

Judgment

Kaiya Jounetsu stared in awe as a fierce arcane battle between arcane titans resumed before her. The nogitsune felt both hunger and fear as she witnessed the realms shaking sorcery colliding with catastrophic force. The oldest records of history and even now, there has never been a battle of power this fierce and destructive between two absolute monsters, one of them only about five years old. The older combatant, the scarlet scaled serpent, unleashed her fury behind a strange purple bolt of energy that raced with so much condensed power, it made Kaiya's mouth water. That single attack spell would have sent her to an eighth tail from her current three. She had met those of nine tails and felt like dust before them, but this being was an ancient soul of terrible power. This was Kehtral, a dragon that was feared across all realms and deep into history to a time when all realms were young. It was she alone who started the feud between the kitsune and dragons. The ruby scaled bitch had told Kaiya personally that she did it just to keep them out of her war in times past into long forgotten history. This was a dragon that was feared more than almost all others. Only her mate, GahlByrn, had a greater fear attached to his name; the dragon that was not only feared, but he nearly conquered and destroyed the realms single handed. This fight was a desperate battle to prevent the female from bringing him back. Kaiya was not the being that stood in her way. She was the prize that these titans fought over. Terror struck through her as she realized the dragoness who had hurled such a devastating attack was not the slightest bit phased by slinging that much energy. It was as if she herself had used her own flame to light a candle. This was the true and unmasked face of the highest ranked mage, the vyrekai, set in raw primal fury.

A purple bolt of energy struck the shields of Kehtral's foe, erupting in a powerful shock wave as the energies exploded against those shields. The earth beneath them buckled and groaned in agony as the force of energy striking the shield ripped it's crust asunder. The smoke and dust it kicked up was heavy for a moment, blocking everything from sight until they cleared. The nogitsune strained to see what her other senses were telling her was still there until the dust thinned enough to show the blazing white light of the odd flame shield and the form inside of it. There she was, hanging in the air like an avenging angel, poised to strike down the foul harlot. The sight was both inspiring and disheartening. That flame shield wrapped around the tiny form of a very special gryphlet that Kaiya had come to respect for her power, surprisingly strong heart, and incredibly sharp mind. Reana Shieldra, her best friend's daughter and an inspiring youngling to know. But she was just a child, and she was only an adept, far out gunned by her opponent. Beyond the difference in their power to begin with, Reana had been bound to only half her own by the fear of her own people. They were afraid of some one so young and innocent controlling such awesome arcane might as she did. Now it only stacked the odds even higher against her in a fight that held everything in the balance. David was facing Goliath while wearing handcuffs.

The girl was not to be outdone simply by being overpowered though. So far, she had managed to survive the Vyrekai's attempts to destroy her with wit, strategy, and fast thinking. Every spell Kehtral leveled against her, Reana answered with the polar opposite to cancel out the effects while using far less energy. But that could only work so far, and they were past that point. She nearly died once already, somehow managing to pull through with that strange shield that covered her body in flames that matched her coloration of pure white, even tracing her wing bands, tail tuft, and tear traces along her cheeks with black. The shield was flimsy if one were to study it for a mere moment, but the girl kept her opponent too infuriated to look. The gryphlet kept leveling small spells and personal jibes to keep the dragon in a murderous rage so she wouldn't think. All Kehtral wanted to do was smash her tiny foe with all her considerable arcane might, sure that she could crush any shield with enough power and force behind her spells. Kaiya couldn't help but smirk, even as her knees quaked at the violent display of unfathomable power before her. The girl was keeping up her ruse of her shield's strength by selectively countering spells with true counters that unraveled their weaves, or striking them with spells that would give an opposing effect to cancel them out. It was a very energy draining spell, but with a foe hammering on that shield, it absorbed those spells and used them to fuel it self. Truly a clever little thing, but the nogitsune couldn't figure out what her real strategy was. The girl did not have the power to break her opponent's defenses and the dragon was already wise to all the girl's offensive tricks. Not even Kaiya believed she could hold out until the Vyrekai drained herself to her level. She knew somehow that the Vyrekai would get too frustrated and shift targets eventually.

A flaming meteor struck the shield next, but something was very wrong and it made Kaiya's blood freeze in her veins. The sound, the force of the shock waves she was having to brace against, it was all gone, giving the battle an eerily detached feel to it. There was another power present, as great as any of the arcane combatants dueling out on that field and greater still. That power seemed to coalesce right next to her and that fact became absolutely clear as a massive white furred cougar seemed to appear from nowhere beside her. The beast sat over a head taller than she, and it had eyes of turquoise energy that matched the turquoise markings around her muzzle. She found it odd that her mind immediately marked the feline as a female.

"You know, she is my greatest daughter," the definitely feminine voice sounded in her head, "Reana holds the hope and future of so many upon her shoulders, and yet she does not even know it. She has grown much on this journey and you may not realize it, but you are a big part of that growth. Most importantly, I have seen some growth in you on this journey. Something has grown in your heart that you tried to throw away so long ago. It is that glimmer that has brought me here."

Kaiya did her best not to wilt, or was it drool, at the power of the goddess sitting right next to her. Standing next to Reana or even Kehtral had her knees quaking from the power thrumming off of her. This cougar trumped them by far, "What do you want from me? No god comes to just sit and chat with us lesser beings like this unless they want something."

"Perceptive. What I want, is to thank you. Young Reana could not have come this far without your love and support. She would have wilted under despair along this journey if not for the warmth in your heart that kept you by her side to give her what she needed. As dark as you try to be, you could not help but show her that warm and nurturing side. It is this combination of your darkness and your warmth of heart that intrigues me," the goddess, Arsiel, as Kaiya knew her to be named from her time with her gryphon friend, watched the battle taking place in the time removed from the two conversing.

Kaiya shook her head, "I felt a sense of right in helping my friend to not lose his child. Nothing more. She is a sweet and wonderful girl with incredible power, it would be a shame if that were squandered and lost over something so stupid as being physically lost. But you must have something in mind, I am waiting for you to quit playing around and tell me."

"I am watching over a world of an orphaned people. Their deity sacrificed himself to protect them from a disaster. Now they are vulnerable to metaphysical attacks, and they have something very valuable to just the sort of being that would want to harm them just hanging in the sky over their heads. I cannot directly act upon their world to protect them, but if I had a guardian to act as my word, and most of all, my claws, to any who would invade, they could be kept safe by the grace of the Great Mother. I offer that missing power link you do not have with Inari, with myself instead. I will never tell you what to do, or how to act. I am trusting you to keep them safe and sound by your own judgment if you accept this task." Arsiel turned her turquoise eyes upon the nogitsune, *"This station is not without reward. The very place it self is quite the gem to behold for one such as yourself. Every day you walk there, you would be bathed in the power of a fallen god, the very god that is gone. He sacrificed himself to protect his children from a premature collapse of their sun and now the remnants of his soul bind the flows of the celestial weave into a source of energy so condensed, it has crystallized. The sun is not a sun, but rather, the radiant light of that crystallized power that is the size of a sun. This very thing that makes their lives possible, and what would attract beings in search of that energy, and that is the reason they that need protection. What is more, you will have the connection to a deity that you have been missing this whole time. I will give you that flow of power like the other kitsune get from Inari"*

Kaiya hesitated, even biting her bottom lip for a moment as she considered the task and the offer before her. It was a tremendous gift, but did she really wish to be held down at all with responsibilities? What was the catch to all this as well? Deities never gave a gift without some sort of catch that served their purposes and furthered their agendas in some form or another. They often did what she called 'editing', simply not telling the entire story so they could alter the open meaning behind the partial words later. Was there going to be another case of that here? She simply knew too little about Arsiel, the great mother of the Titanian gryphons, to make any kind of judgment.

Kaiya decided the best way to play it was safe, "So what is the catch to all this? What aren't you telling me that will be extracted as payment at a later date? Nothing like this goes without a price."

"Being the guardian of Ardour is the price. Your payment for this connection is to make sure the children of my dearly departed friend and colleague are safe from other divine and supernatural forces. I would ask that you live upon that world, but travel is not prohibited so long as you keep watch," the great cougar replied as she continued to watch the gryphlet fight for the lives of her and everyone else.

The nogitsune gave a soft sigh, "This deal is to put myself in the service of a goddess to get the very same gift, yet more powerful, that is offered by the mother of my own race. It wasn't enough for Inari, why would it be enough for you?"

"Because it is not just one god, but two," a rather deep and masculine voice echoed in the vulpine's mind, *"We are a pair, the Consorts who gave birth to the gryphons of Titania and who continue to watch over the balance of our world. Everything my mate does, I support. You will not have connection to her, but to us. Every tail you have and will grow from the point of accepting the deal, will represent and hold twice the power of the tails any other kitsune or nogitsune ever could have."*

Kaiya's heart hammered in her chest, it was the kind of offer she or any other member of her race would have never imagined possible. She would exceed the power of a nine tail, without ascending and without ever having to bow to any deity. All she had to do was indulge on combat with those who sought to steal the treasure that her new domain orbited. No one was saying how she was to protect them, or how often she had to meet with the locals. Power beyond belief, an open ticket to use that power to harm others, and no one would ever fault her for it. Both parts of her heart swelled with glee, the part that had grown so bright and large with her time around that paladin of a gryphon and his daughter, as well as the darker part of her heart that relished in the destruction of others.

Her smirk of a smile that had become her trademark spread across her muzzle, "I know you aren't stupid, so you wont just give me this power. What test will I have to pass to earn this delightfully violent and powerful post? And will I be strong enough to face an opponent like that red scaled whore?"

"You will face opponents like her, for they will be the only ones strong enough to consider taking the treasure of the sun. You will be strong enough to rise to the challenges before you by your power alone, but if you are not, you have already

made the powerful allies that can easily stand by your side and make you near invincible together. As for your test, you must accept my mark of judgment to decide if you are truly worthy of calling yourself my adopted daughter. I will not tell you what I am looking for in this. That has to already exist in your heart, not because you tried to achieve it. Your judgment will come when you reach your fifth tail. If you do not pass judgment, you will simply lose the mark and remain as you are," Arsiel turned her glowing gaze back to the nogitsune, *"I know what you are thinking... and yes, there is no penalty for failing to pass my judgment. You really have nothing to lose except the welcome of my heart and warm nest. You will lose no existing power you would gain on your own and you would not be banished from our world. I would not demand or even suggest you stay away from my Greatest Son or Chosen Daughter either. I am a mother, not an executioner. Just because you might have turned out wrong for what I wished you to be, you still have a right to live and a role to play in the grand cycles of life and death. I await your decision."*

Kaiya could not believe her ears, those words came from a deity. This goddess was everything she could have ever hoped to find in a such a being. If Inari had been the same, she likely never would have avoided the connection to the goddess. She had a chance to feel the embrace of the a goddess who had her admiration for trusting those she asked to help her without some trickery.

There was only one thing she could possibly say, "I'll take your mark, Great Mother."

Arsiel gave a nod before she stood and turned to fully face the nogitsune. She should have towered over Kaiya, but the goddess seemed to shrink in the motion to simply stare her in the eyes as she placed her right paw over the nogitsune's heart. Turquoise light flared between that paw and Kaiya's chest that forced her to close her eyes against the bright flare. When that light faded, she was alone again on the battlefield where Reana and Kehtral were clashing with the kind of power that she had a chance to hold if she passed the test of the Great Mother. She looked back ahead to see something different in the sky, something the dragoness had overlooked. The sky had darkened and the stars were visible, despite the time of day being just after noon.

Kaiya's ears finally started registering sound just in time to hear the final sentence of Reana's speech, "...Grandma Tensaih taught me this one. You should remember it and find the irony that it's your energy I am using to cast it. Star Tears Fall!"

The nogitsune watched in awe as the first of the stars began to drop toward the dragoness who screamed in horror when she realized that the gryphlet had cast a spell beyond her rank, "This is impossible! That is a Vyrekai spell! You can't possibly have controlled the third energy type for that!"

Kaiya's ears pinned against her head as she felt the same horror as the dragon when she felt the raw power of the spell streaking down from the heavens. This was a raw and primal power, far to great to be appealing to her hungers, it only summoned the intense dread for it's destructive power. The first star fell toward them, growing larger with each passing second as it became a true meteor of power streaking from on high. It was somehow locked onto the dragoness, leaving her nowhere to go as the massive ball struck her and the planet with such intense force. The nogitsune wondered as she collapsed to her knees, if the girl had not just brought about the destruction of the planet or the beginnings of a mass extinction event. Surely there were to be dire consequences for the planet to have such a powerful force and so much energy slam into it's surface as they had just witnessed. She was sure that the spell would be her end as well, for the shock wave raced toward her far too fast to escape.

Kaiya was spared by the quick actions of the gryphlet, who shoved her directly into her own shields with a rolling lump of the earth itself. However, she felt no safety there as the flame shield was now gone from Reana, replaced by the glowing runes of her bindings that restricted her power to half. Those binds were so very strained under the power the girl was forcing out of herself to sustain the devastating spell. Two more of those star tears streaked toward their target in quick succession, three more following before those hit. Was the girl over reacting to her foe? That must have been a death blow already. No... She seen her just before the second strike hit. Kehtral was there, barely holding up her shields against the attack. With such a barrage of intense power as that, she wouldn't hold those shields for long at all. The second tear slammed against the earth and that battered arcane shield with all the force of the first one, shuttering the planet as it groaned in pain.

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Kaiya sat upright like a steel trap triggering. Her chest heaved with the efforts of drawing breath in fast enough to sustain her terrified panting gasps. A nightmare? She, the dark, soul-eating nogitsune of flame that stalked her woods, had a nightmare. It took a moment for her eyes to focus. The slim form that slept next to her began to stir under the motion and sound of her waking. The room she was completely white in decor; the dresser with vanity, the carpet, the walls, the night stands on either side of the large soft bed, and even the bedding itself. All of it was just as white as the pure and pristine feathers of the female gryph that was now propping herself up to rest a hand on hers.

That falcon like face was striking with those piercing blue eyes that held her with a concerned warmth, “You had a nightmare, all is well and safe now.”

“No, Shadow, it wasn't a nightmare,” Kaiya shook her head as she peeled back the covers and slipped her lean and athletic form from beneath the covers, her four tails falling free as she made her way over to the mirror on the dresser, “It was a memory, one that shouldn't shake the foundation of my soul.”

Shadow pulled back her half of the covers to slip from their embrace with such a fluid grace, it was hard for Kaiya to believe she was only a mage. The nogitsune watched the other female approach slowly from behind in the mirror, still finding herself stunned to see every last feather and strand of fur was well in place. It may have been due to a spell. She was not certain since the raw energy flowing through the pure white gryph drowned out any minor enchantment or spell she kept upon herself. Kaiya could not help but devour the reflection of the Vyreikai's slim and very nude form approaching her with such graceful strides. Everything about her mingled well with the allure of her energies that tempted the vixen so; her pure white feathers and fur, the very present yet modest breasts that added mystique to her form by lacking any nipple, much like her own, those wings that gave her an even more angelic appearance, and most of all those piercing blue eyes in their unnatural tone. Those eyes that never judged and never demanded anything of any living being, eyes that were always at a calm and ordered peace that made her own inner chaos feel whole and complete. The gryph, like all her species, had no visible ears of any kind. Kaiya didn't mind that at all as she felt that any kind of ear would have marred that pretty avian head.

The moment that pale pink hand touched her shoulder, the nogitsune felt her heart shudder her spine down to her loins. This being was too perfect, too powerful, too beautiful, too wise and understanding. She needed her insight and her well traveled knowledge. That was the reason she came to the gryph in the previous evening, but she found all those alluring traits to be too much to ignore once again. They had no connection or real relationship of any kind, but Kaiya could never deny that she found her way to her bed more often than she ever thought she would. Time well wasted, but she did have other people she wanted to see that day before the hour that would see her four tails become five.

Shadow seemed to sense her inner struggle and performed that bit of magic with her voice that the nogitsune was still uncertain if it was from skill or true magic, “Easy now, I know what is going through your mind... That look is unmistakable and I can assure you, I will not be selfish as to allow you access to my body to lose more of your time to such a weakness. You need to talk about something and time grows short, does it not? So please, talk to me and let me in. I cannot offer any insight if you do not tell me what it is that haunts you so.”

A pitiful little whining caught the attention of both the females as what looked like some tiny form of gryphon struggled to walk toward them from his little cushion beside the bed. It was no larger than a common house cat, which was in fact the cat base it's tail end had. The bird portion was that of a kestrel, save for his serrated beak and talons which gave away his species just as much as his rusty red eyes. The serrations had been filed down and the spines along his tail had been removed, but there was no mistaking the little creature for exactly what he was. Kaiya had found the little Dryn breed male gryphal as part of a small swarm of near a dozen when she accepted a job for a very close friend. The species was supposed to have died out due to sterility decades before she found the little creature, yet they showed up out of nowhere and began taking any who traveled the primary trade route out of the small village that hired the mercs she worked with from time to time. She had eliminated the entire swarm except for the little kestrel marked and colored fellow. She'd decided to keep and experiment on altering his nature and instinct. After some time of nearly having him into something that seemed like a good little pet, she grew a soft spot for him and rewarded him with the name; Bane.

Bane was very old by that time, earning extensions to his life span by becoming a steadfast and loving companion to the nogitsune after she had taken him to shadow for help in creating a new creature of him. Little Bane had his personality and his very nature stripped down to remove much of the savagery and hateful behaviors that the dark creator of the gryphal had built into him. It was a long and painstaking process to find what was truly and honestly the personality of that little soul without the savage behaviors forced upon it by the creature construction, while still leaving him the free will to choose to protect himself and those he cared about if he so chose to. What was left was something that was as independent and self sufficient as a cat and yet as loyal and protective of those he imprinted as his new swarm as any dog or wolf. Kaiya found herself valuing his companionship so much that she put effort into finding new ways to extend his life span. Little bane was way more than twice as old as he should have been able to get, though the life extensions did not prevent his body from aging and left him suffering from very painful arthritis in his hips. He was deemed unable to travel with her several years ago and had to be placed within a permanent location for her to return and visit him at. Shadow was a very convenient contact to have had him imprint upon, since she was kind enough to care for the aging gryphal and always glad to have the nogitsune's company at any given time.

Kaiya bent down and picked up the little dryn that whined any time he had to move, “It is this mark, being judged by a goddess to standards that I am not even allowed to know. If I fail these unseen guidelines, the mark just disappears and I stay the way I am. There really is nothing to lose, but I am still fretting over this judgment that will take place tonight. I can't even figure out why I'm so nervous over this.”

“Well, let us look at this logically,” Shadow reached up one pale pink scaled hand to very gently stroke over Bane's back and offer a soothing warm flow of energy into his age ravaged body, “You've always loved the act of feeding, naturally

hunger for more power, and you hate how easily you are drained when using your abilities. This will make sense as I tick down what you would get out of your success, please bare with me. Success means that you will have power than no other kitsune or nogitsune could even begin to imagine having, You would have a connection to two gods to replenish those reserves while you attempt to deplete them. What is more, you never described Arsiel as telling you not to feed as the guardian of Ardour. Your territory will be extraordinarily large too, an entire planet to yourself with no other kitsune or societies to worry about with the exception of the one you would be protecting. They would likely be thankful for your presence and you would only need to show yourself to them when you felt like it. You won't lose anything you already have, but I would say that you have much to lose if you fail to pass judgment. Your concerns are well founded, but there is the other side of the coin. It is Arsiel, the goddess of the forests, balance, and nurturing that is judging you. She is known to be a kind deity to those she reaches out to work with, but she also has a more primal and brutal side that nurtures her predatory children of the forests. Even the rain forests and their savage beasts fall under her watchful eye. She would be understanding of your need to feed and the desire to even after you have the link. Aside from that, I really see nothing bad about you. Sure you put on a tough and aloof front, but I've seen what really rests in that heart of yours. I am quite confident in your passing this judgment."

Bane purred softly as the energy caressed and soothed his nerves to dull the pain, Kaiya felt a bit warmer inside as he was eased from that suffering, "At least some one believes in me, I'm beginning to wonder if even Bane believes in me like he used to."

"Bane loves you with all the heart we helped him free. He would not be as happy with anyone else or any other form of existence that does not include your presence," Shadow carefully slipped her hands beneath the ancient dryn and shifted him gently into her arms, "You have others you want to speak to and only hours to do it in. You need to get going while I prepare to take Bane in to see a healer for an arthritis treatment. He's getting really bad again and you are short on time to tend to his medical needs."

That struck a lance of guilt through the heart of the nogitsune as the little dryn would never have needed such treatments if she had never extended his life span the way she had. Life was so much easier for her before she met that gryphon mercenary all those years ago. Back then she wouldn't have ever become attached to the little dryn or to the gryphon merc for that matter. She just wouldn't have cared. He was responsible for bringing that part of her heart back out after she had spent so long locking it away. If he had not become her friend, she would have repaid him properly for all the stress and pain that it had brought her. The really tough decisions were the worst ones to her. Normally her own desires would override anything indecisive about morality and emotional sentiment. Extending Bane's life to keep him by her side was easy the first time she did it, but as his body deteriorated, a nagging seed of guilt began to blossom within her heart. Now the poor little dryn suffered so much just to draw breath that she wanted it to end for him, but she also wanted her one steadfast companion that would never judge her or ever think badly of her. She justified the last application of one of her feedings with the fact that the age ravaged Bane only wanted to be with the being he saw as his mother and that he was happy so long as he could do so.

Yet now she felt that twinge of guilt even harder than normal at his state of health, "Thank you, Shadow, for caring for Bane, and for believing in me. It is good to know that Bane is not the only one. I should get going now, I will see you after."

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The palace always made Kaiya a little nervous, mostly because she wasn't sure how she felt about it. It was extravagant and spacious inside, designed to make avians feel comfortable and prevent feelings of claustrophobia. That fact did not change that as she moved further inside, looking warily at the walls well adorned with gold, fine violet carpets and tapestries with gold trim lined the marble floors and walls. Every last color made her stand out like a blazing beacon as the guards kept up a silent eye upon the nogitsune. Not that they could begin to fight her if she decided to slaughter every living being in the palace, they simply had too little protections upon themselves to do so. The particular being she was coming to see was another matter entirely. Even an entire wing down from her room, Kaiya could feel the tremendous weight and pressure of the female who had once been the very girl that fought that battle that haunted her dreams. The girl blossomed into an astounding young woman, and her achievements only mounted as she grew older. Kaiya couldn't help but feel a twinge of pride in the girl as she was the daughter of her closest friend and something of a niece to her after all.

The fur bristled along the nogitsune's tail as she came closer to the source of that power. Normally she would have felt hungry for a large source of power, but something about the sheer volume and knowledge behind this one made her nervous. This power was so great that she didn't even imagine trying to devour that much raw energy as the results would have been catastrophic if she did. Each fall of her paws brought her ever closer to that frightening pressure that was put off

by the Vyreikai she knew so well. Another few doors down and she was outside the suite that the Archmage and Royal mage shared with her mate. Kaiya had learned early on to be able to look through energies so she could focus years back, but still it took her a moment or two to gather herself before she raised her hand to knock, only to have the door open to reveal the grinning kestrel marked face of Valgard.

"Reana can always feel you coming, that's how I do that," the male gryfox smiled at the nogitsune, knowing damned well that she did not like his little game.

She was not without a way to return the favor to the slender male as she spotted the evidence of his profession on his beak. She suppressed the urge to grin at the male as she caught his beak with one paw and licked the other to wipe at his beak like a mother would her child's face.

"Hold still, Valgard, you have soot on your face. Really, what would your mother think if she knew you were so careless to get soot on your beak while you were at the forge," she scolded in a motherly tone, knowing that he hated when anyone but his mother treated him like a child.

There was a clearing of a throat coming from within the luxuriously furnished suite from the slender female curled up on their pile of cushions that made their bed, "Kaiya, please release my mate. It's bad enough how people look at him knowing he's also my brother, he doesn't need you picking on him too. Don't think you're innocent either, Val, you should stop trying to sneak up on Kaiya. I may talk her into really giving you a good shot in the face next time."

"I won't take much convincing," the nogitsune smirked at the offending male.

The vyreikai turned her emerald eyes upon the nogitsune, those black tear traces on her cheeks did not rise with a playful smile at the vixen's words, "Playful or not, I will not tolerate feelings of malice between or toward those I care about. Now you obviously have something you need to talk about, so let us talk. I know you have an event this day and you probably wish to speak to daddy before it happens."

"Yes, but it is difficult to speak of. I have to open up about some things I have kept secret for some time," Kaiya raised her right hand unconsciously up to her chest where Arsiel's mark lay, "This mark came from a goddess, one you know so very well."

Reana tilted her head as her black tail tuft flicked once with interest while Valgard moved to join her in their nest of a bed, "I know that came from a deity, I've known since the very first day you had it. Although, I do not know why you think I would know the Great Mother so well."

"Cut the shit Reana, just like you knew I had the mark, I know you have intimately studied the teachings of Arsiel ever since that battle with Kehtral. You have a much deeper knowledge and respect for the mother of your race than High Priestess Tiahna," normally the nogitsune would not poke a being that could wipe her out with a mere thought, but she had little time and little reason to fear the gryphon woman before her.

The avian mage paused to give her mate a soft nuzzle and nestle in with him before she made any sort of reply, "So what is it you need from me? Regardless of my knowledge of yourself and Mother Arsiel, you know the details behind that mark. I have no way of knowing what was offered and agreed upon between you two."

"She was impressed with the way I stood by you and tried to protect you back on Kalvehnsten, even though you were so much stronger than I was; For the part I played in your victory over Kehtral, for the passion I showed in trying to protect and avenge you when I thought you were hurt or killed. She found I fit as her ideal candidate to be the guardian of Ardour. She offered me a connection to her, in place of Inari, not by force, not by coercion, but by choice. She told me that I would be judged to make sure I did not succumb to the darker mask I wear. She told me that there was no penalty for failure, other than never receiving the connection to both the consorts and not being given the sacred duty of protecting the gryfox. Reana, I admitted once today that I'm afraid of failure, but I admit to you that I am afraid of success. I am not really certain which outcome would be worse. I have seen nothing but good from Arsiel in her handling of the people of Titania, but the time I seen is nothing but the blink of an eye to such ancient deities as the Great Consorts. How do I know they are not like any other god that I have run across? What secret is attached the moment she has hold of me as her servant," Kaiya sank to the cushions of the bed that belonged to the royal mage, who was somewhat of a niece to her, though at times she felt a twinge of maternal pride in her when she heard of her honors and political achievements.

Reana listened closely, those emerald eyes held her with a calculating gaze, though somehow they also held an understanding to them, "I know why you are afraid of failure, you lose a chance at an incredible amount of power. Upon your ninth tail, you would be right on Tensai's hip in the running of metaphysical strength. Right up there with the top three Vyreikai, no kitsune of any kind could ever dream of that kind of power. The only mages that could match you then would already be your allies, family really. I can also see why you would be afraid of success; you are not certain how much servitude you have given yourself over to for the sake of having that power. I think I can reassure you that Arsiel has never been known to double deal in all the history of mortals having dealt with her. What she asked is all she is likely to ask, unless the situation was so utterly dire that even the gods were desperate to protect the people of Titania. I know inside that if things got that bad, you would have already come to try and help by your own choice. What also bothers you, which you have not yet said directly, is that you are afraid she will not approve of your methods. You intend to feed on those you feel deserve such a horrific fate, to indulge in an activity you have come to be addicted to, as well as to send a strong message to those who would hurt your new flock of fire birds. I can honestly say, you are safe. Arsiel can not act upon Ardour in any

direct way, that she is placing a guardian with connections to her power and that of her mate, is a real stretch of the rules placed upon the deities. You also have to take into account that she is a very wild and primal goddess when it comes to justice and protecting her children. The Great Mother is indeed a wild puma protecting her cubs when it comes to those she perceives as her children. Be it directly or indirectly, it doesn't matter to her, hell hath no fury like a mother's scorn. She likely chose you because you will be aloof and away from influencing the gryfox culture, but when you do crave the company of others, you can be nice. When push comes to shove, you can be as cold and savage as she would be toward those who would hurt the ones she vowed to protect. So in short, so long as you keep to your standards of feeding on those who would be executed by the law, you have nothing to worry about. Given how loving Arsiel is outside of her defensive behaviors, she watched you before she approached you, and she is ready to accept you as her daughter if you pass this test. Arsiel would never let anyone treat her children as pawns, and neither will she do so herself. When you pass her judgment, you will be welcomed into the family, be given your chore and one hell of an allowance."

"Thank you, Rea, but I do need to get going now, I really think my time with your father will take up the rest of this day, even if we don't have much else to talk about this judgment," Kaiya smiled warmly and gave the girl a nuzzle before she stood and moved to the door where she paused and looked back, "I have to know something though, how can you manage to dispel my fears by putting whole new ones into me?"

The gryphoness gave a little smirk at the vixen, "It's a gift."

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The air was warm where Kaiya sat in wait for the gryphon, the last person on her little tour before she was to face her judgment. She watched the brown feathered bird from above on a tree branch, the tree sitting not too far away from a cemetery. Age had been kind to the old bird, though he had already lived longer than any of his kind. He was only just past the middle of his life span, though he had shown the signs of aging in his coat back when he would have normally. That brown coat was frosted and peppered with the white of his years to give him a very distinguished look of an elder gentleman. Though his feathers had shown his age at the appropriate time for a Titanian gryphon, the body beneath them was still a finely sculpted image of a gryphon warrior. After she had her fill of watching him for a few minutes, the nogitsune finally decided to confront her dearest friend.

Kaiya landed light before the gryphon, though he did not stop for her, "Hello there, lovely dark masked angel."

"Raust, I-hey," she nearly squawked as he managed to yet again surprise her by scooping her up in a forelimb and holding her against his chest while he hobbled on, "Eep! One of these days I am going to slip free and kick you right square in your balls, paladin."

The gryphon gave a snort, "No, you won't, you love them too much and Kairen won't be so inclined to let you near them if you are damaging them."

"That was a long time ago," Kaiya jabbed him in the ribs with her knee to make the old bird stop, knowing quite well she didn't cause any real harm, "I have something important to talk about with you. I don't have an unlimited amount of time either."

The gryphon paused for a moment as he set her down on her own feet, "You gain another tail today. I don't see why that would be such a big concern."

"Yes, but there's more to it than that. You remember this mark," Kaiya gestured at the turquoise paw print on her chest, though she did not wait for him to respond, "It is from the Great Mother, it is her mark of judgment to decide if my heart is right to become her guardian for Ardour."

Raust arched a brow at his smaller friend, "Again, nothing to really worry about. Arsiel is by far the best of the gods to work for, especially for you."

"What makes you say that," she asked with a bit of a skeptical look on her face, "Gods always want to tell people what to do and how to do it. She is also supposed to be pure and decidedly good, how am I supposed to pass her judgment when I eat the souls of mortals to sustain my life?"

The gryphon gave a nod and thought for a moment, "Well, I know your feeding has been taking place with the condemned prisoners at the penal facility. I have access to the records, and all they have given me a clear picture of you choosing the most vile and unclean souls for eradication by your absorption. You haven't taken a soul that was truly innocent in over a century. What's more, you helped in the fight against the Bohrauk, right up until Sernina's big showdown with their possessed Emperor. You told me in the very beginning that you weren't evil, but pretty damned close. You've grown since those days, Kaiya. You may not admit it, but you are not nearly as dark as you fancy yourself to be my dark robed angel."

"I'm no angel," the nogitsune replied a bit dryly, "I still can't see how she can be pleased with me devouring the

souls of anyone, even the unforgivably wicked.”

Raust raised a brow at her again as they began to walk away from the cemetery, “You sound like you want to fail with that kind of talk. Are you worried about being a servant of Arsiel? I bet you're afraid she'll treat you like a slave like a lot of other deities would, aren't you?”

Kaiya was quiet for a long moment, her huge ears folded back along her head as that damned gryphon cut right into her mind like a hot knife through butter, “It disturbs me that you can see through me so easily. Just another sign that I have grown soft and let you too deep inside my heart. That place that would have gotten me killed so long ago if I had not put up that hard wall. That wall became me for a long time. Now I wonder what it is she wants, the wall or the soft center. I don't know if I could stand to be held down with duties and guidelines, however, the power they offer, being bound to and fed by two elder gods... no other member of the kitsune race can even fathom that kind of power. That part of me is the wall too, but I have the soft part of me that feels I should be better for the people I've been stupid enough to care about that wishes to achieve this to open a much cleaner page in my long and screwed up life. Like I have this chance to finally do one thing right and to not let my selfishness or impatience ruin it. Does any of this makes sense?--it probably doesn't, given my ability to avoid making sense at all.”

The huge broadwing thought quietly for a moment and then turned those amber eyes directly to hers, “You are at a crossroads where you are afraid to leave what you were behind, and afraid of not becoming what you can see in yourself and all the power that comes with it. Just stop, Kaiya. Stop and push everything else aside. Forget the power, forget your ways and your reputation, and just look at you and what you honestly want. Then look at your heart and not what it was, but what is becoming, and you will know the answer to all this so you can face it without fear.”

“Raust, how the hell did you do it? How the hell did you survive as an inexperienced little fledgling warrior with no powers, or developed skills? You took this hard, hard route of being this pure-warmhearted warrior that defends everyone that needs him and never got killed in the beginning. You weren't as strong then as you were when we met, but you made it through just as tough of a life,” the nogitsune turned her eyes away from the gryphon's. She just couldn't face anyone when she felt so lost and vulnerable as the situation had her feeling, “I always thought people like you were weak... with so many of you coming after me and failing to do more than feed my need of their souls. But then I met you, and you beat me, forced me to respect you by having the audacity to spare and even help me. Through you I met the strongest warriors, mages, and even the Bekraih. All the most powerful and dangerous beings out there and they were all like you. They were all these soft hearted paladins. So how were you all so strong to survive those early days?”

The huge avian was quiet for a long moment before he finally answered his shaken friend, “Kaiya, we survived because of a combination of luck, natural skill, good training, and most importantly, good friends. We all rely on our comrades to help us all get stronger and become more than what we all started as. Some of us become legends, some of us just remain run of the mill, but all of us know that we survived because of the man at our wing tip. If you wanted to be more like the rest of us defenders, you really have a much better head start. You have power and skill to speak of, experience in the harshest of combat; You know what it's like to be cruel and to only think of yourself, but also know what it means to stand along side those you care about to keep the scum of the realms at bay. You got your beginning shoulder to shoulder with those that already made it through that time, and now you are just as strong with a choice before you. No matter what happens with Arsiel's judgment, you are free to make this choice. As far as your more dark tendencies, Arsiel is a savage goddess of natural balance. Your more brutal outcome for those who would harm those under her care would be preferable to her. She is as brutal as anything in nature when some one threatens those she sees as her young and it would only please her to subject them to what your warped little mind can cook up for them.”

The vixen went quiet for a moment as she absorbed the gryphon's words and digested them. The very concepts struck her right in the gut and left her wanting to sit down, so she climbed up on the gryphon's back to ride astride his shoulders. Any other person would have found themselves quite firmly placed flat on their back, but she was close enough to the warrior that he welcomed her on his shoulders. While he walked toward the city, she thought hard on what he had said. She couldn't deny the changes he and Reana had brought about in her, making her care again. Hell, even Shadow a little. Bane was the living proof of those changes. She cared for the little dryn and went through a whole lot of work to make him docile enough to be domesticated. Her whims were not so profound as to push her to alter the instincts and very soul of a creature to make it a pet. Something else burned at the back of her mind, something that had also contributed to her habit of solitude.

Kaiya finally reached a paw down to bury the fingers deep in the soft feathers of his neck rough, “Who were you visiting in there?”

“Good old Vertigo,” Raust replied with a rather calm and even voice.

If she didn't know him better, she would have assumed he didn't care, “I didn't keep up with him after the events with Reana and Kehtral. How did he fare after we all went on with life?”

“Old Vert liked the feeling of being the hero, but he was smart enough to never leave a name behind when he helped people out. He had a couple of guys in his life, settled down with one of them until he grew old and just didn't wake up one morning,” the gryphon spoke with a bit of joy in his voice, though the sadness at the loss was still quite evident to the nogitsune.

She had her opening for her last question, “How do you do it Raust? How do you manage to build a friendship with some one you know will live for only a very short portion of your life span?”

“That is actually quite easy,” Raust stopped and looked back at the vixen astride his shoulders, “I had a lonely start in life, so I know how much better life is with people around that I care about. Having to say good bye is indeed painful, but not as painful as never having had them in the first place. These friends helped me get my start and by their camaraderie, they helped make me what I am today. When they die, I do mourn for the initial loss, but I carry on celebrating their life and the effects it had on my own. Mostly because I know my life was better because of them and I hope theirs was better because of my presence in it.”

Kaiya was quiet for a long moment, her hand idly massaged and dug into the feathers at the base of the gryphon's skull, “How do you always manage to put things into an easy perspective?”

“I'm a very down to earth and simple mind,” he grinned a bit as he started to walk toward the town once more.

The vixen snickered, “You are down to earth, but there's nothing simple about you, despite your best efforts.”

“Well, perhaps, but in all seriousness you have nothing to worry about with all this judgment business,” Raust kept his eyes forward as they traveled slowly together, “No matter what happens, whether you pass or fail, you are still Kaiya, my dear Fluttersails. You can still choose to be the guardian without the help of the gods and you can still be as free as you have always been if you do pass judgment. The Consorts do not make slaves of their people, they adopt those who serve as their own family. But, I am confident that you will pass.”

Kaiya thought over his words for a moment then leaned forward to hug at his neck, “Thank you, Featherbear. You have no idea how much it means to me to know you believe in me. Will you wait here for me? I have to do one last thing then slip away to grow this tail, I need you here for me once this is done, no matter what happens.”

“Go on, sweetheart. I'll be right here,” the gryphon settled down onto his belly to let her off his back and to laze about while he waited for her.

There were no more words exchanged, her goodbye was a quick nuzzle against his cheek before she hopped off his back to all four paws for a feral run back to and through the graves of the cemetery. She was looking for a specific headstone that she wanted to visit before she had her tail grow and her judgment take place. It was a short search, as she used the clues of what Raust had said about him to find Vertigo's grave in a quiet corner of the cemetery, beneath a tree for shade.

Kaiya sat before the headstone and stared at it as if it were the dead gryphon himself, “Vertigo, you were in my life for such a very short time, and you were a pompous ass the entire time. But in the end, you and Reana helped me grow so much inside during that whole ordeal. Thank you, for making it possible for me to accept these binds I used to fight, I owe you one for that.”

The nogitsune leaned down and placed a small kiss on the top of the stone before she turned and dashed off to leap the fence and seek a secluded spot to go through the process of growing her tail.

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Kaiya had a short run to find a suitable clearing for her tail growth event, secluded with enough space between her and the brush about the surrounding forest. She wasn't a moment too soon either. The very instant she stepped her paws on the middle point of the clearing, the nogitsune doubled over with the burning sensation in her gut of the intense power welling up inside of her. As she fell to all four paws again, her own blue flame coated her entire body and left her with a feeling of great heat, though not so much to truly burn her skin. The nogitsune glanced back at her rump as the fires intensified. Her eyes fell upon the first signs of her new tail in that blue fiery aura about her as it covered an unseen tail. The heat flashed white hot inside and out as the flames flashed outward in a violent explosion of raw power. The blue light of her flames flashed a blinding white before they died out and left her smoking in the middle of the clearing.

Kaiya gasped for breath as she recovered from the violent arrival of her new tail. The vixen looked back over her smoking body to grin at the newly formed flesh and bone of her new tail. The new depths of power within herself felt so wonderful and intoxicating. She almost lost herself as she felt herself wanting to explore this new found power and the almost mind-numbing temptation it carried within that threatened to pull her into it. She had almost forgotten about her fears of the judgment in the midst of the almost sexual high her new strength had given her. That high faded though and her eyes drifted back down to the turquoise paw print over her heart. It was still there, but there was no new power beyond what she expected with her fifth tail. That confused the vixen to no end, until the entire world turned dark blue and froze around her.

She knew instantly who and what it was, "Great Mother, please, what does this remaining print mean? Have I passed judgment or have I failed?"

"I am afraid that you have failed my judgment," the great white puma goddess spoke without moving her muzzle as she stepped from the forest into the clearing to face the nogitsune, "You have only failed by a single point out of many thousands, but it is a very important point of wisdom and personal fortitude. I am not willing to give up on you for that one point, so I have extended your judgment by one day. I cannot tell you what that point is... you already know why I can't tell you, but you already know what it is deep inside. Go now, you have one day to prove you can face that point and earn the power and responsibility we have offered. I believe in you, my newest daughter."

The world came back to normal color and flow when the vixen blinked next. She sat for but a moment as she asked herself what she truly wanted. Kaiya's heart thundered in her chest as she realized what she really wanted most and what she needed to do. There was no hesitation on her part to charge through the forest to return to the gryphon that she had wait for her.

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Kaiya slowed her pace as she neared the gryphon, who was still exactly where she had left him to wait for her. The only sign that he had not stayed exactly where she left him was a drink and that he was laying on his belly. Her heart pounded in her chest as she knew what she had to do next. It would be the hardest thing she had ever done to that point in her life. That bird was the beginning of her entire change over the last period of near two hundred years. When they first met, he had been the first being without powers to defeat her and make himself a rival in her eyes. It had not taken him long to prove himself to be a comrade that she could depend on when she was in need. His honesty and devotion to treating her with warmth and respect grew on her to earn him the title of friend. That position as her friend had lead her to trust and care for him enough to find them in the role of lovers from time to time, though they had always remained friends. She had always been at odds with the situation, because caring about some one left her open to losing them and being hurt in a way she couldn't steel herself against. The nogitsune knew that she wanted to take up the mantle that Arsiel had offered her, it was a new path in life for her with much more purpose and a sense of direction for her. Achieving that path meant she would have to admit that she had fallen to the one thing she thought made people the weakest, the one thing she feared doing herself.

"You didn't wait for me like you said," she called out as she hid her inner conflict by projecting authority with the cocky little pout and stern set to her shoulders.

Raust snorted at her, "I did too, I just got thirsty soon after you left and got a drink. I came right back to the precise spot that you left me in-- Before you returned, I might add!"

"You still left," Kaiya snatched up the last of his drink and swallowed it in one quick gulp. It was regretfully non-alcoholic. "Still the ever clean and pure paladin. I still don't get how some one who can be as rough around the edges as you on the battlefield can be so clean and pure at home. You have no qualms about tearing a fellow's face off, but you wouldn't be caught dead with a buzz. I could have used that warmth in my head and belly right now too."

The gryphon sat up while keeping his head low for her, "Judgment didn't go how you thought it would?"

"The mark is still there, if you use those sharp eyes of yours," she turned around and leaned back against his sturdy frame to sink into the feathers of his chest, "I didn't make it, but I got close enough to get an extension to see if I could make that last little gesture in the next twenty four hours."

Raust was quiet for a moment before he finally let his thoughts escape his beak, "That isn't much of an extension compared to the rest of the time you had to achieve success to begin with. If I were to venture a guess, you were not told what you needed to do, were you?"

"No, she said I already know inside what it is. She is right, but I don't know how to even begin to face what it is I need to do, not even with you," the nogitsune slumped her shoulders a bit as she fought a fierce battle inside with her habits and old feelings against the strong feelings inside and her need to express them.

"Kaiya, look at me please," the gryphon gently coaxed her to turn and look up into those deep amber eyes, "I know what you are trying to force yourself to say. Before you say anything, I happen to know that a mother figure like Arsiel would want to see the warmth of her daughter's heart. You don't have to say it, Kaiya. I have always known how you felt about me, otherwise you would have tried to kill me more than the one time. You sure as hell wouldn't have stuck around for as long as you have to grow and change inside like you have. You would have just eaten me the first time we tested out those shape shifting abilities of yours in private."

The vixen felt a lump in her throat as she reached up to stroke the gryphon's neck in a display of appreciation, "Thank you, Raust, I don't think I really had it in me to tell you that you're the best friend I could have asked for and that I love you for it and so much more. I would probably curl up in a bristled ball of unsettled vixen if I actually said how stupid I was for heading back to my territory when I could have had that feather Kairen wears on her ear, on my ear instead."

"You wanted my primary," Raust raised a brow at his five tailed friend.

Kaiya gave a snort, "I would still take it if it was there to give. You may be a paladin, but you are rough and gritty enough to make it kind of sexy."

The vixen felt her pupils draw to near pin points as her heart hit her feet when her mind registered what she was saying. She had fully intended to just let her admission to herself pass off as her big achievement. By no means did she intend to even hint at what she had told her dear friend. To her credit, she did not bolt and find some place to hide and bristle up. That probably had more to do with the strong foreclaws that held her against that strong, soft feathered chest. Kaiya could feel her cheeks burning with a rather intense blush as well, so she buried her face in the gryphon's feathers to hide it.

Raust nuzzled softly at her head while he whispered softly to her, "Well, I knew you loved me, I just didn't know it ran that deep. Sorry it all came out like that. I won't poke fun at you for this, Hun. If it makes you feel any better, if I could still give it you would have that feather in your paws now. But, I love and appreciate you all the more for respecting Kairen's standing as my mate."

"Thank you for being you, Featherbear. I don't think I would have been able to either leave you alive or keep from pissing all over myself from embarrassment if you were anyone else right now. I can't believe I just blurted that out like it was no big deal," She spoke the last words and though there was a very visible embrace in place of further words, no one would ever guess at the intense emotions and warmth flowing between the gryphon and the nogitsune in that moment.

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Kaiya slipped into the office, closing the heavy dark finished door behind her. It was a modest office, mostly filled with the heavy desk with enough room for a gryphon to walk around either side to settle behind the desk without disturbing the books on the shelves on either side. The nogitsune could feel the power faintly trickling in and out of the books to her right, marking them to her as spell books. On her left were fairly ordinary looking books, a quick scan of her eyes over a few titles would reveal them to be books of law. Emerald eyes held the vixen in a warm embrace as they followed her to the soft leather chair that was seated directly across from the white feathered being that owned the desk. Reana sat quietly for a moment as she simply observed the other female. Something about that made Kaiya even more nervous than when she had first approached the door.

"Thank you for meeting me here, rather than in my chambers, Kaiya," the gryphon Vyreka raised her forepaws from behind the desk to rest her elbows at the edge and support her beak on her folded paws like a human would rest their chin on their hands, "So you wanted to see me again today, what business would bring you back into my presence to speak to me?"

The atmosphere of the office and the way the gryphoness sat behind her desk made Kaiya feel as though she were a child facing the school principal, which did not help her comfort levels in the least, "You already know I grew my tail and I already know that you are observant enough to have picked up the mark remaining on my chest. I have an extension because I failed one little thing and Arsiel is not ready to give up on me for it. I already went to visit your father again."

"I see," Reana shifted to rest her paws in a cross armed position as she leaned forward, "I have very strong suspicions as to why you're here then. I know my father, and what most do not know is that I am also a daughter of Arsiel. A priestess knows the nature of her goddess and what she would ask of a guardian. You aren't going to get off easy with me though."

The nogitsune felt a chill shoot down her spine as she stared back into those emerald eyes, "What do you mean by that? I didn't come here to fight you."

"I am well aware of that, but you want something to come of this visit for a goal you have in mind. I'm not going to let you get away with just having me say I know what you are feeling and thinking like I'm sure Daddy did. If you're here to admit your feelings, then open your muzzle and admit them. You're a big girl," the gryphoness replied with a rather calm and gentle tone that somehow carried a strong authority behind it.

Kaiya fought the urge to growl at the female before her but she knew that that would get her nowhere, "You little pushy whelp. I watched over you growing up. I helped your father come home more than once so you and your siblings wouldn't be orphans. I stood by you when you were lost on that damned planet Kehtral was using. I helped you come to terms with what you did there, and you thank me with this? If you were of a species that used diapers, I would have changed

a few of them.. and you have surpassed even the beings I still look up to. You never judged me when you were younger, and showed me the respect of another person. You made me respect you for your strength of heart and will despite you being so much younger than I am. We were so alike in our beginnings, except you had natural talent and an ability to learn like no other. You were strong enough to stay on a path that took you down a much more respectable path, where I acted like a selfish little brat and demanded power to be handed to me. We both paid dearly for our power, but you made so much more of yourself than I did. Reana, I am jealous of you and what you have but I respect you more than any other person I have met. After that time we spent fighting for those people along side Vertigo, I felt something inside that I had not felt in a long time. You made me care about the people there and you made me care about you. Not just as your father's daughter, but as a child that I truly cared for. I can't explain how you fit into the category of family within my heart, somewhere between sister, daughter, and niece, but I know that you are my family and I love you for all you are. Even when you are being an insufferably bossy little know it all. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to go find somewhere to calm down and smooth out all this bristling."

"No, you won't be able to do that... I expected you to bolt and sealed the room," Reana replied absently, "Thank you for admitting these things to me, it is so good to know and not simply guess at what I felt to be true."

The vixen did give a growl when she heard that the mage had sealed the room, "You sealed me in? So if I were to do this or not, you were going to force me in the matter?"

"Oh heavens no," the vyrekai shook her head gently, "I was going to give myself a chance to talk to you before you bolted and gave up on this whole venture. I know things may look like I was setting up a mood of superiority with the room, but this is the only place where we could be truly alone for this conversation. I would not have asked you to do this in front of anyone, not even Valgard."

Kaiya narrowed her eyes a bit, "You certainly seem to have had this well planned. If you knew what I was coming here to do, why did you make me say it out loud? You already knew how I felt."

"I am a priestess of Arsiel... I know that she will have wanted to see you say it out loud at least once. I figured I would be the easiest person to say it to. Our bond is not something that holds life altering implications or any kind of intense romantic ties. What I did was only in your best interest to make this more possible for you," Reana explained with a warm smile, "I notice that your mark is still present, so that must mean there is another destination in this last journey of judgment."

The vixen took in one deep breath and exhaled, "Yes, there is one more stop I need to make of a similar nature. Thank you... for trying to make this as easy as you could. I will smooth out on my way, but I have to get going now. Have a good day, kiddo."

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The halls of the academy were so empty and quiet after the classes let out since the dorms were in a separate building. It seemed as though no other living thing were about, but she knew that was not the case at all. Many of the classrooms were so heavily shielded for demonstrations and labs that the life essence of those within could not be sensed. She'd tried a few times. It was well known that many professors at the academy stayed late to grade exams and set up labs the night before they were performed. There would be no less than a dozen mages awake and active at even the rather early hours of the morning as it was for Chiersaldohl. Despite how late it was at her current location, it had been no more than an hour since her conversation with Reana. Such a short interval left the nogitsune slightly bristled and a bit more uneasy about the situation than normal. She was starting to wonder if some other force wasn't attempting to make things more difficult for her so she would back out of the whole judgment situation. She gave a snort as she neared the office of the head mistress. If some one was trying to interfere they would only drive her on harder toward her desired outcome. It wasn't just her own will they were up against, she had the Great Consorts behind her.

Kaiya paused at the door with her hand on the handle as she basked in the warmth of that thought for a moment before she turned the knob and stepped in to find that the white robed gryph was not present, "Shadow? Are you here or at least listening in for me?"

The only response to her call was a bright little ball of blue white light that expanded into a very thin ring in the air behind the large administrator's desk that dominated the office, which resembled Reana's quite strongly save for the books of law being replaced by file cabinets full of student records. Kaiya did not hesitate to make her way around that desk to step through the provided gate. This was the only way to enter the Headmistress' apartment after all, since it was built in the tallest spire of the dormitory. The gate brought her into the front room of the dwelling, right next to the plush white couch. A quick scan of the sparsely furnished living space revealed the quiet presence of the gryph in the open kitchen. She seemed to

be brewing something on the stove. The black granite topped island lay between the nogitsune and the mage, who did not pause in her diligent work. The strong medicinal scent told Kaiya that Shadow was brewing something with painslayer extract, into which she was dipping small cloths.

"Is that for some sort of experiment?" the vixen asked as she moved closer to the gryph, who looked up once she was spoken to.

Shadow had lost that serene smile for the second time that the nogitsune had known her, "No, this is an attempt at a pain relieving bandage for Bane. Perhaps the painslayer will reach deep enough to help him feel a little better. How did your judgment turn out?"

"It was... a loss, but a close one that Arsiel wasn't willing to give up on me over. I've been given twenty four hours to achieve this last point that I have not achieved yet. I have already seen Raust and Reana to let them know how I feel about them. I have figured that the one thing I am missing is to embrace and admit how I feel about those closest to me. It has always been the something I have been afraid of to the point of hating it in others as a weakness," Kaiya sighed as she revealed what she was up to without telling the gryph why she was there.

Shadow let the bandages sink into the medicinal compound as she gave those words a bit of thought, "That is an interesting outcome, though it tells me far more about why you came here tonight beyond the need to collect Bane. That you couldn't come here and directly tell me that you needed to talk to me about such a subject tells me even more than you intended. I am sorry that the judgment has come to be delayed, but I am very proud you were able to let Raust and Reana know how you felt. It is a wonderful bit of growth on your part. May I ask how those two encounters played out?"

"Well, with Raust, he stopped me and told me that he knew how I felt and why he knew it. Then I kind of spilled my guts without realizing what I was saying until after I said it. Reana actually locked me in her office without my knowledge and demanded I speak my heart to her so that I would have said it out loud at least once. I also called her a whelp and told her how I would have changed a few of her diapers if she had ever worn them," the nogitsune felt herself blush a bit as she shared her previous encounters with the gryph, though that quickly faded into a wilted expression when she noticed the little hint of anger and mild pain glinting at the back of the gryph's eyes.

The vyrekai took a slow, deep breath before she spoke again, "I am glad you managed to say what you needed to, but you will not do that here. I know how you feel already, though I will take quite some time to forgive you if you admit it to me at this time. I won't be used to meet your ends, no matter how genuine the confession is."

"I... I'm sorry, Shadow. I never meant anything like that," Kaiya felt her cheeks burning with a blush, she never wanted to offend the beautiful mage so she tried a change of subject to drift away from the awkward moment, "So why are you making those for Bane? Didn't you take him for pain treatments while I was gone?"

Shadow looked toward the hall way that lead to her bedroom with a troubled look on her face, "Yes, I did take him in for a treatment, but after his examination, the healers all refused to treat him."

"What? How dare they leave him to suffer!" the vixen snapped and snarled as her blue flaming aura flared up with her anger, "Did they just not wish to treat a gryphal? What kind of monster could force such a sweet little creature as him to live in such pain?"

Shadow was quick to squash the display of power, literally crushing the nogitsune's aura beneath the pressure of her own, "Stop it, Kaiya. They are not heartless savages that you are accusing them of being. The healers wished wholeheartedly to help Bane, but they couldn't."

As if to punctuate the gryph's words, a pain filled whining sounded through the apartment at a tone almost akin to a wail. Kaiya felt shards of ice pierce right through her heart as the sound was getting louder before she could react to Shadow snuffing out her flame. Soon after it started, Bane emerged from the hall, struggling to even hold himself up on his age ravaged joints as he forced his way against the pain to try and reach the nogitsune. She felt the last hardened portions of her heart shatter like broken glass inside her rib cage as she looked into the little dryn's eyes to see the loving yearning to be near her mingled with the absolute agony that his movement gave him. She began to quiver with the emotions from which she had protected herself for so long.

"Bane, stop, please just stay there," Kaiya snapped her order to the dryn who ignored her words to whine pathetically in pain as he kept on pushing himself forward toward her, "Bane! No! I said stop it, Bane! Quit hurting yourself damn it!"

The vixen couldn't take it anymore and closed the distance between her and the little gryphal to snatch him up in her arms and hold him tight against her chest as her heart threatened to crumble to dust from the millions of glass shards that it was already in. The moment he was in her arms, Bane nuzzled at her chest and whimpered with a slow wag at the tip of his tail. The truth crushed her very soul as her little dryn put himself through all that pain just to reach her and be in her arms. She stayed on her knees in the floor as she just didn't have the strength left to stand under the weight of her heart. She never wanted to love anyone so she could avoid just that kind of pain and now she felt it as she watched her closest companion suffer just to be near her.

Shadow knelt next to the nogitsune and rest a hand upon her shoulder, "The healers can't help Bane with his pain anymore because he has had too many treatments too often in his life. His body has become resistant to the energies to the point that it will take so much to ease that pain that it will dilute and disperse his soul. It wouldn't just kill him, he would

cease to exist as an entity entirely.”

The gryph had not meant to attack her with those words, but they could not have struck her harder if they were a real arrow that had pierced straight through her chest. All this time, there was a monster harming her little Bane, but it was not anyone's refusal to help him or prejudice against gryphal. The nogitsune herself was the one who hurt the loving companion she had known for so long in her selfish need to protect herself from the pain of losing her precious little pet, of those she cared for as deeply as she did little Bane. Of course he accepted her offers to extend his life, he didn't know what was going on or why he was hurting so badly, he just knew he was able to be near her. Kaiya just couldn't stand herself for what she had done to one of the few beings that stood by her through the past century.

“Shadow, Bane, I'm so sorry. I never should have done this to you,” the vixen's voice began to quake as her heart wound into a tight ball inside her chest, “I have to let you go baby. It will be scary, but it won't hurt any more.”

The white gryph rest a hand on her shoulder to bring as much comfort as she could, “Do you want me to do it? I can make sure he feels nothing at all, just simply slips away without pain or fear.”

“No,” Kaiya snapped firmly as she held tight to her little dryn, “I will release him myself and no other.”

Shadow gave a gentle nod and backed away for the vixen to perform the act of mercy for the little gryphal in her arms. Bane looked up at the vixen with a worried expression at her distressed state. He gave a little questioning chitter as he nuzzled up at her to try and comfort her despite the pain it caused in him. That little act of loving kindness both filled her heart with a beautiful radiant warmth, and tore it straight from her chest. The difference in their behaviors was like night and day; while Bane expressed his love by giving all of himself and suffered just to bring her comfort and see her happy, she forced him to live too long and suffer constant and immeasurable pain just so she didn't have to let him go. Enough was enough, it was time for her to love him every bit as much as he loved her and to sacrifice for his own sake.

“I'm so sorry Bane, this is all my fault... I've been such a monster to you,” Kaiya raised a hand to stroke over his tiny head while she fought back the tears, “I hope you can forgive me for putting you through all this, but now it's time for momma to fix it for you. It will hurt for only a moment, and it may be frightening, but I will be right here with you and the pain will stop forever, I promise.”

The nogitsune held the confused little dryn tighter for a moment as she projected her thoughts out into the ether with all her metaphysical might, “*Arsiel, Great Mother, I know you are watching and listening to all of this. I beg of you, please, Bane is gryphal, he is not under the domain of any deity as a constructed species, please do not let him wander the realms as a lost soul. Please take him in and watch over him, keep him safe and loved so that he does not spend his after life in total despair.*”

The moment Kaiya finished her mental prayer, she pulled Bane's soul up above his body along with her own. She had never used her abilities for feeding on others souls in such a manner before, but she had little trouble maintaining control. Despite the complexity of the process the nogitsune never even came close to feeding on her beloved pet on accident. Something inside her gave her so much more strength and control than she had ever known before. She realized immediately that she was seeing first hand the power of love that Raust had spoken to her about before. The vixen hated the circumstances in which she was able to feel such an amazing sensation of personal improvement. The small energy thread that connected Bane's soul to his body was the only thing keeping him aware of the pain his physical form felt, as well as maintaining the soul's ability to keep that time ravaged body alive. Bane's pale radiant green soul looked up at her pale radiant blue light, somehow recognizing her outside of their bodies, just as she clipped that thread. Both the soul and the body of the ancient dryn shuddered at the sudden severing of his life as the final shock of pain in that final firing of the nerves all at once left his physical form limp and lifeless back in her arms. The nogitsune held tight to his spirit for a long moment of the final embrace.

“Good night and farewell, my sweet little prince... know that I loved you as my own when you were alive and that my love does not die with your body, my precious Bane,” Kaiya knew the tears were escaping her physical eyes even then as she leaned her soul's lips down to give her boy one last kiss on the top of his head before she released his soul to move on where ever the powers beyond herself would take him.

The vixen waited until the light of his soul was out of her sight and metaphysical senses before she sank back into her body to shudder with a pain she had never felt before in her life. She knew what pain and mourning felt like, she had felt it when the Reiko that had given her the power of the kitsune used her to slaughter her village. But even that paled in comparison to what she felt at that moment. She clutched the cold feathered form in her arms to her chest as though she could use it to keep her heart from falling in a cascade of shattered shards from her chest. Her body heaved and convulsed with wracking silent sobs as the pain clutched what was left of her heart with icy talons. Without warning, a rather intense radiant warmth engulfed her entire body and helped to hold off that biting cold that threatened to engulf and consume her heart once again. To pull her back into the darkness that she had found comfort in so long ago, that wall that kept her from the kindness that she had let those around her see was there; that wall that was the gateway for she herself to become just like the dark being that had made her what she was today. That warmth saved her. Shadow had pulled her to her chest and was holding her tight as they sat together with the lifeless form of the gryphal they had both helped raise and care for. It took a moment for Kaiya to realize that the tears wetting her fur were not just her own.

In the shared warmth of another that loved the same being she mourned, Kaiya found that her heart was already

beginning to mend and find solace in the rest that her little dryn was finally able to enjoy. The gryphon's previous words rang through her head as she realized that she was finding even more strength in knowing that she had made Bane's life much better than it had started. He had brought her a quiet joy she never would have known otherwise and it made her so much more than she was to begin with. Then she realized why it hurt so much more to let him go. She had to rebuild his soul without the savagery that had been forced upon his life in the beginning of his existence. She had given him new life and, in a sense, given birth to the Bane that she and Shadow both had a hand in creating and raising to fit into the societies they visited and lived in. The vixen now knew what a mother felt in the midst of the war with the Bohrauk, when she laid her fallen child to rest before she herself had passed on. It was then that she realized that the gryph embracing her had shared that same experience with the dryn, though Kaiya had been his primary care taker, Shadow had also been there from the beginning.

The vixen heaved a heavy sigh as she opened her eyes to speak to Shadow, only to find she was no longer in her arms or even in the apartment any longer. What surrounded her was an amazing star-scape spread over her as massive trees of all kinds, from common pines and oaks, to exotic species she had never seen before, like towering wooden titans. When her eyes drifted to the ground she found that she could see the ground and all its colors, and yet she could see right through it to observe what must have been Eldarohnd, the planet that was Titania's home, far below. Directly ahead of her in a bit of a walk was a massive nest, constructed of entire trees woven together with their roots still reaching deep under ground. She could feel the tremendous power of the goddess radiating from within that massive nest.

"Come to me child, I wish to speak to you, face to face," the voice of Arsiel brought her comfort like no other had before, a comfort that she hadn't felt from Arsiel before now.

Kaiya set forth to the edge of that massive nest, each step made her heart pound even harder in her chest as she approached. By the time she started the perilous climb up those twisted and woven trunks, her mind was racing and burning on one question; Not if she had passed judgment, but if her prayer had been answered. As she managed to crest the top of the nest, the sight of Arsiel in her true godly form and size graced the bottom of the bowl met her eyes. The great white cougar was larger than many dragons that the nogitsune had seen. The power of the goddess in her own domain was awe inspiring, it even made her appear luminescent in all her radiance. The vixen struggled to make her way down the edge of the great nest, she just could not take her eyes off the goddess that lay waiting for her. That great feline goddess watched her climbing down the nest, though her eyes stayed closed. That shook the core of the nogitsune even more than the raw presence of the goddess as she finally reached the bottom of the nest to begin the walk toward the Great Mother.

High above the nest was that great white eagle perched on a massive branch. The golden eyes of Skardesh the Sky Lord, the Great Father, pierced to her soul and seemed to read every strand of her being as she approached his mate. He too, was brighter, more radiant in the power that spilled over from his body and made those metallic eyes glow faintly with no pupils to speak of. To her credit, Kaiya did not cower beneath the gaze of the warrior god nor did she hesitate to approach the thick aura of divine power that surrounded the feline goddess before her, the energy somehow now not sending her into a writhing fit from the energies all around her as it would have before.

The vixen bowed respectfully to Arsiel when she was right before the cougar's forepaws, "Great Mother, you have called and I have come..."

"You have been quite eager and punctual in rectifying the last discrepancy in your heart. I am very pleased with your actions today," the goddess smiled upon the nogitsune.

Kaiya could not help but smile back as she felt the warmth of the Great Mother wash over her with that bit of praise, though that warmth faded when her eyes drifted about and she realized something important to her, "Where is Bane?"

"The fate of the ancient gryphal is but a trivial matter. We have to prepare you for the transformation that will come with gaining our blessings to empower you to protect Ardour," Arsiel replied with a very clinical tone to her disembodied voice.

An intense rage boiled up inside the vixen and forced her to snap back at the goddess, "Bane is not trivial! I haven't asked anything of you but to take him in for me. Considering the kind of service you are asking of me, I think something so easy as that should be no trouble to grant. If I passed your judgment, keep your power, I will gladly serve without it if you take that in trade for granting my prayers for Bane."

"If any other being would have spoken to me in such a manner, I would have shredded their soul with my own claws. I must ask, are you truly willing to give up that power for the sake of your little pet? Do you really think you will be strong enough to protect Ardour as you are now," a low growl escaped Arsiel's massive chest.

The Great Mother opened her shining turquoise eyes and let their light pierce the very core of the nogitsune, who held her ground against the ancient visage of the savage goddess, forever stubborn and fiery at her best and at her worst, "Yes, I would gladly surrender everything to keep him safe and happy. I don't need your power to defend Ardour. I have friends, allies I can trust to stand at my side when I need them. Shadow Krietz and Reana Shieldra can easily wipe out anything that has greater power than I. If I find a foe that is too much of a physical match for me, I always have my bird who would sooner die than let anyone bring harm upon me. So you can take that power and shove it up your ass for all I care about it, just take care of Bane dammit!"

"Then you are indeed right for the station we need you to hold. You have not only learned to trust and rely on your closest companions for their assistance in times of need, but you have found it in your heart to acknowledge your love for them. The mate you desired, the daughter and sister you never had the chance to have, the heart you wish to hold now, and the chick that you had to give up for the sake of ending his suffering. You have experienced every facet of love in those few relationships, now take those lessons and apply them to the people who will look to you to wear the mantle of a goddess, even though you will not truly be one," Arsiel's voice took on a more joyous tone that simply glowed with her own pride in the achievements of the vixen before her.

Kaiya snarled and curled her lips back at the deity that was refusing to acknowledge the one thing she cared about, "I don't care about that power, for the love of everything, just protect Bane- please!"

She was unable to say any more beyond that, for in her rage she had not noticed the great white eagle god take wing and swoop down upon her. The moment Arsiel's words ended, the great beak of Skardesh snatched her up and tilted back to pull her down his throat. The muscles were too strong for her to struggle against and when she tried to flare up her own flames, the aura of the elder god simply squashed her power like a gnat. Had she made a mistake in standing up for Bane? Had her insolence lead to this horrific death of being eaten alive by a deity? Her mind raced over those questions for some time before she realized that though she could not breathe, she was not suffocating. What was more, she should have felt her flesh being slowly dissolved by the acids in the massive eagle's stomach. She felt nothing of the sort, though she was conscious of her body being broken down in a way that did not bring pain. It was a very strange experience to feel her body simply becoming a part of her essence, the energy of her very being instead of a physical form. It became clear that the Sky Lord had not simply consumed her, as she retained her consciousness. Kaiya could feel Arsiel's energies get much closer to her and the great eagle. She did not have time to even speculate on what was going on before she felt another more familiar energy flow between the two divine beings. In her confusion at feeling sexual energies she did not notice the transition of the essence surrounding her from the Sky Lord to the Great Mother.

Kaiya wanted to cry out and demand to be free, to somehow fight her way out of the situation and yet somehow she also felt safe and protected. Something began to form between her and the loving aura of Arsiel to make her feel both trapped and safer than she had ever felt in her entire life. The vixen was oddly aware of Arsiel's warmth moving away and to her right. Her right -she could feel her right again- she was becoming whole again. The nogitsune could not begin to grasp a single thing that was happening to her yet, just that she was different somehow and she felt a growing need to escape what ever had her imprisoned. Her hands hit something hard in front of her in the darkness, her hands were back and challenging that barrier. Kaiya fought against that solid surface with all she had, pounding her fists against it until it finally cracked enough to give way under her paws. The vixen heaved against that opening with all her might as the viscous fluid of the egg she had broken out of flowed all around her.

A massive tongue came down and lapped away the egg fluids, cleaning the nogitsune like a newborn cub. It took a moment for Kaiya's eyes to adjust after her restoration to a solid form, but when they did she had her vision filled with the muzzle of the Great Mother. Arsiel gave a deep and gentle purr as she finished cleaning the vixen of the egg and left her new form to the air around them. Skardesh was looming behind her, making his presence known by giving one stroke of his mighty wings to dry her fur completely. Once she was dry, both deities settled around her like dotting parents, which only further confused the vixen.

Her mind started to come back into focus as she started to get an image of what must have happened to her, but none of that is what came to the fore front of her thoughts to spill from her lips, "B-Bane.."

Kaiya's huge ears perked suddenly at the happy little peep that sounded from her right before a small warm feathered and furred body pounced into her arms and a tiny tongue licked at her face. The vixen's vision blurred as tears of joy spilled from them to stain her cheeks. The dryn in her arms was younger and quite in his prime, but there was no mistaking the lack of aggression and that loving gaze.

"I said the issue of his fate was trivial, but I never said that I did not answer your prayer. The safety and security of a growing population was far more important to discuss than Bane, but I would never deny the prayer of a mother for one to care for her fallen child. Even if that child is an ancient gryphal she adopted as her own," the Great Mother smiled upon the nogitsune.

Kaiya held her little dryn tight and kissed the top of his head before she looked up at those two divine faces, "Thank you, so ... so very.. very much. But, it felt like, I mean, did you really just... you know?"

"I swallowed your body and placed your essence in my seed before I planted you in the womb of my precious mate," Skardesh replied with a bit of pride in his voice.

Arsiel purred and nuzzled at the vixen, *"And my body allowed your essence to fertilize an egg within my womb, which I expanded to a real egg for you to allow your rebirth in a slightly less disturbing manner. I was not of the opinion that you would have been pleased to have been birthed as your kind normally are."*

"Now you are reborn. Our daughter in essence and truth. You may already feel the warmth of our power flowing through you. Now, know the embrace of our love, dearest daughter," both deities spoke as one mingled voice as they revealed what she had never expected.

These deities did not just grant her power, they brought her into their family and gave her their love as well. Kaiya

knew the Great Consorts were unlike other deities, but she had never expected them to be quite like this. Her heart was filled with a warmth she had not felt since she was made a member of the kitsune race. She felt.. whole; while the want to feed was still there, the instinctual need to fill the gap with souls were no longer there. She had a family again, as strange and bizarre as it was with most members not really fitting any traditional role, it was still her family and they all loved her. What was more, here sat a god and a goddess of the like that she had always hoped could exist. Even if she were taken over by another stronger being again like in her violent beginning, they could never hope to take what she had now away from her again. She had nothing to fear in losing them or ever disappointing them. That was made resoundingly clear by the words echoing in every particle of energy they shared with her. Kaiya finally noticed the changes she could see on her body around Bane's form curled in her arms. Every black stripe on her body now had a thin turquoise stripe at the bottom that blended quickly into the black. A light breeze gave her a tingle of sensation where she shouldn't have, causing her to reach for the new appendage at her right. A wing, a black feathered wing with a single white primary in the center of the black primaries on that long appendage. A quick wag told her that all five tails were still present.

"Yes, you have new abilities because of the greater amount of divine power flowing through you," Arsiel began to explain, "You will always be stronger with your element, but you are no longer limited to it. You will need to discover how to control the energies to perform new abilities on your own. I will say that learning about energy flow and even basic arcane spell weaving will help you to discover your own abilities by a tremendous margin."

Skardesh gave a gentle ruffling of his wings before he spoke, *"Your wings are black to let it be known that while you may seem like an angel, there is still that touch of darkness within. The white feather is both a reminder and a warning. A reminder for you that you are the daughter of the Sky Lord and a warning of the same to your enemies. As for your feeding habits, the need may be gone, but we can not remove the addiction to the act without altering your personality. We simply could not do that to you. It does, however, leave you with a tool to help drive the message home. One does not attempt to harm Ardour without meeting a harsh fate at the hands of our guardian."*

Arsiel gave a flick of her ear to signal her turn to speak, *"As for Bane, he will stay here with us. Skardesh will teach him how to be a proper warrior. We cannot fully resurrect him. It is against the agreements of the pantheon of this realm. I have, however, given you the ability to summon him to your side for up to two hours a day. That is the most I can give you, so use it wisely for you may need the aide of your little warrior. For now, we will return you to the arms of the gryph that held you as we brought you here. No time will have passed, but you will be as you are now. Farewell, and know that we always walk beside you, dearest daughter."*

Kaiya nodded slowly to what they had to say before her eyes went wide when she realized something very important was missing, "Where is my kami stone?"

"It is within my womb," the Great Mother replied, "There is no safer place for it to be and if you manage to have killed your body, you will be reborn in an egg again. The benefits being that a true elder goddess protects your stone, and you will be reborn where we can pass your incubation in less than the blink of an eye. However, having to hatch again may just prevent you from abusing these boons and becoming suicidal in your duties."

The vixen smiled at the goddess, "I think I'll avoid that. I really don't enjoy being covered in egg goo."

Arsiel and Kaiya grinned at one another for a moment, when the nogitsune blinked she was back in Shadow's arms. She couldn't help but smile after all she had experienced with the Consorts and seeing Bane young and well again. It left her feeling so very warm inside that Shadow's face looked to be that of an angel as she smiled at the vixen. It took Kaiya a moment to realize that she should not have been smiling. The gryph couldn't have known that Bane was all right in the care of the Consorts, so why was she smiling?

Shadow broke the silence first after blinking at her, "Well, I see you were finally judged and found most worthy of your title and the benefits that go along with it. Since Bane is missing, I assume that he is with them as well."

"Yes, Bane is now with Arsiel and learning how to fight properly from Skardesh. I can summon him for two hours a day if I need or want him around," Kaiya closed her arms tight to her chest where she once held the absent gryphal's body before she smiled and looked back up to the gryph. Her heart yearned to tell her so much at that moment, but instead she said, "So, how do you like the new look?"

Shadow stepped back and raised herself to her feet so the vixen could do the same and give a little turn, "I like it. Those wings are so very fitting and quite flattering on you. Those eyes though, that is a rather stunning little effect."

"My eyes," the nogitsune was stunned for a moment before she turned and rushed into the bedroom to use the vanity mirror.

When she got there, a familiar and yet different face stared back at her from that reflection. Her face was the same except for one detail; around the edges of her muzzle, she shared the same turquoise cougar markings as Arsiel herself displayed. When she looked at her eyes, she didn't see any difference at first. They were the same emerald hue that she had always known, until she looked closely. There, around her pupils, were thin rings of color that had not been there before. Around her left eye was the turquoise that marked Arsiel's essence. Around her right pupil was a thin ring of gold, as if someone had inserted a tiny piece of jewelry, which marked the essence of Skardesh.

"Always watching then.. Thank you, Lady Arsiel, Lord Skardesh. I promise you, by my own power, to do my job to the very best of my ability," as Kaiya spoke her promise, Shadow moved up quietly behind her, "Shadow, I want to go

show everyone the changes, the whole family. I would really like it if you would go with me.”

The vyrekai smiled and wrapped her arm around the vixen's waist to pull her close, “I think I can manage to hide from my duties for a day. Let us go and show off this beautiful new look of yours.”

Shadow opened the gate to her office as Kaiya pressed a bit against her, when their feet moved, so did the nogitsune's tongue, “You know... I won't be going back to my old territories. I have some stuff, not very much, but I was wondering if I could keep my belongings at your place?”

“Of course, Hun. I don't have any problem with that idea at all,” the gryph smiled warmly as she felt the vixen slip her arm around her waist, pulling her so very close while they walked through the halls of the academy together.

Kaiya smirked as she gave her a rather playful warm look that spoke of more than what her words did as her new blackened wings very gently brushed against the pure white of the lovely woman beside her, “I'll need access to my things at any given moment, so I'll kind of need a 'key' to get in.”

“I'll adjust the wards and show you how to gate there yourself, you will always be welcome at any place I live,” Shadow smiled and leaned her head to rest it against the vixen's.

She had been through so much since she first met that gryphon and started the journey she had never expected. Some of it was hard, but much of it was wonderful. Kaiya had felt so weak around those who held so much power in the beginning, but they showed her just how strong she really was and helped her earn the respect of her Lord and Lady. In every way, they were her new parents, but she just didn't feel right in calling them that. The title she gave them seemed very fitting enough... She knew she couldn't have gotten where she had if not for all those she had known and befriended in her life, quite the contrary to her old ways of thinking. She was the one with great power now, of her own and of those who were even stronger than she was alone, not to mention that which was just bestowed. They were all one, adding their strength to one another to become truly an unstoppable force of protection for those who had not the strength to fight for themselves. Never had she been part of something so powerful to feel that might as her own, but it was something that she found she loved. The future was uncertain, but whatever it held, the possibilities looked so much brighter than they had in the beginning.