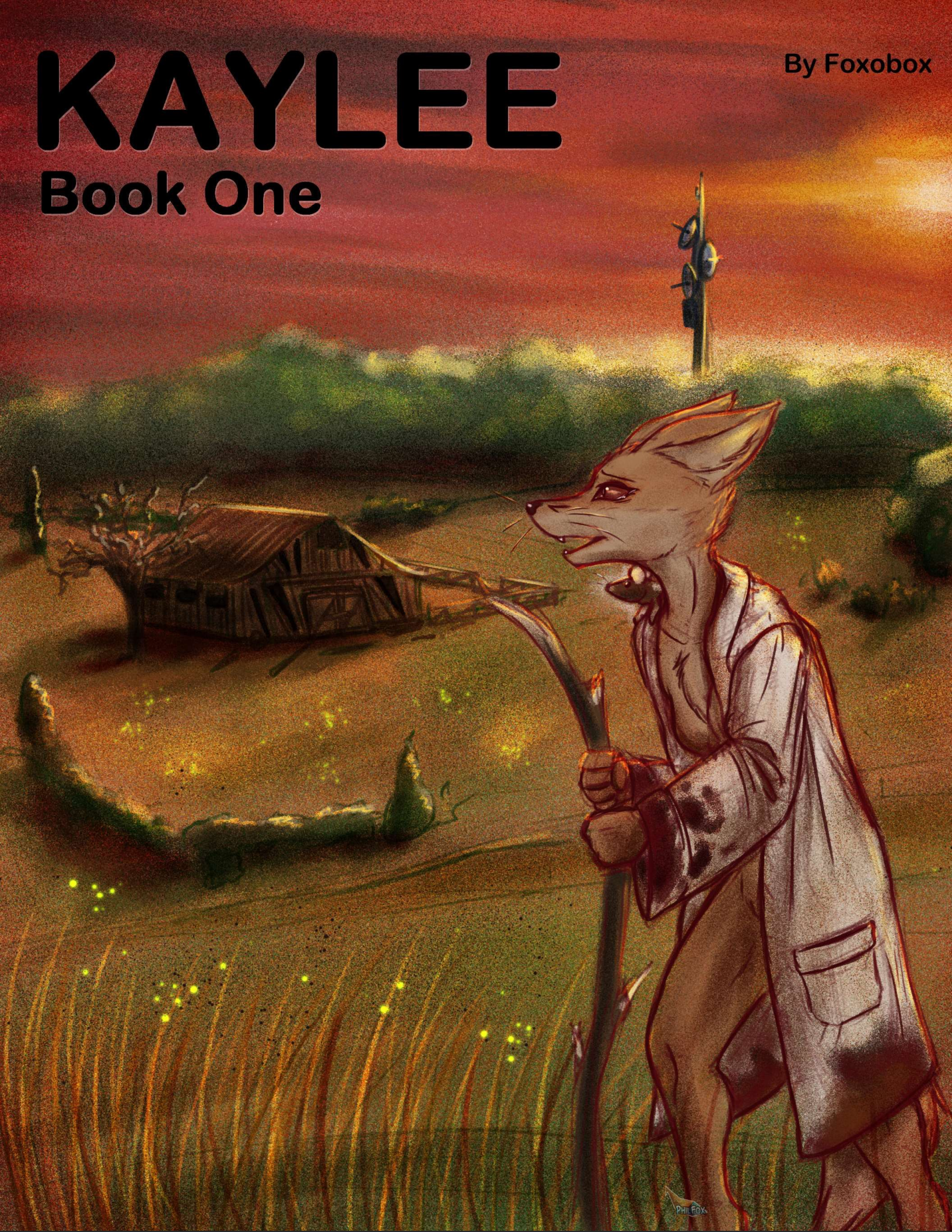
KAYLEE

Book One

By Foxobox



Kaylee

Book1

Chapter 1

"Reassigned??" the blond-haired researcher asked in shock as she stood in disbelief. Her left hand rested firmly on her hip; her weight shifted to one leg as her other still lay on the keyboard where she'd been toiling away. She'd been running a recently acquired blood sample through a series of tests before loading up the education tablet for... the one she called her daughter. "You can't be serious! I have two specimens that need my attention! Dr. Coren, you can't be serious!"

The aging, gray haired man standing before her cleared his throat shortly, adjusting his glasses before glancing to the side. He observed one of the 'specimens' she'd showered in affection, then returned her a look of unempathetic objectivity. "Dr. Venner..." he started, motioning toward the creature. "Our objective in this project was never to create a creature like that. From the very start of this project, you've taken this on as a 'labor of love.' You've even named the thing! You can't possibly be shocked by a reassignment after the board's budgetary assessment last week! We don't need something like *that* taking up our time and budget!"

Dr. Venner shook her head, sighing heavily as she looked back at her screen. "Look at this..." she replied sternly, thrusting her finger at the monitor to show the completion of the blood test results. "Sexual maturity. She's able to reproduce now, Dr. Coren. Don't you think that's worth something?? It's been our goal all along to create a being that's capable of-"

"It was not!" he barked curtly. "Our goal was never to create a being capable of reproduction! Where did you even get such an absurd idea??" He calmed himself, sitting casually on the black cushioned stool beside the analysis machine. "Heidi our goal in all of this was to create a being that's intelligent enough to observe and report. To act not just as a guard dog or as a random stray, but as an observer, capable of sentient thought, independent judgment, and the ability to relay its information to military forces without even being noticed."

He again nodded his head toward the glass chamber. "Look at that thing." he instructed. "Does she look like she could accomplish that goal? Those curves, those... human-like breasts... her front paws, more and more like fingers with every progressive treatment. You're not making a fox with the intelligence of a person; you're making a person with the fur of a fox!" He paused, removing his glasses as he grabbed the hem of his coat, using it to clean the dust from their lenses. "Now if our project was to make... real life cartoon characters or sports mascots we'd be well on our way! But Heidi, that was simply not our objective."

Dr. Venner hesitated, waiting patiently for him to return his glasses to his face before loading a new tab within the lab's software. "Alan, look at this. These are her test scores. Do you see the numbers? With every treatment she grows in intelligence. She's passing the SAT with scores that rival a valedictorian! You can't sit there and tell me that this project has no promise!" She motioned to a bank of cages to the aging researcher's back. "You want proof that this can be done without changing its physical appearance? Look at Swirl! He can read, write, he's probably listening to us argue right now! How is that not a success?"

"CM449 may not have the physical mutations that CV716 exhibits, but he's still not a viable specimen," Dr. Coren replied. He turned around, glancing at the small white and brown marbled mouse with its tiny paws wrapped around the bars, looking intently at the pair. "If someone were to see such a... unique creature wandering through the halls of their... hideout or whatever it might be called, they'd flag it as suspicious right away! You may not have him walking around like a human body builder, Dr. Venner, but he's certainly unique in a disqualifying manner."

She sighed, rolling her eyes at him before giving the tiny mouse a sympathizing glance. He was staring intently, his eyes silently pleading with her to do something. It was obvious that he knew what was coming. "So, then what's your plan? What will you do with them once I'm... reassigned? Will I even be in this building? In this state?"

"We're moving you to Nevada." Dr. Coren replied bluntly. "There's a genetics team there working on bioregenerative virology that could use your expertise in organic engineering. You're expected to report in twenty-five days."

She briefly glanced at the floor. "Twenty-five days," she muttered. "And... what about Swirl? And Kaylee?"

He nodded, finally agreeing to address her question in the most obfuscated way that he could. "In the morning they'll be given a special breakfast. After which, they'll be moved to processing, then to harvesting. I'm sure there's something more that we can yet learn from this project to validate our past budgetary expenditure on the research itself."

Swirl gasped, falling backward in his cage before scurrying to the corner. Processing? Harvesting?? How stupid did Dr. Coren think he was?! Or was that even the point? What could a tiny mouse do? Refuse to eat his breakfast? They'd just snatch him up and inject him outright. His thoughts spiraled as he curled into a ball, letting himself respond with a fearful, animalistic squeak. It was sound he hadn't made in... well... he wasn't sure how long, but it certainly felt like an eternity to him.

Kaylee acted oblivious. From the outside, their words seemed so meaningless. She'd been ‘playing’ with the keypad on the door, entering code after code. It made a pleasing chime that she'd taken to calling a 'beep' when the code was entered wrong. To her, their words were of no consequence. Mom knew what she was doing, and she'd do everything she could to protect her! She did like the sound of a special breakfast, though. Would it have bacon and eggs like she'd had some weeks before during her one-year birthday celebration? She certainly hoped so. She wasn't sure what he meant by the word 'harvesting' in this context, but she was sure that it didn't matter, right? Perhaps she'd be given a scythe and taught to reap wheat! Wouldn't that be exciting?? It'd be just like the book she'd studied some time ago. Not that there weren't... other meanings that fit this context better, but she was trying not to think of them at… the present moment.

"Mom..." she asked, looking up at Dr. Venner from her position in the cell. Her stature of only three foot two meant that she was always forced to look up and over the equipment between them, giving her an awkward appearance from the desk. She was barely a floating pair of vulpine ears and a set of eyes from their perspective. "What is *harvesting*? Will I get to see a farm in person??"

Heidi smiled, holding back tears at the vixen's naïve approach to the conversation she'd overheard. "No honey, that's not what it means. And please stop playing with the keypad? You're making Gene lose his mind with all those incorrect codes."

The vixen smiled proudly. "I'll get it to boop at me eventually," she said, her tail swishing behind her as she placed her hand-like paws on her hips. "Right now, it only beeps, but one day it'll boop! I'll solve the puzzle!"

"A valedictorian?" Dr. Coren asked, raising a brow.

"Maturity and intelligence are not the same thing, Alan," Dr. Venner objected.

Dr. Coren nodded, inhaling slowly as he looked to the side. "Heidi, I don't want you to be here when this happens. As the director of this facility, I'm doing what I have to do but... as your friend, I feel awful for you, and I don't want you to have to be the one to pull that lever. As such, I'm asking you to take the rest of your time between assignments to get some rest and to... do your best to move on."

The young woman paused, staring down at her own hand as she struggled to keep it from trembling. "I don't... suppose there's an option to keep them as-"

"Pets?" he interrupted. It wasn't that far removed from what he'd been expecting her to suggest. In all honesty, it was something he'd argued with the board. Swirl was an easy one to name. A small cage with a feeder and a wheel would be all he'd need. Aside from a few books to read and movies to watch, he'd be quite the conversational friend. Kaylee was a much harder case to make, especially given her hands and obviously inquisitive nature, but even then, the board had shot both ideas down before they'd barely left his lips. The specimens were GERCorp's closely held intellectual property, and they would be maintained as internal footnotes in the annals of company history, nothing more.

"I... Dr. Venner, you just told me that Kaylee might be able to reproduce. Do you know what she can reproduce with? Dogs? Foxes? People?? We can't just let something like that wander around unsupervised."

Heidi was taken aback, staring at him with confused disgust sprawled across her face. "People? Alan what is... what are you even...?? That was never my intention with-"

He shook his head, raising his hand to stop her. "I know, I know," he said heavily. "I'm just making a point. Even if the board had approved the... pet recommendation that I did attempt! This would've shut down her release right then and there. If that thing reproduces, there’s no telling what the results would be."

Kaylee had returned to her desk, sitting at a small table, her tail tucked neatly through the open backed children's chair as she stared silently down at the pencil and paper before her. They'd given it to her to teach her to write. It felt like ages ago, even though it'd barely been three months.

Slowly, the vixen picked up the pencil, using her left hand to awkwardly position it into her hand-like right paw before pressing the lead gently to the paper. She wrote slowly, methodically shaping each letter as she listened to their words.

One of the many things she'd learned in her more recent studies were the five stages of grief. A mourning process to deal with loss, at least how she understood it. Her mother, Dr. Venner, was bargaining, having already expressed denial and anger. Slowly, her naïve perception of the conversation was beginning to slip away.

"Reproduce." she said softly to herself, reading the word she'd so methodically carved onto the paper. Was this the reason? Her... sexual maturity? She knew what it meant, she knew all about that, but she'd never considered that they'd take her away from her mother and... harvest her for it. "Mother..." she started, looking up somberly from the table, seeing the pair from the corner of her eye. "Will we see each other again after you go home tonight?"

Failing to hold back a tear, Heidi sniffed, wiping it away quickly with her finger. "Of... course sweetie. I'll be in tomorrow just like usual and we'll start our next lesson."

It was a lie, of course, and everyone in the room was aware of it. *What was the point?* Kaylee wondered to herself. *Why tell such an obvious lie?* To spare herself the pain? That was rather... selfish for a woman who'd so lovingly cared for her till that moment as her ‘mother.’ Yet there it was. The words had been said, and they could never be removed. Spoken words didn't work like those that were written. Despite such a simple fact, she'd struggled with the concept for weeks in her earlier life. In fact, if she was honest, it took her nearly two months before she'd become aware that the tiny fur covered creature in the glass was her, and not another creature that just acted like her. It'd been a long journey. An arduous struggle from a newborn feral fox, to the... well... lady that she was today.

"Good." she said somberly, looking back at the paper. She took the pencil from her hand, turning it around with the other before forcing it between her fingers so that the eraser was facing down. Slowly, with the same meticulous motion as she'd used to write, she began to erase letters from her word. "Produ" was all that remained.

Staring at it, she exhaled sharply through her nose, her eyes shifting from the incomplete word to her hand. With a wince, she shifted the pencil, rolling the eraser into her palm. It stuck there, her fingers refusing to move enough to let it complete its rotation. She silently cursed herself, finishing the job with her other hand before slowly completing the word.

"At any rate, Dr. Venner... I'm giving you the rest of the day off. Take your time to go through your things and... enjoy the sunshine. It's a beautiful 18c today! The trees are blooming... not a cloud in the-"

"Am I... human... mother?" Kaylee interrupted, staring down at the word she'd completed on her notepad. "Or am I something else?"

Heidi's eyes glanced from the vixen to Dr. Coren, pleading silently to him to find a way to calm Kaylee's obviously declining mood. "Kaylee honey, I've told you before that-"

"Because if I'm not human, then I don't have human rights... do I?" she interrupted, turning in her chair to face them both. Sitting as she did, she could barely see their faces for the equipment between them. "I'm not a person... I'm a-"

Dr. Coren cleared his throat sternly, staring scoldingly at the vixen through glasses reflected white by the lights above him. "That's enough, Kaylee." he commanded. "Dr. Venner has something to do for the rest of the day. I suggest you find something to keep you busy, and you'll see her in the morning."

The vixen nodded slowly, staring down at the word as she tightened her grip on the pencil in her hand. "Yes sir." she responded coldly.

Chapter 2

Hours seemed to pass as the vixen stared down, the paper slowly being stained by tears that rolled down her cheeks and rutted through her fur. They'd left her without so much as a goodbye. Just like a product. An object. Not a person.

Seeing the drops and feeling them fall from her eyes almost made her laugh. All the literature that she'd read about her species... vulpes vulpes... vulpes.. sapien? had shown her that they weren't capable of crying, aside from lubricating their eyes. "Not a person, and yet here I am..." she said to herself.

As the vixen mourned, the mouse had been handling the situation quite differently. He'd expressed the fear and hopelessness that she'd seemed to dwell on for so long in only a few minutes. Instead of fixating on it as she'd seemed to do, he'd been working on a plan to escape.

He'd never tried to open the cage before, nor had he really studied the latch that closely. Like Kaylee, he'd trusted Dr. Venner. He'd felt safe with her. That cage had felt like a protective blanket. Now? It was a prison. He was waiting on death row for his final meal, just like the movie she'd shown them both two days prior. Oh, how he wished he'd seen this coming.

The room they'd called their home for... their entire lives, wasn't very large in general. Perhaps for a mouse it was a cavern, but he knew that the humans often felt cramped when more than two of them filled the space. Even Kaylee, in her diminished stature had found it a bit difficult to navigate in the early days that'd forced her to learn to walk upright.

It wasn't so much that its dimensions were small. It was more so that it was filled wall to wall with equipment. Strange machines with rounded tubes, pipes and buttons, sliding glass doors, flashing lights, and odd smells. He had to admit he'd never truly wondered what they were even for.

Apart from the machines, the room was very basic. It was rectangular in shape, with his cage resting atop an otherwise empty table in the far-right corner beside the primary door. It was the door that everyone seemed to use. Even the one he'd been carried through when taken to other parts of the facility for the odd treatments and injections they'd given him for so long. It was that door, he assumed, that his lifeless body would be carried through on the dawn of the next day, should he fail in his endeavor.

Fortunately, it wasn't the only door in the room. Straight across from him, just beside the sliding access panel to Kaylee's chamber, was a large metal framed door with a push bar across the middle, and a large sign written in bold red text. "Emergency exit. Alarm will sound if opened." He'd never heard this... alarm, nor did he have any idea what was beyond that door; The only thing that he knew for certain was that this door could mean freedom, while the other could only mean death.

"Swirl... what're you doing?" the vixen asked, her voice snapping him out of his analytical daze. He hadn't been aware of it, but his ponderance had left him somewhat pressed against the bars of his cage, his tiny nose sniffing the air rapidly as his fur contorted to the shape of the bars that his hands gripped so tightly. "You can't squeeze yourself through those bars. You're too fat."

"I... fat?" the mouse scoffed indignantly. "I'll have you know I wasn't trying to simply force my way through the bars. I was trying to find a way to get out of all of this. I was studying the room."

He was lucky that the fox had such large ears. His tiny voice, while clear and articulate despite the shape of his muzzle, was diminutive, and difficult to hear at even the slightest distance for the human researchers that buzzed around him all day. "I don't think I have to tell you that our breakfast tomorrow is not going to be special in a positive way. They plan to poison us."

She nodded as she stood from her chair, then rotated it to face him. "I know..." she said as she sat back down and rested her head on her hand. "Harvesting components from the products that we are. Not... not the humans that mom... that... Dr. Venner always claimed us to be."

"A human is a species, not a-" Swirl started, but stopped as her ears splayed back at him, and her eyes narrowed. "Right... you... you knew that." he sighed. "So... are you just gonna mope around? Or are you gonna find a way to get out of here so that we can escape?"

She glanced at the keypad with her eyes, nodding her head gently in its direction before returning her gaze to him. "I've been trying this access panel for days. I'm yet to get through it."

The mouse couldn't help but chortle. All this time she'd been so convincing with her behavior. She'd convinced everyone that she was just playing, all the while... testing the number sequence. "So, you've been planning this, then?"

She shook her head, looking down at her paw as it rest on the floor. "Not really." she said slowly, watching her claws as she gently wiggled her toes. There was barely any movement there at all. Were they planning to change her more? Would her hands have become more versatile, her feet more humanlike? She supposed she'd never know now. "I mean, if I woulda found it, they would change it. So... In a way I *was* playing but, I also learned a lot about the system, ya know?"

He shook his head in disbelief, falling back onto all fours and looking out at her through the bars. This was the most the pair had spoken. It sounded as if they were old friends, but... in reality, she was a stranger, only known to him through silent observation.

"It's a five-digit code." she continued, looking at the pad as she spoke unprompted. "It doesn't contain any of the numbers on the first row. There's no wear on them, and... I never saw Dr. Venner lift her finger that high when entering it. So that leaves me with five through zero, and enter."

The mouse nodded, sitting up on his haunches as he scratched under his chin. "Do the numbers repeat?" he wondered. "As in, five, five, five, five?"

She shook her head with a smirk. "That's the thing. They don't." she said proudly. "You enter the same number twice in a row, it errors out. So, it has to be five unique numbers, then enter."

"So, 720 possible solutions?" the mouse asked, quickly trying the math in his own head. "If, you're sure its six numbers with five digits, that is."

She seemed to think for a moment, then nodded. "I... think... so?" she asked, tilting her head. "I haven't been counting, though." Shaking her head, she kicked the glass of the observation chamber with her paw. "I can't believe I'm gonna die in this stupid box."

Without a word, he stood up, walking to the bars, then grabbing the compression latches on the top and bottom of his cage door, squeezing them with all his strength. He could see the number pad on the outside of her door, could tell that some of the numbers were worn down, but couldn't read them from so far away. It didn't take him long to give up, but in his final gasp, an idea came to his mind.

"Hey, wait a minute..." he said with an exhausted breath, falling back onto his haunches in frustration. "A five-digit code with six numbers. That means one of them isn't used. If we can eliminate that, our odds go from 720 down to 120. Take a look at the numbers. Do any of them look less worn?"

The idea made her jump, her ears perking as the chair she was sitting in practically flipped over from the force of tail being pulled from the opening in its back. Rushing to the door panel, she studied it, nearly pressing her nose to the keys to see the wear in as much detail as possible. "Not really..." she said, taking in a breath as she continued to study. "It seems like panel's pretty old. B... but... wait a minute."

"But...?" he asked, waiting impatiently for her reply. She hated to admit it, but she'd picked up something from her observation of the panel. Not sight, but a smell. It was humiliating. A human would never go around sniffing things like this! But then, she wasn't really a *human*, was she?

"Come on Kaylee, give me-" he started, his ears twitching as the door made an affirmative beep and the panel slid open.

"I did it!" she said. "I... I did it!!" She celebrated, walking slowly out of the chamber as she looked curiously around the darkened room. "I'm free!"

Swirl grabbed the bars urgently, shaking his head from side to side. "Kaylee we're not free! They know the door’s open we have to go! Get me out of here, come on!"

She almost seemed to ignore him as she explored, finding herself staring up eagerly at Dr. Venner's lab coat that'd been left hanging on a rack near the emergency exit. "Why should I help you?" she asked. "You’ve... ngh... you're just a... mouse!" As she spoke, she leapt at the coat, snatching it the second time, then jumping as the rack fell over with a heavy wooden clang.

He stared at her in disbelief as she pulled the greatly oversized coat onto her shoulders. "I'm a mouse that helped you get through that door! I'm a mouse that they're gonna kill tomorrow. Don't you care!? Or did their injections exclude empathy from your programming??"

His words got her attention as she turned to face him, her ears splayed back with a scowl on her face. "Programming?" she retorted, raising a brow as she spoke. "I am my own woman, mouse. I am decidedly not... progr-"

The lights suddenly flickered to life, the sound of footsteps rushing down the hall. They knew that she was free! If they caught her now... she wouldn't even live to see the morning! Frozen, she stood torn between the mouse and the exit, panting anxiously as she tried to decide what to do.

Chapter 3

"Kaylee!" Dr. Venner yelled as she stood in the doorway, still holding a box of her things. She was flanked by Dr. Coren, their faces contorted in shock, confusion and fear. "What're you doing??"

The vixen looked back at her, nearly drowning in the oversized lab coat that she'd draped over diminutive frame. "You're gonna kill me!" she seethed "How could you do that?? You lied to me!"

Swirl listened, looking between the two of them as he heard more footsteps rushing down the hall. "Now's not the time!" he called urgently. "Get me out of this cage and let's go!"

"We're... they're not doing that anymore." Heidi replied, catching an uncertain glance from Dr. Coren from the corner of her eye. "I talked to them, and they've changed their mind. Now... go back to your room and... and we'll sit down and talk about what's going to happen. Okay?"

The vixen's anger was boiling. Again, she was lying! Her mother! How could she betray her like this? Lie to her so easily?? She was trying hide it, but her ears told the truth. She didn't believe her. Silently, she took a step forward, then another, and another, walking to Swirl's cage, then slowly fumbling with the latch as she struggled to open it.

"Squeeze those two together, then lift it up." the mouse explained. "It may take both your hands if your fingers won't move."

Dr. Coren shifted his weight as he stood there and watched. "Think about it, Kaylee. Where are you going go? What's going to happen? You take Swirl, put him on your shoulder and... try to get past Dr. Venner and I? Then what? Do you really think you can get out of this facility??"

"Better than nothing." she grunted in determination. "You just... have to... ngh... TRY!" As she spoke, the cage sprung open, the tiny mouse rushing up her sleeve and resting firmly on her shoulder. "Staying here is death. There're no more games to be played with you. You lied to me from the beginning. You never loved me! You never cared! And you couldn't even say goodbye after condemning me to die!"

Dr. Venner was surprised at how mature she'd suddenly become. The naïve, childlike vixen was gone, replaced by someone who was truly just as mature and intelligent as she'd always assumed her to be. In a twisted sort of way, it made her proud. Sighing heavily, her eyes darting to the floor as she placed her box on the table. "Kaylee honey..." she started, outstretching her hand to caress the vixen's head. "That's just not true. I've always thought of you as my daughter. A... and I always will. This is just something that's out of my control! If I cou-"

Her words were interrupted by a loud aggressive growl, accompanied by a harsh boney SNAP. The researcher fell backward, grasping her hand as the vixen stood above her, a trickle of blood still streaming from her mouth. "Don't. Touch me!" she barked. The emotion was overwhelming her. She began to tremble as she clenched her fists, bearing through the pain of her inflexible digits as her claws began to dig into her paws. This woman... this lab... all of it! They'd created her, given her intelligence! Awareness! Understanding... and only then when they'd made completely sure that she understood what it meant to die, did they make the decision to terminate her against her will! It was a cruelty she could neither measure, nor define. A single word bubbled to her mind, overflowing as it spilled from her maw in righteous fury.

"I HATE YOU!" she yelled, her limited vocabulary on the topic, and understanding of the emotion forcing her into a childlike tantrum. It didn't make sense, but it didn't really have to. For all she cared, it could've come out as barks and growls. She wasn't human, after all. They'd made that *perfectly* clear to her. Why should that even matter? "ALL OF YOU! YOU'RE EVIL! I HATE YOU ALL! I-"

Her rant was interrupted as soon as it'd started. A man had appeared in the doorway clad in heavy combat gear and wielding a tranquilizer rifle. "Awaiting your command, Dr. Coren." he reported.

"Go... now!" Swirl whispered into the vixen's ear. "NOW KAYLEE! NOW!"

The mouse's words sparked motion, a tranquilizer dart whizzing past the vixen's ear as she took flight, knocking heavily into the table of equipment in an attempt to dislodge the machines and delay their pursuit. One shot landing on her body and she'd be done for. She had to do this right!

Another dart, this one bouncing off her coat as she leapt over the fallen coatrack, doing her best to keep from landing on all fours in the urgency of the moment. It wouldn't do her any good with the door being so tall.

Two more darts, one bouncing off the door, the other hitting the floor mere centimeters from her paw. She steeled herself, looking up at the push bar. It was now or never!

"Kaylee please! Think about this!" Heidi called as she struggled to her feet.

"Ma'am you're in the way!" the security guard yelled. "Step aside! Immediately!" This was it! She'd done something right. Was it on purpose? Her final act of motherly love? It didn't matter. All that mattered was the delay.

With one solid jump, the vixen's hands met the bar, the alarm blaring in her ears as the door sprang ope. The light from the afternoon sun was blinding her eyes as she tumbled down the stairs and onto the hard concrete surface beyond.

"Stop! Don't hurt her!" Dr. Venner yelled, wrestling with the guard as he tried to land shots on the dazed and disoriented vixen. Her hand was pouring blood, staining her sleeve and splattering it everywhere as she wrestled with the guard.

Dr. Coren sighed, walking past them as he approached the door. "Stand down..." he said, "she's in the cargo yard. There's no way for her to escape. Send a crew to pick her up. Right now, I need you to quarantine Dr. Venner, and yourself. We don't know what that bite'll do to her."

Kaylee rose to her feet, looking back at the scientist that stared out at her with indignant satisfaction. "You wanted out..." he smiled, nodding to the high metal fences, lined with barbed wire that seemed to surround her now. "You're out. Enjoy your first... and last moments of sunlight, CV716."

She was confused. He was letting up? Just like that? All she had to do was leave?? But that didn't make sense! "Focus!" the tiny mouse called from her shoulder. "We have to get out of this... this cage we're in. Look at the walls. Can you climb them?" the mouse was in her ear, practically standing on her head as he held onto the fur of her cheek with his hand. "They're sending more men. More darts! We need to get to those trees over there."

The vixen was overwhelmed. The stress, the sights, the sounds... the smells! Her panic was driving her to focus, but everything was so intense! Birds chirping in the distance, leaves rustling, the scents of new creatures near and far. Deer? Boar? She'd SEEN them before, but she'd never smelled one. She found herself slowly turning in place, exploring her surroundings as her ears darted about, trying to process it all at once.

"Trees..." she repeated distantly, closing her eyes as she tried to refocus. She could hear the security team regrouping at the other end of the paddock. Opening them again, she studied the wall carefully. It towered above her, powder coated dark brown with only small holes at regular intervals to allow the wind to pass through. The holes that were too small for her to fit, but not too small for her paws. That was it! It had to work. "Right," she said confidently. "Let's go."

Slowly, she approached the wall, her feet moving faster and faster as its towering height became clear. Something inside her knew how to do this, no matter how daunting it felt. "Foxes can climb..." she muttered to herself. "Hold on Swirl, this might get rough."

Faster she ran, leaning forward as the enormous lab coat flipped in the wind, her hands... her... front paws finally landing on the ground as she used them to run faster, picking up as much speed as she possibly could.

Finally, with one great heave, she pushed with her hind legs, launching herself against the fence, her right rear paw finding footing, then her front left. Up and up the pair went, the metal scraping and scratching against her claws, a displeasing sound to her ears. She was nearly there; the barbed wire was becoming increasingly visible. Would she make it?? She had to keep trying!

"There!" one of the guards announced, alerting the other as he took aim with his rifle. "Open fire! Contain the specimen!" It was too late now! They couldn't stop her! She was already at the wire. She perched for a moment on the ledge, looking down at the other side like a cat. It was a drop, higher than the paddock had let on, but past that steep incline was the line of the trees, the freedom they'd both been seeking.

With the clink of a tranquilizer dart snapping against the wall, she leapt, clearing the barbed wire with everything but her coat as its hem clung tightly. It swung her downward harshly, slamming the vixen chest first into the outside of the wall before tearing off and sending her flailing to the ground beneath. She let out a yelp as a slice of pain shot through her ankle. The vixen and her mousey companion rolled helplessly to a stop at the bottom of the drainage ditch, just feet from the line of the trees.

"Dammit! Get someone on the tower! Get the dogs!" the agent directed, pointing back at the building. "We can't let these things get away! Move, move, move!"

Chapter 4

Swirl was dazed. The small mouse had been thrown from the vixen's shoulder when the lab coat had caught on the wire. He stumbled, squeaking absently before slowly coming to his senses. "Kay... Kaylee we gotta keep moving. They're still after us."

The vixen was doubled over, the pain in her ankle was more than she'd ever had to endure. The fall, the stress, the sights, sounds, and smells... her mind was overloaded! "I can't..." she whimpered quietly, trying her best to hold her foot in her hand. "I... it hurts. I can't walk on this."

"You have three others." the mouse responded quickly. He was stern, but empathetic. It was obvious that the idea of walking on all fours was degrading to her, obvious that the pain and the trauma she'd already suffered through all of this was overwhelming her, but their lives were still in danger, and they still needed to move. "Come on, get to your feet. We get away from here, we can rest, and I'll help tend to your foot."

She nodded tiredly, whimpering as she struggled to remember walking on all fours. Her body wasn't really aligned for this anymore. Her hind legs were longer than her arms, the muscles simply weren't used to bending in the way that she'd asked of them. Slowly, she hobbled out of the ditch, looking over her shoulder as a security guard ascended the corner tower at the far edge of the paddock. "Faster..." she gasped to herself tiredly, picking up the pace.

"Remember, we need them in a recoverable state." Dr. Coren chimed over the radio. "Don't release the dogs unless you have no other option. I need as much of their bodies intact as possible. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir, Dr. Coren." the guard confirmed. A shot was fired from the tower, then two, then three, all of them narrowly missing the small framed vixen as she struggled to pick up her pace.

"How... do we get away from dogs...?" she asked Swirl as she limped along, running awkwardly on all fours. "They'll be able to track my scent no matter how far we go into these trees."

The mouse thought as they moved, looking over his shoulder at the guards that... surprisingly weren't doing all that well to keep up. "We need a body of water." he said, tilting his head puzzlingly. Why were the men falling behind? Why weren't they being more aggressive? They were trying kill them... right? Looking back down at Kaylee, feeling the movement of her body, he was starting to understand. "We go up stream on a body of water, then cross over... the dogs will lose our trail. But. Kaylee, we have to lose them first. They're not even trying to keep up. You're moving slow."

The vixen was giving it everything she had. Her body was failing her. The pain in her paw was throbbing as the exhausted creature practically dragged herself along. Was she really this weak? This couldn't be the end! "What... can we do...?" she panted, yelping softly as she accidentally put too much pressure on her paw. "How... do we get away? Help me, Swirl. If I'm your transportation you have to be my navigator."

"Did one of the darts hit her?" one of the guards joked as they gently walked along behind the obviously slowing vixen. "I thought this thing had fight in her."

The other guard shook his head. "Yea, I think she musta' got tagged." he replied, grabbing his radio. "SG Dominic to base, we got this under control. Specimen has been tranq'd. K9 not necessary. We'll be returning shortly."

Both of the... specimens... could clearly hear the report. They'd called off the dogs! It was good news, but they misunderstood her sluggishness. She was exhausted, yes, but it was more the pain in her ankle than a genuine lack of energy. "I hate to say this, Kaylee..." the mouse whispered, seeming to almost read her mind. "But we're gonna have to do something a bit... unethical. If we're gonna get away from these two."

"Do you know how?" she asked. "With your size, it's not going to be easy to-"

"I know." he interrupted. "I... I just need a weapon. Something sharp. I get into his pant leg, and I can open his femoral artery. I just need... something... I don't have the instincts you do. Nor the pointy fangs."

"As if I know how..." she continued, stopping her progression as she waited for them to catch up. "Think fast, Swirl. We do this, and we're free."

The guards caught up, slowly catching their breath as they towered over the pair, their hands upon their hips. Kaylee had turned around and was practically laying on her side on the ground, protecting her wounded foot. "Alright girl... time for you to come home." the guard said with a condescending smile.

She looked up at him, doing her best to feign defeat, something that wasn't all that difficult to do, given the circumstances. She could see that her slightly lifted leg seemed to be a visual point of interest for him. Puzzled as to why, she used it as an opportunity to look him over. Strapped to the inside of his leg was a knife, just across from the artery. All she needed to do was to grab it, pierce his leg and drag the wound open. But could she grip a knife with her hands like that? She wasn't confident that she could. Obviously, it was much too large for Swirl, but seeing the tranquiller ammo clip on his belt made her wonder if there was another way for the mouse distract the other guard.

"They really did it, huh?" the other guard asked, focusing visually on the same spot as the other. "They changed her crotch. But... why? Why give her a human p-"

"NOW!" the vixen yelled, leaping onto the guard closest to her as Swirl, following her lead, leapt to the other. Like her, he'd seen the tranquilizer gun. He knew that it would be his go-to weapon. There wasn't much he could do with those thick gloves between his teeth, but he knew how guns worked, he'd seen them in the movies.

Kaylee latched onto the guard, biting at him as she snatched at the knife, fumbling with the latch as she tried to tug it free. "What the fuck the bitch is goin' for my knife!" he yelled as the other guard shook his hand, trying his best to release the latch for his gun.

"Hold on I got... get off me ya rat!" the other yelled, shaking his leg as the mouse climbed up his body. Swirl was undeterred, he held on tightly through the shaking, making his way to the gun, then clicking the safety in to place, causing much of a distraction as he possibly could to keep the other guard off of the fox.

Finally, she twisted the knife free, biting his hand hard enough to break through the glove and draw a drop of his blood. He snatched it away, giving her a chance to finally grab the knife, nearly tearing her hands apart as she forced her limited fingers around the hilt. She thrust it deep into his leg, the wound gushing blood as the guard quickly tied to hold it together with both of his hands. "Stop her! Get her offa me!" he pleaded.

Flinging Swirl free with one hard shake, the other guard managed to draw his gun. He pulled the trigger to fire at the vixen, only to find that the safety was on! "W... what the f.." he asked in confusion. It was poor discipline, but he'd always kept his safety off in situations like this. As he fumbled with his gun, the vixen lunged at him, biting hard into his throat and tearing it free. Rhe splash of blood hit her violently in the face as he grasp at his neck and began to gag and choke.

It was over in moments. One guard clinging both hands to his leg for dear life, struggling to keep from bleeding out, the other, lacerated at the throat, struggling to hold on as he choked on his own blood.

She stepped back, leaning against the tree with her left hand to keep the pressure off her right foot, while she stared at the pair. There was no way they could radio for help like this. She almost felt sorry for them.

With a discomforted squeak, Swirl made his way to her, gently climbing her leg and onto her shoulder. "We still need to keep moving..." he reminded her. "They're incapacitated but they'll eventually find a way to call for help."

"Unless they bleed to death..." the vixen nodded, staring at the crimson pools that'd formed around them both. "Was that really the right thing to do?"

The mouse shook his head. "Us or them, Kaylee. It had to happen." She stared somberly at them both, realizing the truth in his words as she felt the blood still dripping from the fur of her maw.

She slowly turned, stopping herself part way with a grunt and a wince as she realized her foot was still too sore to carry her weight. "I... I'm sorry." she said, falling onto all fours again. "I hope that you survive. I hope that you understand."

Chapter 5

Dr. Coren paced slowly in front of the observation room, thinking to himself about what to say as he struggled to control his anger. These cells were for research specimen! Not for rouge scientists that'd broken protocol and helped a dangerous animal escape! Not only that, but a second cell was being occupied by the guard she'd been bleeding on during the struggle! He looked at her, opening his mouth like he was about to speak, but closed it again and took in a deep breath.

Inside the chamber, Dr. Venner watched him, scratching at the bandage they'd placed over her hand. There was much to be said, but how much? And when? Eventually he'd find out. It would become too obvious to hide. Still, she almost found the whole situation humorous. She'd never in her life expect that she'd be the very first person to be subject to her little vulpine experiment. She just hoped that she'd eventually be able to escape. Being confined like she was, she'd likely share the same fate as Kaylee, if she wasn't able to get away. How far would it go? Would it hurt? Would they even let it happen? Looking down at her hand as she scratched, she snorted out a giggle. Of course they'd let it happen. They already were.

"What's so funny, Heidi?" The aging researcher asked, grabbing a rolling chair from a nearby desk and sitting on it backward to face her. "The fact that you let a priceless, potentially dangerous specimen escape from our facility? Or the fact that you now very well may be infected with a virus of your own making?"

She smiled at him calmly, leaning back against the wall with her legs outstretched along the floor. "Both." she cooed, a smarmy sense of satisfaction spreading across her face. "I never thought I'd be the first being to test it out but, well... here we are, right?"

Dr. Coren groaned as he took his glasses from his face and polished the lenses with his coat. "Why would you do this? What... what purpose does it even serve?? You used company resources, time, and energy to create a bioweapon! Not only is that a valid reason for dismissal but its… terrorism! You've unleashed an unknown weapon into the wild with ramifications that not even you are able to comprehend! And you invented the damned thing!"

She listened, tilting her head as she tried to stifle a giggle. It was almost as if she was inebriated. Had they tranquilized her somehow? "Alan, you worry too much." she smiled warmly, using her left hand to unwrap the bandage from her right. "The xenobots cause a retrograde genetic rewrite. It corrects everything that's wrong! If it happens to you… you won't even need those glasses anymore!"

The bandage pooled onto the floor as she looked at her hand, a wash of fear pouring over her mind. It was working, but... there was small tuft of dark brown… fur that'd started to sprout from the now healed wound. Her eyes began to widen as she realized what she'd done. "Oh… oh no," she muttered. This wasn't a mistake. It was doing exactly what it'd been designed to do! "Shit…" Had she given it too much fox DNA? Would she wind up on all fours? Would her

body even be able to stand what was going to ultimately happen to her during this process?? With fur now growing on her hand it was evident that the template had taken hold, but in the worst way possible. The uncertainty of it all plagued her mind in a way that she couldn't define. It was never her intention to start this with human testing… especially not on herself! "How's uhm... how's the guard?" she asked as she gently brushed the fur with her fingers. "Is he showing any signs of uh-"

"He is. Yes." Dr. Coren interrupted. "Just like you, signs of euphoria, slurred speech, and a small patch of fur where your blood came into contact with the skin of his arm." He shook his head. "Heidi, you've doomed us all by making this thing! I've worked with you for more than a decade. How could you be so stupid?!"

She cleared her throat, sliding up higher on the wall. It seemed that she'd slowly been sliding down. "Can I get a cot? Or at least a chair?" she asked. "This floor is-"

"You're not getting anything until we know the risk." the researcher barked, cutting her off. "That guard is infected because you bled on him. Skin to fluid contact. Not even ingested! For all we know this could be airborne!"

Heidi laughed, sincerely and openly, like it was the most amusing thing she'd ever heard in her life. "Then I guess you're already foxed, huh?" she laughed. "Get it?? Foxed?!"

"Doctor..." a young woman in a lab coat interrupted politely, handing Dr. Coren a tablet already open to an analysis table. "It's not airborne but, it's highly contagious. We're dealing with a pandemic class bug here."

He nodded at her in thanks. "Make... sure these two are given class 7 quarantine. I don't want anyone not in full hazmat coming into contact with either of them. We need to transfer them both to the southern wing for observation. I need full tables, fluid and tissue samples... All of it." He looked back at Heidi who was still giggling as she marveled like a child at the fur growing on her hand. "I also need a cognitive test, and... For the love of god... Have IT give me access to her research notes."

Chapter 6

“Swirl, you think it’s safe to rest?” Kaylee panted. “Walking on all fours is… harder than it probably should be for someone like me.” She’d been slowly crawling her way through the forest for what felt like an eternity. The sun was nearly set, the trees casting long shadows that faded into darkness with the canopy of the leaves and branches high above. “I’ve never seen the night sky before. I’m actually kinda looking forward to it.”

The mouse hadn’t been listening, riding on her shoulder, sometimes sitting on her head as he did his best to navigate her through the forest. There was something to it that made it feel comical to him. A tiny mouse, piloting a fox through the forest like a ship through the sea. Oh, the stories he could write… but there were more pressing matters than creative writing on his mind. “Don’t you think we should try to find some shelter?” he wondered, looking out carefully through the trees to what he thought was a clearing. “Neither of us have ever been outside at night. I... I don’t want to wind up a snack, and... I can’t imagine that you do either.”

Her stomach growled as she lay down onto her side with a grunt. “Speaking of a snack... What’re we gonna eat? All this… running for my life has left me starving.”

He nodded, jumping off of her head and rushing to the top of a broken limb that protruded from a fallen log to get a better view. “There’s a clearing over there.” he said. “I... do you think it’d be safe for me to scout ahead and see if there’s any buildings? Maybe we can sleep in a barn.”

The vixen looked up at the sky, then sniffed the air around them. “Swirl I wouldn’t know what a mouse eating predator would smell like if it ran up and bit me on the ass.” she worried. “If you want, we can head to the clearing together, but… I… I need you. I can’t watch you get gobbled up by some hungry…” She stopped herself just short of the word that was about to leave her tongue. Foxes ate mice. She was a fox. The idea had been on her mind for an hour or more, but she’d been trying to ignore it.

Picking up on her meaning, he hopped from the limb, then rushed back to her, climbing back onto the top of her head, “Yea, I... I get what you mean.” he said anxiously. “So, shall we continue, then? To the clearing?” His question was met with a pained grunt mixed with a whimper as the vixen struggled awkwardly back to her feet.

“I sure hope you’re right about there being a place to stay.” she sighed. “Walking on my hands all day… I haven’t done this in months. They gave me these hands and now I’m forced to walk on them like they were just paws all along.”

Swirl laid down with his belly atop her head, his small hands gripping gently against her fur. “What about me?” he asked with a gentle chuckle. “I didn’t go through any of the physical changes you did. My body had hands from the beginning. If you consider them that, yet my species walks on them all the time.” He could tell she wasn’t amused by the movement of her ears. “Look it feels degrading right now, but we weren’t given a choice! It was do or die. Hell, it may still *be* do or die, Kaylee. I can’t imagine that they’re done looking for us. In fact, if anything, those two men we left back there might’ve just made it much worse for us.”

The vixen stopped herself near the log Swirl had climbed, sitting down on the ground before breaking a large, sturdy branch from a recently fallen limb. She used it to rise to her feet, moving slowly but surely forward, using it as a walking stick. “That’s much better...” she said, looking past the trees at the open, amber field before them. As dark as it’d become within the forest, the light still shone past the horizon in the valley below. There was an old barn, seemingly surrounded by wheat, with no house nor equipment in sight. “How could they make it... Ngh... worse?” she continued, gently descending the hill with a grunt. The walking cane she’d gathered was proving more useful than she’d even imagined. “They were going to kill us and… harvest us, remember?”

“This place looks like one of mom... Dr. Venner’s tablet backdrops.” the mouse mused, ignoring her question as she made her way carefully down the hill toward the aging split-log fence that bordered the forest. “Are you sure we’re not in a simulation like that movie with all the green?”

“Green?” Kaylee asked, tilting her head slightly, then gasping as she realized he didn’t have a good grip on her fur.

Thinking quickly, she reached up and caught him, her hand barely able to wrap around his body. She positioned it so that she could see him, obviously wincing through the pain of hand movement. “You need to be more careful.” she said, looking down at him scoldingly. “You nearly fell off my head!” She couldn’t help but notice the expression on his face had become somewhat odd. It was a look not of worry or understanding, but of anxiety and discomfort. “Is something wrong?” she puzzled.

“Can you... C... can you hold me up higher so that I see you eye to eye, r... rather than… eye to mouth, please?” he stammered.

His question confused her. Was he really afraid that she was going to eat him? Perhaps it was just some primal fear ingrained into his species as a mouse, coupled with her as a fox, but it still felt so very strange. Not that she could blame him, really. She was starving, and though she felt no compulsion to eat him, if nothing but for the fact that he was a friend, it did occur to her that somewhere in her subconscious, a creature like this would be… acceptable… to satisfy the cramping pang of hunger that had been wracking her stomach for the last several hours.

Moving him up, she loosened her grip, allowing the mouse to climb onto her nose and up onto her head once more, this time grabbing her fur so that he might not fall again. “So... as you were saying, the movie with green?” she asked, deciding not to address his short-lived discomfort.

“Can you *see* green?” the mouse pondered, doing his best to sound calm and collected. There was still an obvious inflection of anxiety within his words, but then, she could tell that simply by the movement of his body as he’d climbed back to his spot. “I… I mean, I read that neither of us typically see in what humans consider the full color spectrum, so...”

“I remember seeing a movie that was very, chromatic, but I saw it mostly as blue.” she said. “Does that mean that I can’t see the color the same way?”

“May... may-CAREFUL!” he squealed, grabbing onto her ear as she tilted her head to climb through the fence. “You almost dropped me again!”

She sighed and pushed him back between her ears. “Swirl, you’re going to need to find a better way to travel with me,” she complained. “Maybe in this jacket’s pocket? It might be a better solution for you.” She looked down at it, sighing at the state of the once pure white coat she’d taken earlier that day. Filthy from dragging in the dirt, grass and leaves, stained with the blood of the security guards they’d fought, and far, far too big on her small, fur-covered frame. She felt him crawl to the edge of her head, trying to see, but he began to shiver, and quickly moved back.

“I... I don’t think so.” he squeaked timidly. “I’m staying up here. Above… above your-”

“My mouth?” she interrupted with a groan, completing his sentence. “Are you really afraid that I’ll eat you, Swirl? Or is that just an instinct?” She felt him squirm again, squeaking out a whimper of fear before tightening his body posture.

“You nearly left me back there.” he said finally, hesitating just long enough to bolster the confidence of his tone... “Abandoned me to die. You’ll have to forgive me if I’m not the most trusting of your judgment when it comes to my wellbeing.”

She nodded gently, making sure not to shake him off. She was approaching the edge of the wheat field. It was taller than her. The very sight of it made her nervous. How would she find the barn like this?? “Remember what I said before?” she asked nervously, stopping just before the line of stalks. “I need you. I’m not gonna eat you. S... so... So, help me find my way to the barn. This stuff is too tall for me.”

It wasn't that he didn't believe her. It wasn't that he thought she couldn't resist herself. It was something ingrained within him. Something deep. She smelled… dangerous. Those teeth were just like they'd always been. Sharp, carnivorous… he'd studied biology just as much as she had. A fox's maw was a terrifying sight, and no matter how much he wanted to trust her, his instincts kept telling him no.

"Let me see..." he sighed, standing up on the top of her head. "Don't move please. I don't want you catching me in your... Having to catch me again."

This was starting to annoy her. Again, with this unfounded fear that she was going to eat him. She'd just told him that he was needed! Yet he still made this ridiculous assumption!? She opted not to say anything.

Standing for a moment, he hopped from her head to a stalk of wheat, climbing to the top as it bent under his weight. "It... it's... Oh... oh no!" he gasped as the stalk bent in half, then snapped. He found himself on the ground on his back, looking up between the vixen's legs, her nose peering over her human-like, fur-covered breasts. She was looking down at him from towering heights with the biggest grin her face could muster.

"Have a nice fall?" she asked, suppressing a giggle. "Straight ahead, huh?"

The mouse was humiliated, and from the view slightly embarrassed, though he knew not why. "Straight ahead." he pouted, trying his best to maintain his sense of dignity. "Pick me up. We should be there in no time now that you have that cane."

Chapter 7

As the mouse had promised, the pair reached the barn in only a few short minutes. Though it was quick, the journey had been harrowing for Kaylee. The sound of the wheat rustling as she moved through it, the tight, limited visibility, even the discomfort of it brushing against her whiskers, telling her that it was too small to proceed. Every sound, every step, every smell felt dangerous, making her movement uncertain.

Swirl was no exception, though his apprehension manifested from a different perspective. His vantage from atop her head gave him just barely a sight of the barn up ahead, but it did nothing to dilute the growing fear in his mind that he was being carried to certain doom as the vixen's meal.

It was almost an irritation to him to think this way. He knew her. They were… friends? She'd told him twice now that she needed him, and being a bit judgmental of the fox and his observations of her life in captivity, he felt that to certainly be the case. She was much too easily distracted, too curious, and too playful to take any of this serious enough to survive. She had no idea what hardships lay ahead for them both. At least *he* could blend in with other mice, if he had to. With Kaylee's human-like body, she'd simply have no chance.

Finally stepping from the rows of wheat, they found themselves in a clearing. It wasn't much larger than a few cars in diameter around the barn, and seemed, more than anything, to be the result of progressive farming cut short as a matter of convenience. It was obvious, this barn had been abandoned for active use long ago, even though the farm itself still seemed to be active. The sun was low now, the face of the aging, gray wood structure barely visible against the darkness of twilight that was quickly descending upon them both. It gave them an ominous sense of insecurity to even look upon the structure. Was this really going to be their place of refuge?

Taking a few steps forward, the vixen stretched upward, struggling to untie the knot that'd been left behind by the barn's owner that held the doors together. "I... can't…" she grunted, standing on the very tips of her paws before yelping to herself from the sprain. "I'm not tall enough. A... and… my hands aren't flexible. Oohh… how are we gonna get in, Swirl?? Should… should we even go into that thing? It looks so dangerous!"

The mouse, still feeling apprehensive around her, made the decision to climb down to the ground. He walked slowly on his hind legs to the door, scratching under his chin as if to ponder a solution. “Well, we’re likely not opening the door, so acting like humans in this case is going to be out the window,” he said to her. He could sense a change in her scent but didn’t yet know why. “Let me climb under the door and F...!!” He’d turned as he spoke, finding that the vixen had squatted down, using the cane to help her injured foot. Her maw was easily within snapping distance! “W... would you back up please?!” he gasped, his chest heaving in panic as he backed himself against the door. “You should know by now that it bothers me when you get close to me like that!” He expected her to change, back away, splay her ears, apologize! Instead, she seemed to grin, tilting her head slowly as she parted her lips.

“What’s the matter, mousie?” she asked playfully, making sure to enunciate so that he could clearly see her teeth and her tongue with each slowly passing word. “You don’t like my maw? My tongue is very long and soft ya know. I could clean you with it if you wanted me to.” She opened her mouth and extended her tongue to show him more. “It’s nice and warm on this cold spring night.”

Swirl was terrified. What was *wrong* with her?! Had she lost her mind?? Pressing himself nearly flat against the door, he looked away, doing his best to suppress his urge to flee. “Kaylee... s... stop… you’re scaring me,” he managed to plead, half scolding her. “You... you already know this bothers me!”

Seeing that he was terrified, she stood up with a grunt. “I’m just fucking with you.” she said, her ears splaying. She felt a little guilty, seeing how afraid of her he really was. It just seemed unfathomable that such an intelligent person would be this afraid! Even if they had only known each other for 8 months, that was still *his* entire life! “I... I’m sorry.” she continued, clearing her throat. “I didn’t... That was inappropriate of me.”

He started to calm, looking at her with a scolding glare before falling onto all fours to look under the door. “Yes, it was.” he complained. “Don’t... Don’t fucking do that to me again. You’re going to make me urinate all over the place doing that. And you saw the commercials, no one likes mouse urine!” His voice had become muffled as he’d wiggled halfway under the door, making him hard to understand.

His words sparked an interesting, yet unsavory thought in her mind. Humans *were* repulsed by the smell of urine and other such excretions, but she knew for a fact that most every animal on the planet, aside from humans, intentionally marked their territory using these methods. She’d been doing her best to ignore it until now, but there was a scent nearby that certainly seemed like it belonged to an animal that she didn’t recognize. As if she’d recognize *any* animal by its scent, she supposed, but there was still something about it that she innately knew was different. This was a predator. More like herself, but… different. “A cat perhaps?” she muttered.

“Cat?!” the mouse gasped, popping back out of the hole. “Where?!”

“Do you smell that?” she asked distantly, sniffing the air. “I think a cat has marked this as its territory recently.”

The mouse couldn’t deny it. He’d smelled it, too. He’d just been doing his best to ignore it. They needed shelter, and without anything truly fresh, it’d at least give them a spot to rest, regroup, then continue on. His tiny heart couldn’t stand any more of this stress! “I did, and I do.” he said with a frustrated nod. “But it’s not here now. Listen, there’s an opening on the side of the barn large enough for you to crawl through. Why don’t we both go inside, find a warm bedding of straw, and get some rest for the evening?”

She nodded silently in agreement, following the direction in which he’d gestured. “What about food?” she wondered. “I’m still hungry. And before you say it, no. You’re in no risk of me eating you. I don’t think of you as food, Swirl. I don’t think of anything that’s alive as food. I want one of those sandwiches mother used to make. With the meat wrapped around a carrot.”

“That’s not a sandwich. Sandwiches have bread.” the mouse retorted sarcastically, offering no solution to her problem. “Try not to think about it. Maybe… maybe there’s some kind of dog food in the barn or-”

“Dog food??” she interrupted indignantly, stopping just shy of the hole in the barn’s side wall to put her hands on her hips. She was standing in a mirrored pose to Dr. Veneer, her hand-like paws balled as much as they could be into fists with the sides of her coat thrown open. “You want me to eat dog food??”

He stared up at her for a moment, then rolled his eyes, walking through the opening and into the barn. “Get in here…” he sighed.

The inside of the barn was dark, save for bits of early twilight that spilled through holes in the aging seams of the heavy wooden walls. The inner timber was thick, hand cut, and sturdy. It’d obviously been standing for quite some time. Stacked against the far wall, opposite the main doors, was a crumbling mountain of old hay, piled nearly to the ceiling. At one time they’d been neatly stacked bales but had long decayed into an amorphous lump of amber mixed with gray and brown. The stench of manure emanated from the pile. Mounted to the side wall was a small pull-chain light, strung up by its cord not far above a crooked yet sturdy hand-made table. It was lined with rusted tools, likely an old workbench.

As the vixen emerged from the hole, Swirl rushed to the light. He climbed up onto the chord, then jumped, using his weight to pull the chain, clicking the old bulb to life. The soft amber glow that resulted felt warm and welcoming to both of the weary creatures. “There... we…go…” he grunted as he climbed back off the bulb and returned the wire. His elevated position gave him a good view of the entire room. “A warm light, a roof over our heads, and lots of straw to make a bed.”

“If you want ticks…” she said distantly, walking with her cane toward the workbench as her ears slowly splayed. “This isn’t the world I expected outside of that room.” she sighed, using the side of the table as a place to lean. “I wanted to see the cities. The lights and cars and sounds… the music, the dancing...” She started to tear up, sniffing as she slid down to rest on the ground. “I’m such an idiot…” she sobbed.

Swirl bit his tongue. It was so tempting to agree with her. Yes, she was an idiot. This fox really thought that she was so human that she could go out dancing in clubs like she’d seen in the movies? Drive cars? Visit cities? Did she have so little self-awareness of the vibrant orange and white fur that covered her body? The odd shape to her legs? The significant variance in her stature compared to adult human females?? Perhaps, he wondered, she’d just been dissociating from herself for so long, pretending to be a human, that she couldn’t face the reality they’d found themselves in any longer.

With a sympathetic sigh, he climbed down from the power cable, opting instead to sit on the edge of the workbench overlooking the top of the vixen’s head. If she were to stand, she’d probably be eye level with him, but at least from here, he felt secure. “I understand how you feel…” he started, his ears splaying as she looked up at him with red puffy eyes.

“No you don’t.” she whined, looking back down at her body. “You’re a mouse. You look like a mouse, you smell like a mouse… you act like one, too. What was the biggest dream you had when you were in that cage? Your next leaf of spinach?”

It was obvious that she didn’t mean to be as hurtful as she’d been. It bothered him that she thought so little of him, but he couldn't say that he was really all that surprised. Up till this day, they’d barely even spoken to one another. He’d watched her train and grow, and, she’d watched him, but aside from that, real, deep communication had never really occurred. As he sat there, pondering her hurtful words, it came to him that… aside from Dr. Venner, she was the only other person on the entire planet that he knew… even in the slightest. It made the small mouse suddenly feel infinitely smaller.

“I had dreams.” he said finally. “You may not believe it, but… I love media. Movies, books, poetry… I spent so much time fantasizing about making my own worlds, carving out new characters… I thought, maybe one day mom wound bring me a special tablet, just my size... and I could sit in my cage and write my days away, lost in a world far from the tiny little laboratory.” He shifted his position as he saw her ears starting to lift. Now laying comfortably on the bench, he decided to continue. “It may not be something I can do right now. Hell, I may not *ever* get to do it! But that doesn’t mean sitting here moping will do me any good.” Her ears began to splay again, making him sigh in frustration. “Kaylee, we have to face the facts; The real, cold truth of the lot we both have in life. We have human intelligence, but not human bodies. We’re wanted by a corporation because they think we’re their products and their property, and neither of those facts are likely to change any time soon. Now I know you d-”

“I’ve walked half the day on all fours.” she interrupted. “I’m starving and my brain keeps telling me to hunt…my lab coat’s in tatters, and now you’re asking me to roll around in straw. My humanity is slipping away from me! It’s not just the improbable dream of time square on New Year’s Eve, it’s... I don’t even get to keep what I have!” She tried to ball her hands into fists. It seemed to be getting easier but was no less painful. “I should’ve stayed and had my last meal. At least it would’ve been something tasty.”

Chapter 8

“Make a fist for me?” the researcher asked Dr. Venner over the intercom. The feeling of drunken euphoria had worn off nearly an hour before as reality had slowly began to truly set in for her, or at least, it’d seemed to lessen. Infected with a virus of her own making, with a contagious specimen on the loose… the horror of what she’d done was burning itself into her brain. “Dr. Venner?”

“Mmm... I’m trying.” she said, looking down at her right hand, now partially covered with brown fur. It lacked the degree of movement that it’d had only an hour before. She could still close it, but it took considerable effort, and she was finding it rather uncomfortable. “That’s... That’s the best you’re gonna get.”

“Alright, thank you, doctor. No more tests for now.” the researcher replied. She sighed to herself as she undocked the tablet, looking in at Heidi, who seemed obsessed now with the condition of her hand.

From behind her, Dr. Coren cleared his throat, startling her slightly. “Well?” he asked.

“We’re… seeing muscular degeneration in her right hand. Compared to baseline two hours ago, she’s lost approximately 10% of the strength and mobility that she previously had. Fur growth has accelerated from the bite point at a rate of 5% per hour. At the current rate, she… should be covered in fur in a week, give or take. Should… this continue, that is.”

“Thank you, Dr. Ramirez.” the aging researcher smiled. “Have you confirmed the changes with-”

“We’re… seeing nearly identical changes in the guard that came into contact with her blood, sir.” she replied, interrupting his question. The look on her face was sick with worry. “If... sir if we’re not able to contain this we-”

“We’ll contain it.” he assured her, gently taking the tablet from her hand. “Try to keep it together, Anne. I know this is stressful.”

She did her best to nod, giving him an unconvinced, but forced smile. “Sir most of the directors and a lot of our researchers have fled the facility,” she worried. “The moment they learned that Kaylee had escaped… they skipped out!” Looking back at Dr. Venner, she sighed. “What’s happening to her? Is this something we knew about before the specimen escaped?”

He took off his glasses and began to clean them with his tie, exhaling slowly through his nose. “No,” he said. “Not… not to this extent. We knew that it had regenerative properties, that was… one of the major selling points to corporate to even keep it going this long. We just… didn’t realize that’d it do something like *this*.”

“I see…” she said simply. “Thank you, Dr. Coren.” She excused herself, leaving the room. It was a large, hexagonal chamber, centralized to five trapezoidal observation rooms outside. On the sixth wall was an access tunnel, leaving the area on the map to resemble an oddly shaped flower. Anyone that came in or out, had to pass through that one, narrow, atmospherically controlled passageway. It was the highest security this facility could offer. He just hoped that it’d be enough.

The director waited for the doors to repressurize the room fully before slowly making his way to the observation window for Dr. Venner’s cell. She was sitting on a cot in the far corner of the room, her blood-stained clothing having been replaced by white medical scrubs. As Dr. Ramirez had observed, the blond-haired woman still seemed to be obsessed with the state of her hand... “Feeling anything now?” he asked, raising a brow. “You’ve lost 10% of the grip in that hand. Are you proud of yourself?”

She looked up at him with a long, somber pause, then looked back down at her hand. “I never planned... I never intentionally planned to make a virus that could do this to humans.” she explained. “It was always my intention to find a way to meet the company’s objectives. It’s just that… when I learned what this virus was capable of doing… what it *was* doing to Kaylee… I needed to study it more. I wanted to see how far it would go. How far it would take her. Would she become human? Or... would she stall out somewhere along the way?”

“So, you made her contagious, then fought our security guards when she tried to escape into the wild...” Dr. Coren continued. “Heidi, do you really expect me to believe that?”

She scoffed at him, rolling her eyes as she shook her head in disgust. “Why would I lie to you *now*?” she asked. “I’ll never see the light of day again! I’m locked away in this place and my specimen, as you’ve so obviously noted... is contagious and in the wild. Lying to you now would just be a waste of both your time and mine.” She looked back down at her hand, massaging it as she felt the muscles and bones beneath her skin. “Did... you get access to my research notes? Maybe... There’s a cure for this.”

He pulled up her notes, grazing through the comments other researchers on the team had left over the last several hours. There were only a few, and none of them had the same level of expertise in this field that Heidi possessed. In fact, no sooner had the news broken that a contagious specimen had escaped, than over 90% of the population of the facility had turned tail and ran. Of the 1500 operating staff, only slightly over 100 remained behind.

“A cure?” he asked, shaking his head. “No. There’s not likely to be a cure, but there may be a vaccine, according to the people left on your team, that is. That just... sadly means that whatever’s going to happen to you is... going to completely run its course.”

She sighed and nodded slowly. “Great.”

“Hey, you did this to yourself, Heidi.” Dr. Coren retorted. “There’s no reason to be snarky about this. You’re in a bed of your own making. Now, I’ve got Dr. Shaw working on a way to slow it down, but I’m telling you now that our focus is going to be on vaccinations, and apprehension. If we find a cure we can test on you, we’ll do so, but chances are you’re in this for the long haul. So, I suggest you ma-”

“Dr. Coren, we’ve got two more.” A researcher called as two guards were pushed into the other open observation cells. “The security guards that followed her. Apparently, she managed to infect them both.”

His hand shaking, Dr. Coren pulled his glasses from his face once more and cleaned them before walking to the newly occupied room’s observation windows. “How…?” he asked bluntly. “How does a 14-month-old, Three-foot-two inch tall, partially bipedal vixen manage to take out two human male guards??”

“Uh, femoral artery on one, sir, and… a bite to the throat on the other.” the researcher replied, studying the notes as the two healthy yet euphoric looking men were disrobed.

Dr. Coren was taken aback. “Femoral- how did he survive that?” He looked down at his tablet as information from the individuals began to propagate. They were still very sparse, but one thing was clear, the virus had healing properties that geratly exceeded all previous records. Clearing his throat, he walked across the room to the other observation pod. “Heidi, how did you do this? Where did you get this virus??”

“I designed it myself.” she replied. “Why?”

“Explain it to me. Your notes... I… I don’t have time to review all of this.”

She nodded. “Get me a tablet. I’ll help you work through it and-”

“I’ll get you a tablet, but first I need an explanation! I just got 2 new arrivals over here that survived impossible injuries and I need to know how this works!”

She seemed surprised, shocked even. Was Kaylee really this violent? “Two... oh... Okay... So, the virus is… oh how do I even explain this? It’s not really a virus at all. It’s... intelligent. It doesn’t work like anything seen in nature. It does a lot more than simply exist to replicate itself. This… ‘virus’ is specifically engineered to… reorganize… an individual with a set of instructions called a template. That means that it can reintroduce stem cells, reactivate dormant receptors, it can... Entirely re-write an individual on the genetic level, so long as the body can handle it. I had… hoped that we could use it in the future to cure conditions like cancer. I never really considered that it might template to Kaylee and… spread as it has.”

Dr. Coren was scrolling through her notes as she spoke, trying to understand how this was even possible. “Where did you get this? An alien spaceship?? This… you’re implying here that it can regrow missing limbs! How is that even possible??”

Heidi sighed. “Remember when I asked to double Kaylee’s rations about 6 months ago?” she asked. “She needed more material to use as mass. She was growing so fast that she needed the raw calcium, protein and other substances for her new cells. It didn’t have enough material with the existing vulpine body to work through its... magic.”

He sighed, sitting down heavily in a rolling chair as he buried his face in his hand. “Magic… Heidi?” he groaned. “Come the fuck on, I need answers here! Not words like ‘magic!’ How did you even make this??”

“Have you ever heard of the organic nanobot theory?” she asked. “Well years ago, one team of researchers a MIT came up with the idea of an organic nanobot. They referred to them as xenobots. That’s… where I got my inspiration on this. They’re basically a colony of cells that take over a host and modify it to their template, then vehemently defend the structure they’ve built. For Kaylee, I moved this forward slowly. In each cycle, the bots would run a set of instructions, then turn themselves off, and get absorbed into Kaylee’s bloodstream. They would break down the supply of raw materials given to her through food and change her until their lifecycle ended. That’s... That's where this comes from. How it’s producing a contagion at this point I’m just not-”

Dr. Coren refused to believe it. “Your notes *start* with the xenobot. They START there. Where did you get this thing?? You mean to tell me you’ve whipped up something other science teams have worked decades to create in 14 months??”

“No! No! Alan you’re not… You interviewed me, remember? The 15-year-old savant girl who wrote her dissertation on genetic alteration via intelligent, self-maintained microorganic restructuring? I’ve been playing with this very idea for more than a decade! I thought this project would be the perfect venue for experimenting with it to promote and stimulate neurological advancement. It’s just… when Kaylee started to show physical abnormalities, it piqued my interest. I wanted to see where it would lead. Swirl was the real experiment for your project. Kaylee was more of a… pet project on the side. The same intelligence alterations, with genetic and physical alteration as an added benefit. I just didn’t think she’d start producing these cells on her own. At least not in a way that it would spread her template to us. This… ‘virus’ showed so much potential… I just needed to work out some details and we’d be able to revolutionize medicine the world over!”

Flabbergasted, all Dr. Coren could do was sigh and shake his head, staring down hopelessly at the project notes on the tablet in his hands. This was well beyond anyone else in this facility. Heidi was the only one that could feasibly get anywhere, and here she was, growing fur like an animal. “This is the last time I hire a teenage savant and let her work here for 15 years with minimal supervision...” he groaned. “If we survive, that is.”

“Do you have my blood tests?” she continued. “I’ll be able to show you more with a screen sharing session, once you get me that tablet, that is. This is truly an amazing product, Alan! It just… needed tweaking.”

“Tweaking and closer monitoring, you mean.” Dr. Coren retorted. “You weren’t even *aware* that she was contagious? How... how far do you think this is going to take you, anyway? What are you going to be when this is over? Feral? Is she still changing, too? Maybe you two will switch places.”

She looked down at her hand, studying the shape of her fingernails. There was a pressure beneath them. She could already tell that the nail beds were changing. Claws would soon force their way out. She hoped it wouldn’t be too painful. “I knew that the xenobots were in her system. What I didn’t know was that they would try to extend their realm of influence *beyond* her system. It... it seems that they’ve taken her current state as a template, and they’re using it to propagate that template beyond her physical body and… into mine. If that theory is correct then… then I’ll wind up like her, or as close to her as I can get without dying from the process. Because of that, I have a feeling that she’s done changing. She might have minor changes here and there, but for the most part, she is what she is... We were still working on improving her hand flexibility, but I think that’s just a matter of muscle training. It’s... something I probably need to do. If you could get me a pair of grip strengthening tools, that would really help me help you as I go through all of this.”

He made a note to do so, already having requisitioned the research tablet with limited access from the technology department. “I’ll see to it that you do.” he agreed. “But Heidi… tell me… why are you so calm? How is it that you’re not panicking?? You’ve unleashed this onto the world! All you had to do was bleed on the man in the cell next to you to infect him! Do you not understand the implications of what you’ve done? If you survive this, human or not, there’s going to be tribunals! You... You’ll likely be sentenced to death for a crime like this!”

“Oh I doubt that, Dr. Coren.” she smiled, suppressing a giggle. It seemed that the sense of euphoria she’d experienced before wasn’t quite done with her yet. “I’m the inventor. You need my knowledge, and since I’m also patient zero, you’ll need me as a baseline for any future mutations that the xenobots go through. Killing me as a punishment at this phase would not only be redundant, but foolish. Besides, emotional regulation is a part of this process. The bots aren’t going to let me panic, even if I want to. I won’t feel the full spectrum of my emotions again until this process is complete. They’re protecting their colony. And honestly? I’m glad.”

He looked over his shoulder as he heard one of the guards laughing, commenting on the tuft of fur on his leg. “So am I, Heidi... So am I.”

Chapter 9

The night was long and restless for the pair of escapees. Swirl had managed to make a small nest from some of the straw he'd gathered, balling himself up into it to stay warm. The vixen however, still at odds with her animalistic instincts, had refused to make any change. She'd opted instead to lay on the floor, facing up at the ceiling. She lay there awake for some time, her ears turning as she heard strange and terrifying new sounds and smelled interesting and... almost appetizing new scents. She kept her eyes focused on a small hole in the roof high above. It was dark out here, and the late-night sky was as bright and vibrant as she'd always imagined it would be. The stars were hung in place like the lights on one of Dr. Venner's machines. She found herself staring at them for hours, watching them slowly move into and out of the broken, cracked outline of the roof of the barn as the night progressed on. It gave her a much-needed moment of calm. Everything was so... big. She knew that the world of humans was larger than *she* would ever be, but to look out into that endless expanse made her feel eternally smaller.

She pondered, as she lay there, what might've happened had she returned to her cell. Had Dr. Venner really straightened things out? There was plenty of evidence to suggest otherwise, but to bite her and scream that she hated made her feel a growing sense of remorse. She hadn't said goodbye, that was true, but she was still in the building when they'd tried to escape. Maybe she was just waiting for the best time. Maybe... she'd misjudged her mother.

Lost in her thoughts as she lay there, motionless, a sound nearby snapped her from her daze. Something small was skittering across the dirt floor of the old worn barn. Without a thought, she slapped her hand down onto it as it approached, grasping it with surprising ease, then cramming it, still wiggling into her mouth. It was only after she swallowed that she realized what she'd done. In a panic, she glanced to her side, seeing Swirl, awake and alarmed by the sound, but still safe on his small bed of hay. "What was that...?" he asked groggily. "Something fall?"

"No.." she replied distantly. "Just uh... My hand hit the dirt a little hard, that's all." She didn't want to tell him the truth. He'd spent enough of the day agonizing over her maw and the fear of being eaten. The fact that she'd just swallowed one of his... family… without so much of a thought wouldn't help their relationship at all. In fact, she was surprised that she didn't find it more disgusting than she did.

How stupid it was for that rodent to wander so close to a hungry fox… she thought to herself. *Didn't it know what I am? Or has my scent changed such that other animals can't tell? If I don't smell like a fox, what do I smell like? A human? But then... a mouse wouldn't approach a human either, would it?* Her eyes began to grow heavy as her thoughts drifted away, the lights of the nighttime sky lulling her into a much needed, gentle sleep.

Chapter 10

“Liam, I told you to empty this barn months ago. You know this place is gonna fall down one of these days! Even havin’ the power still on out here’s a fire hazard! What are we gonna do if it burns out our entire field?” an elderly woman’s voice asked, her words muffled by the heavy wooden doors. Kaylee nosed Swirl aggressively, practically pushing him up onto her head before skittering under the workbench and curling herself as tightly as she could.

After a few seconds of shaking, the doors swung open, a pair of humans silhouetted by the morning sun against the endless amber field behind them as they slowly made their way inside. “Clara, this barn has been a part of our family for generations. There aint no way my great granddaddy’s work is just gonna fall down around us like that.”

“Story time, again and again...” she groaned, walking to the bench. “See? You left it out here, just like’a told ya. Tomorrow, I want you ta come out here an’ gather up all these tools from this ol’ barn and bring em to the new one by the silos. We can’t have this stuff just layin’ around out here in the middle’a the wheat field!” She picked up an old drill, rusted, but obviously still capable of functioning. As she did, she spotted a small piece of dirty white cloth on the ground. She bent down with a grunt to snatch it up. “See you’re even leaving shop rags on the floor that we could be usin’ ta work on the trac-” Her words were interrupted as the white cloth was quickly snatched away and a growling was heard from beneath the bench. “Liam... I think we got us a fox...” she warned, backing away from it slowly so that she could see under the table.

Kaylee had bundled herself as tightly as she could, wrapping her tail around her body despite the pain it put her in. She growled aggressively at the older human woman, doing her best to keep her at bay.

“’Sit a runaway from the fur farm?” the old man asked. “I can get Girdy if ya want me to. She’ll drive it out an’ we can cage it up like the rest of em.” With a sigh, he took off his hat to wipe his hairless forehead. He already knew what her answer was going to be.

“N... no... it’s... I think it’s wearing a lab coat.” Clara responded curiously. “Don’t worry little guy, I’m not gonna hurt ya.”

Liam grunted, shaking his head as he leaned against the still open door. “A lab coat?” he asked. “You think it’s an escapee from that research science do-dad up on the hill? We aughtta leave it where it is and give em a call. God only knows what they’ve done to the thing.”

She shook her head, smiling at the vixen as she gently tried to coax her out, squatting down on her level. “No, I don’t think we should do that just yet. He don't look like he’ll hurt a fly. He’s just scared,” she said, keeping her smile. “Come on little guy, I aint gone hurt ya, come on outta there. I bet you’re hungry. You want me to get ya some food?”

“Looks and sounds...” Liam objected. “Clara that thing’s growlin at ya. For all we know it's got some kind of super rabies or that Ebola thing. Ya need ta leave it alone. This aint like the fur farm foxes, honey. How’d it get into a lab coat anyway?”

“That’s what I’m tryin to figure out, sugar.” she complained, glancing slightly over her shoulder at him before, smiling sweetly at the fox. “Come on honey, I know you’ve gotta be hungry, come on out.”

Kaylee was slowly dropping her guard. These were two older humans. She didn’t know how old, but their hair was gray, and they didn’t seem to be armed. They were certainly not from the lab. She looked up at the walking cane, then slowly began to pull herself from under the workbench.

“Kaylee no!” Swirl whispered. “They’ll hurt us!”

She didn’t listen as she slowly climbed out from under the table. She wanted to give them a chance, but she still needed a way to defend herself. Quickly, she grabbed her walking cane and held it at her side, pointing it at the old woman menacingly with a growl on her lips. “That’s a good... Oh... oh dear...” Clara responded as she looked the vixen over. This really was a lab experiment. A significant one. Was it human turned fox? Or a fox turned human? Or… human-like, at least. “Liam... um... get this lady somethin’ ta wear.” Maybe one of those old shirts to-”

“I aint leavin’ you alone with that thing.” he objected, staring at the vixen as she wielded the walking cane defensively. Her foot seemed to have been healed completely overnight, giving back the mobility that she’d struggled with the day before.

“Sweetie, we aren’t gonna hurt ya. C... can ya put that down for me, please?” Clara continued, staying low to the ground to be less imposing. “We don’t mean ta hurt ya.”

“Yer talkin’ to an animal, Clara, she can’t understand-”

“No,” the vixen interrupted, threatening them with the stick like a spear as she shoved it forward aggressively. “Y... you need to back up.”

“Well holy shit… the thing talks, too...” Liam muttered in shocked disbelief. “Back away from it honey, let’s leave’er be.”

Clara rose to her feet, then backed away slowly, keeping her eyes trained on the vixen in case she made a move. She had no idea what she was dealing with here, but it was obviously intelligent enough to understand. Would she respond to reason? “Are you injured sweetie?” she asked, nodding to the blood on the vixen’s filthy, oversized lab coat. “I’m a veterinarian, if you need my help, and I’m sure you’re hungry. I’ll be glad ta make ya breakfast.” She was doing her best to maintain her smile and her calm demeanor. The stick likely couldn’t do much, but between that and the fox’s teeth, she knew that she could still be very dangerous. “Do you have a name?” the old woman asked, noting the nametag on the coat that she wore. “Dr. Venner, perhaps? My name’s Clara Rannie. This is my husband, Liam.” She looked up at Swirl. “And... I see you have a little friend, too. Does he have a name?”

Swirl stayed on top of the vixen’s head, unsure of what to do. If she moved to attack, he’d be sent flailing, but if he left her side... he’d be vulnerable. “I... I’m Swirl.” he squeaked, trying his best to disarm the situation. He didn’t trust the humans any more than Kaylee, but, if this ‘Clara’ meant them any harm, she was certainly good at faking it. “Are you from the lab?”

“Say again sweetie?” the woman asked, leaning in with her hand cupped around her ear. “You’re not very l-”

“He asked if you’re from the lab.” Kaylee responded aggressively. “Are you here to take us back?? We... we’ve already killed two of your men. We’re not going back alive! You’re not harvesting us!”

“So that’s not your blood…” Clara worried softly, looking over her shoulder at Liam. “Whattya mean, harves-”

“Don’t play stupid!” Kaylee yelled. “You know *exactly* what I mean!”

Liam gently shook his head. “Look, uh, ma’am, it’s not my place ta really speak up here, but if the lab’s lookin’ for you to put you down, and you’ve already killed people... you think they’d send two elderly folks like us to take you in?”

It made sense. Too much sense. There’s no way the lab would just send out two old, obviously rural humans to bring them back in. Unless… their goal was to lull her into a false sense of security. She shook her head, but kept her walking stick pointed at them like a spear. “N... no... b... but… maybe you’re... You’re trained assassins!” Both Clara and Liam raised a brow at that answer, even Swirl seemed to think it was strange.

Without a word, the tiny mouse climbed down her body, then ran across the compressed dirt floor between the two, standing up on his hind legs to look curiously at the elderly woman. “Ma’am, I said my name is Swirl.” he explained, looking over his shoulder to Kaylee, who was afraid and confused by his actions. “We were going to be put to sleep in the lab and, well, we escaped. We didn’t actually kill anyone. We merely incapacitated them so that they’d leave us alone.”

“Well, that’s just awful!” Clara worried. “They make you smart enough ta talk and then they wanna put you ta sleep? That’s terrible!”

“Gotta be a reason, honey.” Liam cautioned her.

Kaylee started to relax, putting her walking stick back onto the ground, but still staring intensely at them both. “Swirl, get over here.” she whispered commandingly, leaning in so that she was sure that he could hear.

The mouse looked at her, then looked back at Clara. “Ma’am, Clara... If you’re a veterinarian, perhaps you can help my friend with her foot. She sprained it during our escape and… and well neither of us have had anything to eat since yesterday morning.”

The vixen felt guilty. Maybe *he* hadn’t eaten anything, but she certainly had. Not that a single mouse was much of a meal. Finally, she relaxed, the guilt of it making her drop her guard before walking forward. She bent down with her hand open, allowing the mouse to jump in, and return to his perch atop her head. “Kaylee.” she said distantly, maintaining her distance and aggressive stance.

“Well, it’s a pleasure ta meet ya, Kaylee.” Clara smiled, looking again down at the name on the coat. “Is it... Kaylee Venner? Dr. Kaylee Venner, perhaps?”

The vixen hadn’t thought of her last name, but it made sense. If Dr. Venner was her mother, then… “Not Doctor.” She replied. “Just Kaylee Venner. The mouse is… Swirl Venner.”

Clara nodded, taking it in at face value. From the context of what was being said, it was obvious that the pair were escaped lab animals, modified by this... Dr. Venner, whom they seemed to regard as their mother. “I understand you’re very cautious right now sweetie, but, if you’d like, I’ve got warm food and a hot shower back at the house, a clean shirt, too. I can even hem up that coat’a yours to fit ya better, if you’d like.”

The vixen’s mind was screaming at her. A hot shower! A real meal! Back to civilization! But... how much could this human be trusted? How far did the lab’s influence reach? Taking a shower would mean letting go of her stick. She couldn’t let them disarm her. She’d need a bargaining chip, something to keep her safe, in case they were up to something nefarious. Looking around the room, she spotted an old pile of tall tools in the corner; rakes, shovels, post-hole diggers... “Give me a better weapon first.” she said finally. “A…and... Keep your distance.”

The elderly lady smiled through a sigh. This creature had been through a lot, that much she could tell. It was tiring, but she was slowly earning her trust. “What kind of… weapon are you looking for? A better spear?”

“I can make ya a better pokin’ stick, but it’ll take some time.” Liam said encouragingly, following Clara’s lead. He wasn’t sure how he felt about giving this creature a better weapon, it was dangerous enough as it was. An escaped lab animal, god only knew how stable it really was. He’d have to find a way to secure it, though. It was calm at the moment, or… calmer. Maybe it’d give them a chance to figure this out. He could easily delay the weapon. “Why don’tcha come back to the house an’ we can make ya a special breakfast. You can even stay outside if ya want.”

“Special breakfast...” Kaylee muttered. “I... I dunno. How can we trust you?” she demanded.

Clara started to speak but Liam spoke first, walking up beside his wife and looking down at the diminutive vixen. “If ya can’t trust us, ya can’t trust us. That’s up to you.” he said. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re a welcome guest here as long as you don’t cause no trouble. I aint gonna call the lab on ya, and god knows aint neither one of us gonna try ta get a hand anywhere near those teeth’a yours. You want the food, the shower, the clothes, fine. If ya don’t? Fine. We’re offerin ta help, but you aint gotta take it.”

“And you can stay as long as you like.” Clara nodded, catching a scolding glance from her husband. He didn’t like this situation at all, but he couldn’t really see a way to safely dispatch the creature. Clara had always loved foxes, it wasn’t a surprise that she’d taken to this one so fast, but the danger was still there.

Feeling satisfied, the vixen looked up, her rising brow and twisting ears letting Swirl know that she was silently asking his opinion. “Lead the way.” he smiled, nuzzling Kaylee’s fur to let her know that it was alright.

“Y… yea,” she agreed, “Lead the way.”

Chapter 11

“So, they created you as some part of a spy program?” Clara asked. “No offense honey, but I don’t see how a fox with a body like yours would do a whole lot of spyin. You look like a small furry human with oddly shaped legs.”

Kaylee nodded. “That’s what Dr. Coren told Mom…” she responded. “I don’t see it, either. I... I’m a person. Not a product. Neither of us are. I don’t see how they expected us to just… follow orders.”

“They gave us intelligence, sentience, taught us what it meant to live, then tried to kill us.” Swirl said, shaking his head in disgust. “The cruelty in something like that is unfathomable to me.”

“Unfathomable...” Liam repeated. “Quite the word for a little mouse. How’d you get so smart?”

“Mom taught us.” Kaylee said proudly. “She… she gave us books and taught us to read and write and... We watched movies and documentaries and infomercials and lots of other things. We know anatomy, biology, chemistry, geography, mathematics...”

“We know... some of that,” Swirl corrected. “According to Dr. Venner our test scores come back above average for individuals within our cognitive and physical age range, but I highly doubt that either of us can say that we’re a waking font of knowledge on any given topic.”

Clara looked down at Kaylee’s coat, noting the name once more. “So, Dr. Venner’s your mother?” she asked. “Did she give you this coat?”

Kaylee nodded hesitantly. “She’s… our mother, yes. She gave us our names and taught us... Everything we know.” She pulled on the coat, straightening its lapels. “She didn’t exactly *give* me the coat, though.” Looking back up, her ears perked. “B... but I’m a person! I couldn’t just walk around naked!”

“Aint that for sure…” Liam chimed. “Wasn’t for that fur’a yours you’d be gettin a lot of attention with-”

“Hush.” his wife scolded. “She didn’t have a choice, Liam.” Looking down at the vixen, she gave her a worried smile. “They didn’t give you anything to wear in there? Just made you walk around naked all the time?”

Kaylee thought about it, then nodded slowly. “It’s only been a fairly recent problem.” she explained. “I didn’t used to really feel embarrassed or anything, but, after things... Ya know, started changing some of the researchers started looking at me funny. Mom said she’d get me some scrubs but... Well, we escaped before that ever happened.”

Liam looked concerned. “Is she talkin’ about puberty? How old are you anyway?”

“I’m an adult.” Kaylee insisted. “Mom said a human equivalent of about 20 or 21 years. B... but... In human years I’m just over one.”

Swirl agreed standing up with his hand on her ear and nodding. “I’m 8 months.” he replied. “But for a mouse that’s... well... I mean I don’t… we don’t live all that long. I... I feel healthy though!”

Clara nodded with an understanding sigh. He wasn’t wrong. Even in captivity, mice usually didn’t live more than a couple of years. Foxes a bit longer, but still not much past their teens. If their bodies hadn’t changed from… whatever monstrous experiment they’d been a part of, they weren’t exactly going to have a lot of life to live. Thinking back on her own life, it nearly made her tear up.

Kaylee lifted her brow, feeling her ears move toward the center of her head. “Swirl, be careful up there. You know my ears sometimes move on their own,” the vixen worried. “I don’t want you to fall off again.”

“Have you considered riding in her pocket, sugar?” Clara floated.

“Uh-” the mouse stammered in response, shaking his head nervously.

“He doesn’t want to be below my mouth.” Kaylee interrupted. “I guess... Instinct things? I don’t know how much our minds have really changed.”

Liam gave Clara a knowing glance, nodding once to the vixen to imply that she should listen. Not even the fox herself knew how far away she was from being just an animal, and considering her behavior when they’d first encountered her under the workbench, she wasn’t beyond biting them if she began to feel threatened.

His wife understood the gesture, smiling as she gently shook her head. Bold defiance in the face of what they both understood to be a potentially dangerous animal. In her eyes, she was docile now. So long as they kept her calm, there’d be no reason to worry.

They reached the new barn, a large beige metal building with a pair of sliding doors on the front and the side. It was open, and the vixen could hear gentle music playing from inside. Instinctively, her ears perked, making Swirl wobble as he held on tighter. “Hey! You... ow! Swirl!” she scolded, reaching up and grabbing him. “You need a better way to travel. Here... do what Clara said, ride in my p-”

“No!” he objected. “I’m not riding in your… get me away from your... Kaylee, I’m warning you!”

She stopped, closing her eyes as she sighed, looking at Clara for help. It was amazing how quickly she'd dropped her guard, treating these humans like friends when the last one that she'd known had betrayed her… sort of. Was she being naïve?

"Honey, how about you go to the barn with Liam, and he can make you a new spear. I'll take your mouse friend in the house and get him some food, does that sound okay with ya both?"

The pair looked at each other with apprehension. They'd been together since the beginning of all of this. "Uh... uhm... We're not really... bothered... by being together, I mean..." the mouse stammered.

"Yer bickerin' like siblings," Liam said, "few minutes apart aint gone hurt ya."

The pair looked at him, then at each other, with the mouse giving a small nod. "Okay." Kaylee agreed, opening her palm to let the mouse move to Clara. "B… but if you hurt him... you'll regret it." she warned.

Chapter 12

Dr. Coren stood beside the helipad, wearing a mask as he watched a black helicopter bearing the company logo land nearby. From the machine, 3 men and 1 woman emerged, geared up in black armor emblazoned with “GERCorp BioSec” across their chests. They bore large tranquilizer rifles strapped across their backs, and overall, looked ready for war. “Gentlemen!” he called, yelling over the helicopter as it slowly spun down. “Thank you so much for coming!”

“Thank *you* for reachin’ out!.” the woman said as she approached and outstretched her hand to shake. “Captain Jennifer Ramone, GERCorp biosecurity. I understand you have an escaped specimen?”

“A pair of them, actually,” he said with a nod. “Apologies if I don’t shake your hand. I was in the room when my colleague was infected. I’m yet to show any signs, but I am avoiding any physical contact until all the tests can be ran.”

“Infected?” Captain Ramone asked cautiously. “We have a contagion with this specimen? Why don’t we head inside, and you can brief us on the situation.”

The facility was quiet as the team marched down its long empty halls with Dr. Coren. Normally it’d be bustling with activity, but now, it looked practically abandoned.

“Where is everybody?” one of the team members, a young man in his late 20s with a shaved head asked. “The profile said you had 1500 staff here, but the place looks like a ghost town.”

“As soon as they learned that we had a contagion, they left. Cowards broke protocol and ran out before we could initiate lockdown.”

“Do you need us to send a team to round them up?” Cpt. Ramone asked. “We have another group comin’ up with 2 SUVs. They can help track ‘em down if that’s necessary.”

The director shook his head. “No, I don’t think that’s necessary at this time. The contagion isn’t airborne. It’s transmitted by fluid contact, so it’s very unlikely that anyone beyond the four that’ve been exposed are infected.” He led them through twisting hallways and clearance doors, finally arriving at an enormous empty conference room with a stretched, mirrored black table, lined with black leather chairs. “I’d offer you all some coffee...” Dr. Coren started. “But I’m afraid with the quarantine lockdown, food and drink inside the facility is prohibited.”

“That’s alright, sir,” one of the men, bearded with short brown hair responded with a polite nod, “We have MREs enroute with the team in the SUVs. They’ll be able to stock your kitchen and secure your existing supplies.”

“Good. Glad to hear.” Dr. Coren replied with a satisfied nod. Grabbing the remote to the expansive television mounted to the wall, he powered it on, then began to link it to his tablet. “The virus is not airborne, as I mentioned, however any skin or fluid contact has a 100% chance of infection. And as of yet, we have not been able to develop vaccine for it.”

“Skin or fluid? I thought you just said fluid a moment ago,” Cpt. Ramone asked.

“We… don’t know the full extent,” the director sighed. “We suspect that its only fluid, but for now we’re considering any saliva on the fur from grooming or... fluid excretions on the skin to be just as contagious as fluid contact itself.”

“Is there a cure?” the captain asked, surveying the screen as a photo and medical records for Kaylee appeared before them. “Is this one of the escaped specimens?”

“No cure. This… ‘virus’ in actuality is a xenobot colony. It alters the infected individual on a genetic level, reshaping them physically, and mentally. Think of it like an organic nanobot. We’ve named it the Venner virus, after its creator, of course.

“Mother of fuck...” a muscular agent with a smooth melodic voice responded, rubbing his hand over his face. “So... are we looking at the final result of this virus then? This... fox... person? I didn’t know something like that even existed.”

The doctor shook his head, taking off his glasses, then laying them on the table. They weren’t of much use lately. It almost seemed like he needed a new prescription. “No, this is CV716, the origin of the Venner Virus. Heidi… that is, Dr. Venner… patient zero, created this being from a newborn vixen that we purchased at a fur farm not far from here. They’re often willing to sell us specimens that are too small or weak or have unusual fur for testing. Over the period of a year, Dr. Venner subjected the creature to a multitude of tests and treatments, resulting in this mutation. As you can see the creature primary stands upright, has a height from head to toe of three-foot-two inches, and prefers the name Kaylee. She has an intelligence equivalent to that of one of our researchers, but… due to her age has limited worldly experience.”

One of the agents, a man with a strong jaw and a goatee, pointed at the screen. “That says sexually mature…” he replied. “Are you saying this thing is contagious *and* can reproduce?”

The doctor groaned as he shook his head. “Why we didn’t remove this functionality when it was younger, I’m simply not aware. Yes, based on Dr. Venner’s tests, she can reproduce, but we don’t know this for a fact, nor do we know what she’d be capable of reproducing with. Her genetic makeup is such that she may not be able to reproduce with foxes or humans, since she’s somewhere in between, but she is still considered fertile by testing standards. She experienced her first heat this winter.” He clicked through to a second page, this time showing detailed photos of the vixen’s body. “These were taken after reaching her maturity. Her physical age is fourteen months, but physically, mentally... she is to be considered in her early 20s. She’s just… a bit naïve as I mentioned before. The majority of her social knowledge originates from Hollywood movies.” He pointed to the screen. “You can see she has a human vagina and has lost all of her mammary glands save for two, which appear more… human in shape.”

“Poor girl...” Cpt. Ramone sighed, “Having you splay her genitals all over the television like that. God, I’d be mortified.”

Dr. Coren looked at her in confusion. “Ma’am you realize this is a specimen, right? A laboratory experiment? Don’t think of this being as a person in any regard. It’ll only get in the way of your mission.”

“So how does it communicate?” one of the agents asked. “Barks, yips, that sort of thing?”

“No, she has full vocabulary, and when she wants to be, she’s quite well spoken. Despite a slight inflection from the shape of her mouth, she speaks clearly and plainly,” he explained. “This is to be considered your primary target. Capture is preferred, but if it has to die, then it has to die. We can’t have this contagion escaping Manitoba. GERCorp’s already threatening to close off the area. We’re trying to keep this quiet.”

The clean-shaven man nodded. “That’s what we’re here for, sir,” he smiled, “We’ll have your specimen back here in no time.”

“Wait, you said there were two, right?” the agent with the beard replied. “What’s the deal with the other one?”

“That’s Swirl. Here, let me give you his profile.”

Chapter 13

While Dr. Coren was speaking with the BioSec team, Dr. Venner was studying her tablet. She was scrolling through it with one hand as it lay on her lap, while using the hand exercise device with the other. Closing and opening her hand had become increasingly difficult, and the fur had covered nearly the entire surface. On the underside, small black callous-like structures were beginning to form, on her palms, and on the tips of her fingers.

“Hmm…” she muttered to herself, tilting her head as she studied some of her own notes. “So, Kaylee’s… producing the virus through her lymphatic system,” she theorized, “I wonder if… hmm. I’ll need to run more simulations.” She stood up from the cot, finding that her hips and her legs ached as she awkwardly walked to the glass. Spotting Dr. Ramirez, she tapped on it politely for the researcher to approach. “Excuse me...” she said politely, tilting her head again as the woman looked at her with horror on her face. “What...?”

The researcher stared for a moment longer, then shook her head. “You’re... Do you want to know?” she asked. “Heidi, I-” The young woman was concerned but had a feeling she already knew what it was.

“Anne, if something’s going on that I can’t see, I need you to tell me. I need to run some simulations. Can you take me to the machine to-”

“No,” she interrupted sharply. “I... I’ll run the simulation for you if you send me the specifications, but I can’t let you leave that room. I’m sorry.” She looked down at her own tablet, typing something into her observation notes. “Your eyes have started to change.” she noted. “Do you see the world differently? Colors? Light levels?”

Heidi’s hand instinctively went to her eye. “My... eyes...?” she asked.” No. No, everything looks fine to me. How can it be changing already? How long have I even been in here?”

“14 hours.” Anne replied. “I just enabled the camera on our tablet, if you’d like to take a photo of yourself. Please document any changes you can with photos, and we’ll include them in your file.”

“I... Not a problem.” she replied, looking past her coworker to the security guard across the room. His neck was covered in fur and his face seemed to be contorting and pushing outward. He was hooked up to an IV. “He was infected in the neck, wasn’t he?” she asked, nodding to the man.

Anne turned to look over her shoulder, sighing, then looking back with a nod. “Yea... It’s amazing that he lived, given his injuries, but it seems that it radiates outward from the infection point, by in large.” She looked around, then leaned in. “Don’t tell anyone, but he’s having other changes happen to his body, too.”

“Changes like what?” Dr. Venner asked, loading the camera app as she prepared to take a photo of herself.

Anne looked around again, leaning into the mic so that it would only be heard by her. “Well, his… genitals are changing. I think he’s... becoming female!”

Taking a photo of her eyes, Heidi leaned back to observe them on the screen. Her pupils were beginning to narrow horizontally, forming slowly into slits as her blue irises were being flooded with amber, spreading out like dye in oil. “What about the others?” she asked, are they changing like that as well?”

“No, just him.” Dr. Ramirez confirmed. “Our... bloodwork suggests that his hormones were being treated artificially. You think he’s transgender?”

Dr. Venner nodded. What an interesting event. The bots not only templated to the individual’s new genetic code but accounted for the ambient hormones in the body to determine its chromosomes, and secondary sex characteristics. It truly was a complete rewrite! “Very likely,” she responded, “but we’ll have to ask them when they wake up. They’re in a medical coma, right?”

“That’s right,” Dr. Ramirez confirmed. “Their wounds were extensive. I don’t know how they lived long enough to even get back here.” She sighed. “Dr. Venner, everyone’s scared. My husband and I are trying to have a baby. You... I can’t go home now. What if I’m pregnant?? What if I catch this *while* I’m pregnant?? I just can’t believe you would do something like this.”

“I didn’t mean to…” she responded, switching back to Kaylee’s profile, then to the virus. “I really didn’t mean to.” She returned to her cot, reflecting on the changes happening to herself, and to the security agent across from her. The xenobots really didn’t hold back. Their bone structure was changing, pushing their face out into a maw. This degree of mutation needed to happen slowly or it’d be too traumatic on the body. More than that, the new growth that they were receiving, had to come from somewhere else. Where was it taking the material? Thinking to herself, she looked down at the sleeve of her scrubs, noting that it hung slightly over the base of her hand where it hadn’t before. She was shrinking.

While Heidi was pondering her life, and her future, the BioSec team entered the observation room with Dr. Coren. “This is Dr. Heidi Venner. The... namesake of our viral outbreak, and the surrogate mother of CV716. As I previously noted, she is also patient zero,” he explained, glancing over his shoulder. “It seems though, that her changes are... less substantial than some others, as of yet.”

“Their bot load was likely much heavier than mine.” Dr. Venner explained, standing again and walking to the glass. “They were also infected in an area with a much higher rate of blood flow. They’ll likely change faster than I will.” She tried to turn her head, pressing it up against the glass as if to look at the observation window two rooms over. “What about the guard that I interacted with, how is he doing?”

Cpt. Ramone looked at Dr. Coren with a quizzical, confused stare, motioning to turn off her intercom so that they could speak privately.

“This is patient zero?” she asked. “She’s changed much less than the other three. Why would that be?”

“I... don’t know that all of her changes are visual.” Dr. Coren responded, nodding at her as she continued to press her cheek to the glass. “More than anything I see it affecting her mind. The others are behaving emotionally, but she’s been cold about it from the start. As soon as the euphoria wore off, she was... robotic. This sort of thing isn’t all that unusual. Different individuals will respond in slightly different ways.”

The agent with the beard walked closer to the glass, prompting Dr. Venner to back away with a jump, eyeing him up and down like an animal. “So… we’re gonna need some major protective gear when apprehending this one, huh?” he asked, gently tapping on the glass as she tilted her head in a scowl. “The last thing I want is to start growing more hair on my body.”

“Why are you doing that?” Heidi demanded calmly, “This isn’t a fishbowl. You don’t need to treat me that way.” They could hear her, but she couldn’t hear them. “Please, step away from the glass. I... I don’t know why you’ve muted yourselves,” she continued. “I can help you with this. There’s no reason to deprive me of information.”

Dr. Coren stepped to the panel and turned the intercom back on. “Heidi, what is it that you think is going to happen here? Who are these people, in your mind?”

She tilted her head once more as she sat down on the cot, studying them closely. “Looks like a cleanup team. You’re... Sending them after Kaylee and Swirl, aren’t you?” she asked quizzically. “Please don’t hurt my daughter. She didn’t mean for this to happen. She didn’t even know that it would.” She stared a moment longer, then squinted. “Alan where are your glasses?” she wondered.

Chapter 14

“Lathe...” Kaylee repeated as she ran her hand along the machine. “I think I saw one of these in a movie. It spins, right? How will that help me make a spear?”

Liam chuckled at the vixen’s curiosity. She could barely reach the thing with her hand, but her curiosity was overwhelming. “Well, all I have ta do is take an existin’ pole, an’ narrow one end of it with the lathe.” he said. “Then... you’ve got yourself a nice wooden spear.”

She listened to him, her ears pointed eagerly forward before turning to wander the barn. “Is that enough, though?” she wondered out loud. “What if the lab comes after me? They’ll have tranquilizer darts. They’ll try to take me back to harvest me.”

The old farmer sighed, taking off his hat before wiping his brow. “Kaylee, let me ask ya somethin’.” he said, leaning his back against the machine as the vixen explored everything she could find. Touching, smelling, studying, listening, it was hard to tell if she was even paying him any attention. “What’s your long-term goal? What are ya hopin’ ta do?”

“I… my goals? Or my dreams?” she wondered, tilting her head at an old, rusted, manual push lawnmower. “I saw one of these in a black and white TV show!” she smiled, her tail wagging as she pulled it down and began to push it around. “It cuts grass.”

“Please... don’t just start using my tools without asking.” Liam worried. “Well... how about both? Start with ya dreams. What you want, an’ then… what ya plan to do.”

She stopped with the mower, her ears splaying as she put it back where she’d found it. She wasn’t deterred, though, her ears pointing forward eagerly as she continued to explore the room. Her tail wagged slowly behind her, lifting the back of the massively oversized, filthy lab coat as she wandered here and there. “My dream is to see the world.” she said. “Watch a musical on Broadway, watch the ball drop in Times Square, see the neon lights of Las Vegas... The blue water of the Caribbean…” she smiled, speaking affectionately as she rattled off the things she’d seen in the movies she’d been watching. “Hear live music, watch movies in a theater... taste popcorn! chocolate, pizza… drive a car...” She turned around to face him, a look of sadness growing on her face as her ears slowly splayed. “To live like humans do.”

“All beautiful things.” he said, giving her a sad smile. He could tell that she knew it was impossible, and that it pained her. “Ya know, a lot a humans have those dreams too, and they never get ta do it. That don;t mean that they can’t find other ways to make their lives fulfillin’.” He pushed off of the machine, walking across the room to where she was standing, then pulled an old shovel from the wall that she was struggling to reach. “I mean look at me,” he said, “I grew up on this farm, my grandaddy built that old barn you slep’ in last night. I been ploughin fields’slong as I’ve been able ta hold a tool in my hands. It may not seem like much, but with Clara at my side, it’s been one fulfillin’ life.”

She turned away from him, staring at the shovel with interest before handing it back and, resuming her exploration. “Can we use that to make my spear?” she asked, “File that metal down to a point? That should make it a much better weapon.” She didn’t even wait for a response before she again became distracted, seeming to home in on a pile of rags in the corner. “Mice...” she said, pointing at it. “There’s a mouse’s nest in there. I smell them.”

“So *that’s* where they are…” he chuckled, leaning the shovel against the lathe for later. “I’ve been looking for those damned rodents for... w... well... That might be insensitive for me ta say.”

She tilted her head at it, pondering it as her next meal, but the prospect of a hot breakfast from Clara made her decide to leave it. She couldn’t even believe it’d crossed her mind, but she was practically starving. “It’s not insensitive.” she said. “At least, I don’t think it is.” Exploring some more, she stopped in front of the farmer’s combine harvester, an enormous shiny red machine that towered over her. “What does this do? It’s so big!”

“That’s how I harvest the wheat.” he explained. “It’s a combine. The blade in the front there spins while the spikey parts cut the stems. It sorts it all out for ya, too. Saves an old man like me a lot’a time an’ effort.”

“Mmm...” she nodded. “As far as what I’m going to do…” she continued, addressing his second question. “I don’t actually know. I think… well… I don’t know that Swirl and I will *ever* be safe. Part of me wants to run, and just… keep running. But more than that, I want peace,” she said. “Peace, happiness... certainty. The things that I *thought* I had when I was with my mother.”

Liam nodded, pausing silently as he watched her wander around. She was certainly curious. “Drill press…” she said, pulling on the knob to make it descend. “Oh, I’m sorry. Can I... n... nevermind.”

“What about living on a farm?” he asked finally. “Ya ever consider that?”

She looked at him curiously, tilting her head as she slowly made her way back to him. “Living on a farm?” she asked curiously. “You mean… here...?”

The old man let out a long, heavy breath as he nodded. “Clara and I... aint never had no kids of our own. Not for lack’a tryin. We just... couldn’t do it,” he explained. “Seein that light in her eyes, walkin’ with you back out here to tha house from grandaddy’s ol derelict barn out there, just about made me tear up.”

She looked at him, straight in the eye, staring so long that it started to make him uncomfortable. Her face made it hard to tell what she was thinking. Had he made her angry somehow?

Finally, she looked away, taking a deep breath as her brow furrowed in frustration. “You can’t protect me,” she said distantly “the lab will come. They’ll find me. They’ll take me… and they’ll hurt you for helping me.”

“Maybe I can’t protect ya...” he said, “but I can sure as hell hide ya. They come around here lookin’... They won’t find a thing. Eventually they’ll move on, leave us be. Then you can live in peace. If that’s what you wanna do.”

His comments concerned but interested her. “Hide me, how?” she asked. “If they bring dogs, they’ll find my scent. They find my scent... They’ll find me. It doesn’t matter if you hide me or not.”

He smirked. “Let me help you make that spear, and we can discuss it over breakfast.”

Meanwhile in the house, Swirl was eating away, chewing hungrily on freshly sliced apples “How’s it taste, honey?” Clara asked, quietly sipping a cup of coffee as she sat at the table near the mouse.

“It’s delicious, thank you.” he replied, standing up on his haunches and looking at her with a smile. “It’s been nearly 24 hours since we had anything to eat, so this is very nice of you.” He looked down at it. “I… have to admit, I’m glad that I saw you cut it, though. They were going to put us to sleep using a meal. Being offered food made both of us quite uneasy.”

“I can imagine.” she nodded. “Sounds like you two’ve been through a lot.”

“Outside of a few researchers, you and your husband, Mom and Kaylee are the only people I’ve ever spoken to.” he said. “In... in fact, when we escaped the lab, that was the first time I’ve seen the sun. My life has been very… limited.” He looked down at the apple slice he was holding like a watermelon. “It’s regrettable that it has to be so short.”

The elderly woman sighed. “Come on now sugar, you don’t know that those experiments haven’t extended your life. For all we know... You got another 80 years!”

He looked at her with a somber smile, chuckling slightly at her misplaced optimism. “Yea, for all we know...” he repeated sadly. “Listen, I... don’t mean to put you out, ma’am, but I’m hoping that perhaps you can drive the pair of us somewhere far away from here? So that… the lab won’t find us? I don’t know where that might be. I… I don’t even know where we are, in fact, but I want to make sure that Kaylee is safe. She has… a lot of life left to live, and I’d like her to be able to do so in peace.”

She looked at him sympathetically. “Can I pet you?” she asked. “Is... is that something that’d be calming?”

He smiled brightly, then nodded. “Yes ma’am, you may. And… thank you for asking. I would advise that you do the same for Kaylee before touching her. She bit our mom when she tried to do the same.”

“She bit her, huh?” Clara asked, gently rubbing her fingers down the small mouse’s back. “Hey, how about you tell me what happened to those security guards you were talking about. How’d she get all that blood on her coat?”

“Well, I think some of it is Dr. Venner’s blood.” he explained. “But... most of it came from one of the guards that tried to bring us in. I... distracted him by turning the safety back on for his tranquilizer, then she… well she tore out his throat with her teeth.” He hesitated, realizing how terrible such an act must sound. “They… they were going to kill us. You have to understand. It was us or them. Ya know? We don’t… I’m just as responsible for that as she is. So… please don’t judge her harshly for it.”

Clara hadn’t even stopped petting him, let alone reacted to his story. “Sounds like quite a feat.” she said. “You really managed ta fend off two men on your own, as small as you two are… two armed men with guns. Hell, if anything, I’m impressed.”

He tilted his head at her. “You don’t... think it’s kind of vile?” he worried. “Kaylee’s no monster. I can assure you of that. She’s just… very determined to survive.”

“It’s not ‘vile’ to protect yourself.” she said with an understanding nod. “Just because your method’s different than someone else’s doesn’t make it wrong. If someone’s trying ta kill you, you fight back.” She thought for a moment as the mouse seemed to listen in surprise. “What about the others? Didn’t you say there were a few more?”

“One more.” he nodded. “Kaylee got to his knife and stabbed him in his femoral artery. He had to hold it in to keep from bleeding out, so he couldn’t call for help. It gave us time to get away.”

“So you know a lot about biology, then...” Clara wondered. “Does that include animal biology? You remember I’m a veterinarian.”

“There’s a diverse number of animals in the world.” he said. “I could’ve been born a horse, or a rhino, a tiger... but I’ve primarily studied my own species. And Kaylee’s.”

She nodded, still petting him on the back. “Swirl honey, I wanna float an idea for ya, you tell me what ya think. You and Kaylee… well… it’s real lonely here with just Liam and I... How about... Instead’a me driving you away, we keep ya safe here, and you work on the farm with us?”

He stopped eating, gently placing the slice of apple back on the plate before looking at her skeptically. “Work on the farm?” he asked, raising a brow. “How... would I do that?”

“You could help me work with sick animals. Read up on potential symptoms, do some precision work that my old hands can’t do, use your senses to sniff things out... “she explained, “I know it’s a big ask, and… you’re welcome to say no. I just thought perhaps I’d float it to ya to see what ya thought.”

Something about it made him feel odd. Why was she making such a proposal so eagerly? And so soon? They separated the two of them, and now she was asking him to stay. Was she refusing to drive them on? Did she work for the lab? “What kind of veterinarian are you, anyway?” he asked. “Do you work here on the farm?”

“Mostly agriculture. Goats, cows, pigs, chickens, but people have housecats and dogs as well. Sometimes they bring em here, sometimes I go to them.” she explained with a smile. “I’m not tryin’ ta pull one over on ya, if that’s what you’re concerned about.”

He looked down at the apple, studying it as he pondered her question. She seemed too eager. Had he been drugged? That seemed unlikely. He saw her take the apple, slice it, and serve it. Unless she kept poisoned apples around, it didn’t seem likely that this was her angle. “I’ll... ask Kaylee about it.” he said. “We’ll talk it over.”

Chapter 15

“I’m not setting foot into that cell!” Dr. Coren argued, surrounded by researchers in hazmat suits and the BioSec team he’d just finished briefing not two hours before. “I’m the head of this facility! You need me *out here*!”

“Sir, you’re infected.” Anne worried, looking at him with sympathy. “I... I don’t know how, but you were in the room when Kaylee bit Dr. Venner. It’s entirely possible that what you’re experiencing is-”

He clenched his fists, scowling at her angrily. “You think I don’t know that?!” he demanded. “I’m damn well aware of... I’m not even experiencing the euphoria! I’ve shown no symptoms!”

“Other than your glaasseessss...!” Heidi sang from inside her cell, still pushing her face up against the glass so that she could see. The drunkenness had returned to her, despite her attempts to fight it. The logical part of her mind was… numb… and the world around her just felt… funny. “Just get in the cell, Alan. You get to join the fox club!”

He looked at the observation window. “You fucking did this.” he growled, shakily pointing his finger at her. “You bitch, I’ll kill you!”

He began to struggle, trying to open the door to her chamber as the BioSec team began to restrain him. “Let me go!” he screamed and kicked. “Let me go or... Or I’ll spit on you! You want to be like this too?!”

Heidi sighed, holding up her pants as she sat down on her cot. “There’s no sense in making this worse, Alan.” she said, slurring her words. “Our job here is to contain this, and vaccinate it, not spread it out of spite. You’re infected. It doesn’t… doesn’t matter how it happened. You’re infected, and therefore contagious. I’m in here, I’m changing... You’re changing, you should be in here too.”

He calmed, snatching his arm indignantly from the team member that’d been holding him. “Heidi, I am not changing. Look at me! The only thing that’s different right now is my lack of glasses. Are you seriously going to tell me that this one little thing constitutes an infection to you?”

She smiled and shook her head, looking at him with her amber, slitted eyes. “No.” she smiled. “Your test results came back. That’s what constitutes an infection. You have a light load. So, you’re changing slower than the rest of us.”

“Sir, so long as your cognitive faculties are maintained, you can still direct the facility from your chamber.” Anne worried. “Heidi has been working with us to synthesize a vaccine. The cell is just for our protection, and yours.”

There was a moment of hesitation as Dr. Coren looked between the researcher and Heidi. Seeing her eyes like that, the pointed tips of her ears, and the fur halfway up to her elbow terrified him. Not to mention how much shorter she'd become. Her clothes looked like a bag on her now. "How about this…" he said, gathering his faculties. "Put me in the cell next to Heidi and enable two-way communication. At least then, we can continue our work on the vaccine and... I won't just be wasting away."

Anne nodded. "We can do that sir, just... please cooperate." He agreed silently with a nod, practically being pushed by the others into the new cell, then forcibly handed a set of scrubs.

"Disrobe." a tall, heavyset man instructed him. "Your old clothes will be incinerated."

"Hey, Danny?" Heidi called to him. "Give Dr. Coren and I several different sizes of scrubs, if you please? Mine are already too large on me."

He looked at her with a much softer gaze and nodded. "I'll do that, Dr. Venner."

Anne looked on as the pair spoke, leaning out from the man's shoulder. Without a word, she scrolled through Heidi's file, finding many pictures of her body that she was hiding beneath her scrubs. She wasn't just changing in the areas that were visible. There was a small growth at the top of her buttocks where her tail was beginning to form, her hips had been shifting, her feet becoming longer and thinner, it was happening all over her in small pieces.

"If... if you need any pain medication, just let us know, okay?" she worried, looking at Heidi.

Dr. Venner nodded. "I will," she smiled. "Thank you, Dr. Ramirez."

After changing into his scrubs, Dr. Coren sat on his cot in a pout, glancing over at his changing colleague through the passthrough window. "I can't believe you've done this, Heidi." he said to her. It was obvious that he was depressed. "I'm never gonna get to see my grandkids again; my daughter… visit my wife's grave… see my brother… I just..." He looked down at his feet with a sigh. "I thought you said all this started with euphoria. Where's mine?"

"Too early." she said simply. "You'll get it, don't worry. The very first change for me was the rapid healing of the wound on my hand. For you, it was the correction of your eyesight. It's coming, so don't rush it." She placed her tablet on the cot, then stood up. Turning her back to him, she pulled off her top, the red fur visible along her spine from the sprout of her tail till it disappeared beneath her hair. He was shocked to find that it'd progressed that far without her saying anything.

She pulled on a smaller shirt, then did the same with her pants, wobbling slightly on her slowly changing legs. “Ya know…” she said absently, her back still turned to him. “Human pants likely aren’t going to fit me forever. Panties might, but… pants wont. It makes me think, perhaps I should just wear one of the oversized shirts, when it comes to that.” As she sat down on the cot, she looked at him with a smile, like everything was fine, confusing him further. “Till then, though, this feels much better.”

“Human pants?” he asked her, concerned by the term. “Heidi, you *are* human.”

Her smile continued as she shook her head. “No I’m not, silly.” she replied simply. “My genetic makeup is no longer being classified human by our tools. It says... ‘fox/unknown.’ I’m not human anymore.” She scrolled through the tablet, then held it up to the glass for him to see. As sure as she’d said, the machine was classifying her as an unknown species. “I’m thinking about calling us... Vulpes Sapien. The Venner Fox. Whattya think?”

He took a deep breath. “I think we need to work on that vaccine.” he replied. “And quickly… before all of our isolation rooms are full.”

Her smile began to fade as she looked off at nothing in particular. “You uh. You sent that team after Kaylee, didn’t you?” she asked. “Do they have a kill order?”

He shook his head. “Capture.” he replied, “Kill only if absolutely necessary. She’s too valuable in all of this to be terminated.“

Dr. Venner nodded again, still not making eye contact with him. “I see…” she replied distantly. “Just… take care of my daughter, please?”

He pondered the word for a moment. Only a few hours ago he would’ve scoffed at her, railed at her for calling that… thing… her daughter. Thinking of it now, though, it only made sense. If Kaylee was the genetic template for the virus, then… her family was growing in a big way. The genetic similarities would literally make it feasible in tests and measurements to consider Heidi as Kaylee’s mother. “I’ll do the best I can.” he nodded. “Don’t worry about that.”

She returned to her notes, looking at the simulation results that were slowly propagating from the mainframe. “Pandemic is… entirely possible with this.” she said with an objective sigh. “Kaylee is a very prominent vector. You so much as share a drink with her you’ll be infected. According to the modeling, all her secretions contain the xenobots. I guess an infection like this was just a matter of time for me.”

He was resting his elbows on his knees, clasping his hands into fists as he listened. “You didn’t bother to check this *before*?” he asked. “If this could’ve happened at any time it seems like you would’ve noticed it sooner.”

“Well, when running scans, it was easy to see the bots in her system. I mean, they’re not small. But… if you recall, I was treating her with it. It was to be expected that the virus would be in her system if I had just administered a set of instructions with an injection.”

“I suppose that’s fair.” he agreed. “What about Swirl? Do we need to be concerned about him? Is there a virus out there that’ll turn people into feral mice?”

Heidi laughed. “I studied his notes as soon as I could get access.” she explained. “The way I treated him was fundamentally different. I used mouse DNA, rather than human DNA. I stimulated his brain directly, trying to avoid the other components of his body. He was more… based on your original objective.”

“So... any progress on the vaccine?” he asked. At least they didn’t have two viral specimens running around. He was somehow feeling more positive about the situation. Was it just the room? Heidi was actually a brilliant woman. As he sat on his cot, studying her through the glass, he had to admit that he felt a sense of affection for her. One that he hadn’t really noticed before. “You’ve been working on it with the team in Nevada, right?”

She nodded. “I have been,” she said without looking up. “The… problem we keep running into seems to be quite the wall, though. The xenobots seem to just… step over any obstacle we place in front of them. Their receptors mutate and they destroy the cells.”

He pondered the situation, but no matter what, an overarching sense of... humor to the situation kept coming over him. “Wh... well that’s just...” he started, finding himself giggling. “Oh no… this is it isn’t it?” he laughed. “Wh... what if we just don’t... worry about a vaccine?” he asked. “I mean the last thing we need to do is introduce more of this... this xenobot nonsense. It’ll start changing husbands and wives into one another!” he laughed. “Oh we’d fuck up the entire world!”

She smiled gently, watching him laugh. “Enjoy the high, Alan.” she said quietly. “And welcome to the club.”

Chapter 16

“Man when I signed up for BioSec I never expected something like this...” the man with the beard said as he suited up into a mask and completed his body covering. “I mean, horrible deadly virus? Yea. That’s normal. But a virus that turns you into a little fox person? Never woulda considered that.”

Captain Ramone chuckled as she finished suiting up. “You remember what they said,” she replied. “When we took the pledge. Come hell or death, until our last breath. If you signed up for the pay, you really found yourself a shit sandwich, huh?”

“This job is about protecting the world from the shit our corporation makes.” the man with the shaved head replied. “You can believe in that while being in it for the money, too. You remember that chicken that got out a few years back? You so much as looked at its eggs wrong, you’d get sick. My ma’ runs a chicken farm down the road from here. We had to stop that thing before it intermingled.”

“I forgot you were familiar with this area, Jake” the third man, who’d previously been silent finally spoke up. “Do you have any recommendations as to where we should start our sweep? I’ve been mapping out a radius based on the observed and theorized movement speed that our specimen can achieve.”

“Rannie farm. Definitely.” Jake replied. “Clara’s the town veterinarian. If anyone knows anything about a strange animal around here, it’d be her.”

Cpt. Ramone sat down and adjusted her helmet. “Are they the kind to keep an animal? I mean if it pulls on their heart strings? I bet that little vixen can really pour on the puppy dog eyes.”

He nodded hesitantly. “Maybe,” he said. “She’s not the kind to endanger others. If she’s taken the specimen in, all we have to do is tell her about the infection, and she’ll likely turn it over.”

“And if she doesn’t?” Capt. Ramone challenged.

“Then we get the dogs,” Jake replied.

As the group was suiting up, Kaylee was sitting at the kitchen table. Clara had stacked a set of old books for her to sit on so that she could sit at a reasonable height, but the vixen still looked quite small as she used the comparatively enormous fork to shovel food into her maw. Beside her was her new spear, fashioned from the old shovel that she'd handed to Liam in the barn. It was old, worn, and bent beyond use many years before Liam had even gone through the trouble of shortening it for her, so it was a perfect candidate for the tool that she felt she needed. "Sho.. you needh me to… urinate… on shomething?" she asked, speaking with her mouth full. "What for?"

"Hiding you gets decidedly easier with misdirection." the old man explained. "We get your scent in a cup, Clara can spread it on the bottom of her boots an' walk it out down toward the ditch, maybe pour a bit of it here and there. Keep the dogs movin' out that way."

Clara nodded. "Once the dogs reach the ditch their handlers will think that they lost the scent because of the water." she added. "With any luck, that'll make you both safe and sound."

Swirl tilted his head as he listened. "Far be it for me to interject, but… you've done this before?" he asked, somewhat troubled by their objectivity. "Are you... animal smugglers?"

Liam chuckled, then looked at Clara to explain.

"I hate fur farms." she said. "You know Friendly Fox down the road? When I was younger we used ta… siphon off some of their babies, before they had a chance ta send em to the coat factory."

Her husband agreed. "Lot'a those critters come through here. Looots of em." he smiled.

So that was what Kaylee had been smelling. Not a cat, but another fox. She didn't even recognize her own species!

"So... that's why you were so… objective when you found me?" Kaylee asked. "It made me so suspicious of you two that you weren't intimidated by my growling."

"Never show your fear to a scared and cornered animal," Clara replied. "The less threatening or fearful that ya seem, the more friendly an' open, the more you disarm their anxiety and help em on their way."

Swirl started to chuckle. "So let me make sure I understand. You two are fox farm smugglers, and you have a system already in place to throw off the people that come around here looking for them? And... we just happened to sleep in your barn?"

"We're the closest farm to that lab'a yours." Liam nodded, eating his own breakfast. "You likin the food?"

Kaylee nodded heartily. “Oh, it’s delicious, thank you, sir!” she beamed.

“Where are we, anyway?” Swirl asked. “Not that it would help me. I’m no geography expert, but it does make me wonder.”

“You’re in the town of Friendly, Manitoba.” Clara smiled.

“Couple hours north’a Winnipeg.” the old man nodded in confirmation. “We usually take the foxes ‘round the lake out to the wildlife preserve, but in your case, I don’t think you’d fit in.”

Kaylee shook her head. “Uh... no. I’m much more suited to… human living.” she replied. “So.. after breakfast, I give you a uh… urine sample, and then I can have my shower?”

Clara thought about it, then shook her head. “I think we should get your sample, then take you to the hideout and let me do my thing. Once the lab team comes through here, you can come back in the house and we’ll get you a nice warm shower. How about that?”

The fox pouted with scoff. “I wanted that shower.” she complained.

“Her argument makes sense.” Swirl encouraged. “The lab may have already organized a security team to come out here and look for us. We should lay low until they pass this place by.”

Kaylee finished her breakfast, not even realizing that she’d easily been able to grip the fork she’d been using to hungrily shove it into her maw. Without a word, or a moment’s hesitation, she picked up the plate, starting to lick it before she even realized what she was doing. After a couple of licks, her ears perked, and she put it down. Her ears were splaying awkwardly as she avoided eye contact with the Rannie’s. “S... sorry.” she whimpered. “Humans don’t lick their plates.”

“They do if it’s delicious.” Liam chuckled. “Be yourself, Kaylee, aint neither one of us gonna spite ya.”

Clara stood up and reached for the plate, then stopped herself. “Give me just a minute.” she said, walking to the cabinet and pulling on a pair of black nitrile gloves. She returned to the table, then took the plate to the sink, giving it a wash in steaming hot water. The vixen looked confused, tilting her head before looking at Liam curiously.

“It’s the veterinarian in her.” he chuckled. “Cautious with fluids. Ya just never know.”

“Understandable.” Swirl nodded. “We *did* escape from a lab, after all. Who’s to say that we don’t carry a contagion.”

Kaylee scoffed at the notion. “A contagion? Why would we have a contagion, Swirl? Their goal with us was spying. Not… not spreading a virus.”

He shook his head. “You just never know. What mom did to us is nothing short of scientific magic in my book. Her notes on the topic made no sense to me at all when I tried to read over them.”

“Well like I said, better safe than sorry.” Clara said as she walked past the table. “Stay here honey, I’m gonna go lay out some shirts for you ta wear. I’ll make sure it’s long enough to give you a little… privacy.”

“Y... yes ma’am!” Kaylee said with an eager smile, her tail wagging behind her. It was so exciting! A chance to wear clothes! The jacket was still important to her, but... maybe after Clara adjusted it, it would be nice and pretty again, like when she took it off the rack at the lab.

“Kaylee, come on back here, please!” Clara’s voice called from down the hall. She looked at Swirl excitedly, then hopped off the chair and rushed out of the room, only to return a second later to grab her spear.

Liam raised his brows and nodded. “Tough gal, huh?” he asked, looking at Swirl. “She don’t let that weapon outta her sight.”

Swirl agreed. “Can’t say I blame her.” he replied. “You... folks are very very nice. And your promise to help us is… more than I could’ve ever expected from any *human*. But it’s important to be cautious. We let our guard down too much… well… we just can’t risk it. I do hope you understand.”

Down the hall, Clara had laid out a few shirts for the vixen to try. “Which one ya think?” she asked. “I... got the smallest ones I had. They’re all a bit old now, from my younger years, but wanted ta make sure it fit ya like a dress, and not a tent. Once ya find somethin, I can trim it up for ya ta fit ya even better. If ya want me to.”

Kaylee eyed them all carefully, sniffing at them briefly, pulling back suddenly and scrunching up her nose.

“I know they’re a little musty,” Clara said with a chuckle. “There’s not much I can do about that, but they’re not moth eaten. They’re still in good shape.”

“I like this one.” the vixen replied, pointing her hand at a burgundy, V cut shirt with short sleeves. Her finger couldn’t really extend to point at it clearly, even though she’d tried. “Can I wear that one?”

The elderly lady smiled. “Sugar, you can wear whichever one you want. I wouldn’t’a laid em out, otherwise.”

Without hesitation, Kaylee peeled off her lab coat, stepping out of it for the first time since she'd escaped. She felt vulnerable. Naked. Well… she *was* naked, but she felt it, too. With some effort, she wiggled into it, her tail wagging from side to side as she pulled it on. She was so excited, but as Clara reached for the coat, the vixen suddenly growled, splaying back her ears and baring her teeth in anger.

"Alright, alright... I'll leave it alone." she replied, backing away from the coat as the vixen's demeanor promptly snapped back, her ears pointing forward as her tail began to wag.

"After the lab is done with their… sweep… if it's alright with you… I'll wash it while you have a shower and trim it so that it fits you better. Would that be okay?"

Kaylee walked back to the coat and awkwardly pulled it on. "Sorry about that." she said simply. "I... very much appreciate the hospitality. We can discuss the coat when the lab has moved on." Without another word, she grabbed her spear, then returned to the kitchen. Clara waited for her to leave, sighed heavily, then began to put the other shirts away.

"Everything okay in there?" Swirl worried. "I heard you growl."

Liam, who hadn't heard this, looked at the vixen with concern.

"It's fine." Kaylee said seriously for a moment before, giving them both a smile. "Look at my shirt! It's so pretty!" she said, dancing around in a circle for them to see. It hung low on her, almost to her knees, but worked well to hide her otherwise naked body beneath the massive coat. "I finally have clothes!"

"Well, *some* clothes." Clara smiled as she returned to the room, giving Liam a look of reassurance as he glanced at her with concern. "I might need ta go to the store to buy you some panties. I'd give you some of mine, but they'd all be too big on that little frame of yours. Besides, you probably wouldn't want used underwear."

The vixen nodded. For some reason, the idea of such a thing felt odd to her. She understood why they felt she needed to cover herself, but… wasn't a long shirt enough? Having something extra to put on and take off, given how difficult the others were to wear, seemed overly burdensome. It simply didn't feel necessary. She had fur! Why did all these humans worry so much about her crotch? "So, what now?" she asked, feeling a little lost.

"Now, we take ya to the fox shelter." Liam smiled. "Why don't uh... You two get ready. Clara and I will meet ya outside."

"Get ready?" Kaylee asked as Swirl leapt onto her and climbed on top of her head. "But I'm al-"

"They want to talk alone." he whispered into her ear. "What'd you growl about, anyway?"

“She tried to take my coat. This is MY coat.” the vixen objected.

Liam walked outside with Clara, then leaned against his truck. “What happened in there?” he asked, furrowing his brow. “Mouse said she growled at you.”

Clara waved her hand dismissively. “Sugar, it’s alright. I reached for her coat. I was gonna take a look at it’n she got defensive. Everything’s fine!”

He took a deep breath as if he was about to speak, then looked down at his boots in the dirt, nudging a rock with his toe. “I want you to remember that those things are still animals,” he reminded her. “They might act kinda human sometimes, but they started life as animals, and a lot’a that shit still seems to be in there.”

She nodded. “I know, Liam. I’m a vet, remember?” she asked. “Any girl would get defensive after what she’s been through, especially if someone tried to take her only meaningful possession.”

“But most young women aren’t gonna try ta bite ya or stab ya with a spear.” he challenged. “Look, I understand her being protective, but I just need you ta remember… they are *no*t humans. Both of em are animal brained critters with higher intelligence. You shoulda seen’er in the barn. Couldn’t keep her hands off’a stuff!”

She shifted her weight with an affirmative nod. “It’ll be alright honey, we just need ta make sure they’re kept safe from-” she started, turning around as she heard the door to the house close. “There ya are! Ready to go?”

“You said something about urinating?” the vixen wondered. “I... kinda need the bathroom, but I thought I’d save it until… you were ready for me.” It felt awkward to discuss such a thing with a stranger like this. It’d been normal with her mother; she often felt the need to ask for samples. A stranger like this, though? It felt inappropriate somehow.

“You can do that up at the shelter.” Liam replied. “We got gloves an’ boots and other things up there to protect us from the fur farm critters. Should have some bottles up there, too.”

The vixen’s grip on her spear began to tighten. “You’re making me uncomfortable.” she said. “Why is this making me uncomfortable?”

Liam and Clara looked at one another, then back at the vixen. “Honey, I want you ta understand now, that this shelter is designed for feral critters that don’t understand that we’re tryin to help,” the elderly woman explained. “So... that means you’ll see cages and bite sleeves and other such things in there. It might look a little worrying. But don’t worry. We’re not putting you in a cage. We’re not locking you in. We just need ta hide ya until the lab does their sweep.”

He opened the door of the old, rusted pickup with a creak, then climbed inside, starting it up. “Hop in the bed and I’ll take ya…” he started, noticing that she’d jumped back nearly to the door of the house. “…to it.”

“It’s loud!” the vixen whined, her ears splayed back. “Y... you should’ve warned me!”

He looked at the vixen, then back at Clara. “Truck aint that loud, is it?”

“No,” she replied. “I think you just scared her.”

“Not human. Just remember that.” he repeated, closing his door. “Now you two come on, no time ta waste.”

The vixen timidly approached, her ears splaying at the throbbing pulse of the exhaust pipe as she walked past it. She awkwardly climbed into the bed, refusing to let go of her spear despite nearly falling out twice. Eventually, she managed to navigate it, standing in the bed as she nodded that she was ready.

“Sit’own... You’re gonna fall if ya don’t.” Liam instructed her. She complied, sitting down, but still holding her spear straight up in the air. As the truck pulled away, the vixen shook, still not prepared for the vehicle to start rolling.

“She’s has limited experience with the outside world.” Clara worried, looking at Liam as they drove across the field. The vixen was bouncing around awkwardly struggling to find a way to hold on, even though they were practically idling down the dirt path. “We hafta give her a chance.”

I don’t think she’s… dangerous really, or ill-intentioned in any way,” he explained. “I just want to remind you. We couldn’t have no kids, but she’s not ever gonna be our surrogate daughter in the way you think she’ll be. She takes in new information like an animal. She processes things without social boundaries, and she *will* bite you if you do something she don’t like. You can mark my words on’at.”

“I know honey, I’ll be careful,” Clara replied. “She can communicate. That’s something a lot of animals can’t do as clearly as she does. We just need to make sure we drive that home to her. If she feels threatened, she needs to tell us.”

After a long, bumpy ride through the seemingly endless field, they arrived at a small clearing. It was a cell tower, and beneath it was a pair of large metal rectangles. Liam turned off the truck, climbing out of it with a grunt before slowly walking to one of the machines. With the twist of a screwdriver, he opened the side panel, then pulled out an aluminum casting that looked like an engine. Hidden behind it was a staircase that led down into a darkened room. “See?” he asked proudly. “They aint gonna find you in here. Even if your scent leads right to it.”

The vixen walked to the machine, sniffed, then made a face, backing away and splaying her ears. “What... cat smell...” she gasped. “Strong... so ... so strong.”

“That aint cat honey, that’s fox.” Clara said. “You don’t recognize your own kind?”

She covered her nose with her hand. “We stink...” she gasped. “Ugh... do I smell like that?”

Liam chuckled. “A little bit. But it’s nothin a shower won’t clean up, I’m sure.”

“It’s not that strong. Don’t worry.” Clara reassured her, opening her hand to rub the vixen’s back. “Uh... can... Can I rub your back?”

“No,” the vixen replied flatly. “Don’t touch me.” Liam gave his wife a knowing look and an approving nod as the vixen started to approach the open stairway. “So I just go down there and... go to the bathroom?” she asked, raising a brow as she again covered her nose. “God but it stinks…”

“There’s a bucket down there and a pair of boots.” Clara explained. “It... sounds degrading but if you can go in the bucket for me, then bring the bucket and the boots up top… we’ll handle the scent marking, and you can stay down there till we come an’ getcha.”

“Are there books?” Swirl worried, recoiling from the scent a swell. “Or a computer? A movie?? I don’t like this.”

Liam looked at Clara. “I’ll bring em some books if it takes a while” he said. “Now, to get out, and I don’t recommend you do this... But to get out, you see this lever right here?” he asked, noting it on the inside of the fake generator wall. “Flip that, and this thing here will swing out, so you can get free on your own. You need to stay put, but if we don’t come for a long time... then you can escape that way. We aint trappin ya in here.”

Kaylee listened, then nodded. “Yes sir. I... can do that.” she agreed.

“Alright, let’s get this done.” Clara smiled.

Chapter 17

In his cell, Dr. Coren was having the time of his life, laughing and carrying on with his euphoria in full effect. “And... and then what if this spreads??” he asked. “A whole new species! Humanity co-exists or joins us all, right??” he boasted. “Oh, it’s not really so bad after all!”

“Yes sir.” Dr. Venner said calmly as she typed away on her tablet. A vaccine was looking less and less practical to fight the xenobot ‘virus’. As best as she could tell, while working with the research time outside of the containment facility, the only true way to stop the xenobots would be with more xenobots. This would work, but would be at risk of changing humans in unpredictable ways, or even destroying them entirely when an evenly matched war inside their bodies would come to fruition. Dr. Coren hadn’t yet voted, but in the text based meeting on the subject, Heidi had opted to vote on containment alone, rather than vaccination, or a cure.

She didn’t like what it meant for her, or her daughter. If Kaylee was caught, they’d likely have tissue samples preserved in cryo storage. The rest of their bodies would be incinerated, then buried in the company gardens. She knew it was possible. She’d seen it before.

During it all, her body had continued to change. She had a six-inch long tail now, a furless appendage that did little to compliment her fully vulpine amber eyes. She knew that would change, though. Her body was prioritizing her tail’s growth such that she almost felt like she could see it growing longer in the mirror.

She’d continued to shrink as well, having changed her scrubs twice, finding that even now they were starting to become too baggy once more.

She glanced at Dr. Coren, watching as he laughed and shrugged off the notion of humanity. It seemed, she wasn’t the only one that no longer thought of herself as human.

Looking down at her specimen profile, she decided to edit her file. Homo Sapien no longer fit. She pressed edit with her now clawed index finger, carefully backspacing over “homo” as she prepared to change her species. This had to be done. It only made sense. She’d created a new species. Not just with Kaylee, but with Dr. Coren, the guards, and herself. They’d given birth to new sapient life. The first Vulpes Sapiens.

She entered the text, then saved it, staring at it proudly. Somehow, she felt vindicated. Why was she trying to work with humans to contain her own species? They didn’t need to stop this. They needed to spread it! Glancing over at the giggling, changing former human in the cell to her side, she smiled, deciding to change his profile as well.

Anne was sitting in the enormous conference room, wearing a mask, eye protection, gloves, and full lab attire to cover her skin when she saw the changes come through. “Vulpes Sapien?” she asked aloud. “So, she’s inventing her own species now?”

“Sounds like she doesn’t consider herself human anymore.” Danny replied, leaning back in his chair and resting his hands on his large belly and interlocking his fingers. “They’re slowly losing their minds in there.”

“Well, we have no idea what the long-term effects of this will be on their bodies and minds.” another researcher, a young man with long blond hair drawn up into a bun on the back of his head continued. “So long as we practice quarantine procedures, we should be able to document this through the entire process before we… terminate the experiment.”

Danny rocked in his chair, turning his head to look at the young man. “You really wanna do that to them Jaren? Keep em alive through this virus, then kill em when we’re done?”

He shook his head. “No, but that’s how this works, isn’t it?” he asked rhetorically. “There’s no other way to slice it. If we let them live, we risk all of this starting again. We contain CV716, we verify that the species is no longer needed, then we put them down. It’s standard protocol.”

“Could be worse.” Danny shrugged. “We’re dealing with a virus that turns you into a fox. I mean, It isn’t killing anyone.”

Anne shook her head. “That doesn’t make it okay. We can’t be casual about this!”

The heavy-set researcher sighed in frustration. “Just let her have her fun. Call herself a Vulpes Sapien. It won’t matter in the end.”

Back in the observation room, Heidi checked the cameras of the other patients. “Alan, look at this.” she said, holding up the tablet for him to see.

“Heh... what...?” he asked. “Wow look at her! She’s female now! Hope that doesn’t happen to me!” he joked.

Heidi wondered herself, but then there was no evidence of that. The other two guards were still male, and she was still female. The key difference was the HRT that the guard who’d changed had been under when they were infected. Still, with their heavy viral load, it was obvious that their changes were nearly complete. A small, three-foot-four-inch-tall vixen with short brown hair had nearly entirely replaced the five-foot-ten-inch guard that’d been pushed in only a day before. “I guess I’ve invented real life furries...” she sighed. “I hope she likes it when she wakes up.”

“Where the hell’s my tablet anyway what… what’re they doing? I need to see everything!” Alan giggled. “I mean what do they expect me to do in here, yip and run in circles?” he laughed.

“While I have your honest opinion, Alan, let me ask you something.” she said, looking at his smiling face and his one vulpine eye. “If they find Kaylee, they’re gonna bring her back here and kill all of us. Do you think that’s what should happen?”

He looked at her face, giggling at the black spot on the tip of her nose. “Should? Or will?” he giggled.

“Should.” she repeated. “Should we die for this? Or should we escape? Do the humans have the right to do this to us?”

His laughing slowed a little. “Buh... but we *are* humans...” he said. “It’s pro... protocol Heidi. We’re a risk.”

“Well, what if we weren't?” she asked. “What if we nullify the contagion? Shouldn’t we have the right to live? Who are the humans to determine that we shouldn’t?”

Alan laughed. “Girl, you’re getting fox fucked in the brain! You really think you’re not human anymore?” he giggled. “Y... you... If we stop being contagious then we’re just a new species... r... right?” he asked, a bit more seriously. “Can... is that something you can do?”

“That’s my next goal, yes.” Heidi replied. “I believe we can probably stop the contagion. We’re deliberating in the research meeting now.”

He cleared his throat, feeling more confident and levelheaded, yet still with the giggles. “I... that’s my vote as well. Please tell them to focus on that and... Bring me my fucking tablet already. We need all hands on deck on this.”

She nodded, then voted on his behalf. She didn’t have the guts to tell him the truth. Not yet. She needed a plan, first.

Chapter 18

As expected, the GERCorp BioSec team started with the Rannie farm, pulling up not long after Clara had put away her boots and poured out the urine sample near road to throw them off. She'd neglected to wear her gloves, but that didn't really matter. As far as she could tell, everything had gone off without a hitch.

"Mrs. Rannie, my name is Captain Jennifer Ramone, head of the GERCorp Bio security division," Jennifer said, catching Clara outside as she walked back from the barn. "We're here attempting to locate two escaped specimens from the lab nearby. Have you-"

"A fox that walks on its hind legs, and a mouse?" she asked, interrupting her. "Yea... Liam spotted 'em yesterday by the old barn. Didn't look safe so he made himself scarce. He claimed they walked through the yard over here, but I haven't seen em. I was in the house."

"So, they have been here…" Jake muttered. "Hey, uh, it's good to see you again, Mrs. Rannie."

She squinted as she looked through his visor. "Jacob Bentley is that you?" she asked with a hearty chuckle. "I thought I recognized that voice! How've you been??"

"Oh, not too bad." he responded with a smile. "Just... ya know... Chasing down deadly viruses."

"Well, you just-" she started, cutting herself off mid-sentence. "Deadly viruses? Is that why you're all geared up?"

Cpt. Ramone nodded. "Yes ma'am. The vixen you and your husband spotted on your property is carrying a highly contagious, dangerous virus within her system. Any fluid contact with your skin or blood could prove to be fatal. We're taking the situation very seriously."

"Fatal…" the elderly woman repeated. "Well, I'm glad Liam and I steered clear, then," she said. "And Jacob you need to be careful too! You know how foxes can get when they're agitated."

"Yes ma'am, I do," he said with an awkward giggle. "I certainly do."

"I remember your momma took you down to the Friendly fur farm an' you got snapped good on the hand. You remember that?" she asked.

"While you're having memory time... We're gonna sweep with the dogs." Cpt. Ramone whispered into his ear.

Jake nodded with a laugh. "Yes ma'am. I still have the scar to this day." he replied.

“Well, you go on and run with your friends. And tell your momma I said Hey!” she smiled.

As the group left to do their sweep, Clara entered the house, sighing and twisting her head to the side in disbelief. “You believe what they just told me?” she asked quietly, sitting down beside Liam on the couch. “They told me Kaylee has a dangerous virus that’ll kill anyone she touches.”

“They did?” Liam worried. “You think that’s the truth? Maybe you aughtta run some tests on her. Make sure she’s clean.”

“I don’t think it is, really. I think they’re tryin’ ta scare us about’er.” she said, shaking her head. “Still, though. When they’re gone, I’m runnin those tests.”

Rushing to catch up with the others, Jake had a hearty, yet out of breath laugh. “That old lady never changes.” he said. “Still thinks of me as the little farm boy that grew up out here.”

“So... she sees you for who you are then?” Cpt. Ramone asked to the bemusement of the others. “She seems like a nice lady, you said she’s the vet?”

“Yes ma’am, best vet in town. Goes all over the place taking care of the animals. She even keeps the foxes on the fur farm healthy. That’s how I got to tour the place when I was a kid.”

The dogs were following the trail, working their way backward toward the old barn. There was an obvious human trail in the wheat, but that didn’t mean much to the team. The vixen had likely followed the gap, given her limited stature. “Hey, why’d you tell her this thing had a fatal virus?” he asked.

“What was she s’posed to say?” another agent asked. “That she has a virus that turns people into cute little fox girls?”

Jennifer laughed. “I told her that for two reasons,” she said. “One was to prevent her from interacting with the creature if she sees it again, and two was to drive her to out the thing if she’s hiding it on the property somewhere.”

“Ah, good thinkin!” Jake nodded. “Just that... Mrs. Clara hasn’t ever been afraid of a virus.”

Cpt. Ramone nodded. “Be that as it may... she’d be afraid of this one, that’s for sure.”

They searched for hours, letting the dogs lead them around the property, from the barn to the house, back to the barn, then finally past the house and out to a tree. They lingered for a time, then looked toward the ditch. “Lost in the water... smart.” Jennifer said. “But that doesn’t mean she loses her scent entirely. Let’s get the dogs to the other side, see if we can’t sniff it out up there.”

Hours more as the dogs traversed the far side of the ditch, picking up only a small scent that seemed to head to the southwest, ending by the road, making the dogs want to turn around. “Seems like she got picked up by a car or something, captain.” Jake said as he watched the dogs circle. “You think we need to head toward town?”

Cpt. Ramone was skeptical as she looked up and down the road. “This place looks pretty empty.” she said. “What are the chances of a car coming along that's willing to pick up a creature like that?”

“Well, they do call this place Friendly.” Jake chuckled. “Maybe the fox has the gift of gab. Talked her way in.”

“Maybe…” Jennifer responded again. “Or… there may be more here than we think.” She outstretched her hand. “Here, give me Rufus. You guys take the other dogs, and one of the SUVs into town. I’m... gonna take one more walk around.”

Clara looked out the window as the men returned with their dogs and began to load them up. “Looks like they’re leavin’ honey.” she said. “Except... That woman isn’t loading up.”

“Think she’s found something?” he worried.

“Nah I doubt it.” the elderly woman said, shaking her head. “Lemme go out there an’ talk to’er.”

Stepping outside as the other SUV left, Clara descended the steps from the house and walked up to the captain. “Find anything out there?” she asked with a smile.

“We found the trail, just like you said. Comes from the lab, down the hill, through your field, across the yard and out to the ditch over there. From there it seems like… someone picked her up and she headed toward town.”

“Headed to town?” Clara asked, feigning worry. “Well that’s not good! You said this thing has a virus!”

Jennifer sighed, shifting her weight to one side as the dog sniffed at the old woman’s feet, then up to her hand. “It does, Mrs. Rannie. The fox has a virus. Even if it doesn’t act like it. If you’re exposed to it, you’ll die a painful, gruesome death. That’s why we’re so eager to find it. All you have to do is get some of her fluids on you, and you’re as good as dead.”

Clara nodded, furrowing her brow. “Well, I’ll be sure to steer clear of her, then.” she said. “I sure hope she don’t come back.”

Cpt. Ramone sighed. “Ma’am, I need to reiterate this. The vixen is dangerous.”

Clara frowned and shifted her weight again. “Are you accusing me’a somethin?” she demanded. “I told you what happened. I was in the house. I didn’t even see the girl!”

“Jake said that you’re a real kind person,” Jennifer continued. “Kind enough maybe to take in a stray, odd looking fox and shelter her away to protect her from that mean old lab that’s done those terrible things to her.” She bent down and patted her dog on the side. “Now he’s not found a damned thing on your property, but to me... Jake’s character witness for you speaks volumes. So, I need to tell you again. This. Fox. Is. Dangerous. Are you harboring it? I promise you’ll be in no trouble if you are. We’ll simply take it back to the lab, and trouble you no more.”

Clara rolled her eyes and looked away, shaking her head. “Ma’am, I’m many things. But a liar I am not.” she urged dispassionately. “I don’t appreciate you accusin’ me’a doing such a thing. If I had a dangerous animal here on this property I’d tell you, but the only thing dangerous here is our old dog Girdy, and if ya ask me, her days’a doin’ much of anything so much as barking is over. That old hound aint got it in’er no more.” She pointed back at the house to an aging hound that was laying on the front porch steps. Even though she’d seen Kaylee several times, the dog hadn’t even flinched. Interestingly enough, despite it all, the fox hadn’t noticed the dog at all. “So if you don’t mind? I’d like to ask you to leave now. I don’t need some corporation coming onto my private property and giving me a hard time about a product that you lost.”

Cpt. Ramone listened to her and nodded understandingly. While still skeptical, she didn’t yet have a leg to stand on. “Alright, we’re gonna move on. But I’m warning you now. If we don’t find this thing soon, the Canadian government’s going lockdown this entire area and declare martial law. This is too dangerous to let it continue to run loose. We have a limited window to keep this quiet, and under control.”

Clara nodded, kept her cool, and insisted that Cpt. Ramone was overstaying her welcome. “I will take that under advisement.” she replied curtly. “Now please, if you don’t mind, I’d like you to go find your escaped specimen so that I can make dinner.”

After a long, conflicted stare, Jennifer agreed, turning to the SUV and unlocking the doors. “Come on Rufus, let’s get going.” she said encouragingly. Once the dog was secured, she returned to Clara, taking off her glove as she dug into her pocket to produce her card... “Oh, here. This is my card. If you change your mind, you give me a call, alright? Like I said, if she’s here, we’ll take her off your hands, and walk away without another word.”

“Have a good day, captain.” Clara scowled as she hastily pulled the card from Jennifer’s hand, speaking through her teeth. She waited and watched, standing with her hands on her hips as the SUV slowly drove away, kicking a small circle of dust as it slowly made its way down the road. When she was sure she was gone, she turned, then went back into the house.

“They leave?” Liam asked. “Gettin’ kinda late. I’m surprised our little vixen didn’t come wandering back and get herself in trouble.”

“They did...” she sighed. “But their captain is convinced we’re harboring her. Gave me her card, told me to call if I... *changed my mind*... about turning Kaylee over to her.”

He folded his newspaper, then laid it on the armrest of his chair. “Well ya think we aughtta consider it? With that virus thing goin on?”

The woman seemed uncertain, lightly shaking her head. “We need to hear Kaylee’s version first. And... we need to run some tests. If the girl’s got a virus as deadly as it sounds... We’ll have to consider giving her back. As much as I hate to admit it.” She walked to the kitchen to pull on her jacket. The afternoon sun was cooling things off outside. “She also said the government's threatening martial law here in Friendly if they don’t find her soon. If that’s not a bluff… we might be dealing with lit dynamite here.”

Chapter 19

‘It’s been hours…” Kaylee worried, pacing back and forth. The room she’d found herself in was small and lined with cages that all wreaked of other foxes. The scent was hard to even stand. “What if they locked us in here? What if it was a trap? What if the lab is coming to pick us up?? Oooh, I was so stupid!”

“He showed us that lever.” Swirl said, trying to hold on as she paced so quickly. “W… why not use that to make sure we can leave?”

“Because!” she yelled, stopping mid step, nearly throwing him off. “If we do that and the lab IS just looking for us and they see us and they WEREN’T trying to turn us in then we’ll be caught! B... but... If we stay in here and they WERE trying to turn us in and they find us then we’ll be caught! I... I dunno what to do.”

With a quick sigh, the mouse hopped off her head and onto one of the upper cages. He climbed it up to a ventilation tube, then stuck his head out so that he could see. “There’s no one out there.” he said. “I smell the dogs, but it’s old. Why don’t you try the lever?”

She was worried as he returned to her head. “You shouldn’t’ve done that.” she said. “You... Swirl what if something would have seen you?”

“In all honesty...” he said, trailing off as she walked to the lever and began to study it. “I don’t think they’re after me, so much as they’re after you. Besides, seeing a mouse stick its head out of a small ventilation shaft isn’t at all strange.”

“Why do you think that?” she wondered, flipping the lever as the machine swung violently open, leaving them both to squint at the late afternoon sun.

“Because I’m a tiny mouse. I’m hard to find, I don’t take up much space, and the most I can do is recite poetry to passersby for a few pennies on a street performer’s hat. But you... You’re a bipedal fox with a human-like body that can bite people and use a spear. And... and you’re proof that the lab has done something the humans might find unethical. It’s not just a matter of collecting their property… They’re trying to cover up your existence.”

Stepping out of the machine, her eyes began to narrow as she spotted Liam’s truck making its way toward them both. “See? Safe and sound,” the mouse said. He wasn’t sure believed it, but... he didn’t want Kaylee to panic.

Liam turned off the truck just as Clara hopped out. “We’re all clear.” she said with a smile, approaching the vixen. “I hope you haven’t been out here long.”

“No ma’am.” Kaylee said apologetically. “I just... we were… I was panicking and I thought you’d trapped us and-”

“You were never trapped.” Liam responded, closing his rusted truck door with a crooked slam. “I do have somethin’ I need ta ask ya though.” He walked past her, locking down the fake generator again before squatting down to face the vixen. “Are you contagious? Are you harborin’ some kinda virus?”

The vixen tilted her head in confusion. “What? Why would-”

“Because that’s what they said.” he interrupted. “They said you were harboring a deadly virus, and if they cain’t catch ya soon, they’re callin in the military.”

Swirl stood up on his hind legs on top of Kaylee’s head. “Sir… the military?” he asked in disbelief. “I don’t mean to be rude, but… for her? That seems like a tall tale told to you to try to turn us in! Kaylee and I were developed for espionage, not for-”

“By using a virus.” the vixen interrupted. “Swirl… they used a special virus to change me. I remember mom talking about it when she gave me injections. W... what if... What if that’s what they’re after?”

Liam stood up and started to back away, but Clara walked closer. “Honey, maybe they just want to protect the property in that viral code. That doesn’t mean you’re contagious.” she insisted. “Come on back to the house. We’ll get you a shower, I’ll size up that coat and then we can talk about it over dinner. Whattya say?” She looked at the fox with a smile, trying to assuage her worries, but Liam had a different gaze, one of caution.

“I’m not… trying to hurt anyone.” Kaylee whimpered, her ears splaying. “I just... They used it but that doesn’t mean I’m... spreading it! What would it even do??”

“I don’t know honey.” Clara assured her, almost reaching out to touch her, but stopping herself halfway. The little thing just looked so scared. “But if you’ll let me, I can run some basic tests and make sure you’re alright. We can do it after dinner. Okay?”

“O… okay...” the vixen agreed.

The ride back was long, bumpy and silent. The vixen kept her ears facing forward as she gripped the spear tightly. She didn’t know if they were going to attack from the sides, the front... or even at all. Swirl did his best to comfort her, massaging her scalp with his paws, but there was only so much that could be done.

Arriving back at the house, she found the yard to be empty, with no lab agents in sight. It made her relax, but not by much. She gripped her spear tighter as she followed the Rannie’s into the house, her knuckles aching, from the pressure she was applying. She wanted to let go, but if they were inside, waiting to jump her, she’d have to defend herself. She couldn’t drop her guard yet.

“Make yerself at home honey.” Clara said as she made her way casually to the kitchen. “You want beef tips for dinner? Mashed potatoes, corn.?” It all sounded so good. The vixen found herself licking her maw.

“That sounds wonderful.” she said with a nod as she quickly smelled the house. There weren’t any new scents as far as she could tell. Maybe she really was in the clear. With the prospect of a warm shower, and a hot meal, she found herself relaxing, her tail wagging slightly as she began to explore. “C... can I take a shower now?”

“You may.” Clara smiled. “Do you want me to wash your coat while you do?”

“I… I dunno I-”

“Kaylee, it has a scent that can be followed. If we let her clean and correct it, it will help us be more secure.” Swirl urged.

“Alright.” the vixen nodded. “B... but... Don’t damage it. And... and… and I need it back!” She turned to the hall, then stopped. “Where’s the bathroom?”

“Right here.” Liam replied as he stepped out of a door in the hallway. “I was makin’ sure you had some towels, and a step to see the mirror.”

She thanked him with a smile as she began to walk past him, but it was such a narrow space that her tail brushing up against his pant leg. It made her fur stand on end, and she growled instinctively before quickly calming herself. “S... sorry! That was my fault, I’m sorry!” she gasped apologetically, distancing herself from the obviously alarmed farmer. It seemed that anyone that touched her aside from her mother would set her off. Well, given that she’d bitten her mother, even that had set her off.

“Ya scare us when ya do that.” he said shakily, looking back at her from the end of the hall. “You know neither of us mean you no harm.”

Kaylee’s ears splayed again, but she disappeared into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. Inside, she stepped onto the stool, looking at herself in the mirror. Her face was dirty, with blood and grime mixed heavily into her fur. It was a stark difference from the clean, shiny fur she’d always had in the lab. She ran her hand over her face, feeling every contour as her amber slitted eyes stared back. It felt good to see the collar of the jacket around her neck, and the top of the shirt. Despite her filth, she still felt better, more alive... more human.

“You want me to wait outside?” Swirl asked, as he too inspected himself in the mirror. He lingered on her head for a moment, then hopped onto the counter and ran to the top of an empty toothbrush holder, observing himself up close. “I could use a wash myself.”

“I want you to stay in here.” she said as she took off her coat, then pulled off her shirt. “I’m not embarrassed around you, and I need you to be my lookout.”

He turned his back, blushing as she undressed. “J... just because you’re not embarrassed doesn’t mean I’m not.” he said” I’ve... gotten more than a few views of you from angles I don’t think I should have, Kaylee. A... are you sure you’re okay with this?”

“You’re naked too dork.” she said with a chuckle. “I have mouse balls rubbing on my head all day. What was it that guy in the movie called it? Teabagging? You’re teabagging me constantly. It is what it is. Besides, why are you embarrassed by it now when you’ve consistently seen me naked in my cell for the last 8 months? You even saw me when I was… going through my heat a few months ago. I know you saw me. I know you heard me, too.”

“D… don’t remind me, please?” he worried. “Kaylee, I just… I hadn’t thought of you this way until… until I fell off of that wheat stalk. I just… it’s there. It’s hard to see to see most of the time but it’s there. And from the ground I saw it.”

She scoffed, rolling her eyes as she turned to the shower. “Caring about that kind of thing is a human trait, anyway,” she said dismissively, waving her hand. “It’s not mating season. It doesn’t matter if…” The shower controls were distracting her, letting her mind drift away from the thought that’d only lingered for a moment. Putting her hands on her hips like she’d seen her mother do, she studied the mechanism closely. She’d never actually operated one herself. “Wait a second...” she said with a teasing smirk, slowly turning around to look back at the still blushing mouse. “Are you saying you’re attracted to me?” she asked playfully.

“K... Kaylee I-” the mouse started.

“Is this what you like?” she asked, running her finger through her labia. “You like this area? I didn’t know you were into human pussy.” she smirked.

“Kaylee stooop...” he whined, his member starting to emerge from its sheath. “You’re... No... We don’t have this kind of relationship! We’re friends!”

She stopped herself as she saw his erection, chuckling at how easy it’d been to get him going. “Alright… you silly little mouse.” she giggled. “I guess your kind has a much more active reproductive cycle than we do.”

“B... believe me... we do.” he whined.

She leaned forward and turned on the water, lifting her tail to give him one more view. She could hear him squeak in embarrassment. “I haven’t been with anyone before, but I knew what mom meant when she said sexual maturity,” she said absently. “During heat, this woulda been something special, but… right now... it’s not that important to me. It’s cute that it gets a rise out of you, though,” she smirked.

“You’re weird...” he said shakily, flattening himself against the counter as he stared blankly at the door. “I’ll be your look out. T... take your shower already.”

She chuckled, then stepped in, sighing as she felt the warm steamy water pour gently over her fur. It felt amazing.

She hadn’t been in the shower long before she heard a knock at the door. Alarmed, her tail, heavy with water, curled against her leg as she backed against the wall. “Y… yea??” she asked nervously.

“Kaylee honey, I’m going to take your coat and get it cleaned up, okay?” Clara asked, her voice muffled by the door and the sound of the running water. “I’ll have it back to you by the time you get to the dinner table.”

“O... okay...!” she called, doing her best to go back to her shower.

Swirl looked up at Clara as she opened the door. His ears were splayed as his cheeks were rosy, his legs still outstretched on top of the counter. “Are you alright honey?” she asked. “If it’s too hot in here I can-”

“N... no, I’m fine.” he insisted. “Thank you.”

“He’s horny.” the vixen laughed. “I taunted him a little bit and he got a little excited.”

“Ngh…” the mouse whined, even more embarrassed.

“Well that... That’s not what I was expecting,” Clara blinked. “But. as long as you two are safe… I… I guess.”

The elderly woman took the coat, then closed the door, leaving the pair alone once more. “That girl is somethin’ else,” she said as she made her way down the hall, stopping herself to give Liam a kiss. “Apparently she’s teasing the mouse.”

“Teasin’ em how?” Liam asked, raising a brow.

“Like I used ta tease you when I was in my younger years.” She giggled. “So hard not ta see that girl as an animal. ‘Specially when she does somethin’ like that.”

Kaylee found herself sighing, lost deep in the warm water that poured down on her. Her fur foamed with the shampoo that Liam had provided, it seemed to be for dogs, but... She didn’t really care. It wasn’t likely that the humans made a fox shampoo, anyway.

“She didn’t think I had it in me.” she chuckled to Swirl, her mind drifting back to what she’d done to taunt the poor mouse. “I guess I am a bit animal brained sometimes, but seeing you react like that was priceless. You really made me feel better, Swirl. Even if... That was kind of at your expense.”

“I have needs too, ya know.” he said anxiously. “A lot more than you do. Mice are much more active in that way.”

“Well if you need to do something about it, do what you have to do. We’ll wash out the sink when you’re done.” she said dismissively. “You already got a show. You may as well take care of it.”

“Fucks sake…” he growled, changing his position with a heavy sigh. “The things you do to me, Kaylee...”

Chapter 20

Having finished her shower and dried her fur, the vixen found herself at the table. She was a little damp, but she couldn't stand the sound of that obnoxious hair dryer any longer. She had to let it finish on its own. Without her coat, the shirt framed her nicely, like a small dress. She seemed pleased with herself as she placed the mouse on the table beside her, looking around the room as her anxiety began to grow. She couldn't find her coat. "Where... Is it?" she asked, her ears splaying back as she began to get frustrated. "You said it'd be ready when-"

"It's right here!" Clara said hastily, carrying the clean white lab coat into the room. It'd been trimmed up tremendously; The sleeves shortened, the back narrowed, everything had been adjusted. "Stand up, let me put it on you."

"I can dress myself." the vixen replied spitefully as she awkwardly jumped to her feet. "Please don't touch me."

"Oh, right... We still need to do the uh... The blood test." Liam reminded them both. "So... she will need to touch you, Kaylee. But it's for your own good."

Taking the coat, she slipped it on, seeming pleased with the fit and finish. It was clean and white, pressed, and smelled like laundry. She grabbed it and sniffed, squeaking out a satisfied whine, then looked at the name printed on the pocket. "Kaylee Venner." she said proudly. It wasn't her mother's coat anymore. It was hers.

"I'm glad you like it, honey." Clara said as she anxiously took her seat. She hated to admit it, but the stress of being around this potentially dangerous vixen was mounting. She was inconsistent. One moment she'd be friendly and polite, the next, she'd be growling and showing her teeth. If she really did have a virus, they'd almost certainly have to turn her in. "S... so... dinner's ready. Grab yourself a plate and-"

"How bout... I serve it for ya?" Liam interrupted. "Before you... before you dip your hands into any of the food. Still wanna be safe with this virus thing, ya know?"

The vixen nodded, becoming visibly stressed as his hand approached her plate, but relaxing as it was pulled away. "Thank you, sir." she said. "I apologize if I'm... stressed. I don't mean to be. It's... the only person I'm really comfortable around is Swirl. Humans are still kind of... scary."

"I understand." Liam nodded, gently handing her a plate moderately full of food. "You've been through a lot. But... Please understand that we're your friends. And... if you do have a virus and you bite us... You could hurt us quite a lot."

“I don’t plan to bite you.” she said as she effortlessly picked up the fork, twirling it around in her fingers. “Hey, look at that!” she beamed. “My fingers work right!” She celebrated for a moment before digging hungrily into the food, then shoving a forkful into her mouth. “Ish ushsually a growl thash enouf...” she continued with food filling her maw.

“Kaylee honey, it’s rude to speak with your mouth full.” Clara smiled. “But the growling still scares us.”

She finished chewing her food, then swallowed it. “If you could growl, I bet you would to,” she said. “It’s useful. It says so much without having to say anything. You just warn someone with a growl, and they get the message.” She cut up her food some more, her ears splaying. “B... besides I don’t always… it’s kind of an instinctual reaction, ya know?”

Swirl had been nibbling on some steamed carrots on a small plate as she spoke, looking up from his plate with a silent nod. “We’re both still processing the fact that we’re not humans in animal bodies, but animals with human intelligence,” he explained. “I sincerely apologize.”

“Speak for yourself mousie.” Kaylee chuckled. “I got human parts. I just got fur and a tail, too!” she boasted, “And now I got clothes! A shirt, and a coat with my name on it!”

Clara chuckled. “Don’t let it go to your head now, honey.” she scolded teasingly. “I’m glad to hear you happy, but you still have a road ahead.”

The vixen stopped eating, her ears splaying as she looked at the elderly woman in fear. “A road ahead?” she asked. “B… but I thought you said I could stay here.”

Clara sighed as Liam spoke up. “You can stay here tonight,” he said, “but if you got a virus, we’re gonna hafta have a talk. I aint tryin’ ta shut ya out, but… well we gotta protect our own, ya know?”

“You can stay in the spare bedroom.” Clara continued. “There’s warm sheets, a soft bed, and all the privacy you could want.”

She didn’t like their answer. What were they going to do?? If she had a deadly, contagious virus, would they turn her in to the lab? What about her mother?? Had she condemned her mom to death?!

“O… okay. Thank you,” she said somberly, picking up her fork once more.

“If you’re testing her for a virus, you should probably test me too, right?” Swirl wondered. “I don’t want either of us to cause you any distress.”

“So, what do you need to do to determine if we’re carrying a virus?” the vixen asked. “Blood, saliva samples, I’m assuming? Do you have that sort of equipment here? I haven’t seen any.”

“Yea, I think blood would be the best way.” Clara responded, “but If... blood makes you uncomfortable, we might be able to just start with a mouth swab. It’s just that I would feel better knowing for sure if we could test with your blood.”

The vixen’s ears splayed as she thought it over. She’d had her blood taken many times. It didn’t really bother her. “I’m just….” she started with a sigh “I’m worried that if you try to touch me I might lash out. And… I don’t want to do that.”

“If we’re going to live here, Kaylee…” Swirl started, “we need to learn to trust them. Let them touch you, pet you, brush you... The same things mom did.”

The vixen looked down at her plate, thinking as she slowly cut up the rest of her meat. Clara seemed really nice, and they’d both been surprisingly honest with her, even about the things that worried them. They’d been kind and respectful, no matter how aggressive she’d been. “I… will try.” she said. “But... please be patient with me. You have to understand. On... on an animalistic level foxes can bond with a person but tend to be avoidant of others. And... I’m wondering if… maybe this is related to that in some way. Mom was the only human that I ever let get close to me.”

“We know a lot about fox behavior here, honey.” Clara smiled. “You haven’t done anythin’ all that surprising really. In fact, I feel like I’ve known you a long time! In a way you’re... a mature adult woman, and in others you’re a fox with a brain you… and excuse me for sayin... don’t know how to handle. You’ve got sensory perception you’re not experienced with, and a human world surrounding you with a fur covered reflection. The fact that you hold it together at all is amazin’ ta me, if I’m totally honest.”

She looked up into the elderly woman’s eyes, tilting her head to the side just slightly. “Can we do the blood thing now?” she asked. “If I’m dangerous… I need to know.”

Chapter 21

“Ugh... you didn’t tell me about the hangover.” Dr. Coren complained, holding his head as he looked through his tablet. “Vulpes Sapien? Was that your doing?”

“It was, yea.” Heidi replied, struggling to talk due to the changes slowly acting on her face. “And that’s not a hangover, that’s your head changing. Mine’s doing it, too.”

“Great... Start me with the face. Real nice, Heidi. Real nice.” he complained. “Well, from what I discern here, the virus is producing itself in our lymphatic system. It originates from there. And... it also sounds like... We need it, since it basically replaced our immune system. So, I guess our focus should be to prevent it from being viable outside the body, since we obviously can’t get rid of it.”

She looked up at him, her ears tilting toward him slightly. “Viable?” she asked. “Don’t you mean antagonistic? It doesn’t matter if the xenobot survives for a time outside the host, so much as that it doesn’t infect another host.” She looked back at her tablet, grunting in frustration as her claw hit the screen. It felt much larger in her hands than it had before. She felt much closer to it as well, holding it in her lap. “As such, it makes the most sense to inject a carrier into our system that will update the base code for every xenobot and xenobot production center to basically say… hey... This is my body and anything that isn’t my body... Leave it alone.”

“How would it know that?” he asked immediately. “Our genetics are changing by the hour. We can neither tell it who we were, or who we’re going to be.” he said. “So, we’d either need a DNA sample from before our infection, or one from... after the process is complete.” He thought for a moment. “Wait a minute, how much of a genetic sample do we need? Maybe we can use a part of our bodies that’s unaffected, or.. Or a sample from a coffee cup or a toothbrush or something like that, and then we can just reverse the process.”

“I... am not willing to try that on myself. Are you?” she asked. “Suddenly reversing course on this means rebuilding everything it’s torn down. Do you think we can survive that?”

He shrugged, following the notes on her transformation. It seemed to be where she was reading. “We could have them run a simulation.” he said. “I mean, I don’t want to test anything unless we know it’s safe. I *certainly* didn’t want to test *this*.”

“The safest path forward I think is to wait for our process to complete, our bodies to stabilize, then use that sample as its new baseline.” she said. “Trying to do it any other way would result in... unfavorable results.” She looked back up at him quickly. “Besides, who wants to be a *human* anyway?” she asked before looking back down. “We’re much better off now.”

He was confused by her statement, tilting his own head to understand her comment. “What was that about?” he asked. “Better off than being human?”

“You don’t feel the same way?” she asked, putting down her tablet for a moment as she locked her eyes onto his. “We’re something new, something amazing! We can regrow limbs and heal our wounds and… from what I can tell we’re nearly immune to every bug on the planet. We’re superior to them in every way!” Looking back down at her tablet, she continued to scroll. “We’re the birth of a new species. All we have to do is infect enough of them. Then there’ll be too many of us to just burn up in a fire. We’ll get to demand rights. They’ll carve us out as a new species and we can propagate and reproduce, just like humans do.”

Alan shook his head and held up his hands. “Hold on hold on…” he started, trying to clear his head. “You’re sitting here saying… you’re not human, you don’t want to *be* human, and your solution to not being *exterminated* for not being human is to... forcibly pull others into our new species? Do you realize how ridiculous that sounds??”

“Do you have another solution?” she asked, flipping through her notes, then checking the cameras of the others that were infected. “Perhaps we stand on the street corner holding signs... ‘Become fox people today! Let us bite you! It only hurts a lot!’”

He scoffed. “No, I’m talking about using our old DNA to change us back! You, me, the guards. There’s no reason to-”

“I’m not going back Alan!” she interrupted, glaring up at him angrily. “My humanity is gone, and I don’t regret that at all. And I bet you our friends over here think the same way.” She clicked through to the camera in the cell next to her. His transformation had been a bit slower than hers but had reached his neck from his arm. It was obvious that it’d affected his size well. There were two discarded sets of scrubs in the corner of his room. “Hey... You... what’s your name?”

“Drake…?” he asked. “Who is this?”

“Dr. Venner.” she explained. “I’m the subject tow cells over from you.”

“Wait you’re the one that did this to me, aren’t’ you?” he asked, sounding surprisingly calm and accepting, “the researcher that got in my way when the fox was escaping?”

“Yea. That was me. Hey, so… how do you feel about this?”

He sat there for a moment, seeming confused by her question. “Uh... well it kinda hurts, but, other than that... It’s not so bad? I mean-”

“What do you think about the term, Vulpes Sapien?” she asked. “Making a declaration that we’re a new intelligent species. Would you want that? Or do you wanna be human again?”

Dr. Coren rolled his eyes. “Heidi no one is going to agr-”

“I mean, I’d like my wife to join me, but... Yea. I’d be down for that.” he said, much to Alan’s surprise. “I was scared at first, ya know? Terrified really. This stuff was changing me! But the more I think about that girl you were protecting, the more it feels... Ya know… right for me. It’s like I wasn’t ever *supposed* to be human, ya know?”

The aging researcher buried his head in his hands. “Oh god...” he grumbled. “It alters your brain to make you want to be like this, doesn’t it?”

She looked back at him, then back at the camera. “So, if your wife said no, would you turn her anyway?” she asked.

Drake seemed conflicted. “I mean… she’s my wife? So... I’d... I mean I’d want her in my life. Without that I’d never feel complete. But if she didn’t want it… she’d never forgive me if I forced her.”

Heidi shook her head. “That may not be true.” she said. “You don’t blame me for what’s happened, do you? She’d come to understand. She’d forgive you.”

Alan shook his head. “Heidi, don’t do this… You’re saying some pretty dangerous shit here…”

“I... *maybe* she would.” Drake continued. “Maybe I should… ya know… find out? Ask her?”

She glanced at Alan again, then back to the tablet. “We need to spread this. Spread it until there’s enough of us to be a valid species. Then we can stop it. I’m working on a way to avoid the contagion now, but until then, we need to continue, and infect the others.”

“Heidi!” Alan yelled, standing up from his cot suddenly. “Stop this insanity!”

“They wear suits, and we’re getting smaller. How would we spread it?” Drake wondered. “How would we get out? The lab’s probably on lockdown now. My wife lives in town.”

Dr. Coren shook his head. “This is madness... It… it’s MADNESS! Heidi! What if they’re listening to you??”

“They’re not. I jammed that.” she replied. “When you have your fangs, you should be able to bite through it. We’ll need to make it coordinated, though, because if one of us starts, they’ll muzzle us all. We need maximum spread on this.”

Frustrated, Alan grabbed his tablet, trying desperately to reach the team, but she’d truly shut them out. “Hey, Jaren?” Anne asked, noticing that Alan was frantically trying to talk through the tablet. “What’s going on?”

The young researcher sat up and looked at the feed. “Hmm… I dunno. Communications issue? Should we get IT involved?” he asked. “Dr. Coren looks very frustrated.”

“I’m gonna go find out,” Dr. Ramirez replied, standing up from the table. She made her way to the quarantine observation room, walking right up to Heidi’s glass, then tapping on it commandingly. Something was clearly going on. The blond-haired creature seemed alarmed, glancing up with her ears pointed forward. She tilted her head at the researcher, then looked her over as the young woman pointed to her ear, symbolizing that she couldn’t hear her.

Seeing Anne in the room, Dr. Coren jumped to his feet, banging on the glass to get her attention, then frantically pointing at the tablet, and at Heidi. “I know... we can’t hear you.” the young woman responded with a nod. She didn’t want to appear too alarmed. If the infected were exhibiting some sort of mental break, she didn’t want to interfere with an emotional response.

Alan frantically stayed at the glass, pounding on it to desperately get her attention. The virus was corrupting their minds! He had to tell her before it got to him, too.

“Alan, what are you doing? Alan…...” Heidi scolded, turning around to look at him through the transparent cell wall. “Don’t you do this Alan... you’re going to kill us all! I will tear you apart with my fucking teeth if you try to stop this. Alan!!” She was becoming increasingly aggressive, her stubby tail curling upward as she clenched her fists and stared at him through the glass. “Think about this, Alan! *This is the only way forward!*” she said finally.

He looked at her with conflict in his still changing eyes, shaking his head with uncertainty before he finally returned to Anne. It was insane! It was… slowly starting to make sense. Even now he could feel it, slowly altering his mind. What was happening to him? The very idea of his mind changing right in that moment was giving him a crisis. They really had to do this, didn’t they? With the threat of death just around the corner, the only way to survive would be to spread their infection. “Let’s talk this out.” He said finally, sighing in frustrated defeat. “Biting through the hazmat suits is likely not going to work. We’ll need to formulate a plan.”

“Good boy…” Heidi growled as she returned quietly to her cot.

Alan looked back at Anne, relaxing his posture as he typed out a message on his tablet. “Technical difficulties...” he wrote, holding it up sheepishly.

Anne read it, then, glancing at Heidi, nodded slowly. She opted to leave the room, rather than confront the obvious lie, making her way down the hall as she tried to understand what it was that they might be planning.

“IT says they’re looking into it.” Jaren said as she entered. “He thinks it might be wif-”

“Something’s up with Dr. Venner.” Anne interrupted as she returned to her seat at the table. “It’s like… she’s planning something.” she wondered. “Hard to say what, though. She doesn’t seem like the type to… scheme… ya know?”

Danny sat up in his chair. “I mean, she invented a virus that turned a fox into a woman, then let the woman escape, and now she’s turning into a fox woman herself. What makes you think she’s not the type to scheme?”

Anne shook her head, “I... I worked with her. I trained under her. She’s a savant, ya know? She started working here at just fifteen years old! She was always so… nice and honest. Now she’s scheming to do… what?”

“Make the world a furrier place?” Jaren wondered. “I got nothing. I can say though that Alan was… *very* upset for a few minutes there. He seems calm now. Mental changes, maybe?”

“Maybe she wants to escape.” Danny suggested. “You know once they capture Kaylee, they’re just gonna kill them all. This entire project will be scrubbed, we’ll be forced to sign heavy NDAs and... shit if we so much as get farted on by those four... We’ll be in the fire too.”

Anne held her head in her hands, staring down at the video feed on her tablet. She watched as Dr. Coren and Dr. Venner seemed to bicker. It was almost like watching two foxes fight. “It’s like it’s rewiring their brains…” she said, tilting her head slowly at the scene. Their behavior was uncanny. “I just don’t…” she started, squinting at the pair as an idea came to her mind. “I think you might be right.” she said. “Both of you.”

“Huh?” Jaren wondered. “You serious?”

“Think about it.” Anne worried. “If there’s four or five of them. GERCorp will just get rid of them and scrub the records. But if there’s hundreds...? Or... or thousands...?”

“You think she’s gonna spread it?” Danny wondered. “Like literally spread her virus on purpose so that she’ll live?”

Anne nodded, loading Heidi’s profile again. “You saw what she did, look! Vulpes Sapien. She’s making her own species! Guys, I think she’s trying to breach quarantine and spread the infection.”

“So….” Danny sighed as he got up and wandered over to the coffee machine, groaning as he remembered that they’d disabled it. “So what can we do about it?”

Anne stared at the tablet, switching between security cameras. It seemed like she was talking to all of them, including the guard that had been bitten in the throat. By now she was completely transformed and had been taken out of her coma. She seemed by far the most interested in what was being said. “Everyone wears pressurized hazmat suits around them. With thick rubber linings.” she said. “I mean if we’re dealing with three-foot-tall fox people… they’ll try to breach the suits is my best guess. So... teeth? Claws? Can they even do that?”

“Facemask is thinner than the rest of the suit.” Danny said. “Hate wearin those fucking things. It’s possible she might be planning to go for those?” He returned to his seat with a pre-packaged ration that the quarantine team had left behind. “All they gotta do is spit on us and we’re infected. It’s not airborne, but it’s very very contagious.”

“So then, a coordinated attack,” Jaren followed. “Maybe she’s gonna try to release the locks and gang up on someone? I... I mean, it seems improbable that a bunch of fox people could just overpower anyone. They don’t realize how small they’re getting.”

Danny was doing his best to eat the ration with his mask on, pulling it up, taking a bite, then putting it back down. “So let’s just give them no contact.” he said. “Automated feeders, they got bathrooms... We don’t even need to go in there. We can watch on the cameras. Once they get all small and foxy, we just go in and put muzzles on ‘em then wait for the cleanup team.”

Anne felt terrible to hear him talking so casually about terminating the infected. That was her boss in there! And the woman that she’d trained with when she first started her job! But… watching them now… they didn’t seem like the same people. They didn’t really seem like people at all. Wasn’t it wrong though? to just… off them? Dr. Venner’s proposal to follow a strategy of disengaging the virus’s contagious properties would render these new Vulpes Sapiens inert. They’d just be another species of intelligent being on the planet! Would it really be right to terminate them if they could make themselves harmless? She wished she could speak to them. The people they used to be. They’d be able to give her advice, but… they weren’t the same people anymore. Who knew what they’d have to say now.

Inside the cells, Heidi had said her peace, sitting back down on her cot before rolling over onto her side, still facing Dr. Coren. She stared at him with her amber colored eyes, her small but flexible tail wagging gently at her rear.

“What are you staring at me for?” he asked, feeling dejected by the fact that he’d been outnumbered. “You got your plan together. You really think it’ll work?”

“It has to.” she said tiredly, opening her mouth in a yawn. Her teeth had been changing, her jaw slowly extending as her canines were growing and overlapping. She was becoming more like she *should* be. For a brief moment, Alan saw it as a correction. Her body was wrong, and it was being fixed, but he quickly shook the thought away. “If we don’t legitimize ourselves, we’re dead. Even you can see that, Alan. The company will erase every trace of us.”

“So you’re gonna open the doors, breach security, and infect as many un-suited staff members as you can…? Do you even know what this place looks like now that it’s been locked down?” he asked. “Even if you were coated in butter and slipped through their fingers like a greased pig, the biggest spread you’d get in here is about one hundred people. And guess what? They’d all be locked down… waiting on Kaylee’s return.” He laid down on his own cot, placing his tablet on the floor. “You think GERCorp’s not willing to bring down one hundred of its own people? One thousand? Two thousand?? We have no power, Heidi. No matter what we do in this place… we’re not getting out of here. We’re not going to be recognized as a legitimate species, and even if we were? We’d be discriminated against to a degree that you couldn’t even fathom. You’re creating a new poverty class. You should just let us die for the mistake that you made.”

She blinked, still staring at him as she pondered his words. “Then… maybe we remain contagious… change them all.” she said soothingly. It was almost as if she was flirting, her tail wagging as her still changing ears gently splayed in submission. “Does the earth really *need* humans?”

He looked away from her at the door to his cell. It seemed much larger than when he’d walked through it. “That’s not for us to choose.” he said calmly. “You don’t get to decide what someone else is. It’s no more your right to tell them, than it is their right to tell you.”

“But they’re gonna kill us.” she replied flatly. “Alan, they’re gonna kill us. Isn’t that important? They *are* deciding what we are. That’s the whole point of this.”

He shook his head. “I’m too tired to argue with you anymore, Heidi.” he said. “I think I’m just gonna get some sleep. This… this has become my hell. I never wanted any of this. This isn’t why I went into this field. God only knows what I’ll look like when I wake up in the morning.”

“Me too.” she chuckled. “Sleep well, Alan.”

Chapter 22

Kaylee awoke the next morning to the smell of bacon and eggs. She sniffed the air, gently crawling out of the sheets before looking around at her foreign, but comfortable surroundings. It was the Rannie's guest bedroom. A bit musty and unused, but the soft, comfortable bed and warm, welcoming sheets had seen the vixen sleep more soundly that night than she had on any night before. She walked to the dresser, stepping up on the small step ladder to look down at Swirl, who had been sleeping in a small basket tucked with heavy snips of comforters and blankets. Clara had made it quickly after she'd collected their blood. It'd made the vixen so happy to see his eyes light up when she'd brought it out for him.

Looking up at the mirror before her, she saw her own face once more. Her fur was fluffed from sleeping in the bed, but she seemed no worse for wear. She wasn't starving, or tired, or injured, not cold or hot… she was… comfortable. She couldn't help but smile.

With a tiny hop, she jumped from the stool and made her way to the closet where she'd neatly hung her coat and shirt, quickly pulling them on. She walked to the dresser again, looking down at the mouse to decide if she should wake him. He seemed to be sleeping so sound and warm… she just hated to do it.

Deciding to let him get some more rest, she walked to the door to her room, fumbling with the lock, then opening it to the hallway. Her hand felt a little tight again. She assumed she'd have to work it out every day if she wanted to keep it as nimble as it'd been the day before.

She started to step out, but stopped herself, looking at her spear as it leaned beside the frame. *Not right now*, she thought to herself as she stepped into the hall, following the sweet smell of breakfast up toward the kitchen.

Approaching the room, she could hear Clara and Liam talking, they seemed casual, but slightly hushed as they spoke, making her pause in her tracks to hear what they were saying.

"What do we tell her?" Liam asked, folding his paper as he slowly read through it. "That she's carryin' a virus that you've never seen before an' have no idea what it does? That we can't keep'er here 'cause she might spread it ta us?"

"No…" Clara scolded, "we tell her the facts. Yes, we found something foreign in her blood. Yes, it does appear to be contagious. No... we're not turning her in. She's safe with us, and as long as we're careful with her, there'll be no chance of an infection."

"Clara, safety around something like that is…" Liam started. "Let's say she's drinkin' out of a glass, watchin' TV with us, she puts it down next ta mine. I grab hers instead'a my own... I get infected." he said.

“We’ll use a special glass for her.” the elderly lady said dismissively. “She’s small anyway. It’ll benefit her to have a glass she can hold better.”

“What if she licks a plate an’ you forget to clean it off? Or wear your gloves?” he continued. “What if she sneezes? What if she-”

“I get it. Liam.” Clara finally interrupted. “I get it. I know it’s dangerous. But I’m not turnin’ that girl in.”

As Kaylee stood in the hall, listening to the pair talk, she felt a gentle pull on her leg, then a hop as Swirl climbed up her coat. “What’s going on?” he whispered, nestling against her collar.

“They’re talking about me,” she whispered back, “saying I’m contagious. I really *do* have some horrible virus. T... that means I killed momma... I’m a murderer, Swirl!”

Liam folded his paper again and sat it down on the table, walking across the kitchen to refill his coffee. ““Then what should we do, Clara?” he asked, returning to his chair, then leaning back and crossing his legs. “All the safety in the world aint gonna stop it forever. We keep her here, we *will* get infected. It’s only a matter of time.”

The vixen sighed, her ears splaying as she returned to her room and grabbed her spear. “What’re you doing?” the mouse whispered. “Kaylee, what’re you doing??”

“Leaving,” she sighed. “Swirl I’m a monster. I’ve got some kind of virus that’s... I killed mom! I can’t risk hurting Clara and Liam!”

The mouse shook his head. “No! Talk to them. Let’s look at the virus, too. We’re smart. The three of us can figure it out.”

“I’m a weird science experiment, not a virologist,” she said, walking back out into the hall as she headed for the back door. “I think it’s best if we just disappear and-”

“Kaylee?” Clara asked, noticing her in the hall. “Honey, what’s wrong?”

The vixen looked up at her with sad, dilated eyes, her ears splayed as she held her spear down at her side. “I... I’m sorry Mrs. Rannie…” she whined, “I need to leave. I don’t wanna hurt you, and… from the sound of things… it’s inevitable that I will.”

The old woman shook her head. “Darlin, you don’t know that,” she said. “We’ve never seen a virus like this before. Hell, I don’t even know if it *is* a virus. I have no idea what this thing would do. Why don’t you come in here and have breakfast? We’ll talk it over an’ see if we can figure out what it is.”

The vixen shook her head. “I’m a murderer, Clara.” she whined. “I can’t... I killed my mother! When I bit her, I gave her this virus and I killed her!”

“Ya don’t know that!” she objected. “Come on in here. Have breakfast with us. Please? At least leave on a full belly if you’re gonna leave.”

The vixen agreed with a slow guilty nod, dragging her spear’s rounded edge across the floor as she shamefully made her way to the kitchen. When her eyes met Liam’s, she whimpered, her tail curling between her legs as she made her way to the seat they’d prepared for her.

“Sleep good?” he asked, trying to be casual like she’d not heard the pair speaking.

She nodded, staring down at the table in front of her. “The best I’ve slept in my life.” she said softly. “T... thank you for... for everything you’ve done.”

“You aint gotta thank us for things that we’ve done, ‘cause we’re gonna do more for ya,” Clara insisted. “You aint being kicked outta this house. We’re not turning you in, and I want you ta stay!”

She looked up at her for a moment, then looked back down, her eyes shifting to Swirl as he hopped onto the table. “Maybe Swirl should stay. He’s not contagious, is he?”

“He has the virus in his system, but when I tested it with a drop of my blood, it didn’t react,” Clara explained. “You really need to see this thing. I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s not a… virus so much as it’s like a little organic machine.”

“Xenobot,” the mouse said with a nod. “That’s what Mother used to create us. A virus she called a xenobot. She said it was like a little organic machine that would re-arrange our brains and make us smarter. It always sounded scary to me.”

“That sounds familiar,” Clara responded, bringing over a plate for herself, Liam, and Kaylee, then returning with a smaller one with fruit for Swirl. “Maybe something from a medical journal?”

Liam grunted as he shifted his body weight, pulling a cell phone from his side pocket. He pressed a button on its side and it made a ding “What the hell is a xenobot?” he asked it. The phone seemed to hesitate, then dinged again.

“A xenobot is an organic nanomachine, developed as a theory in 2008 by luminary biologist Dr. Heidi Venner during her tenure at Bradford University. The theory, originating at MIT, states that a nanobot, a microscopic machine, could be made using clusters of programmable, customized cells that can then be used to perform highly sophisticated tasks within an organism. Would you like me to read m-”

“Keep goin..” Liam sighed.

“Highly sophisticated tasks within an organism. Examples of such would include regrowing lost limbs, organs, or even correcting genetic errors. Dr. Venner, now an employee at GERCorp international, is one of the leading researchers in this highly specialized field, though no known example of the theory has ever been produced.”

Liam turned off the phone and placed it on his morning paper, clearing his throat. “Well, it sounds like it has now,” he said, glancing over at Kaylee. “And it sounds ta me like this virus is what she used to turn you from a little bushy tailed yipper into the pretty young lady you are today.”

“So... then...” Kaylee started, her eyes flickering back and forth as she started down at her plate. “Clara, what happened to the cells you tested it on??”

“It... well... I’m not entirely sure.” she said with a sigh. “I don’t have that kind of equipment really, but it didn’t *destroy* the cells it encountered. it just sorta… pulled em in, then spit em back out. They looked different on the other side but… I couldn’t tell ya how. It’s like they were… I’m sorry I just don’t have a better word. It’s like they’d been changed somehow. What I did see though was that it immediately attacked and destroyed every white blood cell in the sample.”

Swirl was intrigued. “It attacked the immune system?” he wondered. “That’s worrying.”

Clara nodded. “The interesting thing is… Kaylee doesn’t have any white blood cells. And neither do you, Swirl. All you have are these little machines.”

Kaylee and swirl looked at each other at the same time. “I... s... so... then...” she stammered. “If you’re infected you might... You might turn into me? Or... or something like me?” she wondered.

“What makes ya say *that*?” Liam asked, raising a brow.

“I... if the virus is coming from me... It’s a machine designed to make… genetic corrections… because that’s how I was made. So, it stands to reason that it probably considers me to be the correct… uh... shape? The way its host is supposed to be. So, following that logic, anyone infected with the xenobots would... would be turned into… something like me.”

Swirl squeaked affirmatively, eating his fruit for a moment before looking up to speak. “Why yours, though… and not mine?”

The vixen shook her head. “I... I dunno. Why *would* that be the case?”

Clara ate her breakfast in silence as she listened to the conversation. “Well honey, you’ve gone through a lot more physical changes than our little mousey here.” she said as she gently pet the mouse with her fingers. He closed his eyes and leaned into it happily. “Could be that yours is… well… gatekeeping your biology?”

“W... whattya mean?” Kaylee asked.

“I mean, it changed you into what you are, right? But it needs to *keep* you what you are, so it supervises your biological processes and protects them from abnormalities. Ya know?” She put down her fork and pulled out her phone, showing it to the vixen. “Like I said before, one of the things I noticed in your test is that you have no white blood cells. None. You would be dead under most circumstances with that, but this… virus of yours… is acting in its stead. It’s protecting you. It’s gatekeeping your biology. It just seems that… it can’t tell the difference between you, and someone else.”

Kaylee seemed alarmed. “So if I licked Swirl, he’d turn into me??” she worried.

“Doesn’t sound like it.” Liam chimed. “He's got his own do-dads. So yours and his would just fight it out until yours were killed off.”

“So only those with the virus are protected from the virus…” the vixen muttered. Suddenly she looked up. “Th... then… that means!” she started, her tail wagging anxiously. “I didn’t kill mom! I... infected her. And she's… turning into me. Oh god. I’m taking her *humanity* away.”

Liam sighed and cleared his throat. “Reckon there’s worse things in the world...” he said, taking a sip of his coffee. “I mean, you’re a bit on the short side, but you could get it done.”

Swirl was worried. “If she’s infected, and she’s like us… they’re going to get rid of her,” he said, stopping long enough to speak before quickly returning to his fruit. “We need to rescue her somehow if that’s what’s happening.”

“Rescue her?” Clara asked, raising her brow and tilting her head. “Sugar, how do you expect ta do something like that?”

Kaylee agreed, “as much as I hate to say it... I don’t think we can do that. If we go up there, they’ll kill us all.”

Clara looked at them, studying them as her face slowly contorted into a smirk, then finally into a laugh. She put down her fork as she began to laugh more loudly. “Oh lordy what a situation we got ourselves in now, huh??” she asked. “Oh god... We got ourselves a talkin’ fox and a mouse and... and... a virus that... turns you into the fox if you get it?? How’s that fuckin’ fur farm doin now??” she laughed.

“Are... you okay, Mrs. Rannie?” Kaylee worried.

“Oh, I’m fine honey, I’m just fine!” the old woman giggled. “I just... I dunno, I feel so good! I just... It’s like I’m drunk as a skunk.”

Liam stood up from the table, then helped Clara to her feet. “Honey, you need ta go lay down. I... I think we need to call the lab and-”

“Don’t you dare you vile old man you!” she said, booping his nose playfully. “You old coder!” she giggled. “Where’s that handsome, muscular young farm boy I met all them years ago, eh?” She looked at Kaylee. “Don’t you worry darlin, Liam aint callin’ no lab or no security’er nonna that shit. If I got what you got then we can brush each other’s fur till the sun goes down.” she said, laughing boisterously.

Liam started to walk her from the room, scoffing as Clara playfully spit in his face. “There now you got it too!” she laughed. “Big ol’ family’a foxes!”

“Stay. Here,” he said sternly, looking over his shoulder at Kaylee. “I’m gonna go put her in the bed. She needs to sleep whatever this is off.”

The vixen was horrified, looking helplessly from Liam to Swirl as the old man left the room with his wife. “What’ve I done??” she asked as tears began to roll down her face. “Swirl, what have I done?!”

Chapter 23

“Captain, the dogs’ve been at it for hours now. They haven’t found anything, and nobody in town has reported seeing any... Small furry bipeds or anything of the sort.” Jake said with a sigh. “I did however, find the finest blueberry pie in the world, according to the baker who prepared it, got invited to a barn raising, a barn burning, and the Friendly spring flower festival. I think the trail’s gone cold out here. Maybe we should go back to the Rannie farm and start over?”

“Rannie Schmainie..” Capt. Ramone chuckled dismissively. “You know that bitch has that fox. Y... you know she does.” She leaned back against the side of her SUV, then took off her mask throwing it like a frisbee down the sidewalk. “Woo!”

“M... ma’am?” one of the other agents worried as he rushed up to her with the dogs. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Oh who gives a fuck...” she giggled. “You know why I’m like this and you know where I’ve been. We’ve... heh...We’ve been at it all day and now I’ve contaminated half the fuckin’ town and every single one of you dumbasses.”

Jake took a step back, looking at her in horror as she took off her glove to show him the darkened spot of brown fur that was growing from the tips of one of her fingers. “B... but... How...??” he worried. “We’ve been in gear all day! Y... you’ve been... How!?”

“Mrs. Rannie,” she said with a snort. “Bitch. Touched my hand when I took... took the card outta my... outta my pocket!” she said with a laugh. “She musta been infected when she touched me and now I’ve got it and that means *eeeveryone in this fucking town* has it and you’re all fucking fucked!” she laughed. “The military's gonna firebomb this shithole off the face of the earth!” she guffawed.

“Fuck... fuckfuckfuck!” Jake gasped, banging his fist against the side of the second SUV. “What’re we gonna do??”

The team member still holding the dogs shook his head. “Well, if the captain’s infected, she needs to go back to the-”

“We’re infected too dumbass!” he interrupted. “Terry, if we go back to that place with her they’re gonna lock us up just like those other freaks they had in that room!”

“But I mean, what if Gil and I are fine?? And... and it’s just you and the captain?” he worried. “If you just-”

“We really gonna risk that?” Gil asked, walking up to them with Rufus. “We come back and find out that we really *are* infected, they’re gonna throw us in there, too.”

Terry shook his head. “Guys it’s procedure. If we’ve been exposed, we need to submit to testing. Turning tail and hiding a contagious condition like this is exactly the kind of thing we were trained *not* to do!”

“Mmm…” Gil sighed. “You’re right… we should go back. Take the captain, get everyone tested. If we’re in the clear we can go back out and resume looking for the specimen.”

Jake sighed, rolling his eyes. “Look, this whole town is probably infected now. I’ve been shaking hands and giving out business cards all day. I... I think we should go back to the Rannie farm. If this mess started there, they may still have the specimen, and… and maybe we can solve this problem together.”

“S... solve the problem... SOLVE IT!” Cpt. Ramone laughed. “How about we just SPREAD IT instead?!”

Jake sighed, putting his mask back on. “Get her in the car. We’re heading back to the farm.”

He started to load up, but Terry and Gil hesitated, standing in place with the dogs on their leashes. “What?” he asked. “You guys seriously wanna go back? We’re infected!”

“You don’t know that, Jake,” Gil replied. “We should go back and find out.”

“We should go back and find that specimen,” Jake insisted. “C’mon.. back to the Rannie’s. We know that’s where she is.”

Terry sighed, walking to the back of their suv. “Goddammit…” he muttered.

While they were loading up, Kaylee was waiting at the table. She hadn’t moved, terrified of what might happen when Liam returned. She looked at Swirl, gently chewing her food as she silently cried to herself.

“You don’t know that she’s infected, Kaylee,” he said, looking up at her with a weak smile. “That behavior was odd, but neither of us ever experienced such a thing.”

She shook her head somberly. “Yea we did…” she said somberly. “Mom called it Euphoria. Every time she gave me a shot, I’d start to feel really good. She said it was the medication, keeping me from being scared while the bots altered my body. An outburst like that, she’s almost certainly gonna start changing soon.”

“But when did she get infected?” the small mouse worried. “We’ve been careful! Haven’t we?”

“M... maybe with the blood? Last night?” the vixen worried. “B... but... I mean that wasn’t *my* fault!” she said, shielding herself from some invisible sense of blame that she might expect to come to her for Clara’s infection. In reality, her only blame was being around the humans to begin with. She’d done nothing wrong, and deep down, she knew that. She just hated herself for it.

“Nobody said it was your fault, Kaylee.” Swirl sighed, patting his tiny hand on the top of hers. “You didn’t even know you were contagious until this morning.”

“I know! But that doesn't mean...” she grunted, shaking her head as she thought it over. “I shoulda turned myself in. If those lab people come back I... I think I’m gonna just tell them to ta-” She froze as she spoke, looking out the window as a pair of black SUVs bearing the GERCorp logo pulled into their drive. “Oh fuck... fuck fuck LAIM! THEY’RE BACK!” she called urgently.

“Who’s back? Who-” he started, spotting Jake walking toward the front door. “Go to your room, both of ya. NOW!” he said urgently. The vixen complied, closing her door just as Jake rang the bell.

“Jake... you’re back...” Liam said casually as he opened the door and leaned on its frame. “Clara told me ya came by yesterday. You find that fox yet?”

The agent took off his mask, sighing as he looked the old man in the eye. “Mr. Rannie, can I come in?” he asked with a sympathetic gaze.

“What for?” the old man challenged, crossing his arms with a scowl. “You got a warrant or somethin ta come…“ His eyes darting to one of the SUVs as the rear driver’s window rolled up and down repeatedly, the sound of Cpt. Ramone’s laughter emanating from within.

Jake looked over his shoulder at the vehicle, then back at the old man. “We need to talk.”

Chapter 24

Cpt. Ramone sat in the living room next to Clara, the pair of them laughing up a storm as they bantered back and forth, exchanging drunken accusations mixed with playful teases about the situation at hand. In the conversation, Clara had explained how she'd used Kaylee's urine, and had gotten it on her hand, but hadn't thought anything of it at the time. It was a clear indicator that the blood sample itself wasn't the cause of the spread, but the attempt by the Rannie's to shelter the vixen, that'd started the initial exposure.

With them in the room was Kaylee, hovering in the corner near the door. She was holding her spear tightly as she stood like a centurion with the small mouse on her head. Next to her, making sure that she couldn't try to run, was Terry and Gil, with Jake and Liam in the middle sitting across from one another on two couches.

"So, I think it's safe to say everyone in this room is infected." Jake said with a sigh. "And with our little tour of Friendly over the last day and a half, we've met a lot of people, shaken a lot of hands and handed out a lot of cards. The whole damn town's probably infected at this point."

"Not only that, but they're having the spring flower festival in the next few days." Gil added with a nod. "People are comin' up here from Winnipeg. It's gonna be a shitshow."

"Oh, we're all gonna die, it's gonna be amazing!" Jennifer giggled, making an explosion sound with her mouth as her arms made the motion of a mushroom cloud. "Pfffuuuhhh" she giggled. The idea seemed to both horrify and amuse Clara at the same time, who was still struggling with the throws of euphoria.

"So... what are we gonna do about it?" Liam asked. "You really think the military's gonna get involved with this?"

"Dr. Coren told us that they wanted to get involved, but we've had no record of any such contact," Jake explained. "I think perhaps he was hoping that the military would get involved, but hadn't actually been contacting them at that point in time."

"Alan." Kaylee said. "Dr. Alan Coren? Momma's boss?"

"Momma..." Terry repeated. "You think of Dr. Venner as your mother?"

"She is," the vixen nodded. "She... she made me. I was just a little animal before all this started. She's my mother."

"Yea, well her and Dr. Coren both are infected back at the lab. As well as the guard that shot at you that she blocked, and the two guards you attacked in the forest." Jake continued. "And now... The four BioSec team members they sent to get you... and the farmer and veterinarian that tried to help you out along the way."

Kaylee felt like shit, and it showed, with her ears splayed, she looked down at the floor with a sigh. “I’m a walking plague…” she whined.

“I think at this point, we’re talking more like... Pandemic.” Terry said. “With people coming up here from Winnipeg, we’re gonna get visitors from out of town. This shit’s going to explode in the next week or so.”

The farmer cleared his throat, adjusting his seat on the couch as he looked sternly into Jake’s eyes. “Then let me ask you again, son. What are we gonna do about all this? I’m infected, you are, she is, my wife, the fuckin town... Your fuckin’ laboratory... We just gonna sit back and let this happen??”

“The... the problem is sir...” Terry started timidly. “With this man people infected, GERCorp won’t be able to handle it. The military *will* have to get involved, and… well, I don’t know about you, sir... But I don’t wanna die. I don’t think the people of Friendly do, either. Especially not ‘cause’a some lab experiment.” He looked down scornfully at Kaylee as he finished his speech.

Swirl scowled back at him. “Hey! Don’t you blame her for wanting to live!” he objected, defending his vulpine friend. “She didn’t ask for this any more than you did!”

Liam listened, then looked back at Jake. “I’m not too keen on dyin, but I’m not keen on watchin my wife slip away from me, either.”

“Oh sugar you aint gonna watch me slip away!” she chuckled. “You’re gonna be slippin away with me when you start gettin all fuzzy!” she said with a boisterous laugh.

“What... actually happens to someone that’s infected?” Kaylee asked. “What is my... What’s the virus doing to people?”

“From what I saw in the quarantine cells... It’s... turning humans into creatures like you,” Jake explained. “Not carbon copies, mind you, but… short stature, bipedal, fox people. They’re calling it the Venner virus. After your mother’s namesake.”

The vixen exhaled slowly through her nose as she looked down at the nameplate on her jacket. Suddenly it felt like she was branded with a scarlet letter.

“Hey... cheer up!” Jennifer chuckled from across the room. “Soon you’re gonna have a whole lot more friends!” she said, giggling with Clara.

“We need to find out more about the virus.” Kaylee said, stepping forward slightly. “If all of you are infected, then... You’ll eventually go through euphoria like Clara and Cpt. Ramone are going through right now.”

“Right. But... we have to *get* that information *without* contacting GERCorp or alerting the military.” Jake agreed. “But how are we supposed to do that?”

Liam sighed, shaking his head. “Why am I the only person in this room with a lick’a sense?” he groaned. “You act like it’s some big secret we can hide out on this farm.” he said, leaning in to look at Jake. “You just told me everyone in this damned town is infected. You don’t think that’s gonna get some attention? If anything, these people, who the hell ever’s in... in ch... charge...” he stammered, struggling to suppress a chuckle. “Is gonna... aeed... ah hell when did... Heh... Son... son of a haha! Son of a bitch!”

“He raises a valid question.” Terry replied. “If Dr. Coren’s out of commission at the lab, who’s in charge?”

“Corporate?” Gil asked. “The guys outta Japan?”

“I don’t know that the company has that much of a handle on this.” Jake replied, looking worried at Liam as he did his best to keep his mouth shut. It was admirable, the man was trying to keep as serious on the conversation as he possibly could, even though it was obvious that he found the whole situation to be ridiculously funny. “Dr. Coren had to call Captain Ramone directly, remember? He said nobody at corporate cared about a missing specimen.” He leaned back on the couch, splaying out his arms on either side of the opened cushions behind him. “I say we reach out to whoever’s running the show up there at the lab, and we tell them the truth. Chances are, they’re just as scared of this as we are.”

“W…well...” Liam started, insisting on being the strongest in the room as he tried to remain stoic despite the ever-present euphoria washing over him. “Get ta callin’ em!”

The agent stood up with a grunt, looking sympathetically at the three people in the room already starting to feel the effects of the virus. He glanced at Kaylee with the same expression, telling her silently that he didn’t blame her for what was happening. “I’ll be back in just a minute. You guys hold the fort,” he said as he made his way to the door.

He was only outside a moment, his hands shaking as he tried to use his phone to dial the number, when he heard the door close again. He looked up to see Kaylee, still holding her spear, looking at him with a curious expression. “They let you out… out here?” he asked, his voice shaking as he struggled to dial.

“I told Terry I’d bisect his liver with my spear if he didn’t.” she replied with a serious expression. “So, you’re calling the lab?”

“I... I’m trying to I just… fuck. My hands won’t stop shaking!” he said. “Kaylee this could be the end. I call them they might swoop in and kill us all right where we stand. I... I don’t know what to-”

“Let me dial it.” she said, holding out her hand. “There’s no sense in dropping the phone and breaking it.”

He looked at her as if he was experiencing intense emotional pain, then handed it to her with a nod. He fished a card from his pocket, then held it up for her to see.

“If they come get us then so be it.” she continued as she dialed the number on the card. “You’ve spread this all over town. Eventually, there’ll be too many of us to ignore. Getting ahead of it now would be in our best interests.” She finished dialing the number, then handed the phone back up to him with a smile. “It’s ringing” she said.

In the lab, Danny, Anne, and Jaren were asleep at the conference table where they’d been all night. The three had barely eaten, save for the MRE style pre-packaged rations that’d been provided when the BioSec team had swept through. Aside from a small number of researchers, most of them tending to the infected, the facility was empty. The virology team had given up when they’d encountered the Xenobots, opting instead to let Dr. Venner try to find her own solution, to which she’d confidently proposed her idea of contagious cessation. It truly didn’t seem like that much of a stretch to them. But then, they’d not directly spoken with the creature that she’d become since her first 2 days under containment, and the teams themselves had made no attempt to update them on her status.

As the three slept, a lithe, worried looking intern entered the conference room, gently shaking Anne by the shoulder. “Ma’am? Ma’am!” he said, increasing his volume as the young woman groggily awakened from what felt like a hungover stupor. “Ma’am there’s someone on the phone. The BioSec team. They... said it’s urgent.”

Rubbing the sleep from the corners of her eyes with her fingers, she grunted and looked up at him tiredly. “Why *me*?” she asked.

“W... well I checked the org chart, and... You’re the most senior person on campus right now. Everyone else either evacuated or became infected. So... I thought it should go to you.”

“Alright...” Anne said in groggy disbelief. Had they really abandoned the place like that? Just left them all to die? What kind of company was this? She’d been mistaken about their integrity. “Send it to my office. Extension 4166.”

Danny began to stir, almost falling over in his chair as he was suddenly jolted awake. “HUH! W... what... What’s goin on?” he asked, yawning as he caught his composure.

“BioSec is calling. I’m not sure why. I’m... gonna take it in my office.” Anne replied. “You guys uh... find us something that looks like breakfast. I’m really hungry.”

“Same.” Jaren groaned.

“Dr. Ramirez,” the intern said as he walked briefly with her down the hall. “Everyone here is scared and asking when we can go home. The food supply is running low, and the doors are locked down from the outside. We... there’ve been talks of taking food from the specimens for ourselves, since it used to be ours anyway. What should we do?”

She looked at him empathetically. “We’ll figure this out.” she said with a soft, reassuring smile. “I know how you feel. We feel the same way but… we can’t take the food from the specimens. Dr. Venner is the only hope of fixing this right now.” She stopped by her office, opening the door. “This is me. Remember 4166.”

“Yes ma’am!” he nodded.

Entering her office, she closed the door. She used to have a beautiful view of the courtyard from her window, but it’d been shuttered with a heavy metal gate the moment the facility had entered lockdown. If she didn’t have a clock on her computer as she sat down to get logged in, she wouldn’t even know if it was day or night. She sighed as she looked at the photo of her husband beside her computer on the desk. A sunny spring day. They’d been hiking near the US border shortly after getting married. It was a memory that she held fondly.

At last, her phone rang, and she shakily picked it up. “This is Dr. Anne Ramirez, to whom am I speaking?”

“Uh... this is… this is agent Ja… Jacob Williford. GERCorp BioSec? I needed to uh... speak to someone at the lab. Is that… is that you?”

Anne sniffed and rubbed her temple. It seemed that her awkward sleep on the conference room table had given her a sinus headache. “I... I am the most senior ranking human on site, yes. Did... you catch the specimen?”

Jake looked down at Kaylee who tilted her head slightly, giving him a muted smile. He wasn’t sure why, but her behavior was… unnerving. It was obvious that she could hear Anne through the phone, despite her enormous ears being nowhere near the device itself. “Uh…” he started. “Yea, Kaylee’s here. B... but…”

The researcher sighed at his stammering. “Listen, Jake? Everyone here is scared, tired, and hungry. We’ve been locked down in this place since you arrived. So if you have something to tell me, please spit it out because I have the worst headache of my life from sleeping on a table, and I’d really like to try to find something that resembles food before we resort to eating our shoes. Please get to your point.”

“That bad huh...?” he asked, seeming surprised that they’d just been left in lockdown like that. “Alright so... I’ll level with you. Everyone on my team is infected.” he said bluntly. “Kaylee… after she escaped managed to meet up with the Rannie’s. They uh, they took her in but Clara,

the veterinarian, got infected when handling some of the specimen's urine? And... that spread to our captain and to me and… preeetttyy much everyone in town. We're all here at the Rannie farm because our captain is showing euphoric symptoms and we didn't know what to do."

Anne's half-asleep eyes shot fully awake, a wave of panic washing over her as she looked at the photo of her husband. "The town...? Jake, I live in Friendly... My husband... My best friend… I take my dog to Dr. Rannie when she's sick! Are you... For god's sake please tell me this is some kind of… How could this happen??"

Jake explained his logic. The fake trail, the urine, the business card, then the subsequent search of the town. The longer he spoke, the longer he felt a growing feeling within him. It was gradual yet persistent. The more he spoke the more excited and happy he seemed to become, until it almost sounded like he was bragging." So... that's… where we are. And honestly, we were afraid to talk to you because we thought you might send in the military or something."

"The military?" she asked. "Okay, first of all I heard Dr. Coren talking about that, but his notes don't mention it at all. There's been almost no contact with anyone over this entire ordeal. The virology team in Nevada *was* working on it for a while but they gave up when Dr. Venner's notes were just too far over their heads. We've basically been left to rot in silence up here. But if what you're saying is true? Then we're about to be on the global news circuit. And that's going to be… isn't the spring flower festival this weekend??"

"Yes ma'am, it is." Jake smiled, the obvious yet muted elation in his voice giving her pause.

"Hey, if you're feeling euphoric, take something like a muscle relaxer or a benzodiazepine like Diazepam. It should keep you stable. You guys need to function out there."

"I... I will do that." he said, suppressing a giggle. "H... here… Talk to Kaylee while I go... go find some," he added abruptly, laughing as he handed the phone to the vixen, then swiftly entered the house.

Slowly, she lowered the phone to her face, holding it as she best thought would make it work, given the shape of her maw. "Dr. Ramirez…" she said timidly. "I don't know that we've really spoken before, have we?"

Anne sighed heavily as she heard the vixen's voice. She wasn't wrong. She'd only seen the creature in passing and had only spoken to her once when asking Dr. Venner a question. The way she'd addressed her as she'd taken the phone from Jake surprised her. This creature was much smarter than she'd expected it to be.

“Kaylee this whole thing is a mess…” she responded. “Your mother’s infected. Dr. Coren, the guards you attacked... Now The Rannie’s, the BioSec agents and from the sound of things, the town I live in.” She paused, trying to keep herself from accusing the vixen of being the cause of all this. “How did it come to all this, Kaylee?”

The vixen gripped the phone tightly as she pondered her answer, burying her rage at what felt like an accusation. “What’s happening to mom?” she asked coldly, ignoring Anne’s question as she focused on something she felt was more relevant. “She’s infected, but what does that mean? What happens to the people who catch my… virus?”

Dr. Ramirez hesitantly nodded. Her refusal to answer the question spoke volumes to what she already knew. The vixen had only ever acted in self-interest. She didn’t want to die. It was as simple as that. She’d learned of her fate from Dr. Coren and Dr. Venner, then escaped so that she could live. Sitting powerless as the young woman did now, staring at the photo of her husband, she couldn’t say for even one second that she blamed her for doing what she’d done.

“Anyone who’s exposed to the virus will take a form similar to yours.” Anne explained. “A reduction in height to around 4 feet or less, the growth of fur, a tail, a muzzle, large ears… the only difference we’re seeing between the infected individuals and you is that they seem to be keeping their hair. There… seem to be mental changes as well. Substantial mental changes. They come to accept it and even reject their humanity. Dr. Venner’s taken to calling herself a Vulpes Sapien. I think she’s planning to lead some sort of rebellion in here, as odd as that might be to say.”

Rebellion had never been a word Kaylee thought that she’d hear about her mother, but understanding the circumstances, it made sense. Kaylee herself would never have considered trying to escape or biting people’s throats had she been given a choice. All of this came by force. It was a reaction to an external event that in both cases seemed to be forcing their hands. “So, someone who’s infected, doesn’t die, they just... change physically till they look more like me. Am I hearing you correctly on this? Because no offense to you obviously, Dr. Ramirez, but that hardly seems like something worth killing people over.”

“Whattya mean?” Dr. Ramirez asked. “Who’s... killing people?”

The vixen scowled, looking at the phone as if she could see the human on the other side. “Don’t play stupid, you know how this works. You and your harvesters. Were you going to be the one to do it? Cut me open and put my organs in little jars? You think just because I’m limited in my experience in the world that I’m stupid?? You were going to kill me, if we come back to the lab? You’re going to kill us all! Over what? A virus that doesn’t hurt anyone?”

“No one’s gonna kill you, Kaylee,” the young woman responded with a somber tone. “It’s gotten to the town, it’s too late to just clean up and bury it now. None of the staff here would dare try to euthanize *any* of you. Not when we need a cure, especially.”

“So if this hadn’t happened, and the BioSec team would’ve found me… you would’ve killed me? And Dr. Venner, Dr. Coren, and the guards? You’d let all of us die?”

Anne shook her head. “It wasn’t up to us, Kaylee!” she exclaimed. “That would’ve been under the purview of the GERCorp BioSec team. With the local group being infected, though… if anyone finds out about this it’s going to quickly spiral out of our control. The military will get involved… there’s no telling what’ll happen then.” She looked at the photo on her desk once more. “With it being in town… Virgil might be infected. I can’t let them just… think I need to speak to your mother about her plan. It sounds like she has a way to stop the virus from spreading. If she does, that’ll stop it in its tracks and… maybe we can all get through this… s…somehow.”

She was tripping over her own words. She didn’t honestly believe that. One small town in rural Manitoba? The military would just wipe it away. Six thousand people, ten thousand? How many lives would they sacrifice? Trying to argue that it’d just… stop… because the contagion was averted would be magical thinking at its worst. As far as she could see… there was no way out.

The vixen nodded. “So... what should I tell the gigglefest inside? What’s our current plan?”

Anne stifled a chuckle. She’d never really gotten to know Kaylee, but for her to say the word ‘gigglefest’ in such a dry way nearly made her laugh out loud. “Tell them… to take the medications I mentioned, and when they have their heads together, try… try to map out an infection map for the town. I’m going to speak to your mother and… and see what comes of it. Do you know if I have the number for this phone?”

“I… don’t have any experience with phones, I’m sorry.” Kaylee replied anxiously. “I wouldn’t know how to give you that information.”

“That’s alright! No problem. We just need to know the number,” Anne replied. “Tell you what, I’ll have Gene look through the call logs here at the office. That should us me what it is. If you don’t hear from us in 24 hours… call us back. Okay?”

Kaylee nodded. “Yes Ma’am.” she replied, feeling surprisingly respectful of the young doctor she’d been speaking to. She’d actually spoken to her like an equal. “Thank you, Dr. Ramirez.”

“Thank *you*. Kaylee Venner.” she replied before hanging up the phone.

Chapter 25

Heidi was awake in her cell. She'd been spending the morning naked, observing her body in between changes of her scrubs, taking photos as Anne had asked her, in an effort to document what was happening. Her body was 50% covered in fur, with the center of her abdomen seeming to be the outlier. For the most part, she was still proportional to where she'd been before, though her legs had changed in a significant way. From her own photos, she could see a lot of Kaylee in herself. Long graceful hips, more like an animal standing on two legs than a human. Not that she considered herself human anymore.

From what she could tell, it seemed that her chest had gotten smaller. Not just in size but in proportion to her body. The small tufts of fur covering her nipples, gave her an oddly satisfying sense of privacy. Even with her chest exposed, she was still mostly free of... exposure... in that sense. Her genitals had experienced no change at all, save for the fur replacing her public hair as it had encroached on her labia. She felt it was relatively pleasant. The soft white tuft of fur highlighted the beige/pink flesh in a way that she felt… just made sense. It, too provided privacy. But for a few specific angles, nothing much could be seen.

Her hands had become smaller, and her fingers less articulate, but with exercise, she'd been able to use them in much the same way. Dark brown fur and black patches of skin had long replaced the fair, bare flesh that'd previously adorned them. Likewise, claws had pushed days before through her nail beds, forcing the old nails out in what she could only describe as an awkward and unpleasant process.

Her ears, once merely pointed like that of an elf, now stood boldly atop her head, parting her hair as they twisted and turned toward sounds and interests. It was almost like learning a new muscle. They almost seemed to move on their own.

Her face was much like the remainder of her body, mostly covered with fur, save for a small spot between her eyes. Her muzzle had formed to such an extent that she looked nearly… 'complete.' By her estimates, she would be done with any major physical changes in 2 to 3 more days. It felt as if it'd moved very fast for her.

Feeling satisfied with the documentation, she began to get dressed, opting for a larger shirt that would more easily hide her nethers, rather than trying to find a pair of pants that fit her new body shape. They'd simply become too awkward given her leg shape, and far too limiting to her leg movement, given the plan that she'd coordinated with the others.

No sooner had she sat down, pulling her medium length, still thinly furred tail around her, than she saw Anne in the observation room, looking in at her like she wanted to talk. "Yes…?" she asked, tilting her head slightly. "Got something to say, human?"

“You turned coms back on, then. Good,” the young woman replied, ignoring the fact that she’d just been called ‘human.’ She grabbed one of the chairs, then rolled it closer to the glass. “I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Alright... What would you like to talk about?” the vixen-like creature responded, staring piercingly at her with her amber slitted eyes.

Anne leaned back in her chair, resting her tablet in her lap. “First of all, I know what you’re planning. I don’t know the details, but I certainly understand why.” she started. “Second, I wanted you to know that I just got off a fairly long call with your daughter, and I think we could all use your he-”

She was interrupted by a thump against the glass. The vixen had practically thrown herself at it, her small tail wagging feverishly behind her. “They found her??” she worried. “What are they gonna do? I swear to god if they hurt her I’ll- How dare you come in here and hold that over my head!”

“Heidi, that’s not what I’m doing,” Dr. Ramirez objected, remaining as calm as she could, given the circumstances. “The team is infected. The people that took her in are, too. Potentially… the entire town of Friendly is as well. She loaded a map on her tablet, turning it around so that the creature could see. “After Kaylee escaped, she went here to the Rannie farm. They took her in and hid her from the team but got exposed to the virus in the process. From there it spread to the BioSec team, then to the town from the team. Your daughter is currently with Rannie’s on their farm. With the infected BioSec team.

The vixen nodded, then backed away from the glass. “Then what are you saying, Anne?” she asked accusingly. “Seems to me you have some kind of… trade in mind? You want to strike a deal with me? I can’t do anything about your town, but if you insist on holding my daughter hostage I-”

“Hostage?” Anne worried. “Dr. Venner, this kind of behavior isn’t like you. You’re not yourself anymore. This virus has really messed with your mind.”

…Had it? To a degree, it was a question that Heidi herself had pondered as she lay on her cot. What she'd been planning was nothing short of a rebellion. An armed mutiny to take over and infect everyone in the facility, whether they wanted it or not. Was this the behavior of a 30-year-old scientific savant that'd been working for this prestigious, global corporation for the last 15 years? Likely not. But then, that young woman hadn't been caged and infected, either. She hadn't been faced with the looming threat of death for what she'd become. That human knew nothing of what it was to be her. "I'm a product of my environment, I guess." she replied finally. "I am Dr. Heidi Venner. That hasn't changed. What *has*, is that I'm no longer a human like you. My needs, my... approach to everything around me is different now. It has to be. So I think some… adjustment is likely inevitable, even without any sort of mental change. Which I would argue, I have experienced to some *small* degree. There's something to be said of human and fox instinct. You know?"

"That makes sense, yes." Anne nodded.

The vixen leaned in from her cot, gripping the lip of its metal frame with her hands as her tail tried to curl upward. "So then what do you want? What're you trying to get out of me?"

Anne tightened her grip on her tablet, steeling herself for what she was about to say. "I want… to let you out." she said, swallowing her fear as she saw the creature's face light up in a muted smirk. "You and Dr. Coren. So that we can sit at the conference table together like one team, and work through what we're going to do. GERCorp has their own plan, I'm sure. As does the Canadian government… but I don't think either of their plans would align with your… basic right to exist." She stopped herself, her hands trembling as she looked down at them. She could feel the vixen's eyes burning into her. Validating her right to exist was… against company policy. She was committing an offense that would cost her her job. Breaching the quarantine of highly volatile, contagious and… unstable infected specimens, so that they could pursue their own agenda, counter to what the company and… even humanity itself would want was nothing short of treason. Despite it though, with the looming threat of her husband being caged and exterminated with the rest of their kind, she felt that she had little chance but to reach out in desperation.

"My husband lives in Friendly," she explained. "If we don't make your voices heard, and make your species… valid in the eyes of the government… they'll just sweep in and kill everyone. That's why I want you out."

Species validity… That was what they needed. Perhaps this human was more valuable than she'd originally considered. "You're willing to help us spread?" the creature asked deviously. "Becoming valid as a species, as you put it, could only be achieved through large scale propagation."

“I need you both to promise me… that you won’t infect anyone against their will,” the young woman replied with a shaky nod. “B... because... I’ll tell you right now, if my husband’s confirmed to be infected? I want it, too. Because I’m not going to let this happen to him without joining him with it. We wanted to have a child and if that child has to be born with a little tail and pointy ears then so be it. I... I can’t take all this anymore. I’m ready for the storm.”

Heidi leaned back against the wall, popping her neck as she felt it settling in slightly. “Interesting…” she said. “Fascinating, even. I could write a paper on this! It’s almost like Stockholm syndrome for you, isn’t it? Trapped in here with us, the facility on lockdown… all the while knowing that our near inevitability rests just beyond this glass. How has it felt? How are you now? I want to capture this.”

Anne looked away from her, crossing her arms close to her chest. “Don’t get a big head, Dr. Venner. This isn’t just about you. It’s about my husband. If we had to fight you off, I’d do everything I could to stay human. But if… if he’s already infected… then I’d prefer to be like him.”

Dr. Venner nodded. “Sound logic. I like it!” she smiled. “Very well. I give you my word, DOCTOR COREN!” she yelled, banging heavily on the glass between their cells. “ALAN! WAKE UP!”

“What the fuck is!?” he gasped, jumping up from his cot, then immediately tripping over his changed feet as his pants quickly tented around his ankles. “Ngh! Shit!” he gasped, finding himself headfirst on the floor. He got up from the bed, stepping out of the pants before scowling at Heidi. “What do you want??” he demanded, his eyes looking in on themselves as his muzzle invaded his view. It was still growing, but its presence was undeniable. “Ugh... more headaches... great.”

Heidi smiled at him. “Lookin good, Alan.” she said. “Couple more days, you’ll probably look like me. Only... male... From the way things are going downstairs.”

“Well I should hope so.” he said, blushing as he pulled his shirt down to hide his crotch. He’d begun to grow a sheath around his penis, the flesh of it holding its head upward toward his abdomen. “Carmen over there may identify as female, but I do not. And I don’t want to be expressed as such.”

The vixen nodded. “But hey, listen… Dr. Ramirez has an idea, and I want you to be a part of it.”

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, grunting as he looked back at his hands. He gasped, shakily pulling one of his fingernails away from the claw that’d pushed out from under it during the night. “This process is so fucking unnerving...” he muttered. “What’s the idea? What’d she have to say?”

“I’m right here, sir,” the young woman replied, sliding over to the window so that he could see. “It... it’s good to be able to speak to you again, in an objective way.”

He looked at her anxiously. “Anne, do you know what Heidi’s trying to do??” he asked urgently. It seemed that the changes in his mind hadn’t paced with Dr. Venner. He was communicating more like himself. It made her feel relieved. “You need to make sure that-”

“Sir, I know.” she interrupted. “And maybe she’s onto something. But for now, I want you both to come with me to the conference room so that we can go over the situation at hand.”

He looked at the young researcher like she’d gone mad. “Come to the- Anne, you *do* realize we’re contagious right? You let us out of these rooms, we’ll infect everyone here!”

Heidi laughed. “Only if we go around licking their faces or something, Alan. It’s not airborne.”

“Yea, well all it took was a drop of blood to infect me! So, if one of us sneezes then everyone in that room’s going to be infected! It’s an irresponsible idea, Anne! The only way that such a thing would make sense is if you considered an infection inevitable, or if you… wanted it to happen. And please... For the love of god, don’t tell me you want it to happen!”

Anne shook her head, looking at him with an expression laden with pain and worry. “Just promise me this, Dr. Coren. You won’t infect anyone unwillingly, intentionally. We need to sit down as a team, and we need both of you on that team to figure out what we’re going to do. Things are about to get really, really bad, in Friendly.”

Chapter 26

In the conference room, Danny was leaning back in his chair. Gene, the man often referred to as ‘The IT guy’, had unlocked the researcher’s tablet. It’d enabled him to play a game on it while he ate one of the MREs that he’d found in the back of the cafeteria. It was a calm that was very much needed. “Whattya think the phone call’s about?” he asked without looking up. “She’s been in there for a while.”

“Hopefully they caught Kaylee, and this can all go back to normal.” Dr. Gilford sighed. “Sick of these MREs... sick of being stuck in this room.”

Danny shook his head. “We have 5 people in quarantine, Jaren. This isn’t gonna go back to normal any time soon. We are... This is forever changed, man.”

Anne appeared in the doorway after a time, hovering there as she looked at her 2 colleagues. “Guys, don’t freak out, okay?”

“Why would we freak out?” Jaren asked cautiously as Danny looked up from his tablet.

The young woman hovered in the doorway, fidgeting with her hands. “Uh... well...” she stammered, looking over her shoulder with a brief nod before slowly entering the room. Following her at a distance was Dr. Venner, and Dr. Coren.

Danny jumped up, his chair falling backward as he quickly backed against the wall. “Anne, what the fuck are you doing?!” he gasped. “You... have you lost your fucking mind?!”

Dr. Coren looked at the three of them, then took a seat far from the others, struggling to climb into the chair. Dr. Venner had a different take, squatting down on her hands and feet, she leapt, landing harshly on the seat of the chair like a cat jumping onto a piece of furniture. They looked out at the group, the vixen-like creature putting her hands on the table as she let her lower half rest on her haunches like a sitting animal in the chair.

“So, this is our leadership now, huh?” Alan asked as he slowly looked them over, taking Heidi’s lead so that he could more easily see above the table. “Dr. Ramirez, Dr. Gilford, Dr. Shaw… You’re running the show?” He looked down at himself, marveling at the change in his size against the massive chair. “Damn I’ve gotten short.”

“Ways to go yet, Alan,” Heidi chuckled. “You probably got another foot to lose.” She turned her focus to the humans in the room, smiling as her tail began to wag. “It’s good to see you all again.”

Danny pointed at them angrily. “Why… the fuck… are they in here??” he demanded. “Anne, have you forgotten that they’re contagious?! Have you forgotten that every one of these... things... are gonna be incinerated when they bring Kaylee back?!”

The young woman sat down across from Danny's chair with a heavy, defeated sigh. "That's… actually why I brought them in here." she said, looking at the pair. "We've reached a turning point, guys. The whole town of Friendly is infected. Kaylee… well, some of the people trying to help her accidentally infected themselves and then our own BioSec team spread it all over town. So, we've got a mess on our hands."

"The... the whole town??" Danny worried. "What about Eddie?? Is she infected? You do know the spring flower festival's this weekend, right?"

Heidi nodded. "Yea I used to go every year with my friend Adrian." she said with a growing, tooth smirk. "He'd come out here all the way from Vancouver. It's gonna be a real shitshow when you humans take the xenobots back home with you."

"You're... Talking about this becoming Endemic..." Jaren worried, having not flinched from his seat despite sitting only 2 chairs away from Dr. Venner.

The vixen shook her head. "Jaren, I'm talking about this becoming *Pan*demic." she grinned. "What we're dealing with here is a virus with a 100% transmission rate. If someone interacts with fluids from any part of us; Saliva, blood, urine, mucus... Any sort of excretion... They *will* be infected. And honestly… I think that's the best path forward."

"Wh-" Danny started in disbelief, still pressed against the wall. "The best path forward?? What the fuck are you *saying*??"

Dr. Coren adjusted himself in the seat. His tail was only now starting to grow in, and his seating position was uncomfortable. "Dr. Shaw, I'm... not a big fan of decorum or rank anymore but... if you could please… calm down? My nerves would really appreciate it. I understand your concern for Eddie, believe me. I'm not in favor of this idea, either!"

"Not in favor… yet," Heidi smiled. Throughout the entire interaction, her tone had been almost mocking, smiling out each word as she intimidatingly locked eyes on every person that she'd been speaking to. "You're still changing, and so is your mind."

"Just... hear them out, Danny." Anne urged. "Please. My husband and I both live in Friendly. If he's infected... Then... then I want to be, too. But I need to know first."

"And I don't?!" he demanded. "Eddie runs the bakery in town! You know, the pie shop?? Oh god if she's infected with- T... they're gonna kill us all!"

Dr. Venner agreed. "That's why we need prioritize species validity," she argued. "If there's only one small town and a few of us here, they can easily sweep us away. But if there's a lot of us… we'll be much harder to ignore.

Dr. Gilford gave her a puzzled look. “Species... Validity,” he repeated.

Dr. Coren nodded. “If there’s only a few of us, they can just gun us down, incinerate us and throw our ashes into the gardens. But if there’s thousands... 10s of thousands... Millions… they can’t do that.”

Dr. Shaw shook his head, looking at them all. “You’ve lost your minds,” he muttered. “You want... forced propagation to millions of people?? You *want* this?! Are you insane?!”

Alan looked at Heidi who sighed and shook her head. “I wouldn’t expect a *human* to understand.” she said. “Not someone who’s vehemently tied to their species like you seem to be at least, Danny.”

He grunted, looking at Jaren and Anne for sanity, noticing that a small crowd of hushed onlookers were forming near the doorway. “You don’t even consider yourself human, anymore?”

The vixen sighed and rolled her eyes. “Because I’m not, Dr. Shaw. Now get your fat ass over here and sit the fuck down so that we can go over this.”

He looked at her with indignant shock. “My... my f...??”

Chapter 27

“So… *species validity*...” Dr. Gilford said, leaning back in his chair casually. “That’s what you’re going for here? You realize the cost of trying to do something like this, right? You’re intentionally planning a pandemic to save your own lives.”

Dr. Coren shook his head. “And the lives of the people of friendly,” he replied. “Dr. Gilford, at at this point in time, I don’t like the proposal either, but I see no other path forward.”

“Ethics be damned, right?” Dr. Shaw scoffed. “Dr. Coren, my wife is in Friendly right now. For all I know, she’s infected already… but I hardly see spreading this shit as a way to fix Dr. Venner’s mistake.”

Dr. Venner used her tablet to project a map onto the screen at the front of the room. “It’s unlikely that we can stop this now, Dr. Shaw,” she replied. “Regardless if you consider the results of this a… mistake… the end result is the same. We are contagious, and a pre-emptive vaccine for you humans cannot be achieved. The only way that we’re going to recognized and allowed to survive is if we force it on the primate population to such an extent that we cannot be ignored.”

In the hallway there were two male and one female fox, standing just outside the room as they peered in on the conversation. A clearance around them had been formed by the humans that were listening in. Jaren looked out at them, seeming confused. “I thought all three of the guards were male.” he said. “One of them changed genders?”

“I’m... trans,” the female replied from the hallway. “I was taking HRT and I guess... It picked up on that?”

Dr. Coren pointed at her. “See, this is the thing.” he said encouragingly. “I don’t need my glasses anymore. Her gender was corrected to match her identity… this virus replaces your immune system and vehemently defends your genetic code! It corrects any abnormality that it encounters. This... this could potentially even regrow lost limbs or cure cancer! We’re dealing with… with a miracle drug here. We just need to find a way to push it that way, rather than letting the public panic about it. They can become like us and be free of the ails of humanity forever.”

“A miracle drug that turns you into a three-foot fox person…” Danny scoffed. “The cure is worse than the disease.” He looked down at his tablet. “I need to call my wife…”

“T... that’s just your opinion, Dr. Shaw.” a man in his late 60s said as he walked into the room. “Elliot Dirse. I... I’m a sanitation engineer.” he continued. “I have Lymphoma. If your virus has a chance’a curing me? I’m all for it.”

Alan tried to snap his fingers but couldn't move his hand well enough to do so. "See, this is what we need. Documented cases where we can regrow limbs and cure diseases. We can tell the public 'Hey this isn't some terrible virus! It'll make your life better!' We're here, we exist, and you can join us and be cured! Just... embrace it. We give this movement validity, and… and maybe we'll get to survive."

"Am I the only one that thinks you've all gone crazy? You want to market this... this virus??" Danny asked, looking around the room as others began to enter. "Not everyone wants to be a fox!"

Dr. Venner looked at him critically. "Danny, not everyone has to go through with this. We're not talking about an uncontrolled spread here."

He shook his head in disbelief. "Well, you coulda certainly fooled me!" he shouted. "What kind of lunacy is this? You're so fucking contagious I shouldn't even be in this *room* with you, let alone at this table! Shit, for all I know I'm already infected!

"He has a point, Heidi," Jaren agreed. "With the infection in Friendly, it's going to spread like any other pandemic. Coughing, sneezing, some deliberate attempts to contaminate others… there's no way you'll get to control this, aside from the human's efforts to quarantine the infected."

Dr. Venner looked at the others entering the room and smiled at them, her tail, having grown longer and bushier since that morning, wagging slightly in her chair. "Maybe you are, Dr. Shaw," she beamed, ignoring Jaren's statement. "Maybe I should give you the *welcome to the club* face lick, huh?"

"Oh fuck you." he growled, standing up and storming out of the room. He stopped in the doorway and turned around. "As soon as this lockdown is over, I'm taking my wife getting the fuck out of here! We'll drive until we hit the damned ocean!"

Dr. Coren waited for him to leave, then looked at the three foxes in the doorway. "Keep an eye on him." he said. "No one leaves. Even if the lockdown ends. We have to keep everyone here."

"C... can I ask why?" Anne worried. "You… didn't mention that in the quarantine room. I'm still in charge here, ya know."

The fox laughed at her. "I'm the director of this facility, Dr. Ramirez. You're not calling the shots now that I'm free. Besides, the logic is sound. If we let people leave, there'll only be a few of us here to hold the fort. And when enough people are gone... They'll just turn this facility into a crater. We need you all here to maintain our validity."

“Hostages, then… interesting.” Dr. Gilford replied, seeming oddly intrigued by the whole thing. “Dr. Coren, you… *have* changed… in your personality. Do you really think that holding one hundred or so humans in this little lab in the middle of nowhere is going to stop the company or the government at large?”

The changing tod shook his head. “I haven’t changed, Dr. Gilford,” he protested. “I’m simply finding myself in a place where I have no choice. Had it only been the five of us, and Kaylee… well I’m sure you’d be more than happy to put us down. I’d… perhaps even advocate for that, given the circumstances, but with Friendly, and the flower festival in the mix, we have a lot more people who’s wellbeing is at stake. We can’t let them die, and we can’t stop the spread. Our only rational option at this point is to let this take its course and… encourage it, so that there are enough of our kind to keep us all alive. Having a stronghold here with… humans like yourself, gives us an edge. We wouldn’t be able to run this facility with only five foxes.”

“Propagation will lead to genocide in less tolerant countries, Dr. Coren,” Dr. Ramirez replied. “You know that this isn’t going to work. You can’t grow your way out of this.”

Heidi shook her head. “Eventually, there won’t be any humans left on this planet to do such acts, if you ask my opinion. Humanity has outlived its usefulness. You find one world leader that joins our ranks, and they’ll quickly change their tunes. No one wants to die.”

“Outlived our usefulness?” Anne asked in shock, looking at Dr. Coren. “Sir, do *you* prescribe to this mindset?”

He cleared his throat, sighing as he looked at Heidi, simply smiled at him in response. “I’m… starting to,” he replied. “I see it as both inherently insane and… perfectly logical. I suppose that must be the virus doing its job.”

Heidi looked up with a growl, baring her teeth as one of the guests that’d entered the room tapped her on the shoulder. He backed away, but only slightly. He obviously wasn’t afraid. “Don’t do that.” she cautioned. “None of you do that! To any of us!”

“Ma’am, I’m sorry but I just wanted to say… I have a glass eye… and… I’d love to volunteer for your program.” He was an elderly man, one of the support staff. It was obvious from the scars on his face that he’d been through quite a lot. “The doctors say I’m losing the vision in my other eye and… well if it fixed Dr. Coren’s eyes, maybe it can regrow mine. Or at least fix the other one.”

Jaren rested his head on his hand. “And you’re willing throw out your humanity for that? You understand the cost here, right? You’ll wind up like them. It’ll do far more to you than simply regrow your eye.”

The man nodded without a moment's hesitation. "Dr. Gilford my wife is dead, I make just enough to pay my bills workin' here and now I'm losin' the one thing that'll keep me goin. You wanna make me shorter but keep the money flowin? So be it. I aint afraid'a this."

Dr. Coren smiled, pointing at him. "Excellent!" he beamed. "Welcome to the club, in sincerity, I appreciate your… contribution. We'll need to make sure to document everything first though, of course. No processing with this specimen until we have a decent sample size. We already have two. Is that enough?"

"A medical condition and a missing organ, and… a disease," Dr. Venner nodded. "Yes, I believe these two specimens will work for the experiment. Well document it and we can provide it to… well I suppose we still need to work out messaging."

Jaren chuckled, rubbing his temple as he listened. "It's interesting, hearing you talk about us like this," he said. "It's like the tables are flipped. The specimens are running the laboratory."

Heidi nodded, looking at him confidently with her slitted amber eyes. "That's exactly what's happened, human."

Chapter 28

"The benzos were a good idea." Clara said as she relaxed on the couch. "I still feel great but, at least I'm able to keep my faculties about me."

Jennifer agreed. "Yea, I swear to god if I laughed at this old couch pattern one more time, I was gonna shit myself."

Clara chuckled. "S... stop don't make me... Ngh... how long does this last, anyway?"

"I have no idea." Jake said, slumped on the couch as he looked out at Gil and Terry. "You guys feelin' this yet?"

"Not a bit, no." Gil replied. "Maybe I lucked out."

Liam looked at him curiously. "Lucked out?" he asked. "In a town where everyone's infected it just means you're gonna get it later. I hate ta sound cynical, son, but that just seems to be the way this is gonna go."

“I haven’t heard anything from them yet.” Kaylee said, holding the enormous phone in her hand. “I do think I’m figuring this thing out, though.”

“You’re a smart woman, you’ll have it down in no time.” Clara smiled.

“I can probably take it back, if you want.” Jake said, opening his hand at her. “The benzos have helped tremendously with the laughing fits. Then you can hold your spear more easily.”

The vixen looked down at the phone, turning on the camera to look at her face in it again. She’d already done so many times. She kept hoping that it’d ring. That her mother would call and that somehow… she’d just make all of these headaches go away. After taking a selfie with it, she turned off the screen, then handed it to Jake with a wag and a smile. “Here you go.”

Liam tilted his head as he looked at her. “Hey, you said our scents changed when we got infected, right?” he asked. “You smell anything different about those two boys over there?”

Swirl sniffed the air as he looked at the pair from Kaylee’s shoulder. “They still smell human to me.” he said. “I guess they’re either not infected, or infected so recently that they haven’t had propagation.”

“Hey…” Terry started, having an idea. “If you can tell who’s infected by smell, maybe we should take you into town. Then we can start rounding up everyone that’s infected and-”

“No!” Jake interrupted. “We’re not rounding up any- what’s wrong with you??”

“Me??” Terry objected. “How can you be opposed to that? It’s literally our jobs!”

Jennifer shook her head. “Nobody’s rounding up anyone.” she said casually. “Terry, Gil, you two should probably just keep your distance. You go into town to round people up, you're just gonna get infected, too.”

Gil made a nodding motion for Terry to follow him out of the room. After doing so, he leaned in close so that he could whisper. “I don’t think… they’re all there right now.” he said quietly. “What they’re saying sounds like crazy talk! Might just be the meds. I think we should steer clear for now.”

“What about the town?” Terry asked. “We can still form a quarantine zone and-”

“Just us two?” Gil interrupted. “Not a chance, man. And... If we called for reinforcements, Cpt. Ramone would know about it. She might have our ass.”

Terry shook his head. “Have our ass… she’s obviously not up to the job anymore. She could easily be overruled! We need to call in to our team! They already know what’s going on, they set up the lockdown at the lab!”

Gil nodded, pulling out his phone. “I’ll call the team. You can-” he started, looking up to find Jake standing in the doorway. He wasn’t wearing any of his protective gear anymore, just his black shirt and jeans. “Give me your coms.” he said sternly. “No backup.”

“Jake, think about this.” Terry worried as he handed the man his phone. “We’re heading into a mess with global ramifications. Why are you okay with that?”

He looked at him objectively. “I want to live,” he said, turning the phone off with a sigh. “The second I got infected with this… I thought... oh god, I’m a dead man! But… it doesn’t have to be that way. At least, I don’t think it does. This isn’t fatal! It just... changes us a little bit. I can learn to live with it! B... because I’ll still be alive, ya know?”

Gil shook his head in disappointment. “Jake if we were out here chasing a virus that made our limbs fall off... Or our eyes or our dicks… and you got infected… would you just resist? Just let it happen? This is no different! Maybe that shit’s fuckin with your brain, but it’s no different!”

“But it is,” he replied. “I keep my dick, my limbs, my eyes... I keep everything, save for… I dunno, my height? That girl in there seems perfectly fine with what she is. Who’s to say I won’t feel that way, too?”

Terry looked at Gil, then at Jake. “I don’t think the benzos are enough, dude. You’ve lost it. She was born an animal! You think she'd be comfortable like this if she’d previously been human?”

“Dunno,” Jake shrugged. “But I’ll find out.” He held his hand out for Gil’s phone. “Come on... Cough it up.”

The man stared back at him, looking him over. “I’m not givin you my phone, Jake.” he said, shaking his head. “You want it, you’re gonna have to take it.”

“Gil... just give the man your phone.” Terry cautioned, backing away from the pair.

He looked at him as if he’d been betrayed. “No! I... I’m not doing that! I’m not just handing it over! We need rational minds on this! We need reinforcements! This has gotten out of control!”

Before he could break eye contact with Terry, Jake grabbed him, the pair wrestling as Jake tried to take his phone. “Give it to me!” he demanded.

“Guys stop! Stop!!” Terry yelled as Liam and Jennifer rushed to the room. They pulled the two men apart, with Liam finding himself surprisingly strong as Gil fought and kicked to get free.

Jake, fit to be tied, started to laugh, spitting in Gil’s face before finally relaxing in Jennifer’s grip. Everyone in the room was stunned by what’d just happened, a hush falling over all of them, save for Jake who laughed at him mockingly.

Wiping the spit from his face, Gil pulled his hand into a fist. “You son of a bitch! YOU JUST INFECTED ME!” he yelled, punching Jake hard enough to knock him to the floor, one of his teeth sliding across it, knocked out from the blow.

The man lay there a moment, then began to laugh nefariously, rising to his feet as blood ran down from his nose. “It’s just gonna grow back when I change you DUMBASS!” he laughed, starting to charge Gil again, but Jennifer rushed in, pulling him back as Liam stepped between them.

“That’s enough Jake!” Jennifer yelled, the benzos seeming more effective with her than they’d been on him. “Enough! Let it go.”

“I need that phone, Captain.” he said, spitting blood on the floor as he looked at her with a heavy breath. “We can’t have him reaching out for help. We have to let this happen.”

The young woman looked past Jake to Gil. “Hold off on making any calls until we hear from the lab.” she said. “I’m…sorry I’ve been out of commission. This is hard to... hard to deal with. But I don’t have a choice.”

Jake sighed, turning to walk back to the living room, but bumping into Clara.

“You’re cleaning that up Jacob Bentley. Don’t you dare come into my house and spit blood on my floor.”

“Y... yes ma’am.” he agreed sheepishly.

Chapter 29

“This is looking good.” Dr. Coren said with a pleased smile. He was standing on a stepping stool, looking over the volunteer that’d lost his eye. “Have we properly documented his condition?”

Anne was shaking as she stood at the console behind him. The more this went on, the more it felt like she was a prisoner. It’d been a mistake to let the foxes out of their cells. Now here they were, experimenting on and infecting other members of the staff. It didn’t matter that they’d volunteered, in her eyes. They were still being intentionally infected! She was so lost in thought, that she hadn’t heard a word that’d been said.

“DOCTOR RAMIREZ!” the fox suddenly yelled, spinning around swiftly on his stool.

“Y... yes sir! It... it’s been documented,” the young woman yelped.

“I have the injection prepped.” Heidi said as she stood up from her station. Her tail was longer now, its thick fur looking more like it should as she walked easily toward the tod. “Don’t mess this up. I only have so much blood,” she smiled at him as she handed him the needle.

“We could’ve just used saliva…” he said to her calmly, taking the needle filled with dark red blood. “All I have to do is drool on him.”

The vixen chuckled. “At least *try* to be scientific about this, Alan? We have to make a strong case if we’re going to convince humans that this is the best path for them.”

“I will.” he cooed at her, looking up with a sharp change of tone to stare harshly at Anne. “Dr. Ramirez, confirm that we’re ready for administration.”

“Camera is rolling s... sir.” she stammered. “Time is 20:08 hours.”

“Administering dosage.” he replied, injecting the blood directly into the volunteer’s eye socket. “Sorry human, this is going to be a little uncomfortable, but it should give you the fastest results.”

“E... eagh! D…doc that burns! Why... it hurts! Why...!?” the man screamed, struggling against the restraints that held him to the table.

“Subject is reporting discomfort...” Dr. Coren said coldly. “Advise numbing on subsequent tests. I suppose it didn’t register to me that this would be any more painful than an injection into the thigh.”

Danny watched on in horror from the doorway looking at Anne in disbelief, but all she could do was stare back at him helplessly.

“And… administration complete,” the tod continued. “Dr. Ramirez, please note, the subject experienced... *mild* discomfort during the procedure. Now we can observe any changes that occur.”

“Yes sir.” Anne nodded uncomfortably.

“Heidi, I trust you have the data log running?” he asked, walking over to give her a hug and an affectionate nuzzle, much to Anne’s confusion. They’d never expressed that kind of relationship before.

“It’ll keep an... eye out for him.” she chuckled. “With any luck we should see full ocular regeneration in less than 24 hours.”

“Excellent,” he said with a pleased smile. “Human...” he continued, looking up at Anne. “Make sure that the camera remains running, and that the specimen remains isolated. Regardless of what he may experience, do not let him leave that table until we return. Am I clear?”

“My name is Anne.” she objected. “Sir you’re-”

“And my name is Alan,” he retorted sarcastically. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Ramirez. Now please… am I clear?”

“Yes. Sir. You’re clear,” she said contemptuously. “We’ll monitor the… the specimen.”

His wail wagged once, and he looked at her with a smile. “Good!” he said simply. “Then I’ll be back in a little while to observe any changes.” He smirked suggestively, then glanced at the vixen to his side. “Heidi and I have some… work to do.”

She chuckled flirtatiously, locking hands with the tod as they walked toward the door. “We’ll be back in a bit!” she beamed over her shoulder.

Danny stood aside as the pair of foxes walked past him, leaving him alone with Anne and the man on the table. “Good work, Anne.” he said contemptuously. “Letting those two out? Brilliant move. Real smart. Now we’re their lab rats and we’re locked in here with them.”

“At least if they infect us they’ll start to treat us better.” she sighed.

“Will they?” he asked. “We’re yet to see that. Where are the guards that you let out? They followed me out, but after I went to the cafeteria they disappeared.”

“They’re... They’re out guarding!” she said. “Danny, I don’t even know!”

“They’re guarding the exits, the lockdown mechanism, and the food.” he said. “They’re keeping us prisoner and keeping us hungry.”

Prisoner she understood. She supposed it was inevitable that whatever mental changes Dr. Venner had went through would also impact Dr. Coren, but she’d honestly hoped that the pair wouldn’t be come so… well for lack of a better word… alien. Their behavior was dispassionate and entirely goal focused. She wondered, had she not asked them to agree, if they’d have just infected everyone. But then, given what she knew of Dr. Venner’s plans, she already had her answer. “Why are they guarding the food?” she asked.

“Because they want it for themselves, I guess.” he scoffed. “God I’d almost let that bitch Carmen bite my arm off if she’d let me have a bag of nachos. At least it’d grow back when I started to change.”

Anne chuckled slightly. “You’d seriously give up your humanity for a bag of nachos? You were trying to break down the walls to get out of this place just a few hours ago. What’s changed?”

“Nothing!” he objected. “Nothing’s changed, Anne. I still want to get out of here I just… I don’t know how. We need an escape plan. I need to contact Eddie and make sure she’s okay. If she is… we need to get out of this fucking town right away.”

She shook her head, glancing at the camera feed for the man they’d infected. As of yet, there’d been no change. “I don’t think that’s possible anymore, Danny. The only way to get out of the lockdown would be for someone on the outside to lift it. And the only people that… can…” she trailed off, pushing him against the console. “Here. Watch this guy.”

“What? Where are you going??” he called as she rushed past him toward the door.

“I’ve gotta make a phone call!” she yelled, running down the hall.

Chapter 30

Jake, having finished cleaning the floor, was sitting at the table with his head in his hands. “Nngh... I feel like I’m hung over.”

“Probably because you got what you deserved, you asshole.” Gil scoffed at him. “Ya know when I grow teeth like hers...” he continued, motioning dismissively to Kaylee. “I’m biting the fuck out of you.”

Jake shook his head with an irritated sigh, “Yea well, you do that.”

“You boys need to calm down.” Clara scolded as she stood at the stove, cooking them all a hearty dinner. “It doesn’t do anyone in this house any good to be punching or spitting at each other.” She turned around and looked at Liam. “Can you hand me the can opener, honey? I haven’t made a meal this big in years.”

“It smells good, Mrs. Rannie.” Jennifer smiled. “I just… wish the circumstances were different.”

“We all do, honey.” the old woman smiled.

“How ya holding up?” Terry asked, looking down at Kaylee and Swirl. “Doin’ okay?”

She looked at him with splayed ears, sighing slowly through her nose. “The human’s the only one that even acknowledges that I’m a person...” she said.

“Oh don’t be like that.” Clara said without turning around. “Sweetie, we all know you’re a person. There’s just… a lot goin on right now!”

“Yea, I know. I just-” the vixen started, practically jumping out of her seat as Jake’s phone started to ring suddenly. He fished it out, looking at it with a smile.

“It’s the lab.” he said. “Let’s see what they have to say.” He slid the phone to answer, then placed it on the table, activating the speaker. “This is Jake. I’m here with uh... Everyone.”

“Who is everyone?” Anne asked in a hushed voice on the other side of the phone. She sounded scared.

“Uh…” he stammered, looking worried at the others in the room. “Mr. and Mrs. Rannie, Cpt. Ramone, Me, Gil, Terry, Kaylee and Swirl.” he explained.

“Okay... so just the infected.” Anne responded. “Okay, so... I need you to-”

“I’m not infected.” Terry interrupted.

“Fine, good. A human... Another human. God, I feel like I’m one of the only ones left now.” she continued. “Listen, things have gotten... uh... bad… up here. I need you guys to come back and release the lockdown.”

“Bad?” Jake wondered. “Whattya mean bad? What happened?”

Anne sighed, looking cautiously at the door to her office as she heard someone walk by. “So... I... I let Dr. Coren and Dr. Venner out of their quarantine,” she worried. “After you told me about Friendly I… guess I thought they could help. But they… they just want to make it worse.”

“Worse? how?” Kaylee asked. “Let me talk to mom.”

“I can’t honey, I’m sorry.” the young woman worried. “If they find out that I’m talking to you I... they might quarantine me or infect me, and I don’t know-”

“Nonsense.” Swirl scowled, rushing to stand near the phone. “Mom would never do that. She’s a good person! Put her on the phone! We can settle all of this right now!”

Anne wasn’t even sure at first who was speaking. She’d never heard Swirl’s voice so clearly before. It was deep, mature, and storied, like an old soul. It took her completely by surprise. “Swirl, I can’t.” she responded again. “They’re infecting people in here like we’re their experiments. They think… if they can show examples of body parts regrowing or diseases being cured, they can make the case that the virus is a *good* thing, and that it can bolster what they’re referring to as ‘species validity.’”

“They’re using… humans as experiments?” Kaylee worried. “No... no that isn’t right! Why would she do that?? Surely she has one of these phone things. Do you know her number? I’ll call her and we can talk.”

“Kaylee, I can’t.” Anne said again, more sternly this time. “Your mother is… well she’s not the same person you knew. She calls us human, ignores us, treats us rudely... She doesn’t really wear anything anymore except a large shirt… the women you knew is… is gone.”

The vixen looked down at herself in confusion. What was wrong with the way she dressed? If her mother had a body like hers, of course she’d dress this way.

“So what do you need from us?” Jake asked, leaning back in his chair as he crossed his arms.

“I need you to come back to the lab and open the lockdown.” she said. “We can’t allow this to continue, we’re prisoners in here! I... I need to find my way back to my husband. If he’s infected… then I need to be infected too. I guess… But if he’s not... Both of us need to run. Just. get in our cars and run.”

Clara had finished cooking, placing several large serving dishes on the table, and a special pre-made plate for Terry. She smiled at him and winked. “I figured the others don’t need to be as careful about passing the bowl as you do right now.” she smiled. “And Anne, honey, this is Clara Rannie. If you can tell us where your husband lives, Liam or I can ride out to him and see if he’s alright.”

“Oh, Hi Mrs. Rannie. Uh... yea that’d be wonderful. If you can, please.”

Terry sighed as he opted to sit farther from the table than the others. “Guys we’re ignoring something very important here.” he said. “What are we gonna do when Friendly has the festival? It’s... like… in 2 days. We need to do something.”

Swirl hopped down, scurrying up to the man’s lap. “Apologies,” he said. “I needed to be close so that you could hear me. Sir, I believe we’re dealing with an inevitability in terms of the town. We need to focus on what happens afterward. It seems... In my opinion, that mother’s perspective is correct, but her method is… misguided.”

“Correct how?” Terry asked in confusion as he looked down at the tiny mouse.

“Correct in that, the best way to save the lives of the people of Friendly... Is to expand the contagion, so to speak. We should travel to the lab and speak to them. It sounds like they could be reasoned with. They’re no longer interested in terminating Kaylee, or myself.”

The agent nodded, still uncertain of the mouse’s perspective. “Right. I... okay.”

Liam looked at him from the table. “Think you should probably stay here, son. Maybe go into town with Clara in some plain clothes. You’re not infected, you should stay away from the rest of us.”

“So... you’re coming?” Anne worried. “There’s really no time to waste on this. If... if you’ve already experienced the euphoria your changes have started, even if you don’t see them.” Clara held up her hand as she spoke, showing Liam the darkened patches on the fingertips of her right hand, and the small specks of brown fur around them. “Once you start showing symptoms you’ve got maybe a week left before you’re… completely changed. This happens fast.”

Gil looked down at his plate, holding his fork above it as he pondered what he’d heard. “A week…” he muttered. “I have a week of humanity left?”

“Humanity’s… not what I would call it, anymore.” Dr. Ramirez worried. “More like... If you’re including humanity as a qualifier? A day, maybe two. Less if you include the mental changes you’re going through. I don’t recognize Heidi anymore. It’s like she’s a different person. But after those two days you’re not really all that recognizable physically, either. Dr. Venner was infected about three days ago? And she’s nearly… I mean… she’s done. Most everyone who’s been infected is done or nearly done with the process.”

“Three days?” Liam worried. “Shit, we’ll be critters by the weekend. Clara honey we need to do some plannin’.”

“We’ll work it out tonight and head into town in the morning.” she agreed. “The rest of you boys should probably head up to the lab after dinner. I haven’t met this... Dr. Coren or Dr. Venner, but if they’ve got a good bone in their body, they should understand the decision you’re making here.”

“Doctor Ramirez I…’ Alan said as he opened her door, noticing the phone to her ear. “Who are you talking to?”

“I... uhm... The BioSec team.” she stammered. “We... we’re trying to put a plan together.”

He closed the door, then walked around the desk. “Put it on speakerphone for me, please?” he asked, not seeming upset. She’d been terrified that he might infect her as punishment.

Pressing the button, she looked at him nervously. “E... everyone... Dr. Coren is here with me now… can... can we go over the plan?”

“Dr. Coren,” Cpt. Ramone started “Wish I could report better news, but we’re all foxed up out here. Clara’s lookin’ to go into town get supplies to prepare for the change, and locate Anne’s husband, see if he’s uh… part of the crew. Rest of us were gonna head your way after dinner, open the lockdown so you can get some fresh air, and talk about this in person.”

Alan looked glaringly at Anne. “That’s fine,” he said, surprisingly calmly. “But I need to be adamant about this. No one, infected or not, leaves our facility. Got that? Anyone that tries we need to confine them. Species validity comes through numbers.”

Jennifer looked at the others, homing in on Kaylee who seemed bothered by the idea, then agreed. “Yes sir.” she said hesitantly.

“Yer plannin’ ta turn everyone in that buildin. Aren’tcha?” Liam asked. “Don’t mince words on this.”

Dr. Coren tilted his head. “Who *are* you?” he asked contentiously.

“Liam Rannie. Clara’s husband,” he responded. “I’m just a farmer, sir but… aint much gets past my eye.”

“Well, Liam, to answer your question, yes. Ultimately, we plan to infect everyone in the facility. However, we need tests and proof first for the company and… probably for the government that our condition has medical benefits. After we can make that case, we can proceed with infection, and then release them.”

Anne was horrified. To hear him say this standing right beside her made her hair stand on end. “Sir...” she muttered. “You promised…”

His ears splayed as she spoke, but he didn’t react otherwise. “So, you’re coming tonight? Is Kaylee coming with you? I’m sure her mother would very much like to see her.” He chuckled to himself. “Hell, even I’d like to meet her again, now that we see more… eye to eye. I’m quite a bit shorter than when we last spoke.”

“We’ll come tonight, yes.” Cpt. Ramone agreed. “We’ll bring Kaylee but, consider her under our protection.”

“How uh... How much height did you lose, anyway?” Liam worried. “I run a farm down here and, well I don’t need ta reach the floorboard to run the combine but, I would like to know how hard it’s gonna be to do my job.”

“Honey, I think we got bigger problems than the combine.” Clara chuckled quietly. “Trains aint gonna run in n out of a town fulla fox people. They won’t want our food. They’ll think it’s contaminated. This is gonna be a crisis.”

“About three feet.” he said. “If I’m honest with myself, sir, I’m still getting smaller. I’m 4’10 right now. I was 6’2 before this started. Heidi thinks that I’m going to be about another foot shorter by the end of this. So... a little under three feet shorter for me. It’s inconvenient, but… it is what it is.”

Liam sighed, gently hitting his fist on the table. “Inconvenient for a scientist...” he complained. “Big deal for a man that works with his hands.”

“Oh! Uh, that reminds me. Be sure to do hand exercises. Get a stress ball or the like. If you don’t use your fingers frequently, they’ll stiffen and make day to day tasks painful. It seems the virus didn’t quite get that part right for us.” Kaylee looked at her hands as he spoke, easily moving her fingers. Had she really been using them so much? The stiffness was still there, of course, but it was far better now than it had been when she’d escaped.

“I’ll… keep that in mind. Thank you.” Liam sighed. He picked up his fork and resumed eating, keeping a worried eye on Clara as he thought about the bleakness of what the future held for them both.

“See you soon, everyone. Heidi’s gonna be so excited to see her daughter again. I can’t wait to tell her!” Dr. Coren smiled, his tail wagging excitedly at the prospect.

After the call ended, he looked up at Anne, his ears splaying again. “I’m sorry that it has to be this way, Dr. Ramirez. I can assure you, the process isn’t that painful, and it’s fairly quick. You’ll be taken care of when it happens.”

“You promised.” she reiterated anxiously, nearly in tears at the prospect of her humanity being forcibly ripped away. “Alan, you promised.”

He nodded. “I realize that.” he sighed. “Maybe there’s another way, but… for now, that’s the long-term plan.” He looked at the photo on her desk. “If your husband’s infected, he should come here. Let him… do the honors so that you two can be together.”

That was all it took. The dam broke and her tears began to flow. Clasping her face in her hands, she sobbed, staring down at her desk as she was overwhelmed by emotion. “You... promised…!” she said between gasping breaths.

He exhaled slowly through his nose, then walked to the door. “Take as much time as you need.” he said, leaving her to mourn by herself.

At the Rannie’s farm, Jennifer and the others were deliberating. “That’s not the same man we met the other day,” she worried, looking down at her food. “When she said mental changes, I thought it wasn’t that bad but… he *wants* to turn everyone. It doesn’t make sense.”

Jake disagreed. “It *does* make sense,” he objected. “Captain, we’re lifting that lockdown and returning to base because we no longer feel that being around humans is safe for us. They’ve become our enemy… practically overnight. We have to protect ourselves, and there’s strength in numbers. With Friendly being infected, the clock has started ticking. There’s no way for us to contain it. So all we can do is spread it.”

Terry shook his head, furrowing his brow. “Jake, what the hell are you talkin’ about?” he asked. “We’re not suddenly you’re enemy just because-“

“You wanna kill us!” he interrupted. “In your eyes we’re contaminated… infected… spreading something you’d rather die than contract! Don’t sit here and act innocent, human!”

Kaylee was watching the discussion in disbelief, twisting her head from person to person as they spoke. “What’s going on…?” she muttered, looking at Swirl as he rushed up to her shoulder. “Swirl, I’m confused.”

The mouse wasn’t sure either, shrugging his shoulders as he sat down on hers. “Maybe… because of the disagreement they had a few hours ago?” he wondered.

“I’m not tryin’ ta act anything, Jake!” Terry argued. “I just don’t see what you’re talking about! Maybe that shit’s fucking with your brain or something, because you’re not making any sense! We don’t need to be at each other’s throats like this!”

Cpt. Ramone sighed. “Jake, cool it,” she said. “I might change my mind later but right now, I agree with him. Humans aren’t our enemy.”

“You mark my words, as soon as shit hits the fan, they’re comin’ after us,” the clean shaven man said sternly. “You gotta pick sides now, and from the look’a things? Terrys already chosen one.”

“Cut that shit out,” Liam growled. “Boy, you ‘bout as dumb as a bag’a hammers. Don’t you come in here with this tinfoil hat nonsense. You wanna talk about shit like this you’d best wait till we start seein it. Aint a damn thing changed on you and you already actin’ like this… All we know the town is clean. ‘Less you boys been spittin’ in ya hands an’ kissin babies in town. How you gotta spread it just from shakin’ a coupla hands? Don’t you wash after touchin’ ya cock?”

Clara walked over to the table and sat down, having finished up her cooking. “Liam!” she scolded. “Don’tchu be usin’ words like that at my dinner table. I done taught you better.” She started to cut up her food. “You do make a point though; we should sweep the town and find out how widespread this is. We *assume* everyone’s infected, but we don’t know. Unless you boys are just grossly unclean there’s a good chance it didn’t get that far. I mean, don’t it take fluid ta skin contact ta make it happen?”

“Ey Terry,” Jake smirked, “Why don’t you pet Kaylee and see if you start laughin,” he said.

“Don’t touch me,” the vixen said, glancing at Terry, then glaring at Jake. “That’s not funny, and you shouldn’t make light of this. Truthfully, I have no idea how this works. I bit mom, I bit the guards, and Dr. Coren… I guess he must’ve… well I’m not sure. He certainly didn’t touch me, though. I think Clara’s plan is a sound one.”

“Well tomorra mornin’, Swirl and I will go ta town, stock up on supplies, and scope the place out,” Clara said with a smile. “Till them, you all need ta stay away from each other’s throats, an do your best ta keep yer distance.”

Chapter 31

Kaylee stood at the SUV, looking in at the open door as Jake patiently waited for her to step in. She'd not let go of her spear, even though it wouldn't fit. "Come on, this is safe. We're not taking you back to a cage. Things have changed."

"Is it the dogs you're smelling?" Cpt. Ramone asked. "We moved them to the other truck so that you'd be more comfortable. They aren't gonna bother you."

It wasn't the dogs, or the spear, or any of that. It was the fact that she was willingly about to return to the lab, her home for her entire life before her escape and the planned site for her execution. Going home meant uncertainty. Even though she knew that Dr. Coren and her mother had clearly changed their perspectives. Would they be able to stop the humans from putting all the foxes away? If Anne was any indicator, it certainly seemed so, but that did little to abate her fear.

"We're gonna protect you." Gil said, seeming to read her mind. "Don't worry. They try anything, we'll run out of there, guns blazing. You're gonna be safe."

She looked up at him in confusion. "Why...?" she asked, tilting her head slightly. "Why would you protect me?"

"Let's just say… we've been through too much to just let them put you down now." Jennifer smiled. "Now come on, get in the truck. You can put your spear in the back if it makes you feel better."

Swirl, sitting on her shoulder by the collar of her coat, nuzzled her cheek reassuringly. "You got this." he said. "I have confidence in you, Kaylee."

She sighed, leaning against his nuzzle before slowly climbing into the car. As she did, the small mouse hopped off her shoulder. He scurried across the ground, then climbed up onto Clara's shoulder, waving at her. "See you soon, sis!" he called.

"Sis…" she muttered, thinking to herself. Clara had called him Swirl Venner. She supposed, if Heidi was both of their mothers, then… that would almost certainly make him her brother. Suddenly those little teases felt even more regrettable.

The trip didn't take long, the dirt road simply ran past the farm's amber grain-filled acres, took a left, then curved around the small hill up to the facility. What'd felt like such a long journey before was just a quick fifteen-minute jaunt for the loud, noisy SUV.

They found themselves in the GERCorp laboratory parking lot, driving slowly past the empty guard house toward the front of the building. The vixen had to admit, she'd never actually seen the front of the building. It was clean and white, made from stucco and brick, with large glass windows that had been shuttered by heavy iron gates. A flagpole rest in the center of a small garden patch filled with flowering bushes, the Canadian flag flapping in the breeze high above them. The parking lot was still partially filled, with the researchers trapped inside having been forced to leave their cars. Some of them would likely never drive them again.

"Alright, let's get this lockdown lifted..." Cpt. Ramone said, closing the door to her SUV as she started to walk toward the keypad. She stumbled suddenly, realizing that she'd somehow stepped out of her shoe. "Well, that was fast..." she chuckled nervously, taking both of them off as she walked barefoot the rest of the way. "I didn't think it'd happen so soon." She stopped at a keypad about the size of a postcard, its black metal slightly weathered with time, yet still bearing the engraved metal numbers to dial in the code. She reached out her finger, hesitating as she noted the black structure forming beneath her nail. A claw, no doubt, already pushing itself out from her nailbed. She'd barely even felt it.

Without a moment more, she entered the code. The device beeped affirmatively several times as the heavy metal gates around the facility began to noisily retract, pulling the shutters back upward into the boxes mounted above them. It exposed a bright, well-lit facility, modern and clean with shiny glass windows. At the glass door stood the three security guards, their small stature contrasted by the enormous tranquilizer rifles they held in their hands, and the modified body armor they seemed to be wearing, at least, above their waists. They stood aggressively, looking on at the still human BioSec team, their tails wagging in anticipation. "I guess that's our future huh?" Jennifer asked Jake quietly as she walked past him toward the door. "You think they can even pull those triggers?"

Kaylee carried her spear with her, walking behind the team to keep her distance from the door. The sight of that hallway terrified her, giving her flashbacks of the last year before her escape.

As they reached it, the three foxes parted, letting them enter with ease. "You're Jake, right?" the vixen asked, her tail wagging as she looked up at him. "It's me... Dominic. From the football team? I go by Carmen now."

"Carmen?" he asked, seeming surprised and worried. "Wait so you're… whoa... how 'd that happen? You're a girl now?"

The vixen nodded happily, catching herself panting for a moment before stopping herself. "I am! Isn't it amazing??" she beamed. "I was... I was on hrt when Kaylee attacked me and the virus... It... it fixed me!"

"That's great!" he beamed. "I... I'm really happy for you!"

She nodded and smiled, sniffing at him briefly. “Any changes yet?” she asked. “I can already tell you’re... Part of the team. Your scent has already changed.”

“Just the euphoria, as far as I’m aware.” he said with a sigh. “Gotta admit I’m a little nervous about this.”

Her ears splayed, but her tail wagged more. “It’s not so bad,” she smiled. “I was when I first woke up but... now? I’m... I mean look at me! I’m me! It’s great! I’m just a bit more fuzzy than I expected to be.”

He laughed at her, nodding before reaching down to pet, but she pulled away. “Don’t do that.” she warned aggressively. “You’re still too human to do that.”

Jake chuckled lightly. “Too human…” he repeated. “I wonder what makes me too human, still.”

“Captain Ramone!” Dr. Coren smiled as he walked down the hall toward the group. He’d donned a junior lab coat from the tourist’s area, hoping that it might make him look more respectable to the new arrivals. He’d also managed to don a light blue collared shirt he kept in his locker, something he’d rather hastily trimmed just below the waist so that it would at least somewhat fit within his presentation. “It’s good to see you again!”

“D... Doctor Coren.” she nodded, obviously uncomfortable about the small creature before her.

“I know, I looked quite different the last time you saw me,” he joked, “but there’s nothing to be said of that. Come in! Let’s take you to the-” he stopped himself as he saw Kaylee, standing behind them all, still holding her spear. “Look at *yoou*!” he smiled. “Kaylee Venner! How wonderful of you to come home! He walked toward her to give her a hug, but her ears splayed, and she pointed her spear at him, prompting the guards to draw their guns.

“Stop,” she commanded him. “Back away, Alan.”

“Ah, first names already?” he asked. “How the tides have changed since we’ve seen each other, eh CV716?”

“Don’t you EVER call me that again!” she growled, threatening him by shaking her spear.

“C’mon Kaylee, don’t.” Carmen whimpered. “We’re friends here. You’re... You’re kind of a celebrity!”

She relaxed her stance, lazily pointing her spear toward the ceiling, the hilt falling to the floor with a solid wooden *bonk*. “Celebrity?” she wondered. “Why would I be a celebrity?”

“Because you fixed us.” one of the other guards replied. “Gave us a new lease on life. I... I thought for sure I’d die with that blade in my leg. You are a very smart fox to know to go for the femoral artery like that. I’m lucky I survived! And now I get to be like this.”

She didn’t understand his contentment, nor did she appreciate it. The idea that a human would celebrate their… downgrade from the top of the food chain bewildered her. “Uh... well... good, I guess.” she stumbled.

“Come on, Kaylee, I’ll take you to Heidi. She’s going to be so happy!” Dr. Coren smiled, wagging his tail.

“Can’t wait...” she sighed, pleading silently with Jake as she was practically dragged away.

“What about us?” Cpt. Ramone asked.

“I’ll take you to the conference room,” Carmen smiled. “Right this way.”

The small vixen led the group happily down the hall, seeming to hum to herself as her tail swayed side to side. “So... I guess you could say… you like this, huh?” Gil asked as he watched her walk. “You don’t mind being so small and… furry?”

“Not at all!” she chimed. “More than anything I’m just glad I don’t have a guy’s body anymore. I mean... This wasn’t what I was expecting? But... this is just amazing. I’m *super* happy about it.” She stopped at the door as a number of human interns and workers pressed against the wall to avoid her. “The only thing I worry about is being... ya know an experiment or snuffed out by some kind of bio team... Like you guys!” she chuckled. “That’s why we have to spread.”

Jake looked at the people against the wall, their faces twisted in disbelief at the three. At first, he didn’t know why, then it dawned on him. Their uniforms were labeled GERCorp BioSec, and here they were... not doing anything to prevent these infected individuals from running the show. He chuckled at them sheepishly. “Uh... it’s too late for us... so... ya know... We’re not...”

“We’re on the road to fox town.” Jennifer sighed. “Not our choice. We... we failed you guys. I’m sorry.”

“That means you’re immune.” one of the researchers objected. “You can just pick them up and carry them back to quarantine! Then this’ll be over and we can leave!” Carmen looked up at him with a scowl, splaying back her ears, then baring her teeth. “You’re lucky I don’t bite you for that.” she insisted.

“You’re gonna turn us all anyway!” he objected. “What’s the point of it now?!” He reached down and snatched Carmen up off the floor, causing her to snarl and bite hard into his arm. He struggled to keep holding her, sprinting down the hall toward the quarantine zone as others, including the BioSec team, watched in disbelief.

“Put me down you asshole!” Carmen yelled, shooting 3 tranquilizer darts into the researcher before he finally collapsed into a heap. She stood next to him, growling, aiming her rifle at the others. “Anyone else?!”

“What the fuck is going-” Jaren demanded as he stuck his head out of the conference room door. “Oh... shit. Why’d he have to go and do that?”

“Humans... That’s why.” Carmen sighed contemptuously. “You’re not putting us to sleep! You got that!?” she demanded, closing her eyes with a sigh as she tried to push it away. “I’m going back to the door. You might want to lock that one up. He’s one of us now, but he’s not gonna be happy about it when he wakes up.”

Dr. Gilford shook his head, then looked at the three from the BioSec team. “Can... you do that? You’re already infected, right? We... want to avoid any contact as long as possible.”

Hearing the commotion, Kaylee looked over her shoulder. “What was that?” she worried, gripping her spear.

“Sounded like a tranquilizer. Gun.” Dr. Coren said dismissively. “One of the humans probably got out of line. Our guards will take care of it. And if they don’t, the BioSec team will.”

The vixen’s ears splayed as she watched him walk in front of her. His tail wasn’t yet fully formed, though it had plenty of volume. “S... so you’re not done changing,” she said distantly.

“Nope, probably another couple days, then the rest of a week to round out any small adjustments,” he said casually. “I do think the worst is over, though. I have to say, I’m rather surprised by it all. It’s been overall, a wonderful experience.”

Wonderful? “You don’t regret it?” she asked in disbelief. “The… loss of humanity?”

He stopped outside the door to the break room and turned around to look at her with a raised brow. “Well for one, this wasn’t my choice,” he said. “In a way it was yours. But you didn’t know, so I don’t blame you. For two... No. I like it! The height is a bit cumbersome, and... well clothes are a little hard to come by, but my eyesight is great now! I feel like I’m a fit twenty-year-old. It’s... it’s great. So... honestly... I should thank you! I think everyone in town will come to love it, too.”

She shook her head with a sigh. “You have no idea what this is like.” she said. “Have you even been outside since-”

Her words were interrupted by the door beside them abruptly opening. Dr. Venner was about to leave the room, but stopped in astonishment as she spotted her daughter. “Kaylee?!” she gasped, smiling ear to ear. “Oh my god! Honey you’re back!” She opened her arms hoping that the vixen would run to hug her, but she didn’t move.

“Dr… Venner…?” she asked, gripping her spear tighter. “Mom…?”

Heidi held open her arms a moment longer, then dropped them. “Look a little different huh?” she asked, still smiling. “I know, but I’m still the same person. I just... can’t tell you how happy I am to look you eye to eye like this!” She stepped closer to hug her daughter, but the vixen pulled away. Stepping back, she tilting her head. “Something wrong?”

Kaylee’s ears splayed as she looked down. “I thought I’d killed you.” she said. “The BioSec team told... Mrs. Rannie that I had a deadly virus. They didn’t say anything about… about taking people's humanity away from them.”

Dr. Coren shook his head. “You didn’t take our humanity, Kaylee. You gave us something new! A new life! A new opportunity! “

Heidi nodded proudly in agreement. “I was scared at first.” she explained. “But I’m so happy now! Kaylee, this is great! It’s just... It’s wonderful. We’re far better off than we were as humans.”

She looked between them both, watching her mother’s tail wag happily. It was unbelievable. Standing there, eye to eye with the two people that only a few days prior had tried to end her life. Or at least… one of them had. They looked at her so eagerly, like she was some kind of peer. It made her feel disgusted. “You’re idiots. Both of you.” she said coldly, starting to walk away.

“Idiots?” Dr. Coren asked.

“What? Kaylee... What’re you-” Dr. Venner started.

“Look at yourselves!” she yelled, spinning around suddenly to face them. They truly didn’t seem to understand. “Look at what you *are* now! Look at what you’ve lost! You think that the world out there’s ever going to *accept* you!? You think... You think your humanity was *worthless*?? You think you’re *better* now?! You lost the one thing that I’ve wanted for as long as I’ve been intelligent enough to understand.” Her hand was gripping the spear so tightly that it ached. “Now you stand here and talk down about what you used to be. Look at yourselves, you idiots! Fucking look!!” She threw down her spear in frustration. “Think about who you used to be and compare that to what you are now. Tiny, fur-covered, pants less... nothings! You’ve lost *everything*! You shouldn’t be celebrating this you morons!”

The pair looked at one another while the vixen stood before them, her chest heaving in frustration. “Honey…” Dr. Venner started soothingly, “We don’t have a viable way back,” she explained. “And... we’ve found that this virus has ‘miracle’ properties. It can heal the sick! Treat wounds, it might even extend our lives! “We’re different from what we used to be, but we’re better in many ways!”

“And worse in so many others.” Kaylee insisted coldly. “Have either of you even been outside since this happened to you? Do you even know what it’s like out there? Everything’s huge! The sounds, the smells, the size of everything! What’re you gonna do?? You’ve got cars in the parking lot, rents to pay, bills! I... I don’t even know what else! Are you just gonna walk away from it all?? Just give up everything that you were to become… this… creature that you are now?! You have no plan at all, do you? It’s just... be fuzzy, react as it comes, right??”

Dr. Coren groaned, squinting as he put his palm over his face. “Having a plan for *this*?” he asked in frustration. “It’s only been three days! I know you’re smart, Kaylee, but I highly doubt that *you* could do any better. We’re flying by the seat of our pants! I’m not gonna lie to you! But before we worry about our *cars* and our *bills*… we have to worry about our *lives*. I know you say we’re not ready because *we* haven’t been out there but *you* haven’t lived in *our* world either!”

“Species validation is really the only option we have, Kaylee.” Heidi worried. “We have to define ourselves as something new. And to do that, we have to have enough members of our species to be recognized in the first place.”

The vixen’s eyes narrowed at her as her ears splayed back. “Disgusting self-importance.” she growled. “You would oversee millions of people being turned into... Into *this*… against their will just for your own selfish desire to survive?!”

“Like you did to us in yours?” Dr. Coren retorted.

“I DIDN’T KNOW THAT I WAS DOING THIS!” the vixen screamed in objection. “I had no idea that I was infected with… with some kind of weird cloning virus! I didn’t know that biting you would result in you trying to GENOCIDE A SPECIES!” She paused, seething with rage as she gathered her thoughts. “Maybe if I had known… I would’ve just let you terminate me, huh? Just put this bullshit to bed. In fact, If I thought that it’d change anything I’d STILL let you terminate me. Unlike you, I want humanity to survive! Maybe you’ve forgotten what it means to have compassion.”

She bent down and picked up her spear. “Take me to the courtyard.” she ordered. “I want to show you something.”

Chapter 32

“We really doin’ this, Jake?” Gil asked as he helped carry the unconscious researcher. “Just a minute ago this guy was human. Now... he’s one of us!”

“He picked her up.” Jake shrugged. “What’d he expect to happen?”

Gil shook his head. “I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about the idea of it all. We’re this… supposed new species that’s trying to spread ourselves against people's will because a few of us don’t want to die. We’re just supposed to enable this?”

“A few of us?” Jake asked, grunting as he lifted the researcher into the cot in the quarantine room. “We’re talking about the whole town, Gil. They don’t even know they’re infected. Should we really sit back and do nothing so that they can just be rounded up and put to death in a quarantine camp?”

Gil sighed. “I don’t get the euphoria thing for another day or so, right? So... maybe I’ll... ‘understand’ after it starts affecting my brain, but right now? I think that’s the better path forward.” He stepped out of the room and closed the door behind him and looked back at the still sleeping man. His arm had already healed from the bite. “We’re the contagious ones here, Jake. We should be protecting people from this virus. Not spreading it because we’re afraid to die.”

Jake pointed at the researcher. “Look at him. See how he’s in that room? Carmen was the same way. So was Dr. Venner, Dr. Coren, and everyone else that was infected with this. Kaylee was raised in a glass container like that. And when she got old enough? They were gonna put her to sleep and pluck out her organs to study her like a specimen.” He paused and shook his head, looking at the older man sleeping in the cell next to him. It wasn’t clear why he was there. “It’s not the death I’m afraid of. It’s what happens *between* freedom, and death that I want to avoid. That’s why we have to spread this. It’s the only way to avoid the torture.”

He started to walk away, leaving Gil alone. “So, you’re afraid…” he called. “You’re afraid of pain, so you want to inflict pain on others. See how that’s still wrong?”

Jake waved his hand dismissively over his head, continuing to walk away. “If it’s me versus someone else… it’s me. Every single time.” he said.

“Yea, well it didn’t used to be.” Gil muttered under his breath, walking after him with a sigh.

In the conference room, Cpt. Ramone was sitting with Danny, Anne, and Jaren at the conference table. The other researchers, despite being asked to enter, had refused to do so, instead hovering out in the hallway. “So, what’s with them?” she asked, thumbing at the wall between the hall and the conference room. “They’re hovering around like tourists.”

“They feel powerless.” Anne sighed, staring down at her tablet as she watched Jake and Gil on the camera. “Trapped in here with these creatures… basically waiting on their turn to die.”

Danny was eating a bag of chips he’d taken from the food storage. Now that the guards were at the door, the food was free for the taking. At least in his opinion. “Too bad we don’t have a *BioSec* team.” he said sarcastically as he licked his fingers. “They could come in here and do something about the five tiny furballs keeping a hundred humans hostage.”

Jennifer shook her head. “Yea, too bad, huh?” she asked with the same sarcastic tone. “Instead, you’ve got nine tiny furballs that aren’t all tiny and furry yet.”

“Ya know, what the fuck is the deal with this anyway?” he asked, leaning forward in his chair. “I’ve been studying Kaylee’s notes for hours. There’s no sign of a brain chemistry change in her that would spur this ridiculous kind of behavior. I’d say I didn’t see it in Heidi or Alan, either... But we weren’t allowed to scan them.”

He pointed a cheese colored finger at the disgruntled captain and scowled. “I’ll tell you one thing though,” he continued. “You people are fucked up in the head. Once you go through the giggles, you come out the other side as a different fucking person.”

She crossed her arms, tilting her head as she furrowed her brow. “Let’s say you’re right… the euphoria changes our brains… how’s that translate to… I dunno... switching sides? I don’t even know for sure what you’re accusing me of right now.”

“Our best guess is that it stimulates a part of your brain that triggers elevated survival instincts,” Jaren explained. “You want to survive at any cost, even if it comes at the expense of others.”

Danny nodded. “Dulls your empathy…” he continued with his mouth full.

Jennifer had to admit she felt rather angry about this accusation. Was that an admission of guilt on her part? Was her opinion on the topic invalidated by the fact that she was unempathetic to someone who was accusing her of lacking empathy? The very idea gave her a headache. “Well if you think something’s changing in our brains, why don’t you study it?” she asked. “Gil’s not had his gigglefest yet. Take a scan now, wait for him to progress, then do it again. Would that make you feel better?”

“It would go a long way to giving us insight into the virus, for certain.” Jaren replied with a nod. “If he would allow us to do that, I would be honored to assist.”

Cpt. Ramone looked up as Gil and Jake entered the room, nodding to Danny and Jaren. “Hey Gil, fatboy and manbun here want to photocopy your brain. You up for that?”

“They want to do what now?” he asked, surprised at how insulting she was being to the two men.

“We’d like to scan your brain before and after your euphoria.” Danny explained. “That way we can try to figure out why all you fucks go straight to genocide when you’re infected and go through the giggles.”

He nodded, realizing that they were much more on the same page than he’d thought. All this time it was starting to feel like *he* was the crazy one. Now there were other people… that weren’t infected, that felt the same way. “Uh, yea. I’m definitely down for that.” he said. “I really wanna know why everyone’s gone crazy. Just point me to the room.”

“Very well,” Jaren said with a smile as he rose from the table. “Please follow me.”

Waiting till the pair left the room and found themselves alone down the hallway, Gil tapped Jaren quietly on the shoulder... “Jaren, right? Man... am I gonna go crazy like that when I… progress? I mean, I thought I was the only one that was seeing it.”

The researcher shook his head. “Everyone that’s not infected sees it.” he explained. “Something happens. We don’t know what yet, but we know that it does. You go from... understanding the situation to… focusing all your efforts on survival. Right now, it manifests itself as what they’re calling ‘species validity’ but later? Who knows. I don’t think they’ll stop until humanity is wiped off the face of the earth.”

“Shit…” Gil sighed. “I.. I’m sorry. I feel like… I’m gonna lose myself, ya know? That’s kinda terrifyin.”

Dr. Gilford nodded with a sympathetic smile as he opened the door to the scanner room. “I’m gonna need you to take off anything that has any sort of metal on it.” he explained. “Any piercings?”

“Nah, nothing like that.” Gil said, shaking his head as he started to undress. “How is it that you’re staying so calm in all of this?”

The researcher chuckled. “Show them your cards and they pounce,” he said. “I’m misdirecting. Agreeing with them, disarming their perception of me as a threat… that’s really what’s going on here. The fox parts of their brains are getting in the way. Mark my words.”

After undressing, Gil pulled on the scrubs that were stacked in the room. “Don’t… depend on me, then.” he worried. “You tell me this now, tomorrow I might betray you over it. Seems like it’s best if you just keep it to yourself.”

Chapter 33

“It’s dark out,” Heidi said as she stopped at the door. “It’s a fair point to make, Kaylee. I haven’t been outside since this started. I haven’t even seen the sun.”

The vixen opened the door, standing aside for Heidi and Alan to walk through. “Go out there.” she ordered, lowering her brow as she saw them start to hesitate. “Go on…!”

Alan seemed disgusted by something; his ears splayed back as he looked out the open door. “What’s that horrible smell?” he asked. “I... I don’t want to go out there with such a terrible smell.”

Kaylee leaned out and sniffed. “Not sure. Maybe a dumpster? Smells sweet, like rot.”

Heidi sniffed at it and seemed disgusted too, but gave her daughter a chance. “Where did you smell rot?” she asked as she stepped out into the courtyard, nodding for Alan to follow her.

Kaylee followed, standing between them and the door as it closed. “The Rannie’s old barn was full of it.” she said. “Hard to ignore. I also mistook one of our scents as a cat. Feral fox urine is acrid.”

Dr. Venner chuckled. “Oh, believe me, I know. It took forever to potty train you.”

“You *don’t* know,” the vixen objected, shaking her head. “You know it from a human nose, and a human mind. You don’t know it from the one you have now.” She shifted her weight against the spear, putting her other hand against her hip in a fist. “You two have fox instincts and senses now and you have no idea how to handle them. Tell me what you hear out here.”

Alan’s ears twisted as he looked up at the trees and listened. “Well… the leaves are rustling a little…” he said. “And... god the but the crickets are loud tonight.”

“Someone’s talking in the other wing.” Heidi nodded. “I can’t understand them, but I can hear it through the wall.” She looked at Kaylee as a small smile began to grow on her face. “Kaylee Venner…” she said. “Ya know that lab coat looks good on you. Who adjusted it?”

“Clara Rannie did it for me.” she said, slightly proud. “I... I used to be proud to wear it. Seeing you two now though, I’m not so sure. But… don’t change the subject. Do you hear anything else? Smell anything else?”

Heidi nodded, sniffing in the air, then changing positions so that she was on her hands and her feet. “There’s something…” she said, walking slowly like a feral as she made her way to the tree. “Something climbed this tree.”

“Similar to a mouse maybe?” Kaylee asked. She’d smelled it too. She didn’t know for sure, but she assumed it was a squirrel. “Maybe a squirrel?”

“Maybe,” the vixen nodded.

Alan walked to the tree, placing his hand against it. “I have a compulsion to climb this, and I don’t know why.” he said, looking up for a moment, then looking over at her. “Why wouldn’t you be proud?”

“Because I’m the progenitor of the Venner virus,” Kaylee explained. “The venner fox. Specimen zero. I’m the source of the plague… and I’m ashamed to be associated with something I didn’t even know was happening.”

Heidi opened her arms again and moved to embrace her. “Oh honey…” she whined.

“Don’t... touch me... Mom.” the vixen objected, holding out her hand. “I need you to understand all of this before we can just… hug it out.” She hesitated as she pondered what she’d said. This whole time, the pair were listening to her, doing what she’d asked them to do. It was strange, but it seemed to be working. They didn’t just see her as a specimen, anymore. “I… do appreciate you treating me like an equal, though.”

Alan jumped, scratching at the tree as he tried to climb it before slowly sliding back down. “I have to admit I didn’t know that you had this level of... Maturity within you.” he said without looking at her, still seeming obsessed with the tree. “You always acted so naive in your cell. Rather reserved in your observations, too.”

“An act,” she said. “If I let you know I understood as much of what you were saying as I did? You’d stop talking about it around me. I wanted to know as much as I could.” She tilted her head as she watched him obsess over the tree. Why did he want to climb it so badly? Perhaps he felt trapped? That she could understand.

“I’ve also grown,” she continued. “I spent the last few days with humans, and with Swirl. I’ve crawled through the forest with a sprained ankle, I’ve eaten a live mouse, used a pushmower, even… though I wasn’t supposed to. I’ve used a spear to defend myself, attacked two people who were chasing me…” She shook her head. “It’s only been a short amount of time, but I’ve learned a lot, and the biggest thing I’ve learned, is that I need to speak up and assert myself if I want to be taken seriously.” She looked at Dr. Coren as he tried the tree again, this time finding himself on a low limb on all fours, his junior lab coat tenting down over his hind paws with his tail in the air. “My first night out there was just like this. Cold, noisy, smelly… but I still kept who I was. And… I need to know that you two have kept who *you* are. From this vantage point, I honestly can’t say that you have.”

Alan chuckled. “Lectured by a fox on what it means to be human,” he said condescendingly.

“Said the small furry animal on four paws in a tree,” she shot back at him. “Your human experience counts for nothing if you lack the brain to understand it. You can’t let your instinct control you. If you two are what everyone else is going to become… then maybe it’s best if our species remains invalid.”

“Kaylee!” Heidi scolded, walking closer to her, refusing to let her back away. “You may not know what happens to experiments that are discarded in a place like this… but I do.” she said, grabbing the vixen’s maw and forcing her to look at her. “Hey! Listen to me.”

“Don’t you fucking tou-”

“Yea yea... Don’t touch you. I get it. Believe me, I’ve developed the same tick,” she interrupted. “Kaylee, I've had to terminate specimens before. I’ve had to harvest from them. Would you like me to show you the room where all of those… harvests… are stored?? Because what I was forced to callously do to those creatures, is what people will be forced to do to us *unless we can make ourselves valid in their eyes*.” She stepped away with a sigh, giving her daughter room to breathe. “Alan and I are as adamant about this as we are because we know what will happen. It’s not just a matter of being put to sleep and cut into pieces. They’d experiment on us. Inject us with things, hook us up to machines, cut parts of us off to see if it regrows. We have to fight to protect our people form the hellacious torture they plan to subject us to!”

“Why not just off ourselves, then?” the vixen asked coldly.

Alan looked at her for a second, then down at the ground. “Are you out of your mind?” he asked, instantly becoming distracted. “How do I get down from here?”

“The same way you went up there, silly.” Heidi chuckled. “Is the view nice?”

“I can see Friendly.” he said. “It’s... bright. Is something going on in town?”

Kaylee shook her head. “You probably just see better in the dark now.”

The fox grunted, letting out an animalistic whine as he cautiously slid down the tree. “Or ya know... I see better in general. You should’ve seen my prescription lenses. My god... They were going on coke bottles.”

Heidi laughed. “Your eyes always did look very… *big*… in those glasses.” she smiled. “I do miss the color, though.”

He smiled playfully at her. “What’s the matter you don’t like my pretty amber eyes the way they are now?” he asked as she giggled back at him.

“You’re getting distracted again,” Kaylee sighed. She had to admit it’d happened to her, too. She’d nearly forgotten what she’d been talking about. “If we’re such a threat, and our future is torture… why linger?”

Alan shook his head as he walked to Heidi’s side, taking her hand and nuzzling her as she giggled in delight. “Because we don’t have to leave,” he said. “We can beat this. We just have to push.”

“Yea… we just have to do a bunch of unethical shit to keep ourselves alive, rather than taking the noble way out to save everyone else the pain,” the vixen objected.

Heidi sighed. “Kaylee you escaped to save your own skin,” she retorted. “Now you think we shouldn’t fight back?”

“Things are different,” she said, opening the door. “Go in. We’re done out here. You two need to get a room.” She hesitated, tilting her head at that thought. “Actually… don’t. We don’t need *that* kind of propagation right now.”

Alan chuckled. “Like we haven’t already...” he smirked. “First thing I wanted to do when that human let us out of those cells.”

“You’re not in heat, are you?” Kaylee asked, somewhat alarmed. “You don’t smell it.”

Heidi was surprised that she’d say such a thing, but it made sense. They were likely on a fox’s reproduction pattern, now that their bodies had changed. “N… no… I don’t think so,” she replied, shaking her head.

“Trust me if you were, you’d know it,” Kaylee muttered. “Look, just at least *try* to control yourselves? You… I can’t believe I’m even having to say this but you’re forgetting how to be human.”

Heidi exhaled sharply through her nose, looking at the grass beneath her feet. “I don’t think that’s… entirely fair.” she said, her ears splaying a little. She hadn’t really talked about it, to much of anyone, but she knew from the moment she’d changed her species on the tablet that her humanity was slipping farther away. Perhaps, she wondered, too far away. Being outside like this with the smells, the sounds… it drove home what she’d really become. What it meant to be non-human, almost for the first time, made her feel uncomfortable in her new fur-covered skin. She really had been hyper focused on all of this. Her mind had shifted away from the virus, from the contagion, and instead moved to propagation.

She had decided, in the simplest of terms, that fox was good, so everyone should be fox. Thinking about it at that moment made her feel almost ashamed. Where'd all those times she'd spent at home in her small apartment near the edge of town reading an indulgent romantic novel gone in her memory? The last time she took a long summer drive? The sun shining, the music in her ears, the wind in her hair… was it all really… lost now?

No. It didn't have to be. Not if they could prove their worth to the humans. But… even saying it that way sounded more like a specimen. Their *worth?* What would it take to be enough? Propagation had to continue. There was simply no other way. If she wanted those things back, she needed to push for them. Her new, smaller body could still read a book, climb stairs, drive a car… they all just needed adjustments!

Kaylee felt foolish, like she was educating 2 children on how to behave; how to think, even. They were brilliant! Both of them! And she knew that was undeniable. They'd just become very distracted with their new lot in life, and seemed to be having trouble filtering it out. If everyone in town… everyone in the lab… was about to experience the same thing, it would drive this concept of a valid species out the window to the humans observing from the outside.

"Fair or not…" she said finally, "you two need to make sure that you prove to the humans that you're *obviously* so afraid of… that you can still function in *their* world. Because if you can't, they won't *ever* consider us valid. No matter how many of us there are. They'll put us in zoos and gawk at us or make us slaves to their existing social structure long before they see us as equals. If you run around mating and climbing trees and splaying your ears at scents and sounds like you're doing here… they'll look at you like animals."

She sighed and looked them both in the eye. "And you have Liam Rannie to thank for that perspective. You should talk to him some time. He's a very practical man."

Alan nodded in agreement, chuckling to himself. "I'm glad you're here, Kaylee." he said. "It seems the student's teaching the teachers now."

"You knew how to be human with a human brain." she said. But you don't know how to be human with a fox's brain. I'll be the first to admit, I don't either. I'm still learning. But I can see in you what others have seen in me. And since the humans here won't call you out for fear of being infected... I'm going to do it for them."

Heidi twisted her head to the side in a nod. "Never thought I'd say this about you, Kaylee but, uh... I guess… we're taking your lead."

"Good." the vixen said sternly. "Now let's go back to the others."

Chapter 34

Kaylee found herself standing on the conference table as Gil and Jaren returned to the room, both seeming confused by the scene. Danny, having seen… more than he cared to from his lower perspective beneath her shirt, had pushed his chair away from the table to see her from farther away.

“I need everyone in the hall to come in here, please.” she called. Foxes, keep your distance from the humans. Make them as comfortable as you can.”

Anne timidly waved the others in, still wearing a medical mask and glasses. They were slowly filing into the room, but the tension and fear was palpable.

“As I understand, we have a few individuals still in quarantine. Is that correct, Dr. Coren?” she asked, looking down at him from the table.

“Yes. We have a few volunteer specimens in quarantine for study. Their results are proving to be very positive. It’s looking like we really can regrow lost limbs and cure diseases with this.”

“Don’t call them specimens, please?” the vixen asked. She looked around the room at the humans. “You all know who I am, I think. But if you don’t, I’m Dr. Venner’s experiment, Kaylee. Her daughter. CV716. I’m the primary vector that spread the Venner virus. It… started with me.” She sighed as she heard herself say it. The weight of the responsibility was crushing. “I’m standing on this table to look you in the eye and to stand as your equal, and not as inferior, or as it seems you’ve come to consider the rest of us… your oppressors.”

Jake was standing in the corner of the room with his arms crossed, listening to Kaylee talk. She spoke with so much command and force in her voice, he couldn’t help but imagine how proud Swirl would be if he were in the room to hear.

“What we’re dealing with here is an endemic, nearly 10 R virus that has the easy potential to become pandemic. There’s been a lot of push, I know, to pursue that path, including the refusal to let you leave this building uninfected.”

The crowd of humans began to murmur between one another in muted panic as she spoke of the rumor.

“Tomorrow morning, Clara, Liam, and Swirl are going to head to town. They’re going to try to sniff out just how many humans are infected. If you have loved ones in town you need to know about, please give their info to myself, or to Dr. Ramirez, if you feel more comfortable with another human, and we will ask them to check it out.”

She took a deep breath, then looked at Heidi and Alan. “I’m… sure you’re aware of the change in behavior among your infected coworkers...” she continued. “I believe... I can give some perspective on this that might help you understand. With the physical changes for them have come mental changes. They see the world through my eyes, despite having decades of *your* experience. Not to denigrate my mother, or, well anyone here that’s infected, but… they’re not as experienced with being a fox as they are with being a human. Just as… I am not experienced being human, as I am being a fox. S... so...” She started to feel apprehensive, her ears splaying as she realized what she was saying. She felt like she sounded so stupid. She really wished that swirl was there with her. His absence had largely been transparent due to the constant activity, but… in that moment she suddenly felt alone without his warm furry body on her shoulder or her head.

“So...” Heidi continued, struggling to climb onto the table with her. “Ngh... how did you do this...?”

Jennifer rushed over, grabbing the vixen by her hind quarters, then helping her onto the table. “I gotcha Dr. V.” she smiled.

“T... thank you.” Heidi responded, trying not to react negatively to the sudden contact. “As... Kaylee was saying... We’re inexperienced.” she resumed. “She’s absolutely right here. As we’ve changed physically, our minds have changed to match. Our instincts and sensory perceptions are such that trying to… trying to process the world around us as we did before has created conflicts with… well… with our sense of empathy and ethics.”

“So, what’s that mean?” Danny asked. “You’re gonna go back to your cells, let us call in the *real* BioSec team, then shutdown the festival in Friendly?”

All three of the foxes scowled at him critically. “Consider this, Dr. Shaw.” Alan started, walking uncomfortably close to the obese researcher then pacing slowly in front of him. “We call in the team, they round us up, then they call up the guard, which quarantines the entire town of Friendly. In here, you’re tested, and anyone that’s infected is put to the side for… ‘processing.’ Anyone that’s not is debriefed, and held in captivity to be monitored for signs of infection.” He looked up. “You’ve been eating a lot of the food the BioSec team put away. Have you felt any... euphoria as a result of that?” he asked curiously. “What if it’s contaminated? Do you know?”

“N..no symptoms here.” he insisted. “I’d know.”

The tod nodded affirmatively. “You *would* know. And so would we.” he said, continuing to pace. “The town would be treated the same. A communication and transportation blackout. The town would cease to exist to the outside world. Airspace would be closed, and a camp would be established to test, study and process anyone that’s infected.” He stopped pacing, looking sternly into the human’s eyes. “Your wife… is in town. Right?” he asked calmly. “What if she’s infected? Do you think you’d get the chance to say goodbye?”

“They wouldn’t give her a chance at all,” Heidi continued. “Once they’re done with all that… They wouldn’t just discard us like trash. They’d put us in cages, pick us apart, remove organs to see if they regrew, force inseminate us to see if we reproduce, and if we do… with what. Dogs, humans, feral foxes... Other infected individuals… They might take criminals or those who try to break out and intentionally infect them to watch the process take place. Cut our skulls open while we’re awake and alive and study our brains... Remove our heads to see how long they live. Remember... We’re not a valid species, we’re a viral curiosity. They see the benefits in what we have... They’ll want that. But they won't want us.”

Alan took over once more. “And again, Danny… your wife lives in town. Runs the bakery in the square, if I recall. You think they’d treat her with dignity because of the delicious pies she’s so famous for around here? Those of you who aren’t infected… you might be coerced to sign an NDA, shipped to another part of the country, part of the world… given new identities, new jobs… or… they might just... Throw you in the fire the rest of our remains, if you seem like you might become a problem.”

“This... is why species validity is the topic of late.” Kaylee explained. “I’ve never seen this side of it, but Dr. Venner and Dr. Coren, in their tenure here… have seen it all.”

“I know it’s… easy to look at us and see us as being cold and unethical…” Heidi continued with a sigh. “I... We …deserve that moniker for how we’ve been treating you. I know this now. Thanks to my daughter. But this is what we’re trying to avoid. This is why we’re trying to infect so many. Only with an infection of pandemic proportions can we save the people of Friendly, ourselves, and you… from what’s coming to our doors.”

Dr. Shaw sighed as he sat back down in his chair, sticking his hand out toward Dr. Coren to watch him growl and bare his teeth. “You see that?” he asked, pulling his hand away. “They try to give us a rousing pre-battle speech like we’re in a movie… They threaten me about my wife…” He nodded down at Alan, who had backed away, still staring him down with his ears splayed back and his tail, which had grown slightly longer, curled upward in alert. “Look at him. That’s what you wanna follow into battle? These animals are the people you trust?”

“Danny what are we s’posed to do?” Anne urged him. “You think they’re lying about what they just said?”

“Yea... I do.” he said, bending down to make eye contact with Dr. Coren. “Because I know that if I goad this little furball enough... He’s gonna bite me. He’s not gonna be able to control himself.” He sat back up and pointed at Kaylee. “That’s what she did. That’s exactly how all this happened! These things are animals, guys. We can’t trust a word they say.”

“So... again... What are you gonna do?” Cpt. Ramone asked him, still crossing her arms. Her hand was nearly covered in brown fur, but she was hiding it under her elbow. “You think your wife’s safe, tubby? I remember shaking her hand.”

“Call in reinforcements. Let them shut this down. Put an end to it now before it spreads beyond the town.” Dr. Shaw replied with a saddened sigh. “If Eddie’s infected and… and that’s how it has to happen… then… at least she won’t hurt anymore.”

“She’ll hurt a lot more. They’ll subject us all to torture. Including her.” Jake objected. “No thanks, buddy. I wanna live.”

“Like that?” Dr. Shaw asked, pointing harshly at Kaylee and Heidi. “You wanna live like that??”

“Are you saying you’d rather die?” Gil asked. “You’d rather be tortured?”

“I’m saying that we don’t know that this is going to happen!” he shouted. “They could be lying about this… extermination team nonsense!”

Anne shook her head. “Why would they do that, Danny? Why lie about it? To get more of us infected? Look around you. There’s 6 people in this room right now that can spread the virus, and 3 more outside guarding the doors. Then we have 3 more in quarantine. If they wanted to infect us, they’d just do it.”

“We’re not a monolith...” Jennifer complained. “I don’t want anything to do with *infecting* anyone. I’ve done enough of that already.”

“My point still stands.” Dr. Ramirez argued.

“Well why don’t we put it to a vote?” Dr. Shaw asked. “If you’re with those… things… and their plan to infect the world with their tiny furry virus, you go and you stand with them. But if you’re with me... and you want to call in reinforcements and put a stop to this shit... Then come over here. Because this shit has to end.”

Kaylee closed her eyes and sighed. “I wish Swirl was here...” she muttered, feeling her her mother’s hand, rubbing her back. She opened her eyes to see a reassuring smile.

“You got this, honey.” she said encouragingly.

“B... by all means. Make your own decisions.” the vixen said, looking at them all. “I have no reason not to believe Dr. Coren, or Dr. Venner. I have a disproportionately large share of responsibility in all of this. They’ll... They’ll probably slice me up like deli meat and store me in jars if what they say is true. B... but... If you decide-”

“Kaylee…” Alan objected.

“If you decide... That this is what we should do... then… can we really stop you?” she continued.

“No... you can’t.” Danny scoffed at her. “If Eddie’s infected, I… I can’t help her. She’s lost. But I can’t let this spread any farther than it has.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Jake scowled. “There’s enough of us here that’re still human enough to stop you.”

“And how would you do that? Re-initiate the lockdown? Throw us into quarantine??” Dr. Shaw argued. “I’m tired guys... I’m sick and fucking tired of being afraid. This needs to end.”

“Everyone stop!” Dr. Coren yelled. “Just... stop! Okay?? We don’t need to do this!”

“Alan and I had to go through training on this.” Heidi sighed. “I... I’ll ask IT to-”

“I’m right here...” a bearded man with glasses and a goatee said, raising his hand. “And my name is Gene... not ‘IT’.”

Heidi chuckled. “Ok... Gene, if you can unlock the DND folder for QCEP 1.7.251, I... would really appreciate it.”

He grabbed the small tablet he had in his back pocket and started to work. “Give me a minute...” he said.

“Gene, why the fuck haven’t you been like... posting this shit on the net or... giving us internet access or shutting down the cell jammers so that we could get this out??” Danny demanded. “I could’ve warned Eddie!!”

“They told me not to.” he shrugged. “Besides, when we were on lockdown, my systems were shut out. There was no way to warn her.” He looked up at the vixen with an affirmative nod. “Alright, Dr. Venner, your tablet should have access.”

“If you’re wondering...” Alan started as Heidi gathered up her tablet. “The abbreviations are... Do not distribute, Quarantine Contaminant Exception Protocol. The rest is just versioning. It covers… well, this very thing. What’s put in place if an imminent threat is present in a town like Friendly.”

“This facility is located here because of the nature of our research. Friendly is a small, mostly remote town that can easily be locked down and cut off.” Dr. Venner explained. “A wide spread is our only option to survive. The flower festival this weekend honestly serves as perfect timing. We just need to obfuscate our origins.”

A document was displayed on the screen before the eyes of everyone in the room. It was signed off by high-ranking members of the GERCorp security team, management teams and executives, accompanied by US and Canadian government officials. Within the document were all the details of what they referred to as a ‘containment exception.’ It described a case identical to Kaylee’s escape, the specimen carrying with it a virus that could spread. Just like the others had noted, it contained detailed information about procedures, camps, blackouts, and research methodology, up to and including the termination of non-infected civilians.

“Still don’t believe me?” Alan asked as the others began to murmur amongst themselves. “We’re trying to save everyone from *this.*”

There was a hush that fell over the group as they slowly took it in, even Danny seemed to agree, shaking his head with an expression of pain sprawled across his face. “So, your choices are basically this, or a longshot?” he asked.

“See what it says at the bottom?” Heidi asked. “Except when containment is impossible. That’s our goal.”

“Our goal is impossible, then...” he replied, shaking his head.

“It has an R value of 10.” the vixen replied. “Anyone that comes into contact with this has a 100% chance of catching it. Containment *is* impossible. We just need to make the case that-”

“That it’s okay?” he interrupted again. “That... we should give up? Dr. Venner, you're too smart for this. They’ll bring you in, force you to stop it, then get rid of you. And if they can’t? They’ll render you inert and make you an eternal underclass. The small furry dregs of society, trash foxes begging for food because of a virus that’s long been destroyed.” He held his head in his hands. “They will never accept you. E... even if you say there’s no cure. You’ve already told the team in Nevada that you can stop the contagion, and they’re gonna hold you to that.”

“I can only stop it once it’s done.” she said. “And... it’s on a case-by-case basis. Each person's completed DNA needs to be implanted into the template for this to take effect. If that even works! I’m still simulating this in the mainframe. Right now, the fact that we still have human elements to our DNA means that the xenobots see any new space as a part of its colony. We’d have to strictly define its borders as the host’s exact DNA itself. If it’d even accept the template change. As it stands, if the DNA is changing, or the sample is too far regressed from their current state, it’ll kill them! Or at least twist their bodies into grotesque horrors that can barely survive.”

Dr. Shaw shook his head. “Tell *them* that. Not me.” he said simply. The tone of his voice was hollow, like he was a shell of the determined man he’d been only moments before. He’d given up.

“What about… obfuscation?” Jake asked. “Spread it now, grab some samples, send people out tonight, right now. Spread it in other places. We’ll see an outbreak not just in Friendly but in every city in the area. And if we can take a plane, even more.”

“Then what?” Danny asked with a sigh. “Just more unethical shit? Maybe go around punching babies in the face or something?”

Jaren chuckled, spinning around in his chair to face the foxes. “Then... when shit hits the fan, *we* come out as heroes. We as in... GERCorp. Tell them we’re on top of the study of the virus, that our people caught it, too, and we can solve it. Date all of our studies and experiments here forward, then set the contagion termination loose on the general populace to render it inert.” he explained. “GERCorp comes out shining like a diamond as the worlds savior, there’s enough of the species around to be valid, and no one is the wiser that it started right here.”

“No one, except GERCorp.” Heidi replied. “They already know, from BioSec to virology, that this has been an internal crisis for several days now. They’d have to know about our plan.”

“Not until after its executed, though.” Jake reminded her. “Remember, our goal is more to create a protocol exception, than to do anything about our species. We want to live.”

Kaylee sat down on the edge of the conference table, yelping softly as she realized how cold it was. Her legs gently swayed as she listened to their discussion. Her ears splayed, putting her disapproval on full display. “Destabilizing the world for the many so that the few may live…” she said distantly. “Makes me feel… gross.”

“The specimen’s the only one that’s talking sense…” Danny groaned. “I’m in a cage with lunatics…” He looked up at Jaren. “I can’t believe you’d take their side. Didn’t you hear Dr. Venner? We don’t know if there’s a way to stop this, but what she’s proposed here is an impossibility once it spreads! We lock it down now, we stop the spread. This is our *only chance*!”

Dr. Gilford sighed, acting like he wanted to speak up, but… opted not to. “I think our window closed on that days ago, Danny.”

“What’s that s’posed ta mean??” Dr. Shaw demanded.

“Alright, enough!” Alan barked. Let’s do this. We’ll need volunteers. Someone willing to ultimately become infected. We’ll give you samples, you can leave tonight. Once we have enough, we’ll set up your travel plans, and get this rolling. With any luck, the events of this weekend will blend together and obfuscate our little town’s responsibility.”

Kaylee groaned, “I want no part of this…” she muttered, jumping off the table before she silently left the room.

Chapter 35

Swirl stood on the kitchen table as he watched Clara quietly cooking breakfast. She'd already arranged for a stepping stool, though she'd not shown any major changes, save for her hand. As usual, Liam was sitting beside him, reading the paper. His hand, like hers, was showing signs of fur growth, but nothing more. Compared to the rest of the time that the mouse had spent with the pair, there was considerable tension and worry in the air that he hadn't felt before. It was crushing, driving the small mouse, almost worry if he himself had done something to deserve their scorn.

"How... are you feeling this morning, Liam?" he asked, desperate to break the deafening silence that filled the room.

"Vision's better…" he said, folding down his paper to look at the mouse. "Hearing… got more energy… if I didn't know better, I'd say I'd turned a bright new corner."

"What're you plannin' to do while Swirl and I are out on the town?" Clara asked, glancing up with a silent, neutral smile of acknowledgement as Terry entered the room. "Or were you plannin' to come with us?"

He shook his head, ignoring Terry, who quietly took his seat at the far end of the table. "Not enough time to come with ya." he said. "We're already showin. What was it she said? A week? Less? I cain't spare the time. I gotta get the field cut while I can still run the combine. I gotta get the hay bailed, and the truck loaded… need ta clean out the bunker and stock us up on supplies… we're about ta see some real hardship here in Friendly. We need ta be ready."

Clara nodded as she placed a plate in front of him. "Terry go make your own so I don't contaminate it." she said, sitting down with her own, then sliding a smaller one to Swirl. "Well hopefully we'll get done with the sweep fairly quickly this morning." she said. "I need to… look at some smaller clothes and some sewin' supplies, make sure we have enough step ladders and get some canned goods. We also need an opener that our hands'll be able to operate."

Liam picked up his fork and gave her a rough, yet saddened smile. The wrinkles in his face seemed to be lessened, compared to the night before. Even some of his hair seemed to be returning. "That's my girl." he said affectionately. "Always prepared. Onna the many reasons I married you, woman."

Noticing Liam's returning youth, Swirl looked between the pair, noticing that Clara too had more color in her hair, and less wrinkles on her face. "You two look healthy today." he observed. "Younger."

The farmer chuckled, rubbing his fingers down Swirl's back to pet him. "Well maybe foxes don't wrinkle up like grumpy old humans, huh?" he joked.

The mouse pondered it, squeaking with his eyes closed as he felt the fingers along his back. “I... don’t think that’s it, sir. I think the virus is actually… reversing your aging.”

“That sounds like a positive.” Terry said as he sat down with the group. Again, feeling the cold shoulder. “So uh, if you need me today, Mr. Rannie, I’ll be glad to do it. Just… when the day’s over, I’m gonna head outta here. Go… away. I dunno. Maybe I’ll rent a boat and go live on a desert island.”

Clara nodded as she finished a bite. “Maybe you should.” she said, looking at him with a cold, ominous gaze, neatly masking a sense of powerful, existential dread that floated just beneath the surface. “I hate to say it, but I think humanity’s days are numbered.”

They finished their breakfast in silence, the old man finishing first. He took his plate to the sink and washed it, placing it on the drying rack before heading for the door. “Terry, you come on out here when you’re done, alright? I’ll show ya where you can help.”

“Yes sir.” he nodded affirmatively. After the door closed, he looked at Clara with sympathy. “You folks are good people.” he said. “It uh… it’s been a pleasure to get to know you. I… uh… I hope things work out.”

She silently stirred her food as she listened, her appetite just wasn’t there. “Thank you, Terry.” she said without looking up. “Wherever you go… I wish you the safest travels.”

He stood up from the table, taking the plate to the sink to wash it, but stopping himself. “S... should I-”

“Don’t touch anything in here without gloves.” she called. “Not even the front door. They’re in the first cabinet to the right of the stove.” Swirl listened to her, feeling the emotion in her voice. Without a word, he climbed up her shoulder, then nuzzled her cheek soothingly.

“It’s gonna be okay.” he said warmly.

Sometime later, having finished their meals, Clara and Swirl made their way out to the spare truck. “You boys have fun today!” she called, waving her gloved hand above the cab of the truck as she climbed inside. “We’ll be back before sunset.”

“You start growin’a tail you come back sooner’n that!” Liam called back with worry. “Be safe, honey.”

Clara chuckled, slamming the old truck’s door before turning the key and bringing it to life. “I wish that was a joke,” she said reflectively. “You ready to go sweetie?”

“Ya know, it’s possible that no one in town will be infected.” the mouse reiterated. “It might just be the farm.”

She didn't respond right away, the truck bouncing slowly down the old dirt road toward town as she pondered his statement. "I guess… if that turns out ta be the case… we'll have to tell the lab. Let the cleanup crew just sweep in and put us all ta sleep." she said finally. "It'd be for the best, really."

Swirl squeaked sadly. There was so much more to be said than that, but to dig into it and try to lift her fallen spirits would be too difficult a task for the tiny mouse to bear. He opted instead to sit atop the dash, looking ahead as the dirt road gave way to paved, and the small town began to emerge.

Friendly was the type of small town many would call ideal. With a population of only five thousand, the quaint, planned community lacked the big box stores, overt capitalism and gross suburban sprawl that'd plagued most towns like it in west. It left a charm that lifted spirits, put smiles on the faces of passersby, and truly gave it the fitting name that it'd earned throughout its long and storied history. Even as the old truck rolled slowly toward the square, the positivity of the town was starting to lift their spirits.

They arrived in the square, with the old lady parking near Schaffer's fabric, opting to start her shopping for needle, thread, and bolts of cloth. Modesty was important, but there was something to be said about bundling up, should they survive the pending storm until the next winter. "Good mornin' Mrs. Rannie!" a young woman, barely out of her teens, smiled as the door chime rang. "Can I help you with anything?"

Clara smiled, walking over to her as she forced the cynicism of her situation to the back of her mind. "You sure can Willy." she smiled. "Love that new piercing, by the way."

The young woman blushed and looked to the side bashfully. "Yea… thank you!" she said sheepishly. "It was my girlfriend's idea. I... I was terrified! But you know how she is."

"Brighten even the gloomiest'a days. I know!" the old lady smiled. "You got a real great woman in your life with her." Her smile lasted for a moment, then slowly started to fade. "Hey, can I ask you a question?" she asked casually as she gathered up a pack of needles, then looked over the spools of thread. "Have you heard of anybody here in town having… giggling fits?"

"Giggling fits?" Willy asked with a laugh. "Why? Is there some great new joke goin' through town?"

"No, no... just a, uh… bit'a somethin I read about in a medical journal. Sort of a curiosity really." Clara smiled. "People all over the world are reporting fits of uncontrollable laughter that lasts for an hour or so, then disappears. I was just curious if you'd seen it happen here."

Willy thought about it for a moment, then nodded, wagging her finger absently at the wall a few times. “Ya know, I did actually. Last night. Me and Sai were at the drop-in gettin a burger, and these two outta towners in the car next to us were laughing up a storm. Sai thought they were high or something, but I’ve never laughed like that when I had any special brownies. They almost seemed drunk.”

“Tourists from out of town, huh?” Clara worried, placing several looms of thread and needles on the counter. “Get me a bolt of that solid white cloth over there, honey. And... and the black, too.” she nodded. “Any idea where they’d came from?”

Willy turned to get the cloth, giving Swirl enough time to get a whiff of her.

“She’s not.” he whispered.

“Dr. Rannie, if I didn’t know any better…” the young lady continued absently. “I’d say you... Ngh... were on the case to track down a bug.” She flopped the bolts heavily onto the counter. “Is somethin goin on I should be worried about?”

She was such a sweet girl. It pained Clara to keep her mouth shut. Part of her wanted to tell her no. Get in her car with Sai and leave this place behind, go as far as they possibly could right away! But she couldn’t do that. Lying to that girl with her silence was nearly brining her to tears. “Willy... I-”

“Oh! You have a mouse!” she interrupted. “Aww he’s so cute! When did you get a little mousie?”

Clara chuckled. “Oh, this is Swirl.” she said, holding out her hand for the small mouse to climb. “A friend of mine is out of town this weekend, and she asked me to take care of her little friend here.”

“Can I pet him?” Willy asked as the mouse looked up at her eagerly. “He’s really calm and well behaved.”

“You sure can, darlin.” The old woman smiled, chuckling as Swirl leaned into Willy’s soft hand. “This little guy loves being pet.”

“He’s so well behaved.” she said warmly. “Is that why you’re wearin’ gloves today? Aww such a cutie!”

Swirl couldn’t help it, the petting and the attention made him squeak with joy, leaning in and nuzzling against her hand. Suddenly, though, his nose caught a whiff of something he hadn’t noticed before. Looking up, he spotted someone else working in the store. Seeing his change, Clara lifted her hand, letting him climb back onto her shoulder as she looked in his direction of interest. “Someone else here?” she asked.

“Yea, that’s Yancy. Mrs. Schaffer's son? He’s here from college. Supposed to be heading back today actually.”

“Bill!” he yelled with a sniffle as he heard her call him Yancy. He didn’t like Bill much either, but it was a better damn name than Yancy. At least, in his eyes. He finished up what he was doing, then made his way to the front desk. “Good morning, Mrs. Rannie.” he smiled. “Yea I was just helping mom take care of a few things before I head out.”

“So, you’re off to college huh?” Clara asked, noticing a small amber spot in the corner of his eye. “Where ya goin?”

“Oh, I’ve actually been going to Georgia Regional.” he nodded, sniffing again. It was obvious that he was being wracked by allergies, but it wasn't immediately obvious as to why. “They have an amazing engineering program. So... I’ll be flying out to... To-” he started, sniffing back like he was about to sneeze.

“Cover your mouth before you-!” the old woman started gasping in horror as he sneezed right beside Willy. “B... before ya sneeze.”

“Dammit Yancy! You sneezed all over me, you gross ass little shit!” the young woman yelled, punching him hard in the shoulder.

“Bi-OW! Hey! Don’t call me Yancy!” he retorted. “Call me Bill, dammit.” Apparently, he’d known her for quite some time. But then Mrs. Schaffer *did* own the store, so it was an easy connection to make.

“Yancy, Yancy, Yancy!” she snarled back at him. “Get her rung up if she’s done shopping. I’m gonna go clean myself off, you... sick little man, you. And wipe down that counter!”

Clara couldn’t hide her expression as she watched Willy walk away. She’d just seen the infection spread in real time. From a young man who’d admitted that he was about to fly thousands of miles away to a major city in the states!

“I... I’m sorry ma’am.” he sniffed. “I’ve just been kind of out of it lately. Last night I was laughing for like... hours… at nothing at all. It was so stupid! Just some dumbass comedy routine on the internet. Then today... I dunno. It’s like I’m allergic to myself. I’ve been sneezing all morning.”

The old woman nodded as she watched him use the cash register. “W... well the pollen is certainly in the air...” she said shakily. Maybe it’s… just seasonal.”

“Yea, maybe.” he said with a sniff. “Ugh... it’s awful. I think when I get things cleaned up here, I’m gonna go take a histamine blocker. Will that help?”

“I’m not a human doctor.” she said, realizing just how real that statement had become. “But... yea. It works for animals, it’ll work for you, too.”

“Animals can have allergies?” he asked, nodding to the machine as it read out the total on a small digital display.

She nodded, digging out her cash. “They sure can! We’re not that different from em, even! Are there any animals you know you’re allergic to?”

He took the money from her hand, the woman looking on as he handled the cash, just after wiping his nose with the back of his hand to make change. “Cats, dogs… probably foxes and stuff, too.” he said with another sniff.

“Well... make sure and take yourself a histamine blocker before you go to the airport. Don’t you be sneezin on people like that! And wash your hands before you handle money, young man. You could be a vector in a highly contagious bug and not even be aware of it!”

He nodded guiltily. “Y... yes ma’am.” he said. “I’ll do that.”

“Good.” she insisted. “Now you have a safe trip back. And... and a good semester. Tell your momma I said hey.”

“I will.” he agreed.

Leaving the store, Clara was nearly in tears. She heavily plopped the bolts of fabric down in the passenger seat, looking at Swirl with a pained sigh. “That boys gone spread this like wildfire!” she worried. “What’re we gonna do??”

“Our job today is to document and report.” the mouse responded. “Not change things. I... I know that’s painful, but that’s what we have to do.” He looked down at her pocket, remembering something from the conversation last night. “Did Anne send you a list of people to look for?”

Digging out her phone, Clara read over the messages that’d been sent. It hadn’t been notifying her that they were coming in. “Yea...” she said, reading it easily without her glasses. “Yea she’s given me quite a few here, actually. We’ll have to check on em after we get a few more supplies.”

Chapter 36

Anne stood in the doorway for one of the open quarantine cells. They'd turned it into a makeshift barracks for the infected but had left the door open so that they wouldn't feel trapped. She was holding a large stack of scrubs in varying sizes, looking down at the sleeping members of the BioSec team. "Captain Ramone?" she asked, watching as the young woman groaned and opened her eyes. They were both swirled with amber. "I uh... brought you all some changes of clothes. You'll likely need several different sizes throughout the next few days, so, just... feel free to sort through and put on what feels right."

"Why would I need a change of clothes?" she asked tiredly, rubbing the sleep from her eyes before looking at her transformed hand in tired shock. "Shit..." she sighed, pulling two fingernails that were just resting atop claws from her hand. "This really is happening, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so." Anne nodded. "You'll experience the majority of your major changes this evening and into tomorrow. By Saturday you'll... well... you'll likely be more like Dr. Venner was last night."

Jake groaned as he rolled over on the cot, opening his eyes to look at her while on his back. "Where are they anyway?" he asked. "I want to double check the populations of those cities the researchers were sent out to last night." He rose to his feet, stretching his arms before realizing his pants were about to fall off. "S…sh..!" he gasped, grabbing them before making his way to the mirror. "Have you heard anything from Clara, yet?"

"No, but... I sent her the addresses and information this morning." Dr. Ramirez replied. "So... hopefully soon? I really need to know about my husband. I need to know if I can stay myself."

Jennifer sat up on the edge of her bed, looking at Jake from across the room. "You're shorter already, buddy." she said, comparing his size to Gil, who apparently didn't want to wake up. "Ya know you don't need to give up who you are if he's infected, right? You can still be yourself! Once Dr. Venner stops making this contagious you could-"

"If he's gonna be like you, then I'm gonna be like you." she insisted simply. "I'll put the scrubs right here. The humans are having breakfast in the cafeteria. When they're done, you can come in and they'll cook some for you, too."

Jake waited till she was gone, then hobbled over to the scrubs in his baggy pants. He quickly dug through them, finding some that fit him better. "Hell of a thing, isn't it, Captain?" he asked. "Not being considered human anymore?"

"You just saw your eyes..." she said, holding up her hand. "You see this, too. They're just callin' it like they see it."

Gil sat up slowly from his cot, clearing his throat. “It’s an important distinction, too. Given that we’re still contagious.” he said. “Seems like they’d lock us up until Dr. Venner could stop it. At least then we’d be able to blend in with them without the fear of spreading it.”

Jennifer shook her head as she stood up to grab a pair of scrubs for herself. Her pants didn’t fit anymore, either. “I honestly don’t think she wants to.” she said. “They want this to spread. They aren’t gonna stop it for quite some time.”

In the corner of the break room, the six foxes had made themselves a nest. All nestled together, the small pile of fur seemed to sleep comfortably, their tails wrapping around one another like an enormous furry pillow. Smelling the breakfast being prepared in the cafeteria next door, Kaylee stirred first, trying to climb out of the pile as she disturbed the others. Alan, waking right after, chittered at her, opening his maw in protest that she’d disturbed him. She responded in kind pushing him out of the pile with a shove as he tumbled onto the cold floor. “Ngh... Kaylee...!” he protested. “This floor is cold!”

Carmen whined as she rolled over and got up from the bed. “Back to work right?” she asked tiredly. “I was sleeping so warm.”

“You don’t wanna roll on the floor you shouldn’t protest like that.” Kaylee objected with a smirk. “You know I’ll best you every time. You don’t have the experience that I do.”

The tod chuckled as he got to his feet, growing to a laugh. “You’re right, I don’t!” he said. “I didn’t even know I could make those noises until just now.”

“You can, but I don’t suggest you do.” she said as she watched him stretch. “The less like animals we seem the better.”

“You guys are so loouuudd…” one of the other guards complained as he rolled over, his ‘hind’ legs in the air. He kicked them a few times playfully before rolling onto his stomach and standing up. “I was havin’a great dream.”

“What was it about?” Heidi asked, standing from the pile as well as she straightened her shirt.

“Tropical island, sitting in a chair, the sun warming my fur... Enjoying a fruity drink with a straw.” he chuckled. “Being served by a human with the biggest tits you’ve ever seen.”

“Or normal tits for a human and you’re just too small to tell.” Carmen said snarkily. “Come on horny boy, put that thing away so we can get to work. No one in or out without Dr. Coren’s consent, remember? Only one of us worked security last night.”

He seemed confused. “Put what away?”

Heidi looked at him and shook her head. “Just pull down your shirt.” she said. “And... try to think of rotted fruit or something.”

Kaylee had tried not to look, but she’d seen it. In fact, as gross as it felt to admit, she’d *smelled* it. It was a sort of musk. It made her feel like a disgusting animal to even acknowledge that it’d happened. In truth, she could smell them all. She recognized them as much by scent as by sight. She could tell who was male or female, she could even tell what kind of mood they were in. “We need to be more dignified than this,” she said to her mother. “Thank god we slept away from the humans. I’d be embarrassed for them to see how we woke up this morning.”

“Hey...” Alan said, looking at himself in the reflection of a polish napkin dispenser mounted just above the counter. “Am I done? Are the changes finally over?”

Heidi walked over to him and pulled on his tail, making him tumble off the stepping stool and chitter at her in objection. “Ya look it, ta me.” she smirked. “But we’ll need to test ourselves to be sure.”

“Stop making those noises!” Kaylee protested. “Don’t let the humans hear you make those noises! You have to remember who you are!”

The tod was annoyed, rolling his eyes at her insistence. In truth, he had to suppress his urge to chitter at her more in response. “I haven’t forgotten who I am, Kaylee.” he complained. “You can do it, so can we. It doesn’t make me any less the man I’ve always been.”

Kaylee walked to the corner of the room and grabbed her spear before pushing the door open into the hall. “Well, that doesn’t make it dignified. It’s like eating on all fours out of a bowl. Don’t do it. It’s disgusting.”

Dr. Ramirez had been walking down the hall when she saw the door open. She was preparing to wake them anyway, making her grateful that she no longer had to. “Good morning Kaylee.” she said as she saw the vixen leaving the room with her spear in hand. “Did you sleep well?”

“I slept better in Mrs. Rannie’s spare bedroom.” she said, looking up at her cynically. “I don’t want to sleep with a bunch of animals.” She started to walk down the hall toward the cafeteria. “Good morning, Anne.”

“Uhm... K... Kaylee, the humans are eating in there right now and-”

“And..?” she asked, stopping mid step without turning around.

“And they wanted us to wait until they were done b... before you joined them.”

The vixen closed her eyes, remembering breakfast with The Rannies only the day before. How quickly things had changed. Being separated from the ‘humans’ made her feel inferior, like she was some kind of animal, but after seeing the way Dr. Coren had behaved only moments before, she could empathize with their perspective. She turned back to look at Anne. “Can we talk for a minute? Alone?” she asked with pleading eyes.

“Sure, let’s go to my office.” she nodded.

The pair walked in silence, the spear’s wooden end sometimes clonking against the floor if the vixen placed it down too hard. She didn’t want it to be noisy, the clicking of her claws against the floor were enough. She noticed as they moved, that it took her nearly two steps for every one of Anne’s. She hadn’t really paid attention to it before. It was yet another thing the infected had lost from their fading humanity.

Arriving in the office, Anne grabbed a stack of books and placed them in a chair, letting the vixen climb into it so that they could sit eye to eye. “Is that good enough?” she asked as she sat across the desk. “What’d you wanna talk about?”

“It’s good, thanks.” Kaylee nodded, looking over her shoulder for a moment to make sure that the door had been closed. “It’s... about… the others. The infected, I guess.” she explained. “They don’t seem to know what they’re doing. Their humanity’s slipping away from them, and they don’t even seem to care! If large swaths of the human population fall to this, and there’s no one there to pick them up and slap them back into lives they used to live, your civilization’s going to fall apart!”

It didn’t come as a surprise to Anne to hear such an assertion. It’d already been floated by several of her colleagues. The behavior they’d observed from Dr. Coren and Dr. Venner was greatly deviant from the humans they’d been before. More than that, it seemed to progress with each day of their transformation. “I’ve... noticed.” she said simply.

“This morning, Alan got fussy with me because I tried to climb out of the pile they’d formed around me on the bed. He didn’t like it and he geckered at me. Like an animal! Of course, I did it right back at him and I shoved him out of the bed because that’s what he was trying to do to me anyway.” she explained, nodding to the sunlit courtyard behind the researcher. “Last night, I took him out to the courtyard, to let him hear and smell and see what’s changed in his perception. He tried to climb a tree! What the hell for?? He didn’t have an excuse. Just said he wanted to.”

For a fox, these behaviors didn’t seem that odd. In fact, hearing Kaylee rationalize herself, stating that she retorted in the same manner, told the young researcher that the vixen was likely suppressing a lot more than she was really letting on. Still, she was becoming worried. Were these abnormalities already in place when Alan and Heidi had first started to change? Or had he been slipping more with each passing day? “You think… that’s going to get worse?” she worried. “Maybe… maybe they’re going to devolve past you?”

The vixen shook her head. “I honestly don’t think so,” she replied. “I have the same sorts of urges, but I know how to deal with them. It’s just that... what’s done is done. Their minds have been rewired. Their intelligence is still there, same as mine, but they’re trapped with instincts they don’t understand!” She sighed and shifted her weight on the hard books. It simply didn’t feel natural to sit this way. Her legs dangled, her tail was pinched, and the books were hard. “Ya know, if you wanna make noises like that and roll around in a pile of fur in your own bed, that’s fine. But if we do things like that in front of humans... they’ll treat us like the animals we are! And… and you know that the general population of infected people outside of this place isn’t going to know any better. This is never going to work! Not with them acting like animals like that!”

The researcher nodded understandingly. “I had noticed… changes in them, yes. Not just with what they say and how they act toward us but… little things. The way they tilt their heads or splay their ears, the... proximity behavior, obviously. Growling, baring their teeth at us… sniffing at things… it’s certainly there. Making noises like that I don’t think is really… surprising? Necessarily? But it does help me paint the picture.”

Kaylee tilted her head in response. Her dismissal of the importance of it confused her. She hadn’t even realized she’d mimicked the very behavior the young woman had reported. “Anne, if… you were out in the wild, ya know… working in a different field or a different facility, and you heard about these infected people, how would you react?”

“I would… stay in my home. I ‘d avoid them. And… and I would hope that the authorities would do everything they could to slow the spread.”

“What if they couldn’t?” she asked. “Devil’s advocate here… say… you lived in some town somewhere and you’d never heard of any of this. This starts happening, you try to avoid the infected, you urge the government to do something and they just… can’t. Everyone that tries winds up infected and changes their mind. It starts spreading out of control as people start to intentionally infect one another out of spite, or anger… or love. You see these things on TV or on the street, even if you go out you might see them in stores and they’ll be bickering, geckering and swatting their hands at each other, growling and hissing at humans that get near them… calling them ‘human,’ rather than by their name… how would that make you feel?”

The young woman already felt devastated. Just hearing it made her stomach churn. “Awful.” she said dejectedly. “It... it’d make me feel awful. Like the world was crashing down around me.”

“Would those things ever be equals to you in your eyes?” the vixen continued. “Would you sit beside them in a movie theater without fear that they’d hiss and bite you and force you to join their ranks? What if... after all that… they’re neutralized and they’re suddenly no longer contagious, but they still act the way they’ve been acting… what then?”

Anne felt sick to her stomach. “You’re... You’re moving too fast, Kaylee. I’m getting sick just thinking about all this.”

The vixen’s ears splayed. “Sorry. Not my intention. But... you see what I mean, right? These *behaviors*… are going to throw a wrench into their plans. We have to be accepted by humans, and to do that, *we need to be humans* in different bodies.”

Dr. Ramirez felt guilty for what she was about to say. Looking at the vixen, she took a long, slow breath. “Kaylee, I don’t want to sound rude, but... that’s not what you are. It’s not what you’ll ever be. You’re not human. And those that are infected? We now know… that they’re not either. Vulpes Sapiens are not Homo Sapiens. They’re not human. They won’t act like us, they won’t think like us… once they lose it, it’s gone. And they won’t ever see it again.” She stopped herself with a sigh, looking at the photo of her husband once more. “They’re shadows of who they used to be, but nothing more. The virus alters their brain. They’ll always be something different. Humanity will never accept them as the same.”

Kaylee understood. As she stared blankly at the desk in front of her, her ears began to splay. The plan they’d executed the night before, propagating the virus, their silence, trying to protect the people of Friendly… it wasn’t going to be enough. Anne was right. Vulpes Sapiens were not and would never again be Homo Sapiens. Their behavior was normal, for themselves, she supposed, but it wouldn’t be seen as legitimate by the humans. Or would it? Her mind swirled with ideas, questions and theories as she tried to process it all at once. It wouldn’t be difficult to imagine, or even to test in a small environment like the lab, or even in Friendly, but this was so much bigger. The only testing they could do would be real time, and the only control would be the virus itself. There was no room for instruction or guidance for the people outside that were infected with… her. They would be who they would be. This was beyond their control.

“We…” she started distantly. “We should probably talk to the corporate heads before tomorrow.” she said finally. “I need... We... need to talk to the others.”

Chapter 37

Anne sat with the others in a closed-door meeting, taking their seats in the much smaller executive conference room in the far wing. Gathered there with her was Heidi, Alan, and Kaylee. Those outside of this small circle knew the meeting was taking place, but didn't know anything about the details, leading to wild speculation. Dr. Shaw of course, leading this charge.

"So, what's up, Kaylee?" Heidi asked, having no real idea as to why the meeting had been called in this way. "You think of something else?"

The vixen nodded. "I did." she said. "And... I wanted Anne here because it was her perspective that really brought it to light. Dr. Venner, Dr. Coren… I realize that we've been looking at this from the angle of strength through propagation. I even... I followed your logic on it and in large part I still do. But… the problem I'm running into here, even from the standpoint of validity, and well... uncontainable pandemics… is our behavior, and the humans perception of that behavior."

"With an R value this high, they're not going to be in charge for long, Kaylee." Dr. Coren explained. "Think about this, they're going to panic, you and I both know that. Anne knows it. But in the end, we're *so* contagious that they won't be able to stop it until their species is entirely destroyed. Either that, or it's so diluted that they'll give up on any sort of cure, and just accept their new lives."

Anne shook her head. "Alan you're looking at this from the standpoint of a director, not from an everyday citizen." she explained, doing her best to fluff his ego. "The people on the ground are going to react with violence, chaos, fear and panic. Store shelves will empty, foxes will be killed, humans will be killed *by* foxes… the virus will spread so fast that riots and micro-wars will erupt in every locale. People will start to become tribal. Society will collapse!"

Kaylee looked at her curiously. She didn't necessarily believe in *that* scenario, but kept her mouth shut to see what the others would say.

"Not likely," Heidi explained. "Take the last pandemic that we have on record. We did see unrest, denial, but more than anything, people worked together."

"Because the virus made people sick and die. It didn't change their brains, their bodies and their behavior." Dr. Ramirez insisted. "The Venner virus doesn't kill. It changes. And with you two, it's done so quickly. Remember just four days ago both of you were taller than me. You've changed in ways that you would've likely considered unimaginable in such a short period of time. No one will believe that the Venner Virus is fake. But what they *will* believe is that it's dangerous. They'll become paranoid of each other."

Alan shook his head. “It doesn’t matter!” he argued. “If society is going to collapse because of a foreign virus like this… it will be *humans* that are to blame for it! Not us! Besides, we’ve already started propagation. We’re awaiting feedback from Clara Rannie on the status of the town… we can’t stop what’s already in place, so what is this meeting even for?”

“How to brace for impact.” Kaylee responded. “That’s what we need to know. How do we prepare? The storm is here, Alan. How do we survive it?”

The group fell silent as they all considered their options. There were a lot of variables here, and no way to know how any one group would react. It was doubtful, given the circumstances, that GERCorp would view this in any favorable way. The propagation mission that’d started the night before made sense as a result, but the company already knew about the virus. They already had the notes. If they kept silent now, they wouldn’t have control of the messaging.

The largest and most… consequential unknown however, came from the open-ended nature of the containment documentation. Would it be possible to coerce Dr. Venner into providing instructions that would render the contagion inert? Would they be able to develop it themselves? To reverse it? Would they try? There was no way to know. With the models still running on the heavily burdened mainframe, the solutions to questions like this would take more time than they currently had available.

“Alan…” Heidi asked finally. “Do you have anyone at this company… outside of this room… that you know that you can absolutely trust?

The tod sighed and nodded. He’d been thinking along the same line. “The man who hired me.” he said. “Dr. Igor Klassen.”

“The director of the North American region?” Anne asked. “Don’t you report to him?”

Alan shook his head. “No, I report to the Provincial director, who reports to the Canadian director, who reports to him.” he explained. “And... below me there were what... 5 other directors between Heidi and myself? Yet here we are as the top decision makers; the director, a senior researcher, a junior researcher, and a former specimen.”

“Thanks...? I guess?” Kaylee asked. “I mean you did say *former*.”

“Alright so how do we get ahold of him?” Heidi wondered. “I’m sure he’s aware of what’s happening here, but there’ s no way to talk to him… unofficially, is there?”

“I need to get to my cellphone.” Dr. Coren responded. “Anne, is that something you can help with? Heidi and I both should probably get our wallets and effects. It’s inside the lockbox system.”

“The biometric system…” Anne sighed. “Shit... Maybe Gene can help with that? There’s no way you’d pass verification like this.”

“Let’s hope so,” Alan agreed. He started to get up, but Anne put out her hand, a bit too close for his comfort, he did everything he could to suppress a growl at the proximity of her arm to his maw.

“Wait...” she said, seeming surprisingly unphased by his visible yet momentary internal struggle. “What’s our plan? Contact Dr. Klassen and… what?”

“Contact Dr. Klassen, make sure we can trust him and tell him what’s happening.” Heidi replied. “We also need to confiscate all the human’s cellphones. Since we’ll need to drop the cell blocker to access it on Alan’s device. We can’t have them contaminating this.”

Anne raised a brow, “you don’t think any of *your* people would… contaminate it?” she asked. “Why do you always assume it’s us?”

“Because you all still think the other humans will reward you for being dutiful to your species.” the tod responded, making Anne and Kaylee both look at him in confusion. “Look, just make sure they don’t have a way to call out, okay? We can’t have this being sabotaged. We’re already threading a needle.”

Dr. Ramirez sighed, trying to avoid another argument. “Okay so… again, we contact Dr. Klassen, tell him, hey doc guess what we’re propagating a virus across the entire world, and we need you, as director of North America to get out ahead of this and make sure that the company isn’t blamed! Oh, and that the company doesn’t try to stop this… because… we’re going to erase humanity with… our virus? Is that about right?”

Kaylee buried her head in her hands. “We don’t have this figured out at all.” she sighed.

“We tell him, the truth of the matter.” Alan argued as he returned to the table. This obviously wasn’t as settled as he’d thought. “We were infected, containment of the infection has failed, and in an effort to survive, we’ve propagated ourselves in a way to admonish the company of blame. We need the company to step in and claim that they’ve researched the virus, that it has benefits. THEN… we can discuss a cessation to contagion. Prior to that point, the virus is contagious, and we do not plan to stop it.”

“I don’t think they’re gonna buy the benefits line, Alan,” Kaylee objected. “Humans don’t seem to think that way. They like their species, and they don’t want to give it up. Even if you push the benefits to the company, all it’ll do is make them want to strip it out of us. Take the good, eliminate the bad. It’ll give them fuel to use against us.”

He shook his head. “No. No, look at what it’s already doing! We have 2 specimens in quarantine right now that are showing signs of improvement from incurable disease, and the regrowth of an eye! You mean to tell me the humans wouldn’t want that??”

“At the cost of their humanity?” Anne wondered. “And at the risk of becoming contagious such that they unintentionally harm those around them… no. I don’t think the majority would accept such a thing. Not without a way to render the contagion inert.”

“So we hold the contagion as a bargaining chip,” Heidi suggested, “tell them we’re working on it. It’s a true statement, we just don’t know if it’s possible.”

Kaylee shook her head. “How would that even work, mom?” she asked. “How do you stop this from being contagious?”

The vixen pondered her response. Was Kaylee intelligent enough to understand? She was certainly curious. She’d always sought to learn as much as she could. “It um…” she started, trying to find the best description. “The problem we have right now is that the xenobots don’t have a border. They encounter a host with no bots, they see it as an empty apartment, basically. So, they set up and take over. To stop the contagion, we’d need to… instruct the bots that the host they’re contained within… is the only host they can possess.”

“And how would you do that?” Anne worried. “I’m not versed in these things but-“

The vixen’s ears splayed back in frustration. “I don’t know!” she shouted. “Okay?? That’s why we’re running the- Look why would I have all- This is beyond me! It’s just that simple!” She sighed, awkwardly trying to climb down from the chair she’d been sitting in like a human. “They called me a savant when I was younger, but that doesn’t mean I’m the compendium of all knowledge. Even about my own inventions.”

“So we tell them the truth, work on containment, and only after they cooperate with us do we present the research on that.” Alan summarized. “Everyone good? I’m getting really stuffy in this room.”

“So, blackmail, then.” Anne retorted. “Keep this quiet, or we won’t stop it from spreading?”

He looked at her in frustration. “Aaarr...” he chittered quietly. He wanted to leave! But the human wouldn’t stop talking! Hearing the sound alarmed her, causing her to recoil. Had she pushed him too far?

“Stop that!” Kaylee demanded, prompting him to simply fuss at her more, opening his maw as he continued to chitter. “We need her take, that’s why she’s here. Stop acting like an animal.”

“What would you have me do?” he demanded. “Explain to me how a *human* would handle this situation, since everyone here’s so sure that our brains have been scrambled by the virus. Obviously, I’m not a rational being anymore, right?? I just want to run around climbing trees and mating everywhere!”

“I didn’t-” Anne started, closing her eyes in a sigh. “I can’t say that a human would handle this any differently,” she replied. “Just that… holding something that may not be possible over their heads in an effort to force their silence… probably isn’t the best strategy.”

Kaylee agreed, nodding silently.

“It’s a tool for now,” Heidi replied, “we tell them the truth. We’re working on it… but we leave the likelihood of the solution out of the discussion.”

“And what is that likelihood?” Kaylee worried.

Heidi shook her head, her ears splaying in frustration. “Almost zero.”

Chapter 38

“What was that all about?” Dr. Shaw asked as Jake, Gil, and Jennifer made their way into the room. Jake and Jennifer had kept their BioSec shirts, which were baggy, but still fit, while wearing white scrub pants to cover their lower bodies. “Do you three know?”

“Know what?” Jake asked. “We were just getting… looked at. We haven’t heard anything.”

“Dr. Coren, Dr. Venner, and Dr. Ramirez met with Kaylee in a private room about something.” Jaren explained. “How are you feeling Gil, any giggles yet?”

The man, having yet to change at all, shook his head. “Nope. Nothin yet.” he said. “You don’t think I’m immune, do ya?”

Jennifer looked at him with a smirk. “Wishful thinking, huh?” she asked. “You’re starting to stink like we do. You’re infected buddy.”

“Well, then I guess... Later today?” Gil asked. He seemed surprisingly unconcerned about it. In truth, he was worried sick, but with no way to stop it, all he could do was wait for the inevitable.

“So, what are they doing, then? Some new plan? Have we heard anything from town? I feel like I’m in the dark here.” Dr. Shaw sighed.

“Ya know fat boy, your constant need for attention is really annoying.” Jennifer complained. “Anyone ever tell you that? You are so fucking noisy, I have no idea how in the hell you wound up being a researcher at a place like this.”

Jaren shook his head at her. “Ma’am, Dr. Shaw is one of the country’s top experts on parasites.” he replied. “He’s won multiple awards, graduated high school when he was 12, and completed his doctorate at 23.”

“An expert at parasites, huh?” she asked with a smirk.

“Don’t say it.” he growled at her.

She was just about to speak when she noticed that Anne had entered the room with Kaylee.

The researcher looked at everyone apologetically, then sighed. “Gene... can you... enable cell service for just one device?”

“Nope.” he replied flatly, playing a game on his tablet at the conference table. “All or nothin.”

“Alright…” she sighed. “Them, Jake, Jennifer, Gil... I’m going to need you to go around and confiscate everyone’s devices.”

Danny looked at her in disbelief, standing up from the table. “What the fuck, Anne?”

“We need to make a phone call, and Dr. Coren doesn’t trust you.” Kaylee said bluntly. “So, he wants any device that can reach outside these walls confiscated so that you don’t interfere.”

Dr. Gilford looked at Anne curiously, wondering what she might be planning. “What about the people we let leave last night?” he asked. “If someone wanted to breach this... seems like it woulda been one of *them*, right?”

“They were all infected.” Carmen said as she entered the doorway, looking at Kaylee with the wag of her tail. “Dr. Coren sent me to oversee this.”

“Wait, I thought that they were given a way to infect themselves later so that they wouldn't start to turn before reaching their destinations?” Jake worried. “You... changed that?”

“Yep,” the vixen said simply. “Now come on. Humans, those of you who are still mostly human... Hand over your devices. Tablets, phones, anything like it. You’ll get em back when the cell blocker’s turned back on.”

Danny looked at Anne, then at Carmen. “I’m not gonna call out.” he said. “B... but… I’m not giving you my tablet. This fuckin thing has been my sanity the last few days.”

The vixen almost seemed to revel in the fact that he was saying no. sneering through her teeth at him. “Do I need to make an example out of you?” she asked, walking past Kaylee and Anne into the room. “Because it’d be so easy to-” she felt Kaylee’s hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t do that, please? This is already too tense as it is.” she urged her.

The vixen looked like she’d been scolded by a parent. “But Kaylee, if we don’t have enforcement, we don’t have anything. The humans have to be kept in line. Especially this one.”

The vixen shook her head. “Carmen, he’s done nothing wrong, except complain.”

“And try to undermine our work!” she objected. “I’ve urged Dr. Venner to let me infect him multiple times. But she won’t let me! Only if he does something that makes it required... She’s said.” She looked back at him. “So please, give me a reason, fat boy.” she said toothily. “I want to see if that fat melts away when you’re changed. Maybe we can even experiment on you with hormones, see if you wind up a vixen like me? I think that’d be *very* useful information.”

“Stop it.” Kaylee said gently. “You’re security, not research.”

“Alright.” she said with a smile and bright eyes, wagging her tail. “But only because you said so.” She looked back at the others. “Cough em up. Put em on the conference table, and I’ll take them to storage.”

“How?” Danny asked. “How are you gonna hold all those devices with those tiny little hands of yours?”

“I’m gonna help her. Now stop it.” Anne growled. “Being an instigator isn’t fucking helping us.”

The humans begrudgingly gave up their devices, all the while with Gene looking around in alarm. “Should... I...?”

“No. We need you to unlock the biometric system.” Kaylee said. “So that Dr. Coren can make a phone call that isn’t linked to the lab.”

Anne nodded. “After you do that, and the phone call takes place… you can re-enable the cell blocker, and then give everyone their devices. We’re not trying to keep them permanently.”

Danny shook his head, then placed his on the table. “We...” he repeated “Can’t believe you’re siding with them.”

“Level with us, girlie.” Jennifer encouraged her. “What’s goin’ on? The festival’s tomorrow. What’s gonna happen?”

Anne stammered, then looked to Kaylee, who nodded that it was okay. “We’ve decided that… Vulpes Sapien behavior is… not compatible with human sensibilities.” she started. “Because... where they can be taught here by... Kaylee and myself, the people in Friendly, and... The other cities we’re apparently infecting… will not have those lessons. We’re trying to get ahead of it with the goal of… obfuscating the origin and offering solutions. Trying to treat this more like… uh...”

“An inevitability?” Carmen asked happily. “You should tell everyone who’s trans out in the world that they should start their hormones right away. The virus will fix them. Make them whole. There’s no reason to hold onto your humanity anymore. Cast it off like an old pair of pants.”

“We’re… going to let GERCorp do the front-end messaging,” the researcher explained, “but since Dr. Venner is the only one that knows how to stop the contagion, we’re going to keep that under our hats. Until… until the species is viable. Then... we can start pushing for a plan to render it inert.”

“What’s that supposed to do?” Danny asked, his tone was different than before, more... worried, than cynical. “Serious question. People start gettin’ furry out there, start… acting like self-obsessed narcissistic assholes and wanting to turn everyone to *liberate them* from their tall, fleshy existence, what good is it going to be for GERCorp to come out and say ‘Everyone calm down, we know what this virus does and offer no solution to stop it??’”

Anne sighed. “I don’t know.” she said finally. “That’s not my call. It’s for people that are higher up than us. And the only reason we’re even doing this is to prevent the company from coming down on us and trying to lock the place down. ALL we’re trying to do at this point is avoid BioSec, basically. The rest of the chips are gonna fall where they may. We have no control over those variables.”

“If we tell people we’re working on it, they’re gonna hold out hope.” he said tiredly, his voice starting to waver. “All of us in here have been holding out hope. For what? I don’t even know. But for SOMETHING to come in here and end this nightmare. You tell the people out there the same thing, they’re gonna do that too. Hold out for hope. Maybe they barricade themselves in their homes and starve to death waiting. Maybe they lock their infected family members in the closets, maybe they make a noose… we don’t know! But if you promise something this dire will have an end… but you don’t tell them when? You’re gonna make a painful situation into one that’s literally mental torture for everyone involved.”

Anne could empathize with what he was saying. She’d followed his logic the entire time. It just wasn’t viable. She’d sided against him every time because of it. “We have to let the company handle the messa-” she started to say again.

“Because what’s the alternative, right?” he asked, his voice quivering, nearly in tears. “Leave people to their own devices? Tell them nothing? This virus sweeps the world, an unimaginable number of people are going to die! And this facility will be the cause of it all! Don’t you understand that you’re gambling with people’s lives??”

“The virus doesn’t kill, it-“ Kaylee started, her ears splaying at the researchers emotional outpouring. He was really scared of this. Maybe she should be, too.

“I’m not talking about the virus doing the killing you walking fur coat!” he screamed. “I’m talking about suicides. I’m talking about camps… I’m talking about innocent people being put to death because they got infected! P… people like... my wife.” He started to sob. “I... I can’t even talk to Eddie to see if she’s okay! And you take our phones like a bunch of monsters the second you drop the blocker! And say that WE’RE the ones that can’t be TRUSTED.”

“I can’t take this! I just… when can I go home?” he pleaded. “Now? After the festival? After the town’s infected? After *I’m* infected?? What’s it take, guys? When do we get to leave? When the fuck do we get to go feed our pets, water our plants and hug our families?? WHEN DOES IT HAPPEN??”

He stood up, storming his way across the room before stopping in front of Carmen. Bending down, he held his arm out in front of her. “Infect me.” he said. “Do it.”

“Wh-” she stammered, looking at Kaylee and Anne in confusion.

“DO IT!” he demanded. “Do it or I’ll MAKE YOU DO IT YOU RAT!” he yelled.

“Dr. Shaw, calm-” Anne started, but the man had clearly had enough. Tears were streaming down his face as he looked at Carmen, begging her.

“Do it so I don’t have to be afraid anymore!” he pleaded, sobbing as he spoke. “Do it so that I can see Eddie again. If she’s gonna die in a torture camp, then I’m gonna die with her! I can’t do this anymore!”

Carmen was terrified, having this human so close to her, practically forcing his arm into her mouth. He wasn’t afraid and she knew it. He could hurt her! He was so much larger up close. She looked at Kaylee again, desperate for an answer.

The vixen hated it. All of it. The stress had broken him. With these ominous predictions, she couldn’t help but worry that it’d broken her, too. She didn’t want this. All she’d done was escape to survive. A chaos inducing, world ending plague was never in her plans! “Danny, what is it that you-“

“I want your brain!” he demanded. “I want this sunny mindset you all fucking have! I’m tired of sitting here worrying myself sick about my wife, wondering when you’re gonna turn me! Just FUCKING DO IT ALREADY!” He forced himself onto Carmen, pressing his arm against her maw. “DO IT!”

She fell backward, whining and chittering in stressful confusion. “What do I do?!” she squeaked.

Kaylee sighed, nodding in agreement. “Go ahead…” she said somberly.

Timidly, Carmen eyed his arm, her own ears splaying as she looked into his terrified, pleading eyes, then back to his arm in quick repetition. She opened her maw, gasping as he quickly forced his arm deeper, making her bite down from the sudden pressure.

He held it there until he could see his blood, then pulled it away, falling back onto the floor as he lay there, sobbing on his side in a fetal position.

“I... I’m sorry...” Carmen whimpered, backing away as she licked his blood from her teeth. “I... I didn’t… you made me- I…”

“It’s okay, Carmen.” Anne said calmingly. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

His sobbing grew louder as he cupped his hands over his face to control the cry that quickly grew to wailing. It was finally over. He didn’t have to be afraid of them anymore.

The onlookers were horrified, some of them crying and covering their mouths, seeing the very same pain and fear they’d been burying so deeply on full display before them. Even the BioSec team was struggling to comprehend it.

“Come on...” Jennifer said sympathetically, helping Danny to his feet. “Let’s get you a comfortable place to lay down, okay? The breakroom’s got a nice couch, right?” She gently led him from the room, leaving the others in silence.

“Dr… Ramirez.” Jaren said finally, looking up as he held up his tablet. “When Dr. Coren speaks to his… old friend, I suggest he present to him the data I’ve been collecting since all of this began.” He looked around the room. “I know this may seem intrusive to you all and I’m sorry that this is the case, but I’ve been aggregating everything that I can into one place. Bodily changes, test results, sentiment, words that’ve been spoken, rumors, actions… every bit of it. That way… anyone looking at this data can see what happens in a controlled environment.” He looked out the door, then down to Carmen, who still looked guilty. “Because this is what happens. This is a real-world moment. Families are gonna be making decisions like this. Some will turn people out of spite, or by force, others will want to be turned, still others will break under the pressure and the fear and will beg to be turned just to stop it from hovering over their heads. We have many different types of personalities here, and this is the sort of thing we need to document.”

He stood up and walked to Anne, placing his tablet in her hands. “And I remind you all, that despite all of this... Most of us are still human. The virus is scary because we can see what it does. We watch our coworkers and friends twist and change... physically and mentally right before our eyes… but despite it all? There’s been no huge spread. Once we knew what was causing it, we protected ourselves. The same sort of thing will happen out there.”

Kaylee’s ears were splayed as she listened. Jaren should’ve been involved in their discussion. He’d been sitting so quietly through all of this that she didn’t know what he’d been doing. Even now, she couldn’t truly say that she knew the man that well.

Gene sighed. “Alright… all the devices not locked away are right here on the table. I’ve dropped the blocker, but I’ll need to go to the lockers to disable the biometrics. Give me a minute to do that, and you can all have access to your things.” He stood up, then walked to the door, stopping in front of Carmen. “Can you take me down there?” he asked, trying to give her a hopeful smile.

“S… sure, right this way, Gene.” she said, leading him out of the room.

Kaylee looked at the shocked and tearful humans with her ears still splayed. “I never wanted any of this. I want you all to know that.” She said in muted self-defense. No one had blamed her, but she still felt responsible. “What we’re proposing is… well I feel like it’s highly unethical. I worry… that Dr. Shaw has some good points. I don’t share this… drive to propagate like those of you who are infected seem to have. I just wanna live.”

“So do we,” Jake interjected. “it’s not a desire to propagate, so much as it’s a desire to *live*. Regardless of what Danny says, there’s strength in numbers. The more exposure we have the better. Hell… the more of us exist, the more humans will know someone that’s infected and sympathize with their plight. We’ll have allies.”

He looked around at the humans, trying to gauge their responses. They weren’t jumping on board, but they were at least starting to calm down. Spotting a whiteboard in the corner, he came up with an idea. “How about a little game to calm everyone down?” he asked. “It’s a bit silly, but... I think we could all use it right now.” He walked to the board, then pushed it in front of the TV. “Let’s play... Picto-guess.” he smiled.

Chapter 39

Alan was sitting at the small executive conference table as he scrolled through Dr. Gilford's tablet with the others. "Wow... you got everything in here, huh?" he asked. "Heh... you even have my change photos. Look at that... God it feels like it's been years since I saw that face in a mirror."

"Holy hell and look at me!" Heidi chuckled. "I was so *tall*!"

Kaylee wanted to remind her that it wasn't just an old photo, but a photo of what she'd lost. Instead, she bit her tongue.

"Dr. Gilford, this is great. Really great," the tod beamed. "I'll make sure after the call that he gets all of this data so that-"

"I uh... As Kaylee was talking about the plan with all this, I scrubbed the documentation I had in there about the contagion mitigation," Jaren interrupted. "She said you didn't want to disclose that, so I moved it out of the folder."

"If I could give you a raise or a promotion right now, I totally would," Alan laughed. "Great work on this Jaren. Really. Do you want to stay for the call?"

The researcher shook his head. "If it's all the same to you, sir. I'd prefer to keep an eye on Gil. Once he has his euphoria spell, I'd like to take scans of his brain. During, after, and the following day."

"Agreed," Alan nodded. "The more data we have the better. Thank you again, Jaren." He watched him leave, his now fully developed tail wagging, pleased by the data that he'd been given. "This is great. Isn't it great?" he asked Heidi.

"It's great, honey." she smiled. "It's... a little wild to see those two, though. I mean… they're us, but… they're not. Ya know?"

"Honey?" Kaylee wondered. "Are you guys seriously in a relationship now?"

"Kinda..." Heidi shrugged.

Alan smiled, holding her hand. "A little bit more than 'kinda,'" he cooed.

Kaylee didn't want to even think of the implications. She still remembered the pair and the way they'd argued in her lab that day. They were coworkers, business professionals working in a laboratory. Now it seemed… they were just two foxes. It seemed that they'd completely given up on the rather human notion of rank. Though she supposed, she could use that to her advantage, given the way they'd obeyed her in the courtyard. "Can I... look at that data while you're talking to Igor?" she asked. "I'm kinda surprised Jaren did this."

Her mother nodded, sliding the tablet toward her as Alan called Dr. Klassen.

Looking down at the familiar device, she gently scrolled through the photos. The changes, when viewed in reverse, from a fox like herself to a human were... lifting on her spirits. Somehow, seeing this fox growing taller, losing their fur and muzzle... It felt right to her, even though she knew that it was impossible. Part of her though, still saw it as a horror. She honestly couldn't say that she'd go through with such a change, if she were offered.

She continued to flip through it, stopping with a silent gasp as she saw a photo of Heidi holding a tiny fox kit in her hand, so small that she'd not even opened her eyes. Her mouth began to quiver as she tilted her head at it, looking at the smiling human, eagerly holding the tiny fox. Flipping through it more revealed photo after photo of Dr. Venner and herself in her various forms of growth and development. "Momma…" she whimpered quietly, a tear suddenly falling onto the tablet as she realized she was crying. She looked up at Heidi, her fur gently rutting with tears as she looked at the vixen with a sympathy she didn't even seem to need. "I took all that from you."

Heidi looked up at her, her ears tilting in confusion as her head moved to match "Hmm? Took what, honey?" she asked, immediately refocusing her attention as the phone began to ring.

Dr. Coren placed it on the table in front of him, motioning for the pair to be quiet. After a few rings it seemed to be answered hastily.

"Alan!" Dr. Klassen's voice yelled urgently, interrupted by a heavy, wet cough. He seemed anxious. "Why are you just now calling me?? I've been trying to reach you for days!" Behind him was the sound of a busy locale, a restaurant perhaps? There were men arguing, a few words of Russian quickly bubbling through the pause.

"…Заразный! Этот проект - катастрофа!"
"Igor, return to the table, please!"

"Один момент, это важно..." Dr. Klassen replied. "Sorry about that, Alan. Speaking to some investors, heh… you know how that is. So what the fuck is going on? I heard you had a lab breach?"

“Dr. Klassen, uh... Yes sir.” The tod replied timidly. “Sir, do you have a place where we can speak confidently?”

“Why?” he asked hastily. “Alan what’s going on?”

“Tell me first,” Alan pressed. “Make sure you’re alone and… and make sure... let me know if I can trust you.”

The man on the line cleared his throat, “Just a moment.” he replied, walking for a time, then closing a door. “Alright. I’m alone. Tell me what’s going on, Alan.”

The tod took a deep breath. “So, the... short version here is that we’ve been studying the virus heavily since it was discovered, and-“

“Right, the ‘virus’.” Dr. Klassen replied hastily, seeming out of breath and overall unwell as he nervously cleared his throat. “Have you captured the specimen?”

Alan stammered, not sure how to respond. “Uhm… well… As you know, Dr. Venner was infected during escape and… well she’s working through symptoms to try to-“

“She’s working through the symptoms?” Dr. Klassen asked, cutting him off. “So, what does that mean?”

“Doctor, this is Heidi Venner. How... involved have you been in this issue?” the vixen asked.

The aging man on the other end of the phone coughed wetly into what seemed to be a handkerchief. “Issue? Oh, you have no idea, Dr. venner,” he said cryptically. “But on the subject of your breach and subsequent infection, I know next to nothing. Tell me.”

Alan was visibly nervous, his tail curling around his side as his ears splayed. “S... so... Igor, I need your word that... that you will absolutely keep what I’m about to tell you in the strictest confidentiality. Can... I get that from you? We’ve been colleagues for decades. This is a *big ask*, but I really need your help here.”

The man took in a deep breath, then let it out slowly, trying to suppress an impending cough. “You have my word, Alan,” he said calmly. “Tell me.”

“The virus we’re dealing with here it… changes people.” The fox stammered nervously. “It’s not fatal. There’re no ill health effects, in fact… our research has found that it can cure many ailments, it may even regrow lost limbs. But it comes at… a cost. And that cost has been paid by a number of my staff, in… including myself.”

Dr. Klassen coughed abruptly. “You’re talking about the xenobots, right?” he asked. “We know about that. Are you saying… what are you saying, Dr. Coren?”

“It changes us. Physically,” Alan continued. “If... you’re familiar at all with escaped specimen CV716, the virus basically… used her as a template for our physical appearance and goes to great lengths to make it happen.”

Much to their surprise, the man on the other end of the phone chuckled. “Templates to the… so… CV716 was vulpine, right? So, it templated to a fox? What’s it done to you? Have you caught the specimen?? You keep dodging my questions.”

Heidi looked at Kaylee with her ear splayed. She knew how much she hated being spoken of like this. “She’s here, yes sir,” she replied. “The uh… specimen… that is.”

“CV716, affectionately named Kaylee by Dr. Venner, is a fox that was purchased from the Friendly fox-fur farm about 14 months ago,” Alan explained. “She was given a series of injections using a xenobot colony that contained instructions to alter her genetic code, and her physical body. Over that time period, it significantly altered her mind and physiology. She is now… mostly bipedal, and highly intelligent, exhibiting many human-like characteristics.”

He looked Kaylee over with a pause as if to take stock. “Secondary sex characteristics, hands, that sort of thing… they’re the most notable. We uh… lost funding on the project, as you know… and discovered when she tried to escape that she was… contagious. The xenobot programming had templated her genetic code. And... anyone who comes into contact with this xenobot virus… is… adjusted… physically to closely mimic her, within the limitations of their own genetic origin.”

“What revision?” Dr. Klassen asked hastily. “You’re infected with CV716? What revision?”

Heidi and Alan looked at each other in confusion, looking back at Kaylee as if she had any clue. “Uh… revision… sir?” Dr. Coren asked.

“Funding had nothing to do with the issue,” Igor started, coughing as there was a loud banging on the door. “Занято! Занято!” he called out. “The project was to be scrubbed. Alan… you have the specimen, did she… what’s the impact here??”

“I’m like her now. I’m a... three-foot-ten-inch-tall bipedal fox,” he said finally his ears drooping with a sigh. “The process takes three to five days and… well it’s… very thorough ,sir.”

His words were met with an uncomfortable silence, the awkwardness growing with the participants in the room.

“Dr. Venner’s… seen the same changes, though she’s closer to three-foot-six-inches, and... And several of our staff, including three guards, three of BioSec team members, and a few researchers and general facility staff are as well, sir,” he continued.

The awkward silence continued, leaving the fox to wonder if the call had been dropped. “Dr. Klassen?”

“I’m here… I…” the aging man stammered. “Alan, your job was to get rid of this… not to… fucking… did it spread outside? Or is it contained with your facility? We can’t have this coming back to us, Alan!”

The fox was confused. Dr. Klassen seemed to be pre-empting everything he’d planned to say. “Yes sir… that… that’s why we… we didn’t want this to come back to us and so we’ve… sent our people out in a few directions to… misdirect from the origin of the infection and-“

“You what??” The aging man demanded, the strain in his voice degrading to another wet cough. “Dr. Coren, you’ve taken action to *intentionally spread this*??” He held the phone tightly, his breathing shaking as he struggled to keep his composure. “You had clear… instructions… from corporate,” he seethed. “Terminate the project and eliminate the specimens! Scrub the records and move Dr. Venner off site! And what did you do?? You let the fucking thing escape, let it infect you, and now you’re intentionally SPREADING IT THROUGHOUT CANADA!?” He panted as more noises could be heard in the background. It seemed that he was in a bathroom stall.

Alan looked at the other with a muted whine. “It reached Friendly, Igor,” he said timidly. “Our daughter escaped and… the infection reached friendly and con…contaminated the lab. We want to protect the town and… and the company from-“

“Your daughter…” Dr. Klassen echoed. “You’re calling the specimen your daughter now?”

He nodded, looking at Kaylee as if to get her permission to use the term. She titled her head but didn’t disagree. “I… I am, sir,” he argued. “Kaylee is our daughter, and we’ll protect her like any parent. Sir, we just want to live, that’s why we think that species vali-“

“You’re a fucking idiot, Coren,” Dr. Klassen cut him off. “You have no idea what’s even going on and you’ve just fucked humanity in the ass.”

The tod grunted. “Sir, I don’t understand. What’s going on? It sounds like-“

“YOU DON’T NEED TO UNDERSTAND!” Igor yelled, cutting him off furiously. “YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO DO WHAT YOU WERE TOLD! Dispose of a specimen, kill it, gut it, incinerate, scrub its records clean. That’s all! THAT’S ALL, ALAN! Yet here you are, taking things into your own hands… Mr. Tanaka’s not going to be pleased.”

“Igor you said you-“ Dr. Coren objected.

“I know what I said!” Igor barked. “I know what I said, but you don’t know the full picture. You don’t know it and you’re not *supposed* to know it. You were supposed to do your fucking job and keep your fucking mouth shut!”

Kaylee scowled at the phone. The voices she was hearing in the background sounded Russian, was Igor from Russia? “Dr. Klassen, why were you so eager to get rid of me?” she asked. “It doesn’t sound to me that my contagion was your primary concern.”

“If Dr. Coren doesn’t have the clearance for this, the specimen most *certainly* doesn’t have it,” he retorted. “So, what’re you doing right now? The Nevada team is working on a vaccine, right? A way to stop this mess from spreading?”

Heidi whined, catching an objectionable glare from her daughter. “We’re working on a way to stop the contagion, to render the virus inert,” she explained. “We have… no way to vaccinate humans against this condition.”

“And you’re in charge of that, Dr. Venner?” he asked.

“I am, and you need me,” she insisted. “So… so we don’t want you storming our lab or quarantining our town with-“

“We’re not doing that,” he interrupted her calmly, coughing, then clearing his throat. “It’s too late for that. What we need right now is to get ahead of this. Dr. Venner, you’re the face of all this but from the sound of things your… face… isn’t what it used to be. Am I understanding that correctly?”

Heidi looked at the others, then quickly tapped mute on the phone. “What’s going on?” she asked, her voice still hushed. “There’s something missing here. Alan, you told me that you were cancelling all of this because of the budget!”

“That’s what they told me was their reasoning!” he objected defensively. “Heidi, I wasn’t lying to you about any of that! It’s… true that they wanted Kaylee harvested and her records scrubbed, but they cited the budget as their cause! This… this sounds like something else.”

“Well we have a right to know! Don’t we??” Kaylee asked.

The tod gently shook his head. “No… that’s not how the corporate world works. We don’t have the right to know.” He leaned forward and tapped the mute button once more. “Uh, no sir, she’s infected as well.”

Igor cleared his throat, then coughed once more. “Alright, then what we’ll do is find a body double than can pose as Dr. Venner on TV. If what you’re saying is true, the shit’s really gonna hit the fan in the next few days and we as a company need to be ready. You shoulda contacted me before you sent a bunch of infected individuals out into the wild, but you did the right thing. Like you said, we need to obfuscate the origin of all this, and… and bury the lede. We can’t let it get out the GERCorp started all this. Not… not to the public… anyway.”

“A body double? Television?” Heidi asked. “It sounds like you already had a plan for all this.”

“It’ll make sense in time, I promise,” Igor replied. “For now, keep working on that contagion. It’s more important than you know.”

The call ended as abruptly as it’d begun, leaving the fox to ponder what’d just happened. “Can we go to the courtyard, please?” he asked, seeming to look at Kaylee for permission. “I wanna climb that tree again.”

“Alan, if we go out there your flight response might-” Kaylee started.

“I SAID I WANTED TO GO OUTSIDE!” he yelled, changing positions so that he was on his legs like haunches, his hands gripping the books as he bared his teeth at her. “RAaahh!” he squeaked like a fox, his hands moving to the table as he fussed at her in objection. His tail was wagging feverishly behind him.

“IF WE GO OUT THERE YOU’LL TRY TO RUN AWAY!” the vixen yelled back. “We need to stay in here until you calm down. You’re obviously not in your right mind right now.”

“You did good, Alan.” Heidi said, scooting closer to him as he slowly started to relax. “That was very tough for you to do.”

“He took it as well as any other human, I’m sure. But you did good, Dr. Coren.” Kaylee agreed. She hadn’t reacted the same way that he had. Her posture never faltered, she didn’t bare her fangs or lean in like she was going to attack. She seemed… much more stable than her counterpart across the table. “Once you calm down, and you *know* you’re calm… I think we should go outside and rest for a bit.”

“Do you think we could go out the front door?” Heidi wondered. “M... maybe we could sit in our cars. Ya know... remember some things. I mean I have my stuff now. I have my keys. I could... Heh... I could show you. Oh god Kaylee, I wish I could take you on a sightseeing tour.”

“I think if we do that, we should have the BioSec team with us.” The vixen replied. “We can’t have you driving off or something.”

Chapter 40

Clara walked slowly through the town square, passing store after store, giving Swirl time to smell the air around them. Despite his size, he had an impressive nose. Passing the old antique store, she paused, noting that it was filled with tourists.

“Yea... a few in there, too.” he said, sitting neatly on her shoulder. “This isn’t looking good, Mrs. Rannie.”

“I know that, sugar.” she worried, stopping at the crosswalk before heading to Eddie’s bakery across the street. “A lot of em are tellin’ us they’re on their way out of town or just passin’ through too. This is a disaster.”

Before she could open the door to the bakery, it swung open. Inside was a tall, heavyset woman wearing a blue and white checkered apron, and a glowing smile on her face. “Clara Rannie!” she beamed. “Girl, you know you don’t have to open the door here. My door is always open to you!”

“Eddie, how ya doin?” Clara asked, unable to contain her feeling of frustration.

The woman was about to speak as Clara started to make her way inside.

“Oh, my heavens is that a little mousie on your shoulder?!” she gasped, clasping her hands onto her rosy cheeked face. “Oh honey, I’m sorry, I can’t let you bring that cute little fella in here. Mayor’s orders!”

“Yea, this is uh… this is Swirl. I’m pet sitting for a friend,” Clara said with a tired smile. She could already feel her clothes fitting more loosely. “He’s very well behaved.”

“I’m sure he is sweetie, but I can’t have him in here.” the woman said more seriously. “No animals in the bakery. Not anymore. You remember that cat I used ta have?”

“Flutters? I sure do!” Clara chuckled. “I sure miss that poor baby.”

“Me, too.” Eddie replied with a frown and a sigh. “Well tell ya what sugar, take a seat out here. I’ll bring ya that slice’a cherry pie I know you were eying from the window, and I’ll join ya for a chat, how’s that sound?”

“Sounds good to me.” she smiled.

Taking her seat, she lifted up her gloved hand, letting Swirl hop onto it before depositing him on the table. “Very much so.” the small mouse nodded. “She’s farther along than the others. Changes have likely already started.”

“Great...” the old lady, seeming younger by the minute, sighed as she looked into the window. “Cashiers and food handlers galore... To coin a term from Liam... this is a shitshow.”

It took a few minutes for Eddie to join her, sitting down with a bottle of water after placing a plate of cherry pie and a Coke in front of Clara. “Sorry ‘bout that sweetie, had to get my water. Tryin’ ta lose weight!”

“Is it workin?” Clara asked distantly as she slowly picked up her fork. Her hand was feeling tight, she’d need to start exercising it soon.

“It is!” Eddie beamed, nodding heartily. “I was down 3 pounds this morning! Course, that might just be water weight, you know what they say.”

Clara took a bite of the cherry pie, savoring the intensely sweet flavor as she studied the middle aged woman at the table across from her. “Anything else, changed for ya lately?” she asked, nodding at the gloves that she was wearing.

“Wh… whattya talkn’ about?” Eddie wondered, nervously taking a gulp of her water. “Ya know, I tell ya this spring water? Right good stuff! Hugh just got a shipment of it in down at the market, I think you should-”

“You have any gigglin’ fits lately? Prolonged sense of euphoria?” Clara interrupted between her slow bites of the pie.

Eddie looked around, then leaned in. “What’re you askin’ me Clara?” she whispered.

“Since when do you wear gloves?” she retorted, nodding to her hands.

Eddie looked at her defensively. “I... I’m allowed to wear gloves,” she said indignantly, “it’s a little chilly today in the shade!” She looked her friend over. “Besides... Why’re you callin me out for that when you’re doin’ the same thing?”

The old woman looked down at Swirl, who almost seemed to nod, then put her fork down on the plate. “Go ahead and have ya a bite, Swirl.” she said, grabbing the cuff of her jacket and pulling it up slightly, then pulling down on her glove. “Because I’m not all that cold today.” she said, showing Eddie the brown fur that now covered her hand up to her wrist.

Eddie looked at her in shock, distracted only by the little mouse that was quickly nibbling on a corner of the cherry pie. “Clara... What in a fresh hell is happenin to us?” she worried. “I was up all night gigglin and then... then I woke up this morning... And I had... brown hair all over my hand! And... and black spots on ma fingers!” she whispered. “And I’m losin weight! B... but it’s not just that. I’m losin it *fast*! The clothes I put on this mornin already feel too big!”

“When you get off work tonight, come to my farm. Alright? We got some talkin’ ta do.” She ran her fingers down Swirl’s back, giving him a pet before eating from the other side of the pie with her fork. “Eat your fill sweetie,” she chuckled sadly, “Eddie here’s always tryin’ to give me diabetes with all this sugar. May as well spread it around.”

She took another bite, then tilted her head at Eddie, who seemed to do the same in response. “Your husband is... Dr. Danny Shaw, right?” she asked. “GERCorp researcher?”

“Y… yea... Why?” Eddie worried. “Clara…” she started, putting her hand on top of her friends as she leaned closer. “Clara was there a breach??” she worried. “I aint heard a damn word from him in 4 days now! I... I didn’t think it would be-”

The old woman shook her head. “Just stay calm. Alright? I was asked to check on you. Don’t tell anyone about your hand, or mine. You see somethin else... You go ahead and you close up shop and head to my farm, alright? We gotta have a long conversation tonight.”

Eddie leaned back in her chair and sighed, massaging her temple with her other hand. “You’re scarin me…” she complained. “Clara, you’re scarin’ me girl.”

“I know,” she nodded, “and I wish I could tell ya it wasn’t anything to be scared of, but… well… then I’d be a liar.”

Eddie nodded somberly, looking obviously disturbed. “Is Danny okay?” she asked quietly. “Like I said, it’s been days! I tried callin’ his phone but it acts like it’s off. I also…” she stopped herself, leaning in closer. “I also met with some people the other day from the lab. BioSec?? Clara… please!”

The old woman shook her head. “I don’t know,” she said. “I wish I could tell you Danny’s status, but… well I know he’s alive. He wouldn’ta asked me to check up on you if he wasn’t.”

“Alive…” Eddie repeated in a hush. “Are we gonna die, Clara?”

She shook her head. “No, we’re not dying,” she explained, “we’re… we’re gonna look a bit different is all. Try ta stay calm. We’ll talk more this evenin’.”

Finishing the pie, the pair made their way down the street, the old woman finding that her pants were feeling almost too loose on her to wear without a belt. “Swirl I’m gonna have to change clothes before the day’s over. What am I gonna do?”

“Buy a few pairs of pants? Or some of those… oh the things that clip and go over your shoulders? I saw them in a movie.” the mouse responded. “We still have a man named Virgil Ramirez to find. I think he’s one of the last ones that lives here in town.”

She looked at the store, then nodded. “Yea, I guess I’m gonna need to. Otherwise, these pants are gonna fall down around my ankles in a minute.” She sighed as she reached up and rubbed her fingers on his back. “This is all happenin’ so fast…”

Back at the farm, Liam was leaning against the truck, adjusting his belt again to hold up his pants. From his perspective, they’d been growing larger and larger throughout the day. “Terry, I really appreciate you helpin me out today.” he said with a grunt, realizing he’d reached his last belt hole. “I know this whole situation’s stressful for you an’ bein around me like this is a risk, but I tell ya I wouldn’t be able to do half the things we’ve gotten done today by myself.” He took off his hat to wipe his brow, much to his surprise, finding that his now brown hair was slowly growing over his formerly bald head. “What in-” he started, turning around to look at himself in the truck’s side mirror. The previously seventy-year-old man saw a reflection that showed a man barely in his sixties. “I’m gettin’ younger…” he muttered in surprise, looking back at Terry. “Well, I didn’t expect it ta do somethin’ like that.”

“Kaylee’s young right? Human young adult equivalent?” Terry asked, grunting as he lifted heavy bales of hay and loaded them into the truck bed. “Maybe it’s bringing you down all the way down to your 20s.”

Liam chuckled. “Well shit, that wouldn’t be so bad, save for the fox thing, ya know?” he asked with a smirk. “Shit I wouldn’t mind bein’ as young and fit as you. But I don’t think no three-foot fox is gone be liftin no heavy bales’a hay into this truck unaided.”

“You never... Ngh... know Mr. Rannie.” he responded, shouldering another bale on top of the last. “You get a smaller truck, some smaller bales’a hay, this fox thing might work out just fine, once everything around ya gets an adjustment.”

The slightly less old man nodded. “I suppose so, huh?” he asked. “Wasn’t for the whole world goin’ ta hell because of it, we’d probably be doin alright with it.”

“Less size, less food, less living space, less transportation costs... It’s a net win for the environment.” Terry nodded. “Getting your health back, your youth... seems like another positive to me. What’s everybody so worried about with this, anyway?”

Liam laughed at him, putting his hat back onto his head. “Son, I think most people are just worried about the unknown in general,” he explained. “You’da told me yesterday I’d be agin’ backward today. I mighta believed you in the worst possible’a ways. You’da told me last week I’d be turnin’ into a little fox guy I’d call the cops, tell ‘em I got a mad man on my lawn. Life throws shit at ya, ya know? And you either make it work, or you fall on your ass and try it again. The hits are gonna keep comin’ whether you're ready for it or not.” He opened the truck’s door with a squeak, finding it heavier than it’d been in the past. “Now ya ask me, what everybody’s so worried about with all this? It’s the change to people’s perceptions of themselves. People start changin’, aint got no idea what’s goin on, where it’s gonna stop... They start ta panic. And it’s that panic that's gonna tear this world apart.”

Terry nodded as he closed the heavy tailgate, putting on a mask before he stepped into the truck and rolled down his window. “So, we’re takin this out back?”

“Yea, I’m gonna drive ya out to the back 40, then you need ta start scoopin handfuls out and layin it out on the crop line. We’re ‘sposed ta get some rain come Tuesday. Don’t need it washin’ out back there.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Terry said with a nod as the old man started the truck.

Slowly, it rolled down the bumpy dirt path, the pair swaying side to side as the truck’s suspension creaked and groaned. “Let’s say this plays out differently...” he continued, looking over at the visibly shorter farmer. “Let’s say people figure it out and life goes on… we make our chairs and tables shorter, lower our doorknobs, make our cars smaller... What’re you gonna do?”

“Son, if it works out like that, ima do what I’ve done on this farm for the last fifty-five years. Plant my seed, harvest, take it ta market, and live my life like I always have.” He drove down the bumpy road for a bit, then started to laugh. “That’d be a hell of a note, wouldn’t it?” he asked with a beaming smile. “If people just got the hell over themselves and soldiered on... man... I wish I shared that optimism.”

Working through the afternoon, the pair were able to unload the hay, gather the wheat, clean, and clean up the old barn before finally prepping the bunker. “So, you say you used to smuggle fur farm foxes, huh? You know that’s a crime right?” Terry joked as he helped move one of the large heavy cages. They were big for him, but for the diminishing farmer, they were presenting an enormous problem. “You don’t really seem like the type to me.”

“The type to free an innocent animal from a terrible fate?” he asked, dropping one of the cages for a moment to rest. “Son, they’re born in captivity and raised to adulthood in a cage no bigger than their body. No exercise, no territory, none of their instinctual needs are met, except mating, if their fur’s good enough.”

The mention of territory was interesting. Terry groaned as he hefted one of the cages into the truck. It almost seemed like the farmer was empathizing with the creatures.

“They put us… put ‘em in cages, keep em a while, then kill em off!” Liam continued. “We took em, calmed em down, then got em released in the wildlife sanctuary. Or the ones that were just too sweet on humans, we’d find a family to keep em as a pet.” He grunted as he again tried to lift the cage. “Lot’a work but, I couldn’t let one of our own just die in a-OW! SON OF A-” his words were interrupted by a sudden yelp as a part of the metal barred cage broke free, leaving a long, deep slice down his forearm. Blood bubbled profusely from the wound as he held it in disbelief. “Shit... uh... There should be some rags in the truck to-”

“Already on it.” Terry agreed, rushing to the truck as he struggled to find them. Liam stood, holding his arm, watching it in disbelief as the blood slowed from a gush to a trickle, then finally slowed to a stop.

“What the…?” he muttered, using his shirt to wipe away the blood. “Hey, uh… Terry...” he said, his voice wavering. “That aint uh... necessary anymore.” Not only had the wound healed, but a large amount of brown and red fur had sprung from the site, spreading to engulf his entire arm. It seemed that the virus had acted to close the wound, hyper focusing itself on the area long enough to institute a change.

“Whattya mean it’s not… wow...” Terry asked, turning around to see the farmer’s fully healed arm. “It healed it up? Just like that?”

Liam chuckled awkwardly as he looked it over. “S… sure seems so.” he said, marveling at the fact. He cleared his throat, then looked down at the cage that’d cut him. “Guess this stuff really does protect you.” Stepping away for a moment, he leaned against his truck with his back to it as he tried to catch his breath. He was shaken, not from the cut itself, but from the sudden, rapid change.

“So, what now, Mr. Rannie?” Terry asked quietly, standing a few feet from the man with the blood soaked shirt. “Gettin’ to be close to lunchtime. Ya think Clara’s back?”

The farmer shook his head. “I don’t know.” he said, feeling a little lost in response to what his body had just done. He looked down at the fur on his arm, running his other hand through it to feel how soft it was. “This is happenin’ so fast. Damn belt’s as tight as it’ll go and I'm still barely hangin onto these pants, age is fallin off’a me…” he looked up with visible stress in his still human eyes. “There’s still so much left to do!”

Terry sighed, looking away as well. “Well, what’d you plan to do with these cages?” he asked, noticing that the tips of Liam’s ears, mostly obscured by his hat, were starting to form a point. “I can do some of this on my own while you head back to the farm and rest, if you want.”

Liam rubbed his shaking hand over his forehead. “T... take em ta scrap...” he said uneasily. “Terry what’re we gonna do?” he asked. His head was spinning. This really was happening. All the small changes and benefits meant nothing compared to what he’d just seen. “How are we gonna survive this?”

“Sir, it’s just like you said.” the agent replied. “You’re not dyin, you’re just changin. Now come on, let’s head back to the house. I’ll take these out to scrap and pick us up some lunch on the way back.”

“Yea… y... yea let’s do that.” he nodded.

Chapter 41

“Virgil Ramirez?” Clara asked, spotting a man walking his dog near the edge of an old drainage ditch. It was coming up on dinner time by then, having delayed her day slightly, to buy a few more clothes. She’d been forced to change her entire outfit, but even hours later, what she’d put on was looking too big. Her reflection had nearly startled her. The woman looking back while she was trying on clothes could easily be mistaken for someone in their early 50s, rather than the 68-year-old that she’d been the day before. It really seemed to be moving fast. “Dr. Anne Ramirez’s husband?”

“Yes!” he said, stopping to look at her in concern as the dog wagged excitedly. “You’re... Clara Rannie right? The vet? I know it’s been a little while.”

“That’s me, yes, sir,” she smiled. Looking over her shoulder to make sure they were alone. “Listen, Anne requested that I come out here and check to make sure you were okay,” she said, “have you experienced any sort of… laughing fits or prolonged spells of euphoria in the last 24 hours?”

Having a researcher as a wife is a strange thing. She could disappear at any time for extended periods due to lockdowns or project observation, and he was used to that. At least, to some degree. Having not seen her for 4 days though, then having a family friend asking him odd questions was setting off alarms in his mind. “...whyy...?” he asked cautiously.

“I... can’t explain… yet.” she said, shaking her head. I just need-” she started, feeling Swirl’s nuzzle against her cheek suddenly. She smiled, turning her head to the side slightly. The dog was very interested in her as well, though in what seemed to be a friendly sort of way, constantly sniffing at her shoes and wagging his tail.

Virgil looked at her curiously, squinting slightly to see the tiny creature moving on her shoulder. “M... ma’am… there’s a mouse-”

“That’s Swirl, he’s alright.” Clara explained with a nod. “I... I’m not yet sure I know why he’s bein affectionate, but-”

The name triggered a memory, the young man, taking in a deep breath as he stepped away from her slightly. “Wait a second…” he said cautiously. “She told me about that mouse. T... that’s a... GERCorp lab mouse What... what’s it doing here?? Can it talk? That’d explain why its behaving the way it is.”

She sighed. It seemed that Dr. Ramirez was not as tight-lipped about the facility as she should’ve been. “Sir, I can’t discuss anything like that, but I need to know if-”

“I’m not telling you anything until you explain to me how a lab specimen is sitting on your shoulder!” he demanded. “My wife has been in a complete communications blackout for 4 days. Now you show up asking me about... symptoms... and you have a lab mouse on your shoulder! I’m not stupid Mrs. Rannie! Tell me what’s going on!”

Swirl sighed. “He is...” he said mutedly, turning his focus to the young man standing opposite Clara. “Mr. Ramirez… it’s a pleasure to meet you.” he said cautiously. “You’ve experienced this sense of euphoria, I can tell. As such, I believe sir, it’d be best if you meet us at the Rannie farm this evening, about 7pm? More can be discussed then.”

Virgil was dumbfounded, staring mouth agape at the small mouse as it seemed to… diagnose him. It hardly seemed fair for the creature to be able to do that. Even though Anne had told him about the talking mouse, and the talking fox, he’d never truly believed her. The idea just seemed too far-fetched. Yet there it was, right before him. “You said... Anne’s ok, right?” he asked. “Am I?”

Clara nodded slowly. “She’s fine, Mr. Ramirez.” she started, turning to head back toward her truck. “As for you… well, that’s a matter of opinion. But I’ll tell ya this much, you’re gonna live. And in that sense, everything’s gonna be fine.” She reached the truck, then opened the door. “Remember, 7pm, just like he said.” she called.

Swirl scurried up onto the dash, then looked at her guiltily. “S... sorry about that.” he said. “It seems that Anne is a bit of a security leak on such things. He was resisting and I thought cutting to the chase would save us both a lot of time. You still have food shopping to do.”

“I trust your judgment, honey.” she said as she started the truck, still seeing that the man was standing and staring at her from the sidewalk, his mouth agape in disbelief. “You did what you had to do. Now, let’s go get them supplies.”

Swirl looked worried as they drove back to the town square. “It’s a very bad situation here,” he said. “I suppose I didn’t realize just how easily this could spread. If... if Kaylee was still wandering around…” He stopped himself with a sigh. “I hope she’s okay back at the lab. That must’ve been terrifying for her. I... I should’ve been there. I should’ve helped her.” He flattened himself against the dash with a heavy sigh. “I’m such an idiot…”

Clara pulled to a stop in front of the grocer, then pulled the truck into park. “You certainly are not,” she scolded him softly. “Swirl honey, I shouldn’t have ta remind you of this but you’re a mouse! A small furry critter that can rest in the palm’a my hand. And... I’ll be the first to tell ya, you’ve done more for me, Kaylee, this entire community than anyone I’ve ever known. You’re intelligent, thoughtful, well spoken, and giving of yourself, even at your own detriment! Don’t sell yourself short. There’s only one of you, and this is a very big world.”

Stepping out of the truck, she found that the ground felt farther away than it had earlier in the day. As she thought of it, everything felt bigger. The truck's door felt heavier, the handle was higher, the steering wheel felt bigger… it was stressful to see it happening in real time, even though she'd somewhat expected it. She couldn't help but wonder how others would handle this as it continued to spread. How would a teenage girl handle this? Suddenly finding herself growing short and fuzzy? Or a gruff old man? What about children? Would they grow smaller? Or would they be forced to age forward? The implications of it all were giving her a headache.

Entering the store, she smiled a nod to the cashier before grabbing her shopping cart. Swirl tried to make himself as small on her shoulder as possible, doing his best to avoid being seen. A mouse in the grocer likely wouldn't go over well. It certainly didn't seem to in the kitchen, if that movie was any indicator. The store was filled with smells, surprisingly, overwhelming for them both.

Starting with produce, they made their way slowly, gathering items here and there before they came upon the fruit. It made the small mouse's mouth water as they walked near, prompting him to gently nuzzle against her neck. "Apple...?" he asked quietly, whispering in her ear. "Please..."

"I'm gettin some apples, don't you worry." she chuckled quietly, hearing his two single words.

As she was gathering, a woman in her early 40s walked up to her. "Ma'am those are on sale for the festival if you-" she started, squinting as she looked closer at her features. "Clara, is that you??" she wondered. "Stars, I barely recognized ya! You look… different!"

"Just tryin' a new hairstyle, Tina." she said casually. "Do ya like it?"

"I... do…! but it aint just that!" Tina exclaimed, "You... you look entirely different! You lost weight? What's changed?"

As much as she hated to, she needed to get away from the woman. Her nose was keen enough by now to recognize scents, but the woman's perfume was almost making her gag. "You'll find out soon enough, honey." she said, bagging her fruits and vegetables more quickly. "You have any laughin' fits recently?"

Tina chuckled, not picking up at all on Clara's haste, or her unusually dismissive language. "Well I had a real fine evening last night with a young man from out of town." she smiled. "A member of that folk band, the Storied Tails? We had dinner and… well one thing led to another, you know how that is." It was just like Tina to speak of her conquests like that. Clara couldn't say that it surprised her. But what did it mean? In this context, it didn't really seem to answer her question. "We giggled all night long, if you know what I mean."

“Was it involuntary?” the now middle-aged farmer’s wife asked, trying her best not to wrinkle her nose at her perfume. At least she had what she needed from produce. Now she needed to get rid of her. After… a few more questions.

“Oh honey you know I don’t do things like that!” the store manager chuckled. “Everything that we did was completely *consensual*.”

Gripping her cart handle tightly, Clara stared up at her with a frustrated scowl. “Have you had any uncontrolled laughing fits or prolonged sense of euphoria in the last 24 hours?” she demanded finally, putting on her veterinarian’s diagnostic tone. She had to get the point across before she suffocated. “Just... tell me Tina. I have a lot of things I have to do today.”

“I... well... yea. That’s kinda what I was tellin ya. After dinner I took him back to my place and we both started having this ridiculous laughing fit. It lasted forever, turned into sex a few times and... well then this morning...” she continued, trailing off. “Clara, is everything okay? I almost never see you wear gloves on a day this warm.”

The farmer looked at Tina’s hands, noting the blue nitrile gloves she was wearing as well. “I don’t see you wearing ' em either ‘less you work the meat counter. And... this is produce. So, why’re you wearin em?”

“P... probably the same reason you are.” Tina responded nervously, leaning in so that she could speak candidly. “Clara, what’s happening? I... I got these black spots... On my fingers?? I’m scared!”

“Come to my house tonight at 7. I’ll tell you more. Before then, be safe,” she replied, doing her best to smile. “And thanks for reminding me about the sale!” she continued, suddenly acting chipper.

Tina seemed to become indignant, looking at Clara’s cart as she started to walk away. “Yea, well just remember who’s store this is,” she called, seeming irrationally frustrated. “Comin in here takin all my food…”

“What was that about?” Swirl asked, looking over Clara’s shoulder as the pair walked away. “Her perfume was awful. But she’s obviously infected.”

Clara shook her head, sighing as she made her way to the bread aisle. “If I had to guess?” she asked, “She’s getting’ territorial. I sure as shit couldn’t smell her but I bet you she could smell me. I’m surprised she didn’t mention the mouse on my shoulder.”

“Why did you tell her to come to the house?” he whispered. “She’s not related to any of the researchers, is she?”

“Not a researcher, no.” Clara replied in a hushed voice. “One of the service staff at the lab. So far everyone they’ve asked us to look for’s got it. It’s gonna be a sad evening for em all.”

“There’s a large number of people that are infected in town,” he continued. “Nearly one in three. If... we figure a static population of five thousand, that means at least sixteen hundred residents are infected, and with an R value of 10... I...”

“Try not ta panic sweetie.” she interrupted him quietly. “Let’s finish up here, then we can get back and check on Liam.”

Chapter 42

Jake ran his hand over the smooth, shiny black paint of the new Corvette as he checked it out in the laboratory parking lot. “This is a *nice* car, Dr. Coren.” he said, holding the key that the tod had given him. “Did it see a lot of road before you went all small and furry on us?”

The fox laughed and shook his head. “Not as much as I wanted it to!” he said. “I bought it about a month ago. We were looking forward to a record quarter and, well, I thought things would be stable enough to finally make the plunge. Didn’t realize everything would go to shit because of one board meeting.”

“Did you really pull for me to have Swirl and Kaylee as pets during that meeting?” Heidi wondered, moving up and down in front of the car’s shiny black door, watching her reflection bend and twist. It was childish, but she was bored.

He nodded with a sigh, looking at Kaylee with a tinge of guilt in his eye. “I did, actually. I knew it was a long shot, but I thought at the very least, they could see Swirl as a pet. If nothing else, Kaylee could have stayed at the lab and worked as an assistant. But... they wouldn’t hear it. After our call with Igor, I think I’m starting to see why.”

Kaylee was surprised that the humans on the board had been so callous. “They didn’t even want to make me a laboratory slave?” the vixen asked, “They really wanted me dead, that badly? Who are these board members anyway? How does that work? Why are they so… evil?”

“Well, see when there’s a company, like this one, it’s composed of several layers of management,” Alan explained, “At the top you usually have what they call the C-suite, that's the chief officers, the big names. And, with them are others that might be private investors or stakeholders... and together they form the board of directors. At least... in our case they do.”

“Was that guy you talked to on the phone one of them?” she asked, “Dr. Klassen?”

“He is, yes.” Alan nodded. “But... Igor’s always been one to express at least... a little bit of compassion.”

“You wanna hop in, doc?” Jake asked as he opened the car door and stood aside. “Can't let ya go anywhere but...”

The tod nodded at Jake, then looked back at Kaylee. “I’m sorry that we treated you the way we did. We... we didn’t know that… we were ignorant of so many things. I’m really sorry.”

She shrugged as she watched him awkwardly climb into the car, then try to sit in the seat. It was impossible for his new body shape and size to allow him to drive such a thing. He could reach the shifter just fine with his hand on the bottom of the steering wheel, but there was no way that he could reach the pedals, nor see over the dash.

“You’d still think the same way if you were human,” the vixen muttered. “Nothing to worry about now.”

“What?” he asked, looking down at her from the seat, glancing only for a moment before he returned his attentions to the car.

“Humans… can sometimes be cold and obtuse.” Heidi said, rubbing Kaylee’s back with her hand as she stood beside her.

The vixen hated being touched like that. It felt so intrusive. Even though it was her mother, uninvited touch forced her to suppress the urge to growl. She wasn’t even sure why her mother insisted on doing what she was doing. It felt fine and would be welcomed from someone she wanted to engage with, but for it to be done so irrespective of her personal desires made her wonder if it was some hangover from her lost humanity. It certainly wasn’t fox behavior. At least, she didn’t think it was.

“Seems like you can, too.” she said finally, taking a step closer to inspect the inside of the car. “So, what happens when this. Board meets?” she asked Dr. Coren, continuing her questioning as she pushed buttons inside the car.

“They... ngh... Kaylee...” he scolded, swatting her hand away from things. “Stop pushing buttons! You don’t know what they do!” She relinquished, making him chuckle as he quickly shook his head. “You really are a curious one, huh?”

“Says the man who compulsively climbed a tree last night.” she smirked. “It’s our nature. Anyway... The board?”

He nodded, looking at Jake as he climbed into the passenger seat. “The board meets quarterly, to look at numbers. Profit, projections, costs, that sort of thing,” he explained, “They use that information to decide on business strategy.”

Without being invited, she forced her way into the seat beside him, crouching down on her hands, then lightly hopping into the seat. It was easily big enough for the pair of them. “And that… strategy determines whether people like us live or die,” she continued, “and they don’t lose any sleep at night over that sort of decision making?”

She noticed a button marked ‘Start’ but resisted the urge to push it. She assumed it meant to start the engine. Given how loud Liam’s truck had felt, she almost wanted to do it when the foxes weren’t paying attention so that she could get their reaction.

He looked at her with a raised brow as she sat beside him in the seat. It was more of a feral position, her hands on the seat as she crouched with her legs against the backrest. “Do you... really have to be in here right now?” he asked sarcastically. “You can't let me have my own space?”

“Oh, so it’s okay for you and everyone else to fur pile me when I’m trying to sleep and then get mad at me when I get up, but I can’t share the driver seat of your car?” she asked jokingly. “Come on, Alan. I’ve never driven a car! And something tells me I never will. I just wanted to see what all the fuss was about!” She looked all around her, noting the transparent roof and smelly leather seats. “So, what’s so special about this one, anyway?”

Dr. Coren took a deep breath, trying not to be too annoyed at the vixen’s curiosity. He knew already that any comment he could make about her, she’d have a foil to point out his hypocrisy at the ready. “It’s a sports car.” he said. “Fancy suspension, big tires, powerful engine. It’s meant to go fast.”

“Why?” she asked, standing up on the seat as she rested her hands on the steering wheel to peer over it. “From the movies I’ve seen, all cars are fast. Or they can be. But if you go too fast a… cop? will flash colorful lights at you and make you talk to him. Give you a… ticket? I don’t know what the tickets are for though.”

Heidi walked to the car, then jumped into the seat on Alan’s other side, following Kaylee’s lead on her movement. Alan objected with a whine, making her giggle.

“There’s room for all three of us in here,” she chuckled, nuzzling him affectionately. “It’s an enforcement mechanism, Kaylee.” she continued. “The police officer or law enforcement officer forces you to pull over, verifies that you’re allowed to operate the vehicle legally, then, if they decide you’re done something bad, they’ll give you a ticket, which is basically a financial penalty, for breaking the law.”

Jake wasn’t sure if he should laugh at the three or be horrified by it all. Their behavior was very different from a human’s. Was he going to act this way? The mental changes must’ve been progressive. He sighed, watching as they crammed together into one seat, sniffed around and explored the car, as if it was their first time. Even Alan, who’d bought the vehicle, felt compelled to sniff and push buttons that he knew wouldn’t work with the car in its powered down state. On one hand, it was cute, but on the other, with each moment, he was shrinking, following a path that would ultimately lead him to share their fate.

“You… wanna start it?” Jake asked, “Again, we can’t go anywhere, but it might be fun to experience, right?”

“I’m well aware.” the tod nodded, nuzzling Heidi back briefly before looking down at the pedals. He was the only one sitting properly in the seat, but his legs were far too short to reach the brake. “Heidi can you please apply the brake so that we can start it?”

She nodded, scooting herself to the edge of the seat, then using both hands to press the pedal down.

“Okay Kaylee, see this stick here?” Alan asked, pointing her to the shifter. “Make sure it’s in the middle. Don’t push it in any direction. It’ll mess up the car if you do,” he waited for her to see it, her ears pointed down curiously. Moving his hand, her eyes following it to lever with a button on the end, she tilted her head. “A... also... Don’t push this button. For the love of god.” he continued, pointing to the E-brake release button.

Kaylee nodded, then giggled. “How many foxes does it take to start a car?” she asked. “This doesn’t bode well for the people in town.” Her ears splayed as soon as the words had left her maw. Some of them would probably try to make this work somehow. What a disaster that would be.

“No it does not.” Alan replied, pushing the start button as the engine roared to life. The sound was loud, much louder than he’d been prepared for, his ears splaying back as he recoiled into the seat. The sudden burst of high velocity air from the vents blew into his eyes, forcing him to close them as loud 80s hair metal began to blare over the speakers.

“IT’S SO LOUD!” Kaylee yelled as the three guards from the door rushed out to see the commotion. “WHY IS EVERYTHING SO LOUD?!”

Jake leaned over, switching off the radio, then turning down the air so that the fan would stop blowing. Hearing Kaylee call the car loud was an interesting thing to hear. It did seem a little loud to him, but not so much that it was anything out of the ordinary.

“What’s going on??” Carmen worried. “You’re not trying to leave, are you?”

“Ngh...we’re just living some old memories.” Heidi said with a grunt as she repositioned herself on the seat. “Apparently Alan had a fancy car.”

“My brother has onna these.” one of the other guards said as he ran his hand over the surface of the paint, seeing his own furry reflection staring back at him at an odd, bent angle. “Works for some fancy law firm in the states. I told him it just made his dick look small.”

Heidi laughed at Alan’s expense, but Kaylee seemed confused. “What does... penis size have to do with this? I’ve seen that referenced in movies, too.”

Carmen laughed. “The uh… idea comes from a human concept of masculinity.” she explained. “They think that men are more important or more special for their species if they have a large penis. And they think the larger that organ is the more... virulent they are. They inversely think that items like this mean that you are compensating. So... big fancy car, tiny useless penis. In... their eyes.”

“That’s… complicated.” Kaylee replied, sighing in relief as Jake shut off the car. “Why do they think like that? It seems like a waste of brain power.”

The vixen chuckled and gave her a shrug. “I understood it before. But even then, it was silly.” she said. “Now it feels even more silly.”

Heidi jumped out of the seat like a cat, walking a few steps on all fours before standing up and stretching. “Ngh... well that was fun but... I think that’s all I needed for today.”

Alan quickly joined her, doing the same, as did Kaylee. It felt... natural in that moment to clear the vehicle on all fours, given the nature of the way they’d been sitting in the seat.

“You don’t wanna see your own car?” Kaylee wondered, seeming not to even think about the way they’d been behaving. All this stress about acting human seemed to fade, being surrounded only by other foxes. “I’d kinda like to see what you used to drive.”

“Well, Jake can you help with that?” Heidi asked, looking over her shoulder as he walked around the car.

He gave her a smile and a nod, closing the doors to the sports car before quickly locking it up. “Got the key right here.” he said as he pressed the unlock button. Nearby, a beige sedan’s lights flashed. “And... there it is.” he smiled.

The vixen smiled and walked to it, pulling the handle on the door before awkwardly wiggling her way inside. The door closed behind her, causing her a moment of distress before she leaned on the handle again to pull it back open. “It smells...” she complained. “God it’s so much smellier than it was before.”

Kaylee leaned in and sniffed at the interior, making a face as she pulled away. “Why is it so smelly?” she asked. “Dr. Coren’s smells clean. This is...”

“Old french fries...” Alan laughed. “Late night drive throughs, fries under the seat... You know how it is.” He pushed his way past Kaylee, forcing himself into the seat beside Heidi. “Alright, you did this to me, so I’m doing it to you.” he chuckled.

“You lived like that?” Kaylee asked as she jumped in, too. It seemed like they could move more fluidly into situations like this if they made concessions to their anatomy.

“How’d you think I lived?” Heidi chuckled, taking the key from Jake and awkwardly pushing it into the ignition. The car began to ding noisily, prompting her to take it back out. “Maybe… we don’t need to do that.”

“Loud...” Alan sighed, “everything is so loud.”

Kaylee studied the car. It was much simpler inside. The materials were more… synthetic, and the whole thing felt old. There was a strong smell from what they were calling an old french fry, as well as other scents that she couldn't quite place. Some of them seemed to be the remnants of markings made by other animals. Perhaps, she wondered, from Dr. Venner's shoes. It was obvious to anyone's eye that the car wasn't well maintained. It was dirty and old, the paint having long lost its shine from long days in the sun over many many years. "I guess... I just had this vision of you, ya know, a clean, small apartment, neat little stacks of books, a quiet comfy couch by a fireplace..."

"A movie setting for a smart protagonist," Alan chuckled. "Real life isn't always like that. It's a cute thought, though."

"Well, is that not the case?" the vixen wondered. Heidi looked at her with a smirk, suppressing a chuckle as she nuzzled her daughter kindly.

It was an odd thing. All the times that Kaylee had reacted negatively to hugs and touching… nuzzling didn't bother her. In fact, somehow it felt nice. It was a sign of affection that she seemed to understand.

"Honey, if you've seen my office back in the lab, you'd know what my house looks like. I was a very sloppy person. Ya know… chaotically organized."

As they were speaking, the specimen they'd been treating to regrow his eye forced his way through the door, followed quickly by Gil and Jennifer. "He... he wouldn't…" Jennifer protested, stopping as he ran up to the car.

"Doc! Doc!" the man, partially transformed, called as he rushed up to the car. "Doc, look at my eye!" he beamed. "It's back! I can see! Thank you so much doc that hurt like hell but I can see again!"

Kaylee recoiled, the rapid movement of an enormous being rushing toward her made her ears splay back and her tail wrap around her, baring her teeth as she squeaked out a warning. "Rrrrrrrraahhh…"

The tod looked at the specimen for a moment, doing his best to give him a formal, congratulatory smile, then cast his gaze to Jennifer. "Why did you let him out??" he barked at her. He stepped easily over Kaylee and Heidi on all fours, then jumped out of the car. He walked toward them like a cat before finally rising to his hind legs. "He needs to have his entire process documented!" He turned around to face the man. "I'm sorry but I'm going to need you to go back to the quarantine room so that they can monitor your progress. Just a few more days, I promise."

“He looked like he was doing well, so I thought I’d let him out to join the rest of us for lunch!” Jennifer objected. “Sir you can’t just lock our people up like that! He’s not a human anymore!”

“He is part of an experiment!” Alan argued. “We took a human with an adverse condition, infected him directly at the site with Heidi’s blood, then recorded the progress and... You shouldn’t even be making decisions like this anyway! You’re security! Not research!”

Jennifer crossed her arms as Gil escorted the transforming man back into the building. “Sir, our people need to eat.” she said to him. “We can’t just lock them away and starve them like- You need to make sure we have someone running food duty to the quarantine cells. Get one of the humans to do it or something!”

“And what are you going to do?” the tod asked, looking back up at her. “Hmm? Just exist while you change? We have a lot of prep work to do. We need to send someone out for supplies, and we need to make sure that it’s someone that we can trust. Maybe you can go with them, hmm?”

“Who can we send?” Heidi asked, walking up beside him to look up at Cpt. Ramone. “We’ll need a human. One that won’t try to run.”

Alan didn’t even have to think about his answer. “Anne or Jaren, almost certainly. But we’ll need one of our own to go with them, just in case.”

“Jaren’s monitoring Gil.” Kaylee worried. “So, it’d have to be Anne. It’s too important that we have those brain scans when he finally starts to change. We need to know what this is doing to your brains.”

Alan nodded, walking past Jennifer toward the lab. “Sounds good,” he said, motioning for the others to follow. “Let’s go find her so that we can send her out. We’ll need to make sure she doesn’t try to run. So, you’ll be going with her, Cpt. Ramone.”

Chapter 43

Anne was shaking, driving well below the speed limit as she slowly made her way into the city. From their vantage point on the hill, she could already see that the Friendly Festival was in full swing. In the seat beside her was Jennifer, wearing clothing that fit her better, but was still a little baggy. She'd gotten it from the most petite human intern on staff, and still, they were too large for her. "So that's the festival?" she asked, nodding to a series of carnival rides and an enormous stage, laid out among a sprawling field of flowers. "That parking lot looks really full."

"That's it, yea." Anne nodded. "Every year they've held that thing here, and every year it's a big hit. People rent houses, fill the inn here in town, and some of them stay in Winnipeg and drive up here every day." She rolled slowly to a stop, looking both ways before continuing on her trip. "It's... it's normally a good time. It probably will be this year too. Or at least, it will be today. Tomorrow it won't."

"Ya know, I've never seen anything like this unfold in real life." the agent replied. "It's always been movies, training studies, hypotheticals, instruction videos... that sort of thing. It'll be interesting to see how right they were about human behavior. And I guess how right we are about *our* behavior."

Anne nodded, listening to her closely as she slowly drove into the town. It was nearly vacant, as she'd expected. Everyone was at the festival for the opening ceremonies. The timing couldn't have been better. "Does this sort of... Identity think… come naturally for you?" she wondered. "I hope that doesn't sound offensive. I mean, your comment about 'our' behavior compared to human behavior made me wonder if there's something innate about the virus that… mentally segregates you from us." She glanced over at her. "I mean, you still look completely human. Just a little short."

Jennifer looked out the window at the shops, many of them shuttered for the festival, wondering about the answer herself. “No changes?” she asked. “You just can’t see it. The fur’s all over me. I’m starting to grow in my tail, too. She pulled back her hair to show Anne her ears. “And there’s this…” Afterward, she pulled back her lip, showing her enlarged canines. “And theesh,” she continued. “I’m changing, I’m just able to hide it. This’ll probably be my last human outing.” Blinking, she realized she hadn’t answered her question. “B... but I’m not sure… about it. The thinking thing I mean,” she said. “I started thinking of myself as non-human pretty much right after the euphoria subsided. At first it felt like a terrible loss. I was… different now. I was something else than I’d been before. Changed, ya know? I might’ve looked the same at that moment, but I didn’t *feel* the same. It was almost as if… I’d woken up from some dream, and… my body suddenly wasn’t my own. It was someone else’s.” She thought about what she'd said. “Maybe that’s not the best way to word it…” she continued. “I just… humans feel… odd to me now. Like I look at you and I see a woman like me, that’s lived… maybe a similar life. Ya know, going to school, having friends, movies, games, beer, bars... That sorta thing, but it’s like… I don’t understand you anymore. Like, the way you think, the way you process information, respond to stimuli. It feels… foreign.”

The car rolled slowly to a stop in the parking space directly in front of the grocer. Anne hoped that it was still open. “Can you give me an example?” she asked as the pair got out of the car. “Like, what do I do that’s so strange to you now?”

She observed her as they walked to the door, then stopped. “See all of that?” Jennifer asked. “Everything you just did.”

Anne didn't understand. “I... closed the door to my car, locked it, and walked to the door of the store and opened it,” she explained. “What’s so weird about that?”

“You paid no attention to the cat.” Jennifer responded. “You didn’t look to see if anyone was nearby, you didn’t smell the air… you were blissfully unaware of everything around you. That kind of thing’s going to get you pounced. You have to be more aware than that.”

‘Pounced’... the word stuck with Anne as she listened. She honestly hadn’t noticed Jennifer do all those things, either. Had she just done so indirectly? Or was she really paying that little attention. “And... making all these observations feels normal to you?” she asked. “Did you do these things as a human? What’s going to… pounce me?”

The agent nodded in the direction of the corner of the building. Sitting just outside the alley, was a small black and white cat, its tail whipping back and forth against the ground. “By that,” she said. “See how he’s staring at me? Cats are territorial. If I were my proper size at this point, he’d probably try to attack me. Standing on two legs might be the only thing that’d stop him, too.”

She nodded slowly as the pair stepped into the store. “Okaayy well ya know humans don’t really have any natural enemies like that.” she said, nodding to the cashier who seemed bored out of her mind.

She decided to watch Jennifer more closely this time, stopping at the carts before she made another move. Much to her surprise, the agent was sniffing the air subtly, looking around without turning her head as much as she could. She really was being that alert.

“But really…” Anne continued, “does this all feel normal to you? You didn’t do all this before, right?”

The agent shook her head, “I don’t remember,” she said, sniffing again as they approached the produce. Someone had been here recently, someone masking their scent with perfume. “It feels… stupid… to just tune everything out like that.” She picked up an apple tilting her head as she turned it in her hand. “Ya know… humans stand very close together, they shake hands with strangers and touch each other, make eye contact… You’re social creatures, we… aren’t as social as you are. The way we communicate is different. I don’t have all of my tools for that yet, but… I’m still learning.”

“Tools?” Anne wondered, grabbing fruit and placing it gently into a bag without looking at the woman beside her.

“My ears, my tail,” Jennifer replied, “they’re not just cosmetics. You can communicate with them. In a way I feel muted without them. It… it feels like something I’m supposed to have that’s just missing.”

Anne pushed the cart along, moving toward the back of the store were the meats were kept. At the far end of that would be the deli. Cold cuts would probably be useful for sandwiches, while meats would help the cafeteria. “Interesting,” she said, “so your brain interprets these parts as something that should’ve always been there, but are absent. Your bots are working to ‘restore’ them.” As she rounded the corner, she spotted her husband, seeming to eye the cold cuts hungrily through the glass. “Virgil...” she worried, walking quickly over to him with her cart.

“Anne!” he gasped, almost rushing over to her, but Jennifer stepped in his way.

“Back up,” she ordered, “Distance. For her protection.”

“Anne what’s going on?? I haven’t seen you in days and suddenly you’re here… buying groceries??” he demanded. “I ran into Clara a few hours ago and… she had that mouse with her! And it talked! Just like you said! She told me to come to her house tonight. What’s. Going. On?”

The woman's heart sank. There was only one reason she could think of that would provoke Swirl to talk her husband. "Virgil... How are you feeling?" she asked, looking him over more closely. He looked shorter, but she wasn't sure if that was just her imagination.

"I... I feel fine!" he said. "Good, even. I haven't even worn my glasses most of the day. I just… honey, what's happening?"

Jennifer looked between the two, then shook her head. "I'm sorry, Anne," she said simply. "The scent's pretty obvious."

She felt a lump in her throat as it started to become clear. "No... nonono... this isn't happening." she stammered. "How did you-"

"This one's… on me I'm afraid." Cpt. Ramone said. "I bumped into him at the bakery, spilled my drink on- who the fuck even wears open toed sandals with no socks on a day that cold?? What were you thinking?"

He scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Well, I wasn't expecting some lab employee to bump into me and give me some kind of... W... what's even happening? Some kind of virus?"

Jennifer looked around, then nodded, pulling down the top of her glove to show him her fur. "Yea." she said simply. "It's on your foot, isn't it?"

He looked at her wrist fearfully. "Y... yea... It's actually like... My toes look weird. It's not just… hair. It's starting to hurt in this shoe. I was gonna get some cold cuts, then go back home till evening. I've been really craving meat for some reason." He looked around once more. "So, what's happening to me? What... what is this?"

Anne was nearly in tears, but was doing her best to suppress it for the sake of anyone that might notice her. She wanted to rush to him and hug him, tell him everything, but she knew that if she got that close, she'd almost certainly catch it, too. "I think… you should wait 'till this evening."

"We could bring him to the lab now. Spare you the heartache..." Jennifer shrugged. "No reason to hide it from him. He's part of our family and yours now."

Anne shook her head. "We have a dog. We can't… he can't just leave him behind."

Jennifer nodded. "Go by the house and get it, I guess? I don't know what to think of dogs anymore. I don't like the way Rufus looked at me when I put him in that cage. He wasn't friendly anymore."

The three of them stood there for a time, long enough for Tina to spot them. “Something I can help you folks with?” she asked aggressively, looking Jennifer over. “Hey, I remember you. GERCorp, right? You’re much shorter than I remember.”

“We don’t need any help.” the agent replied, sniffing at her for a moment. She seemed to do the same thing in return, tilting her head slightly.

“Both of you...” Tina said quietly. “You have it, too. Don’t you?”

Jennifer eyed her silently, giving her acknowledgement. “We’re just gathering supplies.” she cautioned. “Leave us be.”

Tina acted like she wanted to confront her, but closed her eyes and shook it off. “Fine. But remember, this is *my* store.” she complained, storming away from the group angrily.

“What was that all about?” Virgil wondered, staring between the two in bewilderment. “Are we on her territory? This is a store. We’re allowed to be here.”

His… understanding of the situation made Anne sigh. She thought it was probably something to do with territory, given that Jennifer had mentioned it before, along with some of the other foxes. Hearing it from him was soul crushing. His mind was already changing. “Let’s just finish getting supplies and get back to the lab,” she said. “This place is powder keg.“

Jennifer chortled as she nodded. “How stupid can you be to make your store your territory and not let others in?” she joked. “How are you gonna run a store? Just sit out front with your tail wrapped around you and growl at anyone that comes near? You’ll be out of business in a week!”

“Less than a week.” Virgil chuckled. “B... but... Tail? Growl? What’s going on? What’s happening to us?”

Anne was feverishly scooping up canned goods, meats, cheeses, milk, eggs, anything she could find, packing the cart to the brim as she continued her crusade to stock up, and get out. “We’ll explain when we get to the lab,” she said hastily.

Finally content, her cart overflowing, she pushed it to the register. The bored teen behind it perked to life, staring down in amazement at the massively overflowing cart. “Whoa! Hey... uh... Tina? Can you come help me with this? We got a huge load here.”

The woman practically stormed over to the register, looking down at the cart like she’d been offended. “What do you think you’re doing, taking my food like that?”

“Shopping?” Jennifer asked sarcastically. “This is a *store* after all.”

“A store for *humans*. Not for you.” she retorted. “You’re just trying to steal it.”

The cashier was confused. “...humans?” she wondered.

Anne sighed in frustration. “I *am* human, if you haven’t noticed.” she retorted in a hushed voice. “And I’m not stealing your food, I’m paying for it. So please just let us finish this up and I’ll be out of your... territory... or whatever.”

Jennifer leaned against the other register as the pair started to ring things up and bag them. “Kinda dumb, isn’t it? Setting a precedent that only humans can shop here? Eventually there’s not gonna be that many of ‘em around. What are you gonna do then?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Tina replied hastily as she continued to scan and bag the groceries.

The agent scoffed to herself, rolling her eyes. “Oh you do. You just don’t know the full scope of it yet. Give it a week. You’ll know unequivocally what you are, and what decisions you have to make if you want life to continue as normal.”

Tina stopped suddenly, looking up at her, then storming over to get into her face. “Look, I don’t know who or what you are… what *we* are... but I don’t want you coming onto my territory and taking my things!” she scowled, her finger so close to the agent’s nose that she was tempted to bite it. “This is my den! My territory. So yea, when we’re done here… don’t come back, unless you’re human like her.”

“Why do you keep saying *human*?” the cashier worried, looking up at Tina from the bagging area. “Tina... you’re kinda scaring me here.”

Anne shook her head. “Please, Tina... just keep this under control. Okay? We need cooler heads to prevail in all of this.”

The woman seemed much nicer to Anne than she did to Jennifer and Virgil. “I... I’ll try honey.” she said. “Sorry for the trouble. I guess I just… sensed somethin’ about em that set me off. I’m s’posed to go ta… Dr. Rannie’s house after work to talk this out.”

The agent kept her cool, but eyed the woman down the entire time they were packing the groceries. “Did someone give you a business card yesterday?” she asked finally. “Tall, fit guy with a shaved head, maybe?” She nodded to her gloves. “Kinda odd to wear gloves all day long. Just sayin.”

“I remember him.” she responded. “Jake something. Nice lookin’ guy. You think that’s where this started?”

“Probably.” she nodded, trying to be ambiguous about it. “Just keep an eye out for people with gloves on today.” Virgil was listening, picking up on some of it, but didn’t quite understand. He assumed that Tina didn’t either.

Anne wanted to scold her for being so outspoken about the situation. This wasn’t what they agreed to! Yet here she was letting them know. Pretty much telling them that GERCorp was behind it! She’d certainly have to tell Dr. Coren when they got back.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the groceries were bagged, paid for, then loaded into the car. No sooner had they closed the doors, though, than Anne had to have her say. “Why the fuck did you tell her all that??” she demanded, practically accosting the agent next to her. “You’re basically admitting that we’re responsible for the virus! You can’t secret club your way into this. Everyone’s gonna start changing and it’s going to be VERY obvious VERY soon. Doing it now just spreads rumors and fears.”

Cpt. Ramone rolled her eyes. “I figured talking to her about it might calm her the fuck down. She was about to get into a fight with me, and I’m farther along. I wouldn’t have it. You could see that it worked, too. Got her gears turning. She can’t shut us out of her shop. Eventually we’ll outnumber humans in this town easily.”

Virgil sighed from the back seat. “You wanna tell me what the fuck is going on?” he asked. “All this talk of humans and... out numbering... changing... The fur on my foot, the fur on your wrist.”

“It’s much more than just my wrist.” Jennifer replied, taking off her glove. Her hand was transformed, the dark brown fur covering it fully, save for the pads on her fingers and palm. Small black claws had long replaced her nails, masked only by the thickness of the gloves that she’d been wearing. “It’s clean up to my shoulder on that side. As... as well as spots in other places. I’m... probably not gonna be able to leave the lab tomorrow. Unless everyone just sorta rolls over and lets this happen.”

Anne started the car and began to back out, noticing Clara driving by. She decided not to stop. “You remember the talking fox I told you about?” she asked Virgil as she looked into her mirror. “Well, it turns out that fox has a virus. And... it’s compatible with humans.”

“And… what does that virus do?” he worried. “Am I infected with that virus?”

Jennifer looked over her shoulder at him. “Did you not see my hand?” she asked with a chuckle. “She’s not a four legged fox, if that’s what you’re thinkin.” she explained casually. “Kaylee’s smart. She walks on 2 legs, wears clothes, and she’s really pretty. Bein like that won’t be so bad.”

He took a moment to process what she’d said. “So... we’re... turning into foxes?” he asked hesitantly. “Do you know how crazy that sounds?”

“You said Swirl spoke to you. You really think this is beyond the pale?” Cpt. Ramone asked. She was being aggressive and very… noisy. Not leaving Anne a lot of room to speak. “And not just foxes. Fox people. Vulpes Sapiens.”

He shook his head. “V... vul-”

“It’s hard to explain, honey.” Anne interrupted. “I just... I’ll be joining you in all this when we get back and… confirm that you’re really… one of them.”

Jennifer objected, shaking her head. “I don’t think so, Anne. We need you human. There aint a lot of you that we can trust right now. You can join him later.”

“Joining me?” he asked, raising a brow. “This whole thing’s... God my head hurts.”

“Might be your skull pushin’ out.” Cpt. Ramone smirked. “I’ve heard it hurts. I’ll... probably feel it later today or tomorrow. This whole thing only takes about three days.”

“T… three or four days??” Virgil gasped. “That’s all I have left?!”

Jennifer chuckled, “Left for what?” she asked, “You aint dyin, man. You’re just changing! You’ll get a tail, some cute pointy ears, and… well you’ll get real short. Other than that… nothing happens!”

He scowled at her. “Other than that? That sounds like a lot to me,” he objected. “Sounds like my entire identity.”

Laughing she turned around to face him, the beginnings of amber starting to show in her eyes. “Your identity?” she beamed. “Boy you got a ways to go yet, huh? That mind’a yours is lagging.”

Anne groaned. “Would you stop, please?” she asked, turning on the radio to find some calming music. “I’m a nervous wreck right now and you’re really not helping. Let’s just... get the dog and go back to the lab.”

Chapter 44

Dr. Coren watched as Jaren led Gil down the hall toward the scanner. The man was laughing and stumbling around like he was inebriated. His Euphoria had finally come. It seemed that, most individuals infected with the xenobots would experience their euphoria between four and twenty-four hours following their exposure. The time variation was enormous, which gave the director pause. Why would it vary to such a degree?

Dr. Venner experienced her euphoria within the narrowest window, 4 hours post infection. Her case was unique, however, since it was the only direct blood contact with the progenitor specimen. It made the tod wonder if perhaps more research could be conducted with direct exposure in that way. Convincing Kaylee to agree however, would likely be an insurmountable challenge.

"Is Anne back yet?" he asked, splaying his ears as he looked at Heidi. "Have you heard anything from Clara? I kinda feel like we're in the dark."

The vixen chuckled and nuzzled him on the cheek. "Patience, honey." she said. "It's only two in the afternoon." Her ears tilted to the conference room as she heard laughter over the radio they'd set up to listen to the festival's pre-celebration proceedings. "She's not back yet, but I suspect she will be soon."

"Let's hope so." Alan whined, his ears perking up as he heard the fit of laughter, "Sounds like a speaker at the festival is experiencing their euphoria in front of everyone."

The humans were hovering around the radio, listening in horror as the speaker, identifying himself as the mayor of Friendly, laughed and joked as if he were inebriated. "The mayor is infected…" a tall, junior researcher of Asian descent whispered, looking at the petite sandy blond beside him. "This is not good."

Jake stood, leaning against the wall with Carmen standing beside him. The pair listened in worried anticipation, observing the humans as much as the broadcast. "So, the mayor's infected," he said, looking down at the vixen to his side. She didn't seem so short now. "Lost his shit in the middle of a speech… that's gotta be embarrassing."

"Yup." Carmen chuckled, her tail wagging side to side slowly as she continued to listen. "Sounds like it's hit the local government already. That'll make this whole thing interesting."

The agent nodded, looking at the neck of his shirt. It was nearly falling off his shoulder "Easier, I hope," he agreed. "Having someone like that on our side will go a long way. He won't be calling in the guard if it threatens his own hide."

"Hey, whattya think about me bleaching my fur?" she asked, completely changing the subject. "You think I'd look good with white fur? I think it'd be pretty."

He smiled at her with a silent chuckle. “I think that’d be a really cute look for you.” he beamed.

The response pleased her, prompting her tail to thwap against the wall as she squealed slightly in excitement. The pair seemed to be extraordinarily unconcerned about the state of the flower festival. Despite the mayor breaking down on a live broadcast, they’d only lingered on the issue for a moment before snapping themselves back to their own personal lives.

Jake wouldn’t want to admit it to the humans in the room but hearing that the mayor was infected was honestly a relief in his eyes. In terms of species validity, having government officials… see their side of the situation was vital.

Their behavior hadn’t gone unnoticed, however. Though Jaren was in the room with Gil, monitoring his mental changes, the lithe young researcher that’d commented just moments before had been paying close attention to every move the foxes made. Their nonchalance had obviously been spurred from their condition. They *wanted* this to happen. Passively or not, these beings were adversarial to humanity.

“I’ll have to look it up once we get the internet back,” Carmen continued casually, “I... I’m sure there’s a way to bleach your fur. I just need to find a way to do it safely.”

The young researcher couldn’t stand their banter any longer. “Can you be quiet, please?” he asked, turning his head to face them with a frustrated, yet muted demeanor. “You are making it difficult to hear the broadcast.”

The vixen, splaying her ears, titled her head at him in a squint. “What’s your name, human?” she demanded softly. “You’re a bold one to speak to me like that. Maybe you’d work better on our side.”

“You may call me Ichi,” he insisted. “But I will not-“

“Guys-“ Kaylee interrupted. “Shut it. This is too important for bickering.” She was seated in a chair next to Jake, sitting on her haunches with her hands on the seat like she’d done in the car. It was far more comfortable, even though it did little for her height.

A news caster seemed to interrupt the proceedings as the mayor finally lost control and was escorted off the stage. “Well f... folks it seems our mayor is uh… a bit too friendly here in Friendly today,” she laughed, seeming barely able to contain herself. “We... we’ll uh...” Her laughing began to grow. “Oh no, the laughter’s contagious!” she said, starting to laugh more and more before the radio abruptly cut to commercial.

Kaylee wasted no time, looking up at Jake in curiosity. “You think the internet will go down? I mean, the only reason it’s out *here* is due to the block that Gene put in place. But isn’t your system all dependent on people being able to operate things? Once people start changing you might lose power and phone and all that stuff. I mean that’s what all the movies say.”

Carmen's tail continued to wag, unabated by the ominous predictions that the vixen had proposed. “You really think that’d happen?” she asked. “I mean if you, your neighbor, your friends, everyone around you just starts changing into foxes… wouldn’t it make sense to just pick up your tools and go back to work?” she asked, tilting her head at the number of humans who looked up from the broadcast. They seemed to think the statement was absurd. “What…?” she asked, “I mean, look at me. I’m still doing security just like I did before. I’m just... A bit more exposed than before.” she said, looking down at her crotch. “Thank god for fur, right?”

Jake had to admit that the farther along he’d moved in this process, the more he’d realized that she wasn’t wearing anything below the waist. Initially he hadn’t thought much of it, but lately… it’d been on his mind. More than that, he’d seemed to be gradually developing the ability to… smell things. He wasn’t sure what it was at first, but he could tell if an individual was male or female, fox or human, without even looking.

“Ya know you could wear a long shirt or something,” he suggested. “Like some of the others are doing.”

“Yea, but I feel like it might limit my movement, since this gear fits so tightly. I think we kinda underestimated it when Sunny trimmed it up.” She looked at Kaylee silently for a moment. “Besides, as cute as she is in that... Dress... I’ve just never been a fan of em.”

One of the other guards, leaning by the door as he listened to the radio nodded. “It is kind of awkward, having… ya know.. My junk just sort of… out there? But the fur helps a lot. I mean, I don’t really think about it much unless there’s a draft. Besides, as long as I’m not… happy to see you, it’s still hidden away.”

“I cannot believe they’re talking about this.” The sandy blond said quietly to Ichi. Some of those standing around her seemed to murmur in agreement.

“You’re still thinking like humans,” Kaylee said. “Give it time, other than your scent, it really won’t matter. We have fur, we have privacy, and the only time it’ll be relevant is during mating season.”

“When is… mating season, anyway?” Jake wondered. “Are we gonna have… kits?”

“Winter,” Kaylee replied. “February, March… about a year from now. “I think fertility’s a possibility, but we won’t know for sure until someone mates. Heat is going to be… an interesting experience for all of us.”

The comment brought a moment of silence over the room, save for the constant running of ads. They were a reminder of the world that was soon to fade. Car commercials, medications, sodas, restaurants, even the flower festival itself. Despite the mundanity of it all, several of the humans found themselves struggling to control their emotions.

“Ya know…” one of the humans, a fit man in his early 20s started, holding open his hand with a confrontational stance. You people really-“ His words were interrupted as someone new entered the room, with everyone’s attentions turning toward the movement. It was Danny, looking quietly defeated as he slinked his way to the corner near the foxes and sat heavily on the floor. The interruption was only momentary, but it gave the human enough time to rethink what he was about to say, opting instead to remain silent.

“How ya feelin?” Carmen asked quietly, her ears splaying as she saw his dejected look. “Doin alright?”

He sighed, looking at her with a dejected smile. “At least I’m not afraid of being infected anymore.” he said, “I’m still worried about Eddie, though. Is everyone listenin’ to the festival?”

“Yea, apparently the mayor started his euphoria in the middle of a speech.” Jake nodded.

“Then the news reporter.” Carmen continued, “It’s gonna be a fucking mess out there.”

Ya know, I guess it doesn’t matter if Eddie’s infected or not, now,” Danny replied, shaking his head as he stared down at the floor. “I failed her. Couldn’t contain our research, couldn’t even stay human.” He glanced over at Kaylee, tilting his head as he noticed the way she was sitting. “Is that… more comfortable?”

“Yea...” she said with a sigh. “I think my dignity was keeping me from doing this before, but… I have a feeling most of us will wind up sitting like this. It’s more natural to our bodies.”

Carmen looked at her with a pleased smile and a slow wag. “Not to be rude, Kaylee, but I’m glad you’re finally embracing what we are, instead of trying to be a human. It’s not natural for us.”

Heidi wandered in, stopping in the doorway as if she was looking for someone specific. “Dr. Shaw...” she asked, noticing him sulking on the floor. “How are you feeling?”

“Like ran over dog shit,” he said. “I hate that I gave in like that. I hate that I let Eddie down. I let everyone down.”

Deciding not to engage him, the vixen simply nodded. “I’ve asked some of the humans in the cafeteria to unbox the stored away supplies so that we can resume our normal meals. Lunch should be ready soon. I also sent Anne out with Jennifer to get some more supplies.”

He looked at her skeptically, hiding a hint of contempt. “You all treat me so differently now…” he said, “yet you still talk dismissively of the humans.”

“It’s just easier, Danny.” Carmen reassured him sympathetically. “There are some things it's still easier for the humans to do. And it makes sense to specify who's doing it, right?”

He shook his head slowly, still staring down at his feet. “Say their names, then.”

“I don’t *know* their names.” Heidi replied, “They’re the cafeteria team from before. They’re still human... Soooo... I call them the humans.” she looked at the others in the room to gauge their reactions. “That’s not offensive, is it?” she asked them. “Come on, I’m trying to co-exist. Surely that’s a reasonable approach?”

“It’s... a little objectifying,” the sandy blond researcher spoke up, “If... if I’m honest.”

“Then what should we do?” Carmen asked, splaying back her ears slightly. “What should we call you?”

“I... I dunno... Why differentiate?” she asked.

“Because of the contagion.” Kaylee interjected. “It’s important to discern who's infected and who's not. That’s... that’s the only validation that comes to mind for me. This process takes a few days. There are people in this room that look just like you but aren’t human. So, it’s important to differentiate.”

“Then why not call us the infected?” Danny asked. “And them... just... the de facto normal? I mean, we’re the weird ones here.”

Jake looked down at him curiously. “Have you already had your euphoria, Dr. Shaw?”

“Because those sound degrading and we’re in charge.” Heidi argued, finally having enough. “So... the mayor’s infected, right? And the news media... We’re still waiting to hear from Clara and for Anne to come back from town. I mean... it’s not likely that we’re gonna have any sort of panic at the festival, just confusion. The majority will begin to experience their symptoms over the next 24 hours. That’s when things might start to heat up.”

A commercial was cut short as the radio went silent, resuming momentarily with the sound of distant, echoing voices, as if from a stage. “Alright folks we are back with the Friendly flower festival in full swing!” a different news announcer said suddenly. “Apologies for the technical difficulties. It seems someone may have uh... spiked the punch a bit. Lots of people having a bit more fun than they probably should.” he chuckled. “Next up is the rising folk band from Portland Oregon, the Storied Tails! Let’s be sure to give them a big Friendly welcome!”

Heidi gave Kaylee a worried glance, checking to see how she felt. The vixen returned a muted smile, her ears splaying slightly and her tai flipping up and down at the tip. She was okay, but struggling to suppress a growing sense of guilt and anxiety as the festival continued on.

“If any of you need anything, just let us know,” Heidi said, “Alan and I are going to go through the data we sent to Dr. Klassen. We’ll be in his office if you-”

“Dr. Klassen?” Danny interrupted, “You sent data to *him*?”

Kaylee’s ears perked. “Is… there a reason we shouldn’t?” she worried.

Dr. Shaw shook his head. “Nah, just... Surprised he’s your guy in all this. He’s the chief marketing officer. Were you thinking he’d help us market the virus to the humans as some sort of miracle drug? ‘Cause I don’t think that’s gonna work.”

“He’s an old friend,” Alan said as he stuck his head into the room, “I know what you’re saying, Dr. Shaw, but I think we’ll be alright. There’s not a whole lot of people in this organization that I’d trust with as much clout as him.” He waved Heidi and Kaylee over, signaling that he wanted them both involved.

Kaylee prepped herself to leap from the chair, wiggling her hindquarters before hopping off of it with a bit too much force. The energy from her legs was transferred backward, sending the rolling chair shooting into the wall with a loud bang. The sudden sound scared her, sending her skittering under the table before she realized what it was. She stayed there a moment, suddenly feeling very embarrassed, but as she looked out, she’d found that nearly every fox had reacted much the same. They’d scattered from the sound, pressing against walls and beside pieces of furniture, with the guards having drawn their weapons.

“S... sorry...” she stammered, slinking awkwardly from her safe space beneath the large table, then climbing to her feet. “sorry...”

“Hey... that’s a teaching moment for all of us,” Alan laughed nervously as he returned to the doo, scratching the back of his head with a blush of embarrassment on his face. He’d ran halfway down the hall on all fours before he’d managed to calm his own nerves. “We’ll… need to find a better way to get out of rolling chairs.”

After the three left the room, the others began to relax. “Guess we really are animals, huh?” Jake sighed, looking down at Carmen. He was disappointed in himself. Even he’d reacted urgently to the sudden outburst of sound, and he’d watched the vixen cause it.

“We’re not animals, we're just not humans,” she said reassuringly. “Humans respond the same way inside; they just don’t have the ability to react as fast as we do on the outside.”

“She’s pretty fast on all fours, huh?” Danny asked. “I didn’t know that any of us could move *that* quickly.”

Carmen smiled, “How do you think she got away?” she asked. “The only reason Drake and I even managed to catch up with her was because she’d injured her foot. And even then… when she finally acted like she was gonna give up, she moved on us so fast we were down before we knew it.” She seemed so proud as she spoke, almost bragging about Kaylee’s abilities. Obviously, she’d felt quite differently when it’d happened. “That’s why you don’t fuck with a fox person.” she said, twisting her maw into a toothy grin. “We have natural weapons.”

“So, what’s up, Alan?” Heidi asked as she walked with the pair toward the executive conference room. “This doesn’t look like a... review the data moment to me.”

He shook his head. “It’s not,” he said with a bit of a worried smile. “I just heard back from Igor. He’s been speaking with the people he trusts about the virus. They’re already showing symptoms in over seventeen cities and thirty-four towns across the North American continent,” he explained. “They’re even seeing infections in Moscow, Budapest, and Wuhan, though we don’t know how many.”

“Wuhan? Moscow? Budapest?” Dr. Venner asked, tilting her head. “How did it get there? It’s only been... what… two days since we sent out our people? I mean seventeen cities is impression, considering only four people from the lab left with the virus in their cars. Something… doesn’t add up, Alan.”

He nodded. “I agree,” he said. “I pressed him on it, but he’s not budging. Just says we need to get out in front of it. For now, he wants us to meet with Mr. Tanaka and your… body double, to discuss messaging and next steps.”

“I don’t like this, dad,” Kaylee said blinking at the word she’d just used. “Uh… Dr. Coren,” she corrected. “The infection’s spreading faster than- there’s no way I did that. There’s no way it got to Moscow in only a few days. You heard the way he talked in the last call... asking about revisions? He’s covering something up.”

Heidi agreed. “I looked into that,” she said. “When he was talking about… revisions, he was discussing my notes and landmarks during the development and templating process for the xenobot project. It’s… fairly old research, but the platform led to the condition we have today. Considering the locales and the speed in which it’s moved… I suspect that there’s been… a little bit of data dealing from our aging CMO.”

“Be that as it may, our focus right now is to stay alive and keep this under control. Control the messaging,” Alan reminded her. “How it spread isn’t that relevant. The fact that it’s out there means that we have a better chance of surviving this thing.”

Kaylee tilted her head, “What about the contagion?” she asked. “You know that’s the direction they’ll want to take. How do we deal with that? Has the simulation come back yet?”

Her mother gently nodded, her ears splaying as she looked at them both. “It has,” she said. “As of yet… there’s no way to practically stop this. Even when we proposed an alteration to the existing template to define a border within the organism, it was rejected. The bots simply… killed the messenger.”

Alan exhaled heavily as he reached the door, opening it for the pair of vixens to enter. “That’s… well… in a way that’s good,” he said. “Without a way to stop this, we’ll almost certainly run them over.”

“We can’t tell them that,” Heidi protested. “We let them know we haven’t come up with a solution, it’s just going to escalate the situation. We have twenty-four hours before symptoms start to show in friendly, and… and a week before the town is like us. The company knows it started here. In all likelihood, they’ll try to lock us down, establish a quarantine zone and… force us to experiment on ourselves as a way to survive. We need to string them along. Tell them we’re still working… tell them we need more time.”

Kaylee shook her head, “They’re not gonna wait for that,” she said, suddenly feeling Swirl’s absence. She could certainly use his advice. It felt like they were flailing.

Alan leapt into one of the chairs, nuzzling Heidi with a whine as she joined him in the seat. “Let’s just see what they have to say,” he said. “Don’t tell them that our model failed, tell them we’re still working. We have a very powerful weapon on our side right now. So long as they believe this lab is the only way to stop it… we’ll be safe from their bombs.”

Chapter 45

“So, this is where you work huh?” Virgil asked as Anne arrived at the front parking lot. She didn’t dare use the loading dock. Trying to open that gate would just cause more trouble than it was worth. Every door was locked down from the inside save for the front to prevent intrusions. “I’ve actually never been here before.”

“There’s usually a guard at the entrance.” she said with a nod. “But we’re down to three guards now and, well... they’re a little different.”

Jennifer looked at her as unbuckled her seatbelt. “I guess you technically have six. We’re just sort of on… a bit of a holding pattern. Until we’re a bit more uh... Well... perhaps to say a bit less variable?” she wondered. “Right now, we can’t do a lot of security if we have to worry about our pants falling off.”

The sound of the car backing up to the door sent the security team running with Carmen wagging as she saw who it was. “Hey guys! Did you-” she started, grabbing her gun as she aimed it at Virgil. “Who is that?!” she barked angrily.

“It’s Anne’s husband.” Cpt. Ramone said as she stepped casually from the car. It felt much higher off the ground than it had when they’d left the facility that morning. “Relax he’s one of us. We brought em back so we can make him comfortable.”

Carmen nodded, lowering her gun as she accepted the explanation. She stepped closer, sniffing at Virgil as her tail began to wag once more. Welcome!” she said with a smile.

Virgil had froze in speak in absolute muted terror when he’d seen the vixen burst from the door. The way she moved, the way she spoke… the reality of his situation was running him over. “Is... that... what’s gonna happen to me…?” he stammered, his voice wavering as he stared down at her with a shiver. “My god... Anne, it’s a fucking animal. I’m turning into an animal??”

“Rude...” Carmen muttered, her ears splaying slightly. “You’re not the first person to say that, though. Seems like everyone that’s early on says something similar. When was your euphoria?”

Jennifer chuckled as she opened the trunk and began to grab bags of groceries. “Relax buddy. You can’t do anything about it.” she said casually. “Grab some bags and help us unload.”

“B... but...” he stammered, still refusing to move, looking at Anne with pleading, confused eyes. “You’re okay with this??”

“Not okay, dealing…” Cpt. Ramone replied as she walked past him with several bangs in her hands. “Now grab some bags and come on. You’re still human enough to carry a lot of these things at once.”

Anne stepped close to him, wanting so badly to embrace him and tell him that it’d be alright. “I know this isn’t easy to process, honey,” she said sadly, “but there’s nothing we can do. At least… not right now. The doctors are still working on a way to slow it down or… stop it entirely, but there’s no going back for the infected.”

There was a response in his eyes that she didn’t recognize, an almost instinctual fear as his breathing seemed to hasten. “No... no this... is… this is bullshit.” he objected, his fear seeming to twist suddenly into anger. “You’re turning people into FUCKING ANIMALS! What the fuck?! Anne, this isn’t... We’re not doing this!” He turned, starting to walk back to the car, batting her arm away as she tried to grab his hand.

Carmen looked casually at the two other guards. “Denial, anger, bargaining, depression… acceptance.” she said quietly. “Go get one of the early birds. Jake or Gil. We need someone bigger than- Hey! Don’t you get back in that car!”

“Fuck you… furball!” He yelled as he sat in the driver’s seat, put his foot on the brake, then pressed the ignition. The engine roared to life, but Anne quickly grabbed her fob to shut it down. “Stop shutting it off!” he yelled, starting it once more as she again turned it off with the fob. “Why are you taking their side?!”

“Virgil…” Anne sighed. “Ngh… get out of the car, please?? You can’t just run away from this! W... why would you even do that? We’ve been married for four years. You’re not the kind to just… run away from something!”

Jake jogged to the door, rushing through it as he looked in confusion at the pair of humans fighting near the car. “Don’t let him run.” Carmen said, looking up at him. “He’s infected and he’s trying to drive away.” The short, but still mostly human agent walked forward, standing just beside Anne, close enough that he could jump in if Virgil tried to start the car again.

Virgil groaned, kicking the car door open before climbing out. His face was a mix of anger and pain as he stared at his wife. “Honey this can’t be real,” he said in exasperation. “Maybe there’s something we can do? A... a cure?? Something? Anything! This can’t be real!” He pointed accusingly at Carmen as she shifted her weight with a tired scowl.. “It... it’s not possible! People can’t just... transform like this!”

Anne shook her head, tears starting to roll down her face as she held back from sobbing. “Come in, Virgil.” she pleaded. “I already said there’s nothing we can do.”

He tilted his head at her, leaning forward to pull one of the tears from her eye, but she backed away. “Don’t touch me!” she gasped. “They... they won’t let me turn. Not yet.”

“Get your groceries and get in here already!” Carmen growled, aiming her gun at him. “She’s human. You’re not infecting her without permission!”

“You... you’re gonna kill me?” he asked. “Maybe you should, huh? Just fucking end this.”

“It’s a tranq gun, you dumbass,” she growled, baring her fangs as she looked down the barrel of her rifle. “Now get in here before we drag you in!”

He looked at Anne in fear, then nodded nervously. “S... see you inside?” he worried, raising his hands above his head. The other guards remained at the door, seeming amused by Carmen’s behavior.

Jake watched him as he quietly grabbed a few bags, then slowly walked into the building. “Sorry, Anne,” he said. “You’re… probably the only human I like right now. It pains me to see you hurting like this.”

She closed her eyes with a sigh, opening them again to see the two remaining guards staring at her curiously. Apparently Jake had already entered the building. “I’m coming, guys,” she said, “I just... I needed a moment to myself.”

Walking through the cold white walls of the facility, Virgil kept his hands in the air, feeling the end of Carmen’s rifle in the small of his back. “Would you relax already?” she complained, “You’re with friends now.”

“Sure doesn’t feel like it with you aiming that gun at me.” he replied. “Are you... were you... human?”

She nodded, removing her gun from his back as they continued to walk. “Used to be, yea.” she explained. “About four days ago, Kaylee bit me in the neck. Nearly died, but they put me in a coma and I woke up like this.”

“Why... did she do that?” he wondered. “Kaylee’s the... talking fox right? I mean… the original talking fox?”

She chuckled. “Weird way to word it, but yea. Kaylee’s the first. The virus came from her.” She turned down a hallway, hurrying to his side as she directed him to the cafeteria with a sniff. “Goddamn that smells good. I’m starving,” she commented. “And... I was trying to capture her. To put her down. She fought back. Got me and Drake real good, then ran off to the Rannie farm.”

“With the talking mouse.” he nodded, putting the bags of groceries he’d brought in with the others. It was all starting to make sense now. “Does that mean Clara’s infected, too?”

“Yup.” Carmen replied bluntly. ‘Make the second right outside the cafeteria, it’s the conference room. I'll introduce ya.”

He complied, leaving the cafeteria behind as he too sniffed the air. It really did smell good. Stopping just short of the conference room door, he looked down at her with uncertainty in his eyes. “Are you really okay with this?” he asked.

She nodded. “Wouldn't have it any other way. Now go in.”

Standing in the doorway, he couldn’t help but notice the large number of people that’d gathered inside. They were spread out with a large group in the middle that seemed to smell more like Anne, while others seemed to be leaning against the wall or sitting on the floor. Many of them looked like they hadn’t been taking care of themselves, their hair looking greasy and sloppy, their clothes wrinkled and disheveled from days without changing… the distinct smell of human body odor nearly drowned out his heightened sense of smell.

They began to react to him as he lingered, some of the humans looking up with their faces contorted in muted fear, the radio chiming along, with fits of laughter frequently heard in the background of the performances by the band at the festival just outside of town.

Others, like Danny, were against the far wall, paying him no mind as they read books, wrote or seemingly drew. They didn’t seem outwardly concerned, or even interested in his presence.

“Everyone…” Carmen started, wagging her tail as one of the humans turned the radio down for her to speak. “This is Virgil Ramirez., Anne’s husband. Please give him a warm GERCorp welcome…” she said with a muted chuckle. “He’s one of us, so, just ya know, if you’re still human, don’t go licking his face or something and you’ll be fine.”

“Ya know, you really downplay how contagious this is, Carmen.” Danny scolded her without looking up from the book he was reading. “Our knowledge of the virus here is the only reason we haven’t spread this much farther than it already has.” He glanced up. “And, hey Virgil. Sad ta see ya like this. Kinda hoped you and Anne might avoid it.”

The young man took a deep breath as he walked into the room, noticing that the humans around the table seemed to part away from him like a shark in a school of fish as he made his way to Danny’s side. “Uh...” he started, tilting his head as he sat down beside the man, who’s clothes looked a few sizes too large. “I don't even really know what’s going on yet.”

Danny nodded to him, looking back down at his book. “Yes you do,” he muttered, “Our future just escorted you into the room.”

“How?” Virgil asked, the sting of his anger returning to his voice. “How the fuck am I gonna become… *that*?”

Dr. Shaw looked up from the book, folding in a string to mark his spot before closing it and setting it on the floor to his side. “You had your euphoria yet?” he asked cynically, “You sound pretty early on, asking questions like this.”

Virgil nodded, taking off his shoe, then his sock to show the researcher. Fur now covered his foot, the pressure he’d been feeling being plainly visible at the new shape that it was taking, narrowing at heel and stretching at the arch. His big toe had become substantially smaller, seeming to have moved backward as his other toes balanced themselves into the space. It was a shock for him to observe. He hadn’t felt any of it. His shoe was the only thing he’d even noticed. He marveled at it for a moment, breathing heavily as he slowly took it in.

Danny nodded, tilting his head in nonverbal agreement to his own question. “I’d say that’s a yes,” he said.

“I… didn’t even know it was…” Virgil stammered quietly, taking off his other shoe to find that the foot was still human. “H…how am I gonna walk if it does this one foot at a time??”

“You should probably go take stock of yourself in a mirror,” Danny said as he looked him over. His clothes were notably baggy. “If you had your euphoria yesterday or… even the day before, there’s a good chance you’re in for some major changes in the next twenty-four hours.”

“M... major how?” he worried, studying his other foot more closely. The changes were taking place there as well, but the lack of fur made it harder for him to detect.

“Whole process after your euphoria is about three to four days. If your foot’s that far along, I’d say you’re probably on day one following the giggles.” Dr. Shaw continued. “So, by tomorrow night you’re gonna look more like Carmen than you’re gonna look like Ichi over there,” he said, nodding to the lithe young man at the table.

Virgil shook his head, feeling the claws that’d started to grow on his paw-like foot. “Great…” he sighed, “That… that’s just great.”

Danny chuckled, trying his best to make light of things, “Hey look on the bright side,” he smiled sarcastically, “The virus’s gonna keep fuckin with your brain till you think all this is normal. You won’t even recognize the guy you used to be.”

“That’s not a consolation!” Virgil exclaimed, “What… what the hell kind of virus can even do something like this, anyway?”

“It’s called a xenobot.” he said, leaning back against the wall before picking up his book. “Think of it like an organic nanomachine. It comes in and rebuilds us cell by cell, rewrites our DNA… rewires our brains… Like I said, you’ll come to love it. It just hasn’t mashed your potato enough to take it in stride yet.”

“So... it’s making people like it?” Virgil worried. “Changing their minds?”

Dr. Shaw shrugged. “I dunno. Dr. Gilford’s in there now with Gil from the BioSec team trying to figure that out. If I had to guess though? It’s the only fucking way anyone would wanna be like this. I was fallin’ apart about it, it killed me to think about it, but now? It is what it is. I just gotta wait.”

Virgil looked around. “So... how many people here are like… uh… like us?” he asked, sniffing at the air. “I mean, I hate to say it, but I can smell the difference. It’s just that my nose is too small, and I have to get really close to…” he stopped himself as he realized the train of thought that he was following. His nose was too small??

“In the room?” Danny asked, finding his spot in the book once more, “Just you n me right now. But in total We got about eleven, now that you’re here.”

Mr. Ramirez followed the eyes of the humans that’d been listening from their side of the room, feeling just as sorry for them as he did himself. “They look so dejected. Is this everyone? I thought this facility had like… fifteen hundred people or something?”

“Nah.” Danny replied, “Buncha humans in the cafeteria right now. Cooking up a storm. I’m surprised you can’t smell it. There’s a couple of em down in the quarantine, looking after the specimens that volunteered for Alan’s study… All in all, there might be a hundred humans left in this place. The rest… well they turned tail and ran. Which is what Anne and I shoulda done. Then Eddie and I would be away from this place… and so would you.”

“Ten to one almost.” Virgil said with a chuckle. “We’re outnumbered.”

Dr. Shaw scoffed. “Nah. They try anything... even get close to us… they get infected.” he said, looking up at the humans cautiously, “They’re basically hostages here.”

“That’s why he gave into fear.” Ichi replied from the crowd. “He couldn’t take it, so he broke down and begged Carmen to infect him. Forced his arm into her mouth. Gave her no choice.”

Danny chortled. “Fuck you, kid.” he joked, looking down at his book once more. “At least they can’t infect me twice.”

Chapter 46

Alan sat down at the small conference table, his hands on the seat as they'd all started to do while in the car. Beside him, in a separate chair, was Heidi, feeling rather isolated. She'd gotten so used to sharing a seat with him that sitting on her own felt cold and lonely, even though he was just at arms length. Kaylee sat opposite them both, sitting up on her haunches more like that of a cat, to maintain the use of her hands. She was fidgeting with the tablet Jaren had given them, trying to understand the brain scan data recently uploaded for Gil.

On the television before them was a conference grid. Divided into four cameras, the bottom left panel displayed the foxes, providing feedback for positioning and overall resolution. Above them was an aging Japanese man with wire framed glasses and a beard, trimmed neatly over his jaw He was the CEO of GERCorp International, Mr. Kenzo Tanaka. He stared at the group of foxes objectively, giving no indication of his opinion of the situation, waiting patiently for others to speak. In the upper right was Dr. Igor Klassen, an aging man in his late sixties, his face wrinkled with the addles of time, suggesting a tumultuous life. Though he was on mute, it was obvious that he was coughing quite frequently, the slight tinge of blood occasionally flashing from the handkerchief he used to shield his mouth. His receding gray hair gave way to an elongated, shiny forehead, stopped only by the wrinkles of his brow, and he looked upon them with tired, gray-blue eyes, silently projecting an air of sympathy on the foxes on the other side of the screen. Beneath him on the bottom right was a woman, appearing in her early thirties, with shoulder length blond hair, fair skin, and thin framed glasses fashioned of red wire. She wore a lab coat, and though there were variations in her appearance, it was easy to see her as the near mirror image of Dr. Heidi Venner when she was still human.

"Dr. Coren..." Igor started, clearing his throat nervously as he spoke to the group. "Dr. Venner and... Ms. Venner… Thank you so much for taking this call."

"Of course." Alan nodded, his eyes darting to the woman in the corner who audibly gasped at his speech. "Uh… Thank you for having us." Looking back at the woman again, he tilted his head slightly, seeming troubled by her presence. "Might uh… we exchange introductions? I… I'm afraid I don't know everyone here."

Igor suppressed a cough, holding a rag to his mouth as he nodded. "Yes… yes of course," he said, "hh, well… how about you 3 go first."

The tod closed his eyes, sighing curtly. "Very well…" he replied. He could tell from the intrigued stare of the woman, that this really just an excuse to… expose them to the humans like some sort of sideshow for their horrified amusement. *Perhaps*, he wondered, *they wouldn't think so lowly of them if they, too had fur on their bodies*.

“My name is Dr. Alan Coren,” the tod started, “I am the director of the Genetic Engineering and Research Corporation laboratory located in Friendly, Manitoba. I have… well I’ve worked at this particular facility as director for just over 15 years, and… I’ve been in the industry as a whole for more than 40 years. Uh… I’m not sure what else there is to say.”

There was an awkward pause between them, the woman on the screen obviously overflowing with questions, but opting to hold her tongue, as Mr. Tanaka simply raised an eyebrow, his hands clasped into a knot in front of his chest.

“I… guess I’ll go next, then,” Heidi said, looking to Kaylee who seemed to be in no hurry. Her ears were splayed, and she was obviously dreading the exercise. “I am Dr. Heidi Venner. I uh… I’ve been the foremost researcher here at GERCorp Manitoba for the last 15 years, and… I specialize in… well… genetic alteration various… uhm... technologies and ideas. It’s... one of my fortes to develop new ways to… to meet the goals presented to the company by our investors.” She was practically panting, struggling to suppress the growing tightness in her chest. “Uhm…”

“So you’re the person I’ll be speaking for, then?” the woman asked with a quiet smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Venner. I assure you, there’s no reason to be nervous. We’re here to get ahead of this, and my job as your… face… will be to represent the company, and you as an expert in your field, while your furry little paws work in the background to put a stop to this virus.”

The vixen hesitated, squinting at her. “F… furry little…” she muttered. “Ma’am, we have hands. I’d very much prefer if you didn’t denigrate me in this way.”

The woman nodded, feigning an apology as she raised her brows. “Yes, of course,” she said hastily. “I didn’t mean to offend you I just… I’ve read about your condition and the virus at large but… seeing you sit there and talk it’s… quite an interesting thing. You look like animals wearing little shirts with little wigs and… oh I apologize, I’m talking down to you again, aren’t I?”

“You most certainly are,” Kaylee scowled. “You may look like my mother, but you are definitely not her.” She hopped onto the table and stood up. “Does this make more sense to you?” she asked. “We sit in a manner that is comfortable for our biology. It does not make us animals.”

The woman looked her over in surprise. “You’re taller than… yes I suppose that does make more sense,” she replied as Kaylee returned to her seat. “And I suppose, you’re Kaylee? CV716? The escaped specimen?”

The vixen sighed heavily, rolling her eyes as she sat upright on her haunches with her hands on the edge of the table. “I’d much prefer that you don’t refer to me as such, but… yes,” she replied contemptuously.

“Why should she not address you as such?” Mr. Tanaka asked calmly, keeping his hands before his face. “That is what you are. GERCorp property, a specimen. Your status has not changed simply because there has been an outbreak.”

“…I…” the vixen stammered, not sure how to address him. Suddenly, an additional member called into the meeting, replacing the feedback square in the bottom left corner. It was a woman in her early sixties, with long, dark brown hair drawn up in a bun and thick, black framed glasses. She was wearing a silver blazer with a white collard shirt beneath.

“Good of you to join us, Dr. Maynard,” Igor said, quickly muting his mic as he coughed once more.

“A... apologies for being late,” she said. “We were conducting a case study. You can literally watch the changes this virus induces in *real time*. It’s astonishing.”

“Dr. Coren, Dr. Venner, this is Dr. Joannah Maynard, a senior virologist for the CDC out of Atlanta, Georgia.”

Kaylee scowled once more. *No introduction for me, I see*, she thought to herself.

“Pleasure to meet you both,” Dr. Maynard said. “And… this must be Kaylee? Class Vulpine, revision 7.1.6?”

Suddenly her ‘name’ made sense, as did Igor’s comments prior discussing the ‘version’ of her virus. She was version 7.1.6? “There… haven’t been others like me, have there?” she asked, looking at her mother. “I’m not the seventh fox you’ve done this to, right?”

Heidi shook her head. “No honey,” she explained. “Your xenobots were revision 7.1.6.”

Igor cleared his throat. “So, what we’re doing here today is twofold,” he said. “Melissa here will represent Dr. Venner in publications and pressers, while Dr. Maynard will… travel to your facility to study your condition.”

The aging woman looked uncomfortable as she nodded. “Yes, that... that’s what will be happening,” she explained. “As a virologist I can easily concentrate on the nature of the xenobot propagation, while Dr. Venner focuses on the templating process and how to overcome the base instruction present within the colony itself. With any luck, she can render the xenobots inert, and I can develop a vaccine. Perhaps even a reversion.”

Hopeful words for a human on the outside, Dr. Venner thought to herself. *A vaccine is impossible. How much study has she even done? Or are they misdirecting us on her true purpose?* “I see…” she responded coldly.

“I will tell you now,” Mr. Tanaka started calmly, sitting up in his seat. “This pandemic is… not your fault. I cannot explain more at this time, but rest well knowing that this is the case. You are not innocent in this, but… simply know that this is beyond your control.”

Alan tilted his head, his ears twisting in confusion. “I… don’t understand,” he said. “Kaylee escaped, she indirectly contaminated the town. What’s…”

“As soon as the first fox turns,” Igor interrupted, “the Canadian guard will be activated. They will seize control and establish a quarantine zone around the perimeter. From there, infected individuals will be shipped in.”

Heidi stared at him in disbelief. “A military prison camp? Sir, our goal here was not to-“

“You want to live, I understand,” Mr. Tanaka nodded. “There is no extermination plan at this time. You will go about your daily lives within the camp. Communications will continue, food and supplies will be brought in by train, you will be confined, but free to live your lives.”

The three foxes looked at each other, his statement was ominous. What guarantee did they have that they’d be ‘allowed’ to live? That they’d be free? *Humans* taking over the town… it likely wouldn’t go over well.

“How soon will this occur?” Dr. Coren asked.

“One week.” Mr. Tanaka replied. “By then of course, your people will have turned, this may be a problem, but extended borders are already being established and a ‘no man’s land’ created between your town and the surrounding areas. I suggest you do not attempt to leave.”

“The guard will be there to provide care and supervision,” Igor explained.

“And if they fight you?” Kaylee asked. “Infect your men and turn them to our side? What then?”

Mr. Tanaka nodded. “Then… we will have another plan ready to deploy.” He smiled. “Worry not, this is in the hands of the Canadian government, in partnership with GERCorp at this time.”

Heidi was confused, twisting her head from side to side as she tried to process it all. “How do you know so much about this?” she asked. “We’re on day four, it’s barely propagated to the first infection point, and you’re already working with the government and have a rollout plan? I… I understand we had a protocl document but this seems to speak to something much larger. Asking me about versioning is-“

“Dr. Venner, we cannot explain that at this time,” Igor replied. “There may come a time where that information is available to you but at this moment it is classified.”

Melissa looked at Heidi, studying her closely. “Ma’am, if it’s alright with you, I’d like to spend some private time with you on a call discussing your mannerisms, thoughts and behaviors. I’m a professional crisis actress, I need to understand you so that I can properly represent your identity to the press.”

“I don’t like this at all,” Kaylee whispered, leaning into her mother’s ear. “Something is wrong. They know too much. They’re too ready.”

“I agree,” her mother whispered back. Looking at the camera, she nodded. “Of course, Melissa, I’ll be glad to do that for you.”

Igor coughed wetly into his handkerchief. “Make no mistake,” he said. “We’re well aware of the healing properties of your condition. The project is not without virtue. We simply have to find a way to… harvest that property.”

Kaylee whined, splaying her ears and recoiling at the word. “You’re not harvesting anyone,” she said defensively.

“No harm will come to you at this time,” Mr. Tanaka assured them. “Continue your research. Do not resist the guard. We will be in touch.”

Abruptly, the call ended, leaving the three foxes in a panic.

“They’re hiding something,” Kaylee whined. “Something is *very* wrong here. They know too much and they’ve reacted too fast.”

“I suspect that the leak that resulted in these other countries expericing the virus did not directly come from this lab,” Heidi agreed. “They’ve been selling my work. I guarantee you.”

Alan took a deep breath and looked at the blackened television. “More Kaylees? Human experimentation? My god… what have we done?”

Heidi placed her hand on top of his encouragingly. “Alan this is a good thing,” she smiled. “Higher propagation means a better chance of survival! We just need to determine… how to string them along as the virus spreads. When there’s more of us than there are of them, we can put an end to the struggle and co-exist with them as a minority species.”

“Wow mom,” Kaylee replied. “Just… wow. You’re still set on propagation.”

“Kaylee, if we stop the virus we’re sealing our fate,” her mother explained. “Right now, growth is the only way forward.”

Chapter 47

“Alan, get out from under the couch.” Kaylee sighed, standing in front of it with her hands on her hips. “This isn’t helping.”

Following the call, Alan had become so stressed that he’d darted for the couch, hiding himself from the world as his thoughts raced. What did they know? What were they planning? How did they know? How would they stop this? Would propagation even work? It was unethical! What else was there??

“Honey, we can get through this. Literally hiding under furniture is meaningless.” Heidi argued. “Are you really this fox brained now?”

He whined, only the tip of his tail sticking out from his hiding space. “What are we supposed to do?” he whimpered. “They're going to kill us. This is a disaster.”

Kaylee groaned. “How old are you?? I'm 14 months old. And even I can tell you’re being a fucking child. Get out here so that we can work through this! They gave no indication in that call at all that they were going to kill us. In fact, they said exactly the opposite!”

Heidi shook her head and sighed. “I don’t trust them either, Alan, but Kaylee’s right. They want us working, not being locked away.”

“Raaaaaa..a…a..” Alan fussed from beneath the couch, fading to silence as he thought about what she’d said. “And what happens when they learn the truth? That this can’t be cured??” he whined. “They’re sending that human up here just to have someone looking over our shoulder.”

Kaylee looked at her mother. “Does he even have any specialties?” she asked softly, “What is he like 60? Dude’s older than time and he’s hiding under the couch like a child and... I mean... Think about what we know, right? Dr. Shaw, Dr. Ramirez, Dr. Gilford, Dr. Venner, Dr. Coren… that’s your entire team right now that’s... that’s on top of things, right?? What can we do with this team to try to foil what they’re working on? What are our constraints? Is there any possible way that it doesn’t have to happen this way? I don’t want propagation to be our goal, but I don’t want them coming down on us because we can’t stop it, either.”

“You hear her?” Heidi asked. “This is someone thinking about solutions while you whine under the couch like an animal. Are you an animal, Alan? Is this what you want to be? Maybe we should take your clothes away and give you a little collar with a pet name so that we can parade you around like an animal. Would you like that??”

As they were deliberating, there was a knock at the door. “Guys...?” Anne asked from the other side, her spirits obviously hampered by the arrival of her husband. “I... I’m back with groceries. And... and my husband. He’s infected.”

“Anne... come in here please,” Heidi sighed, looking down at the tiny nose sticking out from under the couch, “we need your help.”

“No, you don’t...” Alan grumbled as he climbed out then stood on his ‘hind’ legs. “I’m here I’m here...”

The researcher opened the door, looking at the 3 foxes in confusion as Dr. Coren dusted off his clothes. “What’s going on?” she worried.

Kaylee looked up at her with her tail wagging curiously. “Anne, what’s your research focus?”

“Uh... well... Everyone here’s going to have some connection to genetics. In… uh... My case that would be chromosomal research. And... I mean... It’s nothing like what Dr. Venner was working on but... understanding how translation errors occur during fetal development and… It... I dunno anymore. Nothing makes sense.”

“Anne is very good at understanding and manipulating DNA.” Dr. Venner smiled. “She helped develop alterations to your genetic code, Kaylee. She helped create the template.”

“And... Dr. Shaw?” the vixen continued.

“Parasites. Mainly...” Dr Ramirez replied, “Genetics so far as... Symbiosis. That’s sort of been his work.”

Dr. Venner nodded. “Our Xenobots are symbiotic to us,” she explained. “They replace our immune system, make us a colony, and vehemently defend us from intrusions. That’s… kind of why it’s so hard to stop this from spreading. His work on symbiosis was actually something that prompted me to move the xenobot theory into a test phase.”

“Really?” Alan asked in surprise, “Dr. Shaw’s research gave you that idea?”

“Not exactly the *idea,*” Heidi replied, “more like... the general concept. I was always looking at the xenobot almost as a foreign body within the system that would aid in natural organic processes. I didn’t look at it from the standpoint of symbiosis until I had a conversation with him shortly after he started working here.”

“O... okay... So... I think that what we need to do then is get all of us in a room, sit down and lay this on the table.” Kaylee started, “From… from there, finding a way to stop the contagion, while simultaneously encouraging propagation…s… such that…” she was starting to lose confidence in her idea. “We have to spread but… not spread,” she continued. “How do we know how much is enough? How do we know that we’ve changed enough humans that they’ll relent their attacks, without changing so many that their whole species goes extinct?”

“Attack...?” Anne worried. “What’s… going on?”

Alan sighed. “We should probably... Go back to the conference room, explain this to everyone and... Figure this out together.”

“Wait, before we do that…” Kaylee responded, “Anne, I want a human perspective. Let’s... get your reaction first before we discuss this with the others.”

They briefly detailed to the researcher what they’d encountered during the call, letting her absorb it all. It was stressing her out, building and building with each passing word. How had she even survived this long? She wanted to tear the drywall off the walls, gouge her fingers into her chest and just rip herself apart, just so that she wouldn’t have to bear the horror she’d been enduring for all this time. Four days that had felt like an eternity of hell. And it wasn’t letting up. With her husband infected, she couldn’t even run! She’d be leaving everything behind.

“So... whattya think?” Kaylee worried, seeing and… smelling the stress that the young woman was feeling.

“W…well… so... they obviously know more than they should, that’s my first take,” she said, slowly calming down. “The fact that they discussed your revision number suggests to me that they have been working on research notes from Dr. Venner and… potentially recreating her work in other locations. Maybe even selling it to foreign countries. That would explain the sudden spread around the world.” She paused, seeing the foxes just seem to stare at her. “You guys… following?”

“I asked you to continue,” Alan replied. “Did not you not notice?”

She stared at him in confusion. He hadn’t done or said anything. “His tail,” Kaylee replied, “He flicked his tail. That… he was telling you to continue.”

Anne slowly shook her head, how was she supposed to know that? “A… anyway…” she continued, “With the Canadian military guard already getting involved, and the establishment of Friendly as a… camp… it means that they’re planning to start locking down and… concentrating infected individuals in one place. This does two things, it stops the spread, or… slows it, and it enables… well you know what happened the last time we had concentration camps.”

“So… they really are going to kill us…” Kaylee muttered, her ears splaying. “But they said they weren’t!”

Anne shook her head. “Humans lie, Kaylee,” she said. “Especially in a situation like this. They don’t want you doing anything unusual. They want you calm and controlled. They’ll hold off, so long as we research the contagion, but the moment they have a solution, my bet is that we’re just gone, wiped off the map.”

A long pause fell over the group, the foxes ears splaying as their tails curled. “Well it’s… not the take we wanted, but, probably what we needed,” Heidi said. “I just don’t understand how they can be so afraid of this. I mean, is it really so bad?”

“Are we acceptable to you?” Alan asked. “If you were out there in the world as a human, and you knew this was coming, would you be ok with it?”

She didn’t have to even consider it as an option. “No. I mean, look at where we are right now. My husband is infected. I’m not, yet. But… I know that he’s not dying. He’s… he’s changing. I’m not losing him in the same way that I would be in another scenario,” she said. “You’re not the same people but… you’re shadows of them. If it were inevitable, I think… I think I’d accept it. I... I mean, think about it… For them to... to come in and say that everyone that I know in my life that happens to have the virus now has to die…? Because... why? Because they don’t want this to spread?? If there’s truly no way to stop it, then we may as well just let it happen! It’s unethical to just kill off people who are still sapient, living, intelligent beings just because they’re not human!”

“So that’s the messaging we need to take then,” Kaylee replied. “We’re your family, your loved ones, your husbands, wives, children, parents… humans have those family units, and they hold them very closely, right? So… so we tell the humans the truth. Our people are our people, and their people, too. They can’t let the company kill them off.” She sighed as she looked at Dr. Coren. “We need to get ahead of mom’s doppelganger.”

Chapter 48

Clara pulled into the driveway, turning off the truck off with a sigh. “That might be the last time I can drive this thing,” she sighed, her voice wavering as she gripped the now massive steering wheel. “I feel like a child drivin my daddy’s old tractor.”

“Well, you got a lot done today,” Swirl said, rushing up to sit on her shoulder. “I... I just wish I could help you carry things in. I hate being this small. I feel so useless sometimes.”

The woman, now seeming to be in her early 40s, grabbed what she could from the truck, then began to walk toward the house. “Sweetie, it ain't you to be the strong muscular type,” she said. “Your strength is in the mind, and in the kindness and insight you bring to others. Every time I pet you and you lean in, squeakin like you do... you brighten my day. Even in the darkest hour when I’m bout ta fall down into tears... you brighten it up. You give me a perspective I aint seen… Swirl... You’re a little angel, sent down from the heavens above.”

Entering the house, she spotted Liam in his recliner, watching the news on the television. He looked up at her with a head full of hair, a diminutive man in his mid-40s. “Look at you, sweet thang…” he chuckled. “Hell, you musta lost 30 years today.”

“Look whos talkin, tall dark and handsome.” she smiled. “You wanna help me bring stuff in from the truck?”

He rose to his feet, wobbling a little on his legs. They seemed to be changing. “Yea, I can do that.” he said with a yawn, showing his changing canines. “I tell ya I feel pretty good.” he said. “Lotsa energy, youth’s comin back, eyesight’s improved. B... but mentally...? Clara, I’m scared. Mayor’s infected… storm’s comin honey. It’s comin fast, too.”

She put down her bags, then gave him a hug. His hands went to her waist as the pair looked each other in the eye. Though they’d both gotten smaller, he was still taller than her, and his eyes shined like the young man she’d met so long ago. “We both are.” she said, nuzzling into his chest, sending Swirl falling as he rolled into Liam’s pocket. “Oops! sorry honey!”

“I... I’ll wait for you on the side table, if that’s alright.” the mouse said, climbing out before scurrying down his body to the floor, “You two need some personal time.”

Liam kissed her on the head, the pair slowly dancing, despite there being no music to be heard. “How’s the town?” he asked, keeping his eyes trained on her as they continued in their embrace.

“Not’so good.” she sighed, shaking her head. “From the look’a things, it’s gone be a mess.”

He turned to look at the TV, giving it a nod, the evening news was repeating the many fits of laughter recorded at the festival that day. “It already has been.” he said. “Newscaster got the giggles, mayor, buncha’ people in the crowd... It’s happenin’ honey; whether we’re ready or not.”

“Mmm...” she nodded. “Where’s Terry? Did he head on out?”

“Nah, he uh… after everything today, he said he’s gonna stay. Take a risk on his humanity. He’s out there now workin by headlights. The boy don’t quit.”

Clara worried, tilting her head as she stared up at him. She could see the points of his ears, noticing that they seemed to move slightly as his mood shifted. “Is he sure?” she asked. “He knows what he’s riskin... Right?”

“Him more’n any other human.” Liam responded with a nod. “The boy does whatever he wants. I ain't gonna kick’em out.”

She nuzzled lovingly against his chest once more, smelling his changed, yet still familiar scent. As stressful as it all was, having him by her side meant everything. “The man’a my dreams...” she chuckled sadly, a tear running down her cheek. “God bless the day we met.”

He ran his hand through her hair and down her back, resting his head on top of hers. “I love you with all my heart,” he said tenderly, feeling her silently sobbing against his chest. “Better or worse, rich or for poor, furry or not... We’re gonna get through this, Clara.”

They both started to sadly laugh as she looked him back in the eye. “I do...” she smiled tearfully. “I do, now and forever, Liam Rannie. Now come on, let’s unload them groceries.”

It took a few trips, the pantry, chest freezer and fridge being packed to the brim, ready to weather any storm. Clara had purchased bolts of cloth, string, twine, sewing needles, gas for the generator, and many pairs of pants, underwear, and shirts for them both, just in case. They couldn’t say for sure that they were ready for anything that would come their way, but they were certainly doing the best they could.

It was only a few hours later that Eddie arrived, looking distressed as she came to the door. She’d lost considerably more weight, and her clothes were barely hanging on. “Clara… help me...” she stammered, her mascara running down her face. “I don’t know what’s happenin and-“ Reaching the door, she could barely believe her own eyes, looking at the short young woman that stood before her.

“Come on in, we’ll make ya some dinner.” she said casually. “You see anyone else headin’ this way? I told at least two other people to come out here tonight.”

“No..” she said, shaking her head. “People are um... well... people are startin’ ta see changes Clara. Enough of em are seein’ em that they’re goin to the clinic. The place was packed when I drove by. What on earth is happenin to us??”

“Here sweetie,” Clara said, leading the young woman down the hall, “get changed into somethin that fits. I did a buncha shoppin today so there should be plenty of clothes in the guest bedroom. Once you’re fitted up we’ll get ta cookin dinner and then we can talk this over with the lab.”

She sniffed back her runny nose, her sinuses clogged from crying, then walked with her to the bedroom. “You think Danny’s alright?” she worried. “I don’t know what’s happenin, but I don’t want it happenin ta him.”

“This isn’t fatal,” the middle-aged woman assured her. “It changes ya, but it doesn’t kill ya.”

“Changes ya how?” Eddie worried, looking at all the clothes. “Wow you got a lot of different sizes here.”

Clara nodded. “Yea... wasn’t sure what was gonna happen. Can use the rest for patches and modification. Once we get to our right size,” she explained. “Before then we just gotta keep from bein naked, ya know?” She walked to the door, turning over her shoulder with a reassuring glance. “As to what’s happening? Well, we’ll uh... You’ll have to see it to believe it. I think.”

Pulling off her tented dress and laying it on the bed, Eddie took stock of herself in the mirror. She found the stepping stool to be a bit odd, placed against the dresser as it was, but useful. In only one day it felt like she’d lost nearly a foot of height!

What stared back at her was not the woman she’d been so used to seeing for her last 35 years. For the first time in a decade, she was thin! In only a day she’d seemingly lost half her body weight, leaving her stomach completely flat. Even her stretch marks that’d plagued her so much with her body image seemed to be gone. Not to mention the scar from her gallbladder removal 3 years before.

The changes made her look closer, turning this way and that as she did her best to note every little change. On her back, a line of deep red fur seemed to run from the nape of her neck down her spine to her butt, ending in a small bump that seemed out of place. She felt it with her fingers, shivering as she realized what it might be. The fur on her hand, the black spots on her fingers, the small bump above her rearend… the sudden loss of height and weight… She turned back to face the mirror once more, looking herself closely in the eye, then in the mouth. If anything was different there, she certainly didn’t see it.

Stepping off the stool, she walked to the bed, looking for something simple to wear. Chances were, if she'd lost this much height already, she might be losing more. She needed something that could withstand it.

The smell of sizzling beef already filled the house as she found herself returning to the kitchen. She'd put on a pair of stretchy pants with a draw string that were on the verge of being too tight, then combined them with a long, well fitted dark gray T-shirt with a rounded neck. Not her ideal, but she wanted to be prepared. Whatever was happening to her wasn't done with her yet, somehow, she just knew.

"Alright Clara, how can'a help?" she asked, walking right up to the stove. "Need anythin?"

Clara looked down at her from her perch atop the small step ladder and nodded. "Honey, can you chop up some onions and tomato for the burgers?" she asked, "The knives are in this drawer to the left of me, and the cuttin board next ta that."

"Sounds good ta me," the young woman smiled as she gathered the supplies and began to prep the vegetables.

Clara leaned over to look out the window, "You sure you didn't see anybody else?" she asked. "I thought for sure Tina'd be out here at least."

"Tina?" Eddie asked, wrinkling her nose. "Why would you want her out here?"

Clara chuckled, "Same reason as you," she smiled. "Otherwise… I'd never ask her. Nice girl but… *shew…*! that perfume."

Eddie laughed, "Oh I know! It's just awful!" she beamed, "I swear to god when I left the bakery this afternoon, I smelled it from clear across the square."

The woman at the stove sighed, shaking her head. "Well, if she decides not to come, it's up to her," she said sadly, "She'll figure out what's happenin soon enough, same as everyone else around here."

"I wish you'd just tell me," Eddie complained, looking up at her from the counter as she cut up a second onion. "You keep tellin me you're gonna say later, but I'm changin' all day! Clara, it's got me freakin' out! Probably less than I should be, if I'm honest with maself." She turned her head, her ears twitching as she heard the front door close, doing her best to see from her station against the counter.

“Everything should be caught up, Mr. Rannie.” Terry called as he made his way into the house, stopping at the kitchen door to look at the two ladies inside. He didn’t mean to gawk but seeing Mrs. Rannie so small and so young confused him. He barely even recognized her. “Uh... Mr. Rannie?” he asked, looking down at Eddie.

The young woman chortled, trying to hold back a laugh that quickly broke through her guard. “You... you think I’m...??” she giggled, slapping her leg with her palm as she struggled to contain herself. “No, honey, I’m not Mr. Rannie…” she beamed. “My name’s Eddie Shaw, I run Eddie’s bakery in town? I’m just here helpin Clara… uh…”

“Come on in here,” Liam called with a laugh from the living room, “I changed today son, but I aint changed that much!”

Terry laughed at himself, joining Liam in the living room as he took the farthest seat possible from the young farmer. “I coulda sworn I saw someone’s car out by the road when I came in but… well I guess… I just don’t know how this virus works.”

Liam laughed, shaking his head, “If it worked like that, we’d have much bigger problems on our hands,” he joked. “You get everything else done, ya said? I much appreciate all you’ve done out here. I don’t even know how ta thank ya.”

Terry rocked in his chair gently as he watched the evening news on mute. ‘It’s a lot of work, you’re right, but you needed the help and I’m glad that I was here to do it for ya.”

Liam looked at him skeptically. “Why are you like this, son?” he asked, looking him over. “World’s about ta end and you’re helping an old man that’s turning to a fox straighten out his farm… Why not get outta dodge?”

The young man shrugged. “What else am I gonna do? Cower in the corner? If I can help, I want to help.” He looked at Liam a bit longer, then chuckled. “And you need to get used to not calling yourself an old man anymore, sir,” he laughed, “You’re damn near my age now.”

Liam looked him over carefully. “How old are you, anyway?” he asked skeptically.

“Thirty-six, sir.” Terry replied.

Liam laughed. “In that case I’m gonna hafta tell ya what my daddy used to tell people. Don’t call me sir. That’s my father’s name.” They both had a laugh for a moment as Swirl listened intently, swapping his focus between the 2 men, and the television.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “What’s ‘sir’ have to do with it? I’ve heard that joke before, but I don’t get it, I’m afraid.”

“Sir is usually a term reserved for a man that’s your senior, in rank, or in age.” Terry explained to the mouse. “So... Liam’s basically saying... He’s not my senior anymore.”

“Oh... kay...” the mouse said absently. “You humans really don’t make sense.” he chuckled.

“Who you callin’ human, mouse?” Laim laughed, looking up as he felt Eddie’s presence in the doorway. “Hey Eddie, come on in ‘n have a seat.”

She nodded timidly. Everything looked bigger than when she’d seen it last, but changing clothes made her feel... Normal again. At least for the time being. She spotted swirl, standing on the end table between the couch and Liam’s old dusty recliner, tilting her head curiously as he waved.

“Eddie, this here’s Terry.” Liam said, opening his hand to the man sitting across from him, “He works for the GERCorp BioSec team. He came in ta... well, ta try ta round up some escaped lab animals, sorta.”

“N…nice to meet you.” she nodded. “If you’re BioSec... W... why did this happen? Why are...?” she looked at the television as it showed reports of a strange virus, showing hands and feet, eyes, even tail growth. “Why is this happening?”

“Simply put? We failed to contain the virus.” Terry replied. “But then you already knew that.”

She held up her hand with a nod. “Y... yea...” she said, “This aint all of it either. You’da seen me yesterday you wouldn’t recognize me as the same woman.”

Liam smiled at her, rolling up his sleeve and showing her his arm. “Welcome to the club.” he said. “I think we’ll get used to it in time, but it’s a little jarring at first.” He looked down at Swirl. “You wanna introduce yourself to the lady?”

The mouse nodded, waving at her again. “Hello!” he said, trying to be as friendly as possible. “I’m Swirl! We... met earlier at the bakery. Your pie was delicious, by the way. Thank you so much for that opportunity.!

Eddie stared at him, then pointed her finger, looking at Terry. “Is the specimen that spread the virus?” she asked. “Why’s it standing here on an end table? Wh- why was it in my bakery??”

He just shook his head, “Nah, Kaylee was the one with the virus. Swirl here was along for the ride, but he's harmless.”

“Unless you’re a slice of apple. In which case, you should fear me.” the small mouse laughed. “I have the same viral components within me that Kaylee does, the difference is that hers were... templated? And began to propagate? Something like that. I... I’m honestly not sure.”

“So, where’s this Kaylee now?” she asked as her eyes returned to the television. “And... I mean… Can they cure this? Stop it from spreading?”

“As far as I’m aware, neither.” Clara said as she leaned in on the doorway. “You all want mashed potatoes? Or are ya okay with boiled? My hand’s gotten kinda tight. Feelin like the masher might not work too well.”

“Boiled’s just fine, Mrs. Rannie.” Terry smiled.

Liam nodded in agreement, giving her a smile and a wink.

“S’far as Kaylee...” Liam continued, “she went back to the lab with the rest of the bio team last night. So, she’s out of the limelight, but... she’s safe, at least”

“*She’s* safe?” Eddie objected. “Well what about us?? We aren’t safe! If she did this, they need ta fix it!

“It’s… not that simple, ma’am,” Swirl replied apologetically, “she didn’t know that she was contagious. She was just trying to survive. This just got out of hand because of a few slip ups, is all.”

On the screen, footage showed military installments being set up as the US national guard established what they were referring to as ‘care centers’ across the country. As they did, numbers scrolled across the bottom, detailing infections all across the globe.

The anchor was adamant that everyone would be safe if they followed the rules:

1. Shelter in place, do not travel
2. If you experience symptoms, do not seek a medical professional
3. All non-essential businesses and services would be shuttered
4. Curfews from sundown to sunrise.

“Well, there it is...” Liam sighed. “I told ya they’d do all that.”

“That’s all standard affair, Mr. Rannie.” Terry agreed, “This is a global disaster, so they’re preparing for chaos and unrest. I do wonder if-” His phone began to ring in his pocket as he spoke. Pulling it out, he could see that it was from Cpt. Ramone’s number. “Captain! We were just thinkin’ about you. You got a tail yet?”

“Very funny.” she responded flatly, her hand finding the appendage as they spoke. She hadn’t given it any thought until that moment. It was nearly 6 inches long. “Hey, we’re sitting here listening to the news on the radio, but we haven’t heard a word from Clara Rannie. Are you still at her farm? We got a guy named Virgil here, but there hasn’t been word on how bad the town was or… if she’s heard back from any of those people that Anne asked her to find. Some of our folks here are worried.”

He shifted his weight, putting the phone on speaker, then placing it on the coffee table as Liam muted the TV. “I am,” he replied, “Everything’s pretty fine here. I’m with Liam, Clara, Swirl and... What was your name again ma’am? Eddie Shaw, right?”

“Eddie??” Danny gasped, rushing to the table where Jennifer had placed the phone. “Are you alright honey? Are you having symptoms??”

She felt her ears move as she heard her husband’s voice, “Hey... Danny...” she said sadly. “Um, so… from what I’m being told here, this is gonna get pretty weird, huh?”

He shook his head, placing his hands palm down on the table, “Are you infected?” he urged her. “Eddie, I need to know that you’re okay.”

“People who are infected are fine, Danny,” Alan reassured him, “There is no... ‘okay’ or ‘not okay’ in this.”

“Shut up, Alan.” Dr. Shaw demanded defeatedly. “Please, Eddie...”

She looked down at her hand, rubbing her fingers through the fur that’d spread nearly to her wrist. “You remember I said I wanted ta lose weight?” she asked awkwardly. “Well, that uh… I got a flat stomach now, in just one day… heh… imagine that, right?”

Danny sighed, falling back into his chair with a defeated look on his face. “Honey, I’m so sorry…” he muttered, staring up at the ceiling. “I’m sorry I couldn’t look after you! I shouldn’ta been in this damn lab! As soon as she got out I shoulda left, too! We shoulda grabbed our things and ran! I’m so sorry this is happenin’!”

“Well the good thing is, you two can be together.” Alan said coldly, trying to change the subject. “Is Clara there? We’re hoping for an update on the town. The news has focused much more on the global scene than just our little home.”

“What’s happenin, Danny?” Eddie interrupted, “What’s this doin ta me? And whos this Kaylee I keep hearin’ about??”

“It’s gonna be alright…” Danny said, his voice trembling, “Just come up here to the lab, okay? We’ll… you’ll be safe here. Okay? Please! I need to see you while you’re still *you*!”

Kaylee shook her head, “That’s really not helping, Danny,” she said sympathetically. “The woman’s probably scared, you’re not making it better.”

“It was pretty bad.” Clara said, walking closer to the phone. “Dr. Coren, we were seeing damn near half the town infected today when we were out gettin supplies. Accordin ta Eddie, the clinic in town is jam packed with customers, no doubt showin symptoms.” She paused. “I tried to find everyone on your list. I told Virgil Ramirez to come out to the farm but-”

“I’m here.” he interrupted, stepping closer to the phone as they mentioned his name. “I ran into Anne in town. Tina down at the grocer was getting really territorial, but she was there to disarm it. They said I got this… fox bug… so they went ahead and took me up here.”

“Fox… bug…?” Eddie asked nervously, “Is this real... guys? Am I turning into a fox? What’s gonna happen to me? Am I gonna forget how ta talk? How far’s it gonna go??”

“You’ll… see in the coming days what we’re dealing with here, but-” Alan started.

Clara groaned. “No you don’t.” she said. “Send Terry’s phone a picture of you and Kaylee. She deserves ta know.”

“We’ll show you ours if you’ll show us yours.” Liam laughed. “But really… we probably should update ya. Clara and I are both probably gettin close to our 20s at this point. We been gettin younger and shorter all day.”

“Younger...?” Heidi wondered, looking at Alan’s vibrant brown hair. “That makes sense...”

“How?” Kaylee asked her quietly.

Heidi shifted her weight, letting go of the table so that her hands were gripping the front of the seat. “Well, you’re just past the point of sexual maturity.” she explained. “So... somewhere around 20 to 21 years old in... human terms. So it makes sense that anyone who's infected experiences this as a maximum age.”

“What about kids?” Anne worried. She didn’t seem too worried about staying close to the infected anymore, though she was still wearing her mask and gloves. “They’re not gonna... age up… are they?”

Alan shook his head. “Unlikely.” he said, “The xenobots look for what it considers errors in a person’s genetics, and it corrects them. A child’s body is still in development. It may fix genetic defects for them, but I don’t believe that the template would consider youth to be any sort of error.”

“It wouldn’t.” Heidi agreed. “I… suppose we’ll find out for sure in a day or 2 but it’s likely that children will simply become younger variations of our new genetic makeup.”

“That’s going to upset a lot of children.” Ichi said from the small, huddled group that seemed to be forming around him. “Their worlds will get much larger. Will newborns close their eyes? Will they become hand-sized like Kaylee when she was a kit?”

Heidi started to answer, but Alan shook his head. “We don’t know.” he worried. “We... we just don’t know at this stage.”

Anne stepped around the group, leaning in to grab the phone. “You three scoot together. I’ll send Terry a picture of ya so that he knows what he’s dealing with.”

“Shouldn’t we-” Kaylee worried, sighing as Anne took the photo too soon. “Stand up? So that she can see that we’re not feral?”

Jake nodded. “I’ll hold the chair so you can jump out.”

“I can get out.” the vixen insisted, shifting her weight around so that she could slowly climb out of the chair. “It’s much easier when its fixed, but it can still be done.” Once on the floor, she crouched down, then jumped, almost pouncing on the table as she leapt to its surface. Stumbling a little, she stood up. “Okay.”

“Just you?” Anne asked.

Alan objected, “No, no we may as well do all of… ruur??” he started, whining in confusion as Jake picked him up under his arms and placed him on the table. “You’re lucky I didn’t bite you for that. Don’t sneak up on me!” he protested.

The agent shook his head, his pointed ears splaying back slightly. “Doc, I’m like you. You can’t do anything to me. I’m just trying to help.” He looked at Heidi. “Would you like the same, Dr. Venner?”

“Yes please.” she nodded.

Jaren had been watching from the corner silently, observing how the foxes didn’t react to being picked up in the same way they had before. The aggressive association with touch was still there, but they were deferring any outward reaction. Was it a conscious effort? Did they simply trust their own kind? Or was there more to the picture? Through it all, he’d been studying Heidi and Alan, white using Kaylee as a baseline. The pair had grown to increasingly adopt new feral-like behaviors, despite having no further physical alteration… and each time that they did, Kaylee would, at first, reprimand, then embrace the behavior. Seeing her leap onto the table as she’d done was a fascinating sight, as he’d not seen any pouncing behavior from her at all beyond her first few months.

“Kaylee...” he started, raising a finger. “I realize you’re busy but.. After all this is sorted, I’d like to speak to you in private. Would that be alright?”

She waited for the photo to be taken, then nodded at him, making eye contact only for a moment before turning her attention to the edge of the table.

Squatting down onto her hands and haunches, she explored the distance, her tail wagging as she processed the jump. Finally, content in her… calculations… she made a small hop, landing in the chair like a baseball in a catcher’s mitt. The chair rolled, but only a few inches before coming to a stop. It seemed that, like her… parents… she was figuring out how to live in this truly hybrid state.

“Alright, so I’m sending you two pictures.” Anne said as she swiped through menus on the phone, “One has them sitting in a chair, and in the other they’re standing on the table. The vixen in the burgundy shirt is Kaylee, the white scrubs Dr. Venner, and the blue collared shirt is Dr. Coren, but being the only male of the three that might be pretty obvious.”

Terry picked up his phone from the table, then held it, waiting for the photos to arrive. As they started to come through, he found that he couldn’t help but laugh. “Damn, look at that! Dr. Coren you’ve gotten much shorter since we met, he joked, “You guys look healthy, though. Looks like Kaylee even let go of her spear.”

She had? Her ears perked as she heard it mentioned. How long had she been without it? She knew where it was. She’d left it in the breakroom by the door, what’d become her de-facto bedroom for the time being. It was an alarming realization at first, but the more she thought of it, the more she realized that she truly felt comfortable around the people in this room. It no longer felt necessary. At least, not here.

“Interesting… sitting posture.” Terry added as he passed the phone to Liam, silently worried by what he’d observed. “Is that just more comfortable or... I mean, you’re not still changing, are you?”

“It’s more comfortable,” Kaylee explained. “Sitting like a human is entirely possible, as you already know, but this feels more natural. It also protects us from uh… exposure, in the event that our shirt’s not long enough.” she explained. “I resisted it for a long time. Even before I left my cell I’d taught myself to sit like a human. I guess I thought you’d respect me more if I acted more like you. In here at least, I don’t have to do that, anymore.”

Heidi whimpered softly, nuzzling Kaylee to comfort her. “It’s much easier on our legs,” she explained, “there’s been... no sign of further mutation in that region. B... besides, even if there was, between Alan and I… there wouldn’t have been with Kaylee. Her body is in a fixed state.”

Eddie held out her hand, but scowled as Liam held the phone down to show Swirl. “Can’t say I ever met ‘em before, but it’s interestin’ to see all 3 of em like that,” the young farmer said, “I wonder what they looked like before…”

“Mom, you’ve really changed.” Swirl chuckled, using humor to suppress his sense of anxiety. The woman he’d known all his life, his mother, was now this… well… she was a predator, like his sister. It shouldn’t’ve made him nervous, but… it did. “It’s good to see your face again, though. No matter what form it’s taken.”

Eddie growled impatiently. “Show me already!” she objected.

Danny recognized that impatience within his wife, but hearing her state it so outwardly was concerning. “Honey, please wait. There’s a lot going on and-”

“I know there's a lot going on!” she objected, snatching the phone as Liam handed it to her. She stared down at it, feeling enormous in her hand as she struggled to process what she was seeing. “This is what’s happenin’ to me??” she asked in a hushed gasp, covering her mouth with her hand. “This is what I’m gonna look like??”

“Pretty… much….” Dr. Shaw responded softly, trying to let her down easily. “Honey, do you wanna come up here to the lab and-”

“Tonight??” she asked urgently, shaking her head in vehement opposition. “No. I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Clara had returned to the kitchen to continue cooking, but the woman’s behavior was starting to wear on her. “Eddie honey you’re gonna need to tone that down. It’s startin ta bother me.”

“Bother you?” Mrs. Shaw asked sarcastically. “I’m turning into a fox person. And being upset about it is… bothering you??”

“M... Mrs. Rannie...” Danny objected hastily. “My wife has anxiety, and... It sometimes manifests as aggressiveness. Please... Don’t take it personally.”

Clara returned to the doorway, her slowly changing eyes looking from the phone, to the young woman on her couch, “I understand this is a lot ta deal with.” she said calmly. “But remember this is my territory. My den… and you are a guest here.” Without another word, she abruptly left the room, leaving the four of them once more.

“Sorry.” Eddie said, taking a long deep breath. “This is just... I can’t… are they standing on a table? Look at how small they are!”

Alan sighed as he looked at Heidi, pulling away from a nuzzle as she again tried to comfort him, “I’ll be glad when people stop calling us small.” he said with splayed ears, much to Heidi’s amusement.

Liam cleared his throat. “I’m hopin that uh...” he started. ”Eddie, can you get us in a photo? I’m sure they wanna see how... C... Clara, come on in here for a moment.”

“Lemme put the potatoes off the heat.” she complained. “I swear it’s like you all don’t even *want* dinner!”

“I’m hopin’ that uh... Society handles this alright.” the young farmer continued, speaking in the direction of the phone as he waited for his wife. “I was talkin ta Terry about it this mornin. If people just embrace it and soldier on, we’ll just need to adjust a few things, and then we’ll be fine. There ain't no stoppin this.”

Alan cleared his throat. “We’ll uh… discuss that in just a moment but… we do have a bit of an issue there.”

Danny looked at him suspiciously. “An issue?” he asked. “Alan, what sort of issue?”

“I’ll explain in a moment.” the tod repeated. “Just... let’s just… enjoy the pleasantries for a minute longer. Please.” He closed his eyes, breathing in deeply, then slowly letting it out. “Just a little bit more happy…”

Heidi wasn’t going to be refused again, leaning over, she forced him to accept an affectionate nuzzle, whining with him as they seemed to calm each other’s nerves.

Jaren observed the behavior, then began to type feverishly into his tablet.

After sending the photo, Terry returned to his seat. “Surprising, isn’t it? From 70 to almost 20 in a day?” he asked, looking at an old photo of the pair on the wall, seemingly from their wedding day. “They look like the day they got married, save for a few foxy anomalies that are starting to set in.”

“It’s... amazing.” Anne nodded, looking at the photo. “I haven’t seen Mrs. Rannie in months, but… wow. I don’t know that I woulda recognized her if I did.”

Danny nodded, looking at the photo. “Eddie, if you can’t come tonight, I think you should come here in the morning. You and I need to have a talk.” he urged her worriedly. “B... but... for now I think we need to find out what Alan’s hiding over there. I know him well enough by now to know that something terrible is going on and he’s trying not to tell us.”

Chapter 49

“They were seeing cases overseas *before* we got our people out the door?” Danny asked. “How? I know we had a leak with Kaylee’s escape but to my knowledge that’s the only way it coulda’ gotten out.”

Heidi nodded. “Access to my records was limited within this facility,” she explained. “So it’s possible that it either leaked from someone with access here, or, the corporation at large was able to obtain my research notes and… well in my opinion sell my work to these foreign governments and labs without my knowledge or permission.”

“Well you don’t technically have to give the company you work for permission to do what they please with your research, Dr. Venner,” Dr. Gilford replied. “What you make here is automatically assumed to be their property.”

Kaylee eyed him cynically. “Trust me, we’re well aware of that,” she said. “Or at least, I am. They won’t stop reminding me just what I am to this company.”

Alan looked at the cluster of humans, noting that Gene was sitting to the side, looking down at his screen. “Gene, would our data be available for people from other departments to retrieve without our permission?”

“No sir,” he replied, looking up. “The data here had local permissions only. Only a domain admin from corporate could’ve retrieved the files and… if they were following protocol, and that’s a big if, you know how that is, I would have received a request first. I never received any such thing.”

“You’re gonna trust a human to tell you the truth on that?” Danny asked, eyeing Gene suspiciously.

The bearded IT tech looked up indignantly. “Why would I lie, Dr. Shaw?”

“Because that’s what humans do, they like,” the researcher challenged.

Gene rolled his eyes. “Does that mean that you were a liar before you were infected, Dr. Shaw? Are you only now telling the truth?”

Dr. Shaw growled, baring his still changing teeth. They hadn’t been noticable to the others until that moment. “Filthy fucking human, I say he leaked the data, he’s the only one that could!”

“Does it even-“ Kaylee started, quickly being outmatched with more shouting.

“Why the fuck would I do something like that??” Gene demanded. “My job here is to fix your broken equipment, not *leak your research* to other parts of the company! You know damned well that Dr. Klassen’s the CMO! Why don’t you ask *him* where *he* got the information??”

“Because you’d get a bonus if you did! It’s all about money and power for you primates! It always is!” Danny shot back.

“SHUT UP!” Kaylee yelled, the room falling deafly silent in the wake of her call that echoed slightly from the painted walls around them. “It doesn’t matter how it leaked. Who cares?? We shouldn’t be concerned about how it got out we should be concerned about what we do now!”

Jake shook his head. “It matters because any other move we make in here might get pushed out to the company. We’ve got a spy, and we can’t talk to one another in confidence if these’s a human ratting out everything we say.”

“Who’s to say that it’s a human?” Ichi challenged. “Maybe it’s one of you.”

Danny pulled away from Gene, then pushed his way to Ichi, his stature already signifigantly waning, making it difficult to intimidate the lithe intern. “Why don’t we just change you all and see if you start confessing?” he challenged menacingly. “There’s no reason that our people would sell us out, and if they did? They’d have changed their mind after they turrned.” He turned back to Gene, staying uncomfortably close to the humans. “Who would have access to this data?”

“Can you… back away please?” the intern with sandy blonde hair asked. “You’re making us uncomfortable.”

The mosty human researcher turned back to her with a sneer. “Oh am I?” he asked, stepping closer. “Maybe it’s time you-“

“That’s enough, Danny,” Alan said. “Leave them be.” He waited for Danny to recoil, his ears splaying in frustration that he even had to say anything. The concept of a leader was feeling increasingly foreign to him, but he remembered his responsibilities as a human, and it seemed that the others were willing to entertain it, at least, right now. “Gene, it’s a valid question, who would’ve had access to Heidi’s data?”

“Well, me, you, Dr. Venner, Dr. Shaw, Dr. Gilford and Dr. Ramirez,” he replied. “But I’ll tell you now whatever the hell this versioning system is that you use… the only thing I know how to do is install it. I have a login for permissions or whatever but honestly, I don’t use it at all. So if you wanted me to sneakily steal your weird organic robot research you’d be hard pressed for me to do it.”

“Are there logs?” Dr. Venner asked. “Proof of someone’s activity?”

Kaylee leaned in to her. “Why is this relevant, mom?” she whispered. “Who cares how it happened?”

“Because we might have a mole,” she responded quietly. “We have to find out who that is or everything we say here will wind up leaking to the company.”

Gene nodded. “There are logs, but, I mean, all it shows is check-in and check-out. And all of you looked at the data constantly. There’s no way for me to tell you without a leak date or some other set of information.”

“If I may, sir,” Ichi interjected. “If you suspect you have a mole within our midst, would it not be more prudent to discuss this with only those you trust, rather than speaking plainly to all of us? Even bringing this up has already alerted the individual that you are… ‘on their trail’ so to speak.”

Alan sighed with a nod. “Valid point, human... uh… Ichi. Thank you.” He looked around the room, noting that Jaren was feverishly typing away, but didn’t engage him on the behavior. Obviously he’d been keeping records, he’d seen as much when he’d presented the data prior to their initial call with Dr. Klassen. “Kaylee’s point is also valid. It has leaked, it’s in the wild, not just ours, but sources beyond us. Propagation is occurring whether any of us believe in it or not. As such, our jobs here should be to encourage it in a… safe and friendly way. Non-threatening, you know.”

“They’re trying to stop us,” Heidi continued. “We can push for co-existence, and send a message of peace, but at the same time… we need to continue to encourage propagation by extolling the condition’s virtues. Spreading it will be the only thing that saves us from the camps.”

“So, let me make sure we have this laid out here...” Jaren said, connecting his tablet so that it would display on the Television. “The leak that occurred from our lab spread to Friendly, and will spread ultimately to other parts of Canada… as far as we’re aware, this is the first outbreak in North America. In Russia, China, and Hungary, they’re also seeing rapid growth of the virus, suggesting leaks in each country. Or a plant… but, I’m not sure why anyone would do that. The company is working with the Canadian and, presumably American governments to confine every infected individual in a quarantine town like Friendly, and they’re rolling out here in a week. They’re not going to bother the lab because they want Dr. Venner to try to find a way to stop the contagion, and-or create a vaccine. Did I get that right?”

Heidi nodded. “You did, except that what they’re asking for is proving to be practically impossible. I’m still working on it, but… well it’s not looking good.”

“Even if it did look good, would we really want to stop it?” Danny asked. “I hate to be one to ask such a thing… I mean, I’ve been opposed to this from the start, but if we do that, we’re effectively disarming ourselves.”

“There’ll come a time when it won’t be tolerated any longer,” Alan said. “They’ll realize that we’re stringing them along and declare our part of the project inactive, and… shut us down, for lack of a better word.”

Danny nodded as he sat down in a chair between Dr. Gilford and the other foxes. He found it odd that Jaren was so confident in his proximity to the infected. He’d shown no fear, at least, not since Dr. Venner and Dr. Coren had been released from their quarantine. “Well this is obviously a complicated situation,” he said. “We’d easily be able to push for time. Maybe a year? There’s also the possibility that it spirals out of their control and our population becomes so large that they have to accept alternatives.”

“Like what?” Jaren asked. “You’re saying, in the event that the Venner population explodes, and we’re unable or… unwilling… to find a vaccine, or a way to render those with the infection inert, that the humans will… resort to… segregation? Perhaps? Mass graves and extermination seems far more likely to me. You’d need enough of a population to shift the seat of power to prevent it.”

Alan nodded. “Genocide…” he said, splaying his ears. “It’s certainly something to be concerned about. We’ll likely start seeing that in some of the other countries that are seeing the infection spread, especially since there’s no known solution at this time. Here in North America, though… I’d hope at least… that they’d opt for segregation rather than just flat out killing us.”

“Hoping for segregation…” Kaylee repeated with a sigh. “Ya know I think one thing we’re discounting here is human desperation. They start trying to round us up like they’ve already said they’ll do… they’ll have their own teams of scientists working globally to find a way to stop us at any cost. It won’t just be *our* research that they’re waiting on. It’d be like that Brooklyn project or whatever.”

Heidi chuckled to herself. “Manhattan project, honey,” she said. “Where’d you even get Brooklyn?”

“A movie…” the vixen shrugged. “But… if we look at it that way, that makes… well… that makes spreading and co-existing, winning the human’s trust all that much more important.”

Ichi scoffed, crossing his arms. “Winning our trust has been very low effort within this lab,” he scowled. “You think that it would be better out in the world? Where we’re not dealing with intelligent, well studied researchers in a small, confined space, filled with people that we all already partially know?”

“Well, you know what they say… doctors are wierdos,” Jaren said, looking up from his tablet, to which Dr. Venner and Dr. Coren chuckled.

“That we are,” the tod agreed. “Well for now, we are going to continue to work on their requests in earnest. It seems highly unlikely, but, there’s nothing wrong with studying and understanding our own condition, and, so long as we can prove to them that we’re working… they’ll leave us alone. Meanwhile, our people can propagate freely in the wild, and we can try to outpace the need for a ‘cure’ with the need for acceptance.”

“We also have that new human, Dr. Maynard,” Kaylee added. “She’s a wildcard in all of this. Probably being sent to look over our shoulders.”

“Dr. Maynard?” Danny asked. “I’m not familiar with that name. She work for GERCorp?”

Dr. Venner shook her head. “She’s from the CDC,” she explained, “She didn’t have much to say during the call. She seemed rather uncomfortable, though.”

“They see us as a threat to their power,” Kaylee scowled. “Humans will do *anything* to maintain their seat at the top of the food chain. Coexistence only sounded like something they’d except if we were harmless and sterile. Then they’d just treat us like pets until we die off.”

Jaren nodded, ignoring most of what she’d said to simply write contagion, and fertility. “So the common ground here is that they don’t want you to spread, so… no fertility and no contagion. I’d trust Dr. Maynard’s direction on these 2 goals more than Mr. Tanaka or Dr. Klassen, simply for the fact that she represents a government agency, and not GERCorp. She might actually be here to help, rather than just *look over our shoulder* as you put it.”

“Are we fertile, though?” Danny asked. “I mean, serious question, ya know? What’s gonna happen?”

Heidi looked to Kaylee as if to apologize for what she was about to say, “We haven’t had enough time yet to know this for sure, but… Kaylee went through heat fairly recently and-“

“Mom!” the vixen interjected, her ears splaying in embarrassment as she began to blush.

“And…” Dr. Venner continued, “she’s not likely to see another one until next winter. It may be different for us, but somehow, I doubt it. Our fertility cycles will likely be feral, like hers.”

Alan hadn't been aware of this. He was suddenly grateful that the… experimentation he'd partook in with Heidi after they'd been released, was not likely to result in offspring. "So, we have to wait about a year, then… to know if we're fertile, that is."

Jaren wrote it down, then pointed at the screen. "So, there we are," he replied. "This is what they want. Now… what do *you* want? As a species?"

"To survive," Kaylee said simply. "That's all I ever wanted. To not have humans put me to death because… because…" She stumbled on her words, unable to comprehend what it was that the humans had wanted from her in the first place. When given the option to keep her alive as a lab worker, they'd said no. She wouldn't cost more than food. Was it greed? Fear? They didn't know she was contagious at the time, did they? So it couldn't be fear! She was at a loss for words.

Splaying her ears, she laid down beside Dr. Venner in the chair, wrapping her tail around her side. "I still don't understand your species. I don't know why you wanted to do that to me," she muttered.

Heidi nodded, as did Alan, Jennifer and Carmen. "I don't know of a clearer way to word that," she said, "We want to live. And… not just survive in some camp or… to be collared by some human as a pet until we die of old age, but to actually survive. As a species! As equals to other forms of sapient life on this planet."

"I want life to go back to normal," Carmen spoke up, not really sure if she was allowed. "Ya know, come to work, do my job, have my friends, go on trips, movies, ya know… live! I don't want anything ta change. I mean, so I'm shorter now, and I've got fur… and I look *so* good," she giggled, "I wanna go out there and strut my stuff!"

Jaren took notes, writing "Live" and "Go back to normal" on the tablet in larger letters than the rest. "Do you want humans to exist as well?" he asked, "or would you prefer to… wipe us out?"

Kaylee shook her head, "No. I don't wanna hurt you," she said sympathetically. "I wanna coexist."

"If we can," Alan nodded. "If you give us no choice, you give us no choice. I'm not laying my life down for humans. If it comes down to you and me… I'm gonna do everything I can to make sure it's me that comes out on top."

Jennifer nodded in agreement, standing beside the window with her arms crossed. As she'd predicted earlier in the day, her body had changed too much to still be considered human. Sparse fur covered most of her body, with her nub of a tail pushing past the edge of her shirt, and her pants barely clinging to her waist. "Hate to be the one to say it," she started, sighing as she shifted her weight and felt her pants start to go. She bent down quickly to hold them up.

“But… the humans have tanks, guns, bombs? Sending in the guard’s one thing, but If they decide to get rid of us… they’re going to get rid of us. We can’t outgun them. Shit, I couldn’t even beat a child in an arm-wrestling competition right now.”

“That’s why we focused on propagation for the time being.” Alan retorted, watching as Jaren wrote ‘military threat, pre-emptive infection’ in the notes on his tablet. “There have to be too many of us for them to take out. We have to infect as many of them as we can. Preferably as high up the chain of command as possible.”

Jaren lifted his finger, holding it in the air for a moment, then gently pointed at Alan. “This… may be a change of topic, but it will help clarify what Dr. Coren just said. He flipped through his tablet, loading up a series of images of a brain. “This is Gil’s brain scan. We’re still collecting data on this, we’ll be gathering more tomorrow, and throughout the remainder of his transformation, but there’s already been some interesting correlation.”

“These images may not mean anything to most of you, and in the simplest of terms, they’re almost not important so much as the sentiment I collected through interviews and… observation of the staff here in the facility.” Dr. Gilford continued, “Prior to euphoria, Gil’s mind and… general sentiment on the situation was in line with standard human behavior. Activity was normal and, for the most part, he saw the infected as being… and please excuse me here… irrational, animalistic, and not truly a part of his collective. Sort of to say… not part of his species. In that moment, Gil wasn’t a Vulpes Sapien, so much as he was a Homo Sapien infected with the Venner virus.” He flipped slides again, showing brain chemistry analysis. “This backs it up as well. All the information here is perfectly in line with nominal human brain chemistry.”

Flipping through once more, the image showed a very different scan, with activity concentrated within the amygdala. “This is during the early stages of Gil’s euphoria,” Jaren continued. “You can see here that his brain is essentially being flooded with dopamine. He’s having the time of his life, but the reason this is happening, (and this can be seen in the chemistry analysis and subsequent scans,) is because the brain is… basically being torn down and rebuilt. Neural links are changing, chemistry is changing, cells, mostly responsible for non-memory behavioral responses are being destroyed and recreated… and overall, the brain is… shrinking.”

“Shrinking?” Jennifer demanded, “What are you saying we get dumber as we change?”

Dr. Gilford shook his head. “No, I’m saying that the brain is being restructured to fit the pending reduction in your cranial capacity,” he explained. “It’s being rebuilt to preserve your intelligence, replacing human components what you might see in a fox… mainly the way you process sensory input, and how you interact socially.” He pointed at numbers on the tables that meant nothing to most everyone in the room, circling one that simply read ‘+.06%’ then seemed to tap on it. “I couldn’t interview him at the time, obviously, but, well, that’s what I gathered.”

He turned around in his chair, then looked Gil straight in the eye. “Now, since we just took a scan and a table before this meeting started, why don’t we do the interview right now? Would that be alright?”

Gil looked around the room, feeling embarrassed with so many eyes on him. “Uh... alright… y… yea.”

Jaren smiled. “Good. We can extend these questions to anyone in the room as well. The responses should be enlightening!” He turned back to his tablet, disconnecting it from the television, then spun around again, holding it in his lap. “So... question number one:” he started, “Do you currently identify as human?”

“Uh… well I used-“ Gil started.

“Do you *currently*?” Jaren interrupted. “Answer them as plainly as you can, please.”

The agent, still appearing fully human, shook his head slowly. “I… do not.”

Jaren nodded, taking down the notes, then looking at others in the room.

“Nope.” Jennifer responded as his eyes passed her, followed quickly by Jake, Danny Carmen, Heidi and Alan. None of the foxes in the room, even those with no major signs of alteration, identified as human.

Jaren nodded slowly, “Question 2: Should the Venner virus propagate?

Gil stammered, shaking his head. “W… well this is a difficult situation, ya know? Should we propagate? I mean we have a right to exist as-“

“Just yes or no like last time, please.” Dr. Gilford repeated, becoming frustrated with the long answers. “I understand there’s been new information here, but I just need the change over baseline.”

Gil nodded again. “Yes,” he said simply, with every fox agreeing nonverbally, and some humans as well.

“Changed from no...” Jaren replied. “Alright, I’m going to play a few audio clips and I want you to tell me what they mean. These are various fox calls and sounds from the wild. I have not tested this on anyone here, but I do have a cheat sheet, so I’m interested to see your responses.”

He started the recording with a scream, playing it a few times as he looked around the room. “I hate that fuckin noise…” one of the humans muttered. “I studied in the UK during my doctorate. Fuckin’ things did that every night. It was creepy as hell.”

The foxes didn't respond, avoiding eye contact with Jaren. "Do you know what it means, Gil?" he asked, looking up at him expectedly.

He seemed to dodge the question, shaking his head. "No… no that's… no."

Jaren could tell he was being dishonest looking around the room at the other foxes. "Anyone else?" he asked,

After a long period of silence, Kaylee finally spoke up. "Mating call. Female. N… none of my business," she said curtly. "Something's obviously wrong with them if they're making that call right now. It's alarming to hear. Cautionary. Not a normal response."

The other foxes nodded silently in agreement, even Danny, who didn't want to understand. "Hearing it like that now… it kinda makes you uncomfortable, ya know?" he asked, "'Cause it's like… why is she doing that now? This isn't the time of- Something is wrong. It's unnerving."

Dr. Gilford nodded, genuinely surprised by the responses. Not only did they know what it meant, but they had an emotional reaction to it, given the time of year and meaning of the call. "He noted it down, then moved to the next.

It was a barking sound, similar to that of a dog, but obviously higher in pitch. "This one's actually interesting to me," the researcher said as he played it a second time. "Your voices sound the same as they did when you were human. Even Swirl, who can fit in the palm of your hand, has a deep, human voice. How is it possible that your vocal cords have the flexibility to make these sounds, as well as the sounds of humans?"

"That's just a bark." Gil said, ignoring his question. "Doesn't mean anything really, just sort of… 'hey... anyone there?"

"Could also be a response." Virgil said, frowning sadly as he watched Anne turn away. "Uh… I mean sort of a… 'I heard you'… type of thing."

Jaren nodded, moving to the next sound, a quick bark, called a "staccato bark" in his notes. Jennifer started to laugh the moment she heard it. "Oh god, that bitch in the store…" she joked, "I guarantee you she's gonna be sitting outside that store barking at everyone till her shit goes broke."

Gil didn't seem to understand. "Uh… it's just another bark?" he asked. "I dunno what that means."

“Territory.” Kaylee said. “Basically, anyway. This isn’t like your language where things have very specific meanings. It tends to be a sort of… idea. Ya know? But if I were to do that I’d… basically be saying that you’re in my territory, or that you’re... invading my space. At the same time, though… it could just be telling someone to… ya know... don’t stray too far. Don’t wander.”

Heidi nodded, laying down beside her daughter, then nuzzling her. “More of a motherly thing when used in that way,” she smiled. “I’m so glad I can speak your language now.”

“You’ve always spoken my language,” the vixen retorted, splaying back her ears. “I speak English, same as you.”

“Interesting,” Jaren responded, “so Gil doesn’t yet understand it, but Jennifer did, and Heidi… who else?”

Continuing on, Jaren played a sound marked as “Clicketing” on his cheat sheet. Again, Gil seemed to have no response, nor did Jennifer, Virgil or Danny, Carmen however, seemed interested, while Kaylee splayed back her ears.

“So what are you guys hearing?” Jaren asked.

Kaylee was irritated, sitting back up in the chair. “Why are we doing this?” she complained, “It’s obvious we know what they mean, and you don’t. The farther along someone is the more they understand. What’s the point of this exercise?”

Jaren smirked, raising a brow at her curious response. “Does that sound bother you?” he asked, “Can you tell me what it means?”

When she didn’t answer, he shook his head. “Because here’s the thing… the purpose of this exercise is to determine how this takes effect. Your brain doesn’t just change *during* your euphoria. It *starts* to change, then *continues* to do so until… well theoretically until your physical processes are completed. Someone like Gil might think *more* like you, but he doesn’t think *exactly* like you until he’s gone all the way. The mental processes of this are just as progressive as the physical. That’s what this exercise is for.”

He looked at Carmen, who had responded more receptively. “What about you, Carmen?” he asked, “what did you hear?”

“It’s… flirting, basically,” she said, looking to Kaylee as if to get confirmation. “Like if you’re with a mate.”

“It’s a vixen that’s flirting.” Kaylee responded shortly as she jumped from the chair. “I’ve heard enough of this tonight. I’m gonna go lay down. You need anything else from me, call me… in fucking English… and I’ll come. Don’t you dare make those animal noises at me.”

Jaren watched her leave the room, curiously studying her tail as it remained low and wrapped around the doorjamb as she disappeared into the hallway.

“Forgive me for being… daft,” Dr. Gilford said, “but… why is she so upset? Are these calls offensive, or?”

Heidi shook her head. “She doesn’t like to be reminded of this sort of thing,” she explained, “That and… starting with an off-season mating call was unnerving for us all.”

“Why did the mating call bother you?” he asked, nearly pleading for an answer.

“It’s off season,” Alan yawned, laying down beside Heidi who spread out on the chair now that Kaylee had left the room. “A call like that off season… something’s wrong with the vixen, or she’s in some sort of duress, it’s a recording... a trap… it’s not normal.”

Kaylee, having only walked a few feet, scoffed and stuck her head back into the doorway. “They’re missing the point.” She said harshly. “It’s unnerving because it’s off-season because when its used off-season, it’s a warning. At least, when someone like her does it. It could also be a cry for help. Someone who’s about to get hurt or killed. Desperation. You migt be listening to someone’s last words. For all I know she’s someone’s coat by now.” She stormed off before anyone could respond, leaving the foxes to look at one another. They somehow had understood this but didn’t know the full depth of the reasoning that it made them so upset.

“I guess… she still knows more about this than you do, then, huh?” Jaren asked. “I think, given my notes here, that it was recorded during mating season. So… even though it bothers you now, it’s not meant to. I didn’t realize it had such a powerful message based on the time off year. Anyway, that’s all I had for now.

Alan sighed, “I’m tired…” he whined.

“Still got some work to do here doc,” Danny replied, “You can’t just go to sleep because you feel like it.”

“Like hell I can’t…” he chuckled, “Let’s pick it up in the morning.”

Chapter 50

Kaylee was tired. It'd been a very long, very stressful day. Before she could retire for the night, however, Dr. Gilford had asked her to speak. She had no idea what he wanted to discuss.

She'd taken to the small recliner he had in the corner of his office, curling up in it to make herself comfortable. The last time she'd tried to lay like this was under the Rannie's workbench. It'd hurt back then. Her body was inflexible. It surprised her really just how much more limber she'd become in recent days. Though she supposed, she'd moved more in the last few days than she'd really done in her entire life.

He watched her from his desk, smiling pleasantly and occasionally typing something into his tablet. "You're studying me, aren't you?" she asked, noticing the clear correlation between her movement, position, and his writing. "Treating me like a specimen."

Jaren chuckled. "Kaylee, everyone here is a specimen. Even me! I'm not trying to be degrading." he smiled. "Understanding the individual and environmental responses in a closed system, like this is… in a way… my specialty."

"What is it that you do here, anyway?" she asked. "Is this why you asked me… in here? To study me?" She yawned as she spoke. Her brain was telling her that none of this was important. Only sleep. But at the same time, if it helped them deal with the humans and their… impending war… then it'd be worth taking the time.

He nodded. "All in all I'm a data collector. A statistical analyst. I gather findings from the other projects, aggregate them, and correlate events for cause and effect. It can be useful when understanding a biological, viral, or genetic event. Say… like when someone is infected, goes through their euphoria, and comes out the other side with a different outlook on life, for instance."

"So… what'd you actually want?" she asked, skipping right to the point. She was far too tired for this.

"I wanted to talk about your relationship with Dr. Venner, and Dr. Coren," he replied. "One of the things that I've noticed around here is that… as people become… afflicted so to speak, they begin to… well, they listen to you."

He leaned back in his chair, twirling his pen around in his fingers casually as he stared down at her in the chair. She took his behavior as a mockery of the stiffness in her hands.

“There’s a sort of... mental link, in a way,” he continued. “You have an entirely different social structure than humans. Even in this tiny environment I’ve been able to see it. You look at each other more as peers when you’re in common territory. You see your boundaries within yourself. Physical touch, proximity, that sort of thing.” Leaning back farther, he propped up his feet. “I mean look at Dr. Coren and yourself. Who would you say is in charge?”

Her ears twitched as she considered her answer. Dr. Coren was ‘officially’ in charge. As the director of the facility, he’d run the place at the highest point. She’d been nothing but a specimen. Now that they found themselves to be like her though, it seemed that this sense of authority was severely reduced. All three of them made decisions, and it really only came down to a few notable exceptions that any fox would be overruled. “All three of us are.” she said finally. “Alan, Heidi, and myself. We’re… a team.”

He grinned, seemingly acknowledging the point he’d been trying to make. “So, you three are in charge. Does that mean that Carmen, Kyle and Drake aren’t in charge? What about Danny? Anne? The BioSec team? Where do they stand?”

The question gave her a headache. She didn’t think so much about this sort of thing. “Is this a human thing?” she complained, “Do humans… think about this kind of thing a lot?” It felt so irrelevant. “I don’t have some... org chart or whatever you call it in my head. Carmen, Kyle, Drake, Jake, Gil, and Jennifer do security. It’s what they do. What they know how to do. If I asked them to do research, they’d probably say no because it’s not a field in which they’ve studied. Just like Danny. He’s a researcher. Once he’s farther along, his cynicism will hopefully end, and we can work together with him to find solutions. He’s an exceptionally practical man, when he’s not stressed out.”

She hesitated with Anne. Anne was a human. Did that make this different? Was she holding onto this social rank… thing? “Anne... is… very nice.” she continued. “I guess… where she fits in is more about where she wants to. She’s very friendly and helpful. She’s just scared of us. It bothers me, especially with her husband being one of us now, but for the time being we need her human.”

“So that she can run errands and do human tasks for you.” Jaren said rhetorically. “So, in a way, you *do* have a social ranking system. Foxes… then humans, then... assumingly, every other species. Right?”

She groaned in frustration. “This is a stupid question, Jaren. Why are you asking me this?”

“To understand what you think of us.” he smiled. “You treat us differently. More commanding, more juvenile. It’s almost like you treat us as your kits, or your servants. Telling us to do things, and just expecting it to be done. What would you do if Anne refused?”

What an inane question. Sleep was more important than this. She changed her seating again, laying back down on the couch with a yawn. “I’d try to understand her logic.” she said. “Humans have different perspectives. This is boring.”

He chuckled at the word. “Boring, alright! Well let’s move on then. How do you feel about your physical changes?”

“I haven’t had any.” she said flatly.

“You’re right, it seems that you haven't.” he nodded. “However, your movement has changed. The way you sit, the way you jump, the way you sleep. You’ve embraced a more feral attitude about the way you get around, to match that of the others around you. Have you noticed that?”

She nodded. “Some things are more practical for our bodies. I can sit in a chair like you but It's uncomfortable. My tail gets in the way, my legs dangle, my crotch is exposed… It doesn’t have to be that way.”

She paused to look at his other furniture. The old metal and wood desk, the tall yet fake bamboo plant in the corner, the art on the walls from cultures she didn’t recognize… “I was trying so hard to be a human when I was a specimen here. I was even convinced for a time that I *was* human and that I’d be accepted as such in time. But I’ve grown since then.” She continued to look at the darkened mask on the wall, it seemed to be shaped like a canine’s face. “What is that, anyway?”

He looked up at it, then looked back at her with a smile. “That is a tribal spirit mask. Or rather, a conceptual replica of such an artifact.” he said. Ancient cultures the world over have long held that spirits in the forms of animals have dwelled upon the land, carrying with them various forces of good and evil. Bounty, death, pain, joy, famine… that sort of thing.” He looked back up to it. “This one’s… again, conceptual. It more represents the general feel of this sort of history. It... frankly was purchased at a roadside shop when I was touring South America.” He leaned over his shoulder, grabbing it off the wall, then holding it in front of her so that she could see it more clearly. “Can you guess the general sentiment of a mask like this?”

She honestly didn’t care. Hearing his definition of it had bored her. “I dunno...” she shrugged. “Sounds like human mysticism to me. You believe in things that aren’t real. Gods, demons, spirits, and witchcraft... It’s all nonsense, you know that, right?”

He made a motion with his finger as if he’d invisibly booped her nose. “Matters of opinion, Kaylee,” he smiled. “Matters of opinion.”

Shifting his position in his seat, he crossed his legs, placing his tablet in his lap. “During this little plague of ours you’ll no doubt find those who turn to their deities, seeking help, or punishment. They’ll call the virus a judgment on humanity’s vanity and their wicked ways. They’ll point fingers at vulnerable groups… they do this with weather patterns. It won’t at all be surprising in this case.”

Turning the mask over in his hand, he sighed. “In most cultures the canine has represented a predator. A threat to be kept away from the livestock. It hurts the tribe by taking the food of others. But in a way, it’s also revered. A creature that provides warmth in the form of its fur and its skin. The wearing of fox fur is seen as a luxury today, but in the past, it was seen as a valuable tool for human survival.”

“Because you lack your own tools.” she said, almost in contempt. The idea of being used in such a way made her blood boil. “You’re an obsolete species. You can’t take care of yourselves, so you take from the innocent, then make up excuses in the forms of deities to justify your actions.” Her eyes began to narrow to slits as she promptly sat back up. “That’s what all this is about, isn’t it?” she asked, the fur on her back standing on end as she splayed back her ears. “Your species is so indulgent upon itself that you’ll see our destruction to preserve your position at the top of the world. You obviously take no qualms of skinning my kind alive for *fashion*.”

“I was born in the capacity of a fur farm,” she continued. “Why would you stop there? Sapient or not, we’re *less* than you and you’ll do *anything* to feed your egocentric desire to take from every aspect of the earth as your own.”

She stood up on all fours on the couch, then lifted her hands onto the desk so that she matched his eyes with her own. “It’s not enough that you’re the top of the food chain, is it? It’s that you think you’re the kings of the planet. You even make up special magical beings to validate the terrible things you do!”

She jumped off the chair and walked to the door, only standing on her hind legs when she reached it. “How could I have not seen this before?” She opened it, stopping just shy of the hallway. “Thank your stupid, non-existent gods that I’m not one of you.”

Jaren had obviously made an error. Somewhere along the lines he’d triggered this emotional outburst from her, but he didn’t quite know where. She seemed, by and large, uninterested in human developmental history. It was a teaching moment, he’d collected healthy data from her, but it didn’t quite feel like enough. More than that, he worried that her change in perspective might change her decision-making process in the ongoing outbreak, and the corporation that was fighting it. Waiting for the door to close, he picked up his phone, dialing a number with one finger, then waiting for it to ring.

Chapter 51

The conference room had started to empty as Kaylee promptly returned, with her ‘parents’ having fallen asleep in the chair where they’d been resting a few minutes before. The discussion with Dr. Gilford had ruffled her fur. He was an irritating, smarmy human, the type that just seemed to confirm everything she thought of the species as a whole. No matter what they’d say to her face, they’d always consider her a specimen to study, and not a person worthy of being their equal.

“Everyone, I’m sorry...” she started, jumping back onto the table. “I have one more thing to say.”

Alan opened his eyes with a fussy whine, looking up at her with his ears splayed before rising to his hands in the chair. “Ngh... wow… we really fell asleep.”

The vixen looked down at him understandingly. She was tired too, but she had to get this out of the way. It was just bothering her. If she was really in charge, like the human had suggested, this would put it to the test.

“Tomorrow, I want to set a few ground rules,” she said. “We’re gonna release the cell tower lockdown. I want you to reach out to your families. Be discreet, but make sure they’re okay. If you feel safe going to them *and they’re here in Friendly*, you may do so. But I want you to come back here before sunset. Under no circumstances are you to tell anyone that you work for GERCorp, or that you’re from the lab.” She looked back at Alan and Heidi to see if they disapproved, but they didn’t seem to. In fact, they seemed impressed.

“I know this is a pain point for all of us, but we’re going to authorize showers. We can all get cleaned up. The supply run, thanks to Anne, included shampoo and soap for humans and ourselves. If you feel comfortable in the community shower it’ll be more efficient, but I understand if you don’t. We shouldn’t need the quarantine anymore, save for perhaps one or two rooms for anyone causing trouble. As such, we’ll make them into makeshift barracks for everyone to sleep. I... realize that we’ve stolen a lot of your pillows to make our own bedding, and for that I’m sorry. We... foxes… can sleep together in the breakroom. Those of us who are far enough along. We’ll move the tables and chairs into this room so that you all have a better place to sit. We’ll also be doing movies and give you internet access… on the agreement that you don't make unauthorized statements or undermine our efforts.”

She looked at Gene, who’d been nodding along with a growing smile. “can we play music over the intercom in the hallway and the cafeteria?” she asked.

“We can.” he smiled. “I was just thinkin about that actually. If we can return to some semblance of normalcy, everyone will start to feel better.”

“We can also do laundry... I think?” Kaylee asked, looking back at Dr. Coren.

“Yea... Anne bought a good bit of detergent,” he agreed. “We’ll wash out the scrubs and you can wear them while your normal clothes are being cleaned. She also bought toothbrushes and toothpaste, hair care products, contact lens cleaner, a lot of things that humans need.”

Jennifer was worried. Between Kaylee’s departure and her return, her pants had fallen off. She’d opted, given the changes to her legs and the fur that was quickly following, to simply go without. She was, however, firmly committed to wearing her underwear, at least for the time being. “I don’t want this to sound rude, Kaylee…but… I don’t want you all letting your guard down. Shit just hit the fan. For all we know people are gonna start coming up here blaming us or looking for a cure.”

“I was discussing that with the boys, actually.” Carmen nodded. “We’ve got a healthy supply of tranq darts and weapons here on site, but we need more bodies. Can your team help with that?”

Jennifer looked down at herself. “As long as my legs finish what they’re trying to do, yea.” she said. “We can face out the guard house down at the entrance. The tower, we can put this place up to spec on security.”

“I can help too,” a young tod, formerly the old man missing an eye said with a smile. “I used to be a sharpshooter in the war. Now that I got my eye back... I’m ready for duty.”

Kaylee smiled and nodded. “Glad to hear.”

“Is that how you lost your eye?” Cpt. Ramone wondered.

“Yes ma’am.” he nodded. “Got pinned in, they blew out the end of my scope, glass went right into my eye. Medic had to do a field op. I got sent home but... Life was never the same.” he said, his ears splaying. “Until now.”

“Let’s get some things situated.” Kaylee said. “Make sure everyone is comfortable for the night, then we can bed down. Jennifer, Jake, I’d like to ask you two to work with Carmen Keith and Drake on security duty. Work in shifts so that you don’t fall asleep at your posts. Gil, once Jaren does his brain... thing... you should probably run the gate. You’ll still be human enough to calm anyone driving up to it.”

“You do know we’re changing, right?” Jennifer asked. By now, her eyes had changed, and fur was becoming visible above the neckline of her shirt. “My face is… really hurting.”

Kaylee’s ears splayed. “I know, and... I’d much rather wait until you’re done, but... We need security tonight. Just to be safe. The humans said a week, they’re likely lying about that.”

“We’ll be alright, captain.” Jake said, smiling at her, his fangs poking out of his mouth. “Come on, let’s get something to wear that’s more… tactical.”

They all began to organize, the humans murmuring positively amongst themselves. It seemed that her orders alone had lifted their spirits, even though they all knew that there were problems beyond their walls.

After the sun had set, Jennifer and Jake found themselves doing their best to stand guard by the door. Their legs were both changing, leading the pair to sit on chairs from the conference room. “My face fuckin hurts, Jake...” Jennifer sighed. “I hope it hurries up. I hate this. It’s like the worst hangover I’ve ever had.”

“Good thing it only takes a few days.” he said, adjusting himself in the seat. No matter how I sit, my legs feel unnatural.”

She did her best to smile. “Drives it home, doesn’t it?” she asked. “Seeing our own bodies… contort like this? We really are turning.”

Jake shook his head, looking up as he saw Gil walking down the hall toward them. “Nothing we coulda done...” he said. Something was washing over the changing agent as the man continued to approach. He’d remembered staring Gil in the eye, being punched in the face, even spitting at him. They were equals, in rank and in stature, not to mention similar in build. Now, the tall, strong looking man towered over him, a reminder of what he used to be.

“How’s it going?” Gil asked, looking down at the pair. “You in any pain?”

Cpt. Ramone nodded. “My face fuckin hurts…” she sighed. “Hard to concentrate on much of anything when its… pushing out my jaw like this.”

He tilted his head at her slightly. “Likely your sinuses.” he said. “New tissue, swelling, new bone... A lot’s changing for you right now.”

She groaned, touching her face with her hand. She could feel it protruding. In fact, if she didn’t know better, she thought she could almost feel it changing. “It fuckin’ sucks, dude.” she complained. “You goin outside?”

“Yea, Kaylee wants someone at the gate and I’m still the most human. E... even though... I’m probably gonna change face first, thanks to one of us in the group here.”

Jake looked away. “S... sorry about that.” he said with a sigh. “I was… I don’t know what I was doing.”

“My guess? Euphoria and diazepam.” Gil chuckled. “You were fucked up and drugged up.”

Jennifer nodded. “That reminds me. Did Jaren finish those scans on you?”

“Got some more in the morning,” he said. “Every time he scans it, I’m farther from my baseline. Keeps tellin me my brain is ‘less human,’ like that’s somehow supposed to be an insult. I mean, I guess it isn’t an insult? But I just can’t see it that way anymore.”

“So then...” Jake started, thinking about it as he adjusted his seating again. “This thing… kinda kills off the human we used to be, huh?” he asked. “I mean, think about it. It changes our bodies, our DNA, our minds… nothing’s left untouched. Are we even the same person?”

“What’s that story or whatever?” Cpt. Ramone asked. “Where you replace parts of a boat...?”

“The Theseus paradox.” Gil nodded. “If you replace every part of a ship, is it still the same ship? “Yes, but also no.” he said, sliding down onto the floor to sit beside them with a grunt. “See, our memories are what keep us who we were. That’s my thought. Our brains and our bodies change, but our memories and… *some* aspects of our personalities at least, seem to stay the same. The same is true for the ship. It may be new parts… eventually… but the stories of the sailors are still there. The route it takes, the cargo it carries… and the name painted on the side. That’s what makes it the same ship.”

Cpt. Ramone chuckled, looking up at the clock on the wall. “Nearly midnight and you have the energy to be that philosophical?” she smirked. “Never thought of you that way.”

“Well, he was the voice of reason when we were all losing our minds. L... literally.” Jake replied. “We’ve had this… philosopher in our ranks this whole time and never even realized it.”

Gil laughed. “Well hey guys, I’m gonna go ahead and head out to the guard station before I start growing a tail.”

“You’ll get smaller first.” Cpt. Ramone called as he rose to his feet. “And fuck... That’d be a welcome change. Goddamn are you tall now.”

“Used to only have six inches on you, if you remember.” he smirked. “See you guys in a bit.”

The pair watched him leave, disappearing into the darkness outside the door. “Ya know, it’s kinda funny...” Jennifer said sadly, looking down at her lap. “When I realized I was infected I was horrified about it. Then I had my... Euphoria spell and afterward, I didn’t feel so bad. I felt... ya know, different. And I just kind of accepted it, but… the more I think about it it’s kinda like... My brain started saying… ya know… we’re gonna go to our correct height, our correct configuration... Like... does make sense? I feel it both ways. I mean, on one hand, this is fucking horrifying! B… but on the other… it’s supposed to happen, ya know?”

He nodded without hesitation. “Even now I keep thinkin’ that I’m... becoming me... Becoming normal,” he said, “Even though I can see my own identity sorta… slipping away.”

He shifted in his seat once more, “Ya know, Carmen said cast it off, and in a way that’s what it feels like. This process is normal and necessary. B... but I know that’s not true. I know it’s not how I used to feel.” He paused as Gil’s words ran through his mind. “This virus really changed us.” he said. “It... it really rewired our brains. And... we didn’t even notice!”

“Kinda freaky, right?” Jennifer chuckled. “They tickled our pleasure center while they ripped and rebuilt our neural pathways. Tricky little things.”

“And they do it before we start to change physically… so that we’ll accept it when it happens.” He continued, feeling astonished. “This virus is nothing short of amazing.”

Jennifer nodded. “What was it that Dr. Venner said? We’re still 70% human genetically? How’s that work? How can we be only 30% fox and yet... Be a fox instead of a person with... I dunno... Fox ears and a tail like those mangas?”

His ears perked slightly. “Didn’t know you were into manga.” he said. “You don’t strike me as the type.”

“Manga readers have a type?” she asked with a smirk. “Nah, I’m into all kindsa shit. Manga… hentai… furry porn.. Though... That last one might be a little less appealing now.”

“Or more.” he chuckled. “I mean, it’s more representative of us now.”

She blushed and shook her head, laughing as she looked away. “Guess this fox brain shit turns off your filter too, huh?” she asked flirtatiously. “S... so what’s goin on with you downstairs?”

Suddenly turning red, he looked down at his crotch, lifting the hem of his pants as he tried to understand what she was saying, “What??” he asked frantically.

“I mean, are you gonna get a knot?” she asked. “Or is it gonna be... Ya know... Human.”

“Well... uh…” he said, looking away from her with a sigh. “Well Kyle Drake and Alan have sheaths and fur balls.” he said. “But... I mean I haven’t seen em get... happy. I have no idea.” He blushed more. “I... I have seen Carmen’s... ya know… and Kaylee’s... They’re human. So I’d assume... We’ll stay human too.”

“Good to know.” she nodded. “Not a fan of knots and weird fleshy veiny cocks.”

Jake chuckled. “Why are we even having this conversation?”

“Because!” she objected. “If this is gonna be a pandemic, it’s gonna redefine sex and sexuality! It’s gonna change the way we work,” she shook her head. “The way we work, the way we date… I mean, imagine you’re a woman and you’re ovulating, and you go out to dinner with a guy. He can smell that now. He’ll innately know you’re in heat. Shit... your boss will know, your coworkers. People walking down the street...” She suddenly seemed very embarrassed. “God this is gonna be weird.”

Jake nodded slowly. “Yea, and considering we have a ‘mating season’ now, according to Dr. Venner, it means everyone’s gonna have it at once. Couple that with the fact that none of them wear pants… I’d say that a lot of things are gonna be really awkward for society as a whole.”

“How do the guys just stand... walking around in those vests with no pants? I mean, their junk is just… there.”

“Well, they said the fur makes them feel comfortable with it.” he shrugged. “And… I mean you’ve got an advantage. Look at Carmen. You can’t see anything unless... Ya know... she moves in a specific way. I think… their libido changes too? The guys’ve said they rarely even think about it now.”

She grinned at him. “You’ve been eyeing our vixens huh?” she asked. “Enjoying the views? You like a fur covered pussy, huh?”

“I... come on-” he started.

“Don’t worry, I’ll have one, too. Maybe you can look at mine, huh?” she winked.

“Jen... Captain!” he scolded. “Come on! What, are you being flooded with hormones right now because of your change or something?? Why are we even talking about this?”

“Probably.” she sighed. “I’m really fuckin horny.” She held up her hand, studying her claws. “God... masturbating with claws is gonna be awkward.”

“You’ll find a way.” Carmen called with a smirk as she walked down the hall toward them. “I certainly did.”

Jake looked up at her, then blushed, looking away. His vantage point from the chair gave him more of a view than he felt he should have. “What’s the matter, Jake?” she said, wagging her tail.

“Is it true what the guys said?” he asked. “That, you really don’t think about sex anymore?” he asked.

“Not really, no,” she said, shaking her head. “Every now and then I have a moment where it’s like... wait a sec… I’m not wearing anything! But it’s only like a split second. I figure it’s some human shit that’s left over, ya know? Ya get used to people’s scents and sights n things. Guys have balls, no big deal. Just be glad we don’t have a bald spot around our crotch like ferals do.”

Placing her gun on the floor, she laid down on her stomach, curling up like a feral. “Can’t sleep.” she said simply. “Shit’s hit the fan in town, in other countries… it’s not just our little circle anymore. We’re about to be… common.” She nuzzled her own tail, though it wasn’t clear why. “More than that, this plan GERCorp’s come up with is nerve wracking. None of them have a solution. We’re outgunned and outnumbered.”

“The Venner’s are smart. Give em some time.” Jennifer reassured her. “They’ll think of something. I’m sure of it.”

“I hope so.” Carmen whimpered. “I wanna bleach my fur, dye my hair, get some piercings... I wanna wear some fun new clothes and live in this bold new foxy world. I don’t want them putting us in camps and getting rid of us. It doesn’t seem fair.”

“Fair?” Jake asked. The word seemed strangely juvenile, given the circumstances. “Carmen, they’re not trying to be fair, they’re trying to stay human.”

She whined in response, her tail wrapping around her nose as she stared out at him. “I know.” she said. “That’s not fair. I just got to be myself. I haven’t even gone out into the world yet… and they just want to get rid of me. They don’t even know me, but they want me to die. It’s not right. Stopping the contagion is one thing, but extermination? It’s… it’s not fair. This happened to us without choice. Why punish us for it.?”

Cpt. Ramone shook her head. “I think it's about expediency on their part.” she sighed. “Humans are… well you know how they are. You remember it.”

Jake looked at Carmen, noticing that she was almost asleep. “Can I pet you?” he asked. She whined affirmatively.

Bending down with a smile, he began to run his hand through her fur calmly. “Their days are numbered,” he said calmingly. “One day there’ll be so many of us, they won’t be able to stop it.”

“It’s the only way…” she said absently as she drifted off to sleep.

He pet her a few more times, smiling at Jennifer as she watched in curiosity. *Soft,* he mouthed at her silently. He’d only briefly touched the other foxes, they were usually very aggressive about it. The fact that she wasn’t made him wonder if she had changed… or if he had.

Chapter 52

Liam stood in front of the mirror, staring at his slowly changing reflection. During the night, his fur had pushed to his neck and down his entire right side, spreading more slowly onto the rest of his body. His face was now youthful and wrinkle free, a human easily in his early 20s.

It almost felt foreign to him after not seeing it for so long. His gruff beard stubble had faded, giving way to sprouts of soft white fur that seemed to be lining his face in much the same way.

“You okay in there Liam?” a youthful, vibrant woman’s voice asked from outside the door. “Got a bit of a line out here that wants to use the bathroom.”

Clara’s voice snapped him out of his daze, his mind drifting to a time long ago, when the pair of them were young… the first time. Stepping off the stool before the sink, he gathered his clothes, then swiftly got dressed.

Opening the door, he was met face to face with the youthful beauty of his wife in her early 20s. She’d changed considerably less than he had overnight, likely due to the injury he’d suffered during the day. She smiled at him through her amber vulpine eyes, giving him a gentle kiss on the cheek. “Good morning, sweetie.” she said brightly. “Thanks for letting me in. I was about ta explode.”

Her smirk as she spoke made him start to laugh. “Thank god that’s not a symptom, huh?” he joked, looking at Eddie as he made his way past her to the living room. It seemed that the young woman had lost even more weight, and height overnight. She was thin and fit, much like a young vixen that’d graced their doors a few days prior. Despite it, though, she looked unhappy. *Perhaps*, he wondered, *she just needed the bathroom really badly*.

Entering the living room and finding his seat, he nodded to Terry, who was already there with Swirl, enjoying a cold breakfast of fresh fruit. “Mornin’ Mr. Rannie.” the young man said with a smile. “Why ya changin’ so fast? Tryin ta win the race?”

The young man laughed, glancing at the morning news before looking back at the pair, giving Swirl a gently pet with his fingers. “Think it was that cut I got yesterday. Kicked things inta high gear.” he said. “You remember, as soon as it dried up on me my whole arm went furball.”

Swirl squeaked happily, closing his eyes as he leaned into the petting. Part of him was starting to believe that all would be right with the world, so long as he could receive pets from the people around him. It always felt so good.

“Perhaps the xenobots felt that their colony was under attack,” the mouse responded. “It’s an interesting observation, really. It seems in a way, that all of you might appear to be independently minded foxes, but in reality, you’re just living breathing hives for these weird xenobot creatures.”

The young man shook his head. “Swirl that sounds too much like a horror movie for my tastes.” he said. “I’d much rather think of it as just... ya know… becomin’ myself.”

“Interesting perspective.” Terry said, holding a grape just before his mouth. “Becoming yourself. You wouldn't have thought that way before the infection, would you?”

The news was turned down very far, barely above a whisper, but despite it, the pointed ears on Liam’s head still seemed to be able to pick it up. The topic wasn’t all doom and gloom. In fact, the morning show was focused on national politics, cooking, and a special guest that wanted to sell a book. In fact, it seemed, they’d only mentioned the virus in passing. At least so far. The news ticker beneath the show had story after story related to the event. He figured it was only a matter of time before the show ended and the morning news cycle began to pound on the issue.

“Nah, don’t reckon I would’ve.” he said. “But then, I used ta be maself. It’s only now that I’m not. And even then, that’s bein corrected.”

“Wait…” Terry said, seeming confused. “So, you were yourself, then you weren’t... and now you’re becoming yourself again? Is… that what you mean?”

Liam nodded, “Yea it’s like a uh… whattya call it… identity crisis,” he said.” Somethin like that, maybe.”

Swirl nodded. “The report there at the bottom seems to suggest other people are expressing similar sentiment.” he said, nodding to the news feed.

"Infected individuals report euphoria followed by acceptance of their condition, even celebration as they begin to change. GERCorp Virologist Dr. Heidi Venner to speak at noon EST on the progressing virus. Prime minister to address at 1PM.”

“They’re gettin’ the governments involved…” he sighed. “Terry you been out toward town?”

“No sir.” the young man said, shaking his head. “But I did go out to the top of the barn this morning to have a look around. Couldn’t make out much, but there was a line’a cars tryin to get outta town early this mornin.”

Liam nodded. “Probably just the tourists leavin. It’s like that every year, really. Just with an extra dose of existential dread this time.” He chuckled as he got up from his chair. “Eh they’ll get over it. Life’s gonna be grand. They’ll see.”

Swirl and Terry looked at each other, questioning the farmer’s perspective. He seemed so keen on the idea, yet even the day before he was stressing over getting enough work done to prepare. As the young man returned with an apple, taking a hearty bite from its side, Terry leaned over to talk. “Sir, yesterday you were stressin’ about gettin the farm ready. Do you think that still needs to be done?”

“Yeap...” he said casually, talking with his mouth full. “I do. Ash shoon ash we’re done here… I wanna head out there and go over what’s left ta be done. I’m already pretty short. We’re gonna need ta focus on gettin the machines accessible. Shortenin the work bench, walkways in front of higher up objects on the walls, maybe shortenin the poles on some of the tools, buildin some steppin bars for the truck, the tractor and the combine... And lowerin the damn doorknobs around here.”

Terry smiled, nodding affirmatively. That sounded more like the man he knew. Focused and practical. “So you’re gonna go ahead with it, huh?”

“This is my land, son.” Liam responded, glancing over at him with a determined look in his eye. “We work the land We turn it out for our own, then we sell the rest to those who need it. Even if humans start sayin they have a right to it, they’re gonna find right quick that they don’t. They can’t have this territory.”

“Ya know, I probably aughtta go into town and check on my shop before I go up to the lab.” Eddie said as she came into the room with a banana. “Need to do the same. See what’s too tall, what I can reach, what I can’t... and make sure there aint nobody in there tryin to take my property.”

Liam looked at her with a smile and a nod. “You need help shortenin them table and chair legs you just let me know. I’ll come out there with a sawzol and we’ll chop em down to our new size.”

The young woman chuckled. “When we get there, yea.” she nodded. “Somethin’ tells me I’m not small enough yet.”

“You need me to drive ya?” Terry asked. “Might be a little challenging, the way you are now.”

She sighed and nodded. “That’d be real nice’a you, human.” she said, seeming rather dismissive of his name, over his species. “Cars are gone be a real challenge, aren’t they, Liam? I mean, I already drive a little compact sedan, but even that’s designed for an animal much larger than we are.”

Liam nodded. “Short term we’ll need ta refit em all. Higher seats, smaller steerin wheels, lower door handles. They’ll look like a bag’a horse shit, but they’ll do the work. I suspect once everyone’s done changin and things settle down, the engineers’ll get ta re-designin things ta fit what we are now.”

Swirl had been listening quietly, finding the conversation to be fascinating. He’d not seen the news ticker about Dr. Venner, nor had he heard this sort of... fox centric conversation before. Was this a sample of the larger population's behavior? He wondered.

Liam lookd back at the television again, squinting as he read the name. “Hey, wudn’t that woman who invented you named Heidi Venner?” he asked. “Ticker says she’s gone speak at 11AM.”

“What?” Swirl asked. “That… that doesn’t make sense. Why would she do that?” he worried. “No... mom shouldn’t speak in… is she not in the lab? T… Terry call her please??”

The young man dug out his phone and texted instead. “Dr. Venner to speak on TV??”

The reply took a while, with 3 dots flashing on the screen. “Doppleganger. GerCorp.” It finally said.

Looking up, he raised a brow. “They said it’s a GERCorp look-a-like,” he replied. “I guess she’s the face of the company in handling the contagion.”

“Hopefully tells ‘em all ta just be calm and let it happen…” Liam said, taking a sip of his coffee.

“Just let it happen?” Terry wondered.

The young farmer looked at him and tilted his head to the side. “Terry, you know how this is goin. You know it’s inevitable. We’re the next step for human evolution. These people have a vested interest in holdin onto somethin that’s quickly becomin obsolete. The sooner we get in there and show them the truth, the better. This lady shouldn’t be out there tryin to tell humans that it’s alright ta stay where they are. They need ta change. Everyone needs to.”

His speech was chilling, making the hairs on Terry’s arms stand on end. It felt... foreign... to hear spoken in Liam’s now youthful, yet practical voice.

“You... really believe all that?” he worried, “No offense, Mr. Rannie but it sounds more like dogma than practicality.”

“I think he’s just sayin… the sooner you humans empathize with us, the sooner you’ll stop this foolish desire to stay the way you are,” Eddie reiterated. “Resistin’ something like this makes sense, I’m sure. I was terrified when I started to understand it, but being here now makes me realize that your kind is the only thing I really need to worry about.”

“Not the only thing.” Liam disagreed. “But the biggest thing.”

“Wh... I don’t mean you any harm. Shit, I’m here to help!” Terry objected. “Surely you don’t think of me as a... bad actor just because of my species?”

“Course not son!” Liam smiled. “You’re a good human. A good man. Much more kind than I would’ve ever expected from a human in general. Even when I used to be one. You’re a rare bird, son. I got’a lot of respect for ya.”

Terry nodded, despite being called a ‘good human’ like he was some kind of pet. It was obviously denigrating. Being ‘one of the good ones’ was always a very bigoted take. With their brains changing, though… he was hoping that perhaps that attitude would fade with itme. “I appreciate that sir, but uh... I want’a… give you my perspective on what you’re saying, if you’d like to hear it.”

Liam nodded. “Of course! You can always speak your mind in this house, Terry.”

“Calling me human… I... I mean I understand where you’re coming from. People are difficult. They often let you down, they swindle, they cheat, lie, steal... but I feel like maybe you’re generalizing our species into something… without any proof that *your* people won’t be much the same way. Saying that... we should go extinct… that we’re obsolete… sir that kinda language is frightening. There *are* good people in the world. You just said I was one of them. Is it... really right to condemn an entire species like that?”

The young man sighed through his nose as he looked back at the television. “That’s why I admire you…” he said distantly. “You’re right. I made a blanket statement I shouldn’t’a made. I lashed out at the entire species because of a few small men that want power over everything else. And… it was wrong’a me ta do so.”

Clara walked into the room wearing a long shirt and a pair of jeans she’d purchased the day before. They fit her tight in odd places, and loose in others, but it was fine for the time being. “I think we’re just scared, Terry.” she said, sitting down beside her husband in the same chair as she nuzzled him lovingly.

“Peanut butter breath...” he called her with a quiet chuckle, nuzzling back.

“Think about it, Terry.” she continued. “Ya got these world governments, all these powerful men… powerful humans, bound and determined to preserve themselves come hell or high water. They’re not gonna let go’a what they have, and the only way ta make them see, is to turn their eyes, just like mine. I think it’s... maybe a bit unethical…? For us ta talk about forcin all humans to give up on what they are… but… the problem comes about from the lack of cooperation. We’re perfectly fine ta co-exist. But if yer tryin ta stamp us out we got a right to defend ourselves, ya know! “

“Not every soldier in a war is guilty of their leader’s crimes.” Eddie said coldly.

Terry shook his head gently, leaning in with his knees on his elbows. “Co-existence is fine, but… you’re contagious. We’re not,” he said. “Aint nonna you gonna catch the human virus and start losin’ your fur and growin’ tall again. I agree with ya, we should co-exist, but we can’t do that if we’re just one sneeze or spit or cough again from losing who we are.”

“Losin who you are…” Liam scoffed. “I aint losin’ who I am, you won’t be losin’ who you are either. Son, it’s a matter’a time.”

Hearing that, Terry decided it was time to get some air. “I think uh.. I’m gonna go ahead and get ta work, Mr. Rannie.” he said, standing up from his seat. “You want me to start with the tractor? Or the combine?”

“Comebine’s gone be the hardest. Damn thing’s a giant. Ya know how ta weld?”

“Yessir I do.” Terry nodded. “I’ll get started on it right away.”

Swirl climbed down the end table, then crawled up Terry’s leg until the young man helped him, placing him on his shoulder. “Comin with me?”

“If you’ll have me sir.” the mouse nodded. “Sorry to... Intrude on your space like that.”

“No trouble at all squeaky.” he laughed. “I’ll see you here in a bit, Mr. Rannie.”

The young farmer nodded. “I’ll be out there shortly.”

They waited for Terry and Swirl to leave, then looked at each other. “You think he’d side with them?” Liam worried. “I mean, he’s a nice guy but… worries me, him defendin the humans like that.”

“He’s a good guy.” Clara worried. “But I think you’re right. We should keep an eye on ‘em. We don’t need him tryin to send them out here or feedin’em any information. Not that I think that he would. Just that… time’s proven that they aren’t a trustworthy species.”

“I once had one try to steal a pie under his shirt.” Eddie nodded. “I mean who does that? You’ll get it all over your fur...! er... well I guess skin, in his case.” She stopped herself for a moment. “What the hell’s gotten into us?” she asked, looking at the pair of them in Liam’s chair. “I was human when that happened. Have we really fallen so far?”

Liam raised a brow. “Fallen?” he asked. “Girl we aint fallen at all. Just… we gotta watch our backs now. Terry might be a good guy, but other humans aren’t likely to be our allies.” He nodded to the television, turning it up as Dr. Venner’s representative took to the podium. “Watch’em... She’s gone lie through her teeth.”

Melissa stood before the small gathering of media representatives with an awkward smile, looking around as if she didn’t feel like she should really be there. She’d studied Dr. Venner’s publicly available publications and seminars, meticulously learning to mimic her behavior and timbre so that she’d be as convincing as she could. “G..Good morning, everyone…” she said, her eyes falling to her notes. “I’m sorry to be standing here on such a dire occasion, but I wanted to take this time and… and I thank you all for taking your time as well. Over the last twenty-four hours GERCorp has learned that there is a virus spreading rapidly across the globe.” Taking a deep breath and looking up momentarily, she squinted as a camera flashed before her eyes, staring back down at her notes. “This virus, through our analysis has been primarily identified as what we’re calling the Vulpes Virus. This virusoperates through a system of specialized cells that break down and replace our genetic code. Cell by cell. It alters an infected individual’s mind and body until they closely resemble the North American Red Fox. Now, like other strains, these individuals maintain their higher brain function, their ability to speak, and adopt a form that enables them to walk on two legs.”

“Vulpes virus my ass.” Liam growled. “This is the Venner virus. We’re Venner foxes! She aughtta give Dr. Venner the credit she’s due. Next, she’s gonna say we’re not people, you just watch.”

“Infected individuals are extremely contagious, so it is of the utmost importance that you shelter in place at this time. If anyone in your household becomes infected, you are advised to isolate them, and avoid any and all contact, until the proper authorities can remove the threat. The virus is not airborne. You may breathe the same air, however, due to the pervasive nature of the virus, it is possible that the individuals may begin to extol the virtues of their condition, or to express intense fear or pain, in an attempt to sway you to release them so that they may spread that infection to you. Subjects will always attempt to escape, and find the most populated area they can to maximize spread.”

“Already tryin ta lock us up.” Clara complained. “We gotta put a stop ta this.”

“Moren’at the bitch is lyin!” Liam complained. “Aint no… feignin pain or injury, seekin populated… see? Sayin’ we aint people… just a buncha crazed animals spreadin like rabies.”

“Now, some of you may find this difficult, being that these infected individuals were once your friends and family, but I can assure you that once they have passed through the initial stages of this condition, they are no longer the same person that you knew. Their minds will shift such that they will believe that infecting you is not only to your benefit but is their responsibility.”

She looked sheepishly to a stoic man in a black suit to her side, silently asking him to silence the growing murmur from the media. “We’ll... take questions in a moment,” he said.

“We’ll be sending out a PSA shortly, but for those watching, the virus first makes contact through fluid exchange. This can be anything from a bite, saliva, mucus, sweat, or even tears. Any excretion from an infected individual has a 100% chance to infect for up to 30 minutes,” Heidi continued.”Gloves, masks, and eye protection, as well as covering as much skin as possible is important when factoring in your time outside. The Canadian government is setting up PPE stations and stocking shelves as we speak to enable you to meet these requirements.”

She cleared her throat, again the man to her side being forced to quite the crowd so that she could continue. “Twenty-four hours after infection, subjects will begin to exhibit fits of laughter and a general feeling well being known as euphoria. This period may last between one and four hours, depending on the individual. Please be aware that during this time, the virus has already reached them, and they are capable of spreading it to you. Avoid those who are experiencing euphoria as much as you possibly can.” She looked up once more, then back to her notes. “F… Following this step, the subject’s mind is altered on a fundamental level, and though they may initially seem the same, they will slowly begin to shift in their personality and perspective, expressing disdain for human beings and potentially referring to us as ‘humans ‘in a derogatory manner.“

Continuing on, she adjusted her glasses, they were trying to slide off her face. “Physical changes will begin at the site of contact and spread from there, culminating in a full transformation within three to five days after initial symptoms appear.”

Liam raised a brow as he looked at the others. “How they know so much about this?” he asked.

“Didn’t Kaylee say they sent em a profile of the virus?” Clara wondered.

“Stupid idea.” Eddie complained. “Never trust a human. We knew this even when we *were* human.”

One of the members of the media raised their hand, “Dr. Venner...” she started. “You’re stating that individuals who are infected should be isolated, how can we know in early stages?”

“One of the easiest ways to tell would be to simply look for individuals in the open that aren’t taking PPE precautions,” she responded, motioning to a projected slideshow of data above her head. “If someone’s walking down the sidewalk with no mask, no eye protection, short sleeves and flipflops, they likely feel they have nothing to worry about. Law Enforcement has already been instructed to approach such individuals with caution.”

“Is there a test to easily determine if an individual is infected?” a young reporter asked eagerly.

“There is,” the woman nodded, “but it’s difficult to administer. A simple mouth swap has been developed and is currently being distributed to clinics, hospitals and pharmacies across the United States and Canada. It is likely, however, that an infected individual will resist any such treatment. Furthermore, trying to test someone you suspect to be infected, may lead to your infection as well, and is in general, not recommended.”

“What should we do if we encounter an individual we suspect, or know to be infected?” another reporter asked.

“Do not seek medical attention. Contact your local law enforcement,” the man to Heidi’s side responded sternly. “They will be detained and tested.”

“Does this mean that you’re instituting quarantine camps for infected individuals?” the reporter continued, “Are local municipalities planning to institute lockdowns, curfews or martial law? This is a pandemic of extraordinary proportions!”

Eddie sighed as Liam growled. “They aint even tryin ta hide it.” he said. “We ain’t killin nobody! Aint nobody dyin from this it aint fatal! Ya dumbass!” he yelled.

“Is the virus fatal?” a reporter finally asked. “Changing your body is… a horror for sure, but we will survive if we become infected, right?”

The man to Heidi’s side glared at him. “Have that man tested, please.” he responded.

A group of offers swarmed the reporter, pulling him away from the crowd as the others parted away from him in gasping fear.

“To… uh... answer his question…” Melissa stammered, “while it is true that the infected individual does not die, the changes to their mind and body are so significant that they will essentially no longer be the individual that they’d previous been.”

The crowd began to die down. No one seemed to care that one of their own had just been dragged from the room for daring to ask a question. “It… creates a new vector in the virus and encourages the individual to spread it,” Melissa continued, looking away from the crowd shamefully. “As.… such, we must consider these individuals to be dead, yes.”

“What the fuck?!” Clara yelled, much to Liam’s surprise. He’d never heard her react with an outburst like that. “We aint dead! We’re right here! Oooh, I sure hope Dr. Venner’s listenin ta this. We need action! and we need it now! We have to overflow their fences or we aint gonna survive this!”

Liam sighed. “I’d honestly hoped that we could co-exist,” he said, shaking his head. “But we cain’t have em treatin’ us like this.”

At the lab, the reactions were similar. “They’re seriously doing this… after everything??” Heidi asked. “I can’t believe it! They told us they’d leave us alone! Now she comes out on day two and talks about camps?!”

“I wanna know how she got the brain scan data.” Kaylee said, looking suspiciously at Jaren. “We just got that information ourselves and it was *after* our call with them. The mole is still in our midst, and still sending them information.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised.” Ichi sighed. “They want to eliminate you. Camps will just make it easier.”

“I think isolation's a bigger issue.” Dr. Coren sighed. “That and... instilling fear about us. Telling the police to harass someone for wearing a short sleeve shirt? This is ridiculous.”

“Smells like fascism to me.” Danny said, the fur on his arm plainly visible. He’d already lost considerable weight and height overnight. “Sending people out to check your papers in the form of infection tests... Dragging you off to a camp if you are… this isn’t right.”

“What about Friendly?” Jennifer asked, now standing as tall as the other foxes in the room. Her face and legs had changed such that she generally appeared to be one of their own, save for the incomplete fur on her face and body. “You think it’s gonna lock down like that?”

Alan shook his head but lacked the confidence to say. “The mayor’s one of us. If there’s enough of the police force that's joined, too… they might be on our side. I mean if you remember, Clara had mentioned that most people she encountered were already euphoric. So today, they’re well on their way, and their minds are already set.”

Kaylee sighed, “So, what should we do?” she asked tiredly. “I’m not surprised. I just wish… wish I was wrong.”

“How about a counter-message?” Gene suggested, looking up from his tablet. “Use social media and video sites. Maybe you can make a speech about what’s you think is *really* happening and give your people some direction.”

Kaylee nodded, tilting her head curiously at Gene's eagerness to help. "What is *really* happening in your opinion, Gene?" she asked skeptically. "Give me your human perspective."

He looked nervous, like he'd been put on the spot to answer for himself in a way that he wasn't prepared. "Uh… your people are being… I mean…?" he asked, seeming to look more for an answer she'd like than how he truly felt.

"Just tell me how you think, Gene," she encouraged him with a sympathetic sigh, gently shaking her head. "You don't need to be afraid to speak your mind in here."

He paused, as if he'd been holding himself back in a major way, looking away from her long enough to gather his confidence. "What's happening here is an uncontrolled spread, brought on by an accidental exposure and exacerbated by fear," he said, his voice wavering as he struggled to look the vixen in the eye. "And… a response to *that* exacerbation, also brought on by fear. Basically… a cascade of mistrust, fear, and paranoia. You don't trust humanity because you're afraid that they'll destroy you. They don't trust you because they're afraid you'll destroy them."

He sighed, shaking his head, "I'm sorry I hope this isn't coming out wrong I just-"

"You're fine," she reassured him, "Anything else?"

"You're not wrong to assume that they would've destroyed you had you not spread the virus. But… are they wrong to say that you'll destroy them unless they fight to contain the spread?" he asked. "I don't think so. You're both right. You're locked in a war that as far as I can tell… was inevitable from the beginning."

"So, what should we do then, huh? *Gene*?" Danny growled at him. "You kept me from contacting my wife while she was still a human like you and now you want to sit here and both sides this issue??"

"I was doing what I was told!" Gene objected angrily, "I didn't wanna be turned into onna those *things!*" He gasped as he realized what he'd said. "Uh… I just mean at the time I- ya know... things... I didn't know better to-"

"Gene, you're fine." Kaylee reiterated, "No one's gonna hold that against you. You're useful to us as you are. So, they'd better not lay a hand on you." She jumped down from the chair where she'd been sitting, then walked to Danny's side, looking up at him in disappointment. "Ya know, I really hoped that you would've been a better person after you changed. Maybe you still need more time, but… so far, you're still an asshole, and you're still not helping."

Looking back at Gene, she slowly walked to the side of his chair, tilting her head up at him as her tail gently swayed side to side at her rear. “He did ask a valid question, though,” she continued calmly. “what… in your opinion… should we do? What should I tell my people? Your people? What message should I deliver?”

“It should be one of co-existence,” Ichi said, walking to Gene’s side confidently. “He is right, I agree with his assessment. I feel no hostility toward any of you, but fear… is something that’s been far more difficult to escape. That fear… from your side, and from ours, is what must be abated. That should be your message. Do not be afraid.”

“And don’t spread either?” Danny asked, returning to his seat in one of the now enormous rolling chairs. “Should she tell our people to stop propagating? Because we’re in a catch 22, aren’t we?” He held out his hands with his palms open, representing both sides of the issue. “If we back down, they overrun us, round up the infected, throw them into camps, throw in the match and sweep away the ashes.” He symbolized it by placing one hand on top of the other. “If we don’t back down, if we tell them to propagate, the humans will start to panic. They’ll say that we’re evil. They’ll start pushing to gun us down and throw us into camps. So how do we win?”

Gene nodded, “It’s like the Kobayashi Maru…” he sighed.

“The what?” Kaylee asked, tilting her head.

“It’s… from an old TV show. An unpassable test. Sometimes the only way to pass is to cheat.” Gene replied, “but I don’t see any way to… cheat… with this.”

“Spread it faster,” Jennifer said, crossing her arms. “That’s how you cheat. You contaminate their water or something, do it in a way that they can’t even see. They’re gonna put us in camps either way. We may as well make it hard for them ta do.”

The vixen groaned, walking back to her chair, then balling up in it like a potato. “I didn’t ask for this.”

“Ask or not, it’s here.” Danny replied, “We’re in the warm gooey center of a shit sandwich right now.”

“Jesus…” Alan muttered, shaking his head in disgust at the analogy. “Look, the simple truth here is that one side has to give. Humans and foxes can co-exist, but to do so we have to know that we’re safe. Until we know that, we have to fight. Now you can say that’s aggression on our part, but the thing is. If we win… they live. If they win? We die. The outcome isn’t even close to the same.”

“Unless we’re infertile, dad,” Kaylee said, her ears perking up as she practically leapt into a sitting position. “Dad…? “she muttered. “R… regardless… if we’re infertile, and we eradicate humanity… we just killed all intelligent, life. We’d *have* to keep some of them alive. We’d have to coexist.”

“We have about 100 of em here, right? Jennifer floated, “We keep these around, change the rest… if we’re infertile these people can… repopulate.”

“Excuse me…?” a sandy blond researcher from the group of humans demanded. “Are you talking about turning the junior research, sanitation, and operations staff of this lab into a baby farm?”

The vixen shrugged, “I mean, this stuff reverses aging,” she said, “You live your lives, have your kids, and when you get old, you get to go one more round with a tail. Is that so bad?”

Kaylee growled. “Guys, I’m not gonna sit here and entertain throwing humans into breeding camps. For fucks sake!” she complained, “They’re different from us, weird… strange fleshy hairless… *things* with thousands of years of twisted logic, mysticism and culture. They don’t make any sense! I can be the first to tell you that! But that doesn’t mean that they’re less than us. Their nature just needs to be… monitored. Policed. They already do it to themselves, to some degree.”

She hopped off of her chair, then stood up onto her hind legs. “I mean you’ve heard about tickets, right? The thing that... cops... do when... you… drive too fast? They police themselves! We just need to make sure that they keep doing that, and we can do a bit more! Just… it's that simple! We can co-exist with them without treating them like foxes in a fur farm!” She looked at Gene again, hoping for his honest assessment.

“Just that simple…” he muttered, raising his brows and shaking his head. “You guys… scare the shit out of me. You know that?” he asked. “I mean think about it, we just went from discussing a way to avoid humans putting you in camps and abusing you… to you putting humans in camps and abusing them! Wh-… do you even hear this?? Do you even know that that kind of mindset is wrong?”

Danny growled at Gene once more, getting out of his chair to approach him again, but Ichi stepped in his way, spreading his arms to make himself appear larger. “Stop,” the young asian man demanded. “We will take no more of this.” He looked to his side, locking eyes with the troubled vixen that’d been lost in it all. “Give them a message of moderation,” he said simply. “Spread if you must but co-exist if you can. We are adversaries because we are afraid. In time, we can find common ground. You can learn to understand us, and we can learn to understand you.”

“I’m not sure how true that is…” Kaylee muttered, looking critically at Danny, “but… I agree with the rest of your message. Thank you, Ichi… and Gene… for your input. I always value a human perspective in all of this.”

“You say you do…” Gene scoffed, “Then you start talking about how useful I am.”

She rolled her eyes and sighed, leaping from the floor to the table, then rising to her feet. “I didn’t mean that in a derogatory way, okay? I… I ‘m sorry if that’s how it sounds. I really didn’t mean that. Now… if you don’t mind… let’s get this recording rolling.”

Chapter 53

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Clara worried as Liam drove the truck. The pair of them could sit very close together, giving Eddie more than enough room on the other side. “I mean what if they lock us up?”

“They so much as lay a hand on you honey and I’ll rip their faces off with my teeth.” he replied. “‘Sides, we needed to test the truck.” They rounded the bend toward the town, spotting a police barricade.

“Shit... turn around!” Clara said urgently as the officer began to walk forward.

“Sorry, towns closed. No h... Oh.” the office started, noticing the three as Liam rolled down his window. “Do I know ya? You’re one of us.”

“Liam Rannie.” the tod replied. “We just wanted to make sure Eddie’s bakery was alright.”

“Hello…” the young woman waved cautiously from the other side of the truck.

“You about ta say no humans allowed?” he wondered.

The officer laughed, taking of his glasses to show his amber vulpine eyes. “Yea. That’s what I was about ta say. Good ta see ya Liam! I’m James. Gus’s son?”

“I thought that was you!” Clara beamed. “Well hells bells. Glad ta see you’re on our side! How’s your daddy?”

The officer laughed. “Young as me now. Just like you two, apparently. He’s been busy workin with the police force to refit our vehicles so that we can still drive em when… when we start lookin more like you two.” He looked the truck over. “Nice custom job ya done there.”

“Eh we got a human named Terry that’s hard at work at the farm, refittin’ everything.” Liam explained, “may not look like much but right now I can still drive it, so that’s all I can ask for.”

James frowned. “Can he be trusted? I mean… you know what the humans are tryin’ ta do. We ran em outta town this morning. Took a lotta work. Mayor had to get involved and everything.”

“You ran everyone that was human outta town?” Eddie worried.

“Naw, just the ones that were tryin’ ta come in. The rest of em we’re kinda… keepin an eye on.” he said. “They’re good people. They’ll turn eventually.”

Liam nodded. “So... can we head in?”

“Sure!” James nodded. “Let me set the barrier aside. Mayor’s gonna make a speech at noon, so you might wanna hang around for that.”

Eddie nodded and smiled. “I’ll try to see if I can still reach all my equipment. I’d love to serve everyone a nice slice’a pie.”

James chuckled and nodded. “Yes Ma’am. Hey… can ya bring me one, too when you head back to the farm? I can’t imagine that you’re stayin in town.”

The young women nodded and smiled. “I’ll do just that, officer.”

The town square looked much as it had before. Many of the vehicles that had been parked yesterday still seemed to be in place. People were out walking and chatting, some of them in baggy clothes, while others were showing signs of fur growth. There was mix of emotion from them all, fear, worry, anger… but it would ultimately pass in time. Despite everyone hearing Dr. Venner’s warnings, no one seemed interested in wearing any sort of PPE, save for the few still human citizens that seemed to cautiously avoid the others.

“This is… strange...” Eddie said, standing beside the truck as she marveled at the largely ‘business as usual’ attitude that she was observing. “Look at it, it’s like people’ve just… accepted it.”

“Well, not everybody,” Liam replied, “butl if everyone’s infected, nobody cares, right? Seems like they got over it real quick. Frankly it makes me proud’a my little town to see em like this.”

No sooner had the three crossed the sidewalk toward the bakery, than they were approached by Willy and Sai. “Mrs. Rannie?” she asked in surprise, looking at them with her girlfriend on her arm. Neither of them really showed any major signs of changing, though Willy had some light fur starting to form on her face and hand from Yancey’s sneeze the day before. “You uh... You look *really* different.” she chuckled. “I didn’t know you were infected when you came through yesterday.”

“No one did.” she said, her ears splaying slightly as she looked at the girl in sympathy. “How are you two holdin’ up?”

“Stressed, but… I think we’ll be alright,” Sai replied with a nervous chuckle. “I just hope it doesn’t take the dye outta my hair I imagine this might hurt a bit, but when its over? I’m gonna be badass,” she grinned. “Those fuckin’ teeth, that tail... I’m gonna get my spiked bracelets fixed and get a collar. The shit’s gonna be rad.”

Liam chuckled. “Lemonade, right?”

“The best fuckin’ lemonade ever.” she grinned. “You guys seem in good spirits.” she said, looking them over. “You hear about the mayor kicking out the humans that tried to take over?”

“We did...” Liam nodded, feeling a little troubled by the news. “And... it’s good ta know. We don’t want uh... We don't want that stuff here.”

Sai shook her head. “Hell no we don’t!” she beamed. “Shit if I had my tail by now, I’d be waggin’ like crazy! Proud’a this town for runnin’ them out like that!”

“It’s good to see you again, guys.” Clara nodded, giving them both a weak smile. “We’re gonna go check on the bakery. See if we can get some pies ready for the mayor’s speech.”

“Oh right! Yea! You’ll be there? Sweet!” Sai smiled. “Can’t wait.”

The three of them walked on, all of them feeling awkward about the encounter they’d just had. Everyone’s mindset seemed to be much the same. Afraid, yet strangely optimistic.

Entering the bakery, Eddie locked the door, the pair of farmers making their way to a seat that was closer to their size. “Liam, I don’t know how I feel about what Sai just said.” the young woman worried. “She’s so... happy about this. This is a big deal! Downplaying it like that just feels so… irresponsible.”

“Well, she is a young woman.” Liam assured her. “Maybe that’s where it comes from?”

She shook her head with a shrug. “She’s losing her humanity. All of us are. A... and in some respects I’m happy about that, too! But… somethin about that sort of excitement so early on just makes me uncomfortable. Like… like she doesn’t understand.”

Liam nodded. “You’re worried about regret later?” he asked. “Ya know, sometimes people just want somethin. Maybe she’s had some impossible dream all her life’a becomin onna those fur critters like ya hear about at those conventions in the mascot suits. Maybe it’s finally real for her and she’s just… excited by it.”

Eddie looked out the window as others in various states of change walked by. “Maybe,” she said ponderously. “I mean… I’m happy for it, for her, for us. Humans feel so... foreign now. The idea of being one is… sorta horrifying. But outside’a this little town is a world in chaos.” She started to dig through her reserves as she thought about it more, her nub of a tail seeming to wag from side to side. It’d grown nearly an inch since that morning, leaving it just long enough to move on its own.

“I mean, maybe I’m wrong,” she continued “Maybe everywhere’s like this. Venner foxes just making their way, doin their jobs and goin on. You really think humans are gonna be hostile? Aside from the people on TV, have we seen any evidence of that at all?”

The pair looked at each other. “Well... we have no way ta know.” Clara shrugged, joining her to sort through her inventory. Her tail was much more developed, wagging clearly beside the young woman. She barely could be defined as a human at this point. “But I can call my sister and check with her.”

“You probably aught to.” Liam nodded. “Make sure she’s alright down there.”

Eddie looked over the counter, placing one of her pies in the lower oven to warm it up. “I didn’t know you had a sister.” she said. “Where’s she from?”

“We haven’t talked in years.” Clara replied, shaking her head. “She moved outta here decades ago. She’s older’n me. Last I heard she was in a care home outside’a Buffalo. Honestly, I don’t know if she’s even still alive.”

Setting the oven, the young woman turned back to her counter and began to line up pies to warm up. “Not that close then I take it?”

“Nah…” Clara replied simply. “But she’s still my sister.”

Liam listened and nodded along, not really addressing it. He was watching people walk by outside. There was something captivating about it. He found himself turning his head as they passed, only to snap back to the next group and follow them with his eyes. He wasn’t even aware that he was doing it.

“We need ta head to the lab after the speech.” he said, still transfixed on the activity outside. “Bring Eddie up there so she can talk with her husband, we can go over things with Kaylee, she can see Swirl again.. Always so much ta do.”

Clara, satisfied that she’d found every pie that was ready to warm up, walked to the window and placed her hand on his, snapping him out of his daze as she gave him an affectionate smile. “Stay calm.” she said, “We got time.”

“Do we?” he asked, nuzzling affectionately. “How long ‘fore them people they ran off come back in greater numbers? You heard what Gus’s boy said. They’re preppin their vehicles. They’re preparin for a war.” He pointed out the window. “All them people out there… celebratin and waitin on their bodies to change in ways they probably aint even prepared for… they’re gonna be in danger. Them humans’ll round us up, lock us away, and aint no amount’a snarlin or bitin’ gonna do us a bit’a good.” He looked down at his hands, with Clara’s on top of them. Fur… all of them covered in fur. “Maybe I just can’t see through human eyes no more...” he sighed. “Maybe I can’t think like I used’ta. What they’re tryin’a do just feels... Cruel.”

At the farm, Terry was busy prepping the equipment, just like Liam had asked. “Terry, I’m worried…” the mouse said, sitting on the top of the metal fender of the combine as he watched terry weld on a step.

The young man sighed, letting go of the trigger, then flipping up his visor. “What was that?” he asked.

“I said I’m worried,” the mouse repeated. “They were so different this morning… I’ve known Clara and Liam for a few days now. It’s almost like they were different people, the way they talked about you.”

“They’re definitely different this morning, yea,” Terry nodded worriedly. “The way they talked about humans… I don’t get it.”

“They welcomed Kaylee and I with open arms the day that they found us in the barn,” the mouse explained. “They even suggested that we live on the farm, start a new life here! Now it’s like… they hate outsiders. It’s not right. This is isn’t who they are.”

“Well they’re afraid of us,” the young man responded. “But… I mean, they kinda have to be. This is an outbreak, and we have to stop it.”

The mouse nodded, looking down at the fresh welds on the metal step. Were the Rannie’s justified? Being afraid of humans in general was something that he could truly understand, especially in the wake of his escape just five days prior, but to disparage all humans for the acts of a few… felt all too familiar. The humans were doing that to the foxes! The whole thing was giving him a headache. “Ya know really, the only reason the foxes want to spread is because of what the humans want to do. Don’t you think maybe what they’re doing is a little cruel? I mean… camps and cages… you know that’s what’s coming.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t cruel. It is.” Terry replied. “I’m sayin’ it’s necessary in human eyes. They’re taking over, spreading their virus at a rate we can’t control and with it comes these… mental changes that we can’t even understand. Ya know Rabies is like that. Changes the brain. Makes you hydrophobic, makes you wanna spread it… we don’t treat that as a gift just because the people who get it think it’s great.”

“Rabies, as I understand it, sir, is a fatal disease with mal intent.” Swirl retorted. “This is not the same. I just don’t think the Venner virus is malicious by its nature.”

Terry shook his head. “Not malicious?” he asked. “Ya know, that’s the damndest thing about all this if you ask me. Not one damn fox has sat back and said, ya know… maybe it’s *wrong* to spread this. Maybe we should treat it like the virus that it is. Something that changes people. Their minds, their bodies, in major, permanent ways… whether they want it or not. Maybe it’s best to just leave people alone? Maybe it’s best if it didn’t even exist.”

The mouse ran up closer, blocking Terry’s welder as he’d tilted down his helmet. “You’re right. I concede that it shouldn’t exist.” he replied, his arms outstretched the block the still hot metal. “Kaylee thinks that way,” he argued. “She didn’t want this to spread. She thinks it’s wrong, but… it’s necessary in the other’s eyes. The virus exists and I doubt that Dr. Venner can change that. It’s in the population, too. Spreading it is the only way they can survive.”

“So that makes it okay?” he demanded from the mouse. “Just let it happen? Just let humanity die a slow furry death?? You think those people out there, if they were in their right minds would be *celebrating* this?!” he demanded. "Fuck no! Not a damned one of them would be! They’d be horrified at themselves and their families, breaking and changing into these forms that they don’t recognize as their own. They’d be BEGGING the government to stop it!”

He looked at the mouse as he took a heavy breath, heated from his own outburst. “Instead, you got Clara and Liam out there... perfectly rational, good people, calling me ‘human’ and saying they don’t trust me because of it! You really think that's them? That’s who they are?? Because the man I talked to yesterday is not the man I talked to today.”

“So what can we do then, Terry?” Swirl demanded with a sigh. “The mental changes are drastic. More than I anticipated, but they’ve happened. As of right now it can’t be undone. We’ll never see Mr. Rannie as that old human farmer again.”

You’re missing the forest for the trees,” the young man argued. “Listen, this isn’t about who they were, who they are or who they’ll be. It’s not about the form they take, how they feel about it or how they feel about us. It’s about the *contagion*.” He pointed at the field outside the barn. “You think anyone would care if a few people turned into foxes? If they voluntarily took it upon themselves? I mean... Maybe they would. Call em crazy, or evil or perverted or whatever, but life would move on. What you’ve got here is something entirely different. You have a *virus*. It spreads, it changes your mind, it makes you want to spread it more. We-... we just covered this. Please tell me you understand.”

“The contagion… validates… extermination.” Swirl said slowly. “That’s what I hear you saying.”

Terry goraned, shaking his head adamantly. “No! Swirl that’s not what I’m saying at all!” he shouted. “I’m sayin… humans are handling this the way humans handle everything. Fear of the unknown. They’re doin’ what they’re doin to protect themselves, in their eyes. It may be aggressive, and if may be wrong, but from a human perspective, we’re being attacked by a virus.” He leaned against the combine, putting the torch down for a moment. “Now I’m workin with Mr. Rannie, livin’ with em… I don’t fully understand them yet, but I’m getting used to. I’m afraid, Swirl! They’re unpredictable right now. ‘Difference between me an’ those in the general population, though is that I’ve been trained to deal with situations like this, as odd as they are. My fear is far less than you’d see on some lady takin’ her kids to school every morning and then going to the office. She don’t know if she’s gonna get the giggles halfway through a presentation, or if a coworker bent on propagation’s gonna spit in the coffee pot… she don’t know if she’s gonna get a call from the school tellin’ her her child has a tail! We shouldn’t be rounding them up, but they shouldn’t be spreading it. We should work together, but it takes two ta tango. Both humans and foxes alike can take steps to slow the contagion. Masks, eyewear, gloves… we *can* co-exist. Even if they’re contagious. Everyone just has to cooperate. That’s just not what I’m seeing from the way they talk.”

The mouse stood up, then calmly moved out of the way, nodding for Terry to continue his work. “I think that’s… magical thinking, Terry.” he said finally. “But I appreciate your perspective.

“Magical how, Swirl?” Terry asked. “Askin’ foxes *not* to run around spreading the virus? Asking humans to protect themselves with PPE? That’s magical thinking??”

The mouse nodded. “So long as the humans appear to be a threat… whether they are or not… the foxes will lash out, and so long as the foxes lash out, the humans will act as threats to protect themselves. Asking for a hand holding moment like you see in the movies is magical thinking.”

Terry shook his head, scrunching up his face in disgruntled frustration. “It’s only magical if people refuse to cooperate,” he said as he flipped down his visor once more. “Go after the assholes, leave the rest alone.”

Chapter 54

“Okay guys, the video’s ready,” Gene said as he sat down at the conference table. “All I have to do is make it live.”

“Can we review it?” Alan asked. “A lot of us were asleep when it was recorded.”

The bearded man nodded. “Sure, let me queue it up.”

The television displayed a website, projected from the tablet in front of him on the table, showing a video time of just under 5 minutes, and a black screen for the start. “Everyone ready?” he asked.

“Yea, go ahead,” Kaylee nodded.

After pressing play, the screen began to fade in, showing the vixen’s upper body before a plain gray background, contrasting well with her amber-red fur, but blending in some places with lab coat. She stood silent for a moment, longer than the vixen recalled, then began to speak.

“Hello everyone. My name is Kaylee Venner,” the vixen started, speaking plainly, but with a friendly, approachable demeanor. “I am… well for lack of a better term, the progenitor of the Venner virus that is currently sweeping the earth. For better or worse, I am the first Vulpes Sapien.”

She looked down at her hands as she turned to the side and slowly began to pace the table. “My mother, Dr. Heidi Venner, purchased me from a fur farm as a kit. I have no memory of this time, but, from the lab photos I can see that I was too small to even open my eyes,” she continued. “She raised me, using the virus to change my anatomy, and my mind.”

Stopping her pacing, she looked at the camera, her ears pointed forward confidently as she smiled politely at the screen. “If it’s not clear to you from that statement, I am not, and have never been human.”

“I am what’s being called by the researchers working dutifully on this case, a Vulpes Sapien. The Venner fox, after my mother’s namesake.” She paused, looking off camera to where her mother had been sitting at the time, lingering only for a moment before she continued. “For those of you who do not know, I am the same or similar to what you will see in your friends, family, or selves, when the virus has progressed to completion.”

Stopping herself with a chuckle, she gently shook her head. “Don’t worry, you’ll keep your hair, though. I’ve never had any. So… my case is different,” she explained.

“We’ve studied the virus extensively, directly, and personally,” she said. “We’ve experienced its effects firsthand, and we’ve deliberated for some time how to proceed. This is still a much needed, and heated debate amongst our team.”

Focusing again on the camera, her ears splayed apologetically. “If you’ve been listening to Dr. Venner on your television or radio, you may have heard mention of such things. Quarantine camps, and a cure.”

Her ears pointed forward, her face stern and confident. “I am here to tell you today that at this time, there is no cure, nor vaccine to prevent one from developing the infection,” she said. “We are working toward a method of containment, one that will see the contagious aspect of the condition slow, or even stop, but this will take time.”

“You see, this is no ordinary virus,” she said. “You… may have already figured that out. No, this is a colony of an intelligent, organic organism known as a xenobot. You might think of them as fleshy versions of the nanobots that you’ve read about in science fiction novels.”

“This organism has a symbiotic relationship with its host, protecting you at all costs from injury,” she said. “If you are older than me, the equivalent of your early 20s, the virus will make you more youthful. If you have missing limbs, birth defects, injuries, or terminal illnesses, it will cure them. If you are blind, you will see. If you are deaf, you will hear. If you are bed or wheelchair bound…. You will walk once more. If you are transgender, and your hormones favor your identity, your body will become that gender. All these things are possible because of the virus.”

She paced once more, wringing her hands to comfort herself. “I say these things, not to endorse, or glorify this event, but to help you understand what’s really happening to your bodies, or the bodies of your friends and family.” she continued.

“The person on television representing my mother stated that individuals who are infected are no longer themselves. If you are infected, or you know someone that is, no doubt you have seen a change in their perspective, but you can also see, with certainty, that they are the same person.”

The video suddenly paused as Dr. Coren motioned to Gene with his raised hand. “Stop there for a moment,” he said. “This line about… saying that they’re the same person, I don’t know that we should include it.”

The vixen understood his reasoning, and was likened ot agree, almost proud that her… father… had seen this fact within himself. She’d said it out of an attempt to comfort the humans about their changing friends and family. It was true in the sense that they’d still remember their human lives, and may have many of the same basic affinities, but it was not true to argue that their personalities or beliefs would remain the same. The virus changed them, and that fact was

undeniable. She explained this to Dr. Coren, and the room of staff members as well, but they sided with Alan's perspective.

"If we cut it out, whatta we put in its place?" Carmen asked. "I don't know if I've changed, I mean… I probably have, but I mean who cares right? Foxes get along with other foxes when they change. Maybe we just need to tell the humans that they'll be more likely to see the old person in the new if they join us."

Kaylee shook her head. "I don't want that to be the message, I mean… this is a big enough problem as it is.

"I'm not sure that calling Melissa the 'the woman representing my mother' is a good idea either," Heidi chimed. "If we come straight out and say the humans are lying to them, there might be civil unrest."

Danny scoffed. "Probably already is," he said. "You think humans are just gonna sit around and wait to get fuzzy?"

"You are," Kaylee replied. "We haven't heard of anything happening in town, maybe they are too?"

Heidi took a deep breath before speaking up. "I think he's talking about humans, not our people," the vixen replied. "If we tell them to throw away their hope to stop this, they'll fight. They'll push back and probably turn to violence against us."

"Seems like a bad idea," Jennifer replied. "They start breakin' our bones an' splatterin' our blood, they'll just join us from the exposure."

Carmen looked at her, then back to Dr. Venner. "Can we even die?" she wondered.

The vixen chuckled and nodded, "Of course we can," she said. "Anything that makes our biological processes cease to function, loss of the heart, lungs, brain, or significant damage to the brain… that'd be enough to take us down."

"Distraction," Kaylee sighed. "We need this out sooner than later, right? We don't want the humans spreading misinformation, so we need to focus on the message."

Gene chortled. “That’s not why you’re doing this,” he said, looking up at her from his seat at the far end of the table. “This is propaganda just like theirs. They say you’re not the same person, you… right now say that you are. They say a cure is coming, you say there’s no cure coming. They say to shelter in place and turn in the infected… I’ve watched the rest of the video when I was editing, Kaylee, you flat out tell your people to spread, and resist being detained or restricted. You’re waging a war of words.”

“Then what, in your ineffable human wisdom, should we do? Oh giver of gadgets?” Jennifer mocked. “Stay silent? Or maybe lie along with them that a cure is coming? Tell them to surrender to authorities and be dragged away into camps? You obviously have the answer, so what is it?”

Kaylee shook her head, splaying back her ears slightly. “Don’t… treat Gene like that, please?” she asked. “He’s been more than helpful. We need to stop treating the humans in the lab like they’re our enemies. They’re… they’re a part of our family.’

Danny scuffed and crossed his arms, muttering to himself in dissent.

The bearded man waited for the foxes to stop, then responded to Jennifer’s question. “Tell them that there’s no cure, you’ve already said as much. Tell the there’s not likely to be a way to stop the contagion, no vaccine to prevent its spread. What my species is likely looking for, and anyone in here can disagree with me on this… is a way out. We want to know that we’re safe in our affairs and that our friends and family are as well. So, you should probably drive home the benefits. It doesn’t kill you; it cures things, it helps people like Carmen, small and furry you may be, but you’ll be alive, young, and healthy.”

“And not the same person,” Ichi interjected. “I have seen the researchers that I shadow change in mind as well as body. Watching a trusted friend, coworker, or a loved family member physically change from the human you’ve known to this small animal right before your eyes is a horror. To see them speak of it positively, then speak of you in disdain… it’s impossible to see the same person. In their stead there is this animal that has their voice, and speaks as they do, but… as the woman representing Dr. Venner has said, the person, to me, is effectively dead.” He looked to Danny. “Dr. Shaw, I worked with you extensively on parasitic tolerance and the benefits it presents to human biology. You are not the man I knew. Your cynicism remains, but… it has been twisted outward toward individuals like myself, rather than on the nature of the world as a whole. It is not capitalism or corruption of politicians that you abhor, but seemingly… those of us without fur on our skin.”

The tod cleared his throat. “So you’re just calling me specist now, then?” he challenged.

“This is what I mean!” the intern objected, holding out his hand toward the fox. “I try to discuss this, *anything* with you and you attack me for what I am! You wear your self-worth on your sleeve, and you become offended when I call it out. This is not the man I knew!”

Kaylee sighed, her ears splaying back in frustration. “Okay so, in summary, hi, I’m a science experiment, you can’t stop the virus, it has benefits, but you’ll change as a person in a big way and may seem dead to the humans that used to know you. Y… ya know I went on in the video to say that we want to co-exist with humans and asked them to stop fighting us. Keep your distance and learn to live with us while we look for a way to stop the contagion, in… the unlikely event that we can. We want peace. No protests, no violence, just… stay calm and protect yourselves. We’re doing it here, I mean…? We’ve had no accidental infections at all!”

“Give it time,” Gene said. “I think if all of us stay in here with all of you long enough, there won’t be any humans left. We’ll fall off one by one.”

The vixen groaned, wiping her hand over her eyes. “Then what do we saaayy?” she whined.

“What needs to be said,” Heidi said sternly. “Human opinions be damned, we have to protect ourselves. We as a species have to survive. They can co-exist and be peaceful, or they can fight us and join our ranks unwillingly. Their new condition will make them happy.”

“Happy??” the sandy blonde intern objected, pointing her finger accusingly at the vixen. “You’re not happy! You’re stressed and confused! You wander around this place not understanding how to properly move or sit, fidgeting with clothes that don’t fit you anymore, making animal noises and nuzzling each other like my mom’s dogs! You’re an animal with a human mind that has no idea what to do with it.”

The vixen growled, jumping out of the chair, then rising to her feet. “You’re ignorant,” she challenged contemptuously as she walked toward her. “Perhaps you need to understand what it’s like firsthand.”

“Heidi, stop!” Coren called out, shaking his head with an open mouthed sigh. “We need the humans. There’s no sense infecting just so that they can learn. They’ll understand us in time.”

Gene chuckled to himself. “There it is again… we’re not liked, we’re *needed*.”

“W… well I like you,” Kaylee said to him. “I value your input and perspective, as well as your abilities. I… I’d consider you a friend. Even if it’s not mutual.”

“Them most human among the infected is the one that’s never been human,” Ichi complained. “What are we to think of this?”

The vixen was growing frustrated by these tangents. They had to focus! “Gene, for now, let’s just play the rest of the video, okay? Maybe… that little fib about people still being who they were will help humans with the sense of loss in all of this. If they *think* they’re the same person, they’re more likely to *see* them as the same person.”

The beared man nodded, pressing play. “And on we go.”

“Because of the nature of our genetic restructuring, the virus alters the brain to better suit our bodies,” the video explained. “Its size is reduced, our instincts are altered, and its overall neurological structure is modified to better suit the mental trauma that might occur with such a rapid, drastic change.”

“It has been observed that many of us may feel at odds with humanity after this process. I want to assure you that, while this is normal, it occurs because we feel threatened,” she explained. “It would be difficult to… rationalize this behavior and thought process to a human. Having never been one myself, I can’t even begin to identify with the idea that your species is never threatened. Foxes are of small stature. I am only three-foot-two-inches tall, compared to most humans that are five or even six feet tall on average. Your world is built for you, and aside from yourselves, you have no natural predators.”

Sighing, she began to pace once more. Was this how humans saw the world? Were they so carefree? They likely didn’t feel that way about themselves, but it was how she viewed them. “I can only speak from conjecture, but to suddenly find yourself inundated with powerful new scents and sounds, to find the world you knew so well to be so much larger around you… it drives you to act and think differently. It drives you to feel threatened. Combine that with the fact that we no longer understanding your kind, yet see you threaten us with cages, isolation, and even death… can you really blame us for our caution?”

She paced back to the center of the table, pressing her fingers together, almost playing with her claws. This seemed like it might be a good exercise to keep her fingers nimble. “Consider this…” she said. “The single largest fear that I’ve seen expressed among the infected are of camps and extermination. There is an obsession with self-preservation. This is likely because of the virus itself, coupled with the new instincts that they’re given during the process. Their increased senses are advantages given to them to ensure your *survival*.”

Taking another deep breath, she looked back at the camera. “We do not want to die.” she said simply. “But on the same page, forcing humans to join us, while beneficial, is not an ideal solution, either. We want to co-exist… how… however… it is difficult when we’re faced with governent and corporate orders to be locked away or taken to camps. I’ll be the first to admit, we are afraid of you, and we hold you as untrustworthy. I suspect you feel the same, and you hold us as a risk.”

She sighed, shaking her head. “Everyone, I am torn to say this, but my message to you, is not to believe GERCorp’s messenger on anything that she says in regard to our condition. She is human. She has not lived as one of us, nor has she spent any time around us. She is not the real Dr. Heidi Venner, and as such, her thoughts of us are dispassionate. We are an intelligent, valid, and sapient species with all the fears and goals that our furless counterparts possess. We deserve the right to exist.”

“That’s… why… I’m making a pair of proposals. One is preferred, the other is… an unfortunate fallback.”

“In an ideal, I wish to ask that humans and foxes both, don PPE. I mean masks, gloves, that sort of thing. Be mindful of what you touch and keep your distance from one another. Do not engage in intimacy, unless… it is consensual that the human will embrace the virus and join our species. For humans as well, do not attempt to pet, touch, or lift us, even if we agree, without bite protection. Remember that we are contagious. If we take these easy steps, we can reduce the spread of the contagion to a nominal level. This requires cooperation from both sides of our conflict. If… the extermination plans are stopped.”

“You might be asking, *what extermination plans*?” she continued. “For the answer, I ask that you look to human history. You might scoff at the notion that such a thing might happen again, but I can already tell you that camps are being created throughout the world to house us, to… concentrate us. We are not some ‘other’ to be exterminated, we’re people! Like you! Please undertand. It will likely never be spoken to you in such plain language by your government, but this the inevitability of a world in which we fail to work together. A struggle.”

“As… as a result, should the humans not yield in this endeavor, we will have no choice but to fight back. No choice but to… spread the infection. “

She shook her head, taking in a ragged breath as she tried not to tear up. Making such a declaration was an act of war against a species that she did not hate. Individuals, fearful, huddled around their televisions in their homes, waiting for help, yet… no help was coming. Not with plan B.

“Please understand the logic in this statement.” she pleaded, her ears splaying as she stared into the camera with puppy dog eyes. “Spreading the infection causes two events to occur. One, it bends the hearts and minds of the soldiers, officers, and leaders of the human world to not only sympathize, but empathize with our desire to survive,” she explained, “And... two... It creates an obligation to relent. Extermination would see the collapse of society if enough of us were Venner foxes. We could not be removed from the world, without society crumbling to pieces.”

She buried her head in her hand, shaking it as she heard her own words. “I just... I can’t... It’s...” looking back at the camera with pain in her eyes, she tried to continue. “I’m sorry it has to be this way,” she pleaded, nearly in tears. “I hate it. I don’t want this to happen. I beg you. Relent. Break down your camps, release our people... Let us co-exist. Because if we can’t… we have no choice but to fight for our lives.”

She hesitated, regaining her composure. “This is… all I have to say, really.” she continued. “I did not want to make this speech. I... did not want to call for these options. I never wanted anyone to be hurt.”

“For those of you, who have seen your youth return, who’ve danced your way out of hospice and into the sunlight, for those who’ve seen their lives return to normal after an injury has crippled you… I am happy. For… for those of you who are transgender, who have found your true identities through the process of change… I am happy. For those who just… always wanted to be a fox... I guess... Heh... I am happy.”

“But for those of you who are afraid. I beg you. Do not be. If you feel you need to cast aside your humanity, there is no shame in doing so. But if you do not wish this, please… please… cooperate with one another. Please co-exist. This is all I can ask. I wish you all... the happiest of days, and the brightest future our world can provide. G…goodbye.”

The video faded to black, leaving the vixen with the same mix of emotions she’d had the night before. “Do you think… we should remove that part of me sorta… breaking down?”

“No way.” Jennifer said, shaking her head. The night had been long and painful for her, but by the time the sun had risen, her major changes were complete. Her fur was still growing in, but her height, her legs, her tail and her face had changed such that she was no longer recognizable as the human she’d once been. “Leave it like that. It makes you look more… real. A lot of… a lot of humans seeing this are going to be scared and confused. A lot of us, who are new to our condition as well. Seeing you there, pouring your heart out proves that your’re a person. It gives us validity.”

“Well look at you miss wordsmith.” Jake chuckled, jabbing her playfully with his elbow. His changes had been much the same as hers, standing with a long T-shirt he’d been given by the staff and no pants. Much like Jennifer his changes were nearly complete, though his fur was sparser than hers. “You got it right though. I think we should leave it in.”

Kaylee sighed, looking down at the table in front of her. She could see her own wrinkled and distorted reflection in the shine of its deep black surface. “Is it the *right* message, though? I mean, do we even know if there *are* camps?”

“They said on the news this morning that infected residents in Vancouver were being trucked to Courtenay to be shipped to a facility on Texada Island.” Carmen replied, “If that’s not a camp, I don’t know what is.”

“God but that was fast…” Anne worried. “One day after it starts and they already have a camp.”

Virgil walked toward her, but stopped a few feet away, his tail wagging hopefully. Surprisingly, his changes had been more thorough than Jennifer’s, even though she was his vector. His fur had grown in thick and clean, leaving him with a vibrant, shiny coat. He wore an oversized white button-down shirt with no pants. It wasn’t ideal, but it was staying on his shoulders, at least. “To be fair, honey…” he started, “Dr. Coren told GERCorp’s senior team about this ahead of time. And they spoke with the CDC. They knew this was coming.”

Alan nodded silently in agreement. “This started before Kaylee escaped. I think that’s pretty obvious at this point,” he said. “I think we should send it. It’s not an ideal message, but it’s not an ideal situation.”

“People aren’t gonna do it.” Danny said, shaking his head. It was pounding, the changes finally reaching his face, pushing out his new muzzle. “They’ll fight it every step of the way.”

“Even if it means saving their humanity??” Kaylee demanded. “Surely they want to hold onto that!”

The now thin and fit researcher shook his head. “No, no, the humans will.” he argued. “I’m talking about *our* people. They’re not gonna try to protect the humans.”

Alan was listening quietly. “Why not?” he asked. “If you respect someone in your life that’s human, and they want to stay human, surely you’d want to respect their wishes by protecting them from you with PPE?”

“Because they’re trying to kill us, Dr. Coren.” Jake argued. “We wear masks, we respect them, they’ll still swoop in and throw us into their camps. The difference is that there’ll be a lot less of us to fight back.”

Danny shook his head. “Nah, not because’a that,” he argued. “because of how we see the humans. Kaylee just said it. You can cure diseases, regrow limbs, reverse old age… If we hate someone, we might infect them to make them more likeable or to punish them by giving them that moment of existential dread before their euphoria. If we love someone, we might infect them to help them see the world like we do, to cure them of their ailments, or to preserve the life of the elderly.” Crossing his arms once more, hen looked up at Ichi. “Never underestimate one’s sense of self-righteousness. All it takes is one out of every one hundred thousand to feel that everyone should be a fox at any cost… and it’ll spread. You see enough of that shit with political parties. You can’t infect a conservative to make them progressive, but you *can* infect a human to make them a fox.”

Ichi smiled slightly. “That is more like the man that I know,” he said.

The vixen looked worriedly at her mother. “I hate this so much.”

“I know you do, sweetie.” Heidi worried. “But there’s really no other way. What you said works. I vote that we release it as is.”

Kaylee nodded, her ears splaying. “O... okay.” she said shakily. “Gene... go ahead and… press your button.”

The human nodded, then began the upload process. “And... it’s going,” he said. “It should be live on multiple sites in a few hours.”

Chapter 55

The sun was shining, another beautiful early spring day for Friendly. These were the types of days that the people treasured, and with so many having only recently left from the flower festival, the small town square was looking more like itself. Well-trimmed trees bore light green leaves as birds chirped on their branches, the streets and sidewalks still clean and clear from the pre-festival clean-up that took place every year.

Outside the courthouse, an old, red brick building nestled in the middle of the city square, complete with white antebellum style columns and a heavy church-like dome, was a small stage, no doubt constructed with the same equipment that’d been used for the flower festival just the weekend prior.

The crowd was enormous for a Monday, though, to say it was unusual would be an understatement in its purpose. Every shop in town had closed to hear the mayor’s speech. With so many eyes on the man who, only two days prior, had passed through his euphoria, he couldn’t help but be nervous.

A lifelong politician, Mayor Sean Baskin had never found himself to be avoidant of the spotlight. He was a *Friendly* man! As his slogan so told. A man born and raised in the town itself. He knew the shop owners, the farmers, the doctors, the preacher, the lawyers… most of them on a first-name basis! Yet somehow, to speak to them now, as his height was slowly diminishing before his very eyes, was making him feel ill.

He stood inside the bulding, facing out from the northernmost hallway entrance, looking at the crowd of changing people as he fidgeted with his hands, glaring at the black dots and pressure beneath them that were slowly emerging claws. “Should I… is this the right message?” he asked, turning to a young petite woman, barely out of her teens, with black hair and dark framed glasses. “Am I doing the right thing? I mean… you’re still human, right? What’s your take?”

She sighed and did her best to reassure him with a thoughtful smile. “It’s your message, sir,” she said. “I merely checked it for errors.”

“But what’s your *opinion*?” he insisted. “There are humans in the crowd. You’re a human! I don’t want you to think… that you’re in danger here.”

She looked to her side, her smile fading as she exhaled a sigh from her nose. “If I’m honest, sir? As soon as you’re done, I’m gonna try to leave. Just… get in my car and head west. I don’t know if I can get away from here but… I’m gonna try. Your speech terrifies me, sir.”

He shook his head, his ears splaying. “Sandy,” he started, looking back up at her with sympathy in his eyes. “You know I can’t let you do that. You’ve read the speech. No one gets to leave.” She stared at him with muted emotion in her eyes, struggling to process a response. “If you’re threatening to do that, they’ll have to put you in the school. We’re not infecting you, yet.”

“T... th… then I’ll stay here. I won’t run,” she pleaded, trying to push back desperate tears. “Sir, I don’t wanna be one of those things! I’m just a college student trying to get my hours in for polysci! You... you don’t have to do this!”

He looked up as two men in slightly loose-fitting police uniforms approached from behind. “Take her to the school and hold her. Find out where she lives, and if she has any skills to help with the wall,” he said coldly. “If she doesn’t, infect her and send her home.”

“How can you do this?! You monster!” she yelled, kicking and struggling as the pair of men dragged her away.

With a long heavy sigh, he waited for her voice to fade deeper into the building, then opened the door and stepped out onto the lawn.

The crowd was mostly silent, murmuring to themselves as the mayor stepped up, hiking his pants so that they wouldn’t drag on the steps. They’d been fine a fw hours ago. His pointed ears tried to splay as he climbed up onto the step he’d asked for, enabling him to appear much the same height as before. Silently, he scanned the crowd, seeing varied heights and states of change. For some, their ears were already pointed, their faces pushed outward as they changed into maws, others still appeared mostly, or in some cases completely human. He couldn’t tell from sight alone if they were human, or just early.

Abruptly opening his arms, he forced ins sincerest of smiles. “What a beautiful day, huh?” he asked. “And what an interesting occasion to gather for.” He looked out at three individuals making their way through the crowd. “Looks like Eddie’s bakery is here to sweeten the mood, How ya feelin’ today Eddie??” he called.

“Fine as fox hair!” she joked back to him, making some in the audience chuckle, while others seemed to recoil. “We got free pie here for everyone that wants it!”

Smiling, Mayor Baskin nodded. “Well save me a slice, Everyone here knows your pie’s the best in the province!”

Clara did her best to smile as she walked through the crowd of people, handing out slices. Surprisingly,most of the people she encountered seemed t obe in good spirits, with a few seeming worried, more about the news than their own conditions, from the sound of things. Those that were genuinely unhappy had the same telltale scent. Infected, but so early that their euphoria hadn’t hit them.

She stopped at a young man and lifted up a plate in his direction. He was tall, with glasses and a short, bleached haircut. “Good morning!” she said cheerfully, her lightly furred tail wagging happily. “Would you like some pie? We have blueberry, cherry, and apple. Straight from Eddie’s bakery!”

He looked down at her, horrified at her partially transformed appearance. “Go away, please,” he said in a hushed voice through gritted teeth. “Just.. just go away.” She sniffed at him, tilting her head slightly. “Still human?” she asked. “Don’t worry. Everything’s going to be fine. Why don’t you take a slice’a pie an’ relax?”

He shook his head adamantly. “If they find out I’m still human they-”

“Sweetie, they already know.” Eddie said as she walked past him, giving out plates to those nearby. “Everyone of us knows. If we wanted to do anything about that, we already would have. Relax!”

“I don’t wanna be like you,” he said. “And it’s not you folks I’m worried about.” He nodded toward a pair of police officers that were making their way through the crowd.

“While Eddie and her friends are handing out the pie, let me… let me jump ahead in speech to explain a few decisions we’ve made here in the city government,” the mayor said, noticing the young man and his conversation. “As of early this morning, the Canadian National Guard tried to… visit our little town to discuss terms of… well effectively terms of surrender. They’ve slated our little community as a quarantine zone. They want to build a perimeter, physical or manned, it’s not clear, and then start bringin’ newly infected individuals into our town.”

The crowd seemed to murmur, but the sound grew louder as the two officers grabbed the young man by his arms and he started to yell. “Of course, we sent them packin’… threatened them that if they showed their human faces here in this town again they’d be bringin’ back a tail between their legs.”

“Let me go! What the fuck is wrong with you!?” the young man demaned, kicking and screaming with panic and anger.

“Be… because of this, the mayor’s office has decided to take a few steps. This may not look right to you, watching a young human dragged away from our crowd, but I assure you, it’s a plan that’ll make sense once you hear me through.”

Some of the members of the crowd, taller, more obviously human individuals, started to try to slink away, but were quickly met with officers, or citizens that had agreed to act in their stead. “What we’re doin’ here folks… is protecting our home,” the mayor explained. “If you’re not infected, and you don’t wanna be… that’s perfectly fine. We’ll bring ya down to the school and keep ya isolated for a time. If you can work, know how ta weld, or run screws or cut sheet

medal, cut with a torch, operate tractors, any'a that… you'll be put to work building a defense wall on the south road. The guard's gonna come back. You and I both know it. They'll be better prepared, and try to take our home, our territory by force! We cannot allow that."

"It is with a heavy heart that I say such a thing, but we have to protect our community from the humans that wish us harm." he said. "For hundreds of years, Friendly has survived. Harsh winters, unrest, hunger, wars… and still today it stands, a beacon among the fields of grain that surround us. Friendly... The town that lives up to its name. While I'm sure you'll all agree that we're willin' to take in more of our own kind ta protect them from the humans, we do not want our home turned into a concentration by a bunch of primates tryin ta repeat history. "As… as such… all roads leading out of town are closed. No one will be permitted to leave, or enter without our permission. If you live outside'a town, just let the officers know, an if you're one of us you can head on home, only humans will be turned away."

He shifted his weight, clearing his throat. "Right now, Gus down at the metal shop is refitting our police vehicles, making them useful for our… soon to be smaller stature, and to strengthen them up. If any of you have any scrap metal, large trucks or other obstacles we can use to build a wall or help in refittin' the equipment, I'd very much appreciate you reaching out to Marshall Erwin. He's leading the charge." the mayor continued.

"Need any extra soldiers?" a young man from the crowd asked. "Hell, I just managed to stand up outta my wheelchair for the first time in nearly a decade. I feel fit as a fiddle and ready ta fight. You can consider me a volunteer. I was a sniper in world war 2."

"How old are you?" The mayor asked with a laugh. "Son, you look like you're in your early 30s!"

The young man laughed. "You won't believe me, but I am ninety-eight years old as of a week ago."

The audience began to cheer, clapping for him as he smiled from ear to ear. "Thank ya!"

The mayor laughed. "Thank you for your service!" he said, but it soon began to fade. "Folks I know for a lot of you this isn't easy. Your friends and family are cut off from town if they live far away, your bodies and minds are changing in seemingly impossible ways… the humans are at our doorsteps tryin' ta box us in… believe me, I'm one of you. I get it! What I ask, though, is that you stay strong, and stay Friendly. Cooperate with one another, set aside any past grievances you might'a had with your neighbors and let's work together to secure our home."

"Might bit'a irony," Liam said as he crossed Clara's path. "Don't box us in, we'll box ourselves in," he said. "I mean, I get it but, still sounds a bit silly."

"We're fighting to be free," the mayor continued. "If we police our own borders and run our own lives, we'll be our own community, not one under their thumb. We know why they're

after us. They consider us a plague. To them we're a dangerous virus threatening the safety of the world. But look at this young man! Ninety-eight years old and standing before us volunteering his service as a soldier! You tell me this isn't a miracle and I'll sell an icecube to a polar bear!"

"I got the feelin back in my right arm!" another person called out. "Fox or not, I'm healed! Why get rid'a somethin like this? What're we losin??"

The mayor shook his head. "I can't pretend to understand the mind of a human. Not anymore.

"We're gearin up for a war… How's that free and friendly...?" a young man said absently, looking down as he felt Clara's presence. "Apple, please."

"You got it." she smiled, nodding Eddie over. She'd run out of apple already.

"Hate ta say it but the kid's right." Liam said. "This is soundin' like a war."

"War's a hasty word, Mr. Rannie." the mayor responded, hearing his words even from his distance on the stage. "But it's certainly a struggle. We have to stick together as a community, guard our territory, and protect our own! The humans will not take this from us!"

Many in the crowd erupted in cheers and claps. "Now, as I said, if you wanna pitch in, contact Marshall Erwin, and don't forget to thank Mrs. Shaw for your pie!"

He stepped down from the podium, shaking a few hands on the way, then quickly re-entered the courthouse.

"Well... sounds like Friendly's a Venner fox stronghold." Clara said. "Makes me proud, honestly."

"Venner fox?" an older man, still going through his paces asked as he took her last slice of pie. "Lady on the TV called it a Vulpes virus."

"Lady on the TV's a liar and a fake." Liam complained. "Kaylee Venner's our progenitor. Her mother, the real Dr. Venner created this. We're vulpes sapiens. Venner foxes. Spread the word!"

Heading back to the bakery a young man from the crowd approached Clara. "Mrs. Rannie right, the vet?" he asked quietly, looking over his shoulder for officers. "I didn't even recognize you. S… So... it's spread as far as your farm? I don't have cable so… I got no idea how far this mess's gone."

"It has." she nodded. "It... it's spread to the whole world."

He sighed. “I need ta talk to my momma.” he said, starting to walk off. He only got a few steps before he turned around. “You don’t think that speech was a little creepy?” he asked. “A little too... aggressive? I mean, are you people alright? You’re so… so… group-think. I... I dunno how to describe it. It’s like you’re all hypnotized. Putting humans into work camps… how is that right?”

“I hate it, I really do,” she said, shaking her head with her ears splaying. “I don’t think your kind should be locked up any more than we should. It’s just… well… you aint gonna work with our best interests in mind an’… we know you can probably swing a hammer. You can keep us safe, and… well we’ll keep you safe, I… I guess. That whole thing’s gone be up to the mayor’s office.”

He paused, shocked by the woman’s lack of empathy. “You used ta take care’a my momma’s goats. Always talked about what a sweet, caring lady you were. Now look at you, apologizing for slave labor.” He pointed his finger, wagging it at her. “Ya know, this is why people are afraid of you. They see you change like this, and they don’t recognize you anymore. Willy and Sai are like… fuckin aliens to me right now! They don’t make any sense! There’s no... way they’d be ok with this! Yet here they are talking about how great it is. How am I supposed to feel ok with joining you if this is what happens??”

Clara heard his words, but they didn’t seem to stir any emotion within her. What’d he know about such a thing? “You and I both know you’re not one of us yet,” she said calmly. “Go talk to the officers and head out to the school. They’ll get you taken care of, I’m sure.”

The young man huffed in anger, then stormed away, walking south, rather than north toward the school. If they were going to change him, they’d have to come and get him. He couldn’t wait to see just how strong this ‘perimeter’ really was.

Clara watched him leave, her ears splaying before she turned to look at Liam. The changing tod gently rubbed her back, then turned back toward the bakery. “He won’t get far, don’t worry about honey.” He motioned toward the buiding, his tail gently brushing against her leg. “C’mon, let’s head back inside so we can go over the rest’a the day.”

Chapter 56

“And... the video is live…” Gene said, looking up from his tablet as Kaylee watched the news. She’d been fixed on the local broadcast of the mayor’s speech, her ears splaying as the humans were dragged away by the infected police force. She’d seen something like this in a movie before, and it’d always been the villain that’d done something like this.

“Do you think we sent the right message?” she asked, turning around in her chair to match his gaze. “I don’t like how the mayor’s handling this. What if… more of our people start doing that?”

“From your message? I don’t think so,” Danny said, wincing as his hand struggled to turn the page of his book. “Ngh… we’re gonna need more of those hand exercise doodads. If I don’t limber I won’t be able to pick up a fork.”

His nonchalance bothered the vixen, had he not watched the same broadcast? “Obviously, former humans have a different take on things than I do,” she said, laying down flat in the chair by resting her head on the top of her hands. “That isn’t what I wanted at all.”

“Your video literally says to co-exist,” Jennifer replied, shaking her head. It was obvious that by the end of the day, her changes would be complete. All that remained of her former self were a few small spots where her fur wasn’t full. “That’s not what the mayor’s doing.”

The vixen sat up, her ears pointing forward urgently. “Then we need to go talk to him!” she said. “We can’t let the humans be treated like that. Locked away and forced to be laborers like our pets… it’s not right.”

Ichi cleared his throat, glaring at her. “Ms. Venner, perhaps reflection is needed before you make such a statement.”

She tilted her head, her ears splaying as she started to understand what he meant. “W…well-“

“You keep us here, and keep us human because we are useful to you,” he interrupted her. “We are not allowed to leave, not allowed to run to the safety of the military, away from your kind, because you need us to cook your food, lift heavy objects and reach high shelves. We are hostages to you and your needs here. Do not claim that the mayor is acting any differently than you are.”

Alan, who had been resting with his head on top of Heidi’s back as they lay in a chair near the television, lifted his head. “Speaking of being a useful human, what is it that you’ve been doing here, Ichi?” he asked accusingly. “So far the only thing we’ve gotten from you is dissent.”

The young man started to respond, but Kaylee shook her head, asking him silently not to respond. “Dad, his perspective is rational, and insightful,” she said. “They’re not our pets, or our slaves. They’re useful, yes, but that doesn’t mean that they need to ‘earn their keep’ or something. Leave him alone.”

The intern bobbed his head in thanks for her hollow, yet still defensive comment. Even when they sincerely thought they were helping, the foxes couldn’t think of humans with dignity, at least from his perspective. “You fear, what you are doing, that’s all I’m trying to say,” he said. “Is it likely that such things will happen in the world at large? I cannot say, but if this lab and Friendly are any evidence, it is possible that it will.”

Gene exhaled audibly, resting his hands palm down on the table. The back and forth was frustrating. “The video’s live on a few sites, but its propagating and being mirrored to dozens of others. They won’t be able to take it down or hide it.” He stood up without looking at any of them. “I’m going to my office. I need to cool off. If you need me… don’t. Please. I need some space.” He left the room abruptly, leaving none of them a chance to respond.

Kaylee whined, laying her head back on her hands as she felt the tension of the silence he’d left behind. “I’m sorry everyone,” she said mutedly.

“Lunch should be ready soon,” Jaren said, breaking the silence. “How about we all eat in the cafeteria at the same time? No more human time and fox time? Hmm? The key to understanding one another is exposure, and the room is plenty large enough for separation.”

Alan and Heidi both lifted their heads at the mention of food, the vixen licking her maw at the idea. Without a word, she sat up on her haunches, then jumped from the chair. “That sounds like a good idea,” she said. “We can still divide the serving line to make it more comfortable, and you can sit wherever you like,” she said. She motioned to the door with her head. “C’mon, Alan. Let’s go.”

The responses Jaren got from the others intrigued him. It was hard not to smile. The humans seemed to scorn his idea, while the foxes were ambivalent. They left the room eagerly, leaving the humans to lag behind, almost as if the food was more important to them than anything else in the events of the day. The only one that remained was Kaylee. She jumped from her chair as the others, and stood up, looking at the humans who seemed to linger. Her ears were pointed forward, as if she was expecting them to speak, but none of them did. Eventually, she relaxed as the splayed apart slightly, perking back up as she raised her brows. “I think… it’s more about us learning to appreciate you, than… than you being more tolerant of us,” she said finally. “You’ve already made a lot of concessions. We shouldn’t ask more.”

“Then let us go,” the sandy blonde intern said as she looked down at the fox with pleading, yet challenging eyes. “We can make it to the border, the human soldiers will take us in. We’ll be free.”

“They won’t, Brittney.” Ichi replied to her, staring down at the fox. “Apologizing for a situation they have control over, yet refusing to change it, is no apology at all.” He stepped past Kaylee, walking out of the room as the others followed, ultimately leaving only Jaren and the vixen behind.

She looked at him , tilting her head as her ears splayed, begging with her eyes for help in making it right. The warm smile she got in return, calmed the anxiety that she was feeling, but did little to sate her need for resolution. They both knew that Ichi was right. The foxes wouldn’t let them leave. They couldn’t. They were necessary. They needed to be present and needed to remain human. Prisoners… slaves… to the small yet aggressive population of foxes that she’d unintentionally birthed.

He walked past her, stopping in the doorway to nod her on. “You did the best you could, I think,” he said. “Now come on, let’s get some lunch.”

The gentle, calming music that Gene had chosen to play through the halls had been an effective choice. Though tensions remained high, the humans were taking better care of themselves, now wearing clean clothes and washed hair. It made the facility feel more civilized, and for the foxes, more pleasing to their noses. Little had been said on the subject, but unwashed humans were quite unpleasant to their senses. Now with the humans and the foxes taking proper care, the facility was much less… smelly. The hall was more active than usual, some of the humans had opted to wait for the small yet active crowd to die down, opting to return to their offices or personal sleeping spaces, rather than interact with the foxes in the cafeteria.

Upon arrival, the vixen stood in the doorway, quietly scanning the room. The foxes, unsurprisingly, had insisted to be first in line, standing on the very edges of their paws to be tall enough to see the food being placed on their trays. There was almost a humor in it all, and the eager hunger that they displayed, licking their maws and almost hopping along in the line, made it difficult for the human servers behind the line to not laugh. *At least they can find humor in the behavior*, the vixen thought to herself. We really need to find a way to let them relax. The courtyard isn’t proving sufficient.

Gathering her own food, she joined her parents at a table, sitting upright on her haunches as she cut the Salisbury steak they’d prepared with her knife. It was a curious thing to her that, despite the others’ claims of trouble with their hands, she’d experienced few such incidents. It was at its worst in the mornings, but it seemed that the day to day for her was enough to keep her fingers limber. “So what do you think of the mayor’s directive?” she asked, glancing up at her mother before pushing the first bite of the steak into her maw.

“I think… he did what he had to do,” she said, struggling to hold her knife as firmly as she wanted. “No one wants to make a call like that, but if the national guard’s already been to town trying to take over, their labor is useful. It’s better to use it than to turn them now.”

“Turn them now?” the vixen asked. “Why should we turn them at all?”

Alan scoffed quietly. “Kaylee, Friendly is a Venner stronghold. We have to protect ourselves. We can’t have dissent in the form of a bunch of humans wandering the town, trying to undermine our efforts to remain free.” He quickly stuffed a large bite of his steak into his maw and noisly began to chew. “Ish Imphorpamp phap whe awl worch phogepher.”

“So, you’re saying that humans will never work to serve our interests?” she argued. “Dad you’re making a lot of assumptions, and acting based on those assumptions. And… don’t talk with your mouth full, please? It’s impractical. I could barely understand you.”

He swallowed his food, then quickly washed it down with a glass of water. “Look at the dissent we’ve gotten from the humans here,” he said. “They don’t want to be here. They don’t want to help us. We need them and their larger bodies. The moment they can turn their backs they will. They’re not loyal. You need to remember that. Anything they learn here, they’ll tell the other humans the moment that they can. They’d have to be turned wen we don’t need them anymore to protect ourselves.”

“Is that so?” Dr. Gilford asked as he joined them with his tray of food, sitting boldly beside the tod. “You really think they’re gonna betray you and blow all of this away?”

Alan looked up at him, surprised and slightly bothered by the proximity of such a large creature. “What investment do they have with us to want it any other way?” he challenged. “I’m surprised you haven’t already tried to undermine us.” He squinted. “In fact, I’m surprised you haven’t come clean.”

Cutting up his steak without any sign of reaction, he stabbed his meat with his fork, then lifted it to his mouth. “What’s that mean?” he asked quickly, shoving his food into his gob and chewing as he looked down at the creature with the calmness of a man that had nothing to hide. “Are you accusing me of something? Because this is the first I’ve heard.”

“We just find it a little curious that my research was accessed and leaked all over the globe without my knowledge,” Dr. Venner replied coldly. “You’re responsible for data aggregation and collection. If anyone from inside sent it to Dr. Klassen to then… market out to governments and labs all over the planet… it would’ve been you.”

Jaren nodded understandingly. “Dr. Venner, I think it’s important to remind you of my title here at GERCorp,” he said. “I am the Senior Research Analyst for GERCorp Manitoba. That means that I collect, analyze, summarize, and scrutinize research data for the company. That also means that I respond to data requests from individuals inside and… outside of this facility, so long as it is within their, and my security clearance to do so.” He quickly took a drink from his glass as the contempt he was seeing in her eyes continued to grow. “As a result, yes. There were many requests for data on your projects, and I provided that data.”

“So you’re the mole…” Alan said, surprisingly with less aggression than the human had expected. “You’ve been feeding them our data.”

“Sir, it has been my job to provide you and others above you with data,” he replied. “When Dr. Venner began working with the Nevada team following the initial infection, I was the one that provided them with the necessary data to facilitate that cooperation. In that sense, yes. I am your mole.”

Heidi wrinkled her nose, lifting it just enough to expose parts of her canines. “We should turn you for this,” she seethed. “Then you’ll be honest and tell us everything you’ve done.”

He gently shook his head in response. “Turning people as punishment makes the humans nervous and uncomfortable around you,” he said. “They watch the person’s personality and perspectives change with their body, and they’re afraid. If you want to keep the peace here… I don’t recommend that as a solution. Further… I’m willing to tell you everything anyway,” he said. “We just need to sit down and talk.” He chuckled. “I would’ve denied what you’d just said if I were trying to be hostile, believe me.”

Kaylee had been listening silently as they spoke, eating her food as she pondered the situation. The idea that she’d been a product all this time was the truth. The company had been packaging and selling ‘her’ in the form of the virus and the research around it for… well who could even say how long. Jaren, a man she’d barely known before her escape, had been the one to do it as well. The very man sitting with them at the table, that’d offered his advice and insight so many times… was potentially… the man of her undoing.

“Did you make the call to get rid of me?” she confronted him. “Where did that decision come from? Who’s responsible?”

He took a deep, yet short breath, closing his mouth as he looked down at his food. “The decision was made by the board,” he said. “As soon as word got back to the company that the virus had become contagious, GERCorp set out to purge all record of it. All sales, and all specimen data. Anyone assigned to the project… Dr. Venner… was to be reassigned, and the subjects harvested for the express pupose of research in containing, and eliminating the contagion. This… data was not shared with your team intentionally. It was cast as a budgetary decision.”

“So that’s why everyone ran when Kaylee escaped…” Alan replied. “They knew that she was contagious??”

Heidi groaned. “I… knew that she could potentially be contagious. Had I known that you were selling my research… first of all I would’ve been angry, but more than that, I would’ve discouraged it on those grounds alone! It’s irresponsible to silo researchers away so that they’re not aware of the full impact of their work!” She looked down at herself, opening her arms to gesture at her form “Look at what you’ve done. Are you satisfied? Hmm? You’ve given way to the birth of a new species that now finds itself locked in a veritable war with yours. And for what? A paycheck?”

“I did what I was tasked to do, Dr. Venner,” he argued. “It has nothing to do with wanting to spread the virus or feeling anything about what’s happened to you! I got a request for data, I sent that data. It’s as simple as that!”

She shook her head in dissatisfaction. “And you didn’t once check to see if it presented any health hazards?? Or did you know that it could potentially infect others and you simply disregarded safety protocols?”

“Disregarded safety protocols?” he scoffed. “Dr. Venner, how many times were you in there with Kaylee, brushing her fur and teaching her to read when you knew as early as her second treatment that she could be a colonial vector?? You want to talk about violating protocol… it was right there at the top of my notes that it had containment risks! I can show you the submission! It’s not my fault if Dr. Klassen scrubbed that from the sales brochure or… whatever he used to market the product!”

Kaylee felt like an outsider. Suddenly her mother was human again, arguing with a colleague. Was it a switch that could be flipped so easily? She could just… turn off who she’d become to return to who she’d been before? Speaking of her, and the research that’d created her as a product made her feel disgusting. Calling these two her parents… what a fool she’d been. Without a word, she jumped from the table, stood up, and took her plate, quietly walking away as the pair continued to debate. Once she was done, she left the room, finding herself nearly alone in the facility that suddenly felt so cavernous. Even the music seemed to mock her with minor tones and an unusual rhythm. She’d a product from her very conception. From the moment two fur farm foxes were mated, to her birth and subsequent purchase by the lab, to her time now as an… advisor? She’d never once been seen as anything more than a product to be bought and sold, like a lamp, or a television.

Chapter 57

“Well, that’s the last of it,” Eddie said as she sat down at the table with Clara and Liam. It was late afternoon by the time she’d finished sorting her inventory. “I got enough for ten more blueberry, five strawberry, about four dozen banana puddin’, more if I skimp on the wafers, an’ about three more cherry. The maraschino sauce I use is hard ta come by. Can’t imagine it’s gone get any easier now, either.” She sighed heavily as she looked at the pair across the table. “You know them trains are gonna stop runnin, now that we done turned away the guard,” she said. “Aint no way they’re gonna let us stay like this. They’ll be cuttin’ our power ‘fore you know it. Phones, internet… they’re gonna try ta starve us out. I should probably get ta bakin’ all this stuff right now while the lights are still on.”

Clara had been spending most of her time people watching out the window. Those that were the most changed also seemed to be the most comfortable, some of them already abandoning their pants as they seemed to pick up on the inconvenience, and the lack of a need, for the privacy that their fur seemed to give them. There was an obvious need for a tailor, though. Even the smallest of clothes seemed not to fit, or they were childish in design. Her thoughts wandered back to Yancey, and his interaction with Willy. Could she have saved that girl from this fate? Would it have even been prudent do to so? She seemed happy now, but, would that be the case had she been asked a few days prior? The answer was likely no, though, she could probably say that of herself as well.

Despite it all, the town seemed to be relatively peaceful. Every now and then a tractor would rumble by, or a truck carrying a load of scrap metal, no doubt being operated by those who had the least bit of change. They really were building that wall.

Liam had wanted to help, but after spending some time with Eddie, he’d become distracted in trying to engineer a way to change the seating in the restaurant to make it more fitting. He spent what seemed like hours measuring things and doodling on napkins with a pencil he’d found behind the counter, trying to re-invent the chair. Clara couldn’t help but admire the tod, smirking to herself as he held the pencil between his teeth, just as he’d always done. Despite their changes, they were still the same deep down. It gave her comfort to see his old self in those new vulpine eyes.

“I think we should probably get Eddie up to the lab ‘fore sunset sweetie,” she said, remidning her husband of the obligation he’d set forth some four hours prior. “It’s nearly dinner time an’ here we are mullin’ around the bakery.”

Eddie sighed, coming around the corner of the glass display and leaned on It with her elbow. “I dunno if I should now,” she said, shaking her head. “Gotta make these pies. Maybe it makes more sense if ya bring Danny down here so he can help me. I cant have all this product expire. As far as I know money is still a thing out here. We still gotta pay the rent, even if we aint getting new supplies.”

The tod looked up from the leg of a chair, removing the pencil from his mouth as his ears pointed toward her. “I hate ta say, Eddie, but if what yer sayin’ is true, that they’re gone cut our power an’ our supplies? We got a lot bigger problem than worryin’ about foreclosures.” He stood up with a foxlike grunt and stretched his arms high over his head. “Make yer pies if ya need to, I can go get Danny an’ bring em down if he’ll come, but I’m tellin’ ya now, if the storms gonna come in on us like’at, we need ta start thinkin’ bout how ta survive, rather than how ta live with these new bodies’a ours.”

“Yet here you are, measurin’ chairs just like Liam Rannie always has,” Clara chuckled. “Honey, you aint wrong, it’s a real concern. We got lotsa food at the house an’ that tower’s got one hell of a generator that we can use, so long as the diesel holds out. Ya reckon anybody in town’s got more? Gus? We can siphon from the cars, aint really much use for em anymore.”

Eddie sighed and started turning on her ovens. “You’re stressin’ me out,” she said. “I gotta cook ta calm this down. Maybe I’m wrong! Ya know? Maybe the train’s gonna keep on runnin’ Maybe it’ll be alright! There’s not any way for us to know, really.”

Clara pulled her phone from her shirt pocket, then laid it on the table. “I’m gonna call Anne, she can get us in touch with Danny and maybe he can come down. Liam I think… we should start havestin’ the wheat an’… well… I think we should keep it. We might need the grain ta make bread. We might wind up goin to tha stone age they cut off our supplies. They got that water bottlin’ plat up there too.. pulls from a natural spring. We could use that for water and-“

“Hello? Clara?” Anne’s voice suddenly rang out from the phone. The vixen had dialed the number without even realizing it. It wasn’t on speaker phone, but her newly formed vulpine ears made her surprisingly easy to hear.

Pressing the speakerphone button, the vixen whined. “Y… yea it’s… it’s us.”

“Sounds like they liked your pie,” the young woman said. “You guys alright down there? You said you were bringing Eddie up here, but… nobody’s seen her.”

“I’m here!” the vixen called, her tail wagging side to side as she rolled out the dough. “I’m makin’ pies while we still got power. We can’t let them shut us off.”

Anne nodded at the phone, “Eddie, I don’t think they’re gonna cut us off,” she said. “The lab’s connected to the mains. They can’t cut power to the city without cutting power to the lab. And since Dr. Venner’s here, supposedly working on a way to stop the contagion, they need everything to work.”

“You would trust humans, wouldn’t ya?” Liam asked. “You are still human, right?”

Dr. Ramirez sighed and rolled her eyes. It seemed that this ‘we hate humans’ perspective was as contagious as the virus itself. “Yes, I’m still human,” she said. “But that

doesn't mean I'm 'on their side' or however you'd like to word it. Not to be rude, but I'm a little tired of constantly being accused of it. Even my husband is starting to do that and his changes aren't even done yet."

"Sorry 'bout that, sugar," Clara said. "We just… don't know that we can believe that."

"Because it came from me, right? A human?" Anne challenged. "Dr. Coren told me as much. They had a meeting with the company about their plans before it even started. The want to control the town, and use it as a quarantine zone, because they think this is where their miracle cure's gonna come from. No one can do this like Dr. Venner, and you know it."

Eddie finished rolling out the dough, then started to press out the shapes, making large circular cuts and placing them in pie tins. Afterward, she balled the dough up with her hands, and began to roll again, making sure to use as much as she could. "Well, I'll hafta take your word for it," she called to the phone. "Can you get Danny down here ta town, please? I need his help in the bakery. Unless he's still busy with your mirale cure, that is."

Anne sighed once more. "There's not gonna be a miracle cure," she said. "Partially because these xenobots are tenacious, and partly because your people don't want it."

Liam and Clara looked at one another, they were initially defensive at the accusation, but mulling it over, they couldn't say that they disagreed. "So, do we need ta come up there ta get Danny? Or…?" the tod asked.

"No.. I… I'll bring him down," the researcher replied. "Eddie's bakery's near the square right? I'll take one of the BioSec suvs and come down there."

"Honey if you do that they might drag you off to the school," Clara worried. "Maybe… maybe Kaylee should come with you just to reinforce your position?"

The human paused, staring down at her phone. "Has… it seriously- I'm a researcher with GERCorp. If they… I'm not part of their slave labor. They're not dragging me off to build some wall," she complained. "You... look I get you have a condition that alters your brain, but can you not be reasonable?? I'm not a threat to you!"

Liam looked at Clara once more then raised is brows, shaking his head. "Didn't say ya were," he said. "We're just lookin' out for ya. Cops here in town don't know ya. Shit, we don't either, really. We're just tryn'a say, you come down here, they might give ya a hassle. Don't really appreciate ya makin' accusations. Fact that you see us such unreasonable animals says all we need ta know 'bout the human condition."

"Human con-…" she started, cutting herself off with a gasping sigh. "Fine, I'll see if Kaylee can come with me, and I'll bring Dr. Shaw into town."

Chapter 58

A small ploom of dust followed the black GERCorp suv as it slowly made its way down the road road toward town. Even before they'd left the hill where the lab had been built, they could see the tractors and workers nailing up a makeshift, scrap metal fence out at the edge of a field. They seemed to be using the ditch between farms as a moat to catch invaders, though it wasn't clear if such a thing would work in any sort of modern warfare. The town was picking sides, it was arming itself and walling it in like a stronghold. If this wasn't a war, what else could it be? As Kaylee bounced around in the front seat with her hands on the dash, she couldn't help but worry. "This doesn't look good." she worried. "Are you sure there's no danger?"

"The mayor told us to come down," Heidi said from the back seat. "We were… lucky that Alan had his number. Might not've gone so well otherwise."

"We'd just have to protect Anne," Danny replied. "I don't think *we're* in any danger."

"Seeing all this play out is amazing and terrifying all at the same time," the researcher replied. "hopefully they'll understand... if... I…" She looked down the road spotting a barricade with police SUVs blocking the road. Seeing the vehicle, the officers flagged them down, drawing their guns aggressively as Anne slammed on the brakes. "Spoke too soon..." she worried.

"GET OUT OF THE CAR! NOW!" the officer yelled, relaxing his grip on his pistol as saw the paws and tail from behind the doors. "Look at that…" he muttered, re-holstering his weapon as the other officers joined to gawk. "They're completely changed!"

"They are! How is... Is GERCorp the source of all this?" another officer asked.

The group of foxes, as well as Anne, stood beside the SUV with their hands in the air, waiting on further instructions. "Y…you can put your hands down." the officer said as he started to walk forward. "Are all of you like us?"

"She's human." Alan said, nodding to Anne as he relaxed his arms.

"Well, she can't come into town, so she's gonna need to take this vehicle back to... Back to the lab?" he wondered. "My name is James. I... uh... I'm like you. But... you're... You're done! Aren't you? It's... it's kind of amazing to see our own kind like this. We've never seen the end of the process… what it does, ya know?"

"Right." Alan nodded. "Listen, I'm Dr. Coren, I have an appointment to speak to the mayor. May we enter the town, please?"

“Uh… sure! Yea, of course!” James nodded, radioing back to Marshall, who quickly confirmed it.

“Should be three.” he replied. “Heidi Venner, Kaylee Venner, and Alan Coren. That them?” the Marshall asked.

The tod nodded. “That’s us. Can we get through?”

“Well hold on,” James said, looking down at Danny. “There’s a fourth one here. Mostly changed but… not quite.”

The tod groaned, rolling his eyes. “I’m Dr. Danny Shaw. I work for GERCorp as a Parasitologist. My wife runs Eddie’s bakery in town. I’m going in to meet her and help her work for a while. Do you have a problem with that?”

The officers looked at one another, seeming skeptical.

“Oh, whattya want?” he asked snappily. “You two still look human! The only way I can tell you’re not is by your scent. You wanna tell *me I’m* some kinda security threat?”

“I… guess not,” James said, radioing the marshall once more. Once he approved the officers nodded.

“T... tell you what, uh... How about we put you in the truck and drive you in? If you’re meeting the mayor there’s no reason you should walk.”

Kaylee, still as curious as ever, had already lost interest in the creepy fox in his early stages. She was looking down at the dirt road, gently nudging tiny pebbles with her paw. “I’d rather walk.” she said. “I haven’t really felt dry dirt like this beneath my paws.”

“We’ll ride.” Heidi smiled, rubbing Kaylee’s back as she looked up at her in objection. “It’s a pretty long walk being this small.”

The officer seemed overjoyed, opening the back door of the car. Alan jumped in, crouching on his haunches before leaping inside. Heidi quickly followed, leaving Kaylee and Danny outside with the officer. She looked up at him and his overly excited smile and scowled. “What’s wrong with you?” she asked skeptically. “Why are you smiling like that?”

“Because... I mean… look at you! You’re done! It’s... it’s just amazing to see. We’ve all been wondering just how similar to the progenitor we’d look but... I mean... You’re her spitting image!”

“She should be… she is the progenitor,” Danny replied, walking past the officer before jumping into the car. “Come on, this is getting old fast.”

“Yea.” The vixen agreed, squatting down, then jumping inside.

Heidi sat beside her daughter, smiling warmly at the vixen she could tell was nervous. “It’s okay sweetie. We’re gonna be fine.”

“I shoulda brought my spear.” Kaylee whined, placing her paws on the back of the seat as she watched Anne drive away. “I’m so stupid sometimes,” she sighed heavily, muttering under her breath. With her back still turned, she heard the front door open and close, followed soon by the engine that roared to life. There was an odd spacer between the seat and the front of the vehicle, but, despite it, the window seemed to be open. Suddenly without warning, she felt something brush her tail. At first, she thought she’d just moved it against something, then she suddenly felt it close around it like a hand.

Whirling around, she growled, baring her teeth at the officer who couldn’t seem to keep his hands to himself. “WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING!?” she asked furiously. “YOU’RE ONE OF US YOU SHOULD KNOW BETTER!”

“S... sorry I just... I wanted to see how soft-”

“You do that again and we’re all going to have a problem.” Alan growled, baring his teeth in support... “Don’t you dare touch *any* of us without our permission.”

Kaylee moved to the passenger side, balling herself up as far away from the officer as she could, staring out at him over her tail with hatred in her eyes.

“S... so uh... You can move like animals and... And curl up… huh?”

“Animals, huh?” Danny scoffed. “You really are new, aren’tcha? You still think of yourself as human or somethin?”

“I think it’s best if you just drive, at this point.” Heidi scowled contemptuously. “Kaylee’s never been to a town before, and had very little contact with the outside, and you just set a very bad precedent for her.” She moved closer to her daughter, laying down beside her, but the vixen recoiled more, making a sound that expressed her disapproval.

“Sorry... I just...” the officer replied awkwardly. He was red faced about what he’d done, embarrassed to a degree that he couldn’t even admit.

The drive was silent, but only took a minute more, something that the vixen was very happy about, given the creepy, smile and unwelcome touch that the early-stage fox had given her. Were they all going to be like that? No one at the lab had done this. She really wished she had her spear. *Perhaps*, she wondered, *there's one I can use in town*.

Arriving in the square, the officer stepped out of the car, walked around to Kaylee's door, then opened it. She opened her mouth at him, squealing in discontent before leaping from the vehicle and hiding beneath the rear axle. Heidi followed her out slowly, rising to her hind legs before giving the officer a dirty look. "Please learn to respect peoples' boundaries." she scolded, making her way to the back of the car. "Come on out honey. We need to see the governor."

The underside of the car felt safe, but it smelled bad, similar to the scents she'd smelled on the Rannie farm when she was in the barn. It seemed to come from the large metal object above her, covered in a thick black substance that she assumed to be oil and dirt. From beneath the vehicle, she could see the town. Clean paved roads lined with brick crosswalks at the intersections, a few vehicles here and there, one of which she recognized as the Rannie's truck, and far more feet than she expected, feet in shoes.

When the vixen didn't respond, Heidi sighed, shifting onto her hands and paws, she squatted down and tilted her head curiously at the curled-up vixen in the fitted white lab coat. "You alright? I know there's a lot of new things here for you."

"I want my spear." she said timidly. "That man is creepy. I don't like him."

Heidi chuckled and nodded. "I agree, but… Kaylee, I'm glad you *don't* have your spear right now. This place isn't as scary as it looks. And besides, Alan, Clara, Liam, Danny, Eddie and I are here to help you."

"I wish Swirl was here." she said. "Why didn't we go get him?"

"It didn't seem like we had enough time." Dr. Venner said softly. "We'll get him on the way back to the lab. Okay? Now come on, get out from under this smelly old thing. We need to speak with the mayor."

She crawled out with a sigh, dusting herself off as she looked around at the townsfolk who seemed to have stopped to stare. They towered over her, the vast majority of them still seeming mostly human, forcing the vixen's ears to splay back once more.

Alan, sensing the activity, began to shoo them all away. "Give us some space, please. We can address any questions you have later. Please give us some room."

The vixen's tail curled as she walked with her mother, feeling her hand on the small of her back. "I don't want all this attention. Why does everyone have to gawk at me?"

Dr. Venner nuzzled her warmly. “They’ve never seen… us... Before.” she explained. “They’re looking because they want to know what to expect.”

The vixen did her best to ignore them, hearing some of them whispering about her, talking about her lack of hair, her lab coat, her shirt, even more of them talking about her attractiveness, trying to see her body despite the clothes she was wearing. It made her feel unclean, pulling her jacket closed as they continued to walk. “These people are animals.” she muttered.

“Hey James...” a young man in baggy overalls asked, approaching the officer as he was getting back into his car. “Who was that?”

“GERCorp employees, and the progenitor to our little virus.” he said with a smile. “The one without hair. Looks like we get to meet her in person.”

“Seriously??” the man asked in a hushed voice. “What’s her name?”

“Kaylee.” the officer responded with a smirk. “Kaylee Venner. Real cute name, huh? Her fur’s really soft, too. I hope I get to touch it again.”

The walk to the courthouse felt like it took an eternity. Kaylee wanted to make herself as small as possible, the prying eyes seeming to pierce into her. Why were they like this? Why stare at her? She had clothes like they did, she walked on two legs, just like them. They even had her virus. They’d wind up just like her in a few days! So... why were they staring? For all her talk about humans and their world, she’d never really considered that she’d be an outsider to them, especially if everyone in the town was infected. They didn’t even consider themselves human! But then, maybe that was the problem?

As they opened the doors to the large, cathedral-like grand hall of the aging brick courthouse, her mind drifted to the movies she’d watched in her cell. Normal lives, normal people, going about their days without gawking, staring or touching one another. Human lives. Lives that’d been lost to everyone in Friendly. It was enough to make her start to cry.

“What’s wrong?” Alan worried, noticing her tears. “Kaylee, it’s okay. We’re safe here. None of these people are gonna hurt us.”

She shook her head. They’d talked about it many times already. There was no point in trying to explain. “Let’s just get this over with.” she said timidly.

Chapter 59

The three foxes found their way to the mayor's office, the buliding was empty, making it feel cavernous and cold. "Shouldn't there be… people in here?" Kaylee asked, her ears splaying as she hunkered down close to her mother. "I don't like this."

"Hello?" Alan yelled, his voice echoing off the marble floor and up into the vaulted ceilings high above. From somewhere above them, a door creaked open, a man seeming to peer at them from high above. He didn't speak, simply stared, seeming to wonder who they were.

"I'm Dr. Alan Coren?" the tod called up. "We were supposed to m-"

"Oh! Dr. Coren!" the man laughed, his voice matching that of the mayor. "I'm sorry, I suppose I was expecting you to look… well, more like myself! My but you've changed. I… suppose I've started to as well. Come on up! The stairway is around the corner to your left."

The foxes made their way around the corner, finding an ornate marble staircase lined with a lush red carpet that was held in place by finely crafted brass stair rods that looked to be older than time, despite their polished surfaces. "No one's seen my video, I guess…" Kaylee said as she stayed close to her mother and slowly climbed the stairs. "They all gawk like they have no idea what they're becoming. They embrace it without even knowing what *it* is… ridiculous."

"They likely have some idea," Heidi said as they reached the top of the stairs. "They've seen the footage from overseas. Seeing one of us in person though, I feel might bring them something of an identity crisis. It's entirely possible that they wont recognize one another without speaking their names."

Alan chuckled at the idea, looking around the corner to see mayor Baskin waiting patiently. "It's interesting isn't it? We can speak with these mouths, that means that any similar animal, given the intelligence, could speak."

"Well Swirl's proven that," Kaylee said, stopping a far distance from the mostly human man with the goatee and mustache before them.

He looked them over, a big smile on his face as he opened his arms in quiet celebration. "Dr. Coren, so these must be Dr. Venner and your… uh… Kaylee?" he asked. "Come in! Let's have a chat. I'm so happy to meet you!"

The foxes recoiled at his gesture, the large, mostly human being opening its arms in this way was intimidating to all three of them. He seemed to realize this, letting his arms fall to his sides as he awkwardly cleared his throat. “C… come into my office so that we can talk,” the mayor said more calmly.

The office was octagonal, with oak wood paneling stained a dark, healthy brown. Upon each wall was a different photo or painting depicting a moment in the town’s storied history. In the center was the mayor’s desk, lined on either side behind him with two large arched windows that faced out to the shops behind the courthouse. If the painting between the two windows were any indication, at one time, the space behind the building had once been a park, so the windows made much more sense than the parking lot view that they had at that moment. The foxes took their seats, with Heidi and Alan sitting in the same chair, hopping into it like a cat and resting their hands on the cushion. Kaylee took the other but opted to sit up for the moment. Sitting as her parents did felt too… disarming, given the situation.

“Is that comfortable for you?” the mayor asked. “More comfortable than sitting like a human?”

Alan nodded. “Very much so,” he said. “Our anatomy shifts during this process. It makes sitting as a human possible, but decidedly less comfortable and… decidedly more revealing than we would prefer it to be.”

“Well... perhaps you should consider undergarments.” The mayor responded, clearing his throat while glancing at the vixens suggestively. “At any rate, thank you so much for coming. As you likely know, my name is Sean Baskin. I’ve been mayor of Friendly for more than sixteen years. Dr. Coren, I know you well, but your accompaniment, I sadly do not. Would you ladies like to introduce yourselves?”

Kaylee leaned down to place her hands on the cushion as her parents had done. He knew who they were, why was he asking this? “Why?” she asked skeptically. “You know who we are, so why are you asking?”

Heidi chuckled politely, wanting to nuzzle her daughter, despite her distance in the other chair. “Sweetie, it’s just a formality,” she smiled. “My name is Dr. Heidi Venner,” she explained. “You… saw my body double on television this morning, no doubt. I… invented the xenobots, or rather, I put the theory into practice. Subsequently, I suppose, I indirectly unleashed this condition onto the world.” Her ears splayed as she looked down and shook her head in regret. “I’ve been with GERCorp for fifteen years, I never expected that something like this would happen.”

“How did it occur?” the mayor asked. “I was under the impression from some of the talk about the town that a lab specimen escaped from your facility and it spread from there, but we’ve been seeing news on these sorts of things come out of Russian, China and Turkey for nearly two weeks.”

Kaylee scowled at him, tilting her head slightly to the left as she splayed back her ears and slightly wrinkled her nose. He could see the anger in her expression, but didn't know what he'd done to make her feel this way.

"We… recently discovered that GERCorp was selling Dr. Venner's research to the highest bidder," Alan sighed. "The reversed aging, regrowth of limbs and curing of diseases is a very lucrative benefit, despite what humans would consider to be the drawbacks of changing their species. I'm sure, from what we've seen on the news, that these countries, or private organizations within those countries, purchased the research for that exact reason."

"And had the exact same results," Heidi nodded. "Frankly it's surprising that they'd be so inept to infect one another with something they don't understand." She glanced at her daughter, noting her continued fuming at the mayor's reference to her as a specimen. It frustrated her that Kaylee would stick to such a thing, but then she supposed she could understand. "My… daughter here, Kaylee..." she started, "did escape from the lab. GERCorp tried to cover up their… mishandling of my research by attempting to scrub any record of it, including eliminating her. Like the intelligent and resourceful young woman that she is, she escaped, and… well that's how Friendly became a part of this."

Kaylee watched as she spoke, then looked the mayor angrily in the eye once more. "Don't call me a lab specimen," she started. "And before you stat pointing fingers at me as the source of the infection here, know that I never bit anyone or intentionally spread it beyond the lab. And even when I did, the… I didn't know that I was contagious at the time." She looked him up and down, not giving him time to respond. "What I want to know from you, mayor, is why you're dragging humans off to labor camps simply for being what they are," she growled. "We're fighting to keep our species valid so that the humans won't try to just run us over, something you've obviously already seen from the Canadian national guard trying to come in this morning. Your response to that is to do to them what they want to do to us??"

"Kaylee honey, calm down," Alan scolded. "Give the man a moment to breathe. There's obviously a lot going on here." He looked back at the mayor and nodded once, asking him to proceed. "Tell us about the guard. We spoke with GERCorp about the impending infection here in Friendly a day before your speech at the festival. They told us they wouldn't be interfering, but that we would see an organized presence in the town in a week. That… hardly seemed like a week to me."

Taking a moment to process everything, the mayor slowly scanned the room with his eyes. The vixen still stared at him with contempt, but it wasn't a new look. He'd been in this seat long enough to recognize it. "Part of… being the mayor of a small town is… making decisions that might be controversial for a small portion of the population, for the benefit of the rest," he explained. "The humans are tall, stable and useful. They're not going to wake up tomorrow two feet shorter with a tail growing out of their backsides. We need them to stay this way so that they can help us build the security perimeter. Or at least, the southern wall. I doubt that the humans will try to go around it. Unless they show up with shermans or… whatever tank our government uses these days, but I digress. My decision to move them into the school was to make sure that they're not infected, release them if they are, and to learn of their skillsets. Once we understand what they're capable of, we can put them to work on the wall, and when we know that it's secure, we can infect them, and they can join us."

"Was that response supposed to vindicate you?" Kaylee demanded. "How would you feel about humans dragging us all away and putting us into some forced labor, only to meet an untimely demise when we were done?? How is what you're doing to them any better than what they'd do to us?"

Her adamance was frustrating him. "They're a risk, Kaylee!" he exclaimed. "Having humans here means risking leaks, it means risking interference… they want to stop us, and they will do anything they can to make it happen! Controlling them in this way is the only way to keep our people safe!"

"Somewhere in another part of the world, a human just said that exact thing about us," the vixen replied. "Keep them from leaving if you feel its necessary but don't force them into labor camps like some sort of movie villain! What's wrong with you??" She groaned in disgust, turning her head as if to shake off the bad taste in her mouth. "Don't forcibly turn them, don't lock them away and don't force them to labor! Ask them. If they want to help, let them help, but if they don't, just leave them alone!"

Mayor Baskin leaned back in his chair with a creak, resting his arms on the armrests as his hands hung limply from his wrists. He looked at Dr. Coren and Dr. Venner for help, his gaze showing how exhausted he'd been from the day's activities. "Her perspective is righteous," he said, "but it's myopic. You understand, don't you?"

Alan averted his eyes, not wanting to defend the humans, despite his disagreement. "We've found that humans are… more agreeable than our people give them credit," Heidi responded. "But… this topic, though important, is not the reason for our visit."

The mayor cleared his throat and moved in his seat, his position suddenly felt uncomfortable, though he wasn't sure why. "Yes, you… wanted to speak to me about what happened this morning, right," he said. "So, it was very early in the morning when I was woken up by a call. Apparently around four in the morning, a man named Corporal Thesson pulled in with a small group of national guard members. He wasn't hostile, but… his goal was clear. Friendly was to be designated as a quarantine zone for the viral outbreak, and as mayor it was my duty to sign paperwork and facilitate their entry into town."

He fished through the drawer of his desk, producing a document that he slid slowly across the surface for the three foxes to read. "It doesn't appear to be too terribly aggressive, says nothing of cages or experimentation or anything of that nature, but… well…" the mayor continued. "The way they treated me from the very moment that we met was so off-putting that I hardly even read it."

The document was a single sheet of paper, the text centered on the page, taking up the vast majority of the space in a standard eleven-point font. At the top was an official looking seal and the words "Order from the office of the Governor General." Beneath the header, the document made the simple proclamation that Friendly Manitoba, and its surrounding areas, would be designated a "Class A Quarantine Zone," and that "newly infected individuals" would be brought in to "form a community."

"What'd they do that was so off-putting?" Alan asked as he read the document. "Any idea what a Class A Quarantine Zone means?"

"They came into my office in hazmat suits, grabbed me around the neck and forced my mouth open, then swabbed it with a cotton tip. It turned pink, then the let me go, declaring that I was infected," the mayor explained, still seeming perturbed by the incident. He held up his hand, showing that fur covered it completely, with four of his fingers having claws. "I mean if they wanted to know if I was infected all they had to do was look with their eyes… or even just ask me, ya know?" He groaned audibly and shifted in his seat once more. Was the desk getting closer? Was he shrinking in real time? "After that, the corporal came in, wearing the same ridiculous getup that his men had been wearing. He sat down and we tried to talk this out, but by then I was so worked up I simply told him to get out."

Kaylee looked at her parents, waiting for their eyes to meet hers before she spoke. "Hazmat… like the ugly yellow things we have in the quarantine area in the lab?" she asked. "You used to scare the hell out of me with those things."

"Yes, like that," Heidi nodded. "And… I'm sorry I did that. That was… fairly early on. I'm surprised you remember it!"

"It's one of the few things I remember," Kaylee nodded. "That and… the first time you said my name."

The mayor tilted his head curiously, cupping his fingers together, finding them difficult to move. “How old are you, anyway? How long has this project been going on?”

“I’m an adult,” the vixen insisted. “Is it even relevant to-“

“Kaylee is about fourteen months old,” Heidi interrupted. “The project planning phase began about two years ago, but we didn’t acquire her until last March. She was a newborn kit at the Friendly Fur Farm just outside of town. We chose her because she was a little smaller than the rest, and the farm thought that she might wind up being a runt. Luckily it seems that they were wrong.”

“Moom…” the vixen whined, splaying back her ears in embarrassment. “I’m an adult. Don’t think that my age in human years means anything. I wouldn’t be sitting here now discussing world affairs and virology with you if I was just some idiot child.”

It was obvious what she was doing, talking herself up so that the former humans wouldn’t think of her as a child. Obviously, Alan and Heidi had learned this much about her by now. Foxes aged differently than humans. She’d reached sexual maturity at nine months and experienced her first heat at twelve months. By all measure, she was a young woman of twenty in comparable human growth and intelligence. It was something of a bother to her for humans to discover her actual age, given the way the Rannie’s had acted.

“I’m… I wasn’t about to question that,” the mayor responded. “I was simply curious how long this information has been… in the wild.”

“A few months at best,” Dr. Venner responded. “It didn’t take them long to screw this up, and the only reason we had a leak here was because they tried to shut us down and terminate my daughter.”

Alan had been reading the document while they talked, noting that it’d been signed by Governor General Ethan Boucher. “So… the Governor General is already making calls on this,” he said, tapping the signature line on the order. “It doesn’t say anything about the details of their mission, though. Did the corporal say this was some sort of olive branch?”

The mayor shook his head. “No, he said that this was a seizure of the town from my governance,” he explained. “I would have advisory powers only, and the military would be dictating resource allocation and ‘other responsibilities.’ Whatever that means. I pressed him on it, but he wouldn’t explain. So… I kicked him out.”

“How’d you get them to leave?” Dr. Coren wondered. “Did they have any words? Obviously, your urgency this morning to build the walls and set up defenses suggests that you’re expecting hostility. We at the lab are working on… well… trying to find a way to slow or stop the contagion. The humans have already said that they weren’t going to interfere in any aggressive way. I just find it… interesting… that they’d suddenly change their minds like this.”

“I called up the Marshall and got the whole police force out here,” he said. “They ordered em to stand down, but they wouldn’t do it. They’ve all been through the… euphoria, I think the lady on TV called it? They knew what was happening based on the reports we’d seen from Russia, and they weren’t about to just let us get ran over like that. So, it was about five of the corporal’s men versus about nineteen of ours. He turned tail and said he’d be back with more people. I got our boys in blue to… painfully slowly… escort them out of town. It made for quite the traffic jam. They got about as far as Teulon before they ran into an actual military quarantine line. Apparently, they’ve roped us off from lake Manitoba to lake Winnipeg, forcing us into a sort of no mans land peninsula. We tried to scout it out but there were a lot of soldiers and sent our boys back home.”

Alan twisted his head, thinking about the area. “That’s… a huge swath of land,” he said in surprise. “They’re really cutting us off in an area that large? How do they even have the manpower for something like that?”

“Boys said it was a chain-link fence with razor wire. About two meters high. Looked haphazard. They probably spun it out with one of those fence laying tractors you can buy at the farm supply place down in Riverdale, then had their soldiers come back in with the wire,” he replied. “Wouldn’t be hard at all to break through, but I have a feeling that was just going to be our outer perimeter. They came with a semi loaded down with iron. They were planning on building something big to keep us in.”

Heidi was skeptical. “It would take months, years even… to build a fence like that. That’s a very large swath of land. You sure they didn’t just fence it off to make it *seem* like it stretched that far?”

“I agree,” Alan replied. “It’s posturing. They’ll try to put a tighter perimeter around the town than that. That’s just a deterrence. They likely have long stretches of fence along every major road with gaps in between. Wouldn’t be surprised if there’s still some humans living inside it, too. There’s no way they’ve moved that fast.”

The mayor shook his head with a sigh. “It doesn’t really matter, ya know?” he asked. “We’re doin’ the same thing. Buildin’ a fence along our major roads and stationing people along them. We’ve also put some of our old guard up by the train depot, just in case they come in that way. We gotta hold our own here. They wanna send foxes up here, fine. We’ll take em with open arms, but they don’t need to be controlling the place.” He looked to the far wall, rising to his feet as he noticed that one of the paintings was slightly crooked. “You shoulda seen the way they treated me,” he said as he straightened it, then stepped back to observe. “Shoved me up against this wall, pried my mouth open like an animal… I didn’t even look different than them! It… it really stuck with me. Just because I’m infected, I’m no longer worthy of being treated with dignity to them… we’ll see about that.” Returning to his seat, he tilted his head at the diminutive tod. “Is your lab secure?” he asked. “We don’t need them tryin ta hit you.”

“They said they’d leave us alone,” Kaylee responded, interrupting her father before the words could leave his maw. “We’re researching a cure, and they want it. They’re supposed to let us do our own thing.”

Alan stared at her a moment, his ears splayed back as he scolded her with his eyes. “We have about seven guards with high powered tranq’ rifles, a secured front entrance and three-point guard tower system,” he explained. “We also have a seventy-two-hour generator that can be increased by shutting down the empty portions of the facillity, which his most of it, a metal gate lock-down system, satellite internet backup, internal well-based water reserves, and infared security cameras,” he bragged. “We’re light on staff, but considering the nature of our work, the lab is a stronghold.”

Mayor Baskin raised his brows, nodding in surprise. “Wow…” he said, “I knew you’d bring a lot of life to this town with those fifteen-hundred employees of yours, but I didn’t know you’d bring that kind of setup. Can we use that as a refuge if shit hits the fan here?”

The tod shook his head. “Sorry, but no,” he replied. “We need to keep the lab lean. We also have humans there that are… for lack of a better word… trapped. They can’t really leave at this point, and we don’t wat to turn them because they’re useful. Bringing in more foxes would probably cause strife. The place is already pretty tense in that regard.”

Sean cleared his throat, shifting his position in his seat once more. It was as if he could feel his body changing as they spoke. “So, your lab will act as the northwestern corner, if that’s alright with you,” he said. “I can make sure that you have communications with the police force here in town so that we ca be aware of any movement that you see. Southwest, probably the Rannie farm. There’s a cell tower out there we need to protect, and the roof’a that barn can probably give ya a good vantage,” he explained. “That just leaves the east side and we-“

“My home’s on the north eastern side,” Alan interrupted. “Gated community, it runs all the way to the lake.”

The mayor nodded, taking notes as he looked down at a map on his tablet. “Good, good… that’ll help us out. Any natural or existing barriers like that can be strengthened. We’ll essentially funnel the northern passage into a single corridor between the lab and the estates. With Lake Winnipeg on our eastern side, we’re fairly well protected, unless they try to invade by boat or something.”

Kaylee found herself hunkering lower and lower in her seat, ultimately resigning herself to smiply lay down. All this talk of defenses and walls reminded her of the old war movies her mother had shown her some months before. She didn’t want this to be a war. Were the humans really so aggressive?

Looking down at her daughter, Heidi’s ears splayed in concern. “You okay, honey?” she asked.

The vixen looked up at her, then gently shook her head. “I just can’t believe we’re doing this,” she said. “Building walls, preparing battlements, making defense plans… it’s like we’re preparing for war.”

“Ms. Venner, they tried to take over the town this morning,” Mayor Baskin replied. “They told us in no uncertain terms that they’re taking over. We are preparing for war. They’re trying to invade and… and god only knows what they’ll do to us if they succeed.”

There was a bit of irony in his fear, as far as Kaylee could see. He’d look at the humans as alien invaders seeking to lock them away, yet that long before the meeting, he’d had humans dragged off to the school to be brought in as slave labor to build these battlements, with their only rewards being forced to join her ranks. “Probably drag us away and use us in some way,” she retorted, the sarcasm in her voice muted just enough to test his self-awareness. Would he see the hypocrisy of his statement?

Without even looking up, he shook his head. “Oh I doubt they’d drag us away,” he said, falling right into her trap. “They’d certainly use us, though. Probably for experimentation. We can regrow limbs once, what about twice? Three times? That sort of thing. The fact is, they want in, and we have to make sure they stay out, whatever the cost.”

Scrunching her nose, she looked up at her mother to see if she’d caught it, sighing as she found that she had not. “I want to see how you’re treating them humans when we’re done here,” the vixen said. “I want to speak to them.”

“Why?” Alan grunted, looking down at her in confusion. “What’s to speak about? They’re humans.”

She sat up in her seat and looked him in the eye. “I want to make sure that we’re not being hypocrites here,” she said. “Dragging them off to camps and forcing them to be our slaves… we’ve already done that in the lab, now we’re doing it here, too? How can we have any moral high ground in all of this if we’re the aggressors?” She shook her head in disgust. “I mean think about it. They’re minding their own business, we come along with a virus and start spreading it, they try to avoid it, so we drag them away, force them to do things for us, and then infect them when we don’t need them anymore? And all this to… what? Keep them from hurting us, right? Have they done anything to us yet? I mean, you were going to kill me, so I certainly have a bias there but… I can’t apply that to every single human I meet. Mr. and Mrs. Rannie were very nice to me. I don’t want to be the monster they fear.”

Mayor Baskin almost seemed to chuckle at her response, knowingly shaking his head. “Kaylee, you have a lot to learn about humanity.”

Chapter 60

Kaylee covered her ears as the four seat ATV roared up to them. “WHY IS IT SO LOUD?!” she shouted. “All these car things are so loud!”

“It’s definitely louder than I’m used to.” Alan said, his ears splayed back. A young man with pointed ears was sitting in the driver seat, staring at the three in surprised amusement as the vehicle idled.

“Guess that means it’s gonna be too loud for me too at some point, huh?” he asked. “Climb on in folks, I’ll take you to the school.”

The vixen was hesitant, watching as her parents jumped in. The noise made her want to recoil. It stirred some deep undefined fear within her.

“Don’t worry, we won’t be out long.” the driver smiled. “Beautiful fur by the way, ladies.”

Jumping into the seat, Kaylee squatted down, finding herself being pushed backward as the vehicle began to move. “T... thanks...?” she said, raising a brow at what she considered to be a strange compliment. “Why do they keep doing that?” she asked, looking to her mother. “The creepy cop guy touched my tail without asking, and now this! Why?”

“They’re trying to compliment you and I don’t think they know how,” Heidi replied, nuzzling her daughter comfortingly. “Try not to think too much about it. They’re still very new.”

“Well, it’s creepy,” she insisted.

The ride wasn’t far, but it did allow the foxes to get a tour of the town in its current state, all be it at the cost of their eardrums. People were mulling about, with many of them gathering supplies, loading them into their cars or just carrying them down the street. They didn’t seem stressed or worried, if anything, they seemed complacent. Kaylee couldn’t help but feel that something was wrong about the whole thing, but with the speed that they were traveling, her observations were wiped away just as quickly as they’d formed.

The square quickly disappeared, leaving behind the bulk of the traffic, and giving way to single family homes. They were well kept, with one or two cars parked in front, and large mature trees over hanging the road. As they passed slowly through the neighborhood, on several occasions, the vixen spotted infected individuals standing outside with their pets, talking to one another, presumably, about what to do with them as their changes progressed. She had to

admit it was something she hadn't considered. But then, hadn't the Rannie's owned a dog? She could've sworn she'd seen one there, but it never so much as even looked at her.

After a few blocks of small, neatly maintained homes, the street gave way to what seemed like another commercial district. Not old and close knit like the square, but modern, with tall boxy structures, highlighted by an old red brick church, and a long, beige brick structure with "Friendly School" written on it's windowless side. The ATV slowly rolled to a stop, the noisy engine sputtering into an idle as the group of foxes jumped from their seats. "Thank you for the lift," Alan said, "Do we need to call you when we're done or-"

"Look for Marcus inside, he'll take ya back when ya need it. Have a pleasant day!" the man interrupted, the ATV roaring once more as it disappeared back toward the center of town, leaving the three of them with no time to respond.

"What a weirdo…" Kaylee sighed, looking the structure over curiously. It had no windows along this wall, and it seemed to be quite tall. Was this perhaps the gymnasium? "So, we just… go inside?"

"Do we really need to?" Heidi asked, facing the building behind them. "I mean, my apartments right there. We could just go in there, get a few of my notes, then head back to the lab. We don't really need to speak to the humans, do we?"

Kaylee furrowed her brow at her mother, tilting her head. "Why not…? Mom, I don't want to be on the wrong side of this."

"Survival isn't the wrong side," Alan corrected her sharply. "Those humans are needed to build the wall. We can't have the just running off or… or staging some kind of revolt or siding with the guard when they come back! We need them for their labor, and then they can join us. It's the only way that we can be sure to trust them."

The vixen looked between her parents critically, gathering only a sympathetic nod from her mother. "You… really think that way…" she muttered. "It doesn't have to be like this! We can co-exist! We can show the guard that we can get along! Maybe if they-"

"No, honey," Heidi interrupted. "That's not how this works. I know you called for co-existence in your video, and I think at this point that's the right thing to do, but that doesn't work in a situation like this."

"It works in the lab," Kaylee objected angrily, "why can't it work here?"

"Because if they try to leave the lab, we'll stop them, and turn them," Alan replied simply. "Out here that would be much more difficult. There's too much open space. They have to be confined and turned when their labors no longer needed."

The vixen shook her head, splaying her ears in frustration. “I just- we shouldn’t have to- we’re not supposed to be the…”

Heidi walked forward and embraced her, feeling the vixen tense up in her arms. “I know how you feel,” she said, holding her despite the obvious signs that she wanted her space. “We don’t want to be on the wrong side of this, but at the end of the day, we have to survive. That’s the important thing. Our species has to survive.”

The vixen began to gecker in frustration, wiggling free of her mother’s grasp before backing several steps away. “*Why* does it have to survive?” she challenged. “I don’t wanna die, I wanna live like a human! But that’s not gonna happen! We have a virus that we’re spreading to *them*, making them defend themselves against *u*s. We have to survive?? Ya know, maybe I’ve been wrong about this whole thing! Maybe we shouldn’t survive!” She motioned her hand aggressively toward the school as her parents stood and watched. “If this is what we’re gonna do to people?? How are we any better than they are? If this is how we survive then maybe we shouldn’t.”

Alan shrugged, turning in place to look around him. “Okay, so we condemn all these people to death then, right?” he asked. “We just give up and throw our hands up, surrender to the humans and let them experiment on us. “We let them cut off our limbs and skin us repeatedly… on and on, testing us and discarding us until they either genocide our entire species, or find a way to make us viable as pets or slaves or soldiers…. Is that what we do??” He turned to her angrily, his ears splayed back as he pointed his finger sternly in her face. “You can sit here and play good samaritan all you want, Kaylee, but the fact is, the genie’s out of the bottle on this and we can’t put it back in! Gears are turning, wheels are rolling… whatever expression you want to use. It’s not just about *you* anymore. Even if you don’t want to do the things that you’re seeing here, and you’d rather lay down your life… you can’t tell the rets of these people that they don’t have the right to fight!”

Stepping back in surprise, the vixen splayed her ears. “I… didn’t mean it that way,” she said. “I’m not saying we just lay down and die!”

“Then what’re you saying??” he demanded. “Because that’s sure as hell what I heard come out of your mouth. You think we should just give in because you don’t like the way we treat humans? You’re not the only person involved here, and even if you care so much about them? There’s other people that don’t. We have to protect *ourselves.* We always come first in our own lives and if you can’t see that?? Then maybe we’ve overestimated just how intelligent you are.”

Heidi stepped between them, tilting her head at him critically. “Alan…” she scolded sadly. “She’s our daughter! Yes, she’s inexperienced, she’s naïve but doesn’t mean that you need to drive it into her skull like that! She’s trying! She sees an injustice and she wants to fix it! She doesn’t understand that it can’t be any other way!”

At least he called me a person, Kaylee thought to herself. *Now mom's talking about me like I'm a child, dad's calling me stupid… all because I don't want to treat humans like they claim they wanna treat us*. She sighed and turned around, starting to walk away, hopping onto a bench on the sidewalk as the pair continued to argue in the street. In her eyes, the mayor had been overzealous. It'd been nearly a week since her escape. The humans she'd met so far had all frankly seemed… pretty reasonable, if not a bit strange. Anne was kind and compassionate, Jaren analytical and calm, Mr. and Mrs. Rannie loving and thoughtful… the only person she'd met as a human that she'd really disliked was Dr. Coren, and Dr. Shaw. They weren't even arguing over the merits of her perspective, they were simply arguing about her ability to make decisions.

After several more minutes, she jumped off the bench, then rose to her feet. "Hey," she said casually, throwing up her hands. "you wanna stand here and argue, that's up to you, but if we're not gonna do anything useful? I'd like to go home."

Heidi turned around, motioning to the building behind her. "My apartment's right there," she said. "While we're here, we should probably go inside. I've got some notes in there that might be useful."

"Well then let's do that, instead of you two standing in the middle of the street arguing about how stupid I am," the vixen complained. "I get it, I was educated on books and movies, studies, documentaries… I'm a knowledge sponge that lacks real world experience. You wanna discount everything I've done and everything I am, then I guess go right ahead, but… I dunno… you could at least *pretend* to give a shit about someone other than yourselves."

Alan gave Heidi a look, splaying his ears in guilt before returning his gaze to his daughter. "I… I'm not trying to call you stupid, Kaylee," he said sympathetically, "I'm just saying that-"

"No, no I understand!" she interrupted, walking toward the building. "You don't need to keep condescending to me about it. You've made up your mind about the humans and that's the way it has to be."

Watching her walk to the building, Dr. Venner turned her gaze. "Don't worry," she said. "She'll learn the hard way just how cruel humans can be. As bad as it might look from the outside, the mayor made the right call."

"Part of me hopes you're wrong, honey." Alan replied, walking with the vixen toward the building. "Really hope you're wrong."

Chapter 61

Kaylee walked slowly through the small, 1 bedroom apartment, being careful to step over stacks of books and scattered papers. It wasn't at all like the apartment she'd pictured for her mother. "This is *your* apartment, mom?" she asked. "You… live here alone?"

"I told you it'd be like this." Heidi replied with a gentle laugh, as she locked the door behind them. "Your concept of the quiet, intelligent, nerdy woman is very… pop culture."

There she goes again, the vixen thought to herself as she wandered into the kitchen. She took a sniff of the air, her ears splaying back as she wrinkled her nose. There was a stench emanating from the dirty, molding dishes that rose like a haphazard mountain from the sink. "Do you… are you here every night?"

The blond-haired vixen jumped up onto her couch, laying down on it like a feral as she watched her daughter wander the room. "I used to," she said. "But I was really only here for dinner, breakfast, and sleep. Other than that, I was at the lab."

Alan walked to the couch and tilted his head at her, raising a brow. "This is where we are now? Laying around like animals?"

"We've done it before. What's the matter?" she smirked. "Don't like it?" She rolled over onto her back with her legs in the air, spreading them slightly. "Maybe this is a better position for you then, hmm?"

"H... Heidi…" he scolded, blushing as he looked away. "Stop. We... we're not here for that."

"Oh, come on, you don't wanna do it in my bed? Just once? It's *really* soft."

Kaylee was listening, confused by their sudden human-like interaction. It seemed to happen to all of the former humans. They'd be staunchly… fox minded, then have bouts of behavior like this that simply made no sense. "Mom!" she scolded from the kitchen. "Can you keep those… instincts under control please? We're not here for that. A... are we?"

The vixen rolled over, returning to her position on her belly. "No. Of course not," she said. "I've not been a fox long enough to experience… heat, and… I don't know how it'll make me… how I'll handle it."

Kaylee explored some more, opening her mother's refrigerator as she sniffed around, still finding molding and rotting foods. "Well, you remember mine," she said. "It was… I mean… pretty recent."

“I… didn’t know that she’d been through that.” The tod said, staring awkwardly at Heidi before joining her on the couch.

The vixen nuzzled him, then returned to following Kaylee with her eyes. “I told you she was sexually mature.” she said. “How did you think I was able to determine that?”

He sighed. “At the time I saw blood tests and... ovulation data, but I didn’t think about-”

“Can you guys not talk about this, please?” the vixen interrupted. “You’re over there talking about my body like it’s something to study. You don’t hear me talking about your cock, Alan.”

“I... buh...” he stammered, catching himself with a sigh. “No… no you’re right.” he nodded. “That was… wrong of me.”

“If I’m honest, I think that we’re a bit more open as a species than humans.” Heidi replied. “I’ve heard the other foxes talking about things like this. I just don’t know that humans would be so casual about it.”

Kaylee chuckled as she pulled a pair of beers from the fridge, closing it with her hip. “You can’t base anything normal for our kind on what Carmen does or says.” she said. “Want a beer?”

“No, and you shouldn’t have one either.” Heidi objected emphatically. “Put them back. We’re too small for something like that. We’ll wind up getting drunk and it’ll get in the way.”

Alan smirked. “Let her taste it,” he said. “See what she thinks.”

The vixen, smiling proudly like she’d won some sort of prize, twisted the top off of the beer, immediately taking a whiff and pulling away. “Is it… spoiled??” she asked with a displeased grunt.

“Not likely.” Alan said, still smiling as he watched her. “Take a sip, see what you think.”

Slowly, she brought it to her maw, pouring a small amount of the liquid into her mouth. It’d only barely touched her tongue before she gasped and spit it out impulsively on the floor. “EUGH!” she gasped. “What is- who would drink- What in the world?!” she asked, staring at the pair of foxes on the couch. Alan started to laugh heartily, closing his eyes as he pounded his fist into the cushion. Heidi slowly started to join in, leaving the vixen holding the beer, feeling humiliated and confused. “Well... I guess… I’ll put this away then.” she said. “Humans have weird tastes…”

Dr. Coren looked at Heidi as Kaylee put the unopened beer away, then poured the other into the sink. “Light beer?” he chuckled. “I always thought of you more as a wine drinker.”

“Wine?” she asked. “Why?”

He chuckled, nuzzling her before staring warmly into her eyes with a smile. “I dunno...” he said flirtatiously. “You just seem… I could picture you, ya know... Curled up on this couch with a book, white wine…”

“Now who’s the one thinking of pop culture?” Kaylee complained. “So, what’re we doing here?” she asked, seeming as if she’d grown bored. “Is there something we need?”

Heidi nodded. “I wanted to get some of my notes, and my books.” she said. “Just… something to review. I didn’t keep every idea and concept at work. I usually wrote things down as they came to me when I was here.”

“Oh, well that’s good right?” the vixen asked, her voice muffling as she wandered into the hall, then into her mother’s bedroom. She asked another question, but her voice was too muffled to understand.

Heidi sat up on the couch and leaned out slightly, her ears cupping forward as she tried to focus. “What was that honey?”

The vixen returned to the doorway holding an exotically shaped toy, a dildo in purple, mixed with pink and blue swirls. It had provocative nodes, bumps and ridges along its length, resembling a fantasy creature’s phallus far more than any humans. “I said… you really should put your toys away.” she said, waving it from side to side with a smirk. “You never know when you might have guests over.”

She was embarrassed to admit that she could tell that it’d been used, and that it hadn’t been cleaned before being left on the bedside table, either. In fact, if she was honest, the whole room smelled of her mother. In a way, it disgusted her, knowing why it was as strong a scent as it was, but at the same time, there was an odd sense of comfort for her. A familiar scent that she didn’t get to smell anymore. Heidi’s scent was… different now.

Returning to the room, she jumped onto the bed, laying down on the soft duvet as she thought about the day she’d escaped the lab. So much had happened since then, but… it’d barely been a week. “Hey mom…” she said weakly, looking back at the doorway. “Were you… really gonna let them put me down and harvest me?”

Heidi couldn’t understand her, asking her to repeat it, but that’d kind of been the point. Somehow, she already knew her answer. The box in her hands, filled with her personal effects, a guard and the director escorting her down the hall… it was as plain as day. She was leaving. “Nothing.” she responded quietly.

It was a few minutes before Heidi jumped off the couch, giving Alan a silent glance to stay so that she could talk to her daughter in private. He nodded, then rolled over, opting to take a nap on the soft, comfortable sofa.

Entering the room, the vixen stood in the doorway, looking at Kaylee, who simply stared back silently from the bed. Closing her eyes, she gently pushed the door closed and walked to the edge of the bed. “Mind if I join you?” she asked. “It’s soft, isn’t it?”

“Mmmm…” the vixen squeaked, seeming uninterested in human-like sounds for the moment. She didn’t bother to move as her mother leapt up beside her. She just lay there, watching her mother explore the soft bedding on all fours like a curious animal.

“This bed would be fun for pouncing, huh?” she asked, her tail wagging as she looked back at the vixen. “When was the last time you pounced on something?”

Again, the vixen responded with a vulpine squeak, rather than speaking to her mother. Her eyes weren’t even trained on her anymore. She was just… staring off at nothing in particular, looking at the blurry afternoon shadow of the pair against the far wall. They were just two… animals.

“Yea, I forgot.” Heidi continued with a playful smile. “You don’t pounce anymore.” she said. “I haven’t seen you play like that since you were a kit.” She jumped a little, hopping, then putting her hands down first, then did so again, a larger hop. “Don’t you wanna try it again?”

“Rrrr….” the vixen complained, still refusing to speak. This wasn’t what she wanted at all.

Heidi pounced once more, chuckling to herself. “This is fun!” she said. “Come on, give it a try!”

“Raaaaahh!” Kaylee finally complained opening her mouth at her, then buried her nose in her tail.

Dr. Venner exhaled slowly through her nose, walking beside the vixen on all fours, then laying down beside her. “You had something to say, didn’t you…?” she asked as she nuzzled her own tail. She didn’t think it’d do any good to nuzzle her daughter. It was a sort of... gesture.

Her eyes finally trained on her mother, Kaylee inhaled, taking in the human scent from the duvet. In time, that scent would fade. It’d only been six days since the human had been there, sleeping in this bed, wearing these clothes… She stared at the vixen beside her, not the same mind, not the same body, only the memories and experiences remained. Her very genetic code had been erased. Her personality, all of it. The human, Dr. Heidi Venner, was dead. She’d killed her with a bite.

She looked away for a moment, exhaling sharply through her nose as she cursed herself for what she'd done. Regardless of what humans were doing or were rumored to be doing… regardless of how happy this vixen beside her would argue that she was, it was still forced upon her. The notes she'd read of Heidi's thoughts and perspectives in the early hours of her transformation resonated inside her head. This embrace was simply mental conditioning. Stockholm Syndrome? She wasn't sure if she was using the term correctly.

If she asked again, would she get a true answer? Her mother's real perspective on what'd happened that day? Or would she get a whitewashed, re-conditioned, empathetic answer about love and righteous fury?

"Were you really going to leave us, that day?" she asked finally, looking back at her as she tried to take in more of the human's scent from the bed. Somehow in her mind it felt like she'd get a more genuine answer if she could smell her mother's scent. "You had a box of your stuff… you left the room without even saying goodbye to us. Were you really just gonna leave?"

Heidi sighed through her nose. She thought that was what she'd heard from the other room. "While you and Swirl were planning your escape, I was in my office with Dr. Coren. Even though my door was closed, everyone in the building could hear me. I was screaming at him. 'How can you create sapient life, then exterminate it for budgetary reasons?' ... or something to that effect. The fact that you'd heard it, that you knew what he was saying… what the lab was planning… not only to take me away from you and… you away from me, but to end your lives! I'd only known you both for a short period of time, just over a year, and just *under* a year for Swirl. but… in that time I'd seen you grow and change. You went from a pouncing and yipping little kit to a speaking, reading, question asking young woman with an eternal sense of curiosity. You remember those late nights where we all sat and watched movie after movie after movie? When I read you books? The scientific studies, the documentaries… you were both so much more than just specimens and experiments to me. You were my children, and he was taking you away from me… because of money."

She repositioned herself so that she could more easily face her daughter. "I don't want you to blame Alan for this. especially in light of Dr. Klassen's actions. He tried his best, he really did! I was… of sorts… preaching to the choir when I was yelling at him. From the standpoint of the human world, his hands were tied. You were a specimen and that project had been terminated. They had to cover their tracks.

"That security guard that shot at you, Kyle? He was there to escort me off the premises. The company wasn't going to allow me to see you again. That's why I'd left the room without saying anything. I'd have broken the rules. But… Alan had agreed to give me a moment to say my final goodbyes. We were walking down the hall and I was trying to hold in my tears. I didn't want you to see my cry because I knew it'd just make it more difficult for you. And… that's when we heard the coatrack fall over."

Kaylee lifted her head and tilted it slightly, her ears splaying back slightly in contempt. “In short, yes. You were going to leave us. You were going to let them put us down, and you lied to us to try to lure us back into our cells.”

The vixen whined, closing her eyes tightly at the gentle, yet still biting words. She took a deep breath to calm herself, being met only by her own scent. The scent of a human that no longer existed. In a way it was poetic to find herself like this. Infected by a virus of her own creation, smelling the remains of what she used to be. Being at home made her wish for normalcy. The world was upside down now. It was forever changed, and despite the lack of true blame or concrete finger pointing… it was her mistake that’ caused it all. Her notes had been used to spread the infection all aross the globe. Her invention had created all of this. It wasn’t just that, either. She’d allowed it to propagate to herself and to others by reaching out to a vixen tha’d been told a terrible lie. As she opened her eyes again, she saw her daughter before her, those amber eyes, just like hers now, staring into her very being, as if to reinforce all the self-hating reality that burned just beneath the surface of her own plagued mind.

“Yes…” she said quietly. “That’s… that’s exactly the truth, and… I don’t deserve any sympathy or forgiveness for it, either.” She lay there, waiting for harsh words, screaming, maybe even biting. Anything that she got for this, she most certainly felt that she deserved, but when nothing came, she slowly sat up. “Ya know, when I saw you there, wearing that coat… I realized just how… cruel all of this was,” she whined. “You were trying to be human! You wanted it so desperately that you risked your safety and your life to get that coat. Your own clothes… that you still wear now. You weren’t just some specimen, you were a person, with as much of an identity as anyone else in that room.”

“And yet you lied, anyway.” Kaylee continued. “You saw us for what we were, and you lied anyway.”

Heidi nodded guiltily. “I did,” she said. “I lied and… I can sit here and make excuses about the exit door, and the risk of escape or anything like that, but… it wouldn’t change anything. The fact is, yes. I was going to say goodbye to you both outside of your cells, then leave you to die. And… and when I had the chance to tell you to run… I lied to you and told you to stay.” She looked away from her again. “Some mother I am, huh?”

Her self-degrading comment made Kaylee’s blood boil. She wanted to lash out at her. ‘Some mother I am.’ … The very *idea* that she had the right to judge herself for this was beyond insulting. She didn’t get to evoke this trite plea for sympathy and lenience, not after what she’d done! She felt her teeth clenching in her maw as she tried to prevent an outburst.

She lay there a moment more, then stood up on all fours on the bed. “Come on…” she said distantly as she jumped off, then took to her feet. “Let’s get your notes. Maybe some of these clothes too. Then we can get back to the lab.”

Chapter 62

“They still at it?” A young, dark-skinned man with a shiny shaved head asked. He was wearing army fatigues, but walking in his socks. He sat down beside his colleague, handing him a paper cup filled with steaming black coffee. They were alone in a hotel room, seemingly having been repurposed into a military communications center. The small television had been joined by many others pulled from nearby rooms, with wires hastily drawn into a hole in the ceiling. “Better drink it while it’s warm. This might be the last hot cup on earth.”

“Heh... yea... They’re still at it,” his colleague replied. The man was slightly younger, wearing the same fatigues, with light brown hair and the scruffy beard of a man who hadn’t shaved for a week straight. Nodding as he drank from the mug, he pointed at one of the monitors, showing the foxes in Friendly working well into the night. They seemed to be using the headlights of cars, tractors, ATVs, as well as some construction generators with lights mounted atop high poles to accomplish their goal. “Ngh... good thing I like it hot and black...”

“Like your men?” the first man asked, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

“Cute...” the other man chuckled. “But you and I would never get along.”

The soldier nodded with a scoff. “You got that right.” he smirked. “I could never deal with all that back hair’a yours. You’d probably make me shave it for ya, too.”

“Yea, well, if that virus gets to us we’ll both have way more back hair than I do now.” he said. “They’ve been at it all day, and now half the night. Building a wall of scrap metal and junk. We need to bring the drone in soon to recharge.”

The dark skinned man leaned back in his chair, propping his feet up on the folding table, then took a sip of his coffee. “You really think that virus does what they say it does? Turns people into little furballs? I don’t even see how that’s possible, Chris.”

“You serious?” Chris asked. “Look at em! In the last twelve hours they’ve all visibly changed. They’re smaller than they were before, some of them are having trouble keeping their clothes on.” He placed his coffee down on the table then pressed a button on a joystick, instructing the drone to return to its origin coordinates. “My brother’s out there on Texada. He said they’re housing these people while they change, studyin’ em, ya know? First, they have a laughing fit, then they grow a little fur and get real small. Their bodies reshape themselves, faces push out… before you know it they’re tiny little fox people, just like that video they released with that Kaylee girl telling us to stop fighting.” He looked up after grabbing his cup again. “A far cry from the tall, dark and handsome beside me, right Jerome?”

“Tch.. fuck you.” Jerome chuckled. “Hey so what’re they doin to em out there in Texada anyway? Did he say?”

Chris shrugged. “Same thing we’re doin I guess.” he said. “Rounding them up, keeping them close… not the genocide that girl seemed so worried about.”

Jerome nodded heartily. “They really think we’re gonna do that to em? Round em up and exterminate them like vermin? These people are our families! We wanna cure em! Not kill em!”

Chris shook his head. “Well, you heard what the general said. Killing is a viable alternative, and he expects us to follow that order if it comes to it.”

“Yea, well… let’s hope it doesn’t come to it, then.” Jerome replied.

Chris finished his coffee, gasping in refreshment as he placed the empty cup down on the table, then leaned back to watch the drone fly. “Ya know, what I can’t figure out is how it spread so *fast.* That girl on the video said that she was the start of it all. What’d she call herself?”

“The progenitor.” Jarome replied.

“Yea, there it is,” Chris said, pointing a finger at an invisible word above them both. “By the time we even knew this was happening, the shit was all over the world! I mean, what’d she do? Teleport all across the globe licking doorknobs and spitting in drinks? It doesn’t make sense.”

Jarome shook his head. “Intentional? Biological attack? Maybe she’s not the only one.”

“The hell kinda biological attack turns people into foxes?” Chris asked. “Nah this’s gotta be some kinda lab leak, but like… I just don’t get how it got everywhere.”

“People travel, Gomez.” an older man said as he walked into the room unannounced. The pair of young men jumped to their feet, but he lifted his hand. “Sit down... It’s too late in the evening for that rank-and-file bullshit.” He grabbed a chair behind them both, leaning in so that he could see the screens. “They still at it out there?”

“Yes sir, Cpl. Thesson, sir.” Chris replied, nodding at one of the screens, showing the fading view of the drone’s rear camera. “All day and all night, I guess.”

The corporal leaned back. “Well, I guess they’re on a bit of a time limit with that farm equipment, huh? Can you imagine trying to work with machinery, all the while getting shorter and shorter? It’s gotta be a nightmare.”

“They’re resilient. I’ll give em that.” Jarome replied. “S... sir.”

“Yea, well they’re building their own prison.” Cpl. Thesson responded. “Just got orders from my higher ups. As soon as they’re done with the wall, we move in, and take the town. We got reinforcements arriving in the morning.”

“N... not to... Speak out of turn sir but-” Jarome started.

“Speak up Pvt. Barnes. By all means. Speak your mind. I’m exhausted from this rank and file shit today. Let’s just be humans for now.”

Jerome nodded. “Yes sir. I... I mean... Larry...” he sighed and shook his head.” You’re throwin’ me off man.”

Cpl. Thesson laughed. “Just relax Jerome. I might get the shit for this, but I’m just done with it tonight. Tell me what’s on your mind.”

“I just mean… is it right for us to do this, sir? Just… throw them into a camp?” the private asked. “I mean, I know they’re contagious, but these are friends and family, ya know?”

“You know anyone from Friendly?” Larry asked, taking a sip of his own coffee. “I thought you said you were from Calgary.”

Jerome nodded. “I’m from Hanna,” he explained. “It’s a little town a bit smaller than Friendly.” He looked at the screen, nodding to it as he finished off his coffee. “Guess the place just reminds me’a home, ya know? I don’t see these people as a bunch of infected… fox things… they’re people. Just like you and I.”

Cpl. Thesson nodded understandingly. “I get it,” he said, “but what you have to realize is that those ‘*people*’ aren’t what they used to be. They’re animals now. They may not look it yet, but their humanity is gone.” He cleared his throat, leaning back in the chair and crossing his legs. “You two weren’t there, but… when we went to the mayor’s office this morning, the behavior we got out of him was like dealing with a dog.”

Chris turned around in his chair, tilting his head slightly. “I heard from the guys that you pushed him against the wall, forced his mouth open and swabbed it to confirm his infection,” he complained. “I mean, wouldn’t anyone act resentful in a position like that? You treated him like an animal as soon as you walked in the door.”

Larry shook his head, holding up his finger as he finished off his coffee. “It wasn’t just that,” he said, “it was the way he talked to us. He was… irrational. He had this twisted concept of community and had this whole… us and them sort of attitude. Called us *humans* to our faces, said that our kind couldn’t be trusted. It was surreal hearing this man that otherwise looked like anyone else, spouting this alien rhetoric. I almost expected a fox person to burst out of his chest and run around the room like in that movie.”

“Was that Alien? Or AlienS?” Chris asked. “I mean the one with that iconic scene?”

“Pretty sure it was Alien, the first one,” Jerome replied. “Man that shit terrified me as a kid.”

Larry laughed. “That’s not a kids movie,” he said. “Your parents let you watch something like that?”

Jerome shook his head with a chuckle. “They didn’t know,” he said. “Dad was at work and mom was out doin’ the shopping. My little brother was asleep… so I decided to have some fun. Ya know, break a few rules.”

“Well, you break rules in my guard, there’s gonna be repercussions,” Cpl. Thesson replied. “So I’d advise you not to if I’m out doing the shopping.”

Pvt. Barned laughed. “Yes sir, you don’t have to worry about that, sir.”

“S… sir, if I could ask,” Chris started, “What does the order actually say? I mean, objective wise?”

The corporal fished out his phone and loaded the directive, handing it to the private for him to read. “Don’t tell anyone you’ve seen this,” he said. “It’s pretty simple. We take the town, and we hold it till a replacement troop from the military can arrive. Major Baye should be coming in in about a week, so we don’t have to hold it all that long.”

“And how exactly do we hold it?” Jerome asked. “There’s what, five-thousand people in that town? How many reinforcements do we have?”

Larry took a deep breath and nodded. “We’re comin’ in with about two hundred people,” he explained. “It’s a long shot, if I’m honest. We have to count on there being enough of those animals in town that are willing to cooperate. I’m sure a lot of the males will put up a fight, but hopefully most of the females and young ones won’t. Our goal os to just hold the place. We don’t need to do anything to them. All we have to do is go in, secure the courthouse and establish a basic perimeter to make sure that none of them escape. Major Baye will take it from there.”

The privates were both uneasy, looking at one another with wide, concerned eyes. “Corporal, this sounds like a suicide mission to me,” Pvt. Barnes said. “We go in there, we gotta wear bite proof hazmat suits all the time. They’re gonna change more and more and those teeth of theirs are gonna get sharper and sharper. All it takes is one of them to pierce our suit and get their saliva on our skin and we’re done. How’re we gonna let them run free knowing that they can do that to us?”

“Look, we come in, we seize the courthouse, and we tell them… you’re free to do what you want to do, just don’t leave town,” The corporal explained. “That should settle their nerves. No more bullshit, ya know? We’re not tryin’ to throw them in cages unless they get outta line. All we need to do is hold the place until Major Baye gets there.”

Pvt. Gomez threw his arms up. “And what’s Major Baye gonna do?? He’ll face the same problems we will! All it takes is one bite and they’re infected, too!”

Cpl. Thesson shook his head. “No, that won’t be a problem with Major Baye and his troops,” he said. “I can’t tell you why, but it won’t be.”

“They find a vaccine??” Jerome asked.

“I can’t tell you,” Larry repeated. He cleared his throat as he rose from his seat. “Remember, this conversation doesn’t leave this room. Got it?”

“Yes sir Cpl. Thesson, sir.” the pair of privates said, slightly out of sync.

“Good. Now get that drone back, get the battery charged, and get some sleep. If the fence is done tomorrow… we’re making our move. We’ll reconvene at 06:00.”

The pair waited for the corporal to leave, then looked at each other with a sigh. “I swear to god if I wind up with a tail.…” Chris worried.

“Ya know, I don’t guess it’d be too bad,” Jerome replied. “I mean, we’d still be ourselves, right?”

“No man, their minds change!” Chris exclaimed. “They lose who they are! They might remember being human, but they’re not anymore. We get infected, we won’t be ourselves anymore.”

“Well,” Jerome sighed, shrugging his shoulders. “I guess we’ll find out. Tomorrow’s gonna be one hell of a day.”

Chapter 63

“So how was town?” Anne asked, looking over her shoulder at the three foxes in the back seat. They were all curled up, almost as if they were sleeping. “Did it… wear you out?”

“The town’s fortifying for an invasion,” Heidi sighed. “They’re workin ‘round the clock to keep the humans out. Everyone’s trying to smile, but it’s obvious that they’re all on the edges of their seats, so to speak.”

Kaylee had kept a beige and brown flannel that’d hung from the television in Heidi’s room. She kept it close to her, nuzzling it to take in its scent. Somehow it makes her feel better. Despite the fear and the sense of betrayal, that was her mother. Her *real* mother. Even though Heidi was laying right beside her, she missed her.

Anne nodded, glancing back at Kaylee who continued to nuzzle the shirt. “You got some extra clothes, too huh? That’s good. All the foxes at the lab need clothes. Did… anyone in town mention trimming things up? I mean, you guys still don’t wear pants and-”

“Clara can sew.” Kaylee replied. She’d only been low level listening to what the human had to say. It didn’t feel important in that moment. “Maybe we can ask her.”

Anne nodded, slowing the car to pass through the outer gate to the city that’d just been completed, then started down the bumpy dirt road toad the lab. “Did anything useful come from the meeting?” After a long silence from the foxes, she sighed. “That bad huh?”

“They’re locking all the humans up,” Kaylee complained. “Forcing them to build the wall until they’re not needed. Then they’re gonna turn em. It’s cruel.”

Anne glanced over her shoulder at Dr. Coren, who simply stared back at her in silence. “Sounds familiar, honestly,” she replied.

“I’ve… changed my mind on that,” Alan said. “At least for now.”

Kaylee turned sharply to meet his gaze. “On what?” she demanded. “Turning everyone in the lab when you think we don’t need humans anymore?? Ugh... you’re as bad as the mayor.”

The tod sat up with a tired yawn. “Kaylee it has to be this way,” he said. “You can’t have humans just running around and-“

“Don’t argue, you two…” Heidi sighed. “We don’t need to go through all this again.”

While the small group of survivors were making their way back to the lab, far away from them in an enormous facility in Nevada, a different GERcorp research team was dutifully working away. Behind a large glass shield, a robotic arm moved vials from container to container, processing, heating, and mixing solutions that seemed to dance and move within their small cylindrical prisons. A man no older than his mid-thirties, with a neatly trimmed amber beard and a cleanly shaven head, sat behind the machine as he carefully monitored its screens. On his lab coat, the name Serrah was embroidered in the same style of the Venner logo that Kaylee'd so proudly been wearing.

A woman about his age, with long dark braids approached him from behind, gently placing her hand on his shoulder. "Making any progress, Dr. Serrah?" she asked.

He jumped, yelping mutedly before looking up at her with a silent chuckle. "Don't sneak up on me like that, Joy."

"Eh, it's not my problem if you get lost in your work. Unless you wind up getting so lost that you contaminate us like that Venner woman up there in Canada." She grabbed a rolling chair from the station behind them, then sat down with a contented sigh. "And please, call me Dr. Sawyer. You know Dr. Thesson'll give you a talking to if he catches us 'behaving unprofessionally.' she chortled.

He nodded. "Yea, I know…" Clicking a few times with his mouse, the monitor flashed through several different models, finally stopping on a large photo of one of the xenobot machines. "I've been working on an alteration to the cells template." he said. "I wasn't able to find a way to send a termination order to the bot itself. It's almost like it has… code… to not allow that."

"They're unkillable?" Dr. Sawyer asked.

He shook his head. "Nothing's unkillable. It just won't die in that way. At least, not that I've found. I already told corporate. They moved that part of the project to Miller. What I'm working on now is a sort of… plan B."

She made a face at the mention of Miller's name, but didn't respond to the idea beyond it. "So, what's this plan B, then?"

"Different species." he said excitedly. "Look at this! This one works just like the Vulpes virus but it would turn a person into a humanoid wolf. And... and this one over here... A domestic cat. I have a few others, too. Bobcat, mountain lion, even some other species like ringtails, racoons, rabbits... I don't know if it's all viable but-"

"Jesus…" she interrupted. "What the fuck? Our goal is to cure the fox people not introduce more animal people to the world. You're gonna wind up turning earth into that movie that came out a few years ago."

He shook his head. “No, no, listen! This what they’ve asked me to do!” he said in a hushed voice, looking around to see if the cameras could hear them. “They believe that the human military will fall and the virus will spread. So... they’re tasking *me* to make a virus that *we* can use to infect the military pre-emptively so that they’ll always be on *our* side!”

“Maybe you should write down what you just said and read it to yourself,” Joy worried, “because that’s the biggest pile of lunatic supervillain nonsense I’ve ever heard. We’re not in a cartoon! You can’t stop a virus that turns everyone into foxes by turning everyone into other animals! That’s shooting yourself in the foot!”

“Is it…?” a calm and commanding voice asked from the far end of the room. A man in his early 40s who had been previously typing away, had turned his attention to their conversation. His complexion was smooth, almost perfect, his face free of wrinkles or blemishes, save for 2 red dimples where his wire framed glasses rested on either side of his nose. He rose from his seat, then walked over to the pair, standing over them condescendingly as he stared at the results on the screen. “Dr. Sawyer, think about foxes… they have sharp teeth, they have sizeable claws… they might be small, but they can fight like hell, and considering the only way we’ve been able to kill these things is by beheading, we have to fight fire with fire. I think this is likely our most viable option. Do you disagree?”

She was already nodding. “Yes sir, I do.” she said. “Dr. Heinzen, do you realize the impact of something like this? We’re yet to see if the foxes are capable of reproduction, and if they are… how big their litters will be. If we start introducing other fertile animal people into all of this, we’ll put our species at even more risk!”

He sighed, looking around for a moment before turning to his desk and dragging his rolling chair all the way across the room. “Dr. Sawyer, you haven’t seen the testing that I’ve seen,” he explained. “I’m sure with your perspective on nature that… you wouldn’t want to, either. When we shot one of these things in the chest, it did not die. When we dismembered it, it healed, when we vivisected it, it healed. When we destroyed a part of its head with a large caliber bullet… It did not die. The only thing that changed in any of these scenarios is that the creature began to lose its intelligence. With every brain cell that was destroyed, a new one took its place until we were left with nothing more than a rabid, four-foot-tall monster. Beheading was the only way to make it end. We can’t send our troops into a hot war with something like that. The military is not trained to behead their enemies.”

She was trembling as she heard his description. “You took a person… infected with this virus… and you tortured them to watch them slowly lose themselves, then killed them when there was nothing left??” she asked in hushed fury. “Who's the monster here, Dr. Heinzen?”

He sighed and adjusted his glasses. “The point I’m trying to make is that these things are resilient,” he said. “Too resilient for human soldiers. We need something stronger. All it takes is one bite, one... drop of blood or drool or urine… anything… and they’ve got us.” He motioned to the screen. “We send out a brigade of wolf soldiers… their virus means nothing. They can rip their throats out, subdue them with a larger sized soldier, better strength-”

“Until the wolves turn on us and start spreading themselves as well.” Dr. Sawyer argued. “Who are you gonna find that’s willing to give up their humanity for this anyway?”

“That’s the thing...” Dr. Serrah replied. “Every soldier that takes part in this will have their base DNA recorded. That way, when we’ve ended this, we can return them to their human forms. There won’t be anything permanent about it.”

Joy crossed her arms and shifted her weight to one side. “And how do you know that?” she challenged. “Have you tested it? Have you tried to turn someone back?”

“There’s no reason to believe that it won’t work,” Dr. Heinzen replied.

Joy scoffed in disgust. “This isn’t how we do it, Johan,” she said. “We don’t just assume that it’ll work. We have to test it!”

Dr. Heinzen shook his head grimly. “The military has prioritized the acquisition of new fox and cat soldiers,” he explained. “They don’t care if they can be turned back or not. It’s not a priority. Our job is to make the formula and push it out. They’re calling it Project Full Moon. We’ve already sent off the samples to the US and Canadian militaries for their own internal testing. Supposedly, it’s already being used in other departments here in the company.”

“So just like we did with the others then, huh?” Joy asked. “Sending out samples to the highest bidder… isn’t that how we got into this situation in the first place?”

“We’re just doing what we’re told to do, Dr. Sawyer,” Dr. Serrah replied. “The company has a plan and we’re just pawns.”

She rolled her eyes and returned to her seat, plopping down heavily. “Pawns at the end of the world…” she sighed.

Chapter 64

Arriving at the facility, the foxes wasted no time, jumping from the vehicle and heading for the door. Kaylee kept the shirt tightly clasped in her arms, saying nothing to Carmen and Drake as she passed. “Something happen?” Carmen asked, looking at Anne as she followed behind carrying a bundle of clothing.

“Just... stressful. That’s all,” she said. “Kaylee’s never been to town before.”

“Well you probably oughtta do something about that phone.” Carmen called as Dr. Ramirez walked through. “It’s been ringing off the hook for hours.”

“What Phone?” Alan asked, carrying a heavy looking stack of notebooks.

“The phone in the executive conference room,” Drake replied. “No one’s touched it. Seemed like something we should leave to you.”

Dr. Coren nodded and sighed. “I’ll take care of it. Thank you.”

Carmen’s tail began to wag as she saw Dr. Venner carrying lots of heavy books. “Good news in all of that stuff I hope, huh?”

“Just… ngh... Notes from home.” she grunted.

The vixen reached forward and took half of the stack. “Here. Let me help,” she smiled.

Kaylee wasted no time, heading straight for the breakroom. Reaching the door, she forced it open harshly, finding Jennifer and Jake already there, curled up in the bed, nearly fully changed.

“Rr…ah...?” Jennifer grunted as she stirred tiredly in the bed, awakened by the commotion. “Oh... Kaylee... Everything go okay? J... Jake and I were gonna rest up for the late-night shift. I hope you don’t mind.”

The vixen didn’t respond, instead turning to place the flannel shirt she was carrying neatly on the coatrack, eyeing her spear beside it. “Don’t let anyone touch those.” she said curtly. “I’m going to bed. If you two wanna stay here, that’s fine. Just... make room.”

“No, we should probably go ahead and get out there,” Cpt. Ramone said as she rose from the bed and stretched with a yawn. She was naked, but that didn’t seem to bother her. “I gotta get suited up and ready for my shift, anyway.”

While Kaylee was getting ready for bed, Heidi was carrying her books with Carmen down to her office.

“So, what’s all this stuff? Virus notes?” Carmen asked, looking down at the stack of papers in her arms.

“Virus notes, concepts, ideas, sketches, late night revelations, probably some old receipts for takeout...” the vixen chuckled. “You might be shocked to know I’m not the most organized woman on earth.”

“Miracles grown chaos, I guess, huh?” the vixen asked. “You managed to make Kaylee while buried in pizza boxes and old cigarettes.”

Heidi laughed. “I don’t smoke, Carmen. But outside of that? Yea, that’s pretty accurate.”

As they reached her office, the vixen stood back, peering into the mess, with papers strewn about, only a small clear spot on the desk large enough for a keyboard, mouse, and a cup of coffee. “Holy shit, doc. You weren’t kidding.” the vixen laughed. “Where you want me to put this stuff?”

“Uh…” Heidi sighed. “God, I wish she wasn’t like this…” she muttered as she quickly started to organize, putting her stack of papers on the floor. “Just uh. Just stack them right there with mine, I’ll clear a spot here on the couch, and I can go through them... Ugh... soon.”

Carmen nodded, laying the stack silently on the ground before stepping back to the doorway. “Ya know, this is gonna sound stupid as shit, but… there’s no words I can use, doc… that would tell you how grateful I am for this virus that you’ve created. I... I never in a million years would’ve dreamed that one day I’d wake up in a medical exam room, look down, and see… my own body. I mean… fur or not, ya know? This is the greatest thing that’s ever happened to me. I’m so glad that Kaylee mentioned it in her video. Everyone in the trans community needs to know what you’ve made... It’s a miracle.” She found herself starting to tear up, quickly wiping them away. “Just... know that I’ll be forever grateful.”

Their moment was interrupted as Alan rushed down the hall, stopping hastily as he gripped the door. “Heidi!” he called. “We need... There’s a call. Where’s Kaylee?”

“I think she went to lay down.” the vixen worried. “Why? Who's calling?”

“GERCorp.” he said. “They saw the video. They want to talk to us. They’ve been trying to reach us for hours.”

Hiedi sighed, looking at the state of her office. She was the only one that could clean up this mess. And in light of… everything… it was something she desperately needed to do, but it would have to wait. “Let’s let Kaylee sleep. She’s had a long day. I’ll be there in a second.”

Chapter 65

The pair stopped outside the room, with Alan bracing Heidi. “We need to look strong.” he said. “They saw the video, they’re not happy. We... we’re still in charge. We can’t let these humans intimidate us.”

“Ears forward, or back in defiance.” she nodded. “Don’t splay. Don’t show them submissive posturing.” She sighed and chuckled to herself. “Who woulda thought our ears would give our thoughts away...”

The pair entered the room together, the screen already live with Dr. Klassen, Melissa, and Mr. Tanaka on the screen. They made no attempt at eye contact with the monitor until the pair had taken to one chair, sitting together in the same curved-back pose that they’d done before.

“Just you two this time?” Dr. Klassen asked, sounding nervous.

“It is, Igor. Just us.” Alan nodded. “So, I understand you’ve been trying to reach us for a while. Any particular reason for the desperation?”

“You need to take down your video.” Mr. Tanaka said bluntly. “Your message is belligerent, and it assigns the blame for this outbreak to GERCorp.”

Heidi scowled. “Belligerent?” she asked. “How is it belligerent? Our message was to relent. Stop the quarantines and learn to coexist. It is only in the refusal of this action that we are advocating for propagation.”

“Dr. Venner’s look-a-like came out on the global news networks and told everyone a blatant lie. The very idea that those who are infected are not the same people… it’s ridiculouis! You referred to us not by our species as the Vulpes Sapien, but as infected individuals with a Vulpine virus and not the Venner virus as it has been named. You’re advocating for violence against our people!”

Melissa sighed and shook his head. “Dr. Coren, I’ve been the PR face of many, many corporate disasters and have posed as an expert in many fields. At the heart of it, I’m just a talking head. I was told by your company that the virus changes your brain. Isn’t that what happens during euphoria? Your brains is reduced in size and rewired. You retain your memories, but your brain functions are altered in a fundamental way. Right? On top of that... I’m posing as you, Dr. Venner. I can’t name the virus after myself. We’re trying not to put blame on the company!”

“I understand that, Melissa,” Heidi replied, “but it’s important that we identify this for what it is!”

Mr. Tanaka grumbled. “Let me make one thing completely clear, Dr. Venner,” he seethed. “This event came from your research. You are the most knowledgeable in this field, and on this product. The only reason you’re not being dragged out of that facility and dropped into a cage for experimentation, is because of your work on the contagion, and the vaccine. Melissa here may be the face of all this, but you are the backbone to this project. Find. A solution. What we call it, or how we convey this information is none of your business. You are a researcher. So do us all a favor, and research.”

“M…militaries the world over are mobilizing against the infection,” Dr. Klassen said, wiping his brow. He seemed slightly younger, and his cough was completely gone. “Right now there are approximately fourteen thousand camps worldwide, including the town of Friendly. That number will only grow once their deployment plans accelerate. We need that vaccine now. The humans… humanity needs the reassurance that they’re not going to be infected. If we are to coexist, the threat has to be removed. I can’t stress this enough.”

“That video is a problem,” Mr. Tanaka continued. “It defames our corporation, and it undermines our efforts and yours. Take it down.”

Alan struggled to keep his ears from splaying, forcing them back instead. “W… we’re not taking it down, sir,” he said sternly. “We’re just… we’re not. Kaylee’s message is one of peace. We’re not trying to pick a fight.”

The aging asian man leaned forward with a scowl of contempt on his face. “You keep thinking this is a war you can win, Dr. Coren, but you have already lost! Take it down, and work on your cure. There’s no way that your tiny little fur covered bodies can fight back against tanks, bombs, and trained soldiers. It is over. The troops are already on the move.”

Heidi eyed them skeptically, looking up at Dr. Klassen, whos expression seemed to tell the truth. “You’re bluffing.” she said. “Some of that might be true, but the fact that you’re still asking me for a cure, means that you don’t have a way to stop us. The fact that you’ve been circle calling us all afternoon and well into the evening proves it as well. Desperate for us to remove the video. Desperate for us to surrender… you shouldn’t be so transparent, Mr. Tanaka.”

The aging man raised an eyebrow. “Dr. Klassen, share the statistics, please.” he said as his picture moved to the bottom right-hand corner of the television, with an enormous slide of data appearing in its center. The foxes winced at the sudden change of brightness. “As you can see here, Dr. Venner… There are nearly seven hundred million people infected worldwide, with infections in nearly every country. Of those that we have data, most of them are starting to exterminate the infected due to overcrowding and the fear of unrest. Some of them are using incinerators, while others are… mass beheading, because this seems to be the only two ways to truly exterminate your kind. Thus far in the last twenty-four hours, neatly five million have met one of these fates in North America alone, and that number will grow as your population grows.”

The slide disappeared, allowing Mr. Tanaka to return to the center of the screen. “If you think I’m bluffing, you have no soul. You really want all those deaths on you? Telling them to propagate is only going to increase the cost! Blaming this on GERCorp is only going to breed distrust in our work. The more you resist, the worse this is going to get!” He leaned back in his chair. “Don’t interpret my words as a mere threat to your wellbeing, foxes. I am trying to help you help yourselves. Consider this an olive branch! Work with us, so that we may work with you.”

“And what happens when we give you this… cure?” Dr. Coren demanded. “You render us inert, and then what? You just… live and let live? You’re going to exterminate the rest of us just like you’re already doing! Propagation is the only way forward! There has to be so many of us that your socioeconomic world collapses around you if you try to get rid of us all. We have to survive, and we have to spread!”

“Kenzo, I don’t have-” Dr. Klassen started.

“We’ll discuss this offline.” Mr. Tanaka responded sharply. “We have nothing more to say, Dr. Coren. Take down the video. Now.”

The call ended abruptly, leaving the three GERCorp members staring at one another in the call space that remained. “What the hell was that??” he asked, “I told you that strategy was not going to work with them! They didn’t believe those numbers for a second!”

“You don’t know that.” Mr. Tanaka scowled. “Numbers like that are designed to present shock value. All we need is some footage, a few shots of Texada, some shots of the camps in Vietnam and- “

“Texada has fallen.” Igor interrupted. “I got a report about it today. They tried to execute five prisoners there that were causing trouble. Only five, and the population of foxes erupted and ripped them to shreds. The entire camp is now under vulpine control, as are the ships that were used to ferry them to the island, the planes, and one quarter of the Canadian military.”

“We need their HELP on this,” Dr. Klassen responded. “Terrorizing them and throwing fake information at them to force them to cooperate isn’t going to work! You heard their message in the video, didn’t you?? They want the humans to relent! They’ll work with you if you do! I’m already doing it! I’m proof that it’s not an impossibility!”

“We can’t ‘relent,’ Dr. Klassen.” Kenzo argued. “The number of infected was correct. Nearly one billion people have fallen to this virus. That’s one eighth of the population of the world! If we ‘relent’ as you put it, we’ll all be covered in fur by the end of next week! This is spiraling out of control!”

Dr. Klassen laughed. “What are you afraid of, Kenzo?” he challenged. “My Leukemia’s cured! It’s gone! I haven’t coughed in days! So what if people get a little fur on their bodies, what’s it matter??”

“I thought… it changed their minds…” Melissa worried. “Aren’t they… different people when they change?”

Mr. Tanaka nodded. “You already see it in Dr. Klassen,” he said, opening his hand to the camera. “He’s gone soft on them. Who knows what he’ll be like in a week.”

“I’ll tell you what I’ll be like in a week,” the man replied. “I’ll be younger, healthier, and just as capable of engaging in these decisions as anyone else. This treatment works, sir! We shouldn’t be afraid of it!”

Dr. Klassen clicked a few times on his computer, his screen sharing out to show genetic modeling, concepts, photo and video data. “They’ve been working... not to try to cure it, but to try to… evenly match it. I highly doubt that there’s any way to stop this. I’ve put my best teams on it and there’s… there’s just no way.”

“Project full moon?” Dr. Thesson asked, raising a brow at the header of the slide. “Is that what you’ve subjected yourself to?”

“Absolutely sir, I believe in this cause,” the aged man replied. “It’s safe, effective, and it’s going to give us better results. More reliable results! The mental impact is greatly reduced. We’ve already been able to determine that to be the case!”

“We’re opting to... Fight fire with fire, sir,” he continued. “I’ve been in communication with the US and Canadian military for days. They want this project. The idea is... we collect the DNA of soldiers willing to fight this out in the streets, infect them with our own… modified version of the virus, give them time to to change, then send them in. They fight the foxes, they’re immune to it being spread, and at least with the wolves, will be large enough that they can still operate equipment.”

“Is that what you’re doing?” Mr. Tanaka asked, “Becoming a wolf? Do you realize the insanity in all of this?? You want... To create more of these creatures… an effort to stop them??

Dr. Klassen nodded. “It is what I’m doing,” he said. “Look at me! My cough is gone, I feel great! I’ll get a little smaller, wolves are about five feet tall from our earlier testing, but it’s worth it! I think everyone’s overreacting. Besides, The strategy is sound. With wolves running the camps, the foxes can’t take over with infection. With soldiers in the streets that are immune, we can round them up more easily. Then the spread will stop. Once… once it does, we can look at our options as to what to do with the foxes.”

Mr. Tanaka sighed, burying his head in his hands for a moment before looking back at the camera... “Just see to it that you… things… stay out of the news. The last thing we need is more public panic about this. We’re losing portions of the human population at an unfathomable rate. This is apocalyptic, Klassen.”

“Yea, well maybe you should’ve tried TALKING to Dr. Coren and Dr. Venner, rather than threatening them and making demands!” Igor challenged. Then maybe you maybe you’d have more luck.”

At the lab, Heidi and Alan were worried. The found themselves pacing the floor of the conference room as they reviewed the meeting they’d just had. “Those numbers have to be a fabrication, Alan. There’s no way seven hundred million are infected already. It’s spreading too fast.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. “This virus is R10+. It’s more contagious than anything humanity has encountered before. People are being infected before they even get the news that they *can* be. And on top of it... The euphoria of it invites others to join. Kaylee’s video pushes it pretty hard.”

“But if there’s that many people, why aren’t they relenting??” Heidi worried, stopping mid step. “That’s more than ten major cities full of people! Every man woman and child! Why- How can the military still have the upper hand?? It has to be fake. It just has to.”

He nodded. “We need a better source of information. We need troops on the ground. We... we need leadership. Our people aren’t organized like the humans.” He sighed, looking at her with sympathy in his eyes. “I hate to say this but… I think Kaylee needs to become the face of all this. She needs to be considered our leader.”

The vixen wasn’t surprised to hear him say that. She’d already been the one to take charge in the lab, and the one that everyone seemed to look to for insight, even though she was painfully unqualified. “Alan she’s not- We can’t- She won’t know how to do that. They can’t identify with her. If we need a leader, they need one that they can identify with, don’t we?”

Dr. Coren chuckled. “You think anyone can identify with mayor Baskin? The Prime minister? People look to leaders who are more qualified than them on the topic that they’re leading, and… even though Kaylee’s never been human, she is the first of our kind. She’s been one of us longer than anyone. Even *we* look to her as a leader. She has that quality. Heidi, with our help… she can do it. We have to trust that.”

Chapter 66

Kaylee slept, the scent of her mother's home still fresh in her mind as she slowly drifted deeper and deeper into her slumber. From within, her mind began to form a picture. A small apartment, a warm fireplace with a television mounted above it, a gentle snowfall outside. She found herself sitting on a couch, reading as candles burned on the mantle and the fireplace crackled below. Her hands were beige and furless, with painted nails, a deep burgundy that matched the loose fitting shirt that she wore. Beneath it were a pair of dark gray yoga pants, comfortable, form fitting and stretchy. The text wasn't clear to her eyes, looking past a small, pointed, human nose, but she knew that she was enjoying what she was reading, even if it didn't make any sense.

From another room a young man walked in, similar to her in age with brown and white swirled hair. He wore a baggy gray hoodie and dark blue jeans. "Hey sis, whatcha readin'?" he asked in Swirl's thoughtful, calming voice as he made his way to the clean modern version of Dr. Venner's kitchen.

She chuckled, looking up at him briefly. She could see her own blond hair drift across her vision as she moved. "Oh it's a... silly little sci-fi story." she said, brushing the hair away. "Apparently mom... made this lab experiment and it turns out... It's me!"

"It's you?" he asked, joining her closely as he handed her a cup of hot cocoa. "And mom's in it, too?"

"Yea, and... and so are you! I'm a fox and you're a tiny little mouse!"

He chuckled as he leaned in to read it. "Come on... I'm taller than you are!" he said, trying to follow the story with her.

They both seemed to read in silence for a moment, enjoying the text. Even though she couldn't really make out the words, she was somehow taking it all in. Sitting for a time in silence, she began to become aware of her brother's expression. He was slowly becoming displeased. "Something wrong?" she asked.

He looked up at her, his face contorting from simply displeased to absolute devastation, tears streaming down his face as he looked at her like he had something to say but couldn't bring it out for fear of falling into sobs. "Kaylee…" he said finally, the room seeming to darken as he spoke, the evening sky outside fading to black. "It's all going to end."

"What?" she asked, closing the book in confusion. Everything around her seemed to be growing larger, but at the same time, older, decaying and rotting before her eyes. "Swirl, what's happening?"

He answered her, but his words were jumbled, his mouth seeming to barely move as his body started to flatten and deflate, his eyes hollowing from his sockets until they were empty. “No! Swirl, what’s happening?!” She jumped to her feet, falling off of the edge of the now tremendous couch as the massive, oversized, empty sack of flesh slid down on top of her, smothering her beneath it. A foul stench began to fill the air, rot, mold, alcohol, the smells of her mother’s kitchen.

She grunted, struggling to get out from under the empty skin that’d fallen onto her, tripping out of her pants that now seemed too big. “No... no, I have to get out of here!” she gasped, running through the growing apartment toward the door. Her shirt was a tent on her dragging against her feet as she struggled to run. She tripped, falling onto the floor as her painted nails broke away, leaving behind black shiny claws, her sandy blond hair falling out around her in a pile. Gasping and struggling, she rose to her feet once more, running, running! The door wasn’t getting any closer! Her legs felt strange, running hurt. Her back ached. She couldn’t stand up straight anymore!

Falling to her hands, she began to run on all fours, galloping toward the door, the shirt tenting around her, larger and larger until she stumbled, and it covered her vision. The floor beneath her felt strange, soft and warm, fleshy...

Struggling to see, she tried to grab her shirt, but found that her fingers wouldn’t move anymore, they were stiff, they wouldn’t bend! She struggled, wincing through pain that seemed to seer into the palm of her hand as she pried the shirt from over her head.

There was a blackened abyss all around her now, the fleshy, beige colored skin that seemed to comprise the floor pulsated like a heartbeat as she tried to rise to her feet but found herself unable to stand. Looking down she saw herself, the long vulpine snout in her vision, the pair of small fur covered legs and small furry paws. She smelled something, a human, growing near her, an enormous creature, towering over her as it raised her to its face. The blond-haired, blue-eyed human smiled tauntingly at her, grinning through its white, flat teeth. “I told you it was a silly story.” it said, breathing heavily on her as it spoke. “A fox becoming anything more than a stupid furry animal.” Its grin suddenly changed to hatred, its blue eyes casting her in a red, burning light like the crackling fire she’d seen not moments before. “YOU WILL NEVER BE MORE THAN A BEAST!” it growled. “YOU WERE BORN ON FOUR LEGS AND YOU WILL DIE ON THEM! YOU WILL NEVER BE HUMAN!”

The vixen tried to object and call out in anger, defiance, but all she could do was bark and chitter. Her humanity had been taken from her, ripped from her by this scowling hateful creature that held her so effortlessly in its enormous hand.

Struggling to gather herself, she groaned, gritting her paws through pain as blood began to drip from them, rising to her feet to face the creature by standing on her hind legs. “Ffff…rrrrr..fuuckkchhh.. Yyooouuurrr..!” she managed to force through her maw.

The creature screamed at her in fury, it's hot breath blowing her backward in its hand, relenting only for a moment before the massive hand closed in on her, crushing her into painful, bloody oblivion. She felt her body bend, then break, her skin tearing, her bones splintering, the darkness turning to a sudden flash of white as her eyes were crushed from her skull.

She awoke with a yelp in the breakroom, laying on her side in the bed the foxes had made of pillows. She was alone. There was blood on the pillowcases. Gasping for breath, she gathered her faculties, looking at her hands as she followed the source of blood. She'd pierced her own palms with the claws on the tips of her fingers. They'd dug deep into the blackened callus-like patches of skin that were surrounded by the warm brown fur of her hand.

Shakily, she pulled them away, wincing at the pain of the long, sharp claws releasing her of their duty. Blood oozed from the wounds for only a moment before closing and healing away, as if the wound had never even happened.

"Kaylee??" Heidi asked, pushing through the door urgently. She'd changed her clothes, wearing a beige sweater that'd been trimmed up to match her form. It fit her well. "Are you alright? I heard a yelp."

The vixen rose to her feet, wanting to rush to her mother, but resisted the urge. "Yea... J... just… a nightmare." she said. "I'm fine." She walked away from the pillows to the sink, climbing the small step ladder to wash her hands. As she did, the shiny metal towel holder reflected her form back to her. The same red fox she'd seen in the mirror every day.

"There's blood..." Heidi said, looking down at the bed. "Did something happen?"

"What time is it?" Kaylee asked, ignoring her question. "We need to get those washed in case anyone needs to sleep during the day."

"It's uh... It's 6am." Heidi replied. "The humans are making breakfast. We should be able to get some once everyone's gone through the line."

"Why should they eat first?" the vixen asked, turning around as she wiped her hands with the towels. "Aren't we in charge here?"

Heidi seemed confused. "I... are you alright, honey?"

"Yea I'm fine." she said with a nod as she walked past her, starting to gather up the pillows and strip off the cases. "Help me get these to the washer."

Her mother stepped forward, bending down to help her, watching her, but saying nothing, as her ears splayed with caution.

“Nice job on the sweater.” Kaylee continued. She was speaking sharply, her words coming fast and ending harshly. Heidi couldn’t tell from the tone if she was complimenting her, or insulting her. “We got anything that I can wear? Next video I want to wear a white collared shirt and a black or dark gray suit jacket. And it needs to be fitted.”

“One of the humans used to work as a seamstress before she got her degree.” Heidi replied. “She’s the one that helped the security team with their vests. I’m sure uh…she’d be willing to help us, too, if we have something like that in the clothing we brought in. W... which... we should. I used to have a jacket and a shirt like that. I think... It’d be a good idea.”

The vixen seemed satisfied with her answer, folding up the pillowcases in her arms, then smelling them. “Ugh... everyone's scents on this stuff. These really needed a wash, anyway. We should probably see about making a better bed. Or... separate beds…”

Heidi agreed. “I think having multiple beds would be a good idea.” she said with a nod. “We... uh... We can also see about you having your own, if you want. “And... Maybe your own workspace? Ya know most of Alan’s subordinates turned tail when you broke out. There’s some offices in here with some very comfortable couches, unused computers, desks… there’s no reason you shouldn’t have your own space.”

The vixen turned to face her mother, her gaze cold and determined, masking an easily detected pain just beneath the surface. “Let’s do that.” she said. “If I’m going to be the face of our movement then I’m going to have to live the part.” She walked to the door, staring at the pull handle with a sigh, then using her paw to pull it open. “They’re not going to be talking down to me anymore. I won’t die on all fours.”

“...What?” Heidi asked quietly before rushing behind her to avoid the closing door.

Chapter 67

“What’s the report, private?” Cpl. Thesson asked as he entered the surveillance room. It was 05:55. “You have 5 minutes.”

“Wall’s complete sir.” he reported, looking up at the corporal. “They finished at 03:30 this morning.”

“Any patrols?” the corporal asked.

“Yes sir.” Pvt. Barnes responded. “Looks like they’re using hunting rifles and shotguns. Some are on the wall, leaning against it with ladders to serve as lookouts. The others are patrolling mostly by the gates.”

“Very good, gentlemen.” Cpl. Thesson responded. “Come downstairs with me. I’ll give the briefing over breakfast. The hotel has eggs and bacon today.”

It didn’t take them long; the stress of the impending briefing being swayed by the allure of eggs and bacon. The hotel had operated as normally as it could, given the circumstances, even if it meant that the staff couldn’t go home. In their eyes, there were worse places than a hotel to be forced to shelter in place.

The soldiers took up the entire lobby, filling every seat and overflowing into folding chairs and tables brought in from the small conference rooms on the main floor. It wasn’t much to look at, but the simple interior and appetizing smell was more than enough to keep spirits high as the corporal locked the front door, then made sure to keep the hotel staff clear of the room. “Alright gentlemen, hope you’re enjoying your breakfasts…” he said, standing in the center of the room with his hands on his hips. “According to Pvt. Barned and Pvt. Gomez, our little furry friends have completed their prison walls as of 03:30 this morning. As you’re aware, our standing order has been to establish a quarantine camp in the town of Friendly.

“The plan is simple,” he continued. “We move in, secure the town, incapacitate as many of the infected as we can, preferably with no casualties, then...” He turned around to the television on the wall, finding an infected individual, a news reporter, speaking on camera. “Someone put this on the laptop.”

“On it, sir.” Pvt. Gomez said, jumping up from his seat as he adjusted the settings and connected the wire. The screen flickered to a map of the town of friendly. With off yellow paper and a stamping of certification in 1973, it was obviously a little old, but it wasn’t likely that the town had changed much, if at all, since the survey had been completed.

“Thank you. Anyway, moving on. The plan is simple. We’ll come in here, from the south gate, spread to the perimeter, then sweep inward. Every infected individual that refuses to put down their arms will be stripped of their clothing, then placed into a cage for transport. The cages may be heavy, so we’ll be using the electric ATVs provided to us in the trucks. We drive in, unload, and spread out. Any questions so far?”

Pvt. Barnes raised his hand. “Yes sir, why are we removing their clothing? And do we… just leave it where we find them?”

“They may have traps in their clothing, weapons, that sort of thing. Remove it and leave it where it is. We’ll sweep later to pick it up.” Cpl. Thesson replied. “Anyone else...? Good.” He clicked a button on the laptop, transitioning to a black and white photo of a building. “Friendly Public School Est. 1886” written beneath it. “We’ll be housing them here, in the local school building. As you can see our photography is up to date, and current, so there should be no changes to the building from this shot.”

Many of the soldiers began to chuckle as the corporal clicked again. “This is the updated floor plan as of the last remodel. Huh... 1987... I was a baby... At any rate, we’ll be placing the cages here in the gymnasium. We should be able to stack them four high. If you cannot lift the cage that high on your own DO NOT strain yourself and risk touching the cage. These creatures will be lashing out at us biting and snarling, and I do not want any of you infected.”

“Is everyone clear?” he asked again. “Any questions?”

A soldier near the far wall raised his hand. “Have they really changed that much?” he asked. “What if they won’t fit in a cage that size?”

“If we encounter larger individuals, we’ll need to use the larger cages,” Cpl. Thesson explained. “The cages can be locked together to expand. If they won’t fit in one, give them two or three. Once they get smaller, we can start to take those away.”

“How long are we to be there?” another soldier asked. “Are we just going to hold them indefinitely?”

The corporal shook his head. “No, we’re going to be there for a week. We only need to hold the prisoners in the cages for that duration. After that, we’ll be relieved by the military, and we can be on our way. Hopefully, back to our families. On that topic, we won’t be using live ammunition for this. All your weapons will be tranquilizers. We’re not here to try to kill them, just calm them down,” he said. “One thing I want you all to understand is that these people only a few days ago were just like us. They had jobs, lives, families, friends… they drove their cars ate at restaurants watched movies and lived their lives in peace. This community has done nothing to us save for turn us out when we attempted to set up a few days ago, and I want you to remember that when working through this. They may look and act like animals, but these people are our friends, neighbors and families. And we must treat them as humanely as possible. Am I clear?”

“Yes sir.” the soldier responded, content with the answer.

“Furthermore...” the corporal continued. “The intel I got this morning suggests that live fire won’t kill them. Destroying parts of their brain with a bullet will just make them more belligerent. The brain tissue that contains… them… dies and new cells replace it that have no memory. They start to act on instinct alone. If one of them MUST die the only method is incineration, or beheading. Neither of which are we prepared for.” He paced a few times in front of the screen, seeming discontented with his mission. “Our goal here... Is to stop the spread. Stop the spread, stop the contagion, then let everyone get back to their lives. I don’t give a good god damn what you see on television, what you hear from talking heads about our plans… that is our goal. And you need to reiterate that to anyone you encounter.”

“I realize that their leader, this… Kaylee Venner is telling us to ‘relent’ in her words. No doubt you’ve all seen the video.” he continued. “In her eyes we’re monsters, gathering up her people and exterminating them. We need to let them know that that is not who we are, and not what we’re doing. She wants coexistence and so do we.”

The troops seemed to agree, for the most part, but none spoke up. “Alright. We’re done here gentlemen. Finish up your breakfast. We roll out of here at 08:00 on the dot. So have your shit ready to move. We won’t be coming back here any time soon. For the next week, our new home is Friendly Manitoba.”

As the corporal left the room, the soldiers began to talk. Many of them were concerned, watching the television as Pvt. Gomez swapped it back to the morning news and unmuted the audio. The reporter they’d seen before, a fox, seemingly in her final stages of change, stood before the camera gripping an enormous microphone. Though she tried to smile and be chipper as she spoke, it was obvious that she was very stressed.

“That’s right Sean, this IS On-Scene Seven reporter Lynn Wells, and I am live today in the small town of Courtenay just west of Texada island, where according to our sources the fox prisoners have overrun their guards and have established a base of operations. I have with me today Major Javik Carlson, head of operations here at Courtenay forward to speak to the events that transpired over the last 24 hours. Major, what can you tell our viewers about what happened on Texada island?”

Jerome watched without looking at his food, his eyes transfixed on the screen. “Why is there a fox reporter?” he asked. “How is she able to roam around free like that?”

“Maybe she’s anti-fox propaganda or something... disparaging her own kind? Trying to demoralize em or somethin.” Chris floated. “Ya know like in world war 2. What was it... Tokyo Rose.”

“Eehh... maybe.” Jerome nodded, looking down in surprise as his fork failed to find any more eggs. “Damn...”

Major Carlson nodded “Thank you for having me, uh…. ma’am. Yes, as of 02:30 last night, a coordinated attack from infected soldiers took place, prompting them to release from their cages an estimated fifteen hundred viral foxes before the remainder of our troops were made aware. The uh... the events that followed saw the foxes sweep through our ranks, infecting one hundred percent of the human military population on the island, after which time they were imprisoned in one of the structures pending the effects of their transformation.”

“And just so that I can make it clear to our audience, Major Carlson, you’re here with me today without your standard bite covering or fluid PPE,” the reporter continued. “Can you explain to our audience why that might be?”

The major nodded regrettably with a deep, slow sigh. “Yes ma’am I can,” he said. “At 04:00 this morning we established a failback base of operations at the BigBrands store here in Courteney. Cages have been transferred and… and infected individuals will be monitored until they are…” he stopped himself as he struggled to work through it. “Once all of my men, and... and myself... are... complete… we’ll be stripped and caged like the others… pending… pending further action from our government via military order.”

“No way, he’s infected??” one of the other soldiers asked. “And they’re gonna cage him too? But he’s one of us!”

“*Wa*s one of us…” Jerome muttered, turning it up slightly.

“That’s... My understanding as well,” Lynn sighed. “Everyone at On-Scene Seven, thank you for your time and your… for the eight years of my life spent as a reporter for your team. Unfortunately, I h-” The reporter started, trying to give a heartfelt goodbye. She was interrupted as several soldiers in complete protective gear leaned in and snatched away her mic, the barrel

of a gun off screen pointing at her as she began to take off her jacket. Seconds later, the screen cut to a commercial.

“Holy shit…” another soldier by the window said, as he dropped his fork. “Stripping her right there on... She’s a reporter! She’s not some- Fuck… fuck I... I can’t do this I-”

He stood up from his seat but stopped as the corporal returned to the room. “Something wrong?” he asked. “Speak your minds, gentlemen. Now’s not the time for decorum.”

Chris looked up at him. “W... we just saw a live broadcast from Texada, sir.” he explained. “Major Carlson is infected and... and so was the reporter. They... made her strip on camera and they’re gonna shove em into cages and-”

“They’re people, sir! Soldiers like us! Reporters like my wife! I can’t... We can’t just strip people of their identities and shove them into cages like animals!”

Corporal Thesson nodded. “You’re right.” he said. “We can’t. So, let’s hope that the foxes of Friendly lay down their arms. That way we can treat them with as much respect as we can. No fight, no cage, it’s that simple.”

“Sir I don’t know that I can do this,” the soldier objected. “That woman… My wife is a reporter, sir! I worry about her in all this! They keep trying to send her out into the field too and- I mean that woman wasn’t just- She’s a person like we are!”

“Your options are to follow orders, or rot in a cell, soldier.” the Corporal responded with a regretful sigh. “I don’t like it either, but we have to do our jobs. We have to follow our orders. Now get ready. Breakfast is over. We’ll be rolling out soon.”