A puff of smoke had been expelled from the beaker nearby casting a shadow of soot upon Fio's face. Getting out a cloth from his side, he wiped his face off and slunk back into his chair with a huff.

*This isn't going anywhere* he thought to himself. He glanced over his notes again, brushing away any of his dark brown hair that got in the way. *Marigold petals and nightclover should've given me exactly the results I wanted. Maybe I should add a bit more snapdragon extract? Gosh, this is becoming a bit more of an impossibility with every change… I should just leave it for now. Caelyn always says I shouldn't overwork myself* he thought to himself then smiled. Caelyn, the little kitsune he met months ago, who showed him so much beyond the confines of nobility his parents trapped him within. Perhaps he could go see them tonight, see if they wanted some tea, see if they could answer some more questions, maybe questions about Fio himself. Fio looked at his reflection in the beaker, a distorted view of his face looking back at him as if it was sneering. He moved the beaker out of view and sighed, grabbing his travel bag from the side of his bed then poked his head out from the door. The coast was clear.

Slinking out from his bedroom like a wolf on the hunt, his emerald eyes gleamed in the dim suffocation of the dark halls. Not too far away, he could hear his brother arguing loudly with mother, the words soon turning into wolf-like growling. He snickered silently, Fiorenzo would provide a nice distraction for his escape this time, a blessing he didn't often have on these escapades. Tip-tap went his boots as he strode down the hall, then, he froze as he heard what sounded like father. But it seemed like he was more concerned with asking the chef what would be best for breakfast tomorrow than worrying about where any of his children were. However, the entrance door to the kitchen was wide open and anyone would easily notice Fio if he were to just walk by. With a swift thought, he relaxed he body and his amber skin became covered in dark brown and cream colored fur, his nose elongated into a snout, and his ears grew to points. As his hands morphed from human fingers into fluffy wolf paws, they broke through the leather gloves he wore and he frowned as he realized he'd forgotten to take them off, ruining yet another pair of perfectly good gloves. Either way, now he had the advantage of a predator’s camouflage, but the only prey he'd be hunting down tonight was his love. Sticking to the shadows, he slunk by the open kitchen door as his dark fur blended with the darkness and then made a dash towards the door of the manor. Fio's nose twitched as he smelled the familiar waft of ale in the air… the guards had been drinking again. Perfect. With a confident gait, he walked out the door and past two drunk guards, who barely even seemed to notice the youngest (by only mere minutes) of the twin brothers from the D'Amore family walk straight by.

Fio smiled to himself as he climbed over the front gates. “Caelyn, here I come!” and he bounded off into the cover of night.

The streets were empty and quiet, quiet except for Fio. The tap of his boots broke the silence with each step and he walked over to Caelyn's. Only a few blocks from the manor due to her position as a baker there, getting to her home was as easy as simply turning the corner and taking a five minute walk. Soon, he'd arrived with not a soul seeing him on his way there.

Knock, knock, knock he hit rhythmically on the front door as he stood in the chilly winter cold.

“Oh! Coming! Coming! Just wait a second!” a voice called from within the house. Then, creaking open the door while mixing together gingerbread cookies in a green glass bowl was a small fennec, a few inches shorter than Fio, but their tall ears hid how tiny they really were. “Fio!” Caelyn cried gleefully. They nearly dropped their bowl as they did so, but quickly kept hold. “I was just making cookies as sweet as you. Making sure the gingerbread is perfect for the Night of Pale feast next week at the manor.”

“That's really kind of you to put so much work into it for us,” Fio commented with a smile.

“Well I'm mostly concerned about *you* being happy! Now come in, please! More company is always good. Was just about to chill the batter too!”

Fio entered inside the small hovel of a home. Cooking equipment was set around haphazardly in the kitchen, some cookies already out cooling while fun cut-out shapes were drying on a rag nearby. On the other side of the room, away from the kitchen, was a bed small than Fio himself with a canvas set up next to it, the painting of a snowscape with a quaint home in the middle of it. Golden lights illuminated shadowed figures in the windows of the painted home, displaying silhouettes embracing each other.

“Your painting skills are improving faster everyday, Caelyn,” Fio remarked.

“Oh you think so? I practice everyday! I call that piece ‘Snowed In Love,’ what do you think?”

“A very fitting title from a very beautiful friend,” Fio said as he patted Caelyn's head. Their cheeks blushed as their ears parted to the side.

“So, what did you come here for?”

“Well, actually,” Fio began as he felt his body tense up. “I wanted to talk about some things over some tea.”

“What kind of things?”

“I heard you got a top-surgery and I was wondering what it means to you?” Fio continued. “If that's uh, okay! I don’t want to he invasive!” Fio said in a short panic after.

“Of course it's fine! Let me get a pot on and put this dough in the ice box and we can sit down. That sound good?”

“Y-Yeah, of course!” Fio said with an embarrassed blush as he took a seat at the weathered kitchen table. Fio wondered if Caelyn could actually sate his curiosity. But as he watched them do a little dance and their tail wag gaily as they poured water into the kettle, a sort of warmth kindled in his heart, the warmth he felt whenever he saw them. That alone was enough to feel sure that everything would be alright.

A few minutes later, Caelyn was pouring a glass of tea for Fio and themselves. There was an aroma of cinnamon in the air wafting up from the cups, tantalizing Fio's nostrils. However, the distorted reflection in the liquid put him off quickly from getting close to sniffing the aroma.

“Cinnamon tea? I don't think I've ever had something like this before,” Fio stated matter-of-factly.

“It's a special blend I made with some help from the local tea master,” Caelyn replied. “But that's besides the point. You wanted to know about my top surgery?”

“Well… yes,” Fio said tentatively. “What does it mean to you?”

Caelyn laughed and then took a sip of their tea. “Well that's a simple answer, it helped me affirm my feelings about my identity and self.”

“How so?”

“Well, think of it this way. On the inside I didn't feel like the gender I was born as and on the outside my body didn't quite fit, so I simply made those my feelings and body match,” Caelyn explained.

“That's… I never thought of something like that,” Fio mentioned.

“It's not something I imagine a lot of people think about. I'm surprised you asked about it!”

“Well, to be honest with you, Caelyn. When I see myself sometimes, something doesn't feel right,” Fio lamented.

“Like you'd prefer to be in your wolf form?”

“No, no, no, more like you, like what I am just isn't right. Like… being a guy isn't exactly what it's cracked up to be.”

“Oh! Then perhaps you're like me… not exactly the same, you want to be more of a girl maybe?”

“Maybe, I just, I don't know. It feels so strange to look into a mirror and always see something wrong… something that isn't me looking back.”

“Well I have an idea!” Caelyn declared as her ears shot up.

“Y-You do?” Fio said as he fell back in his chair a bit from the sudden excitement.

“What if I paint you! Not you as you are, but what you could be? You know, as a girl! Would you be okay with that?”

“I'm not opposed to the idea, no, but wouldn't that be a bit difficult?”

“Well, when you have psionic abilities like I do, I can always try and visualize something in my dream plane,” Caelyn said confidently.

“Your powers can get a little out of control though! I haven't exactly perfected an elixir for it yet.”

Caelyn's ears went down and her smile turned to a frown. “I mean, yeah you're right, but it's worth trying at least isn't it?”

“As long as you stay safe, that's all that matters to me. Can you promise that?”

“I can!” Caelyn smiled. “Here let me set up a stool for you to sit on and then I’ll get my brushes!”

Caelyn ran off, leaving her tea to grow cold on the kitchen table as she got a stool for Fio and directed him to sit down and smile on the seat. At first, Fio smiled wide and sarcastically, but with some directions and prodding from Caelyn, he relaxed into a more regal stance.

“Is this good?” Fio asked.

“Yes! Perfect! Now stay there and I'll get started,” Caelyn said enthusiastically. Pulling out numerous brushes and a painter's palette, they got to work as they concentrated on Fio's face and the canvas, vividly imaging what their friend would look like in this new body. First, Caelyn began sketching. Looking from behind the canvas at Fio then gently drawing upon it as they inspected every nuance of Fio's face. Then, when they felt all was complete, they began dropping blots of paint upon their palette.

“Everything good so far? Getting a little sore sitting here for so long,” Fio said.

“It's going great! Don't worry! Just finished the sketch and now I'm going to start painting the colors and lining,” Caelyn replied.

“Yep, sounds good,” Fio said as he straightened himself up a little bit.

Caelyn looked at the colors on their palette and then compared them to the clothes Fio wore and his complexion, taking a moment to mix the paints to create new hues. Gently they began by painting in the browns and whites of his vest and slowly did the colors leak out behind them like a cascading stream.

“Uh, Caelyn, I think your psionics are acting up outside again,” Fio said as soon as he noticed. However, Caelyn seemed to be entirely focused on the canvas, painting in the browns and getting the folds of the fabric just right. Each stroke sent the very same color flying out in psionic light, seemingly erupting from nothing as they covered the room and the physical began to fade away. Imaginary paint dripped down the walls and on to the floor and began painting a landscape itself. The white paint became snow and the brown, a cottage in the distance, warm and inviting, as color swirled in the sky like an aurora.

“Caelyn, I think we're in your painting,” Fio blurted out in surprise. Caelyn's ears shot at this remark and she took a second look around, feeling snowfall without chill and seeing light that gave off no illumination.

“This is… different, uh, let me finish this quick,” they said as they quickly returned to painting. With the clothes finished, they began the face, a face similar to Fio's but distinctly different. First they began with his complexion, using cream colored paints they brushed the canvas with care and from it sprung a distant moon, shining in a nightless sky. Once Caelyn was satisfied with Fio's complexion, they moved the more minute details, painting his dark brown hair into a bob and with each strange that was painted a shard of night creeped into the sky above. Soon, the sky imitated the midnight feeling blanketing the set of this dreamscape, the moon now gently caressed by a raven's cloak.

At least, Caelyn moved to the most important parts, the eyes and lips. An emerald green filled the painting's eyes, the lights of the aurora descended down and danced in humanoid forms among the two. One aurora in an indistinct shape, took the hand of Fio and swept him up in a midnight revelry.

“Caelynnnnn!” Fio cried as he danced and pranced upon the fluffy false snow.

“Just one last thing!” Caelyn said. They added pupils to the eyes then moved to the lips, painting them into a smile and as they did, the aurora that danced with Fio began to take form. The colors switched and formed a vest like the one Fio wore, then hair popped out into a bob, then soon emerald light became eyes with makeup to emphasize them, until at last as Caelyn added the finishing touch, a smile grew upon the face of the aurora, a mimicry of Fio. Yet, there was something different. It was him, but… not quite. This face with its feminine touches, gentle yet toughened, and this body with a small bust he distinctly lacked, but in heart desired, and a strong yet dove-like figure, it embraced him as they danced, reflected him, reflected what he wished to be, what he was truly. It carried him in motion ‘round and ‘round, mirroring his steps, until at last it faded and he danced straight into Caelyn's arms, the two falling into the snow as Caelyn let out an squeal and they fell and fell through an endless sky alight with color and straight back into Caelyn's house and landed on the floor with a thump.

“Sorry about that,” Fio said as he got up with a groan. He helped up Caelyn, who's clothing was bit of a mess after the long fall.

“No, no, I'm sorry, I got carried away. I didn't mean to drag you into something like that. It just sort of… happened,” Caelyn somberly said.

“It's okay, really! I-I, I've never felt so happy. I…” Fio looked over to the painting that stood beside them. Painted upon the canvas was the spitting image of the aurora he danced, of herself. Tears began drizzling from his eyes like a rainy day as he looked at the painting, everything coming out.

“You okay, Fio?” Caelyn asked as they gave him a hug.

“I-I, thank you so much, Caelyn,” he said as he hugged her tight enough to pop a balloon. “It's perfect… it's me.”

“I'm glad you like it… but could you let go… I can barely breathe,” Caelyn said as they scrambled out of Fio's grasp.

“Oh! Oops, sorry!” he said as he let go of Caelyn and patted their head.

“Thank you,” Caelyn said as they took a quick succession of breaths. “So, um, what are you going to do now?”

Fio looked at the painting and smiled. “Well, I think you can start by calling me Fia,” she said.