

Threads of Fat, Chapter 10

by Cerine Hero

“Stella, sweetheart, I don't want to be rude, but I am pretty sure that if you could just put the food down for two minutes, they could actually get your measurements...”

“No.” Stella glanced at the bracelet on her wrist. The stone was glowing a concerning red-orange, so she finished stuffing the cinnamon roll into her muzzle. One of the ferrets attending to her offered a napkin and the skunk wiped her paws clean once again. Given how insatiable the bracelet had become in the past week, she'd be requesting more food in a few minutes. Cleaning her paws was just an effort to keep her from getting her bare fur sticky while they measured and dressed her.

With only a day to go before the red carpet premiere for *Star Ranger*, Vivian had hauled – somewhat less than metaphorically – the super-heavy skunk to a high-class fashion boutique to get fitted into a dress to wear for the occasion. Stella had completely inflated out of her entire inherited wardrobe at this point, with only the stretchiest cotton underwear and poorly-fitting undershirts from a plus-size men's store capable of holding in her overflowing rolls and breasts.

Stella had blown up to a third-again bigger than she had been the first day she made the deal with the stranger. She was huge then, but enormous now. The bracelet, sinking into her blubbery wrist, seemed almost impossible to get back to a comforting green color – to say nothing of making the glow go away altogether. When Stella woke in the morning, it was an angry red, and even if she spent the whole day cramming food into her mouth, she only seemed able to get it down to yellow. The skunk squished her paws against the sides of her hanging apron belly and lifted it up. It pushed up her pillow-sized breasts, making them spread out across the top of it. She had no idea what to do with her ridiculously over-sized bust. Vera was more creative in that regard.

Turns out the staff at the boutique were at a bit of a loss, too. They put the skunk on a dais in the middle of a fitting room and struggled with getting her measurements. With her belly hanging down to her fat-smothered knees – assuming she was standing with her back straight – and her breasts sagging over the top of her stomach, it was hard to get accurate numbers. The ferrets also needed to tie multiple measuring tapes together to get around her hips. Stella watched them fret around her while she continued feeding herself from a party-sized box of cinnamon rolls that she'd bought on the way into the boutique.

Vivian was standing at the side of the dais, with one hoof against her hip and the other flicking across the screen of her phone. “We still need to figure out who you're going to the premiere with. At this point most everybody is paired up...”

“Do I actually *need* someone?” Stella asked, turning her eyes without turning her head while the ferrets lifted her belly up to measure her waist.

“It's free publicity, dear,” Vivian explained, “we can't just ignore an opportunity like this. So, yes, you need to take somebody.”

Stella finished another cinnamon roll and licked her muzzle. Wiggling slightly while the attendants measured her, she said, “Well, there is someone I wouldn't mind taking... Uh, do crew get invited to premieres?”

Vivian looked up from her phone, a confused expression knotting her face. “Not... typically? Unless you mean senior crew, then yes. Who are you thinking of?”

“Well, she's a... friend of mine. She's a stuntwoman. If you're making me pick *somebody*, then-”

“No, no, no, Stella,” Vivian interrupted, shaking her head. “I'm not talking about just anyone. We need buzz! Something for the cameras. A big name. We've gotta get the reporters talking tailors and rumors, you know that.”

Stella wrinkled her nose and looked away. It would have been nice to take Vera with her to the premiere, but Vivian wasn't going to have it. The skunk sighed as the ferrets hefted up her breasts, trying to measure them as if she was wearing a fitting bra.

“What about Chris Hailer?” Stella offered, raising her thick arms up to shoulder height. It was hard enough to get them up that far, let alone fully above her head. “He actually invited me the other day, but I didn’t... really answer him at the time.”

The doe tilted her head. “I thought you weren’t necessarily on speaking terms with him. Not that I’m saying no! That’ll gin up a lot of press for *Oceanview Terrace*! So that’s definitely something I approve... one second, I have his agent in my phone, let me send him a text.”

Stella let her arms drop as the ferrets moved away. Her paws rest on top of her door frame-bending hips, where the waistband of her undergarments were stretched to their limit and beginning to fray. “He’s, well... he’s sweeter than I first gave him credit for. Like, I only knew him at work.”

“Oh, yes, he’s notorious for being a machine on set. Like, don’t even try to talk to him.”

“Explains a lot, actually. Oh. When you text his manager, tell him it’s not a date. We’re just doing this premiere thing together.”

Vivian nodded as her thumbs whirled on her phone’s keyboard. “Uh-huh. You know, if the two of you *did* date, it would be really great press...”

“No.”

“Alright, fair enough. Still, I cannot believe he hasn’t already got somebody for the premiere. He’s really hot right now.”

Stella glanced at one of the many mirrors on the walls around her. A chestnut-and-white-furred blob looked back at her. “Tunno, maybe he has a type. He’s the one who asked me, so...”

Vivian’s phone made a jingle and she held it up close to her face. “Ah! Just got a message back from his agent. He says Chris would be happy to walk you down the red carpet. Now we just need to get this outfit situation under control...”

“I was thinking about just going like this. You want headlines, right?”

“You’re going in an original Jumienne or not at all, Stella,” Vivian said, her tone getting a little terse now as she lost patience with the skunk’s flippant attitude.

The ferrets departed from the room with the measurements on a piece of scratch paper. Stella held out her paw for Vivian to take, and the doe helped her step down from the dais and onto a wide bench sitting to one side of the fitting room. The skunk’s rump squashed around the narrow wooden bar as she relaxed her weight. The bench bowed beneath her girth. She drummed her paws on the sides of her bare belly as Vivian paced in front of her, waiting for the attendants from the fashion boutique to come back with something.

Stella found her thoughts wandering elsewhere. She leaned back against the mirror behind her and closed her eyes for a moment. Sleep was starting to get hard to come by as she got bigger. Her breasts were so massive now that she couldn’t lay on her back or they’d smother her, so she had to lay on her side, letting some of her belly hang over the edge of her mattress. Getting in and out of the bed was a bit of a chore, too, but at least once she was up, she was up.

Mostly the skunk was bothered by the stress the bracelet was putting on her. She felt her stomach grumble hungrily as she sat on the bench and her muzzle twitched. The last “acting” thing she’d really done was the script reading last week. All of her time was otherwise consumed by eating and napping. She had to gain multiple pounds a day or the bracelet would get too red for her liking. It was unclear how much she could actually ignore it, but risking it was... well, she didn’t want to do that. She wanted to feel Vera’s fingers in her hair. She wanted to dip into her pool some more. There was a not-bug-infested bed waiting for her at home. She wanted to see Chris’s smile.

Stella snapped her eyes open with a grunt. She rubbed a paw over her face, trying to clear out the conflicting thoughts. Vivian turned towards her and frowned.

“Are you okay, Stella?” she asked.

The skunk shook her head a bit. “I’m just... confused on a lot of stuff. I thought I’d closed up a box, but it popped open again.”

“I’m not following you.”

“Don't mind me.”

The doors opened again and the ferrets returned, wheeling in a plus-size mannequin with a beautiful blue dress on it. It reminded Stella of the one she wore for *Oceanview Terrace*. Her eyebrows rose as she looked it up and down. There were pearl strands for shoulder straps, and the low-cut but ruffled front would highlight her chest without blatantly displaying it. Some gold trim filled out the fabric, giving it some depth.

“It's wonderful,” Vivian said, clapping her hooves together. “What do you think, Stella? Do you like it?”

“Sure,” she answered. “It's... way too small, though.”

“Oh, of course, but they'll alter it tonight and customize it for you. So just remember: It's a Jumienne, make sure to tell everybody, that's why we're getting it for free.”

“Right. I can change now, yeah?”

Stella got up and picked up her day clothes. She'd come in wearing a pair of extra-large sweatpants and a hoodie, despite the heat. It was the only thing that could cover her now. The elastic band around her pants stretched snug around her hips and belly and she pulled the hoodie over her head, leaving a little bit of white tum exposed to vent excess heat. She let Vivian finish with the business about the dress and wandered off to the main showroom floor of the boutique, surrounded by mannequins of various shape all garbed in outlandish celebrity outfits. Hers was at least sensible in comparison.

She fished her phone from the hoodie pocket and looked at the screen. There was a missed call from Vera. Stella smiled and squished her thumb on the call back button. It rang a couple times while she examined the fabric on some kind of... bird-themed dress. Who donated the feathers?

The phone clicked. “Hey, big s-s-skunk,” the vixen said. “Where were you?”

“Half-naked while a bunch of people bounced my fat,” Stella answered, putting a bit of a joking, smug tone on it. “Nah, it was a dress fitting. I have to have *something* to wear tomorrow.”

“Oh, what's tomorrow?” The fox's voice sounded a little hurt. “I thought we were going to have a night in.”

Shit, did she not tell her? Stella lowered the phone from her face and winced. She was so confused that she'd made two different plans on the same day. “Uh, I have a movie premiere to do,” she said. “It's a really big thing. I'm sorry. I just... it really slipped my mind. But my agent will literally grow antlers just to spit me if I don't go.”

It took a moment for Vera to respond. “Oh, well... we can reschedule, right?”

“Absolutely. We'll get a big tub of food. And – oh yeah – the premiere will be on TV, so if you wanted to, you can check it out!”

“I'll try to. My roommate's calling me, s-s-so I gotta go. I'll catch you on TV though!”

The fox hung up and Stella sighed. She was definitely mad, but the skunk's paws were tied. While Stella stuffed her phone back into her pocket, Vivian walked out into the showroom. She stepped around the skunk's aisle-filling bulk and looked her in the face. The doe knit her brow as she read Stella's expression.

“Dear... are you alright? You've been acting very strangely lately. I'm getting a little worried about you.”

In the real world, or at least the world Stella knew, a sudden gain of two hundred pounds in a couple months would be a series of red flags to make people concerned. Even though she was pretty much used to it now, every once in a while it was just so strange to almost never hear anyone remark on it. Stella glanced at the bracelet on her wrist and shook her head.

“I'm just overwhelmed,” she answered, sighing.

Vivian crossed her arms and nodded. “Well, I don't want you burning out. Look, we'll get you through the premiere and the after-party, and then you'll have time to relax.” The doe leaned in and rest her hooves on top of the skunk's tense-yet-soft shoulders. “You'll wake up nice and snug in bed in the

morning and everything will be fine.”

“There's an after-party?”

“Of course there is,” Vivian told her, straightening her hoodie.

“I'm not going.”

“Well... fine. It's not a media thing. But as long as you nail the red carpet. Then whatever it is that's bothering you, we'll make it all better. Promise.” Vivian slid her hooves down Stella's arms and gripped her by the wrists. The skunk looked down, seeing the orange glow of the bracelet peeking out of her sleeve. Vivian inclined her head and continued, “Now go home and relax. They'll ship the dress to you in the morning, just be ready when the car comes to pick you up.”

Stella said nothing, just exhaling slowly as Vivian turned and headed out of the boutique. The skunk was left standing alone in the forest of mannequins while ferrets chattered about resizing her dress behind her. Looking down, she tugged on her sleeve to cover her wrist and the bracelet.

“...and we're Entertainment Daily, coming to you live from the red carpet at the premiere of the hot new superhero film, *Star Ranger*! We've seen so many beautiful faces come by here already, haven't we?”

“And so many beautiful outfits.”

“I cannot get over Tawni's opalescent number. Just wow! Every color in the rainbow trapped in shimmering white. And it perfectly suits her. Isn't she just to die for?”

“Oh. Oh! Someone else is here. A stretch SUV is pulling up to the gate now. Let's see who it is... erm, well, the door is open but, uh... is someone coming? They're coming out, right? I think there might be some kind of issue- Oh, the driver has come around now, she's reaching into the back and doing something. She's helping the passenger climb out of the SUV. She seems to be... stuck. Someone else is pushing.”

“Is that Stella Mitchell?”

“Of course it's Stella Mitchell, who else- Oh, uh! Yes! Yes, it looks like Stella, one of the co-stars of *Star Ranger*! What do you think of her outfit?”

“Pearl straps and low-hanging fabric is very yum! That color looks absolutely wonderful on her, too, but what else is new? I think she's got her feet under her now, so who is that behind her? Oh, sweet heavens, it's Chris Hailer. These two are co-starring in *6 Oceanview Terrace*. Look at that chemistry. He's helping fix her dress, what a gentleman.”

“Okay, they're coming this way, let's see if we can call them over for an interview...”

Stella blinked rapidly. She wasn't ready for the sudden assault of light and sound on the red carpet walk. On one side ahead of her was a tall, white-and-black checkerboard wall, covered in logos for sponsoring companies and upcoming films. On the opposite side was a rope line and a pressing crowd of journalists and camera operators. So many voices were yelling all at once, and the skunk was practically blinded by the fast, staccato flashes of cameras.

Chris rest his paw on top of her bare shoulder, squeezing slightly. He stood to her right, between her and the high wall, as he was taller than her. He wouldn't block the view of her from the cameras that way. The maned wolf was cutting a devilishly handsome figure in a crisp, white tuxedo jacket and black bow tie. He smiled knowingly at Stella and dug his fingertips into her shoulder. With a wink towards her, he began to lead them both forward.

Not knowing what else to do, Stella tried to do what she had seen celebrities do on red carpet walks before. She raised up one chubby paw and waved towards the crowd. With every step, her massive figure wobbled underneath her dress while all the camera shutters worked overtime to snap pictures of her. Stella attempted to inconspicuously hike up the front of her dress and cover a little more of her cleavage, but it came across as blatantly obvious.

Some people were yelling at her, waving their paws frantically in the air. It was a pair of bunnies, wearing press badges from Entertainment Daily. Stella wanted to just smile and wave at them

and keep walking towards the safety of the inside of the theater, but Chris turned her towards the crowd, sliding his paw down to her wrist and leading her over to the rope barrier where the interviewers were waiting. The two bunnies were vibrating rapidly as the tall wolf and fat skunk walked over. Chris rest one paw on the barrier pole in front of him and threw the other around Stella's shoulders. She found herself – surrounded by strangers – smiling uncomfortably and leaning into the wolf subconsciously.

Microphones appeared in front of Stella's muzzle. She realized she hadn't actually heard the question and blushed, still dazzled by the flashing lights and onslaught of sound.

“Can you repeat that?” she asked, grinning awkwardly.

“You're looking absolutely amazing, Miss Mitchell,” one of the bunnies loudly said, folding down one of their – man, woman, either, Stella couldn't tell – ears. “Who are you wearing?”

“I'm wearing a dress,” Stella replied, equally loud and confused.

Chris leaned down and spoke directly into her ear. “Who made it.”

“Oh! Uh... it's a, uh... Jumienne!” Stella smiled broadly for having remembered the name right, and she gave the wolf a smile for helping her out.

“They did an absolutely stunning design for you,” the other bunny interjected. “It highlights your figure *amazingly*.”

“Ah-hah, uh... thank you!”

“So your here with Chris Hailer, who as we all know is the star of *Beachtown House*,” one of the bunnies said. Stella knew that. She knew his whole filmography. “What's it like, having the most eligible bachelor in town as arm candy tonight?”

Stella blushed and looked away before wiggling her shoulders and answering. “Well, I can honestly say I never in my wildest dreams thought I'd be right here... so that's kinda wild.”

“Same for me,” Chris cut in. “Alright, thank you both, we're gonna head in.”

Stella was happy to keep heading towards the theater entrance. The flashing lights and noise were giving her a headache. Chris kept his arm around her shoulders as they walked under the huge arch with the *Star Ranger* logo over the entrance. There were cardboard cut-outs of figures from the movie flanking the doorway. One of them was Stella – probably Other Stella – in her revealing outfit as Princess Callandra. The chestnut-furred skunk in the figure was almost 250 pounds lighter than what Stella had currently blown up to.

A couple ushers held the doors open for them as they entered, letting Stella's wide hips go first through the double doors. It was still crowded in the lobby, but the energy was completely different. Celebrities in dresses and suits milled about and chatted, some holding martini glasses. Stella inhaled deeply as she stepped into the crowd. Faces turned towards her and smiled, nodding knowingly. The skunk felt even more out of place here than she did on the set of the movie she was about to watch. Her paws shook and she clasped them together between her belly and bust to try to hide it. She recognized almost none of these faces, which was understandable – she only actually did reshoots in the movie for a single day; Other Stella filmed all the rest of it. If she squinted hard enough, she might have been able to recognize the director. Or was she thinking of the director of *6 Oceanview Terrace*? Or the movie she was supposedly gaining weight for?

Chris placed his paw warmly on the middle of her back and stood beside her. He waved to a few people that recognized him and was all smiles and gleaming teeth. The maned wolf looked down to her and lifted his eyebrow.

“Are you alright?” he asked softly. She was constantly taken aback by how sincere and warm he was, in stark contrast to how different he had been when they were acting. When *he* was acting, at least.

“Just nervous,” she replied. Thinking quickly, she added, “Never gets easier. There's a bar, right? I think I'll grab a drink.”

“Sure,” Chris said, rubbing her back softly before pointing the bar out to her.

Stella squeezed her way through the crowd, greeting people who knew her and shaking hands. A

few older men in tuxedos – probably studio heads and producers, if she had to guess – actually kissed her paws, which made her fur crawl. She grinned through it, though, and pressed on towards the bar, finally resting her heavy belly against it and putting her paws on the counter. The bartender, in a sharp vest and tie, turned towards her and asked what she would like.

“Whatever it is you've been putting in those cute little glasses, that'll be great,” she told him, watching as he grabbed some bottles and began to fix her a drink.

She somehow missed seeing Tawni appear at her side, despite the fennec's riot of colors. “Stella, did you come in with Chris Hailer?” the fox asked her, poking a finger into her chubby side.

The skunk's eyebrows went up and she turned to see the fennec, who was decked out in a beautiful dress made almost entirely out of shimmering color. Gosh, finally, a face she knew! Stella twisted herself around and looked backwards to where Chris was standing head-and-shoulders above a group of people, chatting and laughing.

“I did,” she answered, nodding down towards the fennec.

“Wow, really?” Tawni whistled lightly to herself. “You know, I did a movie with him once, and he was about as cold and closed-off as they get. Whatcha seeing in him? Or is this just a business thing?”

The bartender got Stella's attention and slid her drink towards her. She thanked him and picked it up, taking a sip. “You know, I thought the same thing for a while,” she said, trying to be quiet but also loud enough so the fennec could hear over the crowd, “but that's just when he's working. Otherwise, he's very sweet. I honestly kinda feel bad for misjudging him.”

“That so,” Tawni mused, shrugging her shoulders lightly. A wry smirk crossed her muzzle and she winked to Stella. “Well, I hope you have fun later tonight, then.”

The skunk choked a little on her drink and snapped her free paw to underneath her chin to keep from dribbling alcohol onto her cleavage. “D-do what?!” She glanced around, but Tawni was already gone, disappearing into the crowd. Stella sighed a little, leaning her weight against the bar behind her and sipping more of her drink. She tried to keep what Vivian told her in her mind – get this over with, and then relax. Problems would go away. But the premiere *wasn't* her problem. Stella looked down at the problem, and her bracelet was a nasty shade of red-orange already.

She ate three boxes of donuts before she headed to the premiere, in the hopes that it would hold off the needy bracelet long enough to watch the movie. Apparently it wasn't. Blowing her breath out through her nose, the skunk turned back towards the bartender.

“Um, you wouldn't happen to be serving anything to eat tonight, would you?” she asked, resting her empty glass on the counter. As big as she was, that little bit of alcohol wasn't going to affect her at all.

“No, ma'am, only the bar is open for the premiere tonight.”

Stella huffed but nodded in disappointment. “Yeah, fancy dress and all that. Thank you.”

A paw touched her shoulder and she looked up to see Chris standing over her. He smiled and then nodded his head towards the theater's inner doors. “They're starting the showing in just a moment. Shall we go find a few seats?”

“I'll probably need a handful,” Stella grumbled, turning and walking with him.

“As long as I get one beside you, then I don't see any problems.”

The crowd was milling their way into the showroom as ushers held the doors. Stella and Chris got into the line, with people parting for one of the stars from the film to come in for priority seating. Stella waddled through the door and headed down the aisle, feeling her hips bounce against the handrails on either side, before turning and peering into the quickly filling auditorium. It wasn't a regular theater like she was used to, but a decently-sized venue for musical acts, operas, or comedians to perform. A projector screen was lowered down from the ceiling over the stage, and the lights were down to a low, golden tone, giving just enough light to see which seats already had souls in them.

The stars and their dates had a reserved row near the front but before the closest seats. Stella

noted that it was the first row behind a walking path. That was nice because it meant she wasn't going to have to try squashing her enormous body into the much more narrow stacked rows. There was no way she'd be able to sit without her belly rolling over the chairs in front of her. But she couldn't help but wonder if they were all sitting there *because* of her. She noticed that Tawni was sitting in the row already, next to a couple others she recognized only vaguely from the cardboard movie cutouts. There were open seats beside the fennec, so Stella made her way over. Chris helpfully raised the armrests for her, optimistically lifting up two of them so she had three seats to settle her wide hips onto. The skunk assumed that was too much – until she actually sat down, and her love handles squished against the further armrests. She blushed, feeling her enormous bowl of belly fat resting on top of her thighs. Chris settled himself down beside her and playfully pat his paw on her stomach, making her jiggle a bit in the dark.

As more people filled into the theater, the lights went down even lower. Stella rest her paws on top of her girth, and in the near darkness, she could plainly see the glow from her bracelet. The red light made her blue dress look black. For just a moment, she had a flash of anxiety that everyone was going to be able to see the glow, too, but she reminded herself that wasn't true.

It was red already, though. A tiny part of her begged for it to turn purple and then blue, or something, just to make sure that time wasn't close to running out. Another small part just wanted it over with, to yank the bracelet off and let whatever was going to happen, happen. But mostly she was a bundle of nerves, hoping she'd get a chance to stuff her muzzle with an entire cake before bedtime. How long was this movie going to be...?

The projector ignited and there was mild applause from the gathered crowd. Instead of trailers, there was a short video from the studio producer talking about the movie and how much it meant to them and the studio. Stella had no idea who that was, so she tuned it out. Her eyes kept flicking towards her bracelet. After a couple minutes, the video dimmed and was replaced by the usual battery of logos and intro videos that came before a film.

Stella knew absolutely nothing about this movie. Given she only played the character for one day, and not even really well, at that, she didn't bother even trying to look up the comics it was based on. So when a voice started talking about planetary wars and aliens and some kind of cosmic fuel source that people could channel into superpowers, her brain shut off. She watched the movie with disinterest, squirming in her chair in a mixture of boredom and tension.

Chris nudged her shoulder about thirty minutes in. He had noticed her eyes were wandering, and he directed her up to see herself, completely filling the big screen. She – Other Stella – was fighting a bunch of aliens in her wildly impractical outfit, wielding that sword made of blazing blue lightning instead of just an empty handle. Yeah, it made a little more sense once all the special effects were added in. Honestly, with her huge belly and love handles hanging out of that outfit, the skunk expected to hear snickers and laughs in the audience. It was quiet and respectful, though, so... that was nice.

Even later into the movie, she recognized the scene she did, where Tawni's character was dying and taken away by what she could now see was some divine, angel-like figure. To her, the reshoots looked pretty obvious, because she was distinctly heavier in them, and she looked confused more than anything. Maybe she just didn't have the imagination to work in movies where she could see essentially nothing around her.

Stella glanced at her bracelet during the big, obnoxious battle scene at the climax. It was so red it looked ready to go apoplectic. Her stomach grumbled hungrily, churning on top of her lap. She swore her dress went slightly slack, as if she was shrinking from hunger. The skunk tapped her feet, looking up at the screen for any kind of sign that the movie was about to end.

Loud applause rippled throughout the theater after the hero's big speech and the cut to credits. The house lights came back up and people from the row behind her started to congratulate Stella on her performance. She awkwardly accepted their praise for something she didn't do, and then tried to

wobble away while they turned their attention to Tawni.

She snuck into the passageway where she'd entered the theater from. Once she was fairly alone, the skunk sunk two fingers into her heavy cleavage and pulled out her cell phone. Unlocking it with a swipe, she pulled up her contacts list and let her thumb hover over Vera's name. The blue light from the phone was almost overpowered by the red glare from her bracelet.

Right when she was about to touch the green phone button, Chris appeared behind her. "Where are you going?" he asked, gently touching her shoulder.

"Home," she offered, turning to smile at him awkwardly. Even though he couldn't see the angry, red bracelet on her wrist, she covered it with her paw anyways. "I had a nice evening, though. I've just... I gotta go."

The maned wolf's eyebrows tilted as if he was hurt. "Oh. I was really hoping that you were going to attend the after-party. It'll be a laid-back thing; don't need to worry about all the microphones and paparazzi." He looked her square in the eyes and grinned a bit. "There'll be food, too."

God, she swore he could read her mind. Or she wasn't that hard to figure out. Inhaling deep, she gripped her wrist with the bracelet tightly. "How much?" she asked, squinting.

"They always make more than enough," the maned wolf replied simply, his teeth showing in his smile. He extended a paw to her. "Will you come? I still need a date."

Stella looked at his extended paw and bit her lip. She glanced down at her phone again and pressed the lock button, putting it back to sleep.

Vera's roommate, and vocalist for her band, settled down on the couch beside her. The porcupine offered a bowl of popcorn towards the fox. Vera was sitting on the patched, re-upholstered, partially stained couch with her legs crossed and a black tank top covering her white fur. Her snake, Lugnut, was lazily wrapped around her neck and shoulders like a scarf, obviously flicking his tongue and looking into the distance. She took a pawful of popcorn and started to munch while she watched the red carpet coverage for the *Star Ranger* premiere.

The porcupine talked through a mouthful of butterless popcorn. "So if she stiffed you, why are you watching this? Like, this is really boring."

Vera grumbled. "She didn't s-s-stiff me. She just had things that she f-forgot about."

"Uh-huh. Big, pretty movie star forgot about a movie premiere?" The porcupine shook her head. Her quills were gathered back into a thick bundle like a ponytail and they rustled together.

The vixen finished her popcorn and then pulled her fluffy tail into her lap. Nervously combing tangles out of the fur, she snipped back at the porcupine. "She's just s-s-stressed out lately. That's all. She has a lot to think about."

"Yeah, like all her money."

Vera slapped her thigh in frustration and turned to look at the porcupine. "Why are you being s-so negative?"

"Hey! I'm just trying to look out for you," her roommate offered, balancing the popcorn bowl on her lap while she held up both paws. "She came to our show, yeah, that was cool, but I don't trust her. People like that, all they do is use people. They're in another world."

Vera made a point of huffing loudly. She pet Lugnut and turned her attention back to the TV. The two reporters from Entertainment Daily, a pair of energetic bunnies, were chattering about the stars they could see. As she watched the pageantry and proceedings, she couldn't help but feel like her roommate was right, to a point. That really was a different world. It was one Vera worked in, but was always still just on the periphery of. She wanted to be an actress, a long time ago, but her stutter made that impossible. Fortunately, her fur made it easy for her to become a lighting stand-in, and then a stunt double.

But she felt like Stella was different. There was a grounded quality to her that she didn't get from other actors she met. Like she was something else entirely. Yeah, the fox was frustrated to have

their plans canceled for tonight, but the skunk was very busy. That's what she was telling herself. Her shoulders sagged as she watched the bunnies talk to a rainbow fennec in a beautiful dress. Maybe she was giving the skunk a lot of leash because she was nice to her. Vera swallowed hard. No, that was just her roommate's doubts.

The porcupine thumped her shoulder. "Hey, hey, I think she's coming."

Vera's eyes lit up and she leaned forward, watching the screen. The camera operator tilted the view to look up along the carpet as a tigress in a business suit tugged the oversized skunk from the back of a stretched SUV. Oh, Stella would hate that getting caught on camera, but fortunately she squeezed her way out and got her feet underneath her. And then someone... else... stepped out of the back of the SUV. It was a tall maned wolf in a crisp tuxedo. He placed his paw on Stella's shoulder, smiling warmly to the gathered press. The vixen's lips parted as her jaw slowly dropped open. She could feel her heart pushing against her ribs.

Her roommate whistled. "Wow, he's cute for a tool. Who is he?"

"I don't know..."

"You don't know the guy your girly-friend is hanging out with at the red carpet?"

Vera's neck muscles worked as she began to breathe faster. "Stop."

Stella and the wolf walked over to get interviewed by the two bunnies. The conversation went fast, with the bunnies asking questions and Stella being confused at first, but then happily answering what kind of dress she was wearing. The whole time, the wolf stood right at her shoulder, beaming proudly and having his paw resting on her. Get your fingers off her, Vera wanted to snarl, but... Stella wasn't brushing him off. If anything, she seemed to gravitate into his embrace.

Then she said it. She said it was beyond her wildest dreams to be there with him. Out there with him... instead of with her. Her roommate was right. Vera felt her heart plummet down into her stomach. Her paws trembled and she felt like throwing up.

Her roommate wrung her paws together, her eyebrows lowered in sympathy. "Vera... I'm... I don't know what to say."

Stella and the wolf took their leave from the interview, leaving Vera with nothing but a swirl of thoughts and questions all talking over one another in her mind. Who was that? Some rich actor? He was handsome, wildly handsome, even if that wasn't to Vera's taste. Were he and Stella actually... together? She'd never mentioned anyone like that to her before. If that was the case, where did that leave her? What if she was just... fun. She felt idiotic for thinking she meant something to someone like Stella.

The TV cut back to the Entertainment Daily studio, where a badger lady in a nice blazer was standing on the set next to a freeze-frame of Stella and the mysterious wolf. Vera looked up and watched the show through water-rimmed eyes.

"It sure looks like Ms. Mitchell and Mr. Hailer are enjoying themselves at the premiere," the badger said, a wry smirk on her face. "The cute couple are the stars of the upcoming *6 Oceanview Terrace*. Is this the start of something more to come? We'll have to find out soon. But we do know that the beautiful Stella isn't hurting for any romantic partners, at least according to this photo acquired by Entertainment Daily."

A picture popped up on the television. Vera's roommate audibly gasped and then covered her face. The fox's heart practically stopped. It was Stella's backyard, where she and the skunk had romped playfully in the pool. And the photo was showing exactly that – both of them completely in the fur, standing waist deep in the water. Some "tasteful" censor blurs blocked out Vera's breasts and face, but it was still very obviously, painfully, her. The noise she'd heard from the bushes that afternoon hadn't been an animal. It was a photographer.

The image cut back to the badger, still wearing a snide grin. "Who is Ms. Mitchell's mystery friend? We have a few ideas – and we'll discuss them when we get back from these messages."

Vera blood couldn't decide if it wanted to be ice cold or boiling hot. Rage and mortification

warred in her veins. She jumped out of her seat on the couch and stormed to her room. She didn't know what to do, but she was going to explode if she couldn't do something. It was too much. Just all too much all at once. She wanted to pull the ripcord and just be out.

"Vera...? Are you okay?" her roommate called. The vixen put Lugnut away in his habitat and locked the door, taking several tries because her paws were shaking so badly. She grabbed a leather jacket and keys and stomped back into the living room.

"I'm going out," she told the porcupine, not raising her gaze up from the floor.

"What are you going to do?" her roommate asked, reaching for her wrist.

Vera pulled open the door and shook her head. Tears were staining her face. "Probably make an ass of myself." She slammed the door shut behind her, rattling the pictures on the walls.

The after-party was held at a mansion in the hills by the coast, only a short distance away from Stella's home. As she looked out the windows of the SUV, she began to recognize the area. She had no idea whose house this was, but it was *much* bigger than her own. Cars were lining up and dropping off guests, who walked up the steps and into the warmly-lit front door late into the evening.

Stella glanced at her bracelet off and on the whole way to the after-party, to the point where Chris was beginning to furrow his brow in confusion. He couldn't see the pulsing red glow that radiated from the black stone, but he could hear the loud grumbles of hunger in her oversized belly. Stella took up much of the back of the SUV, her hips nearly reaching from one end to the other. The maned wolf could only fit in the reverse seat across from her, and even then he had to hunch a little due to his height. The skunk smiled anxiously at him, thinking the red glow illuminating his face in slow pulses looked particularly worrisome.

"I really hope they've got a lot of food," Stella mumbled, waiting their turn to pull up to the door and step out. Or roll out, in her case.

"Should be plenty, don't worry," the wolf replied, grinning and winking at her.

Their time to unload came, and Jackie immediately went around to the door, pulling it open. Then she walked to the other side of the SUV, opened that door, and climbed in so she could start to roll and shove the skunk out of the vehicle. Stella squeezed herself out of the narrow doorway, panting for breath when her feet finally touched the pavement. Chris thanked the tigress and tipped her before climbing out himself, dusting off Stella's dress before taking her arm and leading her in to the party.

Stella recognized some of the faces and outfits from the premiere, but there were even more people here than at the theater. It was practically crowded, with little room for the extra-large skunk to maneuver. Everyone who saw her had something to say, telling her how good she looked in the film or how well she acted. She politely thanked them all, a growing blush on her face. Her eyes kept furtively looking around the room, hoping to spot a buffet table or something. Chris, fortunately, kept things moving, his paw on her shoulder and leading her along.

The skunk tucked her wrist in against her dress, trying to hide the bright glow from herself. It was shining so brightly and wickedly now. She swore it was going to go off anytime. Nudging her way past more people, she worked her way to the back of the room, finally spotting a buffet table covered in a white sheet and several chafing dishes. Offering the caterer a cursory thanks, she snagged a plate from the pile and piled it full of finger foods from each of the trays and warming dishes. Chris stood beside her, watching her gather up food like she was preparing for hibernation. A few other party-goers offered her awkward stares but then went back to their business.

"Really hungry, huh?" Chris asked, gently brushing back some of her silver-white hair. Stella offered him a quick glare before going back to shoveling food into her mouth. "I'll be right back. I'd like to start this party correctly."

The wolf took his leave, noticing someone he recognized. Stella remained by the buffet table, pushing little finger foods into her mouth one by one, barely taking the time to swallow. People came up to her to shake her paw or offer her neck-crushing hugs. No one she recognized at all, and many of

them wanted to talk about box office projections and things she had no interest in. She tried to be polite, all while keeping her plate piled high and mouth full. Many of the people noticed how... distracted she was with eating, and eventually left her be – though it only created an opening for someone else to come talk to her.

But no matter how many plates she ate, the glow on her bracelet just remained as red and angry as she'd ever seen it. The caterer looked a little concerned, but kept stocking the buffet table with more treats for the skunk to claim for her own. At least the constant stuffing sessions with Vera had helped her get used to overeating. She gobbled down plate after plate, huffing for breath and leaning her weight against a decorative column in the house.

“Stupid thing,” she growled at the bracelet under her breath, pushing even more cocktail hot dogs into her muzzle. “Just... turn orange already. I just wanna see orange.”

The bracelet simply shined an even brighter red. It was like having a fog light attached to her arm that only she could see. The red light was overpowering everything else.

The sound of clinking glass drew Stella's attention. She turned and looked, seeing Chris standing in the middle of the room. The crowd parted between him and her, revealing the gorgeous tile floor that she hadn't even been able to appreciate before now. The maned wolf was holding a pair of champagne flutes, both full of bubbly amber drink. He motioned for her to come over, and – finding that all of the eyes in the party were on her – Stella did as he directed, bringing her plate with her. She blushed, standing in the middle of the party now, the center of attention. The bracelet bathed Chris in red light, flickering through the champagne in the flutes. The wolf handed her one of the glasses in his paw and raised up the other. Glancing around, Stella noticed that everyone had been handed a similar glass while she was occupied with stuffing her face.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I don't think we could possibly have a proper party to celebrate that amazing movie we just saw unless we toast the lady of the hour,” Chris said, his voice carrying over the crowd. He smiled brightly and looked down at Stella's reddening face. “To our Lady Callandra of the Blue Star, or as she's better known to us, Stella Mitchell.”

There were words of agreement from around the crowd. Stella drank from her flute just to hide her embarrassment. Chris downed his as well, and was reaching out to gently hold the skunk's muzzle between his fingers. But before they could touch, mutters of confusion rippled through the crowd. Someone was nudging their way through the gathered celebrities. Stella looked past Chris and saw a tuft of white hair squeezing between the dark outfits. When Vera finally shoved her way through into the open, wearing a leather jacket and tears streaming down her face, Stella's jaw dropped. The plate tumbled from her paw and clattered on the floor.

“Vera,” she gasped. She waddled over to the fox, her eyes wide with surprise. “What are you-”

“Had s-s-something to do, huh?” the vixen asked, sniffing. Her eyes were red and raw. Stella could see that even though the bright, shining red light from her bracelet.

Chris stepped up next to Stella. “Um, who is-”

Stella pushed her champagne flute into Chris's paw and nudged him backwards. Turning back to Vera, she asked, “Vera... what's wrong? Are you okay? Come here, let's go outside.”

“Why? You don't want them all to s-s-see me?” A muted gasp rolled through the party crowd. The vixen balled her fists and shook her head. “I don't know what I was thinking. You were s-so nice, but I should have known. You didn't really think anything about me, did you? I was just a tool. A toy you could take home s-s-sometimes and play with.”

“No!” Stella reached for Vera's paw but the fox yanked it away.

“I'm s-sorry I'm not a big c-c-celebrity like *him*,” Vera continued, jabbing a finger towards Chris, who narrowed his eyes and recoiled. She lowered her face and shook her head. “I knew. I always knew it was too good to be true. But you had me going for a little while.”

“Vera, please,” Stella pleaded, feeling her heart pump in time with the pulsing of the light coming from her wrist. Every sharp glow of red lit Vera's face from underneath, giving her face a

sunken, skull-like visage. It was just like the makeup she wore at the club. "Let's go talk. Please. I can explain."

"It's too late," Vera replied. "I don't even know why I came here. I was headed to your house to just... I didn't know what I was going to do. Probably just s-s-say all this. I wanted to tell you it was over, because then at least I could f-f-feel like I had some decency." The fox swallowed hard, pausing for a moment. It was deathly quiet in the party. "Bye, Elle. Thanks f-f-for... everything."

Stella was too stunned to move. Vera just turned around and began walking away, squaring up her shoulders as she disappeared through the mansion's front doors. Quiet mumbling began to ripple through the crowd. The skunk's knees felt weak. Chris tried to put his arm around her.

She ran.

Not after Vera. She turned and ran the other way. The crowd parted for the huge skunk as she just looked for anywhere she could go to be alone. Storming through room after room, she yanked open a veranda door and stepped out onto a terrace on the side of the house. She threw her weight against the balustrade surrounding the veranda and buried her face into her paws. Stella sobbed, heartbroken. How could she have messed up so badly? She knew Vera was scared... she *knew* that. Tears streamed down the skunk's muzzle as she leaned on the stone railing.

Sniffing, she looked up, past the balustrade and into the night. The ocean sparkled with moonlight down the cliffside. She was wearing this fancy dress and bawling her eyes out. It was just like the scene from *Oceanview*... there was just one thing missing.

"Stella." Chris appeared in the doorway behind her. Stella turned and looked at him, blinking away tears. He walked over to her, touching her cheek with his paw. "I'm here."

She slapped his paw away. "Fuck off."

Chris placed his rebuffed paw on the balustrade and looked at her. "Listen, if you want to talk, I'm here. What happened back there?"

"I don't want anything from you," Stella growled. Her chest heaved for breath as she struggled to keep herself from just completely going to pieces. Her head was spinning. The red light from the bracelet was a blinding glare. "I had one good thing in this whole, stupid game... and I ruined it. I fucking ruined it. I should have... I fucked it up."

Chris tilted his head and took a half-step backwards. "What... game? Stella? Are you okay?"

"His stupid goddamn game," she hissed, holding up her wrist and baring her fangs at the bracelet. "What was the point of this? What was I ever going to *get*? I was fucked from the start... fatter and fatter until I couldn't eat enough to keep this stupid thing happy. I got so sidetracked with it that I just... I lost her. But I was always going to lose, wasn't I? That fucking asshole..."

"Stella... you're not making sense."

She glared at the wolf. "You're not real. None of this is real. And I'm done. I was about to lose anyways, so I'm quitting. Just... I give up."

Stella wrenched her fingers underneath the bracelet, squeezing them in between it and her chubby wrist. She twisted and pulled until the bracelet popped from her paw and tumbled to the ground. The intense red light shining from the black stone died in an instant. The veranda went dark save for the glow from the open door.

Chris reached out to touch Stella's shoulder again, but as she looked up at him, he began to turn transparent and hazy. It almost looked like he was being blown away by the ocean breeze. His paw disappeared just before it landed on her shoulder, and the rest of his body followed suit, wisping away like smoke. The skunk stood alone in the dark, breathing heavily and trying to calm her heart. Tears dribbled down her face, dripping from the fur on her chin to land on her chest.

She walked back through the mansion to the main hall where the party had been held. It was empty. Every single person had vanished like fog. Champagne flutes lay scattered on the floor. Cars idled empty in the front driveway where people had been trying to leave. Everyone was just... gone. Chris was gone. Vivian was gone.

Vera was gone.

Stella stood alone in the middle of the mansion. She felt like the biggest, stupidest idiot in the world. She wiped her face with the back of her paw, smearing tears into her cheek fur. Everyone might be gone, but the world was still here. She was still here. That meant there was one thing left.

The skunk looked upwards, clenching her fists. "Where are you, you asshole?" she shouted. "Get out here and explain yourself."

She felt a cold wind against her back and turned about. The air itself warped and twisted, and the stranger appeared out of nowhere. He stood with his paws clasped in front of himself, but now he was somehow... scarier. The eerie, featureless fox looked larger and more threatening than before. He looked down at her along his long, pointed muzzle with eyes that slid between hue, shape, and size, but no matter how they changed, their intensity remained the same.

"Stella Mitchell," he said, his voice even and flat. "You have terminated our arrangement."

The skunk steeled every ounce of hard-bitten public defender in her and stood her ground. Her body shook with restrained rage at the object of her frustration. "I did. You win. You were always going to win."

"It was not about winning or losing."

"Well, I sure as hell feel like I lost!" she screamed. "What was the fucking point of this? Did you just want to torture me? Show me something I'd never have and then yank it away because there was *no way* I could keep up with your stupid bracelet's demands?"

The fox did not quail one inch against her shouting. "As I told you when we first met, this was about perspective. More for me than you, perhaps." He raised up one paw slowly and held out a finger. "You received what you bargained for, did you not?"

"I don't give a shit about all that," Stella replied. "You can take your money and fame and this whole fake fantasy world and go to hell. I've lost the only thing I genuinely wanted. So you can take your stupid game, your stupid rules, and your stupid bullshit and leave me alone. This is all your fault."

The stranger turned his head slightly and began to pace around Stella. "Are you so certain...? You wanted wealth and success. You had the man of your very dreams fawning for you. If these things did not tempt you, and your new companion did, then why did you choose to indulge in them?"

Stella opened her mouth to speak, but she didn't know what to say. Her anger ebbed and she just felt cold.

"Poor Vera," he continued. "She loved you. In her heart, she did."

"I loved her..."

"But she felt fear." The fox tapped his chest. "She feared losing you. She feared that you were fraudulent. You proved her right. No amount of good intentions can overcome that."

Stella's knees gave out. She dropped down to her paws and knees, her belly pressing on the tile floor beneath her. Tears dripped from her eyes onto the tiles as she sobbed. Beside her, the stranger knelt down, tilting his head unnaturally to the side so he could look at her.

"If you truly cared for her, why did you not give all this up?" he asked, gesturing towards the opulent mansion. "Why did you not say *this* was what you wanted, and cast away the shackles that were never yours to begin with?"

"I should have put her first..." Stella groaned. "I thought I had to balance everything... I wanted to maintain my- *her* reputation. But I'm not her. I'm not part of this world. And I couldn't let go of how I felt about Chris. If I hadn't met Vera, then he and I... no. You're right. You're absolutely fucking right. I should have been there for Vera. I could've been with her now, just... for as long as the goddamn bracelet would let me. Just one more day, if that." She looked up at the fox. "You didn't tell me. What was the point? Why give me this? Why let me meet her when it was all going to go away?"

"That was never part of the parameters, Stella Mitchell," the stranger answered. "The experiment was to see how you would act in a world very much not your own, with rules you could not comprehend. It was an interesting development, you and Vera finding each other. How incredibly

curious. And only because of the weight gain stipulation, it would seem. An interesting perspective. You have been quite the enlightening participant, Stella Mitchell. Thank you.”

The skunk sat up on her knees. “So that's it... it's over?”

“The agreement is ended.”

Stella swallowed hard and looked around the empty mansion. “Whatever... there's nothing left for me here anymore, anyways.”

The fox nodded and took a step backwards from the skunk. He held out one paw, finger and thumb pressed together. There was a *snap*, and the world went dark.

Stella's eyes popped open in the morning light. A familiar, stale smell filled her nose. The skunk sat up very easily in the bed and looked around. It was her apartment. Her small, crummy apartment. She threw back the blankets and saw a slender body beneath her, covered in wrinkled pajamas. Sirens blared outside, somewhere in the distance. Her phone rang, vibrating across the end table beside her bed. She picked it up and held it to her ear.

“Ms. Mitchell. You need to get down to the precinct, we've got-”

“I quit.”

Stella tossed the phone onto the floor and sighed. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and sat still for a long time. Her eyes stared forward, empty. She was home.

* * * * *

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