

Noticing the soaked state of the three newcomers, Caedim falls back and requests that they stop for a moment. Conjuring up his magic, he creates a small pocket of wind that Lyca jumps into with curiosity, and moments later the mini Scarfox is fully dry and free of the sand that had stuck to her feet when she'd left the water. Andy follows Lyca and sighs contentedly once he's dry and sand-free, but Sunny seems reluctant to approach the wind bubble. She stares at it, tail curled around her legs and her hands clasped together with an uncertain expression on her face. Looking at Andy and Lyca, she utters a soft sound, and the way it pitches upward at the end makes Andy realize that she's asking a question. He's just not sure *what* her question is, but he takes a guess that she's looking for confirmation that it's not going to hurt her.

"It's just wind, Sunny," he puts his hand in the bubble and wiggles his fingers, "it won't hurt you. It'll just cool you off and help you dry, it feels nice."

Lyca climbs up onto Andy's back and the two walk back into the wind bubble, Andy reaching his hand out towards the nervous merfox. Sunny reaches out partway, but then pulls her hand back, ears flattening back against her head.

Caedim watches the three of them and turns his attention to the merfox, looking her over and taking note of the water cloaking parts of her body. "If she's used to being in the water, maybe she'd rather not be dry," he offers. "I don't know how it might feel for an aquatic Scarfox to be dried off, perhaps it would be uncomfortable?"

Sunny looks at him, her ears perking up, which Caedim takes as a sign that his guess was correct. Nodding to her, he dispels the wind bubble and motions for the trio to follow him so that they can catch up to the others. Though they were only stopped for a minute or two at best, the other Scarfoxes had already found a large clearing of the beach and were in the middle of setting everything up. Matixx was with Noemi and Will, the three of them setting up the small, portable barbeques and cooking elements, and Mata was currently dumping out the melted ice from the coolers while grumbling about the summer heat.

"We haven't even been here that long and already the ice is melted," she grumbles, "the drinks aren't gonna stay cold with no ice..."

"If it's ice you need, we can help with that," Lyca calls out, still clinging to Andy's back. "We have a walking ice machine right here!" The mini Scarfox points to Andy, a big grin on her face. The latter grumbles, ears drooping, before giving an awkward smile and nodding.

Mata grins back, waving to the mini and her companion. "That would be appreciated!"

Climbing up onto the taller fox's shoulders, Lyca holds Andy's ears and pushes them forward. "Onward," she giggles.

"Ohoho, no way! I'm not taking orders," Andy grins, arching backwards and wriggling, trying to shake the mini off of him.

Lyca erupts into a fit of giggles, clinging tightly to the brown Scarfox as he bends all the way back and proceeds to hastily crawl around on his hands and feet, contorted like someone possessed by a demon in a horror movie. Hearing the commotion behind him, Matixx turns to look over his shoulder and lets out a shriek at the sight, throwing his hands up in front of his face and hopping back, knocking over the tabletop BBQ he was setting up and sending the charcoal rocks into the sand.

"Oh no!" Matixx scrambles to pick up the charcoal lumps, brushing them off and setting them back into the portable BBQ.

Once things are restored, Will helps light them with the fire from his wisps while Caedim and Shiori start unpacking the food containers and laying out the various items that Matixx prepared prior. Observing the contorted fox scurrying around in the sand, Haseo finds himself amused and can't resist joining in, taking up a similarly contorted posture and scuttling after Andy and Lyca in a light-hearted game of chase. Seeing a photo opportunity, Mata takes her cellphone out of her hoodie pocket and snaps a quick picture of Haseo, Andy, and Lyca, and then takes a few more of Matixx and the others before turning her camera lens to Sunny. The merfox is watching the events with a smile on her face, but Mata can tell that Sunny feels a bit lost as well. Putting the cellphone away and closing the coolers, Mata approaches Sunny and calls out to her.

"Haven't seen you around here before," Mata smiles warmly at the merfox. "My name's May-ta, what's yours?"

In a similar fashion to when she introduced herself to Andy and Lyca, Sunny places a hand on her chest and communicates with the urban fox telepathically. "I am Sunny. Sunny Shores."

Mata's smile widens. Though she's curious about Sunny's choice to use telepathy, she doesn't want to overwhelm the new fox and instead chooses a compliment. "Your name suits you well,"

Saiko and Shiori join in shortly after, and the three girls help Sunny get settled in just as Matixx starts to put the first meals on the barbeque, the latter instructing Noemi and Caedim on the cooking time and when to turn the food over. Haseo and Andy finish their game of tag, and Lyca finally lets go of her companion to run over to Matixx.

"Smells good," she exclaims. "Can I help?" She looks up at the blue fox hopefully.

Leaning down, Matixx picks her up and holds her in his arms, letting the smaller fox hook her arm around his neck. "Well," he thinks for a moment, "I'd be too nervous to let ya near the hot barbeque, but do ya wanna take the blanket there and start laying it out in the sand? I'll need a place to set up all this food once it's cooked, so that'd be a great help!"

Lyca nods enthusiastically and gathers up the large blanket, tottering off to set it up like Matixx had requested. Once it's laid out flat, Lyca takes the boxes of wooden cutlery and the stacks of plates and arranges them neatly on top of the blanket. As she does, she hears her name being called, and calls back to the familiar voice. After a bit of back and forth hollering, a pink Grem and another Scarfox emerge from the treeline of the Hidden Garden. "Skaia! Nomine~!" The mini Scarfox waves her hands at them. "We're having a party, join us!"

"Lyca, you shouldn't be running off like that," Nomine looks at the small Scarfox before turning a wary gaze to the water some meters away and visibly shrinking back. "It's dangerous."

"You always say *everything* is dangerous, Nomi," Lyca complains. "Besides, I found friends! Many friends! It's fine!"

The newcomer Scarfox sighs in despair and facepalms, an action that engulfs their upper body in their hand. The smaller pink Grem standing beside him looks around the gathering with a relaxed expression on their face, and their gaze comes back around to Lyca. "Is that so," they ask. "And what did they all do to become your friends?"

Lyca launches into an excited re-telling of the last hours to Skaia, detailing her meeting with Andy and Sunny, and how they played in the water and Sunny showed off various things found on the seabed. As she does, Nomine approaches Matixx with an apologetic expression.

"I'm really sorry if she's caused you any trouble. She's a dear, our Lyca, but she's prone to disappearing silently. We hadn't realized that she got up from her nap and ran off."

Matixx waves a hand and laughs cheerfully. "Nah, she's been no trouble at all! Quite the opposite, actually! A wonderful little helper!"

"That's good. Still, I think it's time to go. Come, Lyca," Nomine beckons the mini fox, who stands her ground.

"I don't want to! It's a *party*, we were invited! You can join too! Right?" Lyca looks at Matixx.

"Of course! The more, the merrier! Sides, I got a lot of food prepped, no way we're gonna eat all this by ourselves!" Matixx turns his attention to the newcomers. "Y'all are more than welcome to stay if you want!"

Nomine's face scrunches, a conflicted look on their face as they consider the invitation. Looking to Skaia, the Grem shrugs. "We're invited, why not? An extra pair of hands couldn't hurt in the preparation"

"YEAH!" Lyca grins excitedly. "Oh! What if we brought food too?"

Agreeing to the idea, Nomine leaves through a portal and returns momentarily with supplies to make mini arepas with cheese. Setting into the preparation, Nomine begins to put the ingredients together while Lyca continues her retelling to Skaia, pointing out the various other Scarfoxes and mentioning the activities they'd done together. While this is taking place, Nomine strikes up a mild conversation with Matixx.

With the barbeque now in full motion, Mata and Haseo unpack the speakers they'd brought with them, connecting them to a power bank. Connecting Mata's cell phone to the same power bank, she pulls up a playlist of music and hits shuffle, a lively and upbeat song starting to flow through the speakers and adding energy to the setting. Matixx immediately starts swaying along to the music, Mata and Haseo falling into the groove as well shortly after. Within seconds, the three of them are dancing to the music. Saiko joins in, and Matixx sets the cooking utensils down to take her hands and dance with her, breaking only long enough to turn the food over before rejoining her. Realizing the soda coolers had been forgotten on the shore, Andy heads over to them and fills them with fresh ice using his own magic, making sure to chill each can as well. Once he's done, he brings the coolers back to the serving area and takes a soda for himself.

The afternoon progresses in good spirits and high energy; Sunny and Lyca eventually teaming up to build a sand castle together while Haseo and Andy play a variant of beach volleyball with Noemi, Caedim, Will, and Mata using a lightweight but durable "ball" made of finely woven twigs and vines from Shiori. When one of them gets tired, they switch out with Skaia and Nomine, who have taken to alternating on food preparation so that each can enjoy the activities too. Shiori sits at the edge of the trees in the shade, watching the others have fun and swaying along to the music while she leisurely sips a can of soda. She watches a sneaky Coco Rat scurry in and grab a morsel of food behind Matixx's back, and as it retreats, it sees her and freezes. She giggles quietly and presses a finger to her mouth, making a "shhhh" sound. It scurries back into the shrubs where it came from without a peep.

"Hey Matixx, is the food ready yet?" Mata calls out. When Matixx shakes his head, she slumps dramatically. "UGHHHHHH. You are LITERALLY the slowest cook I've ever seen," she teases.

"Ya can't rush **greatness**," Matixx hollers back, grinning slyly. "I know *you're* used to 3-minute microwave trash, but this is **REAL** food. It takes time."

Mata feigns offense, gasping dramatically and putting her hands on either side of her face. "You did NOT just say that to me."

Playing along, the blue fox crosses his arms in front of his chest, spatula in hand and looking smug. "And what if I *did*, huh? Whaddaya gonna do about it?"

Instead of a witty retort, Mata looks at Saiko instead. "Is his cooking really that good?"

Saiko shrugs. "I'm not sure, actually. I normally do the cooking at home. Mati usually prefers to go to a diner than cook for himself."

"Hmmmm," Mata squints at Matixx, scrutinizing him. "We'll see, I guess. You talk big, you better serve up some delicious food to match that talk, mister!"

"Just you wait," Matixx grins darkly, keeping up the confident facade. Once Mata turns her attention away, Matixx looks skyward. "Please don't let me embarrass myself," he groans to himself.

As the afternoon sun moves across the sky, the food is finally cooked to whatever standards Matixx seems to be following in his own head, and eventually set out on plates for everyone to come and collect. One by one, everyone comes and collects a plate, settling down in the shade of the trees to eat and chat away idly. Eager to see if Matixx's confidence was deserved, Mata sinks her teeth into one of the steaks she'd picked up and lets out an impressed squeal.

"IT'S ACTUALLY REALLY GOOD??? Saiko!! You held out on me! You knew all along, didn't you?"

Saiko raises her hands defensively, laughing quietly. "I really didn't!" She turns her gaze to Matixx. "I'm surprised, too. If you can make food like this, how come you don't cook at home?"

"Well," Matixx looks away sheepishly, "I don't *really* know how to cook." He leans back on his hands, looking up at the sky. "When I was still human, my dad and I used to spend a lot of time outdoors. Ya know, camping and fishing, father-son bonding things. Everything y'all are eating right now was what he taught me a long, long time ago. Once I was old enough to operate a grill on my own, he taught me all of his own recipes." He falls silent, reminiscing. "I suppose cooking wouldn't be that much different though. Just a combination of ingredients. Buuuuut, if I did that," he looks at Saiko, "then I'd miss out on this gal's absolutely amazing home cooked meals." He looks at her with love, and she covers her face with her hand.

"Wow, get a room," Mata deadpans, but the smirk pulling at the corners of her mouth gives away her attempt at disgust.

As the others start to dig into their food, Mata's sentiments about the food are mirrored all around, and Matixx is given compliment after compliment for the food. Skaia and Nomine receive praise as well for their arepas with cheese, and before long there are hardly any left so Nomine leaves through the portal again to bring more ingredients. As the food quantity rapidly dwindles, Matixx notices Andy periodically looking around, the latter's ears drooping each time before he gets distracted with conversation. At one point, the brown Scarfox grabs a new plate and starts picking up at least one of each food item before they're all gone, putting it all on the plate before setting the entire thing aside. Tilting his head, Matixx makes a comment on it.

"Taking some leftovers?"

"No, these aren't for me. I was... hoping someone would have showed up at some point in the day, but it's fine. Parties aren't his forte," Andy chuckles and smiles to himself. "Then again, they're not usually my forte either, but today's been fun!"

Matixx opens his mouth to reply when another figure slinks onto the beach. Striding slowly over to the group and drawing the attention of everyone else, the figure brushes their fingers over Andy's hair and ears before speaking out, red gaze falling on Matixx. "Room for one more?"

"YOU CAME!" Andy squeals excitedly, setting the plate down and pouncing on his mate, knocking the dark fox off balance and sending them both tumbling into the sand.

While Andy aggressively snuggles him, the newcomer sits up and brushes the sand off of himself with a sigh. Picking both himself and his clingy baggage up, he sits down with the others, acting like the last few seconds hadn't taken place and he wasn't currently being hugged within an inch of his existence. He picks up the plate that Andy had been preparing, digging into the food before it had a chance to get any colder. "You didn't tell me there was a *party* going on."

Andy laughs quietly. "We kind of got invited last minute."

The dark fox tilts his head curiously. "We?"

Clearing his throat, Andy points to Lyca sitting in Nomine's lap. "The little one was running around on her own. I was worried she'd get hurt, so I ran after her. We ended up playing in the water for a bit, and that's where we met Sunny." He gestures to the merfox happily chowing down on a cheeseburger, currently oblivious to everyone else. "We got into a splash fight, and that's when everyone else came along and invited us to party with them. We had fun, there were shenanigans, and now we're having tasty food!"

"I see. Tasty, indeed."

Matixx puffs his chest out a bit in pride, validated and immensely pleased that his barbequed food was enjoyed by everyone, and Saiko giggles, elbowing him. Grinning at her, he scoots closer and wraps his arm around her shoulders, nuzzling his face into her hair.

When the food is gone and everyone's had as much as they could stomach, the party on the beach continues even though the sky is starting to grow dark. Prepared for the situation, Mata retrieves her bag and pulls out strings of lights, followed by a second power bank, and decorates the nearby trees and bushes with Shiori's help. Once that's done, Mata goes back to her bag and calls Noemi over, and the two huddle together for a moment before the sound of sparks are heard. Turning to face the others, Noemi and Mata are both holding sparklers. Giving hers to Mata, Noemi begins to light and hand out sparklers to everyone, the first one going to Lyca. The mini fox jumps up and runs around with it excitedly, waving it around and drawing lines of light in the air until it fizzles out. Her ears droop, but it's only for a moment as Andy approaches her with multiple sparklers in his fingers. Handing them all to her, he picks her up and puts her back on his shoulders. Taking hold of her feet, he runs around with her, letting her hold out the sparklers and leaving trails of sparkles behind them as they dash and twirl around.

When the final sparklers have been used up and a soda toast was made to the summer and good times with friends, the gang packs everything up and prepares to say goodnight. Skaia, Nomine, and Lyca say their goodbyes first, and little by little, the remaining Scarfoxes leave until Andy and Silverlight are the only two left. They sit together at the water's edge, Silverlight holding Andy from behind and resting his chin on the smaller Scarfox's head. Neither one speaks, both content to just enjoy the moment and listen to the waves crashing on the shoreline while the cool breeze flows through their threads. After several minutes of quiet, Andy's voice draws Silverlight back to focus.

"Uh, is the water... glowing?"

Following his mate's gaze, the sleepy Scarfox notices the soft glow in the water.

"Yes, it does appear to be glowing..."

[To be continued in the Sea Critter Caper prompt...]