

Foxish  
By Heather von Stackelberg

Jen first noticed her in the coffee shop. Maybe it was the way the light played in her thick and soft auburn hair, hair that looked so silky Jen's hands itched to run through it and pet her as if she was a cat. Maybe it was the lightning quick mischievous smile she shot the barrista on her way out, white teeth glinting and looking just a little too bright and sharp to make the smile entirely comfortable, no matter how playful it looked.

The next time Jen saw her flash that grin in the coffee shop, she followed it out the door and down the street, despite the fact that she should have been going on to class. She followed the glint of auburn, the smell of caramel and cappuccino down to the art district a few blocks away where the woman disappeared with her take out coffee into an old renovated building with an art gallery on the main floor, and studio apartments above.

Jen stopped at the big windows of the gallery and peered inside. There was the usual collection of abstract paintings and blocky sculptures, but what made Jen step inside were the copper wire sculptures.

They were off to the side, sitting on a group of pedestals and on the shelves behind. The sculptures were of various creatures, birds, dogs and people; the wire did not show the complete shape of the subject, but suggested lines full of movement and energy. As Jen gazed at the sculptures, she found her eyes being drawn back to a canine-like creature that sat with its large tail curled around its feet and its tongue hanging out in a grin.

“Amazing, aren't they?” A low masculine voice interrupted her thoughts.

Jen turned to see a very strange man at her shoulder looking past her at the

sculptures, but obviously paying attention to her. Though he looked at first glance to be handsome, a slightly longer look at him revealed that his nose was just a bit too thin and prominent, his eyes a shade too small and too close together. His clothes were also trying just a little too hard to be casual without being too casual.

He blinked at her, and Jen realized that she had been staring at him.

“Oh, sorry, I mean, sorry.” She stumbled. “Yes, these are brilliant. I have never seen anything like them. The fox especially looks almost alive.”

His smile looked just a little less welcoming. “Yes, well. The artist has an eye for animals, doesn’t she?”

“Yes...do you know the artist?” asked Jen, trying not to be intimidated.

He made a non-committal noise that sounded vaguely like disapproval. “I know of her...know her type. I’ve been looking for her for some time, now.”

Confused, Jen turned to look at him, and stepped back involuntarily at the mix of glee and hate on his face, as he regarded the wire sculptures. She hastily mumbled something about needing to get to class, and fled the gallery. She couldn’t help glance back as she left, though. The strange man still stood transfixed before the sculptures, but the seated fox seemed to wink at her as she went.

The next day Jen found her feet turning in the direction of the gallery again. She stopped at the edge of the window, wanting to see the wire sculptures, but also wanting to avoid the strange man, if he was there again.

As she looked, she heard a high-pitched yelp in the alleyway between the gallery and the next building over. The surprise and pain in the noise drew Jen toward the alley,

and she peered down it. In behind, half-concealed by the stairs going up the side of the building, there was movement, and a flash of red-gold. Cautiously, Jen stepped around the stair for a better look, and saw an auburn-haired creature with a pointed snout, its lips pulled back in a snarl, showing white, pointed teeth, a deep growl rumbling in its chest.

A fox, Jen realized. Unusual to find one so deep in the city. Another slow step forward, expecting the fox to bolt. It didn't, but shifted slightly, and Jen could see why it hadn't run away – its hind foot was caught in a trap. The steel teeth cut cruelly into the fox's leg, crimson blood running down the paw and over the curved arms of the trap. The fox's brown eyes looked at her with a combination of wariness and intelligence, something Jen didn't expect from a wild animal.

“Can I...can I help you?” Jen knew she should not be approaching a wounded wild animal, but she couldn't just leave any creature in pain like this.

As silly as Jen felt at talking to the fox, it seemed to understand that Jen was offering to help. Its lips slid back down over its teeth, and it shuffled itself over to give Jen the best possible access to the trap. She knelt next to the trap, the sharp metallic odor of blood mixed with the musky scent of the fox, and threatened to make her gag. Jen grasped the steel arms, being careful of the sharp metal teeth. It opened slightly as she put pressure on the arms, but before the fox could withdraw its foot, the blood made Jen's hands slip off, and it clamped back tightly on the fox's leg.

A pained yelp from the fox echoed through the alleyway.

“Sorry! I'm sorry!” Jen winced in sympathy.

“I've got to find something to get more leverage with.” She said to the fox's intelligent brown eyes. “I'll be right back.”

Jen returned a short while later with two boards ripped from a broken pallet she had found tossed behind a building a couple of streets over. The fox still stood, its head turned toward her, its ears pricked forward. She could see that it had licked away some of the blood, but hadn't chewed at the wound.

"Here we go." She said soothingly, and very carefully inserted the boards between the teeth of the trap on either side of the fox's leg. The fox stood still, looking curiously over its shoulder. Jen slowly and carefully applied pressure to the boards in opposite directions, and the fox was just able to remove its paw before the boards cracked, snapping the teeth back together.

As the echoes rang off the alley walls, a voice boomed from the street end, "What do you think you are doing, girl?"

With the sunlight behind him, Jen could only see a large dark shape as the man from the gallery strode up the alley.

"Don't you know what that bitch is?"

Anger flared in Jen at the man's aggression, and suddenly she recognized him as the creepy man from the gallery. "I know it was a creature that was cruelly hurt when it wasn't hurting anyone."

"No, no! It is evil, an abomination!" The man tried to push forward towards the fox, but Jen planted herself in the way and pushed back. He was taller than her, and half again her weight, so though she struggled, he was able to lean his weight against her, and toss her against the alley wall. Jen hit with a thud, the back of her head striking the wall hard enough that sparks danced in her vision for a long moment.

The man returned, his face twisted, snarling in a much uglier expression than the

fox ever wore. “You idiot! She got away! I had her, and she got away!” The man’s hand impacted across her cheek before Jen registered that the blow was coming. He stared at her as she slid down the wall, tears coursing across her face. Jen cringed, waiting for worse to come, boots to swing, fists to fly. But the man just huffed out a breath full of frustration and anger and stalked out of the alley. Jen looked around to see that the fox was indeed gone. She put her head down on her knees and sobbed.

Sometime later, as her breath had calmed, she must have dozed curled up in a ball against the wall, because she was woken by a gentle touch on her shoulder.

“Hey.” A woman’s voice was soft in her ear.

Jen peeled her sticky eyes open to see the auburn-haired woman looking at her, her face full of sympathy and concern.

“You should put some ice on that, help take some of the swelling down.” She gestured towards Jen’s cheek, and Jen suddenly became aware of just how tight and sore that side of her face was. She lifted a hand to touch her cheek and an involuntary gasp of pain slipped out. The woman winced in sympathy.

“That was kind of you, to release m...the fox.” The woman said. “I’m sorry you paid for it like this.”

“How...” Jen tried to force her muzzy brain to think, to make some sense of the events. “How do you know what I did, what happened? There was no one here, except...” Jen focused on the woman’s soft, red-gold hair and sharp features, and something clicked. She shifted to look at the woman’s ankles. Bare feet stuck out of jeans, but one foot had blood dripping from above the cuff.

“You’re the fox!” Jen gasped. “That’s what he was talking about when he asked

whether I knew what it...you...were!”

The woman grimaced. “Yes, he’s been hunting me for some time. I think he’s been tracking me through my sculptures, damn it. I don’t want to stop making those. The wire ones, inside.” She tossed her head in the direction of the gallery. “I’ll have to disappear again. His kind of hate won’t let him give up. Thank you for your help; I’d be dead now if it wasn’t for you. I’ll have to be more careful.”

She flashed Jen a wide grin of joy, friendship and love of life. Then she sprang to her feet and trotted down the alleyway, with only a slight hitch in her stride. She disappeared around the corner without looking back.

Jen pushed herself to her feet and walked slowly back towards the street. She stepped out into a world transformed.