

The bell over the door dinged, signalling a new customer. Sylv glanced up from their boxes, taking a second to register the lone young woman in front of the counter.

“Ah! One second, please! I just need to finish getting these last few decks out for display.”

The customer nodded, seemingly content to take the shop in as Sylv set the last couple of Tarot decks into the display case, locking the glass display.

“Alright! Sorry about that, what can I get for you?”

The young woman, looking to be around mid-20s, set her bag down on the counter, taking a moment to take everything in before responding.

“Uh- yeah! I heard there was a new occult shop in the area, and I’ve been looking for a specific kind of incense. Nobody around here seems to have it, thought I’d maybe give this new place a try?”

Sylv nodded. “Understandable! Incense is a little hard to come by nowadays, but it’s real useful! What kinds you looking for, I’ll check the back to see if we have it.”

After she rattled off a few different kinds of incense, they nodded again, pushing the double doors to the storeroom wide open.

“Alright, let me go check on those for you real quick! Feel free to take a look around, I’ll be back in just a sec!”

Sylv quickly disappeared into the back, leaving the young woman alone at the front counter.

Alexis grabbed her purse, watching the storeroom door close. Taking a look around, she saw she was the only other person in the shop. Not even any other employees; just her and the guy behind the counter, who she assumed owned the place.

But to his credit, the store itself was extremely well kept. The displays were all extremely tidy, the store was clearly sectioned off and labeled, and there weren’t any parts of the sales floor that felt cluttered or confusing. If the owner had done all this himself, she doubted this was his first rodeo.

While he searched around in the back, she decided to give the displays a glance. Over by the entrance were all the divination tools, from Tarot decks and pendulums to scrying mirrors and other, more niche (and closed practice) methods. The crystals section was well organized, with each crystal type clearly marked and visible, and a large selection of rough and polished crystals, as well as carved and sculpted statues of varying materials and designs. She was tempted to buy that small jade kitsune statue, especially for that reasonable price, but she didn’t have the cash on her for that. She needed to save what she could on her card. Jewellery, as well, which Alexis spent a considerable time looking at. Rachel had stated she’d be interested in

a Tiger's Eye bracelet for her birthday... but if she couldn't buy the kitsune statue, she doubted she had the money for the bracelet, either.

Moving along, the next section was the scent and smudging based sections. Shelf incense, candles of every color and scent under the sun, backflow burners, candle holders and even a display case with specially engraved Zippo lighters. Alexis had been expecting some dank little corner shop, stinking of weed and with a few more cultural appropriations than she was comfortable with, but this place definitely vastly exceeded her expectations. Things used in closed practices were clearly labelled as such, which made her a lot more confident in the owner's reputability.

But perhaps the most unusual part of the entire shop was all the way in the back. Because, instead of carrying on with the witchy/occult merchandise, the entire back half of the store was... a costume shop. Or, an odd mix of a clothing store and a costume shop. Sure, a lot of the shirts had cheesy Witchy slogans and various well-known sigils printed on them, but she never expected to see the sigil of Lucifer right next to a bear kigurumi. A very *well made* kigurumi, at that.

The storeroom doors creaked open again, Sylv struggling to keep them open and not drop the few boxes of incense they were holding. After a few seconds of struggle, they managed to drop them on the counter safely, closing the offending doors with their boot. It took them a moment to spot the customer, as she'd wandered off to the back of the store, but she looked up when he waved to get her attention.

"Alright, managed to find a few different kinds for ya! Don't have any powdered, unfortunately, but found some in cones and sticks! Interesting scent choice, by the way-"

They held up a box, labelled "Moonlight Sonata", with a picture of a fox. All of the incense on the counter, in fact, was the same scent, just in different formats.

The customer shifted a little awkwardly. "Yeah... it's super specific, I know. But that was the incense my mother burned when she taught me Tarot way back when we lived in Japan, and nobody around here carries it since it was a local thing there... I honestly didn't expect you to have it!"

Sylv smiled, glancing up. "You lived in Japan? That's pretty cool, actually! I- only passed through. Layover stuff, y'know. I did live a little south of that though, in Thailand. That was pretty cool too!"

As Sylv and the customer struck up a conversation over Southeastern Asian divination methods, Sylv set some of the incense aside as she pulled out her wallet. The conversation didn't last long, just enough for her to pay for her incense, but they could tell she enjoyed it just as much as they did.

“Oh!”

She stopped at the door, turning.

“I should’ve said this a little earlier, but if there was anything else you were eyeballing, as long as it’s not too expensive, I’ll consider it on the house! You’re one of the first customers, and seeing as I didn’t immediately recognize you, you must have gone a bit out of your way. Figure I might as well treat ya there.”

“You sure? I don’t want to-”

Sylv waved her misgivings off. “Aah, it’s fine, it’s not gonna put me outta business. Besides, the shop’s a hobby, anyways.”

Already closing the front door, she seemed to make up her mind. She led him back to the display case and pointed out the kitsune statue, where he unlocked the case and got it for her. She also grabbed the bracelet she’d been eyeballing before, but she paid for that with the cash from her purse, which it turned out she *did* have enough for.. They waved as she left, already starting to put the boxes back in the storeroom.

Nearly an hour’s drive later, Alexis pulled into the apartment parking lot, picking the same spot she always did under the tree right next to the parking garage. Turning the car off, she looked at the bag again, still not believing her luck.

‘Man... how lucky do I have to be, to get that statue for free? That thing was almost \$30! And I managed to get that bracelet for Rachel! Double win! Definitely worth the drive out there.’

Speaking of her roommate...

Alexis shot her a quick text, saying she’d arrived back. Rachel didn’t respond immediately, which probably meant she was out at another business meeting. Fine by her, it meant she had a little peace and quiet to burn her new incense.

Room 307. The same room the two of them had been staying in ever since their freshman year of college. Now, already graduated and moved on, they continued to rent that same room. 307. And as she unlocked the door, shivering against the late October chill, 307 looked the same as it always had: same brown carpet, dingy from age, same beige walls streaked with whatever the previous tenants had been smoking, same mismatched furniture and makeshift alter in the front room.

Home, sweet home.

Alexis tossed her keys into the bowl next to the door, not even bothering to take her shoes off as she sat her purse down next to it. This was her house, damnit, and she'd walk on the carpet if she wanted to. Besides, she had a more urgent matter to get to.

Plopping down on the bright orange, 90's retro corduroy couch that she still didn't forgive Rachel for getting, Alexis dug around in the bag, pulling her items out. But before she did anything, incense!

The smell that hit her as soon as she opened the box brought back a wave of memories. Ah, she missed Japan... she wished her mom was still here to smell this too.

As the incense burned, she grabbed the bag, taking the little jade kitsune statue out and holding it under the light. Such high quality... she could see the sunlight reflecting off the eyes, the face, every single furline in all nine tails. Whoever had carved this knew what they were doing, and the jade itself was a stunning mix of white and green, clearly a fine piece.

And to think, she'd gotten it for free...

Alexis set it down next to the incense burner, finally taking off her shoes. Rachel was out, at least for now, which meant she had time to box up her present...

Top cabinet, right next to the bucket of markers. Alexis has been saving that box for this exact purpose. Taking it out, she scratched a small itch on the back of her neck, right under the tag of her shirt.

"Damn tag. Knew I should've taken it off."

Back in the living room, the only thing left in the bag was Rachel's bracelet. Again, a very fine piece of work, from the Tiger's Eye beads surrounding the entire band, to the carved gryphon charm dangling from it. The charm was more of a reddish color than the beads, but it was still clearly Tiger's Eye. If she turned it just right, she could even see little bits of iron reflecting the light.

"Oh yeah. Rachel's gonna love this."

Putting it in the box, closing it up, setting it aside. Now, just to find a place to hide it until her birthday...

Something caught her eye. Not a hiding place, but one final thing in the bag. A small black business card. Setting the box down, she could see it was purely black, except for the words "The Other Side" emblazoned on one side in gold cursive. Flipping it over showed it was blank.

"Huh. Nice card."

She scratched that annoying itch again. It was stronger this time, and didn't go away immediately after she scratched it, which meant that tag was irritating her skin. Grumbling, she got up, letting the business card flutter down onto the bag.

"Damn tags! Why is it so hard to find tagless shirts, ugh!"

She didn't get a chance to use the scissors.

Because, as soon as she went to cut the tag off with them, she noticed a discoloration on her palm.

Alexis' skin was already a dark hazel, but her palms were discolored almost black. Definitely not normal. She just assumed they'd gotten stained from the incense, or maybe her steering wheel leather was dry rotting again. With a sigh, she set the scissors down and flicked the sink water on, grabbing a liberal amount of soap from the dispenser right next to it.

But, no matter how hard she scrubbed, the stuff on her palms wouldn't wash off. Instead, it seemed to be... spreading?

That, and the itch on her neck was getting stronger, and beginning to spread too.

"What the... hell...? Oh, shit, I'm- having an allergic reaction to that incense! Where the hell is my phone-"

Scared, she rushed back into the living room, trying to scratch as many of the itchy spots as she could. Quickly grabbing her phone, she tried to unlock it, but kept fumbling the code from how much her stained hands were shaking.

"Come on, come on! I need to call RachAAAAAAH-"

She was cut off as her ankle gave a loud *crack*, sending Alexis (and her phone) tumbling to the floor. Trying to blink the shock out, she could feel her ankle continue to give off worrying *pops* and *cracks*, accompanied by some equally unpleasant feelings. Managing to sit up, she was barely prepared for what she saw.

Her ankle was lengthening.

And as she watched, horrified, it continued to, her socks getting pulled along with it. After a moment, she had the thought to take them off, and she was treated to a front row seat of her own toes swelling, her nails condensing into animal-like claws as thin brown fur began sprouting over her entire leg.

"Hooooooly shit holy shit what the hell is *happening* to me what the *hell*-"

Alexis didn't even realize she'd been backing up until she hit the coffee table. With nowhere else to go, she was forced to watch as the ball of her right ankle kept growing, getting longer and furrier, as her toes continued to congeal and swell into paws.

Glancing down at her hands, she was horrified to see the palms swelling out as well, getting significantly rougher than they had been. Her fingers were also undergoing the same swelling as her toes, meaning they'd likely be left as paws too. More of that brown fur was sprouting, not just on her legs but on her hands, her arms, her stomach and back and neck and *face* and-

She tried to control her breathing. Panicking would do her no good, even as her ankles finished lengthening and her knees clicked. She felt hot... was she sweating? She felt like she was sweating. Alexis almost took her shirt off, then seemed to think better of it.

"NNgh- no! I- I'm not gonna give myself the indecency- uugh. What... the hell..."

Alexis had always been fairly athletic, having done track and field in high school and continuing her running every morning since. But even then, she could feel her thighs, her arms, her stomach gain a slight boost in muscle. Nothing outrageous, but enough to pull what little slack there had been in her V-neck and jeans taut. She didn't even know if she needed them anymore, seeing as that thick coat of fur kept on sprouting, completely covering her arms, her legs and her torso, poking through her shirt and pants.

Speaking of pants...

A small (but rapidly increasing) pressure in the base of her spine made her pant, clawing her way into standing by holding onto the kitchen table. Something was growing from her spine, something *big*, and whatever it was, her pants were keeping it in.

"Ahhh shit! Ah shit that- oh, oh god, that hurts! Fuck it, if it makes the pain stop!"

She only had to barely pull the waistband down, just enough for her tails, plural, to pop out at once with a *floomph*. As they kept growing, getting bigger and fluffier with every passing second, she tried to reach for her phone again, only succeeding in batting it away with her newly formed paws.

"Come- on- Gotta- call- Rachel-"

As the pressure built in her head, she had to drop back down to the carpet. She knew what was coming next, judging from the raging headache making it nearly impossible to stand up, but that didn't make it any less comfortable.

Alexis' skull cracked, bringing her entire face with it. As she was forced to watch her entire perspective shift slightly, she watched, transfixed but equally horrified, as her nose bulged on the end of her face, growing black and rough like her paw pads, only wet. That soft brown fur

marched up to claim territory, but it was too blurry to make out the growing tufts on the end of her own face. Closing her eyes, she felt both her ears fluff out, growing pointed as they both migrated to the top of her head.

And just like that, it was over. Alexis lay there for a moment, trying to get used to the sensations and smells and sounds she'd never heard before. What had gone mouldy in the fridge again? Since when had that pipe started to leak? And for fuck's sake, did they need to deep clean these carpets *again*? What the hell had the previous tenants done to this place!?

A minute passed. Two. After three, Alexis finally found the strength to get to her feet (paws?) again, holding onto the table for support. Her paws were unwieldy, yes, and much different than what she was used to, but the pads on her soles muffled the carpet and took away the arch pain she'd felt since she was ten years old. Looking down at her handpaws, she saw they were indeed pawlike, but nowhere close to her hind paws, meaning she could still hold and grasp everyday objects with no problem.

She gasped.

"A mirror. Where's the mirror! I have to- Oh, Rachel, please say you still have that floor length one-"

She was getting the hang of it. The digitigrade stance definitely made walking a little more difficult, but she was more than capable of adapting. After wobbling her way to Rachel's bedroom, she was delighted to see her roommate's floor length mirror still strapped to the door.

And what she saw took her breath away.

She'd become some kind of fox. A bipedal fox, with brown fur that matched Alex's hazel toles exactly, a white underbelly and black paws and ears, poking up through brilliant black curls of hair that had magically stayed the same, along with her brilliant green eyes. A sliver of furry stomach showed under her white shirt, showing she'd had to have put on at least a few inches in height including her ankles.

But behind her. She counted three... no, five... *seven* tails waving in unison behind her, each a slightly different shade than another, clearly showing she was a *kitsune*, not a *fox*.

A kitsune...

Just like the statue.

By the time she managed to get back out to the living room, the incense stick was burned out. Nothing but ashes littered the tray below it, and the jade statue was no different.

But... something told her the statue wasn't what did it. She'd only started feeling the itch *after* she put the statue next to the burning incense, not when she lit it, or when she touched the statue for the first time.

Quickly grabbing her phone off the kitchen tiles, Alexis breathed a sigh of relief as her phone picked up her inputs. Fingerprint was out of the question, as was facial recognition, but that was why she always had a backup code!

[One text from Rachel (4:17 PM)]

[Sorry I'm not home yet, meeting ran late! Omw now, see you in a few]

She couldn't help but smile. Glancing back at the box with Rachel's bracelet, Alexis made a mental note to light some more of that incense when she gave it to her roommate.

Sylv clicked the sign over the door, extinguishing the bright neon. Commute wasn't a problem, since they lived in the flat above the shop, but it just meant it was all the more reason to lock the shop up every night. And as they laid a talon over the door, the protection spell caused the locks to click shut without any input from them.

Before they went back to the storeroom, they looked at themselves in the reflection of the window. A normal human, early 20's, easily could have passed as a military kid growing up from the buzz cut and the lack of facial hair. But as they put their talon up, the cloaking spell only showed in the reflection. Blue and black scales, claws, the entire works. They gave their reflection one last good look, watching the human in the glass also lower their hand, before giving one curt nod and disappearing into the storeroom.

It would be hard for a dragon to run a witchy shop, after all, if everyone knew they were a dragon. But soon enough, Sylv would start getting more and more people over to the Other Side, and then they wouldn't *have* to hide behind cloaking spells, because then enough people would also be able to show their true selves too!

They smiled.

Someday...