

Feraltales

Conversation Pieces



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About the Aqueduct Press Conversation Pieces Series

The feminist engaged with sf is passionately interested in challenging the way things are, passionately determined to understand how everything works. It is my constant sense of our feminist-sf present as a grand conversation that enables me to trace its existence into the past and from there see its trajectory extending into our future. A genealogy for feminist sf would not constitute a chart depicting direct lineages but would offer us an ever-shifting, fluid mosaic, the individual tiles of which we will probably only ever partially access. What could be more in the spirit of feminist sf than to conceptualize a genealogy that explicitly manifests our own communities across not only space but also time?

Aqueduct's small paperback series, *Conversation Pieces*, aims to both document and facilitate the "grand conversation." The *Conversation Pieces* series presents a wide variety of texts, including short fiction (which may not always be sf and may not necessarily even be feminist), essays, speeches, manifestoes, poetry, interviews, correspondence, and group discussions. Many of the texts are reprinted material, but some are new. The grand conversation reaches at least as far back as Mary Shelley and extends, in our speculations and visions, into the continually created future. In Jonathan Goldberg's words, "To look forward to the history that will be, one must look at and retell the history that has been told." And that is what *Conversation Pieces* is all about.

L. Timmel Duchamp

Jonathan Goldberg, "The History That Will Be" in Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996)

Conversation Pieces
Volume 91

Feraltales

by
Couri Johnson





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*To Christopher Barzak
Who got me out of my coffin*

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The Foxes' Child

A King took a wife, and for a very long time they were very happy together. But that very long time passed and became too long, and that happiness was no longer so. The King wanted a child, and the Queen had given him none. This, the King reasoned, as many Kings would, must be the Queen's fault. Often he badgered her about it, and often she cried, and often they both screamed at the top of their lungs. Finally, the King decided enough was enough.

“For a year, I'm going to go away. If you don't have a child by the time I'm back, it'll be the axe, you hear?”

The wife could do nothing to change his mind, and he left. After a few months, when no baby came, the Queen began to get pretty anxious. She went to every midwife and mystic she could find, but none could tell her how to make sure she'd have a baby, especially with her husband gone. Eventually, it was a cook from the kitchen who took her aside and told her that she might know someone who could help.

“But,” warned the cook, “they may not be too keen on it.”

“And why wouldn't they be?” the Queen asked. “We're the royal family!”

But the cook just raised her eyebrows and looked away, knowing how to use tact when tact was needed. She had worked in the royal kitchens all her life.

“You’ll see,” was all the cook said.



The King was what everyone believed the greatest and manliest man should be. He was educated, assertive, rich, and of course, accomplished at his chosen sport. This King’s chosen sport just so happened to be fox hunting. It was celebrated kingdom wide. Every year there were great hunts put on. Every year scores of noblemen rode out into the woods with their dogs barking, and their guns in hand, but none did it as often and with as great enthusiasm as the King himself.

The forest outside the castle just so happened to be plentiful with the little beasts, and it was in this direction the cook led the Queen. This was all fine and good with the Queen until they stepped off the carefully treaded path and into the wilds of the woods. Then the Queen’s gown kept snagging, her feet kept stumbling, and she began to worry in earnest.

“How much further?” the Queen asked.

The cook stopped her and told her to close her eyes. The Queen did, and then the cook laid her hands on her back, pushed hard, and the Queen hurtled downward.

She kept falling for a good long time, and whether she had her eyes open or not, everything was complete darkness. The Queen thought for sure that the cook had tricked her, that she would surely die when she struck the ground. But then suddenly she wasn’t falling at all. She opened her eyes and found she was sitting at a low

wooden table in a small circular room. She looked closer and saw that the walls, though hung with hand-woven tapestries like her own, were made of dirt. The floor under the carpet was dirt as well. The Queen blinked, and she wasn't alone anymore. The cook was right there with her.

"Now, Highness," the cook said, "you just let me do the talking when they come, all right?"

"What do you mean?" the Queen asked, blinking. But before she could get an answer, footsteps echoed down the long hall across from them that she hadn't managed to notice before.

Before long a sleek little woman with orange hair had sat herself down in front of the Queen and the cook. She had yellow eyes and a long, angled nose that hooked to the side. She was dressed in a tight, black dress, the likes of which the Queen had never seen before.

"What's she doing here?" the woman asked the cook.

"The Queen is in trouble, ma'am. You see, her husband has run off and left her with the task of getting herself with child with no place to get a child from."

The woman humphed and picked at her nails before polishing them off on the shoulder of her dress. "Don't see how that's my concern."

"Well, I'm sure the two of you could come to some arrangement that would be mutually beneficial," the cook said, raising her eyebrows in a meaningful way.

"Never dealt with their kind in a way that's been beneficial to us," the woman said. The Queen was aware then of many eyes glinting in the dark hall, watching her and the woman with interest. As she stared after them, she noticed the form of the woman in her periphery flicker

a bit, so that it wasn't a woman at all sitting there, but a tall, lanky fox perched on its hind legs.

The Queen looked at the cook, but the cook wasn't paying her any mind. The Queen looked back at the woman, and she was just a woman. There was something toothy about her smile, though. And she sure did smile a lot, despite the bitter sound in her voice.

"I'm sure if you could give the Queen what she wants, she'd grant you any requests you happen to have. Why don't you talk it over? We can wait."

The woman nodded, and both went quiet. The Queen opened her mouth to speak, as she thought she should, but the cook laid a hand on hers and gave her a look that said *shut it*. The Queen blanched and made a mental note to check just how much the cook was paid and if she was really necessary.

The woman tilted her head, and the Queen heard small yips, all coming together, overlapping. The volume rose. Then died.

The woman nodded. She leaned forward and set her elbows on the table.

"We can give you a child, yes, but you have to do whatever I say, and so must the King."

The cook looked at the Queen and gave her a nod. The Queen unglued her mouth and pressed a hand to her heart. "We will."

"Swear it," the woman said.

"I do. I swear."

"Your husband has taken fourteen of our own. That's in the last year alone. Fourteen, by his own hand. And for each one of them, your child will be ours, and ours alone for a year. You will not lay eyes on it. And for

those fourteen years, no one will hunt a single fox in the kingdom.”

The woman bit her lip but thought of her husband's warning. “I'll do what you say,” she said finally. “Just tell me how to get my child.”

“Out in your garden there will be a fox. The oldest of us all. Tonight, he'll die so that you can have your child. You must bring him into your room. Sit with him in your bed and let him lay his head in your lap while he dies. Sing to him, stroke his fur, comfort him as you would were he your own husband. Well, not your husband, maybe. Someone lovable. When he has passed, you must pick every hair from his body and swallow each one. Do this, and you'll have your child the very day after your husband arrives home.”

The Queen flushed. “I can't lie with some dirty old fox in my bed,” she said. “It's unheard of.”

The woman leaned further forward so that the neck of her dress drooped low. The Queen could see the top of her bosom peeking out. She wanted to cluck her tongue, but the woman took her hand before she could even react.

“Well, ma'am,” the woman said, smiling, “if it makes you feel any better, he's avoided your own husband every season since your boy started hunting. See, he's a *real* man. A real fine fox of a man.”



The Queen was led back home by the cook. She waited for the fox in the garden, reasoning that one night with an animal in her bed would be better than a life

with no head. And running was even worse. She'd have to live on the streets then.

The old fox showed up toward dusk. He was a scruffy creature. Graying, with most of his hair fallen out. This, the Queen thought, at least made the last bit less work. But it didn't make up much for the stench of him. The Queen picked him up in her arms and threw a blanket over him, hoping to hide the whole ordeal from everyone but the cook.

Then she took the fox into her room and her bed and let him lay his head on her lap. She sang him songs; she stroked his old fur—being especially not gentle so that maybe he would lose a little more before he bit the big one—and treated him with all the kindness she could muster. After some time, the fox gave one long, contended sigh, closed his eyes, and breathed no more.

Then the Queen plucked the first hair, put it past her lips, and swallowed. Then she did another. And another. And so on, until the fox was quite bald.

Feeling woozy, the Queen lay down, hand pressed to her stomach, and fell right asleep next to the fox's dead body. When she finally woke, it was nowhere to be found, but the skin of her stomach had grown quite taut, and already she was swelling gently.



As the fox woman had promised, the Queen was with child and was just about ready to pop the day the King arrived home. He showed up already writing her eulogy and a call for a new bride. When he saw her swollen belly, he switched gears. He was good at that.

"I knew that would fix it," the King said. "All you needed was a little motivation."

They went to bed, not quite as happy as they used to be, but as close as they had come for a very long time. And the Queen? She didn't tell the King about the agreement. Not just yet.

The next day, she went into labor. After many hours of being pestered by the King and prodded by a midwife, she finally gave birth. A bawling little bundle of flesh was lifted from between her legs. Before she could even lay hands on it, or the umbilical cord could be cut, the child stilled. It looked the Queen in the eye and said quite clearly: "Here come the foxes."

The doors swung open, and yes, in the foxes came. The woman fox was walking ahead, dressed like a nanny whose clothes had started dissolving. The nursemaids and the King's men tried to stop her, but she waved her jeweled little hand, and they found themselves falling back instinctively. At her feet a pack of foxes followed, ears up, heads tilted, eyes bright.

"Give it here," she said, waving her hands at the midwife. The midwife stuttered and looked to the Queen and King.

"What's the meaning of this?" The King asked, but the woman had already taken the babe from the stupefied midwife's hands. One of the foxes stood up on its toes and snipped the cord clean off.

"Ask your wife," the woman said. And then, as quickly as they came in, the foxes and the woman left.

So the wife had to come clean on how she had made the child. She told the whole of it, save for her lying with the dying fox, eating the hair, and the fact that the fox

had apparently been a better sportsman than her husband. The King was angry, but the Queen calmed him as well as she could.

“We have a child,” she said. “An heir.”

“If it is a boy,” the King snarled.

“I kept up my end of the bargain,” the Queen said. “You just remember that.”

And it was true. She had. So the King had to content himself with firing the cook.



Years and years passed. Very nearly fourteen. The King had nothing to amuse himself with that whole long time. No fox hunting. No heir. Just long days of nothing, nothing, nothing, and bickering with his wife. But even that had lost its flair since the Queen would always tell him that in the end she had been the one to get the child. Just as he said to do.

The King was not a patient man, but somehow he made it to the very day before the child’s fourteenth year. By that point he was quite restless. All day he wouldn’t let the Queen be. They were waiting in the throne room together. The King jostled about, snapping orders, cursing everyone, but the Queen was calm as could be. Honestly, she thought this was the best way to do parenting. It required so little work on her part. She wasn’t looking forward to the child coming the next day.

“Where was that den?” the King asked his wife.

“In the forest,” the Queen said, rolling her eyes.

“But where in the forest?” The King paced and stroked his beard and stared out the window. “You must know. You were there.”

"I've told you before, and I'll tell you again. It was the cook that took me there, and I have no clue of the way. Settle down. Tomorrow, you'll have your child."

"If they give it back," the King said. "All I want is to look in, make sure that they intend to keep up their end."

"Just wait," the Queen said.

"And you didn't see what the sex was? It came out of you, and you still didn't see?" The King rounded on the Queen. She set down the needlework she had been fooling with and stared at him long and hard.

"You'll know soon enough either way. Just wait."

"Fourteen years is an awful long time to not know the gender of your own child."

"What does the gender matter? Really?" the Queen said, returning to her work. The King just huffed. Went to the doors and called his nearest servant.

"Get me a dog. A good dog with a good nose for foxing," he told the man. "I'm going out."

"Honestly," the Queen said. "Is one night of peace so much to ask from you?"

The King turned and drew himself up. It had gone on long enough, him being told what to do, and he wouldn't stand it another instant. He was the King. He was a man. "The child is as much mine as yours," he growled. "Don't tell me how to handle it."

The Queen just shrugged. "Have it your way," she said. And he would. Always.

Very soon a dog was brought to the King. This was the last dog that had ever actually been foxing, because all the others had died out over the last fourteen years. He had just been a pup then, but now he was old and rather gray. He had only ever been on two fox hunts, and

his real worth at it had yet to be determined. Once the servant saw the King's face, however, he decided against telling him that.

When the King saw the dog, he turned to his wife. "You had better go with me," he said. "And I won't take no for an answer, you hear?"



The King, the Queen, and the dog set off after much fuss into the woods. Soon they were off the path with the dog lumbering lazily in front of the two while they bickered. After a few hours wandering around in circles, the dog finally lay down on the forest floor, his head resting between his legs.

"This is hopeless," said the Queen. "We won't find them 'til they want to be found."

"It has to be here somewhere. How dense do you have to be to not remember?"

"It was fourteen years ago," The Queen hissed. "I'd like to see you remember something like that!"

"Well, you better start trying," the King warned.

The Queen looked around, shrugged her shoulders, and pointed at a rock jutting out of the ground a few feet away. "That rock looks kind of familiar. I think we had just passed it when we got to the foxes' den."

The King roused the dog, and they headed toward the rock. For just a moment, the dog's ears pricked up, and then he let out one low woof. Then he sat back down and looked up at the King.

"This must be it," the King said, and set to searching. He looked and looked but found no hole nor sign of fox.

Exhausted and at the end of his rope, he got back up in the Queen's face.

"Do you have a brain in that head of yours? That rock, really. What kind of marker is that?"

"Well, I thought you were supposed to be a master sportsman, but here you are being outwitted by a bunch of mangy animals."

"If you could have just had a child from the get-go, we wouldn't be in this mess. What kind of woman are you?"

"Don't you talk to me like that," the Queen said, squaring her shoulders. "How do we know it wasn't you at fault? After all, *I* had a child. Without much help from you, I might add."

"How dare you speak to me like that. I ought to—"

"Oughta what?" the Queen asked, shoving him. The King stumbled back, tripped over a branch, and fell down, down, down—the Earth opening up beneath him.

He fell a very long way and eventually landed in a large room of dirt like the one his wife had fallen into. In this room a pile of blankets pushed together made a sort-of mattress, and many bones were scattered all over. Fox cubs were tumbling and playing and yipping. Playing with the cubs was a young, filthy girl with orange hair on the top of her head and white underneath. To the King's horror, she was naked, had jagged teeth and nails, and looked a little like his wife around her yellow eyes and dry lips. She didn't look that different from the cubs either, much to the King's discomfort.

When the King fell among them all the cubs scattered, but the girl stood up and put her hands on her hips.

“Oh great,” she said. “Just fantastic. Couldn’t wait one more day, could you? Now you’ve gone and messed it all up.”

“I’m sorry?” The King stuttered, getting to his feet and brushing off the dirt from his robes. “We’ve come to take you home?” But now the King wasn’t sure that he wanted the child. It wasn’t a boy. He wasn’t even sure it was human.

“You better be sorry,” the girl said, jabbing her finger into the King’s stomach. “By tomorrow morning I’ll be dead. Thanks to you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the King said, feeling relieved. “I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

The girl barked a laugh and went on scowling at the King. “Well, that’s not even the half of it, buddy. You’ve got three options here, so you better listen up. You can either let the black plague roll through your kingdom, have all your crops fail, and all shit just go haywire in general. Or you can have two decades worth of bloody war. And we’re talking brutal here, the kinda war that’s gonna need a King on the field. The kind of war where it’s gonna need a King’s body dead. *Or* you can take my body, put it in a plain wooden chest, and keep it in the church on the castle grounds. Each night, you have to post someone to watch over it for a year, you dig? So, which one are you gonna take?”

The King blinked, looking down at the girl. “Well, the third one, of course.”

The girl’s smile was a snarl; she scratched at an itch behind her ear furiously. “Yeah, I figured. Maybe you ain’t as dumb as you look after all. But, if you move it too

early or fail to post a guard up, the first two are gonna happen anyway. So you better be a King of your word.”

“Well,” the King said, backing up against the wall and trying his best to smile. “I’m sure this is all unnecessary. You’ll be fine, dear. You’re just overreacting. You’ll be fine. We’ll see you tomorrow when you come home. Your mother sends her love.” The King groped along the wall, looking for an exit, but he found none. The girl just went on sneering at him, the fox pups behind her watching him with their hard little eyes, practicing their baby growls.

“How do I get out of here, again?” The King asked meekly. The girl rolled her eyes and snapped her fingers. The King felt his stomach tumble and suddenly he was in the woods again.

“What happened?” The Queen said.

“Forget about it,” he said. “Just never mind. I think there’s been some sort of mistake. That kid can’t be ours. They can go ahead and just keep it.” The Queen opened her mouth, but the King hushed her. He grabbed her by the arm and dragged her through the woods, making her promise never to speak about the foxes, or the child, or any of it ever again.



The next day the King was ready to put it all behind him. They’d *adopt*. Honestly, he wasn’t sure why he hadn’t thought of it before. It was a totally sensible option. Find some nobleman with an extra brat and take it for their own. He was the King after all, so it’s not like it would be denied him. Then he could move on with his life.

But some things have a funny way of not letting you move on from them, and not too far into the morning, the King's men raised up an alarm. Someone was coming. A party, it looked like. But no one could decide if it was a war party, a funeral party, a bridal party, or what. Everyone was confused about what to do. But the King, knowing, just slumped down in his throne and let the hustle and bustle go on all around him.

Through the courtyard the party came, and up close the people could finally see what it was, though it made very little sense to them. It was a party of foxes, done up like any other royal march, about a mile long. Foot soldiers were walking on their hind legs, wearing bits of mismatched armor that were too big or too small. They had cloth tied around their waists, ribbons in their tails. They carried flags of various colors that looked like they had been long torn and left in the dirt.

There were also foxes riding on boar back, carrying spears and sabers in one hand, and reigns in the other. The boars snorted at any who came too close, and the foxes leered at the people. Behind them all, draped in all manner of livery, was a carriage pulled by four of the largest, most beautiful foxes anyone had ever seen. At the front of the carriage rode the fox woman. In the bed, the child was laid among flowers, her face pale and quite dead.

The march stopped at the doors of the castle and separated so that the carriage could come through. When it had reached the front, the fox woman stood up and called loudly for the King and Queen. Reluctantly, they came out, standing side by side and looking quite as pale as their dead child.

“You have broken your word and come to the girl a day earlier than you ought to have. Now she is dead, and you must pay the price. You have agreed to keep her body a year in your church, in a chest, and post a guard every night. If you do not do this, you know what the consequences will be,” the fox woman said, staring down the couple. The Queen shot the King a nasty look, and the King fretted with his hands before nodding.

“Take up her body, then,” the fox woman told the King’s men. To the King’s horror, they listened, gathered the girl in their arms, and carried her up into the castle.

Then the foxes began to weep, because each had loved the girl as their own. One by one they filed back into the woods until it was only the fox woman and her carriage left. She stayed a moment longer, looking coldly at all the people assembled. Then she gave the word, and she too was gone.

The King had no choice but to set the girl’s body up in a chest and put it in the church. He assigned one of the men to watch it that night and thought that that was all. It was settled. Time to move on now. But of course it wasn’t.



The next day the sentry was gone. Poof. Vanished. The guards searched all around, but he hadn’t been seen since he took up his post.

“Coward,” the King told the head of his guard. “Post someone more reliable, this time.” And so someone new was posted, and then, the next morning, that someone new was gone. It went on again the next night. And again.

Until all sorts of creepy stories about the chest in the church and the ghost of the girl were being passed around.

“She comes out and eats up the guard,” people would say.

“She’s a wild child. A vicious beast.”

“The post is certain death.”

After some months of this, none of his guard would take up the position. They would flee before they were even asked. The King was running short on men, so he offered money for any person willing to stand guard. A large sum. For a while this worked, but those who signed up never got their gold. They too would be gone in the morning. Which at least meant the King got to keep his cash, he thought.

But then gold wasn’t enough to draw people in either, and the King was quite vexed. When a volunteer could not be found, he eventually declared that they would begin using prisoners.

“Drag someone out of the jail and make them stand watch. Tell them if they make it, they get a full pardon.”

And so prisoners were made to stand guard, and in the morning they’d be gone. Which, the King thought, was at least saving him some money, since the Kingdom would have one less mouth to feed. But soon the prisons were running empty, and so the guards had to start arresting more and more people to keep a steady supply of sentries available.

And so re-enters our friend the cook into the tale, quite against her will.



Since being relieved of her post, the cook had taken up working at a tavern. And drinking at a tavern. Wine was her favorite, but she'd take anything, and she'd often take it in as large amounts as possible. It was only three days until the anniversary of the girl's death and the setting up of the chest, but the jail was completely empty. Suddenly, for some strange reason, everyone had become very lawful. No one was going out of their houses save for when they had to, and no one was going out to drink.

Which meant the taverns weren't doing well, and the cook was dirt poor. Since she had no customers to serve, the cook decided to imbibe herself, and it didn't take very long for her to be very drunk. She had been talking with the tavern owner, last she remembered, about what it had been like to cook for the Royal family, and then suddenly she was out on the streets, screaming.

"Fuck the King. Bollocks to the Queen. And screw all you, too!"

Tact was something she had forgotten in the fourteen years she had been gone from the castle. She had her dress hitched up and was pissing in the middle of the empty road. Her mouth tasted slightly bitter, like vomit. That's when she felt hands seize her, and everything went dark.

The next day she woke in a cell alone, her head pounding. She was being charged with public uproar, besmirching the name of the Royal family, and in general being a waste of life that people would be better off without. For her crimes against the Kingdom, she would be forced to stand guard by the dead girl's chest.

“Yeah, well, whatever,” the ex-cook said, hands pressed to her throbbing temples.



That night the cook was brought to the church and made to stand guard. All of the doors and windows would be locked. If she was there in the morning, she'd receive a full pardon. She was told there was no way out, so she might as well settle in. They left her just on the other side of the church doors as the sun set and locked her in. At the end of the pews sat the chest, plain and wooden. The cook went to it and nudged it with her foot.

“You in there, dearie?” she asked. No one answered.

“Remember me? You probably don't. Hell, you weren't even actually a thing yet, I guess. But I'm part of the reason you were born. So do me a solid and maybe keep your teeth to yourself tonight.”

The cook got bored with the chest after an hour. She began to wander around the church, touching the stones, looking around. As she walked, a thought struck her. The priest of this old place used to be a regular at the tavern, and she remembered him saying something about a little hatch under a tapestry that led outside. Some kind of secret way for old Kings to come and make a confession so that the whole Kingdom wouldn't hear about their sins, or something equally silly.

She started checking behind the tapestries, and sure enough, the wall behind the pulpit had a little hatch just big enough for her to slip through.

So the cook decided to head for the hills. As soon as she came out the other end, however, she heard a tiny “tut-

tut" to her right and found she couldn't move. The fox woman stepped out of the shadows, shaking her head.

"Where are *you* going?" The fox woman asked.

"Anywhere that ain't here," said the cook.

"But you must stand guard," said the fox woman, taking the cook by the elbow and pushing her back towards the hatch. "Here. You take this and settle in on the pulpit. When she comes out a-sniffing, throw it to her, and all will be well."

The fox woman pressed something into the cook's hands and shoved her back through. The cook tried to open the hatch again but found it wouldn't budge. She unwrapped the parcel in her hands and found inside a dead chicken.

"What good is this?" the cook asked. But she kept it next to her anyway and stayed on the pulpit. Midnight struck, and the chest flew open. A horrible wailing filled the air. Out climbed the girl, only she wasn't only a girl. She was a horror-show of parts. Both fox and girl, a paw with one crooked human finger, half her face snouted, hair growing in patches all along her body. She crawled and jerked along the floor, screaming.

"Sentry? Oh sentry? Come on out. Come, come, come," she said, bloated tongue flicking against her lips. "If there's no one here, it will be war. It will be death. Oh sentry? Has the King kept his word?"

Then her yellow eyes locked on the cook, and she scrambled up the stairs to the pulpit. Before she could get all the way up, however, the cook lobbed the dead chicken in her face. The girl went tumbling back and landed on the church floor. Then she sprang up, took the chicken in her mouth, and chewed.

Bit by bit the girl tore into the chicken, slurping and cracking bones in her teeth, 'til there was nothing left, not even a feather. Then the clock struck one, and she scurried back into her chest, and the lid slammed shut.

“Fuck me,” the cook groaned, slumping back against the pulpit wall. But in the morning she was still there.



The cook got her pardon, but the King didn't let her go. He insisted she speak with him and tell him all that had happened. Of course the cook didn't like this, but she didn't have much of a choice. She decided to play her cards close to her chest, said that she stood guard all night and not a single thing had happened.

The King, not even recalling a little bit that this was a woman once in his employ, smiled with all his teeth and said: “So you wouldn't mind doing it again, then?”

“Actually, I would. Very much,” the cook said.

“What about for gold?” The King asked. But the cook just shook her head.

“Are you sure?” The King pushed. “I'm talking a lot of gold here.” No prisoners were left in the jail, and no other brave souls were willing to volunteer. The King was quite desperate. “Like maybe 100 pieces?”

“I'll do it for half of your treasury,” the cook finally relented.

“Half of the treasury?” The King said, taken aback.

“Half, and I want it in writing, signed and decreed publicly. Half.”

“All right,” the King agreed, wagering that just because she made it one night didn't mean she'd make it

another. The deal was struck, written, and said aloud for all the people to hear.

And so it was that the cook who was put in the church a second night.



Half of the treasury was enough to make her stick around an hour or two after she was left alone. She sat on the pulpit looking down at the chest, trying to speak boldly.

“You’ve grown into quite the lovely little monster,” she said. “Quite a healthy eater, too.” The time ticked closer to midnight, and the cook began sweating just a little. Her eyes darted over to the hatch. She thought of all the gold, but thought about how much she liked living, too. After the two sides argued for a bit, she decided gold could be got anywhere, so long as you had hands still to get it.

“It has been lovely catching up,” she told the chest. “But really, I have to be going.”

She turned to the hatch, heaved it open, and slipped outside. She made a run for it. No sooner than she got to the edge of the castle grounds did she freeze again, a small “tut tut” echoing in her ears. The fox woman came up behind her.

“And where are *you* going?” The fox woman asked.

“Are you serious?” The cook groaned.

“Quite,” said the fox woman, and the cook found she had to follow her all the way back to the church. At the door of the little hatch the fox woman pushed another parcel into her arms and told her to stick to the pulpit. Then shoved her in once more.

The cook opened the parcel to see it was a whole boar's leg, bone and all. She set it down on the pulpit floor next to her and waited. Midnight struck, and out came the girl.

"Sentry, sentry, sentry. I can smell you. You smell delicious. Much better than hen. Hen was nice, but tonight you smell nicer." The girl was still a mangled mess, but less so. The snout had gone down and turned a fleshy pink. Three fingers popped out of one paw, and she even had a whole foot. The girl crawled around the church, up the stone walls, and across them toward the pulpit.

The cook took up the boar's leg like a bat and knocked the girl down when she came too close, dropping the leg along with her.

The girl scrambled to her feet, crouched down, and managed to get the boar's leg wedged between what would be her hands. She bowed her head and gnawed on it. When not a speck of it remained, she sat back, burped, and the clock struck one. Back into the chest she went.



The next morning they found the cook still at the church, and the King was beside himself. One more night, and he was sure that whatever had happened to the rest would happen to her. He just needed to convince her to take the post again. So he brought her in to speak with him and asked her to stand guard one more night.

The cook wasn't too into the idea. So the King pushed harder.

"We could pay you," the King said, fumbling for any way to tempt her.

"I think you're forgetting that I already have all the money I need," she said.

"Then what do you want?" The King asked. "We'll give you anything. Honestly. Anything you want."

"Anything?" The cook asked and the King nodded. "Then I want half the Kingdom."

"Half the Kingdom," he said, jaw dropping. The cook just folded her hands in her lap, and nodded, as if this were just another day and just another deal for her.

"Fine," the King said, and slumped back in his chair. If she did make it through the night, then he would do something to fix the problem in the morning. After all, this was the last night of the year. Sentries wouldn't be needed anymore. After this he was going to chuck the box and the body into the ocean. Find some nice noble boy to rear.

And some filthy foxes to hunt, he thought.



The cook was taken to stand guard once more. It took just a few minutes, however, for her to decide to flee. She knew the King didn't intend to keep up his end of the deal, and even if he did, she didn't like this Kingdom much. In fact, she was pretty sick of it. She would slip out of the hatch, make her way to the docks, and jump on a boat. Spend her life looking for a place without kings and queens and foxes.

So out she went, without even a hello or goodbye to the girl in the box. She ran as quick as her plump little legs could carry her. It was early enough that the fox woman was probably still slipping into her dress, putting on her face, she thought. No way she'd catch her tonight.

The cook made it all the way down the road, through town, and to the beach. She jumped into a rowboat and pushed herself out to sea.

“Did it this time,” she whispered to herself, grinning. “Take that, ya bastards.”

She made it out a few leagues, and then the boat froze. “Tut tut” rolled across the sea. The boat slowly pulled backward as if a long rope was reeling it in. The cook made ready to jump into the water, but found she was stuck fast. The boat rocked to shore, and standing inside it was the fox woman, hands on her hips.

“Honestly, where are *you* going?”

“Can’t you let me be?” The cook groaned. “I just want to find a quiet place to drink all of this away.”

“Maybe tomorrow, sweetie,” the fox woman said, and the cook found herself compelled to follow her all the way back up to the church. They came to the hatch, and the fox woman placed something heavy into the cook’s arms.

“Take this. It’s her favorite,” she purred affectionately. Then she shoved the cook through. The cook settled down on the pulpit and heaved a sigh. She tore open the parcel and saw a pig’s head. Severed. Eyes open—black and beaded. Still bloody where it’d been cleaved from its body.

Midnight came, and the chest swung open. This time the girl sprang and scurried straight up the wall to the ceiling. She twisted her head around to look straight at the cook. Tonight, the cook thought, she could see more of the girl in her. Her face had smoothed out and become all human, save for the eyes. The eyes were still huge and yellow. Her hands were only slightly nailed, her back only slightly hunched. But still she was terrifying. The cook held the pig’s head up in front of her own.

“Sentry,” she screamed, her mouth tearing into a sick grin. “I see you, sentry.” She crawled on all fours across the ceiling until she was hanging just above the pulpit.

The cook scrambled to her feet and raised the pig’s head up behind her own. She braced her feet. “Don’t you come another inch closer,” the cook warned. “I don’t want to use this.”

“Sentry,” the dead girl hissed, tensing against the ceiling. She licked her lips and flung herself down at the cook. The cook chucked the pig’s head, and it struck the girl in the stomach. The two went hurtling to the ground.

The girl swarmed around the pig’s head, biting, chewing, and clawing. She ate and howled, she screamed and swallowed. The cook plugged her ears and thought about praying. Didn’t know any prayers to use. Especially for a situation such as this.

One o’clock came, and the girl didn’t go into the box. Instead she settled down on the floor in a puddle of her own saliva and slept. The box swung closed without her in it. The cook stood up and looked down at the girl. She grew dizzy. How long had it been since she had slept? Or maybe this was all a dream after all? She pinched the skin under her arm and felt the sting. Nope. No such luck.

What do you do when a dead girl doesn’t get back into her box? The cook didn’t know. She slumped back against the wall and closed her eyes.



Horns woke her, loud and blaring. She heard a ruckus, a beating on the doors. The cook stood up, rubbing her eyes. The church doors caved in, and the foxes entered in two straight lines, dressed in their livery. Just beyond the

doors, the cook saw the sun rising over the trees, a sight that was soon blocked by the bodies of the foxes pouring in and in and in. They filed into the pews and sat, one after the other. At the end was the fox woman, holding a scepter, wearing a thin, silver tiara. She walked up the aisle and knelt beside the sleeping girl.

She poked her in the side with the scepter. “Sweetie,” she said. “Oh sweetie?”

The girl stirred, rolled onto her back. She yawned and stretched. The fox woman reached down and took her hand, helped her to her feet. “Welcome back, little girl.” The fox child threw her arms around the fox woman, and the fox woman stroked her hair.

Then she stepped away and presented the girl to the room full of sitting foxes.

“Our girl,” the woman said. The foxes cheered, yipping and yowling, raising their long snouts into the air. They waved banners and stomped their feet. Then the fox woman turned to the cook up on the pulpit, pointed down at the cook. “And her champion!”

The foxes cheered again, and the fox woman winked at the cook. The cook was feeling a little too tired for all of this, but she put on a cheerful smile and waved at all of them anyhow.

Just then the King came up the lane with his men, ready to find the cook not there, or to very quickly and quietly make her not there. He found the doors broken, and he and his men peered in. Saw all the foxes.

“What’s going on in here?” The King asked. He took one long step inside and looked about. “What are all you foxes doing?” His men hesitated. The foxes turned their

heads toward them, and the cheering stopped. The fox woman turned back toward the door and grinned.

"Highness," the fox woman said. "Welcome to the party. I think there's someone who'd like to say hi."

The fox child stepped forward and opened her arms wide. "Papa," she said, beckoning him into her arms. "Papa, I'm back."

The King looked at the girl, her yellow eyes, her snagged teeth, her two-tone hair, the slant of her nose, and the hard curve of her nails. He backed up, his hand pressed against his chest. He bumped into the men behind him. "You're no child of mine," the King said.

"Papa," the fox child sing-sang, stepping after him. "Papa, give me a hug."

The King turned and fled out the door. A fox up front pressed his mouth to a hunting horn and blew one long, shrill note. Then all the foxes were up on their feet, racing after the King. They rushed out past the dumbfounded guards and ran after him into the woods.

The hunt was on.

When the church was empty save for the guards, the girl, the fox woman, and the cook, the fox woman stepped forward in her clacking little heels. "Well boys, say hello to the new heads of state," she said, cocking her head back at the cook and the girl.

The cook twisted her mouth and stepped down from the pulpit. The guards looked at one another and gave a half-hearted salute. The girl tugged the woman's sleeve and shook her head.

"I didn't sign up to sit in no stupid chair all day," she said.

"But honey, it's your birthright."

The girl rolled her eyes. “Look ma, I don’t think this one’s got a clue what she’s doing,” the fox child said, motioning to the cook. The cook tilted her head, opened her mouth, and the girl threw up her hands and added “No offense. Neither do I, and that’s exactly what I’m trying to get at here.”

She turned back to the fox woman. “You’re gonna have to go ahead and take my half of the kingdom. Least for a while. It’d be for the best. Plus, I got some things I’d rather be doing.”

The fox woman smiled and brushed the girl’s hair out of her face. “What things, child?”

The fox child stretched her arms and legs, twisted her back this way and that. “I’ve been in that box so long,” she said. “I think I’d like to join the hunt.” The fox woman kissed her forehead, and they shared a crooked grin and a loving look. The fox child sprang down the aisle, out the door, yipping and howling. In no time at all she caught up with the rest of the foxes, the smell of the King’s sweat, and the King’s fear hanging heavy in the air.

“Well,” the fox woman said, taking the cook’s arm, “I guess it’s just you and me.” She smiled at the cook, and the cook shrugged her shoulders. “How about we settle in and have ourselves a drink?”

This, the cook thought, was the most sensible thing she’d heard in a long time. The guards followed them inside the castle. The women had them bring a bottle of wine for the cook and some whiskey for the fox woman hens.

The Queen came down, found her husband gone and the two women in the thrones where the King and her-

self ought to be, getting quite drunk and laughing together. "Oh no," the Queen said. "No, no, no."

"Don't worry, sweetie," the fox woman said. "I'm sure we have a place for you." She looked at the cook and smiled. "In the kitchen."

And so that is how it came to pass that the cook and the fox woman became the new Queen and Queen, the old Queen the new cook, the old King the new fox, and the fox child the new sportsman. Long was their reign, and long was the hunt. In fact, it's gone on until this very day, and will probably still be going tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that.