of felines while rain poured from the living room ceiling; his car was nudging a nearby window with one of its wheels, asking if it was invited; the floor had vanished, yet they floated above the endless void beneath them and Mrs. Chambers was gliding towards him on a pair of golden roller skates clutching a jar of mayonnaise in her hands; Melissa was bathing him in the bathroom sink which was now a ball-pit...

The fox jerked himself awake, looking about the room wildly for a moment. Realising that being in a full bathtub wasn't the best place for a nap, he shook his head free of drowsiness and sought to bring his indulgence to an end: he filled his lungs, then submerged himself – the fact that he could lie completely flat under the water said more about his size than the tub's.

Moments later, he was watering the bathmat with the droplets dripping or trickling from his sodden fur, his hands rubbing the towel Melissa had brought him furiously over his head. He worked the fabric over every bit of himself until he was just damp, rather than bedraggled. As he straightened up from drying his feet, the towel, now heavy with moisture, slipped from his grasp to pile on the floor before him; no matter, he would collect it once he'd dressed. He duly scanned the floor for his clothes but saw only bare tiles: Melissa must have removed them on her way out. The fox now felt oddly exposed and vulnerable, despite already being naked. He snatched up his towel, the only

cover available to him now. He tried tying it around his waist in the customary way but, as it was more like a beach towel than the ones he was used to in order to accommodate the tall family who owned it, the fabric pooled around his feet like an overlong skirt.

He had just begun untying the knot with the thought of wearing it across his chest when he heard the slightest of rattles and caught the door handle turning out of the corner of his eye. He hurriedly retied the knot around his waist as the door was pushed wide enough for Melissa to slip inside.

"All clean?" she asked, smiling fondly down at the diminutive figure before her.

He nodded once more in reply, then broached what was the subject of key importance at that moment: "Where are my clothes?"

"Oh, I put them in the wash for you!" she replied brightly, "But don't worry, you'll get them back tomorrow and you can wear this for now," she held out a dark blue bathrobe to him. It certainly looked warm, soft, and cosy – the fuzzy material out of which it was made couldn't fail to be so – but, like the towel he was wearing, it was certainly too long for him. Indeed, once she'd circled around behind him and slipped the garment over his shoulders, the hem of it hung barely an inch from the floor and the sleeves extended some distance beyond his fingertips. He heard her giggle softly above him, then her arms descended into view to tie the rope, not around his waist, but around his upper thighs as the loops through which it was threaded hung so low on his body.

He suddenly became aware of two soft, round objects pressing against his shoulders, a pair of arms wrapped around his middle, and a chin resting on the top of his head. As his cheeks filled with colour she started to purr, his skull vibrating as her pleasure rumbled through him. Her grip on him tightened, squeezing a tiny puff of air from his lungs in her enthusiasm for the intimate moment.

Several minutes passed with him clutched firmly in her arms as she swayed from side to side, forcing him to do the same while her continued purrs resonated through his body, filling his ears with contentment.

She eventually seemed to decide that the moment, while wonderful, should be brought to a close: she relieved his head of the weight of her own, pressed a kiss between his ears, then released him. "Bed time for the little prince," she said, stooping briefly to tug his towel off, leaving him with only the generous covering of her bathrobe.

The next thing he was aware was being led out into the night, his hand once again having been swallowed up in one of Melissa's. In spite of the short time it would take for them to hurry around the fence to his front door, Freddie kept close to the cat's reassuringly towering presence as he felt the still warm evening air swirling around his barely-covered undercarriage. Seeming to sense his unease, she quickened her pace. In fact, she quickened it to such an extent that he was nigh jogging to keep up, his free hand clutching the loosening knot in the rope to preserve his modesty.

Once they were finally inside, Freddie had barely time to note that the boxes that had been gathered around the foot of the stairs had disappeared before he was being tugged up to the second storey. However, before they reached his bedroom, they veered into the bathroom. The fox was understandably bemused by this change of course until he found his toothbrush (which Melissa had no doubt located while rummaging through his belongings) being thrust into his hand, heavily laden with minty paste.

"Gotta keep those chompers nice and pearly!" she trilled, eyeing him expectantly until he did as she wanted. He turned to face the mirror as he scrubbed the bristles back and forth, up and down over

his teeth. Melissa mimicked his movement and was soon stood directly behind him with her hands resting gently on his shoulders. For the first time, Freddie could truly see how tall she was...or how tiny he was: her face rose so high above his that he would practically have needed to be another head taller just for his to fit neatly beneath her chin; even counting his ears at full perk, he wouldn't have been able to claim that he reached her shoulder; the swell of her chest was what he would be most familiar with, the two sizeable mounds framing his head, gently brushing the back of it.

He spat out the mouthful of foam that had developed and leaked onto his lips and chin despite his best efforts to contain an amount of toothpaste better suited to the mouth hovering close to a foot above his head, then took a small swig of mouthwash from the proffered bottle. As he swilled it around, a hand towel wiped its way across his muzzle, catching up as much of the mixture of fluoride and saliva as could be hoped. It did its job for a second time after he'd rid himself of mouthwash, then he found himself being directed towards his bedroom at last.

"I laid out some pyjamas on your bed," he heard Melissa saying as he pushed the door a little further ajar to admit him, "give me a shout when you're ready."

*At least she's not making me strip for her,* Freddie thought as he closed the door and slipped out of the overlarge robe. While it was a warm night which hardly necessitated the wearing of proper pyjamas, he slipped into the garments waiting for him, then got himself settled under the covers which too were rather excessive for a summer's evening.

He allowed himself a few moments to look around his room before exclaiming his readiness; she had done rather more than just make his bed and lay out sleepwear for him: a good number of his personal effects were situated on shelves around the room, some of which were in places Melissa had doubtlessly thought best befitted them, while others were exactly where he remembered them being ten years previously. The fact she remembered such little details after so long made him feel still more warm and content with his new life.

"Ready!" he called. The door opened at once and Melissa swept over to him, still smiling adoringly down at him.

"You rest well," she began, gently easing him down from his sitting position until he was laying flat with his head on the pillow, "and I'll see you in the morning." He nodded, his stifled yawn punctuated with a soft kiss to his lips. "Good night, my little love," she murmured, gently dragging one finger through his cheek fur as he muttered something indistinct in response. Seeming satisfied that he was as warm, comfortable, and safe as she could make him, she left his side, extinguishing the light as she closed the door behind her.