

A VERY PHOENIX



FACING  
THE  
STORM

CRIMSON STORM  
TRILOGY

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Cover Design by JoY Cover Design

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# FACING THE STORM

CRIMSON STORM TRILOGY



AVERY PHOENIX

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## FACING THE STORM BLURB



***Calming the storm inside me was a challenge. Now it's time to face it .***

My name is Crimson Jiyuna, and I just revealed the truth. To think Homatomashi's golden girl who was mourned by many, was the culprit for many years of growing chaos and crime.

The truth of it all is a lot to handle and, for some, too much to bear. As much as I want to comfort my men, I have to deal with my own wounds that are still raw. Not to mention my growing sympathy for my ex-boyfriend who might not be as evil as I thought.

The clock is ticking, and N.R.O. is doing everything in their power to cause calamity in Homatomashi and across the world, but I can't allow them to succeed. White Eyes is who stands in our way, and if he's left undefeated, war will be the result.

With one crystal left for me to retrieve, and my goal to finish N.R.O. once and for all, it's time for me to wrap my wounds and aim to heal my guards for the final fight in this uprising.

***Facing this storm will be the most challenging thing I've ever done, but with my men, familiars, family, and the people of Homatomashi, it's time to reclaim the peace amongst all races and fight to become victorious.***



## GLOSSARY



### Japanese Glossary

- | *H* AI – **Yes**
- | SENPAI – **Teacher**
- | HACHIMITSU – **Honey**
- | URUFU – **Wolf**
- | ARIGATO – **Thanks**
- | ARIGATO GOZAIMASHITA – **Thank You**
- | YAMERU – **Stop**
- | YAMATO KOTOBA – **words inherited from Old Japanese**
- | TATAMI MAT – **Traditional Japanese furnishing/accessories**
- | WATASHI NO AI – **My Love**
- | WATASHI WA ANATO O YURUSU – **I Forgive You**
- | USOTUSKI – **Liar**
- | NANI – **What**
- | BAKA – **Stupid**
- | KUTABARE – **Go To Hell**
- | CHOTTO – **A Little**
- | KUSOKURAE – **Fuck You**
- | GOMENNASAI – **Sorry**

| KATANA — **Sword**

| SHAZAI ITASIMASU — **You're Welcome**

| OKAERINASAI — **Welcome Home**



## TRIGGER WARNING



This story explores deeper aspects of topics that may be triggering to some readers.

If physical OR sexual abuse, suicide, or child abuse triggers you in any way, please do not continue reading.

The story is rated 18+ for matured readers.

You've been warned.

*Avery P.*

## PROLOGUE: THE TRUTH



"Crim? What's wrong?" Aki asked.

"Crimson." Itsuki repeated my name, but I focused on reading the document again.

*That fucking bitch.*

Those words weren't enough to express the amount of anger that shot through me.

"Erica had this document...where?" I whispered, trying to keep my cool.

"In a safe, but the access code was on a piece of paper in her packed luggage."

"Where was she planning to go?" Itsuki asked.

"Switzerland," I said softly, the pieces finally coming together.

"Crimson, how do you know that?" Malachi asked. "Um...Crim, you look pale," Haru pointed out.

I bit my lip, trying to hold off the anger inside of me. *No.*

*There has to be a mistake. She wouldn't. She couldn't! Not to them.*

"Crimson? Can you read what it says?" Aki asked.

"Yes," I confirmed, blinking back tears.

*How could she? How dare she...?!!!*

"Crimson, is this about Erica?" Haru asked softly.

Urufu growled quietly, snuggling closer to me. I could feel her agony and

also immense regret.

A familiar who had no choice but to serve felt regret for supporting such a person, and that was only making the anger grow stronger.

"What's going on?" Quil asked.

"Crimson, what does the document say?" Yoshi asked.

"It's an official ownership document...for the N.R.O," I announced.

I heard them curse but I didn't care, my eyes scanning the agreement over and over again, my hands trembling with anger.

*It must be a mistake. Maybe this is a trap. It must be a trap. She couldn't be so selfish. So evil.*

Denial wasn't going to get me anywhere, and I knew if I didn't say the words now, I wouldn't be able to do it with a straight face.

"Erica was the leader of the N.R.O?" Malachi inquired, and I stood, walking over to the open window and hoping the cool, gentle breeze would help me to not freak out.

"Crim?" Aki queried.

I took a few calming breaths, closing my eyes.

*It has to be done...even if it hurts them. They need to know the truth. Nothing but the truth.*

I opened my eyes as I turned around to face the guys who had stood up and were lined up before me.

"Erica didn't sign this," I revealed.

"Then who did?" Malachi asked.

I stared at Aki first, noticing his confusion before his eyes went wide.

"No," he whispered.

I knew Aki would be able to read me before anyone else. He'd put the puzzle pieces together just by looking at the expression on my face.

Yoshi and Haru looked at him, appearing confused and a bit afraid. The others seemed clueless, and I took a deep breath.

I outstretched my hand to present the paper to them and closed my eyes,

letting my rage turn into power.

*Reveal the truth.*

Without even knowing how to cast such a spell, my magic had revealed the words to me because of my dire need to let the guys understand what I saw.

I felt the magic flow from my fingertips that pinched the top of the page and course down the paper.

I opened my eyes to see the paper was now black and, on closer inspection, noticed the white ink that disclosed the entire contract in Japanese.

The guys gawked at the page and the room was completely silent. Urufu walked to my feet, sitting down to peer at the guys as they stood frozen in place, none of them able to speak.

I stared at their hurt expressions, deciding I'd be the bringer of bad news.

"The person who signed this...or should I say, the previous CEO and creator of Nozomi Rukenza Organization...was Storm Yuna," I declared, making sure to pronounce the words as clearly as possible.

Those words felt like a thousand pounds, weighing down the entire atmosphere that grew heavy.

Silence followed, and no one could say a word, my statement slowly processing through their minds while their eyes continued to scan the document as if it held a fault or discrepancy.

I took a calming breath, feeling a bit strange; the familiar essence of the woman who caused all this, the true culprit of our problems.

The woman my men had once loved, cherished, and would lay down their life for.

Even though my anger wanted to shove her presence away, I also wanted to hear what she had to say. To let her take over and reveal why she could have stooped so low to use these men not just for months, but years.

*You lied to your country and the people who served you unconditionally. I*

*know you cannot hurt me, so here's your chance to speak the truth. Here is your chance to say what you have to say, but I swear, I will find a way to make you wish you never dared use the men before you. I swear it.*

The essence took over then, and my mind pulled back, hoping the guys would get the answers they deserved.

A smile formed on my lips and Urufu stood and moved to stand in front of the guys, a growl escaping her as her pink eyes began to glow.

"Urufu?" Malachi moved to calm her down, but I knew it wouldn't help.

She knew exactly who I was, and that Crimson was currently asleep. How I wished to take over this body. To watch as the truth tore these men apart, but alas, I had no such power.

It wouldn't matter. I'd figure out a way to get through this silly enchantment.

*Crimson won't become strong like me. I'd make sure of it, just to return to Erica's side.*

Aki's eyes darkened, making him look quite threatening and made my smile widen even more. I could tell his Kitsune was rather upset, his tails appearing from behind him as his ears popped out without his hair being left down, which only happened when he was absolutely furious.

"Akihiro. You shouldn't stare at your past lover in such a way," I purred, tossing the piece of paper in my hand and moving to lean against the window.

My back pressed against the glass while my arms lifted to cross over my chest.

"Storm." Aki practically growled my name and Urufu began to growl while Malachi had to hold her down.

Quil stepped forward, his eyes a brilliant red that portrayed his rage. "You shouldn't be able to take control of Crimson!" he snapped.

I shrugged, completely unbothered.

"Ya, ya. The talisman and all that. The hag said I can only communicate with her in times of desperation and need. Right now, she allowed me to take

over. Either that or her mind is a little distraught from when my sweet Erica was having her fun time."

The giggle that left me was cold and rather menacing in my opinion, but I didn't care.

Crim was making such a big deal about being touched by Erica. She should have just sucked it up. Erica was rather gentle on her and yet she was sobbing away like she'd been violated by a man.

*Hmph. I would have enjoyed her touch. Way better than these men who've been avoiding me when I'm right here.*

Malachi was glaring daggers at me while he gritted his teeth. "Bring Crim back. There's no reason for you to be here."

"Aww. Malachi, are you upset? My once sweet Lion. You really have fallen hard for Crimson to turn on me so soon."

"You never loved us!" Haru snapped.

I looked at him and sighed. "You're right. I never loved any of you."

Silence filled the room; my words were like a dagger that went through each of their hearts which pleased me even more.

*I wanted them to hurt like I hurt. To get a glimpse of the agony I had to bear for years.*

I uncrossed my arms and turned around to stare out the window.

"Men. All of you are so selfish. You care about nothing other than power, fame, and fortune. You call yourselves guards, yet you couldn't even protect me. Now you're upset about realizing who I really am? I'm amazed it took this long." I degraded them, knowing my hateful words would add salt to their open wounds.

"What are you trying to do, Storm?" Itsuki's voice was calm, and I looked over to see his blank expression which only irritated me.

"Do? I'm merely confirming the truth of what you've read," I declared innocently .

He shook his head and stepped forward, moving to stand on the other side

of Urufu who was still growling. He knelt down and slowly stroked Urufu, the touch instantly calming her.

"You're doing all of this to prove a point. Degrading us with the truth to make us hate you even more. Why? There's no way you'd use us without some purpose. To pretend for so long. Why?"

"She wants us to feel disappointment like she did," Haru whispered.

I watched the others look at Haru whose eyes were filled with menace.

"The disappointment she always felt when she had to leave Erica to return to us, her loving men."

The others looked confused. Only Yoshi and Aki seemingly understood his words and it only pissed me off as I turned to face them.

"Don't speak of her like you know her!" I shook my head as I clenched my fists.

"Why don't we all look at how I feel? What I went through? You're all butt hurt because I used you all? Who's still alive while I'm stuck in this body?! Wasn't the time I spent being a slave to this man-made environment not enough?!" I snapped.

"And what could you have possibly gone through, Storm?" Malachi questioned, sounding irritated with a hint of mockery which only angered me more.

*He's mocking me?! How dare he?!*

"What have I gone through?" I whispered while my clenched fist trembled in anger. "You know nothing! I was born into this world with the sole purpose of being the perfect tool of power. Yet, I was regrettably a GIRL rather than a boy. A disappointment from the start, but there was no way the men of the Council would allow such power to go to waste. When children were playing, I worked to be praised and pampered. I worked my ass off for years to prove my strength, and yet, I was still belittled and treated like garbage."

I turned around and stared out the window, hiding my tears that formed in



my eyes.

"I never enjoyed a normal childhood. I never got to experience what family was all about. I worked to please those in power who only wanted me to help them for some selfish need."

I looked back again at them and laughed.

"I couldn't even love a woman. Someone who knew exactly how I felt. We couldn't openly hold hands once we reached ten years old, and the shameful looks we'd get just for being 'too friendly' was enough to prove that our love for one another would always be a secret! How is that fair?! That I can't love out in the open when I've done SO MUCH for this country. For the shifter race!"

They were silent, and I shook my head again in utter rage.

"Erica was my joy. She made me smile and laugh. She loved me and cherished my vision. She'd give me the world if she could, yet we couldn't display that love out in the open. The only way I could do that was to find a career that didn't need me to be there. To find a type of business where I could be happy and still make money without being a pawn. That job was N.R.O," I revealed.

"All N.R.O. cares about is causing chaos and destruction throughout the country. How the fuck does that benefit you?" Quil snarled.

"Chaos leads to war. Destruction leads to reconstructions and change. Such a change would implement new laws, and I would make sure equality was one of them. I'd make sure with every power and connection I had, I would ensure I could walk hand in hand with Erica by my side. N.R.O was the first step of that, and I used you guys to be able to continue my good girl act."

"You did all of that...just to be able to love Erica out in the open. You were willing for shifters like us to die, be raped, and tortured, just for your happiness," Itsuki whispered.

"If that's what it took, YES! Not just my happiness. All those who want to

love whoever they want! Why is it fair that women can have multiple partners, but I can't date and marry a woman?! Why does this look like rocket science to our people when other places around the world are implementing it?! You look at me like I'm speaking nonsense, and not even attempting to see my perspective!" I shouted.

"That doesn't make your method right, Storm. Wanting innocent people to be killed to create a revolution so that equality is brought to Japan. That involves sacrifice and wars or violence and would only lead to more greed," Aki pointed out.

"Two wrongs don't make a right, Storm," Yoshi whispered, and I hated the pity that lingered in his blue eyes with hints of gold.

"Sacrifice. Wrongs?! I figured none of you would understand. Typical of men to be one-sided, like all the men before you who used me to sit in the positions they're in. You think that they want peace? You believe in their lies and deceit? You all are foolish if you think Homatomashi will go up and change by silly peace treaties and conferences. LOOK! They killed me, the bringer of peace and justice. You still think they want to enforce change and equal rights to all. Hah!"

"Enough, Storm!" Aki shouted, and I merely glared at him.

"You'll never gain peace if you can't put your feet in someone else's shoes and see the vision they see," I spat, tears rolling down my cheeks.

*I knew they would never understand.*

"Using people and wanting change by means of murder and destruction for your own selfish needs isn't putting yourself into someone else's shoes. You're lecturing us, yet you don't care about the fact you used us? You don't put yourself in OUR shoes after knowing our insecurities and seducing us to love you only for your plot of happiness with a woman who dared to hurt Crimson!" Aki snapped.

If it weren't for Yoshimitsu holding him back, I bet he'd be right up in my face and that only made me grin in delight.

"Hurt Crimson. Ah, you mean my sweet Erica touching her without her permission. You all hype such a situation up like it was so painful." I noticed even Itsuki looked upset by my words.

"Touching someone against their will IS painful, Storm."

"If she'd stayed still, it wouldn't have been painful. Having a few fingers shoved up your pussy isn't painful. She handles cock just fine," I scolded.

Haru took a step forward and everyone froze; the ground below him began to ice up while the temperature seemed to drop.

I held my tongue with my next statement as his deadly eyes met mine.

"Doesn't matter what she can handle. You're in HER body, Storm, and you're only lucky to have a mouth to speak thanks to her. Erica violated Crimson. No, she RAPED her! You talk about equality and all that other bullshit about you not having the fair life, but you're saying it's fair for Crimson, a woman who is straight, to be touched by a woman against her will. What happened to seeing the world in another person shoes? In fact, you're in her body right now. You're telling me you can't feel the slightest pain Crimson's dealing with right now?"

I was silent, not wanting to listen to the truth in his words.

He shook his head. "See? Your vision is so strong that everyone else is in the wrong. Your actions don't count because men are horrible people and you deserve to love. It's okay to hurt us...to wound our hearts that would have been left broken in pieces if it wasn't for Crimson, but you can be happy with the woman you cherished. Your vision for change is only one-sided, Storm. That was the reason for your downfall."

"I don't need to be lectured by you. I've already done my damage on you all and it's only a matter of time until I can free myself and take control of Crimson. Then I'll return to Erica who wouldn't mind this body at all. She'd love me no matter what, and you lot of broken men will have to sit and watch. Just like Crimson will within herself," I declared with pride, feeling a bit better of myself.

Malachi rose, and his guarded expression left me wondering why he wasn't upset by my words. In fact, they all had guarded expressions except for Yoshi who sighed.

"Storm, give up already. Your soul is gone. Your essence will fade the stronger Crimson becomes. You lost, Storm. You won't be able to stay once Crimson gets the final crystal."

"I won't give up," I huffed, but Malachi shook his head as Quil sighed.

"Erica's dead."

I stared at his red eyes that were beginning to shift to a golden color.

*Satisfaction.*

"What...?" I whispered, feeling like my ears had misinterpreted his words.

"She's dead, Storm," Malachi said quietly, and his guard fell as he looked at me with pity.

*No...she can't be dead.* "Liar!" I snarled, leaning back to press myself against the window, my eyes wide with disbelief. "Erica wouldn't die from your petty hands."

"She didn't. James killed her," Aki declared.

I tried to respond, but my words were stuck in my throat.

*No....no, no, no!*

Haru took two steps forward and I raised my hands up.

"Don't you dare come near me."

"Return to your dormant state, Storm. You've shared your truth. We revealed reality. Erica's dead, and soon you will be too."

"You think I'm scared of death now. I can leave whenever I want! If Erica is truly dead, I'll simply die and meet her in hell!"

"You won't be able to," Yoshi whispered and the others glanced at him.

"What? You can now tell me where I'll go after death? Let's be real, Yoshi. You're not the only knowledgeable one of the group," I mocked.

He ignored me and continued. "Erica is bound to the earth. She'll never be able to cross over."

My next set of words stopped at the tip of my throat, and I stared at him in shock.

"Liar..."

Aki shook his head.

"It was determined by the monk of Homatomashi. She'll never cross over, Storm, and there's no way for you to bind yourself to this world because your soul is already gone. You've lost, Storm."

Silence lingered in the room and Haru took another step forward, followed by another.

"Leave Crimson alone, Storm. There's nothing left for you here," Haru whispered.

I had no other words, my resolve seeming to dissipate just like my presence as I pulled away.

Away from the surface, people, and shocking reality.

*Erica...no...*

\* \* \*

~**HARU**~

"CRIM."

I closed the distance between us as I watched Crim's knees buckle.

She fell forward, right into my arms, and a weak moan escaped her.

I lowered her to the ground, the others crowding around me as I rested Crimson against my chest. I made sure I did my best to avoid any spots Aki had warned us about; my right arm slid under her neck while her body rested against mine. I didn't touch her anywhere else, unsure if she'd wake right away or go into a deep sleep.

"Is she okay?" Aki asked.

"Did Storm hurt her?" Quil questioned with a stern voice.

"No. I think it's the shock and transition. It's been a while since Storm's essence took over, so it must have caused a drop in magic energy," I explained.

Crimson's eyes fluttered, and she let out a weak moan, opening her heavy eyelids.

"What happened?"

"Storm took over, Hottie. You okay?" Malachi asked, moving over to kneel down in front of us with Urufu who ran right up to Crim and began to lick her face.

A weak smile formed on her lips and she slowly nodded.

"I think I need a few minutes to rest my eyes. I'm okay, though." She tried to reassure us, but her pale expression told me she needed a few hours of sleep.

*She could smile and reassure us knowing we'd worry about her. Yet, Storm couldn't care less about hurting us. How could we have been so fooled by love?*

"That's fine, Crim. Just rest," Yoshi soothed.

She nodded once and had enough strength to reach out and pet Urufu, who cuddled into her right side and placed her head on Crim's chest.

"But...Storm. The truth," Crim pointed out.

"We'll explain everything when you get some rest, Crim. We're fine," Itsuki whispered, and I noticed the small smile on his lips.

*Of course, Crim would rather make sure we were okay than think about herself. She was the polar opposite of Storm who only cared about her happiness.*

"Thank yo...." Crimson trailed off as her eyes came to a close.

She was out in seconds, and I let out the breath I'd unconsciously been holding.

"She needs rest and I'd suggest we change her bandages before we put her

to bed," I announced, looking at the others who nodded in agreement.

Aki walked up to where Malachi was.

"I'll carry her up and get the supplies ready. I'd like you guys to watch so you know how to properly bandage her. Even though she's asleep, her Kitsune is still reactive and can come out in defense," Aki explained.

The rest of us nodded in understanding, knowing first hand what kitsune shifters could be like thanks to our time with Aki. There were a few times he'd been injured, and we'd encountered his Kitsune, who was merely protecting him, by accident.

Aki carefully took Crim from my hold, lifting her up with ease as he stood. Urufu was right at Aki's feet, looking up at Crim with loving joy that made me smile.

"Let's get Crim into bed and then we can talk?" I asked the others, noticing their guarded expressions were gone and replaced with their true feelings of hurt, sadness, and regret.

"Yup," Yoshi whispered.

"I need some air," Quil admitted and didn't wait for us to reply as he left.

Malachi groaned, looking irritated. "This is so fucked up. I'll make sure that idiot doesn't light a cigarette. Be back before you start Crim's treatment, Aki."

We watched Malachi race after Quil, and Yoshi ran his hands through his hair. "I need to update my father. This changes everything."

"I'll wait for you guys upstairs. I'll get Crimson some fresh clothes and give her a bath before we start the treatment. Should be about 30 minutes or so. Just take a breather and we'll talk," Aki suggested.

"I want Crim to be involved too," I announced, which in return gained me three blank stares. I continued. "She's going to be more involved in everything that is going on and with retrieving the final crystal. She needs to be on the same page, regardless of being injured and recovering."

Itsuki nodded. "Haru's right."



"She's earned it," Yoshi whispered.

"Then we'll wait for her to wake up, but everyone still come back to see the methods I use to bandage her. I won't be here all the time and if she needs help, I'm relying on you guys," Aki pointed out.

"Understood," I replied.

Itsuki nodded in agreement and Yoshi verbally agreed.

Aki headed to the stairs with Crim fast asleep in his arms and Urufu followed him happily .

Yoshi headed into another room that led to the backyard.

Only Itsuki and I were left, and I lifted my gaze to see his saddened eyes. "We protected and loved her, and she just used us like bait."

I reached out to pat his arm, hiding my own sadness and heartache.

"It's in the past now, and we're better off now with Crimson. Don't let it make you think of the past. Crimson won't deceive us."

He nodded, but the doubt lingered in his eyes which only left me feeling more worried for the future of our group.

*We can't break apart now. For the sake of Crimson and all of Homatomashi. We have to move forward and fight for what's to come.*

*I just hope we can get past this.*

## TIME AND ME TOO



~CRIMSON~

*"Ninety-one. Ninety-two. Ninety-three."*

*Pain speared through me and I bit my lip to hold back the screams that threatened to escape.*

*I didn't dare open my eyes for fear of seeing the damage that was being done to me with each hit of the leather whip that lashed at my once perfect skin.*

*"One-hundred."*

*I gripped the wall as short exhales escaped me, the sweat that rolled down my face fell to the ground while my tears stained my cheeks.*

*"What a good sport you've been."*

*My hands clenched into fists; my rage vibrated through me as I wished to fight back. To defend myself like I knew I could.*

***Yet for the sake of the men I'd come to love, I remained still.***

*"I should reward you. How would I reward my Storm?"*

*The sickening feeling that ran through me almost made me vomit right there, and my body stiffened at the woman's gentle touch. She turned me around to face her, pressing me against the wall and using her body to pin me against the wall.*

*My eyes filled with tears, knowing exactly what was about to happen, the scene that had plagued me over and over again and made my body hot with*

anger.

*"Don't..." I whispered.*

*My body trembled as I squeezed my legs together in hopes of protecting myself.*

*"Now, now . You'll enjoy this. I'll make sure of it."*

*The sinister smile formed on those red lips and I closed my eyes, hoping the next set of events would end in a flash.*

My eyes snapped opened and I immediately sat up, my breath coming out in rapid gasps.

Scanning the dark room, I looked for the woman in question.

*The woman who'd hurt me.*

My body trembled, and I slowly turned to see Aki was asleep next to me, his tails wrapped around himself as he slept on his right side, his back facing me. Urufu opened her pink eyes and lifted her head to look at me.

"Woof?" The worry in her eyes only left me even more anxious as I caught my breath, and my body was drenched in a cold sweat that left me feeling sticky and vulnerable.

*The same way I felt in that dungeon.*

I slipped out of bed as quietly as I could and went straight to the bathroom. I only increased the light lever just slightly, giving myself enough light to see myself but not too bright to hurt my tired, tear-filled eyes.

My arm reached out to close the door but stopped it midway when Urufu ran into the washroom, something I knew she'd do regardless if I told her to stay out. Whenever I was in distress, she always came to my side, never leaving me until I calmed down.

*Or worst-case scenario, run off to get Akihiro.*

I turned the tap of the sink on and splashed cold water on my face in an attempt to get rid of the dream that lingered in my mind. I didn't want to think about it. Didn't want to see the images flash through my mind and remind me of the aching pain that somehow felt present.

Letting the tap run, I put my hands on the sides of the sink, gripping it as hard as I could while I lifted my head up to stare into the mirror.

"Just a dream. I'm safe...in my bedroom with Aki and Urufu. No one is here. No one will hurt me...or touch me. Just me. Urufu. Aki. She's not real. She's dead. Dead, dead, dead. "

**"You wish I was dead."**

I bit my lip hard and closed my eyes tightly. I knew my mind was playing tricks on me. Knew the sweet familiar voice wasn't real. *Yet...I was afraid.*

Urufu brushed her head against my leg, trying to bring me out of my dark thoughts. She whimpered, prompting me to open my weak eyes to glance at her worried pink ones.

"I'm okay, Urufu. I'm fine," I whispered, but my body trembled and began to feel hot.

*Scorching hot like my body had felt from that woman's closeness. The sweat that had rolled down my figure from the screams that left me as I tried to fight back. The pain...the gripping pain around my wrists as those fingers went somewhere they shouldn't have. Somewhere I had not given permission for her to cross and put those damn fingers in.*

"Fuck!" I cursed and moved to the bath.

I pulled off the thin white t-shirt, not caring that I was half naked standing there in just a pair of tight black shorts I'd worn to bed.

I didn't dare take them off; they were my protection from those filthy hands that had hurt me.

*Even if she's dead. I won't let her hurt me again. Never.*

I turned the handle of the bath and switched it to shower mode, making sure the water was frigid.

I stepped into the tub, allowing the cold water to rain down on me and drench my already trembling body.

Lowering myself to the middle of the bath, I curled up under the stream and tried to control the sobs and whimpers that escaped me, hoping the

stream would mute them so that Aki wouldn't hear.

Urufu moved to the bath, her whimpers barely reaching me as I focused on trying to calm down.

*I'm okay. I don't need help. I don't need medication or any of the guys. I can do this. I have to do this alone. I won't be a burden. I'm just struggling. Yes, struggling. I'm strong...I must be strong. That's what I'm supposed to be...supposed to portray? A strong woman who will get the last crystal and end N.R.O. Strong people don't cry. They don't cower to their demons.*

I tried to convince myself, to create the image that I'd envisioned the world wanted to see. Storm Yuna was an idol to many eyes, and look how that turned out? She'd been a selfish woman who only cared about the woman in her life and nothing else.

*Who am I trying to kid? I'm not strong...nothing compared to how she was. I'll never be able to reach that level of power. That level of idolism. Not with these bruises.*

I was crying loudly now, rocking back and forth as I let the cold stream continue to fall. I zoned out Urufu's howls, zoned out my sobs. I just wanted to be lost in myself, and a tiny part of me wished I'd find the old me.

The me who was strong, optimistic, and determined to be someone. To prove to the universe that no matter what, I could contribute and be a part of society. As a human, I felt the empowerment and fought against the barriers that rose and tried to stop me from achieving my goals.

*Why as a shifter did I feel the opposite? Weak, vulnerable, and insecure. Was it all because of what happened to me? Should I really be a victim? It was my fault...wasn't it? I could have fought back. My chance of survival wouldn't have been high, but look what that despicable woman had done and left behind.*

***She left me broken, and I didn't know if I could be fixed.***

My Kitsune pushed to the surface then; her countless efforts to reach me had finally passed the mental barrier I'd put up. I could feel her sadness, the

growing agony for us, and the desperate wish to help me somehow.

Her presence helped tremendously, almost like a person who'd always stand by you no matter rain or shine. No matter how much I could push her away, she'd always be there because she was a part of me and understood me the most.

The stream of water stopped, but my body still trembled from how cold I was. I continued to rock back and forth, and though I knew someone was calling me, I didn't want to hear it.

*I just wanted to escape. Anyone else would judge me because that was how life was. It didn't matter if you were hurt by someone. As long as you still breathed, at least one person would neglect your pain, ignore your outcries, and mock your weak claims.*

"Crimson."

My Kitsune reacted to the voice first; her head lifted and those beautiful white ears twitched at the sound of one of our lovers.

"Crim. Come back to me. I won't judge you or hurt you. I'll be right here just to comfort you."

Akihiro's soothingly calm voice was what gave me enough courage to lift my head. My weak eyes opened to meet his eyes; those forest green orbs held a level of acceptance and kindness that threw me off guard.

I was lost in them, tears forming in mine and contributing to my blurry vision.

"Aki..."

"Watashi no Ai," he whispered.

*My Love.*

His beautiful long gold-orange hair was left down, his Kitsune ears and tails were out. He wore thin white pants, and he was crouched down next to the bathtub with Urufu on his left side.

"What's the matter, Crim?" His voice was so gentle I wasn't afraid to answer him.

"I...had a bad dream. About, you know. That....that." I bit my lip and closed my eyes, holding back my sobs.

"It's okay, Crim. I understand." I could tell from the tone of Aki's voice that he did understand, and it was helping me calm down and not linger on my failed attempt to explain. I tried to finish.

"It felt so real. Like I was back there again. I was there...and the pain was real. It was so hot. So fucking hot, and I couldn't do anything. Why didn't I fight back? I should have, but I was scared. She said she'd hurt you all. She dared me to try and defy her. What she did was a reward. How is it a reward when it hurts? It hurts, Aki. Every time I try to move forward, the pain comes back. Yet...for a split second, I liked it. I actually...liked it, but I hated it at the same time. I just feel so defeated. So worthless. I want to be strong Aki, but how can I be strong when the memories haunt me in my sleep and when I'm awake? How can I heal? I want to heal, Akihiro." I cried, looking desperately into his eyes.

"You can heal, Crimson. You're taking the first step right now. Talking to me. Venting your feelings instead of bottling them up inside and letting them eat you up. You aren't weak, Crimson. You aren't giving up. You want to take the next step and that is a representation of strength," he said softly.

"Aren't you disappointed in me? Why haven't you judged me?"

"There's nothing to judge, Crimson. You were put into a situation that led to those events. Yes, you could have fought back, but you were selfless and thought about protecting us, the people you love. That isn't wrong, nor should it be judged or looked down upon. You did something many people wouldn't be capable of, and I won't allow anyone to say otherwise."

"What if I don't heal?" I asked as my teeth chattered.

He shook his head and his expression softened while a small smile formed on his lips.

"You will heal, Crimson. I promise you. It may take days, months...maybe even years, but the healing process isn't a race and whatever



has a beginning, has an end. You will reach the finish line and your prize will be getting the chance to feel the confidence and strength you yearn for in this moment. All I need you to promise me is that you'll never stop running toward the finish line."

I took in his words and nodded slowly. "I won't stop," I whispered, praying the vow would be enough to hold my desperate request.

*My request to heal.*

Aki nodded and rose up. "Why don't we get those soaked bandages off and have a nice warm bath?"

I nodded, noticing how trembling cold I was.

"I think running cold water was a stupid idea of mine," I admitted and Urufu barked. She leaned in to lick my face, looking happy to see I was reverting back to my usual self.

My Kitsune also calmed, feeling more reassured just as I did. She could feel Aki's kitsune, and it felt like we bonded even more since he'd started taking care of me. I wanted to have similar bonds with the others. I just needed a bit more time to heal these open wounds in my heart and mind so I could face them.

"Just a little bit. I don't think your Kitsune likes her tails being soaked either."

I hadn't even noticed my tails were out and completely drenched which made me scowl at the realization.

"Ewww. I feel like a soggy puppy." I groaned, rising up with the intentions of getting out.

Aki walked over and got two towels placing one on the floor for me to stand on while he cautiously wrapped the other around my body. He helped me out with ease, and while I tried to remain somewhat warm thanks to the fuzzy white towel, he worked on making the warm bath.

It didn't take him long and he easily helped me remove the bandages that were practically stuck to my skin. At least my wounds were beginning to

heal, but some parts were still sore and sensitive.

He lowered his gaze to my shorts and then glanced back up to me.

"You want to keep them on?"

I had to think about my answer, a hint of fear running through me at the thought of being completely naked. Aki immediately noticed.

You can keep them on, Crimson. Not a race," he whispered and reached up to hold my hand.

I swallowed and took a deep breath.

"I want to try to have them off," I said softly. "As long as you stay. I don't want to be alone."

I didn't feel ashamed of asking him, but I was scared he'd reject my request for his company. My fear was that if he left, I'd hear that woman's voice again and fall back into the spiral of my dark thoughts.

"I'll stay for as long as you want me to," Aki assured me.

He allowed me to remove the tight black shorts, and he didn't rush me when I stared at the warm bubble bath he'd drawn up and proceeded to take a few calming breaths.

With my Kitsune's motivational howls in my mind, I stepped into the bath and slowly lowered myself into the bubbles. I sighed in relief, feeling my once tense muscles loosen after trembling for so long thanks to the chilling cold water from earlier. I looked up at Aki and kept my voice low as I spoke.

"Do you...want to join? I mean you don't have to." I started with the suggestion but corrected myself, feeling slightly embarrassed for asking. I knew our relationship was solid and I shouldn't have felt embarrassed asking for my companion's company in the bath, but because of my current situation I didn't know if he'd want to be so close to me.

"I'd love to." His whispered response made my heart skip a beat. "Is it okay for me to be naked?"

A smile formed on my lips, moved by his compassionate consideration.

"Naked," I murmured, which really sounded like a purr.

He grinned and proceeded to strip off the loose set of pants.

We hadn't been intimate since the incident.

*Intimate as in sex.*

I wanted to, but at the same time, I didn't want to break down into a sobbing mess if Aki touched me the wrong way.

He and the others had been really understanding, and I knew they weren't with me merely because of sex, but I realized it was going to be a process and that I had to slowly work my way to convincing my body I was in safe hands and the guys would never hurt me.

I moved forward slightly, giving him enough space to enter the bath. A bit of water went over the edge, making Urufu bark before she began tapping her paws in the little puddle of water on the floor, her focus on the pink and gold bubbles.

Aki relaxed back against the wall of the bath and I eased into his hold. Somehow, he was able to wrap his arm around my waist without triggering anything, and I relaxed by resting the back of my head against his chest.

My eyes closed as we both sat in a comforting silence, neither of us eager to exchange any words. I wanted to enjoy a few peaceful moments with Aki, appreciating the intimate contact of his bare flesh against mine and the warmth of the water that wasn't too hot.

My Kitsune curled up within me, satisfied with the result of everything and enjoying the comfort of Aki and his Kitsune's presence. I hadn't even realized my tails had disappeared, but with how heightened my current hearing was, I assumed my ears were still out.

I don't know how much time had passed until Aki whispered, "Crim? Want to finish up and go back to bed?"

"Do we have to?" I asked, feeling sleepy, but not wanting to return to bed just yet.

"Not if you don't want to."

"Aki...can I ask you something really personal? You don't need to answer,

but it's been bothering me."

"Sure, Crim. What's on your mind?" Aki's supportive voice was enough motivation for me to confront my dying need to end my curiosity.

"Were...you...I mean, did you experience what I did?" I finally got the words out and held my breath as I waited for him to answer. I didn't know if he understood my specific question because I'd worded it horribly, but I hoped he did because I wasn't sure I'd have the guts to ask it again.

"Yes," Aki confirmed.

My Kitsune whimpered at the truth and I frowned, slightly turning my body to face him.

His eyes were still green but had hints of amber in them as he met my gaze with a sad smile.

"When I was younger. I didn't reveal it to my parents until later. Mine wasn't necessarily sex trafficking where I'd be sent to different 'masters,' but I voluntarily chose to go to different individuals who wanted me for their own pleasurable endeavors."

"You volunteered?" I asked. It wasn't a judgmental statement, but I was shocked that he was willing.

"It was me or my sister." His softly spoken statement had my jaw losing slack.

"Aki..."

He reached out to run his hand through my shoulder-length locks.

"I'd rather live with the mental struggles I dealt with as a child and teenager than let my sister go through those dark times. Kitsunes are known to be kidnapped and sex traded to the highest buyer. Due to my parents somewhat higher status, that couldn't happen. So they threatened to use my sister and I wouldn't allow it. I did it for a few years until I was strong enough to say enough was enough. Yoshi's Father was able to track down the organization who was supporting this and they were shut down a year later, right before they had the intentions of kidnapping my sister anyways."

No words could be spoken to even describe how I felt about his revelation. He noticed my speechlessness and smiled.

"I'm over it, Crimson. I allowed my body to heal and with it, brought me the strength to continue forward. I have times where I break down or something triggers my past, but the guys are aware of it and they've supported me with no judgment. Was it hard? Yes. Sometimes it's still hard, but I look at how far I've come and the good things in my life, and I tell myself I can keep running and aiming to bring peace around Homatomashi and eventually across the world so no one, shifter or human, has to deal with such a tragedy ."

"You're so strong, Aki," I murmured.

"That took time, Crim. Time that you have in your grasp and will be able to embrace. You'll reach the finish line, and I'll be there to congratulate you on your victory," he whispered, his thumb brushing my cheek as he stared directly into my eyes.

I smiled, a genuine wide smile as my eyes softened.

"Aki?"

"Yes, Crim?"

"Can I kiss you?" My gaze lowered to his lips.

How badly I'd wanted to kiss those lips this entire time but didn't have the courage to face him. Now, we were face to face, and I wasn't afraid of abandonment or judgment.

*Aki loves me. Just like the others. I have to work on healing, and that starts with being able to kiss them on my own again.*

"I've missed your lips." He nodded in approval, and I leaned into his embrace and kissed his soft lips.

*Me too, Aki. Me too...*

## MORNING LOVE & APPRECIATION



~CRIMSON~

*I* felt something gently pat my forehead, which made my ears twitch. My mind was still in the middle stage of awake and asleep, making it hard for me to decide whether I wanted to wake up or not.

"Woof." Urufu's quiet bark made me smile, and I felt another pat on my forehead.

"Woofa?"

*Hmm...Mizuko? What is he doing out?* Opening my eyes out of curiosity, I was greeted by Mizu's turquoise blue ones. Uru poked her head into my view, the two of them curled up right against me and my Kitsune, tails wrapped around their backsides.

"Morning Uru and Mizu," I mumbled, slowly closing my eyes. I knew something was holding me against them, but I didn't feel afraid or really bothered by it. I just wanted to sleep a bit longer.

"Woofa."

"Woof."

I listened to my two familiars play with one another while still in the bed. I heard Aki mumble something and he tightened his hold around me, his tails wrapping around me before he relaxed. I smiled, thinking about what happened last night.

After our joined bath, Aki had helped wrap my lingering wounds with

fresh bandages after applying a new ointment Father had bought me. It was making a dramatic difference and was speeding up the healing process. *The physical healing process.*

I didn't bother to put a new pair of shorts on, wanting to take another brave step. I wouldn't eliminate wearing them, but I figured since Aki wouldn't hurt me, there was no need to wear them.

We'd both put on underwear and went to bed, cuddling one another while we randomly talked about stuff.

I was curious as to what Storm had said when I'd allowed her to take control, but I wasn't in the mood to go into those details, especially without a cup of tea to relax me. Aki promised to explain with the others when we woke up and had some break-fast, which I was thankful for.

I felt with the recent news, we wouldn't have much leisure time left and I'd have to enjoy every moment of it.

I must have fallen back to sleep because I woke up again to Aki tying up his hair into a ponytail. My eyes remained locked on the symbols on the long white ribbon that had gold and orange incantations.

Aki noticed my inquiring gaze and a smile formed on his lips. "Morning."

"Morning," I whispered, matching his smile with my own as I stared up at him in a dreamy manner. My Kitsune was awake and doing her own appreciative gazing, both of us loving how sexy Aki looked in the morning.

He chuckled, finishing the last knot in his hair before he leaned down to give me a tender kiss.

"You have a dreamy look on your face."

"Do I?" I teased, hoping he'd give me one more kiss. He must have read my expression, lowering his lips to mine once more. This kiss was longer but still as gentle as ever.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked.

"Yes. I woke up to Urufu and Mizuko. I didn't even summon Mizu," I admitted and turned over to sit up.



"WOOF!"

"WOOFA!!"

The two familiars I was speaking of jumped onto the bed to greet me and Aki. We both laughed and gave them a few strokes as they licked our faces.

We watched them both jump off the bed and return to playing with some of Uru's toys in the corner. It reminded me I'd have to get Mizu some toys to play with too.

"I noticed when you fell asleep as we were talking he appeared. Didn't know why, but he and Uru were cuddling with you for the majority of the time. Though they were playing around when I woke up. Maybe you summoned Mizu in your sleep?" Aki suggested.

"Maybe?" I replied, resting my head on Aki's shoulder. He wrapped an arm around me and we watched the two begin to run around before a question popped into my head. "How is it Uru stays in her form all the time and the others don't?"

"I don't really know. For those who have familiars, its different for all of them. I'm assuming Urufu is the strongest or 'leader' of the five of them and thus, can maintain her body with ease. The closer you get with the others, the easier it will be for them to be summoned. You have to just be careful not to expel too much energy by summoning all of them. Once you get a better understanding of them, you'll know which ones like to be out whenever, and which would rather be dormant until summoned."

"Will you guys teach me? I feel things are going to get busy, especially when we have to retrieve the final crystal," I noted.

Aki nodded. "Yes. Once we do a recap of what happened yesterday we'll have to figure out what the game plan will be. At least everyone got the evening off to absorb what we found out yesterday so we'll figure out what our next move will be. Itsuki will most likely be your main trainer for familiars and magic. Malachi can help out as well, especially with combat. I'll

most likely have to help Yoshi with planning soon. Quil's been taking my place but certain political leaders would rather deal with me than Quil," Aki explained.

I frowned, realizing he wouldn't be around. He squeezed me gently and pressed a kiss to my forehead. "When you were resting yesterday, I taught the others exactly how to put on the cream and bandages. If they're unsure about anything, they'll ask you," he assured me.

"Thanks, Aki. I know I should rely on the others more."

"They want the best for you, just like I do, but they don't mind me spending time with you while you recover. Whatever makes you comfortable."

I turned to look at him as he continued. "But if you want me to stay back, don't hesitate to say so. You are our priority," he stressed which made me grin.

"I'm grateful to have you all in my life," I whispered. "It's nice to not be lonely anymore."

He gently pulled me into his arms, letting me hug him tightly before I leaned back to look up at him. "We should get ready ."

"We should, seeing as we slept in."

"We did?" I asked, glancing around the room for the clock. My eyes found the one on the wall, realizing it was 11 AM.

"Nani?! How is it almost lunch time?!"

The curtains were far too dark and covered the windows so well I didn't even see a hint of sunlight.

"We were awake around four in the morning and didn't go back to sleep until close to six. You really needed the sleep," Aki explained. I gave him a shy smile and lifted the blanket to get out of bed.

"Let's get ready then. At least we don't need to shower again. Do we need to change the bandages?" I asked.

"You should be fine. The area is healing from earlier this morning."

Changing them more often may be a negative as well. We won't be doing anything sweat worthy today, so they'll hold up just fine." Aki slid out of bed and began to stretch.

I admitted his back muscles always made me bite my bottom lip, and that yearning to enjoy him in bed came back. *Down, Crimson. You'! have plenty of time to enjoy Aki...lots of time.*

Aki walked over to the dresser while I went to brush my teeth, Mizu and Uru following me to sit at my feet while I started my morning routine. I brushed the knots out of my hair, assessing the length that was now past my shoulders. *I'm going to have to start tying my hair up.*

I'd yet to determine whether I was going to cut it short or not, my previous liking of the long hair was maybe influenced by Storm's presence. Now that I knew who she really was, I was confused whether to keep it long or cut it short like it used to be.

I finished washing my face and even applied a bit of makeup, something I hadn't done in quite some time. My self-care, in general, hadn't been really good, and it was only thanks to Aki and occasionally my dad that I was somewhat presentable during my time here.

Once finished, I went to the dresser to find something decent to wear, quickly slipping on a matching lingerie set in a nice caramel shade.

I was in a good mood, especially after my talk with Aki. I wanted to feel more confident today, and I decided to wear an outfit I'd usually wear.

After a long time of staring at my favorite jean shorts, I decided to be bold and wear them. Urufu and Mizu were staring at me happily, looking pleased with my choice of clothing. I slid the shorts on, ignoring the white bandages that poked out from the dark denim material.

I picked out one of my white short-sleeved shirts, sliding it on before I walked over to take a look in the mirror. With a deep breath I nodded to myself, my eyes stalled on the bandages that reached just above my knee.

*Maybe I shouldn't wear shorts? It doesn't look nice, right? Shorts and*

*bandages. Ya...someone might ask what happened to me. Not like I'm going outside though...*

My Kitsune tilted her head in confusion, moving up to the edge of the surface which caused my white ears and multiple tails to come out. Normally I had three with an occasional fourth, but now there were six, which freaked me out a bit.

*Dear Kitsune of mine. Did you do that on purpose?*

She rolled around happily, and I could envision her playful behavior and pride-filled pink eyes.

*Guess I can't chicken out ...*

"Woof!"

"Woofa!"

I looked down at my familiars who were now standing next to my feet and gazing up at me with joy. I crouched down to pet the both of them and they snuggled into my embrace when I gave them a hug.

"You guys somehow get me," I whispered, and they barked in approval.

"Crim?"

I glanced over my shoulder at Aki who was out of the wash- room in his boxers. I rose to my feet, Mizu and Uru taking the opportunity to run past Aki to play in the washroom.

His green eyes scanned my outfit and I blushed, turning around to move back to the dresser. "I wanted to wear shorts today, but I think it looks weird with the bandages and all, and I guess I should change because it looks weird and the guys would think I have no fashion sense and criticize me and I could just be rambling a bunch of excuses, so I don't go out like this and freak out even though I don't plan to go outside in this."

I didn't wait for Aki to reply, reaching to pull out the middle drawer to find something else, but I felt his presence behind me and he ever so gently pulled me into his arms.

"Aki?"

"Sorry. I would have asked, but my Kitsune wouldn't let me stall," he admitted with a low voice that sent tingles of anticipation through me. I paused in my quest of finding a different outfit to turn and face him, pressing my hands against his bare chest as I stared into his eyes that were filled with admiration and pride; those green orbs shifted to an amber color.

My Kitsune was intrigued then, and if it weren't for the little resistance I had, she would have burst through the surface to meet the kitsune who I knew was staring down at us.

"You are a jewel. A precious item that one should polish and cherish. Wounds heal. They don't tarnish the beauty within your soul."

The wise set of words gave me encouragement, and I slowly nodded my head in understanding. "Arigato Gozaimashita," I whispered.

Aki's eyes reverted to their forest green color and he sighed. "He always interferes when I want to make myself look cool," he mumbled, which made me actually giggle. My Kitsune jumped around in my mind, feeling just as happy for getting Aki's Kitsune's attention.

"Does your Kitsune have his own personality?" I asked.

"Something like that. He likes to sleep most of the time, but he has a liking for you and a crush on your Kitsune it seems. Now he's growling at me for telling you." Aki shrugged looking unbothered while I blushed; my Kitsune stalled mid-movement to gawk at his words. She ran to the corner and curled up shyly as if Aki's Kitsune could see her which made me smile.

"My Kitsune is trying to hide because she's shy but happy that your Kitsune likes her."

My words made my Kitsune growl and she snuggled in the corner again, purposely ignoring me.

"Ya, kitsunes get shy when they're honest," Aki whispered and pulled me into a hug. I rested my head against his chest, closing my eyes to listen to his heartbeat.

"Don't change out of your outfit. You look beautiful as always."

"But what if the others don't like it?"

"They'll love it, Crim."

"Even with the bandages?"

"Even with the bandages," he confirmed. I lifted my head back to look up at him and he claimed my lips, kissing me passionately like how things used to be. He broke the kiss and gave me another peck on the lips before he ran his fingers through my hair.

"Hmm. I wonder if your hair has something to do with your ears and tails popping out randomly ."

"I have more tails this time too." I slightly turned my body for him to see the increased number of tails. Aki arched an eyebrow at me before he headed towards the nightstand next to his side of the bed.

He opened up the top drawer, retrieving a thick white silk ribbon with pink incantations on it. "Let's try this."

"Is that like the ribbon you have in your hair?" I inquired, noticing the similarities.

"Yes. There's a strong kitsune elder who lives near the palace who designs these for kitsune shifters. It's made so stronger shifters like us don't need to worry about our ears and tails randomly popping out during our everyday life."

He walked back to where I stood, moving to stand behind me. "I'm going to be right behind here for a moment, Crim. You can see me through the mirror, right?"

I side glanced to the standing mirror on my left and nodded. "Yes. I can see you." I realized he was making sure I didn't panic. "You can do what you need to do. I'm okay."

He nodded, looking pleased before he began to gather my long silver and black locks. I watched him gather them into a ponytail before he began to tie the bundle of strands with the white ribbon.

"I informed her the shifter I was getting this for could potentially be a

nine tails kitsune. She added a large boost to compensate your energy levels for when you get stronger. If you really need your ears and tails, the ribbon and the incantations will activate, allowing you to do what needs to be done whether it's protecting yourself or fighting in combat," Aki explained.

He finished up and moved around to face me, gesturing for me to check the mirror. I smiled brightly at the new hairpiece that was tied in a similar style as Aki's but gave off a feminine appearance. *If bows could look male or female, this ribbon was killing the game in the girl department .*

My Kitsune was also pleased, giving up on her hiding efforts to come close to the surface. I noticed my ears and tails had disappeared, and even though my Kitsune was very close to the barrier that held her in, I still appeared the same as I normally did.

"It worked!" I announced, and Aki chuckled.

"It suits you," he whispered, placing the loose strand that hung on the left side of my face behind my ear.

I took a step forward, wrapped my arms around his waist, and leaned up on my tiptoes to kiss him. He looked shocked by my move, but his eyes closed and he kissed me right back. I hoped the bittersweet kiss showed just how much I cared about him.

"I love you so much."

"I know, Crim," he murmured against my lips.

"Will you teach me how to use my Kitsune powers? I don't know what they are, but I'd like to be able to harvest them. Especially if we're planning to get the final crystal."

He nodded. "Once we get your combat and magic usage down, we'll work on your Kitsune powers and see how lethal you are."

"Me? Lethal?" I huffed, rolling my eyes. "I doubt it."

"You are underestimating what a nine tails kitsune can do, love," he pointed out with a wide grin.

"A nine tails kitsune is that powerful? I never heard much about them," I

admitted.

"We'll teach you. Myself, Yoshi, and Quil all have a good amount of knowledge on kitsunes. We'll have to do more research as well to help you out."

"You'll research more for me?"

"You didn't think we would? We have to make sure we're knowledgeable about the woman we love and protect." He kissed my nose and moved back to the dresser to pull open his drawer and retrieve some clothes.

"Protect, huh? Aren't you guys going to have to find someone new to protect? I mean like someone who was at the level of Storm's status and needed such protection?" I inquired.

Aki slipped on a pair of black sweats and grabbed a red t-shirt. "Nope."

"Nope?" I repeated.

"We already agreed that we're protecting you from now on."

*Nani?Protect...me?*

"Why me? Once we regain the last crystal, don't I have to return the pocket watch and be on my way?" I clarified.

"No. Its magic responded to you. It has chosen you as its owner."

I gawked at him while his words sunk in. My Kitsune was running around happily, seemingly pleased with the rather shocking news.

"Chose me? Even though it was by accident?" I questioned.

Aki slipped his shirt on and walked over to me. Once he faced me, a smirk formed on his lips.

"Everything has a meaning in this world. Fateful encounters like these aren't an accident. Some may think it's stupid or impossible and can think that something scientific happened that leads to someone being at a certain place and particular time, but the ancestors that watch us from above decide when someone or people enter our lives. I don't think us meeting you was an accident."

He reached for my hand, slipped his in mine, and squeezed it gently. "I



don't want it to be one, anyway."

A sweet smile formed on my lips as Urufu and Mizu began to run around us. "I'm glad it wasn't," I whispered.

With those words we headed to the door, letting my familiars out to run downstairs. "Aki, do you think we'll be able to take down N.R.O as we are right now?"

"As in at the power level we're at now? Not yet," Aki admitted. "But that's why we're going to plan out what we have to do to get stronger. But first, I think we need a type of break. A mini vacation for all of us."

I thought about it for a moment. "I think that's a good plan."

*A mini vacation with a! the guys. Maybe I'll ask Hakua to come along?*

## BREAK AND FUTURE PLANNING



~CRIMSON~

"*H*akua said she booked the resort for us," I announced, hanging up my phone and looking around my men who appeared a bit shocked by my words.

"You just called her ten minutes ago," Malachi pointed out.

"There's no way she was able to book Onimatsu Resort. It's booked for the rest of the season," Quil added.

"Not to mention only celebrities or people in power can get a booking," Itsuki revealed.

"Check the reservation again. They sent a confirmation email?" Yoshi questioned.

I looked at my phone and Haru got out of his seat to sit next to me, peering over my phone as I opened my email to retrieve the details of our booking.

"Onimatsu Resort, 12PM check in at Villa A, VIP resort. The entire section is reserved for Ms. Jiyuna and her company for the three-day stay. Special permission granted by Hotaka Jiyuna..." I trailed off, realizing my dad had granted our request.

"My father," I stated out loud.

"That explains it," Aki said with a wide smile.

"How did he even know?" I questioned, feeling grateful to

him for continuing to show his support in unexpected ways. "You changed your last name, right?" Haru asked.

"I did," I replied with a nod for extra emphasis. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Jiyuna is really well known for his acts across Japan and across the nations. Onimatsu is owned by a Japanese American couple; the wife is Japanese, and the husband is Caucasian. They travel back and forth between our country and America and normally assist with political matters; they also know many of the fighters and defenders from our country. They must know your father well and heard of the recent Council change and appointing of your mother," Haru explained.

"Not to mention, Crimson got major recognition for it," Malachi added.

"Recognition? Who got recognition? Me?!" I asked feeling a little stunned.

Malachi looked at Aki. "You forgot to tell her, didn't you?" He sighed. "See, Yoshi? I told you he'd forget."

Yoshi blushed and sighed as well. "I had hoped this time would be different."

"I didn't forget!" Aki countered, his cheeks growing red as he innocently scratched his head. "See, what happened was every time I did remember, it would slip my mind just as fast."

"He was too happy spending all his time with Crimson that the mere thought escaped his mind like a butterfly being distracted by the sun," Itsuki mumbled, shaking his head.

"Agreed." Haru chuckled and Aki groaned.

"It slipped my mind. I didn't forget."

"That's the same thing," Malachi countered. I smirked, watching them bicker before they got back on topic; Haru took the lead to explain.

"You were awarded an award for Bravery and Ambition for Peaceful

Lifestyle. You weren't there for it because you were recovering so your dad accepted the award on your behalf. He made sure that everyone that was present knew of your existence and that you were truly his daughter. He gave a speech about how proud he was of you and it received a standing ovation in the end."

I just stared at them with my mouth open, rendered speechless by their words as I tried to hold back my tears. "He...told everyone about me? I'm not anyone important though. Isn't he...I don't know, ashamed that he had a daughter who was human most of her life?"

It wasn't like I wanted to be negative, but I'd been looked down upon and tossed to the side my entire life. To suddenly and quickly find out who my real father was and have him present me as if he'd raised me single-handedly boggled my mind, and the sheer mention of him being proud of me left a fluttering happiness within me.

"Crimson," Yoshi whispered, walking up to where Haru and I sat. He lowered to sit on the other side of the sofa and smiled.

"You deserve to be praised for everything you did. You had no obligation to follow us on that mission. We could have left you behind and searched for the crystals ourselves. However, you joined us and thanks to your presence, we located the next crystal and revealed a traitor who'd been spying on us for years. Many people have tried to bring Erica down and show her true colors, but she was a rat that never got caught. You also helped us find the truth about Storm, and that is what's going to help us finish N.R.O once and for all. It's a big role that, with the way everyone had treated you since birth, was something you didn't have to be a part of. That in itself has shown bravery and proven that there are many things that need to be changed and improved upon for Homatomashi to be a better place."

I looked at the others who also had proud expressions on their faces as they nodded in agreement.

"You earned that right, Hottie. Now you get to be treated the way you

should have been treated from the beginning. You'll see a big change now that you're legally a Jiyuna and people see the truth about the countless lies that were fed to them for years," Malachi declared.

"That includes getting into resorts and other places with ease due to your status," Itsuki added.

"Is it unfair?" I asked. "We're getting access over celebrities who'd pay top dollar to get in."

Aki shook his head. "Onimatsu is a resort where 100% of their proceeds go to stop injustice and sex trafficking."

My jaw dropped at his words. "Really?"

Haru nodded and reached out to hold my right hand that wasn't holding my phone. "Not many people know about it. We only found out about it a few years ago when Aki discovered it.

They've helped save thousands of shifters and have dismissed numerous legal cases where the victim was blamed wrongfully. We've been there a few times."

"That's amazing," I whispered.

"Their Villas are huge! Wait...WE GOT A WHOLE VILLA?!" Malachi shouted.

My gaze returned to the email and I looked at it again. "Yup. Villa A. Why?"

"A Villa is basically like having an entire resort to yourself. It has everything! It has its own set of hot springs, spa, restaurants. Think of it as an island sectioned off for specific guests," Itsuki elaborated.

"It's that big?!" I exclaimed.

The others nodded, exchanging glances. "This looks like it's going to be a nice mini vacation," Aki declared.

"Hakua can come, right?" I asked.

"Sure! As long as she doesn't force me to deal with children again," Malachi whined.

"You're still salty over not having alone time with Crim." Aki winked.

"Don't remind me of my failures." Malachi groaned dramatically, making us all laugh. We relaxed for a few moments as we finalized our plans, deciding we'd head to the resort early tomorrow morning.

We then focused on the more important matters.

"Do we have any news about what's going on with N.R.O at this point?" Aki asked, his gaze landing on Yoshi who sighed.

"Father has sent a few private agents to try to figure out what their next plans will be. Right now, they're at a huge disadvantage with wanting the crystals and pocket watch. They do, however, have the last one and they'll guard it with their lives."

"Or they'll come after Crimson to steal the watch and crystals," Itsuki pointed out.

"Or simply kidnap her, " Haru grumbled.

The others looked displeased about that and I closed my eyes. In seconds, the pocket watch was in my hand, which resulted in a few gasps as I opened my eyes to see their shock.

"Did Crimson just summon the pocket watch that I swear Aki put away in the drawer last night?" Malachi asked, seeming a bit freaked out.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm right here, and yes I did. I had a dream about it a few days ago."

They all gave me confused looks.

"You had a dream about how to summon the pocket watch when you're not wearing it?" Quil clarified.

"It's kind of hard to explain, but Urufu was like, in human form? Well...I think it was Urufu because the woman had pink eyes. She told me I could summon the watch into my grasp no matter how far away it was. I don't really remember anything else after that, but I've been able to summon it like this ever since."

"Crim's a lot stronger than we thought," Itsuki mused. "Stronger than you

thought?" I grumbled, feeling offended. Itsuki blushed and raised his hands up in defense. "I don't mean it in a negative way. Storm wasn't able to do that until recently ."

"As in six months before her death," Haru announced.

"Wait, it's a skill? Or power?" I asked.

Yoshi appeared deep in thought, and Malachi took the moment to speak. "That pocket watch has been passed down for generations. The watch's bond with its host determines how powerful it can get. That power is amplified by the owner who possesses it. It also shows the connection you have with it and the crystals embedded."

"Does Crim summoning Mizu in her sleep count as well?" Aki queried.

"She did that in her sleep?" Quil asked.

"Ya. Last night she did it," Aki confirmed.

"Woofa!"

We looked down at Mizu who sat up from where he and Urufu perched next to my feet.

"And he's still in his form without bothering Crimson," Yoshi noted.

Haru looked at me. "You feeling alright, Crimson? Like are you tired or feel your energy is being taken from you at a slow pace?" "I feel perfectly fine. No, I'm not tired at all and I don't feel like energy is being taken away from me."

Yoshi stood from where he sat next to me and walked over to stand opposite of us, so he'd be able to address all of us. "I think we should get trained by a professional, especially Crimson."

"Trained by a professional? Professional what?" I asked.

"Professional Mage Master. My father had suggested it the first time we arrived at the palace, but I didn't think it was necessary because I assumed we'd be strong enough to protect Crim. However, with Crimson's powers beginning to manifest and morph into the watch, she has to be able to defend

herself at a higher level which includes magic and weapon usage."

"Not to mention she has to train her Kitsune as well," Aki added.

Quil nodded and Malachi crossed his arms over his chest. "She'll need to work on using her swords," Malachi noted.

"And familiars," Quil stated.

"So, I, Crimson over here, have to basically train my butt off to protect myself and use all my shiny new powers," I summarized.

They all smirked and Haru stood up, moving to stand next to Itsuki. "Pretty much." He winked.

"Crimson, have you dreamt about anything else?" Yoshi asked.

I frowned and glanced away. "Nope."

My words were like ice and they gave off the 'skip the subject' impression. I didn't want to linger on my nightmares since that was about 80% of my dreams.

Aki walked over to me and knelt down to meet my gaze. "Hey. He just means the good ones or anything that involves magic like the pocket watch," Aki soothed. I bit my lip, feeling a bit bad for shutting them out over a simple question.

I took a quick glance at the others, noticing their worried expressions, and I sighed. "Sorry. I'm...still working on things. I didn't mean to be rude."

"Woof!" Urufu added, hopping on the sofa to put her head on my lap. Mizu joined on the other side, both of them nestling to my sides and placing their heads on my lap which made me smile.

"It's alright, Crimson. We understand," Yoshi replied, giving me a supportive smile while the others nodded in agreement.

"Arigato," I whispered, giving them a small smile. "To answer your previous question, not really? I mean...sometimes I dream about cherry blossoms. If that makes sense."

Yoshi nodded and stroked his chin. "That's what I'm worried about. Now that your powers are becoming attuned to you and your Kitsune trusts you,



your cherry blossom power is going to kick in and that will need intense training to control it."

"It's just cherry blossoms? Pink petals that don't even cause papercuts. What is the harm?" I shrugged. "You guys did explain a bit of it, but I don't see why it's such a high-level skill."

"Innocent but deadly, Crimson," Haru whispered.

"It's hard for us to explain it. The Mage Master would be able to demonstrate to you. She's one of the few kitsune masters in the world. She'd be able to show you and help you with your Kitsune as well."

"Is she a nine tails kitsune like me?" I asked.

"No. Six and she has an SS magic affinity," Aki replied and rose up. "She's trained me in the past and had trained Hotaku Jiyuna many years ago."

"I guess that means I'm potentially stronger? In terms of magic level and my Kitsune?" I asked.

"Yes, but without training or control, you'd be an easy target," Itsuki noted.

"True," I replied. "So the plan is to start after our resort stay or will I begin training there?"

"We'll need to ask her first. She's most likely going to challenge you," Malachi announced.

"Challenge me?! Hold on, she's like a legendary ancient woman versus me who just got her powers like a few weeks ago?!" I exclaimed.

"It's like throwing her into a pack of wolves," Haru pointed out to Itsuki who nodded.

"Basically."

"You guys can't really be down for that?" I questioned. "She'll kill me before I take a step."

"Crimson, you have some good instincts and can fight back when you want to. You wouldn't have survived that mountain with those two guards if you couldn't defend yourself," Aki reminded.

"But..."

"Crimson, we'll train you before that time comes," Yoshi assured me.

Malachi and Itsuki nodded. "We'll be helping you train in combat."

Malachi motioned to himself and Itsuki who nodded.

Quil stepped forward. "I'll help with magic."

"And I'll make sure you eat." Haru smiled. I giggled at his comment.

"At least I won't starve. This sounds tiresome." I sighed, already regretting mentioning it. *This is going to be a pain.*

My Kitsune yawned and laid down with her tails waving from side to side in a lazy manner. Seeing her lazy appearance made me smile at her. *Yes, I'm lazy too.*

She barked in reply, looking pleased that I agreed.

"We'll take it slow for now. There won't be any rush until we know exactly where we stand and what N.R.O is planning," Yoshi declared.

"Guess we can go pack then?" I suggested, and the others grinned.

"Yes!" Malachi announced. "We all deserve a break after yesterday."

"Agreed." Quil sighed and ran his hands through his hair.

"I get dibs on staying with Crimson," Haru called out. Everyone was silent before all hell broke loose.

"Oh, hell no!" Malachi and Quil said together.

"What kind of smooth trickery is this?" Aki argued.

"You don't get a say. You've been hogging Crim for weeks. Go away." Malachi brushed him off. "This calls for another Rock- Paper- Scissors battle!"

"Why can I see this not going well for any of us?" Quil sighed.

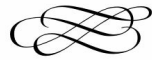
"Because it won't." Itsuki chuckled.

I stared at them as they began their little competition and lowered my gaze to Minzu and Uru who were watching the guys in excitement.

"I've missed them," I whispered, petting my two familiars while I continued to watch them duel it out with the game of chance.

*I hope I'll be able to protect and love them the same way they do me.*

## CONFRONTATION AND REGRET



~CRIMSON~

"Crim, are you sure nothing is bothering you?"

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, doing my best to keep calm when my Kitsune was practically growling with her six out of nine tails out.

*She means well. Don't be upset.*

No offense to Hakua, but I was getting annoyed with her continuously asking me if something was wrong.

We were in our room of the resort. The guys split up into groups of two while Hakua and I got our own room to share. Urufu was playing around with Mizu outside in the garden and the guys were giving me a chance to have best friend time.

However, the moment Hakua saw me she could tell something was off. It would have been my outfit that tipped her off. I wore a dress but with black leggings, something I had always been against unless it was practically freezing in Japan.

The fact I said I wasn't in the mood for hugs right now was probably raising red flags in Hakua's mind, and she wasn't going to take my "I'm fine" responses. I thought I could handle her annoying inquiries, but my Kitsune was getting irritated as well and that was only adding anxiety to my already high-stress level.

Having been cooped up in the safe house with Aki and my dad, I hadn't

ventured outside in a while, and I felt almost uncomfortable in public. It made me feel like I was a different person, and though I was doing my best to "fit in" and act like I wasn't recovering from everything that happened in the forest, it was beginning to go downhill.

"Nothing is bothering me, Hakua, for the 35th time." I practically growled my response, laying out my white robe that I hoped to put on once Hakua went to the washroom.

"I can tell something is wrong, Crim. Who the hell wears leggings when it's so hot I can boil an egg with the sun and the asphalt."

I glanced over my shoulder to give her my best "DROP IT" look. She groaned and rolled her eyes. "Fine. Don't complain by saying I'm the worst friend ever after asking you X amount of times if you're okay," Hakua huffed. I watched her grab her stuff and she headed for the washroom to shower.

With a sigh, I shook my head, my Kitsune finally settling down as she returned to her little corner and allowed her six tails to curl up around her body. She still stayed on guard, looking ready for another round of growling.

I appreciated her protective behavior, but I knew Hakua was just trying to be a good friend. *It's okay. We'll hopefully get through this vacation and go back to our safe space at home. At least the guys don't ask a million questions.*

Taking the opportunity of Hakua's absence, I stripped and began to remove all the bandages. The guys stated that Haru was going to stay behind while they prepared to go to the hot springs, so they'd make sure to have someone help me bandage up my back wounds.

My legs were healing, and Aki said with time, the Mage Master would be able to create a cream that would help heal my scars. That's where he had gotten his scars healed up.

I finished throwing out the bandages and pulled out the ribbon from my hair to stare at the beautiful rich material. It made me smile, and my heart skipped a beat at the present that meant a lot to me.

I folded it and placed it neatly next to my kimono for the evening. Itsuki had made sure the staff gave me the longer version to cover my legs since there was a new trend that the female guests received shorter kimonos due to the intense heat in these parts.

I reached out for my robe to put it on when I heard Hakua gasp.

*Great ...*

"Crimson Jiyuna, what the fuck happened to your back and thighs?!" Hakua snapped.

That set my Kitsune off, her growling fit returning with force and another two tails appeared, making her total count a lovely 8 out of 9.

"Nothing Hakua," I replied and quickly put my white robe on. "Just got injured when we did the mission thing. It wasn't bad."

"Wasn't bad? Crimson do not fucking lie to me! You look like you were fucking whipped! Why haven't they healed yet? Do the guys know? Does your family know? Who the fuck did that to you?!"

I couldn't even keep up with the words coming out of her mouth, and I walked over to grab my little bag with shampoo, conditioner, and some special 2-in-1 for my tails and ears. I wanted to take a rinse before I went to the springs, but I didn't want to do it here with Hakua's watchful eyes.

*Not like it mattered anymore.*

"It's a long story," I replied.

"One you didn't care to share with me?!" she shrieked, and I closed my eyes, doing my best to be patient while my Kitsune began to approach the surface like a predator ready to pounce on its prey .

"Hakua. Drop it," I whispered and grabbed a towel and washcloth from the complementary bin provided by the resort. "I'm going to the springs early. I don't want company."

"Crimson, you're not leaving this damn room until you tell me what the fuck happened and who the hell hurt you!" she snapped.

"It's none of your business!"

"IT IS my business! You're MY best friend. Why am I the last to know about this? I've known you practically your whole life! I've been there for you during the worst parts and best parts. Why the hell did that change?!"

I clenched my fists that were both trembling and remained silent as she continued.

"What happened, Crimson?"

"Nothing," I replied and headed to the door. I could hear her approach and I begged the ancestors to make sure she didn't touch me, but that went out the door when her hand landed on my shoulder.

My Kitsune reacted then, coming right to the surface, and before I could fight for control, Hakua was on the ground with her hand behind her back.

"Shit, Crimson! I'm not going to hurt you."

"Do. Not. Touch. Us." My Kitsune snarled before she pulled back, and I immediately let Hakua go and rose to my feet.

Hakua was up just as fast and she turned around to face me.

"What the fuck, Crim!"

"DROP IT, HAKUA!" I screamed.

Within seconds, the door slid open and Aki, Yoshi, and Quil were staring at the two of us.

"What the fuck is going on?" Yoshi shouted.

"Why doesn't someone fill me in as to why the fuck my best friend has wounds all over her back and thighs?!" Hakua snapped back.

I lost it.

"I GOT RAPED, HAKUA! YOU FUCKING HAPPY?!" I yelled.

Her jaw dropped open and I decided to just say what I had to say before my Kitsune had her way.

"Erica kidnapped me, locked me in a fucking cold ass dungeon like a chained-up animal, had the time of her life whipping me, and then proceeded to fucking touch me as a fucking reward! Then she went back to whipping me some more! THERE! That's what fucking happened, and maybe

if you used your fucking eyes and paid attention, you would have realized I don't want to fucking TALK ABOUT IT!"

I moved out of there so fast I didn't even know how the hell I'd reached the spa area that was on the other side of the giant resort. I closed the door and locked it before I dropped my stuff and moved to the shower portion of the bathhouse.

My eyes locked onto my image in the large standing mirror that was positioned on my right before the showers, causing me to stop in my tracks.

My white ears and tails were out, my tails surrounded by a dark pink aura that reminded me of the time Aki had confronted James. My eyes were no longer turquoise, but a bright pink. I had weird lines on my face that I'd only seen in shows and books about kitsunes, and my arms and legs had similar ones.

My body was trembling with rage, and as much as I fought not to stare at the wounds on my thighs, I did, the action bringing those memories right back.

**"Ninety-One, Ninety-two."**

I lifted my hands to my ears and let out a frustrated scream. *"You're DEAD! You aren't here!"*

Moving to the showers, I reached out to put the cold water on but stopped, my hand trembling so hard that I could barely wrap my fingers around the handle. My inhaled and exhaled were fast, and my legs buckled as I dropped to the ground.

**"I should reward you."**

"I don't want it!" I screamed, putting my hands on my ears once more. *Go away, go away, go away!*



My mind knew it was an illusion, yet Erica's voice felt so real. It sounded like she was right there, holding her whip with that sinister smile of hers as she walked around me. I could see the lust in her eyes and the way she'd licked her lips, ready to torture me.

***"Did you like your reward? Don't cry. You came just fine. Just admit you enjoyed it."***

"I DIDN'T!" I screamed back and moved to the nearest corner. I curled up into a ball while my tails wrapped around me, and I rocked back and forth. *Help, help, help. I don't want to hurt anymore. I don't want to touch me. Please don't touch me. I don't like it. Please.*

"Crimson!"

It must have been my imagination continuing to play tricks on me; Haru's panicked voice echoed throughout the room. *I locked the door. No one can come in. Erica can't come here. Yes, she can't come...but no one can save me.*

My Kitsune pushed to the surface again and allowed me to hide while she protected me from the approaching footsteps. *We won't be hurt again. Never again.*

Haru walked right into the showers, his head whipping in our direction and his eyes growing wide. "Crimson?"

My Kitsune growled, and out of nowhere, cherry blossoms began to fall from the ceiling. Haru stood completely still and he put his hands up.

"Crimson. It's me, Haru. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Liar." We growled in defense, tears rolling down our flushed cheeks.

"I'm not lying. I swear it," Haru replied. My eyes noticed his orange and white fluffy tail, that stayed completely in view. My Kitsune knew what he was right away.

"Fox," she stated out loud. "Cunning and dangerous."

"Just because I'm a fox doesn't mean I'm going to hurt Crimson. I promise I'm here to help."

My Kitsune was silent for a moment before she pulled back from the surface. My frightened eyes met his wide ones that softened. "Crimson. Don't cry."

His words simply ignored the waterworks and I began to sob. "I didn't mean to, Haru, but Hakua wouldn't stop. Now the voice is back, and I don't know what to do."

"The voice."

"Erica's. I know she's dead, but I can hear her counting and her wanting to reward me. I tell her to stop and I know she's not real. Her voice isn't real, yet I can't shut it out. I'm scared if it's not completely gone, it'll happen again. She'll come back and take me to the dungeon and torture me again. Then...then...re-ward me...and make the pain come back." I cried.

Haru nodded in understanding. "Crim. I want to come closer. I won't hurt you," Haru soothed, and I slowly nodded while my shoulders shook. He approached me at a slow pace, his mismatched orange and gold eyes assessing my body as if to make sure I had no wounds.

When he reached my side, he lowered to the floor on his knees. "It's going to be okay, Crimson. I just need you to breathe and your Kitsune to calm down."

"But...but..." I tried to explain through my rapid pants, but I choked on tears and began to sob harder.

"No, but. Everything will be fine. I'm going to hold you, and you can cry as long as you want. Then we'll take a nice shower and head to the hot springs. I'll stay with you the whole time and make sure no one hurts you. Then we'll go right to sleep."

"What about Hakua? She's going to hate me. I-I...have to apologize. It's my fault. Everything is my fault."

"No, Crimson. Nothing is your fault. What Erica did is NOT your fault."

What she did was deliberately to hurt you and you're still healing. Don't blame yourself. The others are talking with Hakua."

I looked into his eyes once more and saw the truth in them, and I opened my arms up for a hug. "Haru. I'm sorry. We're sorry. I'm just scared of being out here. I'm scared of being judged."

Haru moved forward to embrace me and soon I was on his lap, my forehead pressed against his shoulder as I cried uncontrollably. I wanted this to go well. To be able to enjoy this vacation with all of us with no issues at all, but I'd fucked it up because I couldn't walk away. I wanted to run away and reacted when I couldn't.

"I know, Crimson. We all understand, and no one is judging you. Just let it all out," Haru whispered.

"I'll get better, I will. I just need more time. I want to get better. I really do."

"You are enough, Crimson, and will get stronger. Don't rush your healing process. Just embrace it and know that your lovers are here. We'll never abandon you and we love you just the way you are."

I pulled back to meet his gaze. "Even though...even though I'm not the same? Even though someone else touched me?"

"No matter what happened in the past, we love you. You are still our Crimson, and no one will touch you like that again. We'll make sure it doesn't happen," Haru vowed.

"Hai," I said softly, and he reached out to gently move my drenched locks from my face. I'd worked up a sweat and my hair stuck to my face.

"I promise, Crimson," Haru repeated and ever so lightly pressed his lips onto mine. I closed my eyes and, finally after all that happened, I relaxed. The tension seemed to leave my shoulders and my exhaustion began to fade.

I didn't want to open my eyes, my body and mind wanting to enjoy the blissful kiss that seemed to bring warmth through me. Maybe Haru was healing me somehow, and the thought left me feeling grateful that he was

here.

I'd been so afraid to rely on anyone aside from Aki, thinking I'd be judged and humiliated after the incident with Erica. It was an assumption that was a waste of time when I could have bonded with the others.

I didn't necessarily regret it, having gotten the time to know more about Aki and my father, but it made me realize how amazing these men in my life were and how they had always stepped up to the plate when it came to my needs, both good and bad.

*I have to trust them. They've loved and supported everything I've needed to do. They're willing to help me heal, so why am I pushing them away?*

My Kitsune was quiet, having calmed down and she moved to the edge of the surface just to show that she was there too. She wouldn't allow anyone to hurt me anymore. We'd fight to the death if we had to.

*We'll be strong very soon. Strong enough to defend ourselves and fight those who want to do the same to others who can't protect themselves. No more of shi"ers and humans being raped and hurt because they're weak or threatened. I can't allow it anymore. I'll fight to stop it.*

*That starts with me.*

## HEALING THROUGH CARING



~HARU~

*I* stared at the stars above, doing my best to ignore my growing arousal due to my current position. My gaze lowered to notice Crimson's white ears that twitched ever so often while she gazed at the wondrous night scene before us as the steam floated into the cool night air.

Once Crimson had calmed completely, I'd helped her out to wash up and made sure her healing wounds weren't adversely affected during her breakdown.

I understood from the little bits of information I'd picked up as Itsuki and I rushed into the scene that Hakua must have seen her wounds and the scars on her thighs.

Crimson had mentioned that she didn't want to tell Hakua at the moment, knowing quite well she'd inquire about what happened and she wasn't mentally ready to face it.

We didn't think they would fight on the first night when we'd only been here for a few hours. Itsuki had helped defuse the situation; Quil and Aki were really defensive regarding the topic and, in my opinion, didn't help Hakua feel any better for setting Crim off.

Malachi was last to show up, having been in the shower when everything had happened, and he wasn't pleased when Yoshi was starting the recap of what they heard.

None of them wanted to interfere when they were in the hall, but once Crimson screamed, they went right into gear and that was when Crimson went off on Hakua and was out of there so fast, no one knew where she'd gone.

I was the best candidate to find her the fastest, and as much as Aki wanted to take the lead, Yoshi requested him to stay back on this one. I knew very well that Akihiro had dealt with what Crimson had for years, and he knew how to handle her, especially when she broke down, but if we continued letting him take over, she'd never be able to rely on us when Aki wasn't present.

With the Erica incident, it felt as if we were back at square one and we had to regain Crimson's trust. We could still kiss her, but anything with a touch of our hands like hugs or strokes of her back would be a serious problem and potential trigger if we didn't work on gaining her trust.

After we'd washed up, we moved to the hot springs. Instead of sitting side by side as I thought, Crimson was in front of me, her back pressed against me and my right arm around her waist.

I didn't know if she needed the contact to realize she wasn't alone in the hot spring, or if she just wanted to enjoy the closeness, but I wasn't complaining. I'd missed Crimson a lot, and I think we hadn't noticed what an impact her presence had made in our everyday lives until recently.

Her tails had vanished, but her ears were still out, twitching once in a while. Aki explained that it happened when he was intrigued by a certain sound and wanted to heighten his hearing to get a better listen.

As tempting as it was to touch them, I didn't, knowing they were super sensitive. We'd been sitting in the peaceful silence, listening to the sounds of the forest that surrounded three-fourths of the springs along with the soothing sounds of the flowing water from the little waterfall.

I knew Crimson was lost in her own thoughts and I didn't blame her; I was just as lost in my worries and my concerns for her. What Erica had done

was unforgivable and I couldn't deny that I was still upset we hadn't gotten the gratification of killing her.

She deserved to be tortured and to pay for her crimes. Not given the easy way out. *Not to say that being bound to earth was necessarily easy, but I wish she could have suffered a lot more.*

I wanted Crimson to have time to heal, and though she'd had a few weeks of no interruptions and had progressed greatly, she still needed the extra reassurance that it was okay to cry and vent. I felt she thought of herself as a burden and what we wanted to fight was her thinking of herself as the problem.

*Putting the blame on herself for being raped when she was a victim and had every right to feel the way she felt.*

It was society's fault that we had a reverse mentality and tried to blame ourselves for the wrongful actions done to us. Didn't matter if someone targeted and sought you out to deliberately hurt you.

People, especially shifters, would make sure that they had some type of reason to put the blame on you unless there was solid evidence. *Even that depended on the situation and the people judging the case.*

Crimson had experienced the harsh side of life, having everyone look down on her for being human when in reality she was a shifter and a victim of injustice thanks to that man who had pretended to be her father.

She must have thought that because of what happened, she'd have to face the same hateful glances, not so quiet whispers, and the judgment people young and old would give her.

I was glad that no one else knew what had occurred with Erica, and I knew Hakua would never judge Crimson either. Our Crim just had to realize that she was in a safe environment that wanted to help her rebuild what was lost: her confidence, self-esteem, and courage.

"Haru?"

"Yes, Crimson?"

"How did you get into the bathhouse?"

"Wasn't hard."

"Doesn't answer how." The way she combatted made me smile.

"I used magic to create a key to unlock the door," I revealed. "You can do that?"

"I can."

"Sneaky," she mumbled. "Is that what helps you do your job?"

"As an assassin?" I clarified. She slightly turned her body which only contributed to my cock growing harder at the feel of her ass brushing against my manhood. Thankfully, I hid it well because Crimson didn't notice.

"Yes. Is it because of those skills that you're able to be an assassin?"

"Yes. Most fox shifters are assassins for corporations or become thieves for bad corporations. Kind of depends on the shifter's morals."

I knew I wanted to do good with my skills and my chance came when I met Aki and the others and it eventually led me to Storm.

"Do people confuse you with kitsunes?" she asked.

"Sometimes. Our orange and white fur gives us away though, unless it's someone who doesn't know the difference," I replied.

"How..." She trailed off, looking a bit hesitant to ask me something.

"You can ask me, Crimson," I assured her. I didn't want her to be afraid of asking me questions. I wanted her to open up to me and that required me opening up to her.

"How do you deal with killing people? Does the guilt linger there?" she asked. "I sometimes...think about the people I killed on the mountain and the one in the field we'd shot down. I know it was essentially self-defense in both cases, but sometimes when I'm deep in thought, I feel guilty for killing them."

*This woman is too good for us.*

Her words moved my heart, and I took a moment to gather an answer that would help her ease such worries.



"Feeling guilt once in a while is normal. It shows you still have compassion within you. To numb yourself completely will only take away your ability to be happy, sad, angry, and love yourself and others. Those deaths were self-defence and you shouldn't feel guilty for fighting for your life. It wasn't like you'd all walk out of that blizzard mountain alive. Same way with the fields where we were getting shot at. It's either kill or be killed, and that's the mentality I keep in the back of my mind when I have to kill someone. I try not to kill if it's not necessary, but I won't allow someone to take my life."

I didn't know if my explanation was helpful, but that was the best way I could explain it from my life experience. Being an assassin wasn't necessarily my choice, but if I could aspire to get rid of people who wanted nothing more than to spread hate and murder innocent shifters in cold blood, I couldn't pass up the opportunity.

We needed change to happen so shifters and humans alike got a chance to live the life they were meant to and not be murdered before their time was up.

"That makes sense," she replied. "It's okay for me to feel guilty at times, but to understand that it's okay to protect myself and acknowledge that I deserve to survive like anyone else."

"Exactly," I confirmed. She looked pleased and it was like her worries were lifted from her shoulders.

"Arigato, Haru. I appreciate your openness," she whispered, turning in my embrace to face me.

I felt the heat grow on my cheeks and my cock twitched. I'd been doing my best to ignore how beautiful Crimson was. Her body was so perfect, from the curves of her hips to the perkiness of her small breasts.

I loved that she was growing her hair out. Her short hair had complemented her, but there was something about the longer strands of black and silver hair that brightened her up even more.

My eyes lingered on hers before lowering to her lips, and I bit the corner

of my bottom lip hard, needing to snap myself out of it before I did something stupid.

*Get a grip, Haru. She's not in the mindset yet to do those things.*

Crimson's turquoise eyes lowered to my lips and back to my eyes, a wave of understanding running between us. I was shocked when her body pressed against mine; those nipples of hers felt hard against my pecs and she leaned up to give me a tender kiss.

Our eyes remained open as we slowly kissed, our lips moving in the perfect rhythm, and I couldn't help putting my hands on her hips, making sure to avoid her lower hips where her scars remained.

I let her have control, kissing me at the pace she wanted, whether it was to kiss me with dominance or at a more passionate rate.

Her arms wrapped around my neck and she seemed to melt in my hold which made me groan against her lips. She slipped her tongue into my mouth then, and it was taking everything in me not to move my hips; my length grew harder and made it almost impossible to think straight.

How I'd wanted to kiss her and touch her but held back. Now I was naked here with her, and I had no idea how I was going to hold back if she continued.

"Crimson," I whispered against her lips when we were both catching our breath. I didn't know if she could hear the desperation in my voice, cause her hand wrapped around my cock beneath the water, making me freeze and my heart skip a beat.

"Haru..." she said softly, and her hand moved up my cock and back down to the base. My eyes fluttered closed and I prayed she wouldn't stop. She was filling one of my many fantasies, and I didn't have the will power to let her not continue.

I did want to please her, but it was hard to know what to do in her situation. My fox understood my dilemma and together, we decided to let her be in charge. She needed to feel in control and we were certainly going to

give it to her, even if it meant we couldn't please her in return.

My breathing increased, and I moaned a bit louder than I meant to, enjoying the way her hand expertly moved up and down my cock and the pressure of the warm water added to the stimulation.

"Faster, Crim," I whispered. I felt her lips press against my neck which made me groan at the added pleasure. I loved the way she made me feel and the love that transferred with every action she did.

I didn't think I could love someone at this level as my love for Storm was not as strong as the others'. Maybe it had begun to disappear when I started to pick up on her hidden tactics. Either way, it made me realize the major difference between what love really was, and it was even more satisfying knowing that love was mutual.

"Ah...Crim. A bit more." I moaned, and she increased her hand strokes which made me pant. I was close to releasing my load and it was the first time I'd ever cum underwater which seemed to excite me more.

She knew how to give the perfect hand job, and it wasn't long before I cursed and let go, my climax making me grow rigid for a moment.

"Fuck." I tried to catch my breath. Crim claimed my lips once more, her hand still wrapped around my manhood and stroking it from time to time while we kissed.

We broke apart when we had no choice but to breathe, and I couldn't help but press my forehead against hers. "Crim. I want to please you, but I know it's not the right time."

"You can take a rain check?" she purred. "I want to do more, not yet...but soon."

Her admission made me smile, and my heart beat faster against my chest, moved by her words that she actually wanted me. It left me excited and also thankful to even get a hand job.

"I'd love one," I replied.

She grinned and pulled me into a hug. "Arigato, Haru. For just getting

me. You don't know how much I appreciate it." Her voice was filled with emotion and every word made me want to show her how she'd helped us.

Without her, we'd be lost and left without a sense of direction and purpose. Our fateful meeting had led to all these events that led to the truth, and I hoped it led to a future where the world would be a better place and we'd be able to enjoy a life- style where all of us were together.

"Aishiteimasu, Haru," she whispered.

A wide grin formed on my lips and I couldn't help but hug her back. "I love you too, Crimson. More than you know ."

We'd help her heal. It would be a process and we didn't know how long it would take, but I was determined to watch every step of the way.

*One day, our Crimson would be stronger than ever, and I knew we would be able to protect and love her with our minds, bodies, and souls.*

## RAPID COURSE AND WAR IS NEAR



~HARU~

"*W* OOF!"

"WOOFA!"

I grinned at the two familiars that greeted me the moment I used a spell to slide the door of the room I shared with Itsuki open. They both moved aside to let me in and my fellow friends' eyes landed on me.

"Is Crimson okay?" Itsuki questioned.

I looked down at Crimson who was fast asleep in my arms. We'd spent way too much time in the hot spring, leaving Crimson a little light headed. I encouraged her to sleep and leave the rest to me, something I knew could have been hard for her to decide.

Again, I was blown away by her trust in me as she relaxed in my hold and fell asleep within seconds. Thankfully, there were spare kimonos in the change rooms, making it easier for me to cloak her in something where we wouldn't need to bother her to change again.

The guys shuffled around; Malachi and Quil helped spread out the futon so I could lower Crimson onto the soft, comforting sheets. Malachi laid the blanket on her and Uru and Mizu ran over to cuddle next to Crimson. I took a moment to watch her breathe in and out, her peaceful expression making her look even more adorable.

You wouldn't be able to tell she had a breakdown earlier, and I knew that

it was a wise decision to relax in the hot springs and not just head back to our rooms.

"She's okay. She did have a breakdown, but I was able to calm her down. I didn't think it would be good to bring her back, just in case Hakua was upset, so we relaxed in the hot springs," I explained.

"Good call," Aki praised. "Coming back would have made her more anxious and her Kitsune could go off again. Letting her have space and time to relax her emotions was the perfect move to make."

My eyes scanned the room, and I wondered where Hakua was. "Where'd Hakua go?"

"She went back to Nokamoto," Itsuki announced.

"Nani? Why?" I questioned, feeling a bit upset by the sudden departure. "She didn't tell Crimson she was going. It's going to make Crim feel like it was her fault. That's what we're trying to avoid here."

"We agree." Quil sighed, running his hands through his short blond and red hair and looked just as disturbed as I did. "It wasn't a good move, but she didn't have a choice."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"My father called and said he needed Hakua's assistance with a few things. You know Hakua is highly skilled in sword dancing in combat, so he must have needed her for something within that department. Otherwise, I don't see why he'd summon her to return so quickly," Yoshi explained.

"Doesn't make sense," I grumbled and looked at Crimson who stirred slightly. With a frown, I moved over to her left side. Urufu shifted to give me space as I knelt down to lay my hand on Crim's forehead.

"Is she catching a fever?" Malachi asked.

"No. She's just not deep in sleep I think," I replied. "Maybe having a disturbing dream."

"Her nightmares have been more frequent as of late," Aki mentioned. "I don't think it's normal."

"You mean her nightmares should be decreasing with her therapy and her wounds healing. Not increasing," Quil verified.

"That's what I'm thinking. It's different for everyone. However, Crim's been muttering weird stuff in her sleep."

"Weird stuff?" Malachi questioned. "Like Aki has a small cock, weird? Or actual weird stuff."

Aki rolled his eyes but continued. "Mantras and weird spells. I don't know if it's some type of side effect with Storm's essence still being inside her, or if it's her powers growing a lot stronger than everyone anticipated."

"The pace is a bit too fast," Itsuki admitted. "I've been watching her aura as of late and since the last time we saw her, it has practically tripled. I think we'd have to try to schedule her with the Mage Master sooner, rather than later."

"I agree. If anyone who can read auras just by one glance notices, she'll be a target," Yoshi noted.

"Can we place a spell on her to hide or lower her aura?" Malachi asked.

"We could," Aki replied and Yoshi nodded.

"It would give us some leg room while we figure everything out."

"Do you want me to do it? Would be faster," I suggested.

"If you can, that would be great." Yoshi gave a supportive nod.

The task was easier for me to do than the others seeing as Quil and I were stronger in the magic department, but I still ranked at the top. *I just tried to hide my capabilities most of the time.*

"How soon do you think the Master Mage can take Crim in? We'll all have to go, and I think Itsuki should be in charge of sword training, Malachi hand to hand combat, Haru and Quil with magic usage, and Akihiro with kitsune training. I know a little bit about her cherry blossom power and I think it can be incorporated into her sword dancing training to give her an extra boost." Yoshi glanced around at each of us as he spoke.

"I'll contact her now. Give me about ten minutes?" Aki replied.

"I think we'll need her to make a bracelet of some sort for Crim as well," I noted.

The others turned back to me and I met their curious gazes.

"I can hide Crim's aura for a few days, but it won't be long term. It's strong, even for me."

"Could be because Hottie's power has been sealed for a good five years when it should have been a part of her. The entrapment of power only causes it to grow in anger and now it's far more powerful than it should have been," Malachi explained.

"That would make sense," Yoshi agreed.

"This is going to be complicated and out of our area of knowledge," Itsuki mused.

"Master Mage isn't far from here. I'll go and see her. She'd rather talk in person anyways. You guys relax. I'll be back in an hour or two," Aki announced.

"Alright. Be careful," I replied.

Aki nodded in understanding and left while the rest of us decided what we wanted to do.

"Who's staying with Hottie?" Malachi asked.

"I don't mind staying. I'll finish up this spell and rest for a bit. You guys go soak in the hot springs. We should take advantage of being here before we, too, have to start training," I reminded.

"I agree; my muscles ache." Quil sighed and Malachi rested his arm on Quil's shoulders.

"You'll be good, Haru?"

"Ya, I'll be fine. I'll join when Aki comes back. He shouldn't take long, and knowing him he'll need a nap after he shifts back to human form," I replied.

"Good point," Yoshi noted. "He always naps after he shifts."

"Shifting is exhausting. I'm surprised he can do it so smoothly. If I shift it



leaves me aching for a good month," Quil complained.

"Because you're a damn dragon. Takes up half this resort with your big ass." Malachi snorted. "Being a lion is so much easier."

"Wolves are better." Itsuki shrugged.

"That's just bias," Malachi countered.

Quil nodded. "Totally biased."

Yoshi sighed. "We can continue our debate in the springs.

Let's go."

"Hai." The others replied in unison before bidding me

farewell. Once everyone was gone, I took a deep breath and looked at Crimson, who was still deep in sleep.

I got up and dimmed the lights before I changed into some shorts and a white t-shirt. I laid a futon next to Crim and slipped myself under the large comforter, my eyes on Crimson as she continued to sleep.

"Woofa?"

I grinned at Mizu snuggled between Crim and me, and he reached up to lick my face. Lifting my hand, I stroked his head. "Crim's going to be just fine, isn't she?"

"Woofa!" Mizu replied and rested his head on Crim's side. It wasn't long before both Mizu and Uru were asleep.

I watched the three of them sleep while I finished up the spell to hide Crim's aura. With a sigh I closed my eyes, getting lost in my own thoughts.

*We have to get stronger. No, we wi! get stronger.*

\* \* \*

**~AKIHIRO~**

I STRETCHED out my arms before I leaned back to help stretch out my back.

"Fuck. Why does shifting still hurt when I do it so often," I groaned to myself.

My Kitsune lifted his head and practically rolled his eyes at me before he curled up in a ball and went to sleep.

"Rude," I muttered to my Kitsune who completely ignored me. His sleep was far more important than my rambling about aches and pains.

I began to gather my hair up to tie it when my ears twitched. With a sigh, I let down my hair and turned to look behind me.

"You could do better than that. Unless you got tired of me pretending you weren't following me this whole time."

"You could have ended my misery and said so. I could have been in bed sleeping by now. Instead, I'm here," the familiar voice huffed, moving out from the darkness to reveal himself.

"No one invited your ass here, James. If you want to join the harem, you can ask nicely you know," I pointed out with an eye roll.

My gaze met his and his cheeks tinted red. He crossed his arms in obvious annoyance.

"Whatever," he grumbled, and I shook my head at his stubbornness.

We'd caught onto his presence once we left the resort, but I wasn't in the mood to deal with him until things were done with the Master Mage, ChiyoChi Na. She'd accepted my request with a little hassle but said she'd still need to test Crimson.

I'd at least had enough time to give her a brief summary of what happened to Crim and her current wounds and healing process. Training would be a lot of physical hand to hand combat in the beginning, and I needed her to understand if Crimson did freak out, and know the reason.

I wasn't worried about Chiyo working with Crimson, especially since I'd trained with her when I was going through darker times. All I wanted was to ensure Chiyo would test out Crim-son's strength and not push her to her breaking point right away.

"Why are you following me?" I asked, looking at his 6'3 frame. I'd noticed his red locks were long enough to tie up in a tiny ponytail, the ends transitioning to black.

He wore a short leather jacket, red t-shirt, and cut black jeans. Simple black running shoes completed his somewhat punk look.

James lowered his arms and pulled something out of his leather jacket. He walked up to face me and presented me the box. "This."

"What is it?"

"If you opened the box, you'd find out."

"Could be a bomb and then I'd be dead."

"If it was a bomb, we'd both be dead, baka. Just open it already. I'm on a time limit and I'd rather avoid getting lashes because you're a stubborn ass," James complained.

I frowned at his statement but reached out for the item.

I didn't sense any ill intent from him, so I opened up the box to see a white beaded bracelet with what looked to be light pink roses. My eyes lingered on the dangling charm on it that had a special incantation symbol.

"Is this..."

"My master knows Crimson has her powers back. When we broke in to retrieve the crystal, he wanted me to make sure I destroyed that. I'm assuming it can hide her aura like how mine does," James explained, sliding his left sleeve up to reveal the bracelet on his wrist. "Should also help her harness her power so it doesn't overwhelm her."

"Are you spying on us?" I asked.

"Not really. More like I overheard while I was minding my own business and enjoying the fresh air of this resort. You're the one who said I can join the harem."

I sighed. "You didn't even ask."

"Hmph." He grumbled, and I closed the box and raised my gaze to look at him.

"Crimson's having major nightmares and flashbacks."

James grimaced, his eyes growing serious as he locked his gaze with mine. "With what that bitch did?"

I nodded. "She snapped at her best friend today."

"Hakua? I guessed that most likely would happen. Hakua is the type to not let things go until she can find the root of the problem, but she's usually more observant than that. You guys didn't tell her what happened?"

"Didn't think it would be necessary. She may be Crim's friend and a helpful resource to what's going on, but none of us think she needs to know that much."

"Makes sense. She's not around anymore. That annoying perfume is gone," James noted.

"She left."

"Why?"

"Got called to help with stuff," I replied.

James looked a bit concerned, but it was gone. "Be careful.

I'm not saying Hakua is bad or anything, but things look like they're going to heat up now that N.R.O is desperate for the crystals and Crimson."

"We know...thanks," I whispered. Since Erica was a spy, and now that we had found out the truth about Storm, we were having a difficult time knowing who to trust.

"I suggest you guys stay away from the palace for a bit. That includes the emperor."

"Is that a warning?"

"If you want to take it like that. It's your choice. Didn't hear it from me. Maybe you guys don't know, but I know who to trust in this war."

"And you trust us."

He shrugged and didn't answer, but his relaxed body language told my Kitsune and me that he did trust us.

*Trusted us enough to warn us as to what was to come.*

"Has Crim done therapy?"

"Physical?"

"Emotional and mental therapy? Like talking it out to someone and explaining how it made her feel?"

"No. She's been closed off lately. We came here to give her a bit of a break, but the fight happened," I admitted.

"She needs to talk to someone about it. You guys may have noticed, but Crimson keeps things in. She doesn't want to burden people with the full extent of the situation. You don't know what Erica did and if it was the only thing that happened. Crim gave you the basics, but what if there's more? She needs to let it out, and I'd make sure she tells a female with knowledge about such things."

He turned around and put his hands in his jeans pockets. "I got to head back."

"Who do you suggest talks with Crim?" I asked.

"She should be fine with that Mage Master. If not, let me know."

"Why are you helping? You know it can get you in trouble if your Master finds out," I pointed out.

James stopped midway of taking a step and looked over his shoulder to reply. "She could have killed me in the forest."

I lifted an eyebrow at him and he elaborated. "Her cherry blossom skill activated, and if she truly had the intention of killing me, she could have. Yet she had space in her heart to forgive me. To forgive someone who tried to kill her, made her life a living hell half the time when we dated...and essentially made her feel like shit. It's also my fault for leaving the forest and not keeping an eye on her. If I had, Erica would have never laid a hand on her."

He turned away and took a deep breath. "I can do what I can from behind the scenes, but Crim needs to get stronger. If you guys want the last crystal, Master isn't going to come to you. All of you guys are gonna have to go to him and N.R.O isn't a play-park of average shifters. It will be the fight of the

fittest, and he won't lose without an intense fight."

"Which side are you going to be on?"

James chuckled. "Don't know. Guess I'll let my heart decide when that time comes. Take care of Crim and if you make her cry, I'll kick your asses."

Before I could reply he walked away, turned the corner, and then his presence was gone. My Kitsune lifted his head and tilted it to the side in confusion.

"I know. He's confusing as hell," I replied out loud.

"Who's confusing as hell?"

I glanced back to see Malachi with a white robe on. "Was someone else here? A different scent was bothering my Lion. Smells like a sweet cologne like in the forest."

"James was here."

"Why was Mr. Bipolar here?"

"This?" I opened the box to show Malachi the beads. "It's Crimson's beads from her family home. James was sent to destroy them when they invaded their place to get the second crystal."

"The beads we were talking about? How did he know we needed those? Is he stalking us?" Malachi questioned, appearing displeased.

"Who knows. I didn't sense him until I left the resort and he followed. He clearly knows how to cloak his presence which includes his cologne," I replied.

"He really still loves Crimson, doesn't he?" Malachi whispered, reaching out to hold onto the box and inspect the beads.

"Loves her hard. I guess he didn't know how much he cared about her until she was out of his life for good."

"What do we do? Should we trust him?"

"I don't feel like he wants to do harm to us. He's still a pain in the ass, but I think he wants to pay it forward. To fix his wrongs? We need to figure out how badly entwined he is with his Master."

"You're worried if we kill White Eyes...James will die as well?" Malachi asked.

"Maybe. We don't know who White Eyes is and it seems clear that James is his second in command. There has to be a reason for it. Even if James is a dick...he doesn't deserve to die. It would also hurt Crimson."

"She does still care for him." Malachi ruffled his current afro and looked to the starry sky that was to my right. "We're going to have to tread carefully. Things are going to spiral out of control and we have to make sure we're not left in the fire."

"Agreed. We all have to train hard and help Crimson the best we can."

Malachi nodded and looked to me once more, his sky-blue eyes transitioning to a light gold which told me his Lion was at the surface. My Kitsune noticed the change and he got up and moved to the surface as well; my tails began to glow as a result.

"We need to do another check of the palace."

"I'm aware," my Kitsune noted.

"When we get back. You and me. Let Yoshi keep his father busy. Itsuki and Quil can stay with Crim and help train her. We'll need Haru."

With a nod we replied. "Sounds good."

His Lion pulled back then and so did my Kitsune, seeing no need to expel energy. Malachi stretched, returning to his usual self. "My hot ass is tired as fuck. Where's Haru? I bet he's cuddling Crim right now. Haru?" Malachi whined, moving down the hall to Haru's and Itsuki's room. I smirked and looked out to the starry sky .

*War is coming, and I pray we a! get out of this alive...*

## CHIYOCHI THE MAGE MASTER AND DISCOVER THY POWER



~CRIMSON~

"*Y*ou okay, Crim? You don't look too hot," Malachi whispered as he slipped his hand into mine, stopping me from entering the shrine entrance.

I let out a long exhale and turned to face Malachi as the others walked away, not noticing either of us had stopped.

"I'm nervous."

"About the testing match?" he clarified.

"Yes," I said quietly. "What if I fuck this up and we have to go home? I'm not like you guys who've trained for years.

It's been about 3 months and half of it was me discovering who I was. I don't think I'm ready, and I could fuck up this only chance."

"Crimson." Malachi used his free hand to reach out and brush my cheek. "You will be just fine. You've trained with us and have done well at defending against and attacking your opponent. You're second guessing your power. This Master knows that you're new to this part of our shifter world, and she's doing this to test where you are so the training plan is individualized to your needs. Just take a deep breath and use your instincts and kitsune to help you."

My Kitsune lifted her head, her ears twitching as her currently four tails wagged back and forth. She looked excited to get some screen time and it reassured me a bit that she wanted to help.



I definitely wanted to learn more about her and how I could use her powers in combat. Aki would assist, but it would be nice if this Master could help me harness those traits more.

"You're right. I'm just...nervous about other things..." I whispered, looking at the floor.

I wore black leggings, a white t-shirt, black Nike's, and my favorite black leather jacket. My hair was up in a ponytail thanks to Aki who'd given me a row of colored ribbons, all in various shades. The one currently in my black and silver locks was black with pink incantations.

Malachi took a step forward to face me and reached out for my other hand.

"Hottie. Lift your head."

I did as he asked, my gaze meeting his proud eyes. "I get it. I understand what's going on, but I want you to be more confident. You've been training with your father. You know how to defend yourself; if you stall or begin to freak out, let your Kitsune help you. That's why she's there. To help you when you're struggling and to protect you. Let's meet the Master Mage and get an understanding of who she is. Then you'll know the character of the person you're dealing with and her intentions in regards to training you. Alright?"

I slowly nodded and rested my head on Malachi's shoulder. "I miss our jogs."

"I miss them too, Hottie. I missed you a lot." His arms wrapped around my upper waist while I held back my tears. My heart ached at the time I'd missed with them. I missed us all being together, and even though we'd spent the last three days together, I greedily wanted more. *A lot more.*

"Go and show Master Mage who is boss," Malachi whispered, pressing a soft kiss to the left side of my neck. He pulled back to look me in the eyes; his sky-blue orbs twinkled with joy and a serene smile formed on those loving lips. "And know that we're behind you. Regardless of what happens,

we'll train you and make you as strong as possible."

"You guys are so supportive," I grumbled with a pout, making Malachi laugh.

"We'll always be supportive of you, Crimson. We're your set of matches to keep your fire burning." His husky voice shot heat through me and he tossed me a seductive wink.

"Stop seducing Crim and move your ass."

We looked back to see Quillian walking to where we stood, his hands in the pockets of his blue jeans. I smirked while Malachi groaned.

"Why does everyone ruin my amazing moments? Go away," Malachi whined. He hugged me again like he was shielding me from Quil, who rolled his eyes.

"Because you choose the most inconvenient times to flirt. Let's go and stop hogging Crim," Quil huffed.

"I get to walk with her to the gate."

"Not a chance hot ass."

"It's Hottie McHot Pants!"

"Let me hug Crim." Quil groaned and Malachi pouted his lips but let go of me. I giggled quietly and the both of them stared at me in confusion.

"You two love to bug one another. When do you stop?" I raised a brow as I waited on their replies. They exchanged looks and a sly grin formed on Quil's lips as he opened his arms to hug me.

I moved into his embrace and took a deep inhale of his cologne before he whispered in my ear. "We stop when a certain Hottie is in bed with us."

My face burned, and I loved the way his hot breath brushed against my ear. He pulled back slightly to kiss my cheek before he pulled out of the hug and slipped his hand into my left hand.

"Let's go." Quil's smile was wide as he urged me to start walking, leaving Malachi to catch up.

"Matsu!"

He caught up with ease and slid his hand in my right hand. I took a quick glance at both of them, noticing their pleased expressions which made my smile widen.

*Everything will work out. I just have to start believing.*

\* \* \*

"CRIMSON JIYUNA. ARE YOU READY?"

I gave the tall woman standing before me a slight nod, my eyes taking in her magnificent looks in an attempt to ignore my fast beating heart.

Chiyochi Na, Homatomashi's Master Mage stood before me. She was 6'2, with long white hair that reminded me of my Kitsune's white fur coat. She was in her half kitsune form; her white tails transitioned to a light teal and glowed with a golden aura.

She was half Japanese and half black, and had been saved from a village war that happened back in her home country by a Japanese soldier who worked in the palace.

The man had taken in Chiyochi and her mother who was a single parent. Within two years they married, and the soldier had taken ChiyoChi in as his own. Since then, she trained to learn different fighting techniques to help ensure others learned how to defend themselves.

The moment Aki introduced us, I could tell the power within her right away. It practically leaked off her, and it was contributing to my fidgeting. However, I got to see a hint of her kindness when she had to explain to Aki why we would be fighting without their presence.

She may hide it well, but for a few seconds, the compassion that bled into her expression when talking to Aki told me that she respected his opinion and loved him. Not in a romantic sense, but like a mother would look at her son.

After formal introductions were complete, ChiyoChi had given me and

the others, who didn't know much about her, a summary of her life; it was time for me to take the test.

I didn't have to change my clothes and had my twin swords hoisted on my back for extra support. My hair was left down, but my Kitsune remained in her spot, her tails wagging side to side from time to time as she remained half asleep.

Even though I was a nervous wreck, this was my best bet for becoming stronger. I did trust in the guys to help me increase my strengths in each area they specialized in, but I knew right away Chiyochi could help me obtain the power I needed to reclaim the final crystal.

Minzu and Urufu were somewhere around the property, but I knew if I needed them, they would come to my aid.

*I can do this. I just need to believe in myself.*

My Kitsune was rolling around in my head, looking impatient but silly at the same time. I could feel her anticipation, but she was being patient while having her own fun.

"You are allowed to use any tactics to try and stop me. When one is unable to fight, whether it's from being cornered in a situation that would automatically mean death, or the inability to continue due to exhaustion, the test will be over. I will judge you based on your agility, magic power, physical combat, and the use of any special abilities or Kitsune. Any questions?"

"No, Master," I replied firmly, my eyes 100% focused on her.

I couldn't let the guys down. The room was soundproof, so they wouldn't hear our combat, but vibrations and magic pressure could still be felt outside those walls. I didn't want to worry them, and my ultimate goal was to impress them.

"Let's begin," ChiyoChi announced and started to walk towards me. That was the first thing that confused me. She WALKED. She didn't run or try to finish me off like you'd expect in a fight.

My Kitsune had paused in her rolling fun, lying on her back as her pink eyes stared at the woman in confusion. I was just as lost and we watched her begin to walk around us in a wide circle. It was as if she analyzed us, just as we were analyzing her.

There was a moment she'd stop and linger on a certain part of me, her eyes shifting from turquoise blue that reminded me of the sea, before she'd continue walking and they would transition to a dark purple like an eggplant.

I didn't know if I needed my swords yet, but I pulled them out anyway, feeling the power vibrate through them as they began to power up; the symbols that resided on the silver metal of the blade lit up to a bright pink.

"You have great power, child, but you hesitate to use it," ChiyoChi declared. I gulped as she stopped and faced me. "You hesitate because you're afraid of how powerful you can be."

"That's...not true," I countered but bit my lip. My Kitsune was up now, moving to the border of the surface; her expression held a level of interest in the woman's words.

"Isolation. Sadness. Loneliness. Fear," ChiyoChi whispered. "You feel like isolating yourself from the world will give you time to process what has happened in your life and perhaps give you an opportunity to grow stronger while dealing with something that's left a wound on you. Both physically and mentally."

My hands tightened on the hilt of my swords, trying to ignore the trembling in them as my eyes narrowed on this woman. *Is she trying to break me down through her words?*

"The sadness that you try to hide is not due to what has hurt you, but what you perceive will be bestowed upon you when the men you love find out."

"What are you doing?" I whispered, and she smiled in response.

"The loneliness you feel confuses you. You're surrounded by people who love and cherish you for the person you have become. They love you, whether you feel like you're a damaged product that should be discarded

when someone has used and abused your worth...setting you out to be wasted. However, their love doesn't reach you. Not entirely. Because you've put a barrier up...a shield to block their love from reaching you. Why? Simply due to those very feelings that rank you as unworthy ."

I moved then, dashing straight to her just as my Kitsune growled. We didn't want to hear her words. Couldn't stand to listen to the truth of them and acknowledge how painful it was to be read like an open book - our secrets being revealed one after another.

She raised her hand to block my attack with ease; purple cherry blossoms appeared out of nowhere to shield my attack. My glaring blue eyes met her now green ones as she continued.

"Fear. The very emotion that makes you react because it's your deepest secret that you're trying so desperately to avoid."

"YAMERU!" I snapped in Japanese, my Kitsune rising to the surface. We jumped back before we dropped to the ground and used it as leverage to dash forward, cherry blossoms beginning to flutter down around us.

ChiyoChi had a sad smile on her face which only irritated me more.

*She doesn't know me! Or my Kitsune. She doesn't understand anything. Isolation? I didn't isolate myself...I just took a break. I deserved it! That bastard hurt me! Sadness. Loneliness. Those are just emotions that come with being stuck in one place. Fear? I'm not afraid. S he's just trying to distract me. Yes!*

My swords struck her shield of blossoms once more, but I kept attacking, striking blow after blow as the pink and purple cherry blossoms from both of us continued to rain down and come to our aid as I fought and ChiyoChi defended herself.

"You're afraid of losing everything."

"I'm not!"

"You're scared of judgment, abandonment, and weakness.

You don't want the people you love to judge your current weak- ness and

abandon you. You love them to the point that you can't live without them. The fear that is now causing panic within you is losing it all and having to return to the life you once lived. A life filled with loneliness, sadness, and hopelessness."

"CHINMOKU!" I snapped and found a perfect opening as I dropped down to slash at her feet. She jumped then, hovering above me as she summoned her cherry blossoms to assist her flight. My Kitsune growled, the sound vibrating through our throat as we pushed off the ground and used our power to support us as we got ready for the sword dance fight.

My eyes widened when a whip materialized in her hand, my instincts telling me to cut it before I had to deal with the consequences later. My swords slashed against another barrier, and I used it to help me push off it when ChiyoChi lifted the handle of the black whip that began to glow a dark teal.

She whipped in my direction and I avoided it with ease, but my eyes grew wide when a whirlwind of power burst from her attack sending me flying into the wall. I cursed when my back hit the wall, the pain in my back coming back with force and disabling me for a second as I dropped to the floor. My Kitsune yelped, feeling my pain, and her pink eyes were filled with remorse.

*It's okay. Not your fault.* I'd been foolish not to summon wind to slow my crash and now I was feeling the pain for it.

ChiyoChi began her approach towards me, the hilt of her black whip in her left hand and the slick long thread in her right. "You're letting your emotions control your actions."

"...I'm aware," I grumbled, hating the fact I just admitted it. I slowly stood up, outstretching my hands to call forth my swords that had fallen to my sides.

They answered my call, shooting back into my trembling hold. My eyes were scanning for a way out, but I soon realized I was in the corner of the room and that alone was making me anxious. *Too anxious to ignore the*

*familiarity of the situation.*

I backed up to the wall where both ends met, my breaths uneven as I tried to think things through. *You're fighting Crimson. This isn't the dungeon. That is ChiyoChi...not...Erica. You'll be fine. You won't lose.*

"You can't freeze in the middle of a battle, Crimson," ChiyoChi said softly, and in seconds she was in front of me. My swords were in defense mode before I could think, and I gritted my teeth, trying to hold off the crashing winds and purple blossoms that were doing their best to try and pin me against the wall.

Pink blossoms began to dance around us in a circle, growing taller and taller in a way to shield off any escape ChiyoChi could make. I wouldn't let her run away, I'd just narrow the space until neither of us could move.

*I wouldn't be backed into the corner. I won't let her win...I promised to fight back. I. Will. Fight. BACK!*

My Kitsune roared, baring her teeth as she ran to take control once more; our white ears popped out while six tails emerged, glowing a dark pink as power whirled around us.

ChiyoChi grinned and her ears twitched. She moved as far as my petal cyclone had allowed her and she lifted the handle of her whip and began to twirl it around above her head.

Purple petals formed within the closed space and I clenched my teeth as I felt the weight of her power and attempted to not freeze up again from the whip's threatening presence.

My hair was flying everywhere, and I was struggling to stay in place. ChiyoChi's whirlwind of purple blossoms picked up pace and power, overpowering mine within a minute. I decided to attack before I'd be lifted off my feet.

I launched off the ground, using the power of the wind to give me a push to head straight for ChiyoChi who shot the tail of the whip at me. I lifted my swords to block the attack but crashed straight into another barrier she made.



My eyes were locked on hers, and I knew right away I wouldn't win. However, that realization made me even angrier as tears began to form in my eyes. *Why can't I be stronger? Why can't I defeat the people who try to hurt me? Why did I have to lose out on a! this time that I could have trained to become the best I could be, but due to someone's selfishness for power, I was the victim of his actions and ultimately the weakest link in a group of men who'd throw their life on the line for me. WHY!*

ChiyoChi's eyes turned blue then, and her gaze softened. Just like that everything came to a stop: the winds, the petals, everything.

My hands dropped in exhaustion and my swords clattered to the floor with a clanking sound. I was breathless, my shoulders moving up and down while tears rolled down my cheeks.

I didn't dare move my eyes from the woman before me; the Master hadn't even broken a sweat whereas I had drops of it rolling down the sides of my face and beginning to drench my shirt.

"Why do you question yourself, Crimson?" ChiyoChi whispered.

"I should be stronger! Thanks to that man who I thought was my real father, I lost out on everything! From birth I was neglected. Only the times I got to spend with my mom, which were so few I can probably count them on my fingers, and the moments I remember with Jiyuna who I've now found out is my real dad, I lost out on all types of training. I watched in the shadows while shifters were trained to be the best. I was treated like an outsider and a disgrace that no one wanted to be in the same room as. Twenty-three years and I lost out on all of that! I can't even use my OWN swords that were supposed to be given to me 5 years ago!" I confessed, lifting my hands to wipe away my tears.

"I feel so pathetic...so weak. I have to push myself to my limit because I don't have fucking time! I'm scared! I can't function without freezing up and no matter how desperately I want to fight back and protect myself, I fail! I have this amazing SSS affinity and a rare cherry blossom power, yet I can't

even use it! My poor Kitsune has to be partnered with a girl who doesn't even know how to use her!"

I lifted my gaze to glare at ChiyoChi as I shouted. "I was robbed of a life I should have received! A life that was MY RIGHT! Not a privilege I'm now getting 23 years later. How am I supposed to protect the men who'd lay everything on the line for me? How am I going to face these enemies or spies or what- ever they are?! I couldn't...I couldn't even protect myself from that bastard Erica! I couldn't do anything because I thought self- sacrifice was the smartest route. Now look at me! I can't even function when I see a damn whip! I can't be hugged or touched without someone asking me if it is ok. I want to be the best I can be, but HOW CAN I?!"

I caught my breath and lowered my head, letting my tears fall as my sobs escaped me. "I want to be strong, Master ChiyoChi. I so desperately want to be able to bring change to this country. I want to heal...I want to laugh and hug and kiss the men who cherish me like no group of people have. I want to make my real dad happy and proud of me, and make sure my mom doesn't worry about me. I want to be able to apologize to my best friend for snapping at her. I just want my Kitsune, familiars, and self to be happy." The last sentence came out as a whisper.

I stood there and cried, knowing that I'd failed. I couldn't damage her even a little bit, but she'd been able to break down my walls, both physically and mentally. I'd so desperately wanted power, but I knew I'd never obtain it in my current state. I would never be able to get the final crystal at this rate.

I heard ChiyoChi sigh, and I closed my eyes and tensed, waiting for the disappointment in her voice as she told me I'd failed.

Instead, arms wrapped gently around me, the scent of lavender and cherry blossoms enveloping me. Though I'd normally flinch or freak out by the sudden touch, it was the opposite- it was like a hug of a mother comforting her child, and that only made me cry harder.

"Crimson. Life has not been fair to you, but you have tried your best to

adapt to this new change. Some would run, while others would hide. Yet you've jumped into this world, not by choice, but for the sake of protecting those you love and cherish; you'd done your best to keep up. You have power and abilities that are finally blossoming inside you. All you need is time and patience to allow them to come forth."

"I don't have time ChiyoChi. I don't...I need to get the crystal from N.R.O, and if I don't work harder, they'll come and try to kill those I love. I can't afford to lose anyone. I don't want to. My men...my lovers were used and left to be forgotten. They deserve better. I want to give them all of me and help them heal...but I'm just as wounded. Maybe even more so. I want to get better...I just don't know how in such a short period of time."

She patted my back soothingly, and though it was very close to the wounds hidden beneath the thin fabric of my shirt, her comfort was helping tame the whimpers and sobs that escaped me.

When my whimpers settled, ChiyoChi pulled back to look down at me, her eyes their original cool toned multicolored appearance.

"For one to be powerful, it requires patience, dedication, and determination to grow. When we train, I do not show mercy but match my power to my students. In your case, you don't know how strong you are, so I will train you differently," she stated.

I had to stare at her in shock and my Kitsune, sat down on her back legs and was just as astonished as I. "You'll...train us?"

ChiyoChi's eyes twinkled with kindness, the same passion I'd seen previously when she talked to Aki. Her pink lips parted as she announced the words I never thought I'd hear.

"You and your Kitsune, yes. Congratulations, Crimson Jiyuna. You have passed my test," ChiyoChi confirmed.

## TRAINING AND BONDING



~CRIMSON~

"*W*hy would I have to make a barrier that's ALL THE WAY over there, while I'm fighting my culprit who is over HERE?!" I exclaimed, feeling frustrated.

Itsuki gave me a smirk while Haru chuckled.

"She's cute when she's frustrated." Haru grinned.

"She really is, especially with her ears out like that," Itsuki added.

I growled and threw my hands up in the air, waving my swords like an idiot.

"Answer me!!!! And I'm not cute!"

They both just chuckled, and I pouted my lips as my arms fell to my sides. My Kitsune was just as annoyed; neither of us liked the fact we were being called cute in the middle of our "fake battle."

It had been a full week of training with ChiyoChi and the guys. My daily schedule from Monday to Friday started with me waking up at 5:30 in the morning to run with Malachi.

The first three days it was just me and him, and I personally couldn't be happier. I'd missed the chilled morning breeze, the chirping of the birds, and watching the sun begin to rise as my feet squished into the soft ground of the trails that were all over the shrine.

Malachi appeared just as pleased to go back to our running routine, but he

did push me harder than usual, trying to increase my endurance and help me use my Kitsune's agility to assist me if I landed myself into a situation where I'd need to run for my life.

By Thursday, Haru joined us in the morning runs, wanting to work on his endurance as well as liking to spend time with me without kicking my ass in training that happened later on in the day.

When we would return from our morning run, I would shower and either Aki or Quil would help wrap my wounds. The last three days Quil had been doing the bandaging because Aki would go off somewhere with Malachi and Haru. I didn't know what they were working on, but seeing as I would have training after breakfast, it wasn't a big deal.

Haru and Itsuki would alternate making breakfast for every- one, and Quil would then take me to ChiyoChi and stand on guard while we trained.

I didn't see the purpose of Quil or Yoshi standing guard to protect me when I was training with Master ChiyoChi who had a reputation of killing thousands of men at war. A thousand men was apparently an understatement, but ChiyoChi merely shrugged when I asked for clarification. "*I lost count after one thousand,*" she stated, acting like it wasn't an amazing achievement.

Yoshi would stand on guard when Quil needed a break, but he'd been going back and forth from the shrine to the palace to have discussions with his father and help with the planning.

So far, there hadn't been any major incidents around Homatomashi, but the crime rate was still high and there had been more reports of rapes and kidnappings happening in the smaller communities where prostitution was much higher.

After my training sessions with ChiyoChi, which would be between 4 to 9 hours, I'd break for either lunch or dinner and do training with the guys, particularly Itsuki. He'd been training me consistently all week, with the occasional addition of Quil and Haru who'd rotate guarding us while we trained in a different location within the shrine.

The training was HARD, and it was thanks to Haru for making some replenish medicine that I wasn't a crippled mess after each training session; it kept me going during our night training.

"I'm going to tell the others that you're going to be late coming back. Quil's outside on guard duty so don't worry about staying too late," Haru suggested, walking over to me. He gave me a comforting hug and patted my head, which made me pout once again.

"You guys treat me like an innocent animal."

"Well, you're pretty innocent and cute until you start doing that petal stuff. Then you're frightening." Haru winked and gave me a peck on my lips that I hadn't been expecting. He smirked at my astonished look, my Kitsune pausing in her current pacing. She wanted to get back to trying to kick Itsuki's ass, but Haru's small gesture of affection threw both of us off.

"Hai..." I replied, not even realizing I'd answered in Japanese until Itsuki chuckled.

"You notice whenever anyone seduces Crim even a little, she's thrown off?"

"Definitely noticed. Malachi does it all the time to her when he takes his shirt off after our runs," Haru teased.

I blushed before I glared at Haru. "I do not!"

"Uh huh. Should have seen when Malachi ran topless the other day. Crim almost ran into a tree while checking out his six pack."

"That- that was different! I was distracted!" I defended.

"Distracted by them tight muscles of his abdomen and the dip of his sweatpants." Haru winked and my face grew hot red.

"Baka! Go away!" I whined, placing my hands on Haru's shoulders. I turned him around and began to push him toward the door, which only made him laugh harder.

"Admit it."

"Never! Go enjoy Quil's abs or something!" I huffed. My eyes focused on

the approaching door and a wind picked up, sliding the wooden door open. Quil's head popped up on the side of the door frame but he moved back right in time as I gently pushed Haru out into the cool night air. He turned around and I pointed at him. "Go tease someone else."

"What did you do?" Quil asked with a grin.

"I told Itsuki that she'd been checking Malachi out and almost ran into a tree." Haru smirked as he put his hands in his black sweatpants.

Quil sighed, his pink eyes filled with amusement. "You know she gets completely distracted when she sees something she likes."

"Quil!" I huffed.

He shrugged. "It's the truth."

My Kitsune came to the surface and eyed the both of them; they noticed the shift and froze. We took a step back and closed the door with ease.

We turned around and walked back to where Itsuki had been watching everything play out. Even though my Kitsune was in control, he still couldn't hide his pleased expression.

"You're impatient, Ms. Kitsune," Itsuki noted. His words were more of a compliment to us than anything.

"I want to get stronger," she replied and ran back to her spot while I took over. "That makes the both of us," I added and sighed. "But I think I need a break."

My back was aching, which happened every couple of hours. The wounds were healing and some of my wounds had finally closed, but it still hurt in certain areas, and I still hadn't fully gotten over my "deer in headlights" moments.

"Are you okay?" Itsuki asked. I knew he was referring to whether I could continue training after a few minutes of rest, or if I was done for the day.

With a smile, I nodded. "Yes. Maybe some fresh air would help."

Itsuki looked at the entrance where Quil would most likely be guarding.

"Want to go somewhere? I'm technically not supposed to show you yet, but Yoshi's rather busy and you may have to be trained earlier rather than later."

"A place I shouldn't know about? Sounds exciting. Don't we have to tell Quil?" I followed Itsuki's gaze to the door.

When Itsuki was silent, I turned my curious gaze on him to see a slight smile on his lips while his purple eyes met my mine.

"There's always an alternate exit everywhere."

He reached out and slid his hand into mine and guided me to the corner of the room where there were a few mats placed on the wall. He let go of my hand to move to the middle blue mat, revealing a back door.

"That wasn't there before!"

"We know." Itsuki winked, reclaiming my hand in his before he used his free hand to reach the doorknob. "We move it during each training session. You haven't noticed though."

"I feel robbed," I grumbled, wishing I was a part of the loop which made Itsuki laugh. "That's what Malachi said when he finally figured it out. Now, try to be silent. Don't want Quil noticing."

"Hai!" I replied while my Kitsune began to roll around in excitement. She could feel my aches, and the idea of getting some air and discovering a new place we hadn't explored yet was exciting to her.

We moved quietly outside into the cool breezy night. The door closed on its own, sealing itself and returning to what it originally looked like, which was the dark blue wall. We were in the back of the building, but we didn't stay long, Itsuki leading the way to this unknown location.

Walking in the forest was comforting, especially with Itsuki present. I knew we hadn't gotten a lot of time to spend with one another, but it didn't feel like he was upset about the lack of attention.

With everything that had been going on the last couple of weeks, it made sense that we were so jam-packed and had no down time to actually learn about each other even more. I felt like everyone knew what was going on



with me, but I'd yet to learn more about some of the guys.

I didn't expect to have a balance or to know everything about everyone quickly, but I prayed I could strive towards learning about all of my men.

*I want to scratch the surface and see what lies deep within and gain an even stronger connection with all of them.*

My dream might be delayed due to all this training in preparation of getting the last crystal from N.R.O, but I hoped after all this was over, I'd have all the time in the world to spend with the guys. *To learn more about them on a personal level and grow stronger together.*

When we reached a clearing, my eyes grew wide and a smile formed on my lips.

"Wow ..."

My eyes were immediately drawn to the crystal clear water that had a type of algae glowing vividly along the bottom. The translucent teal and purples made the pink lilies that floated gently on the surface look untouchable, and the moonlight that shone above us only added to the spectacular view .

Gold fireflies buzzed around us while the calming trees had various fruits and flowers blossoming on their large branches. Some of them reaching so far up into the sky the moonlight couldn't penetrate through the thickness of the leaves and boughs.

Itsuki squeezed my hand to bring me out of my daze, and the alluring expression on his face brought out the handsomeness I'd been trying to ignore.

It wasn't because I didn't want to appreciate him or any of the guys' attractiveness. It was more along the fact that if I acknowledged their handsome features like before, I wouldn't be able to step up and perform without remembering what had happened to me. *To remember those dark thoughts.*

"It's stunning, right?"

I grinned and looked around once more. "It's more than just stunning. How can something so immaculate remain this way? Has no one come here before?" I inquired.

"ChiyoChi and Aki have trained here before," Itsuki replied.

"Really? What can they do here?"

"Sometimes, depending on the situation, you're going to have to fight on water. This place helps you attune with your powers and learn how to balance your energy throughout different body parts."

Itsuki used his free hand to point to the water. "To balance yourself on water, you have to focus your energy as you would when you're sword dancing. It's a bit harder because you're not using only the wind element to aid you in hovering above the water. You have to acknowledge the water as an object and constantly remind yourself that you are a light object that can float on the surface, just like the lilies."

"Can you do it?" I asked, feeling intrigued by the new information.

"Not really. I'm pretty bad at it and Quil's too bulky. He'll sink right in." Itsuki shrugged while I snickered.

"I can imagine Malachi teasing him for that."

"He does." Itsuki winked and chuckled as I laughed quietly. It was such an easy situation to envision and it was relaxing to laugh about it with Itsuki.

"Haru can do it for a short period of time and Malachi isn't too bad at it either. Akihiro was trained to know how to fight on water, but Yoshi is a pro at it."

"Really? Is it a palace or royal thing?"

"Royal families participate in traditional water dances. It doesn't matter if you're male or female. Dance is rooted in the Japanese culture and is mandatory. Yoshi actually dances every year at the Summer Festival at the palace for royals across Homatomashi. He didn't participate last year because we were on a mission. He'll most likely be in the Winter Festival since the Emperor gave Yoshi a break for the summer one."

"Yoshi dances. I really want to see that one day," I admitted.

"Malachi does too, but he's way better at his hip-hop club dancing." Itsuki chuckled.

"Do you guys even go clubbing?"

"Once in a while when we all need to relax. To be honest, it's been a long time since we've all been together for this length of time. I mean, sure we're not together in one place all the time but being in the same country together varied. Dancing isn't my thing, but I like reading and sometimes drawing. Haru loves cooking, running, and sometimes he plays video games with Malachi and Quil. Malachi and I love training more than anything, and Quil joins from time to time with Yoshi and Aki. Our interests are all different, but we've become pretty close that we don't mind doing one of someone's favorites. Malachi has won a few competitions though."

"Wow. I realize we haven't gotten to do a lot of our hobbies as of late," I whispered.

I hadn't touched a paintbrush in weeks. Aki had announced I was on a much-needed break, but everyone had been super positive and supportive, insisting I deserve a break after all the years of delivering artwork.

It wasn't like I'd lost my passion, but I wasn't ready to pick up the brush and draw out how I felt.

*I could reveal the truth of the extent of the incident with Erica, and I'm not ready to face that hurdle yet .*

I'd yet to tell the guys, and even though I'd wanted to tell Hakua eventually, with our previous fight, there was no way I could tell her.

Itsuki nodded and the empathy that showed on his face made me wish I could tell him more. "I know. But hobbies and passions never leave a person's life. We can put them on the shelf and let them collect dust for as long as we need to, but when it comes time to pick them up again, all we would do is brush the dust off and get back to enjoying them once more. Painting, dancing, reading, any of those can wait for us to be ready to love

them like we have in the past. I think that's what I love about it."

I maneuvered myself so that I stood before him, face to face. Sliding my hand in his, I stared up into his purple eyes that glittered from the rays of the moonlight.

"How...how are you doing? I mean, in regard to everything. I know I haven't been doing my part as a girlfriend should in seeing how all of you are coping with Storm's betrayal."

I really had been slacking and felt a bit self-centered for not addressing this sooner.

"It's hard...sometimes. I mean, I've accepted the fact that Storm essentially used us and never loved us. I think compared to the others, I haven't really let it sink in yet. We all handle devastating news somewhat differently, and I'm a slow responder. I acknowledge it, just haven't allowed it to fully sink in. When it does, I know it will hurt as it did when we found out," Itsuki admitted, lifting his eyes to stare at the starry sky .

"Storm was once our world. We felt like we had a purpose in her life, especially since we all came from, well...broken lives. We all knew what tragedy felt like. We all experienced losing someone dear to us. Maybe our pain is what brought us all together, and now that we know about Storm's true pain...guess she, too, felt some connection with all of us. I won't deny that finding out she used us hurt, but I think I'm more upset that it hurt my fellow friends who are basically like family to me."

He lowered his gaze to look into my eyes. "And it hurt you as well. You didn't have to stay with us. You weren't obligated to after being caught into this mess, yet you did. You showed us loyalty that others would take years to prove and loved us when we weren't sure of what we wanted. You're a rare jewel that people would dream to love and adore, and it makes me happy to know we get to love and protect you."

"Even with everything that happened? I'm not really a shiny diamond anymore." My Kitsune growled at my negative talk, but that was the first

thing that came to my mind. *I feel like they're too good for me, yet they think I'm a jewel that others would be blessed to have?*

"Crimson." Itsuki lifted his hands to cradle my face, making it impossible for me to move my gaze from his. "No matter whether a jewel is untouchable or shattered into little pieces, it doesn't lose its essence. Just because a jewel falls and cracks, doesn't mean its beauty and purpose is lost. It still holds its shiny glow, and once fixed, it's returned to its original appearance. Sometimes you won't see the lines that show it had once been broken, and if the lines do remain, it does not tarnish its overall beauty. It proves that anyone can survive being broken and those lines show the beauty that comes with survival."

I bit my lip and blinked back the tears threatening to spill over, my Kitsune just as moved by his words as I was. She moved up to the border of the surface to show me she, too, was here and didn't think of us as something that could never shine again.

Itsuki smiled and his gaze lowered to my lips. "Would this beautiful gem before me be fine with a kiss?"

"I'd love one," I replied as a single tear left my right eye and rolled down to his left thumb that brushed it away. His head inched closer as my eyes slowly closed. I wasn't afraid of a simple kiss, and even though closing my eyes trickled a bit of fear through me, I knew I was in safe hands. It was something I'd have to keep reminding myself of, in hopes of one day conquering that fear.

The tension in my shoulders loosened when those soft gentle lips pressed against mine. I couldn't wait for the day the fighting would be over and I'd be able to spend time with Itsuki. There was so much I wanted to know, yet time had always been a factor. I wanted to show him that I loved him too but didn't want to force it either. He was patient, and so was I, but I just hoped he knew that I cared about him like the rest of the guys.

I broke the kiss for a moment and whispered against his lips. "I know we

don't spend a lot of time together...but please know I care and love you as well. I adore the patience you display in every moment and the fact you can still love me after everything I've gone through. Please remember that."

"I know, Crimson, and I'll never forget it. Our love isn't a race. It will grow and bloom, but it will never wilt and die. Your love is enough for me, and once all of this is over, I know we'll get to spend time together." Itsuki pressed his lips against mine once more.

I savored every moment of the kiss, Itsuki's hands leaving my cheeks to rest on my waist. His touch was light and held no pressure to make me freak out which made me want to love him even more.

Storm had given up on a group of men that were loving, considerate, passionate, and had shown immense dedication. This was one of those once-in-a-lifetime things you never got a chance to experience, but she was blinded by her love for Erica and unable to see the glittering set of diamonds in her life.

*I bet if she'd been truthful and told them about her love...they would have accepted it. Even though Erica...was problematic, in a world where they hadn't done the deeds they had, they could have had that chance. They could have gained happiness and not let go of these men.*

I twisted my hands into his dark purple shirt and pressed my body against his as we deepened the kiss. This peace felt perfect, like one of those scenes where everything fell into place and the amount of love through a simple kiss could move mountains.

"WOOF!" "WOOFA!" "Kiku?"

*Huh?*

Itsuki broke the kiss and we glanced in the direction of where I heard the sound of my three familiars. Within two seconds, Urufu, Mizuko, and Chiryoshi appeared from the forest, running towards me with joy in their eyes.

"Nani? What...how?" I asked in confusion as Uru and Mizu reached us

first, running around the both of us in excitement while Chiryoshi landed on my shoulder. I turned my head slightly to see her bright golden eyes and her soft white feathers. She practically hopped over and over again on my shoulder before she snuggled her head against my cheek which made me giggle.

"Where did you come from, Chiryo. You haven't come out since healing Haru." I lifted my right hand over to pet her head soothingly and watched her feathers fluff up as she hummed happily.

"Kikkuuuu!"

"Did you summon them by accident?" Itsuki asked as he knelt down to pet Uru and Mizu who stopped to enjoy Itsuki's attention.

"I don't think so?" I stated. "Aki did say I've been doing weird stuff in my sleep, but I know I hadn't summoned Chiryo."

"Kiku!" She chirped with the cutest expression.

"Ah, I didn't mean it like that," I assured her, rubbing my cheek against her head as reassurance.

"I knew they would run off to find where you were."

As we looked up, we saw Malachi walk out of the forest, his hands resting behind his back. He wore a simple black t-shirt that said 'SEXY' in bright blue and a pair of black sweats. "They wouldn't settle at home, so I thought they needed a walk. Then Chiryoshi appeared out of nowhere."

"Malachi." I smiled and when he reached where we stood, he leaned in to give me a peck on the lips.

"Hey, Hottie. Enjoying your time with Itsuki?"

"Very much," I whispered and noticed Itsuki's cheeks tint a bright red.

He looked away and mumbled, "Me too."

Malachi and I exchanged looks before we both smiled. "Weren't you guys training? And I swear we weren't supposed to show her this place. Yoshi's gonna kick our asses."

"Oops?" Itsuki shrugged. "I'll blame Urufu for it."

"Woof?" Uru tilted her head while her pink eyes looked shocked at the accusation.

I giggled and lowered down to pet my two familiars. "He's just playing with you," I said to Urufu. "Hey you guys. Did you give Malachi a hard time, huh?"

"Woof!"

"Woofa!"

"Kiku!"

"I'm impressed the phoenix hasn't shown up," Itsuki noted. I looked up at him as he rose up.

"This is normal then?" I asked.

Malachi looked like he was thinking while Itsuki shook his head from side to side.

"Not really. I mean, Storm usually only summoned her familiars when she needed them in battle. Even Urufu never came out that often. However, since you took ownership of the watch, Urufu has been able to stick around the majority of the time, and now that Mizu and Chiryō are appearing, my best guess is your bond with the watch is growing," Itsuki replied.

"Yes. I know with others who have multiple familiars, the stronger the individual, as well as the stronger the bond becomes between Master and familiar or familiars, the easier it is for them to come out without draining said individual. It won't be surprising if your phoenix is able to come out when he pleases as well. It also depends on whether the familiar wants to come out," Malachi added.

"I guess I have to work on understanding my familiars more," I commented.

"With time. It's a process that takes a while to learn. Your familiars are fond of you and I'm sure the final one will be too," Itsuki reasoned.

"Do you know what the final familiar will be?" I asked.



"Unsure," Malachi replied. "They can change. Urufu remained the same, but the others took different animals."

"Interesting," I said as I stood. Urufu and Mizu began to play around and Chiryō moved off my shoulder to hover over them, joining the fun.

"We can talk more about it after some food. Aren't you guys hungry?" Malachi asked.

"Now that you mention it," I admitted, feeling my stomach clench with hunger. "I'm famished."

"Aki and Yoshi came back with green tea ice cream." Malachi winked and I almost squealed.

"Yes!"

Itsuki chuckled. "You really love green tea ice cream."

"I won't deny it. So good!" I praised the matcha dairy food that always cheered me up. The thought reminded me of Hakua once more, and I absentmindedly reached for my phone that was in my back pocket. "I haven't really apologized to Hakua properly," I admitted.

I knew it was a bit random to change the subject, but Itsuki and Malachi exchanged looks. "Just text her saying you'd like to meet tomorrow and chat," Malachi suggested.

"What if she doesn't wanna travel down here?" I asked.

"Go to her? She should still be at the palace. You can meet up with her tomorrow and let her know how you feel," Itsuki studied me as he waited on my thoughts.

"I guess I could. She'd feel like I'm taking the issue seriously," I mumbled and decided to text her a quick message. *It doesn't hurt. I'm sure she'll take me up on the offer.*

"Good. Let's start making our way back?" Itsuki put forth. "I'll go ahead to get Quil."

"You just want to rub it in his face that his dragon hearing didn't hear you guys leave." Malachi rolled his eyes but looked extremely happy about it.

"Pester him all night long."

"You're horrible." I giggled.

"I won't let you down." Itsuki laughed and leaned over to give me a slow kiss before he walked ahead, Urufu and Mizu chasing after him.

Chiryoshi stayed behind, landing back on my left shoulder. "Kiku."

"You want to stick with us?" I asked.

"KIKU!" She snuggled against my neck. I lifted my hand to pet her again and turned my attention to Malachi who was smiling from ear to ear.

"Your progress always leaves me in awe."

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"No matter what the world throws at you, in the end, you always try your hardest to rise back to the top."

"I still feel I'm doing a shitty job," I confessed, turning my eyes in the direction Itsuki had gone. "Like, how are you guys able to be loyal to me when we're still learning about one another. I know you guys are committed to me...but sometimes, I'm scared to accept it because I've always been let down. How do I know you guys won't abandon me when this is all over?" I questioned.

Malachi moved to face me, and I stared at him with an intrigued look as he lifted his hand to his little pom pom ponytail.

"In my culture, our hair holds immense value. To take care of our hair takes time, money, and ongoing perseverance to keep it growing and not end up a knotted mess. It also represents a sense of loyalty to the person we love. In some cases, when love and dedication are tested, we'll cut our hair short in honor of that affection we have for the person we love. As a lion shifter, it's a bit similar with our mane, but a little more complicated for us to cut it in that form."

"I never knew that," I whispered. "And I like your hair. Don't cut it."

He chuckled at my pouting expression and leaned down to place a kiss on my forehead. "I would if it made you realize just how loved you are."

He pulled back and sighed. "The past will always try it's best to bring us down. However, the people around us who love us will always be there to help you look forward and not backward."

"I'm getting lectured by Hottie McHot Pants. What is the world coming to?" I sighed dramatically and Chiryō flapped her wings in agreement.

"Kiku!"

"Hey. Feel more confident in me. I'm actually intelligent enough to give advice."

"Hmmm."

"Don't overthink it," he whined, making a cute hurtful expression that made Chiryō start chirping happily as if she were laughing.

I giggled and reached out for his hand. "Thanks, Malachi. Sometimes I feel like a broken record...but I think, with time, I'll be okay," I whispered.

He gave me a full glimpse of his white teeth as he smiled. "You will, Crimson. Time heals, and I know you will."

My phone buzzed, and I pulled it out with my free hand to view Haku's message.

***BESTIE HAKUA:***

"I'd love to meet. Maybe tomorrow? Afternoon or whenever.

We can walk in the cherry blossom garden and talk.

Thanks for messaging me. XOXOX."

"She's okay with meeting!" I declared with a smile.

"Good. I didn't like you sulking during the trip," Malachi noted.

"I wasn't sulking."

Chiryō tilted her head and hopped on my shoulder.

"Kiku."

"I was not," I whined to her.

"And how do you even know that?"

"Kiku Kiku." Chiryō fuzzed her feathers and stretched out her wings.

Malachi laughed. "Just because your familiars aren't physically out, doesn't mean they don't see what happens."

"Well...I wasn't," I grumbled.

Malachi shook his head but didn't argue with my stubborn nature but instead claimed my lips with his. I responded to the unexpected kiss, and I wouldn't deny it made me a bit happier that they could now kiss me without me suddenly freaking out.

"Alright. You were bubbly and fun," he mumbled against my lips. I kissed him this time and he smiled before deepening the kiss.

*Everything will work out. I just have to keep telling myself that. They love me, and their loyalty has never faltered. Just keep being positive.*

*Yes. Positive.*

## RUNNING FROM THE TRUTH AND I'M SORRY



~CRIMSON~

"*I*'ll be back soon. It's the palace, Yoshi, and Hakua is there. I don't need any guards to go to your father's place, which is the empire of Homatomashi," I stressed over the phone. "I'll take a picture with Hakua to confirm I'm alive and well. Besides, I'm learning some epic moves from Chiyo and Itsuki. Quil's going to teach me more magic spells tomorrow too!"

I'd promised Hakua to meet her today as last night was far too late and I wanted to enjoy my time with Itsuki not kicking my butt in training.

Thanks to the training I'd been getting recently, I'd felt a little more confident walking around in public. I'd taken a public transport to get back from Chiyo's shrine, wanting to feel what it was like to be back in the general public.

It didn't feel as rewarding as I thought it would, but it was progress, which was what I had been aiming for. Chiyo wanted to do a quiet therapy session with me in two days, saying we'd focus on the emotional balance and mental stability of being a shifter. I didn't want to admit I was scared, wondering if she'd ask about what happened with Erica.

*The parts I didn't tell the guys yet.*

It wasn't like I was scared of saying it, but again, the fear of being judged in the situation I was in always made me hold my tongue and I continued to keep the dark secret. I knew it would get easier and the guys didn't need to

know that part of Erica that I knew.

*The part of her I'd been seeing in dreams.*

To be able to head to the palace on my own gave me time to think quietly and be lost in my thoughts while I enjoyed the warm breeze and scents of the cherry blossoms.

I walked up to the gates, nodded my head to the guards, and entered through the private entrance. I was supposed to meet Hakua on the third floor, but this building made it so you had to go through each floor by steps. *You'd think they would have made an elevator by now.*

Pulling out my phone, I sent Hakua a quick text, stating I was here and would be on the third floor shortly.

Slipping the phone back into the back pocket of my jeans, I stopped midway through the 2nd-floor hallway, my nose picking up a sweet scent.

*Huh? So sweet.*

My Kitsune was intrigued, running up to the border of the surface which prompted my ears to pop out even though my hair was up thanks to the ribbon Aki had given me.

*What's wrong?*

She seemed suddenly excited, hopping up and down before she began to move in a circle.

"Why are you so excited?" I commented out loud as I crossed my arms.

*Is Hakua coming down?*

My Kitsune stopped and had a sour expression on her face by the mention of Hakua. I let out a long exhale and shook my head.

*Are you still mad? We were both wrong. That's why I'm here to apologize for snapping at her.*

She growled and stomped her paws in protest not liking the idea, and she moved back to her usual spot.

"And now you're all upset. I thought we needed to be more forgiving in this- EEP!"

A shriek escaped me when something grabbed my arm and pulled me into the next room. My fighting instincts kicked in, and I turned the tables on whoever grabbed me by twisting their arm and slamming them into the red wooden doors.

The person hissed in pain and groaned.

"Baby, you need to use your instincts more before pinning people and trying to break their body parts."

The sweet aroma hit me, making me realize the person I'd slammed into the door was James.

"Well, fuck?! James! What the flying fuck?" I snapped, as I tried to calm my rapidly beating heart. "You fucking scared me!"

"Sorry. Didn't want to reveal myself so soon. Your Kitsune knew I was there," he grumbled as I let him go.

My Kitsune pranced around in my mind with her head up high and I growled.

"Really? Couldn't give me a heads up?" I huffed to her.

She paused and shot me one of those adorable looks that made me give up on being angry at her. *Don't use your cuteness on me.*

She went back to running around, knowing quite well she was off the hook. *Damn animals and their cuteness. Get enough of it with Urufu and Mizu stealing my food and making me feel pity for them with one look.*

"Why are you stalking me, James?" I questioned. "Please don't kidnap me again."

"May have to. We need to leave," he announced.

"Oh no, hold on a minute," I stressed putting my hands up in defense. "WHY do you need to kidnap me again?"

"Because you ask too many questions and we're running out of minutes to spare," James huffed and reached out and grabbed my arm. I froze, and James immediately noticed the fear that flashed through my eyes. He cursed and let go before he whispered, "Crim, I'm not going to hurt you, I swear. Breathe."

His reminder made me realize I'd held my breath and I did what he said, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. Sadness masked his expression and he took a slow step forward before he pulled me into his arms.

I didn't fight it, taking a few extra inhales and exhales to calm myself. "What the fuck did that psychotic bitch do to you?"

"She's not a bitch, but a psychotic bastard," I mumbled into his shirt and returned the hug, gripping his shirt as tightly as I could. "James...please...tell me I can trust you. Please?"

He was quiet for a long moment before he pulled back and looked me square in the eyes. "You can trust me, Crim. In this moment, you can. I'll make sure to tell you when I shouldn't be trusted."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and gave him a slow nod. "Hai. I'll trust you. Just...be careful how you touch me." I muttered the last part as I looked away.

He reached out to place his hand under my chin, moving my gaze to meet his. "I'll be careful, but if I need to do something quickly, don't panic; and trust your Kitsune more," he advised before leaning down to give me a tender kiss.

The kiss seemed too short for my satisfaction, and I reached up to wrap an arm around the back of his neck and pulled him down for another deep kiss. When we broke apart, he looked bewildered by my sudden compassion.

"You're weird." I huffed, feeling my cheeks grow hot.

"And I've missed you far too much and can't stay away for the sake of my own sanity," he replied and smashed his lips against mine again. We kissed for another minute before my ears twitched, hearing the sound of footsteps.

I broke the kiss. "Someone's coming."

James cursed and looked at the door. "I'm going to lift you up and you're going to act like I'm kidnapping you."

"Making you look like the bad guy?!" I exclaimed. He didn't answer, lifting me up to put me over his shoulder. "James?!"



"Start being over dramatic and scream." He began to move as his fox ears emerged.

"When the fuck am I over dramatic!" I screamed and punched him back in anger. "And watch the fucking thighs you ass!"

He groaned, moved out of the room after kicking the door open, and paused for a second to change my position just slightly so his arm that secured me on his shoulder was on my waist and not my thighs.

"Tha...oh shit, Hakua?!" I tried to thank James, but my eyes landed on Hakua who was down the hall with five other guards. Her eyes locked on mine, and I noticed she held something round in her hand.

My Kitsune growled and approached the surface, which made my tails begin to form until I felt six fluttering around.

"Fuck, Crim, put your tails away." James groaned and began to run.

"I can't! Hakua!" I screamed, and she pointed at us.

"INTRUDER! After him!" She ran forward with the guards following right behind.

I lifted my upper body slightly, my eyes growing wide when I realized where we were going. "Oh, hell no! WE'RE ON THE SECOND FLOOR!" I screamed, but I quickly ducked as James crashed through the glass and we descended to the ground. He landed with ease and he began to run towards the forest that was filled with cherry blossoms.

I looked up to see Hakua stop right at the entrance, pointing for the guards to go through the steps before she followed them.

"They're going to reach us, James," I pointed out. "You need to run away."

He stopped after a minute as we entered a wide clearing that was surrounded by cherry blossoms. He lowered me as gently as he could and gripped my face with his hands.

"Crimson, I need you to summon that petal tornado thing you did when we met at the forest."

"What?! Why?! I'm not killing you!" I huffed. That made him smile, but I noticed the sadness in his eyes.

"Because something bad is about to happen, and I'd rather not allow you to see it. Please, Crim baby," he whispered. I stared into his red eyes, knowing he was doing this to protect me.

With a nod, I turned to face the way we came and closed my eyes, zoning everything out and feeling the energy of the blossoms around me.

They could feel my call, and I felt the wind begin to pick up and the rushing sound of leaves which I knew were the cherry blossoms leaving their hold to come to my aid.

I opened my eyes slightly as the cherry blossoms began to thicken, and my eyes locked onto Hakua's whose eyes were wide.

James wrapped his arms around my waist, pressed his chest against my back, and he leaned in to whisper, "I'm sorry."

I was bewildered as to why he was apologizing.

"Why are yo..." I trailed off when my Kitsune roared in my mind, and it felt like everything slowed down.

My Kitsune ran to the surface, taking control of the whirlwind of pink blossoms that surrounded James and me.

Hakua ran forward, anger pulsing through her purple eyes that narrowed as she ran with power. She let out a battle scream while the other guards appeared from the forest into the clearing, charging towards us.

She outstretched her arm that held the circular item, the object heading towards us. I looked at her in confusion; the cherry blossoms became thicker and thicker to the point I could barely see her head while the rest of the view was cut off by the rapid swirling of pink.

I blinked and realized why James had apologized. That level of anger and disgust wasn't towards him.

**It was towards me.**

"FOR N.R.O!" Hakua screamed.

James hugged me tightly, covering my eyes with his hand.

Hakua's words sank in; my mind went into shock as I realized what was going on.

The scream that left my mouth wasn't mine, but a battle cry from my Kitsune, and I could feel her seal the last space of the tornado of petals.

*Sealing us away from the world as the bomb went off.*

WHO DO I TRUST? WILL YOU BETRAY ME TOO?



~CRIMSON~

*H*ave you ever seen something that makes everything just stop?

An image, scene, or action that makes the movement of your exhale pause, your heartbeat skip a few rhythmic beats, and your brain unable to comprehend what has just happened?

**That was me.**

As the petals that swarmed around James and me began to dim, the shocking truth started to sink in while the aftermath of what had just occurred played once more. Before my eyes could see the other side of the petal cyclone that shielded us, I could smell three things.

**Smoke. Blood. Burning Flesh.**

The petals wanted to protect me—shield me from the view that would be waiting for me when they dispersed and returned to their simple form of nature. Yet, I had to know.

*I begged them to reveal the truth.*

***The truth I so desperately didn't want to acknowledge.***

The petals dispersed, just like that, displaying what I knew wouldn't be a happy fairytale as they rained down upon us in saddened dismay.

My gaze lowered to the ground a few feet away, landing on the first body parts of many.

*A hand.*

It wasn't just any hand, but one that had comforted me when I needed someone to hold my hand and allow me to cry when I felt abandoned.

A hand that patted me on the head when I'd done a good job at training.

A hand that high fived me after surviving another week of hell.

A hand that shook mine when I'd successfully sword danced.

The hand of the woman I'd called a best friend.

*A best friend who'd ended her life to betray me.*

### **To Kill Me.**

My gaze moved away; my brain had more than enough of the single image. With the fire that was burning around us, it wouldn't be long until that body part and the ones that remained would be nothing but ash.

The ashes of my best friend and the guards that were led astray. *Were they led to their deaths, or were they aware of the deed that was about to be done?*

"Crimson."

I didn't move at the sound of James' voice. It wasn't like I couldn't hear the agony and pain in his smooth tone. Or envision the sadness in his red eyes. He'd warned me. He protected me by looking like the bad guy, yet to my Kitsune and I, we didn't know what to believe.

*Who to trust.*

My ears twitched, making me realize they were out still, and I caught the sound of approaching footsteps. *Extremely fast ones.*

James walked in front of me, blocking my sight with his broad back as he

pulled out his sword that materialized in his hand, the scabbard appearing on the side of his waist.

A familiar scent hit me, my senses already telling me who it was.

*Lion...*

Three seconds passed, and Malachi's large lion form jumped into the clearing, a loud roar raging around us.

I wanted to move. So did my Kitsune. Yet, we stood there like statues, unable to lift a finger as we continued to stare right into James' back.

*If I stared at his back forever, would that mean I didn't have to accept what just happened? Could I pretend that I could trust people?*

Another set of footsteps made my ears twitch and the strong cologne reminded me of Quillian. The footsteps grew louder and louder until the sound of someone's rapid breathing filled my ears.

"Crimson! What the- Mr. Bipolar?! What...what the fuck did you do?!" Quil snapped.

Malachi growled, but it didn't sound defensive, almost giving the notion that he was calm. Quil cursed and I heard James sigh as he slowly slid his sword back into its case and lowered his arms.

"See? Even the Lion has more reason than you, ass," James grumbled.

"Fuck off. Why is Crimson behind you?!"

"She's...in shock," James admitted but didn't move.

"Why is she in shock?" Quil demanded, but more footsteps could be heard. James moved just slightly to the side, allowing me to see Malachi's large lion form in its dark beauty, and Quil, whose eyes were darkened with anger. *The eyes as dark as the blood that stained the soil beneath us.*

I couldn't make direct eye contact, my eyes just staring at the space, yet my mind understood quickly that Haru, Itsuki, and Yoshimitsu had arrived.

"What...?" Yoshi began, but he trailed off. I didn't blame him for being speechless because so was I. He was seeing the aftermath of what had

transpired here. He didn't truly see what I saw.

*He couldn't FEEL the hurt in my frantic heart. No one could, except myself and my Kitsune.*

"The guards," Haru whispered.

"James, what happened?" Itsuki questioned. James turned his head toward me, and I didn't move, my eyes somehow locked on Malachi now. I didn't get why I was staring at him, my eyes taking great effort to focus on every dark purple strand of his fur coat then to stare at the burning ground around us.

"Want to put the fire out before it spreads?" James suggested. "You'll need it for evidence."

I heard the clap of a set of hands, and out of the corner of my eyes noticed the flames suddenly freeze over. The heat that once hovered around us dropped, a cool chill replacing its power and remaining victorious as we stood there.

"There," Quil stated in a harsh voice. "Now, spill. What's wrong with Crim and what the FUCK happened here?"

"Hakua tried to kill Crimson."

The words felt like weights, each word setting a block of cement on my shoulders and contributing to the pounding headache I was currently experiencing.

*They're just words. They aren't true. Yes. Hakua...she'd...never...never...*

My brain wouldn't let me continue, as I'd stopped functioning completely. It wouldn't allow me to say it, blocking my pitiful attempt at denying something my very eyeballs had observed to the last second.

The silence that fell felt like a cloak of tension, the unimaginable situation that none of my lovers would have predicted.

*Hakua...is...my...friend. She'd never...*

Again, denial that I so desperately wanted to play a role in the act that was happening around me.

It had to be an act, a simple test or confrontation that needed to be done to

make me stronger.

*Yes. An act. I bet Aki will show up and say this was all an attempt to make me stronger. This can't be real. No way...never...never, never, never.*

"You're lying," Quil whispered, the anger in his voice now absent. What replaced it was sadness. If only it held even a quarter of the amount of misery that was beginning to pool within me.

*Too bad it didn't stop the growing rage that was flooding me and would overtake me if this prank didn't end.*

"Do I really have a reason to lie?"

"How did you get here?" Itsuki asked. Here must have referred to the clearing, but how would I know. My eyes were still glued to the magnificent lion who'd yet to move those sky-blue eyes from mine.

"I got a tip and went to investigate. I snuck into the palace and heard Hakua talking to a specific guard about her plan to lure Crimson here to the clearing and give her a crystal ball. That ball would have been a bomb, the appearance being altered by Hakua before she'd meet Crimson downstairs outside of the building. I stayed on the second floor, knowing Crimson would have no choice but to pass and essentially tried to 'kidnap' her to safety. Hakua caught us with the undercover guard who's a part of N.R.O and the other four guards that were summoned to help do rounds around this area. When they saw us, Hakua ordered to stop us, knowing that I was trying to save Crimson and it would screw up her plan. She chased us here and Crimson created a protective blossom barrier around us...right before Hakua set off the bomb," James summarized.

Everything was silent, making me wonder if I'd gone completely deaf. The Lion took a step forward, his eyes still on mine, and I had to blink a few times to clear my somewhat blurry vision. *I must be losing my senses, because why else would my eyes blur?*

"Fuck..." Itsuki whispered.

"You're...not lying." Haru sounded shocked.



"Don't need to. I'm not spelled to not share something I've just witnessed. It's your choice to take it or leave it. I think we should worry about Crimson right now ."

Even though I could feel more than one pair of eyes on me, it felt like I had tunnel vision and the only thing in my path was Malachi. *I need to go...*

My body moved before I could think as I slowly turned away from it all.

*Away from the pain, truth, and ultimate reality that every- thing James had said was true.*

"Crimson," James called out, and I stopped, not even noticing I'd taken three steps away. *I need to go...*

"Crimson. Think for a moment. Running away won't solve anything!" Haru shouted. My trembling lips parted, while my vision blurred even more. I wanted to say something, to be logical about all of this, but the anger was stronger. The pain and heartache that rooted inside me was what was fueling the built-up rage and was ultimately about to contribute to my actions.

"I'm leaving."

"Crimson!" Quil shouted, but it made me even angrier.

"I. Said. I. Am. Leaving." As I repeated myself, this time my Kitsune helped me out as her body seemed to glow inside my head; the dark eerie pink aura that engulfed her white fur body almost transitioned to pure black.

"Crimson." Yoshi's voice was stern and that really ticked me off. "You are in shock. You need to trust us to handle thi-"

"Trust," I whispered, which silenced him. "Trust?"

The laughter that escaped me was an eerie cry for help, a sound you were more likely to hear in horror movies than to come from my shaking lips.

I slowly turned around then, my eyes taking their time to scan the men before me and landed on the Lion once more.

"Trust? You want me to trust? Trust what? You? The others? Your father? My parents? Who should I trust, Yoshimitsu? A woman who'd known me for most of my life decided her last words would be 'For N.R.O.' I trusted

her...she was my best friend. Why would she hurt me?" I questioned, the cynical side of me taking over as another laugh escaped me.

It wasn't as if I found this situation utterly amusing. It wasn't. Yet, my brain couldn't grasp any other action that would help me absorb all of this. The laughter helped me realize I was still alive and very much losing my sanity with every ticking moment I wasted standing here. *I. NEED. TO. GO.*

"Crimson. You're in shock." Haru took a step forward as he cautioned me. He froze as his eyes widened, and that only contributed to my curiosity, noticing everyone but Malachi's eyes grew wide with fear.

*Yes. Fear. The only feeling I was currently capable of and what I'd wished I could rid of from my heart. I wanted to pass it along. To give it to these men to carry instead. Along with my pain, sadness, and disappointment, and allow the anger to settle inside me forever.*

It wasn't until Malachi took another step forward that I noticed my hair was fluttering in the wind, and jet-black petals began to gather around me.

*Petals that would be the judge and executor as I brought death to anyone who challenged me right now.*

"Shock? When your best friend deceives you after all these years? That's the result? Shock..." I whispered and bit the bottom of my lip hard. How I wished this was a nightmare and that I'd wake up, but after what had happened with Erica, wishful thinking wasn't going to help me.

"You will all deceive me..." I insisted, staring at each and every one of them, "You'll break my trust. Just like everyone else."

"Crimson. We wouldn't dare. Please, don't think this way." Quil tried to reason with me but I shrugged as a laugh left my lips. "Don't think like what? Don't accept the reality that everyone lies to save their asses? To complete their own duty and mission. I lived a life I wasn't destined to live because of a man who wanted power. I was best friends with a person who wanted to kill me. I dated a man who I still don't know whether I can trust or not." I whispered the last part as my eyes landed on James, who had a hurt

expression on his face.

"Crim baby...there's a reason for all of this. Please."

"I. Am. Done. I can't keep doing this." I slowly realized that I was crying. "I can't hurt like this again. Not after the deceit I've experienced over and over again."

I took a step back, and the black petals that began to spiral around me increased in strength and numbers while the wind picked up.

The guys looked in shock and Malachi let out a roar before he leapt from his spot towards me. With a strong push off the ground, he was able to glide through the air and into the small space that sealed the moment his body passed through it.

He landed with ease and stood in his spot; the dark petals around us made sure no one else could get through. It was just me and him and the black petals that felt the multiple feelings running through me. It didn't matter how I felt about him or anyone.

*I knew that one of us wouldn't come out of this alive.*

\* \* \*

*~MALACHI~*

**HURT...**

That's what I saw before me. My eyes did not deceive me, even as one of the King predators in the vast shifter world, the power, and rage that was on the outside surface didn't faze me. Was the woman who we loved and cared about angry? Yes.

*But the hurt that throbbed inside her was stronger.*

The pain needed an outlet, a way to come forth and show how hurt its host was. The magic that coursed through the pitch- black petals that swirled

around us was a representation of that.

The tears that rolled down Crimson's face were enough to confirm my thoughts and my Lion held a level of empathy for her. She needed to get away because she was tired.

*Tired of the lies, deceit, and disappointment. Exhausted from people and shifters alike letting her down and making her wonder if it was hopeless to have faith in humanity.*

Her body trembled while her fist clenched so tightly, I was concerned she'd cut off her blood circulation.

My Lion growled quietly, and Crimson bit her lip so hard that a blob of blood began to form on the left corner of her bottom lip. Her eyes were a dark pink and emitted the same amount of power that surrounded her.

"Go. Or I'll kill you," she declared. I wasn't sure who was speaking, whether it was her Kitsune or Crimson actually talking.

Either way, I was confident I wasn't abandoning her. She needed to see that not all of us were bad.

*We don't have such intentions. We won't abandon you.*

My only dilemma now, was how was I going to prove that to her? How could I show her that the others and I weren't going anywhere? I needed to prove it to her somehow. *How?*

A thought came to my mind, and it was both stupid and brilliant but either side would potentially get me killed.

*Do you think I can reach her?* My Lion was knowledgeable enough. He would know whether the thought I was conspiring in my mind would get us killed or be successful. He could read anyone's body language and see past the walls and barriers one created to protect themselves.

He helped me see Crimson for the beautiful soul she was, and I needed his guidance to bring her back to us. With a nod, my Lion sat down in place, which made Crimson arch an eyebrow at us.

"You think I'm joking?" she snarled.

We didn't move, knowing very well she wasn't joking. I decided this was the best moment to initiate the plan and, without a second thought, I switched back to my human form.

The shock that formed on Crimson's face was expected, and I rose up from my kneeling position, not caring that I was fully naked. I knew this wasn't one of those occasions where I could get away with distracting Crimson with my looks for fun. Standing there bare showed my vulnerability

I knew what her powers could do. Aware of their once smooth, soft texture and how they were now sharp as blades. A whirlwind of those black petals would cut me so quickly and effortlessly, I would die before I'd even realized it.

Then Crismon could walk away like nothing happened. No one would be able to track her if she left the scene within a minute. The silent killer of those "harmless" cherry blossoms would end me, and Crimson would be free.

*Even with such knowledge, I won't back away.*

"I don't think you're joking, Crimson." The area was silent; the chaotic spin of the petals and high winds didn't contribute

any noise. It was like being in a silent room, and it was just Crimson and me, face to face.

"I'll kill you," she repeated. The emphasis in her words made me worried, yet I still didn't back down.

"You won't," I whispered.

She looked angered by my words as she grimaced. "Why does everyone say that? Like I'm some weakling!"

"You're not weak Crimson," I noted, lifting my hands up to gesture around us. "This doesn't show you're weak. Contradicts it, actually ."

"Yet, you think I won't kill you."

"You love me, Crimson," I acknowledged. She didn't reply, her eyes still locked onto mine as I lowered my arms. "You wouldn't intentionally hurt me.

However, the world has hurt you. Shifters and humans have hurt you throughout your life, and you may feel like this world is filled with nothing but pain and hate."

I sighed, looking up at the only glimpse I had of the blue sky above. "But there's good, Crimson. There are people who do love you wholeheartedly. Who'd put their lives on the line to make sure you lived."

Lowering my head, I continued, making sure my eyes never left hers.

"I won't stand here and say no one else will hurt you. I can't make such a promise when I myself am unsure who to trust outside of our circle. But the men who are waiting outside of these petal walls care deeply for you. Just as I do. I can confidently vow they would never betray you. When we love, it's absolute, and I know you won't betray us like Storm did because you know exactly how it feels. Just as we do."

We both stood in place and I wondered if my words even touched the surface. My heart ached for our Crimson. I just wanted her to see the truth in my words. To know that we understood and would never do the same to her.

She took a few steps forward and petals from all angles shot towards me, stopping right at my flesh. I could feel their sharp-ness, the pointy tips ready to finish me if I did anything to set their commander off. They were doing their duty to protect Crimson, and at the moment, I was the enemy.

Crimson finally reached me, and I remained completely still.

*Not like I have much of a choice.*

Those dark pink eyes continued to emit a level of fury, but they began to fill with tears and my expression softened.

"I love you, Crimson. No matter what you decide, to kill me or give us a chance to prove ourselves once more, I want you...no, NEED you to know that the short time you've been in our lives has been the most adventurous, fun, and loving times that I've experienced. I bet the others feel the same. Arigato, Crimson Jiyuna."

I could feel the single teardrop leave my right eye and I accepted my fate,

closing my eyes as I waited for Crimson to make her decision. *A t least she knows. A t least I can die without any regret .*

"How..."

I opened my eyes to gaze into those familiar turquoise eyes while tears rolled down her flushed cheeks. The petals that poked my flesh began to transition back to their baby pink appearance, their once sharp edges now harmless as they began to fall to the ground.

"How can you be hurt by other people and still trust society?"

"I don't trust society, Crimson. I go with my gut and trust those who earned it. That doesn't shield me from betrayal or heartache, but I know that no matter what society tries to throw at me, my friends out there waiting for us would support me. They would lift me up, and I can trust them with my life. That also applies to you. Whoever is foolish enough to choose the side that you're not on will be the one to lose at the end of the day. I can't vouch on Hakua's behalf because I don't know her like you did. Regardless, if she was a fake friend like Storm was a fake lover to us, she's left this world and failed in her attempt to ruin you. You're here and this is your chance to move forward and live."

She lowered her gaze to the floor, a few tears falling from her tear stained cheeks as she trembled. "Your words...have truth in them. I can tell that...yet I'm not sure, Malachi. I'm not fucking sure...I can deal with this anymore. I'm tired..."

I had to gulp down the lump in my throat, my Lion feeling Crimson's pain. I took a deep breath and decided to go with my last resort.

"Crimson."

She lifted her head slowly and her eyes grew wide as she realized what I was about to do; I held a sword in my right hand while my left hand grasped the tied part of my ponytail.

I was ready to do the deed, but my arms couldn't move any further, even when I tugged on the resistance that stopped me.

With a quick look, I noticed the pink vines that were wrapped around my wrists, and I turned to see Crimson's hands that were spread out and had a slight glow. A smile formed on my lips.

"You got better at that skill," I praised, and she gave me a conflicted look.

"If you dare cut your hair, I'll divorce you," she snarled. My smile widened, and she let me go, the vines dematerializing just like the gold sword I'd summoned.

I let my arms fall to the side and I took a step forward to be merely inches away from Crimson. My arms wrapped around her and I held her tightly .

"I never knew we were married, but I like the idea, Hottie," I whispered into her ear. She hugged me back and I held her while she cried.

I wished we could have prevented this, but how would we have known Hakua was working for N.R.O. In fact, how would we know who was undercover in the palace? If there were so many spies in the palace, no one was safe there, especially the emperor.

*We have to get rid of N.R.O fast. This mission could determine whether our country goes to war with itself if we didn't figure out who was friend or foe.*

The sudden shift in weight pulled me out of my thoughts and I had to tighten my hold around Crimson's waist to hold her up. "Crimson?!"

I lowered her to the ground and noticed she was unconscious and burning up. Oh, fuck! Not now.

"Hottie? You need to stop the petal tornado going on here so Haru can help you." I gently shook Crimson, who moaned weakly.

"But so sleepy," she whispered.

"I know, Crim. Just a quick moment and I'll let you sleep." I scooped her into my arms and lifted her up. She mumbled some- thing incoherent, but the petals that were now pink again began to slow in the spiral motion.

I sighed in relief when I started to see the others, catching a glimpse of the Emperor and Hotaka Jiyuna.



"Thank the ancestors!" The relief in the exclaimed statement was apparent on Mr. Jiyuna's face. Haru moved before anyone else, coming up to us as the last set of petals fell to the ground.

"She's burning up again," I announced. Haru nodded and instructed me to kneel down and lower her to the ground so he could get to work. It would take him a bit longer to work when we didn't have the option of putting Crimson in an ice-cold bath like last time.

"Grrrrrr."

Haru froze, and I looked over to my left and saw the large eight feet tall Kitsune with bright amber eyes and a full set of nine tails glowing behind him.

*Double fuck...*

"Who triggered Aki to go nine tails on us?" I asked no one in particular, my Lion a bit annoyed. We weren't irritated with Aki necessarily, but his Kitsune was a protective asshole and a stubborn one at that. He'd burn us to a crisp even though we were his best friends if we ticked him off.

"He arrived that way. There was a huge attack at the market- place an hour ago. We were doing damage control when we were informed there was an explosion at the palace, and you can guess what happened," Yoshi explained.

"We only got here first because Aki was ripping apart a group of guards that were in disguise," Itsuki added.

I sighed, having come to the palace on my own when I heard Crimson had gone alone. My gaze returned to Aki. "Akihiro. Crimson's burning up like last time. I need Haru to work on her and Quil to keep her cool."

"Grrrrrrr!" He snarled, gritting his teeth, and my Lion pushed to the surface.

"Stop being a stubborn fucking ass and let's help Crimson. You can have her to yourself later."

Aki glared at us, but he stopped growling. He moved slightly closer,

taking a peek at Crimson who was starting to breathe more rapidly and looked a tad paler than before.

He let out a huff, which gave off a poof of fire, before he sat down to wait patiently, his tails wrapping around him. "Arigato." My Lion pulled back and I glanced at Haru, who got to work.

Quil swiftly moved to kneel on Haru's left side, placed a hand on Crimson's forehead, and closed his eyes. I could feel the coolness that resonated from his hand and Crimson sighed in relief, looking like she'd fall into deep sleep in seconds.

"We need to leave. If there were that many imposter guards on the property, the palace needs to be evacuated and searched," Itsuki declared.

The Emperor nodded. "The evacuation is happening as we speak. You all take Crimson somewhere safe."

"What are we doing about Mr. Bipolar?" Quil asked, pointing at James whose worried eyes were on Crimson.

He blinked and looked around us before he frowned. "What about me? I'm going home," James grumbled.

Aki huffed before a low growl escaped him, which made us all look at him.

"What does that mean?" James asked.

"He said if you're going to stalk us, just come along," Mr. Jiyuna replied.

"How did you translate that by a growl?! And I wasn't going to stalk...not necessarily...I'm busy!" James argued.

Quil groaned. "Can we just leave his ass?"

"Sadly, no," I announced. "He saved Crimson again, remember?"

"Maybe it was a fluke." Quil shrugged and James rolled his eyes.

"I didn't travel here to fuck up. Now, aren't you all supposed to be taking Crimson somewhere safe? You guys are slow ."

"I still don't like him," Haru noted.

"Me neither." I sighed.

"Don't need you guys to like me. I'm leaving," James huffed.

Aki got up, which made us all freeze; our eyes locked on him as he strolled over to James who bit his lip.

Aki reached where James stood and literally picked him up by his shirt. "OI! Let me down! Hey?! Dammit, you big ass Kitsune."

Aki ignored him and began to walk away. "Ugh! At least put me on your back?! Compromise dammit!"

We all exchanged looks and sighed. "Guess Aki wanted him to come along."

"I suggest you listen to what James has to say," the Emperor noted. We turned our attention to him and Yoshi frowned.

"Why is that, Father? He works for N.R.O as well. He's the one who killed Storm...well even though it was well deserved, but he wanted to kill Crimson. He's a criminal."

Haru moved back and gave me a nodding gesture which meant he was done. I scooped Crimson up and the three of us rose, looking at the Emperor with questioning expressions as he glanced at Jiyuna; both of them wore serious looks.

"Not quite," Mr. Jiyuna replied.

"Not quite?" Yoshi repeated. "Either he's a criminal or not. Which is it?"

The Emperor sighed and glanced at all of us before he replied.

"James is a double agent. We hired him."

*Well, shit ...*

## WHO IS THE ENEMY AND ALLIANCE



~ITSUKI~

*M*y eyes lingered on Crimson's sleeping figure as I leaned against the wall next to the window. Haru was performing another checkup, working around Urufu,

Mizuko, and Chiryoshi who were crowded around Crim while she slept.

It had been a long afternoon of clean up, and we were finally settling down to deal with the problem at hand.

*Or should I say discovery?*

"She's much better now. I don't think she'll be unconscious for as long as last time. I think her familiars are helping her out," Haru explained.

Uru lifted her head, letting out a yawn before she replied.

"Woof!"

Malachi, Yoshi, and Crim's father grinned; the three of them stood opposite from me near the door. Yoshi and Aki were on my right side, Yoshi seeming a bit peeved while Aki wore a guarded expression. They did smile slightly at Urufu's desire to be a part of the conversation, but it wasn't long before their expressions returned to what they were before.

I didn't blame them for being pissed. My eyes scanned over to James who stood next to Emperor Yomatoshima, or Yomato as he liked to be called. They were standing against the wall that faced the opposite of the head of Crim's bed.

The tension was high in the room, and the reason was the fact we were yet again left in the dark. Yomato had revealed that James—the ex-boyfriend who not only treated Crim like shit when they were dating but also kidnapped her and sent her off with his goons to dump her there to die—was a double agent, and now he was acting like the hero.

I wasn't going to ignore the good he had done. Crimson didn't know, but the only reason we'd found Aki and the others so quickly was because small glowing red lights began to guide us up. Aki had said he felt James' presence, but it was gone by the time we'd arrived. He'd then been in the forest following us before he'd confronted Crimson and given her the third crystal.

He'd told us the exact coordinates of where Crim was taken by Erica, and he'd done us a favor by killing her with the bonus of binding her to the earth so she wouldn't pass on and be able to reach where Storm was.

We found out he saved Crimson yet again, pretending to kidnap her to draw Hakua out and lower the casualty rate that would have happened if the bomb had gone off where she and Crim were originally supposed to meet up. With that revealed, the ultimate truth that James Hamilton was actually a double agent for Homatomashi came out, and now we were going to get the answers to our questions while Crimson recovered.

Regardless of the dual knowledge of James' good and bad deeds, I still didn't understand how we were just finding out about this.

"So, are we worthy enough to know about this or are we just being told because you have no choice?" I asked.

Quil walked out from the washroom, having finished washing his face to help cool his temper. He strode over to stand on my right side, but the majority of the others were shocked by the coldness in my voice.

I didn't get upset often, but I was just as tired as Crimson was with the lies and deceit. To be honest, it felt like we were all fed up with the constant up and down that had been going on for what felt like almost 4 months. It all started with Storm's death, and I was getting burnt out from the rollercoaster

ride.

Yomato sighed. "I get you're all upset. The last few months have indeed been chaotic and I apologize greatly for that. This was supposed to be a smooth plan that was initiated years ago. It wasn't supposed to escalate to this degree."

"Can we get a run down as to what James' role is?" Malachi asked.

Yomato looked at James who shrugged and took a step forward. "My initial role was to be a spy for Homatomashi and find out more about White-Eyes. I obviously can't reveal details of who White-eyes is, but he has connections and is able to see who has potential on the training grounds. I was secretly scouted by him."

"Nani? White-eyes can get reports of children who are excelling?" Yoshi snapped.

"It was due to a loophole at the time. It's been dealt with long ago, but if there are people like Erica or even Storm who were undercover, I can't guarantee there aren't other spies from N.R.O." Yomato gave Yoshi a sympathetic look. He knew Yoshi was mad for not being informed about all of this, but I figured the Emperor had his reasons.

"Anyway, I was one of the children White-Eyes was intrigued with and was sought out. To help get intel on N.R.O, I ended up accepting the offer after informing the emperor. Obviously, my acceptance meant I had to prove myself over and over again until I eventually became White-Eyes' right-hand man, or puppet if you will. If he wanted something, I'd have to bring it to him. The only thing I couldn't do was bring him Crimson."

"Bring Crimson. He knew about Crimson?" I asked.

"White-Eyes was in a business agreement with Arashi. The deal was to keep the truth of her power in exchange for financial assistance. With how greedy Konashi Arashi was, he wouldn't let such a situation slide out of his grasp. He didn't love Crimson because she wasn't his child. He couldn't kill her because it would have been noticed, so it was perfect to wait for years to

pass by. There was a time where he considered killing her, but that idea went south when I started dating her."

"Did you date my daughter because you wanted to or was there an underlying reason for it?"

We all glanced at Jiyuna who appeared displeased by what he was hearing. James glanced at Crimson for a long moment before he replied.

"I was intrigued by Crimson and why White-Eyes was obsessed with eliminating her. I won't deny the fact that I came into her life...I guess to protect her in some way. When I officially introduced myself to Crimson when she was nineteen, it was to make sure White-Eyes didn't kill her. She'd become more and more independent over the years, and White-Eyes was getting anxious that she'd unlock her powers and reveal the truth of her birthright. You all are aware that Nine Tail Kitsunes are rare, correct?" James questioned, his eyes landing on Aki whose arms were crossed over his chest.

"We're aware," Aki replied. Only a few people in all of Homatomashi knew Aki was a Nine Tail. It was one of the reasons he was trained by ChiyoChi.

He was trained to hide his power and, when he did shift, he normally had 6-7 tails. If we ever saw him have nine tails out, it was either because there was an urgent matter that needed him to use a great deal of power or he was simply pissed off.

*Not to forget how utterly possessive he was.*

"Then you can understand what a big deal it would be if Crimson ended up being on Homatomashi's side of justice. Crimson was human, yet she was the top sword dancer. She already had good endurance thanks to her running as well. She was making her connections by selling artwork and gaining followers. If she gained the power she was born with, she'd be a bigger threat and White-Eyes' rule of thumb is when anything becomes a threat to him, it's eliminated."

"Did that apply to Storm Yuna?" Quil asked.

James slowly nodded. "Yes. The peace agreement would not benefit what White-Eyes has planned, but Storm was more concerned about getting the agreement over with and leaving Japan to live freely with Erica. She was too blinded by her love to see that she couldn't run away. White-Eyes had wanted to be the leader of N.R.O for years. He wouldn't dare let her off the hook to enjoy life while he had to pick up the slack. If he was going to run things, he'd do it on his terms by being the boss."

"When you dated Crimson though, you acted like the typical drunk boyfriend who didn't give a shit and had side chicks left and right," Malachi reminded.

James rolled his eyes, looking a bit irritated. "I had no choice. It was the most believable act I could pull off. I won't deny the fact I cared about Crimson...I probably still do but getting close and lovey with her would put her at a greater risk. White-Eyes doesn't always keep an eye on me now that I've gained his trust, but he would rather believe I was drunk in love with Crimson and let our relationship slide knowing it was just that - a love based on when I was wasted but was non-existent when I was sober. Was it fair to Crimson? No...but if it kept her alive, I didn't care. I'd rather be looked at as a pathetic boyfriend than get Crim killed."

"Was you getting all tight knot in the pants when we arrived an act too?" Quil asked.

"Yes and no. Still don't like you guys," James grumbled but continued. "But the more resistance I showed, the better I looked. It assured Konashi and White-Eyes that I wasn't in on what was going on. Your interference was random and not expected, which was already adding tension to the problem. Konashi knew the moment Crimson got involved that the secret they had been trying to hide all this time could be revealed by accident and that was making White Eyes antsy because it threatened the reveal who N.R.O belonged to. When Crimson inherited Storm's powers, no one knew whether that included her memories, and that was another problem."



"You left her on the mountain though," Malachi reminded.

"I was there, but with the commotion that went down, it was hard for me to keep track of Crimson. I found her right before Kitsune arrived, and I didn't see it necessary to interfere then."

"It's Aki," Akihiro huffed, his ears popping out randomly . James sighed. "Whatever."

James looked back at Jiyuna. "So, to answer your original question, I dated your daughter to protect her, but I did love her. She did deserve someone better and not a puppet like me, but if I had the choice to go back and decide, I'd do it all over again. As long as Crimson's breathing, I don't care how I'm perceived."

The room was silent for a long moment before Yomato decided to add his view on things. "We've been trying to get information on White-Eyes for years. James was our best bet and we took hold of that. However, Crimson's involvement and Storm's death wasn't expected. James wasn't aware he'd need to kill Storm until an hour or two ahead and was unable to reach us to deliver the news. With the knowledge we have now, I'm slightly relieved that Storm was removed. Her signing the peace contract in the position she was in could have backfired in the long run and lead to war either way."

"If James is a double agent, is he even allowed to be here? Won't he put Crimson and well all of us at risk?" Haru questioned.

"I have some freedom of where I can be at certain times of the day. I get a few days off at the moment, but I don't know if White-Eyes will call me back prematurely due to the failed bomb mission Hakua just pulled," James explained.

"You knew about Hakua?" Yoshi questioned, narrowing his eyes at James.

"Slightly," James replied, looking uninterested with the topic.

"Slightly? How is that even an answer? You could have prevented all of this if you had told us," Quil confronted.

The others turned his gaze on him and he bit his lip. "Can't say."

"See. That attitude just pisses me off," Quil grumbled.

"Wait," Haru announced, his mismatched eyes locked onto James. He narrowed them for a moment and James crossed his arms, looking a bit uncomfortable with his analytic gaze.

"What?" James muttered.

"You're spelled," Haru declared.

James rolled his eyes. "I thought that was mentioned already."

"What does that have to do with anything?" I asked.

"Because he's spelled he had to treat Crimson like shit for the sake of face?"

"Yes," Yomato announced again. I knew we sounded like we were repeating ourselves, but it didn't sit well that Crimson was treated so poorly for the sake of information.

"James needed to gain White-Eyes' trust. That means having to make oaths to ensure his loyalty remained, and he wasn't swooning over us if you think of it that way. White-Eyes doesn't know James is a double agent on our side. He simply believes James is the one gathering information on us for years to favor N.R.O. We've been merely giving him information that wouldn't necessarily harm us," Yomato explained.

Even Jiyuna looked a little confused by the disclosure but remained silent. He must have known James in general, but not to the extent of dating his daughter and treating her poorly .

"Still doesn't make it right that Crimson was treated like shit," Aki mumbled.

"Or why he got away with what he did on the mountain," Yoshi added, his sapphire eyes already beginning to transition to a vibrant gold which already told everyone in the room that he was upset.

"I get you're butt hurt. Can we discuss how you all hate me later?" James whined.

"Back to Hakua. Why are we finding out about her betrayal now?" James groaned. "Can't say ."

We all groaned except for Haru, Yomato, and Jiyuna.

"He can't," Haru reminded again.

"At least someone remembers the situation I'm in," James muttered.

"You're able to tell us all that information, but you couldn't tell us about Hakua?" Malachi questioned.

"I am spelled. Whatever I've told you is based on my own knowledge and discovery. There are certain things I can't say, such as who White-Eyes is or his intentions, or why he wants Crimson and all that stupidity. Same thing with Hakua. I can't share about my so-called 'colleagues.' It's not my place, and I only found out recently that Hakua was a part of N.R.O. After her argument with Crimson, that was what basically sealed the deal with her wanting to eliminate Crimson. I don't know why or what went on in Hakua's head because I barely knew her, but my fox wouldn't settle anymore and I never ignore our instincts. The moment I heard her conversation with the guard, I had to do what I did. If I'm found out, my ass is dead." James shrugged.

We couldn't argue with his statement, and Haru sighed. "Are you able to bypass the secret thing in your fox form?"

"You mean as a cunning fox and bypass it somehow. Haven't tried it. Not many fox shifters," James replied.

"Would you be up to try it?" Haru questioned.

"Up to my fox. I don't care." James' eyes returned to Crimson again, and I was curious as to why he kept looking at her.

"Why do you keep staring at Crimson like you're worried about something?" I asked.

"Crimson's still hiding something," James whispered, his eyes lingering on Crimson's sleeping figure.

"What do you mean she's still hiding something?" Haru clarified.

"Have you guys figured out what fully happened? With her and Erica?" James asked.

"It's a hard subject to bring up, Mr. Bipolar," Quil pointed out.

Malachi nodded. "It's not like we can waltz in and say, 'Hey Crim. We feel you're hiding something. Spill.' Doesn't work that way." He ruffled his mini afro with his left hand.

"Crimson is a person that, until pressed or cornered, will keep hold of certain information that's on her mind. It can be about an incident or situation she's in that really bothers her and it's not until you nag her that she'll reveal EVERYTHING about the troubling situation. I've known Crimson long enough to confidently say there's MORE. She can't move forward if she doesn't reveal whatever she's holding back," James stressed.

Jiyuna nodded. "Even when Crimson was a child, she held back a lot. She wouldn't express what was bothering her until pressed by her mother. Even then, it was a rarity in itself."

"What could she be not telling us?" I asked.

All of us were silent, trying to figure out what the possible reason could be of Crimson's silence. She was pretty open with all of us, and before this incident, we didn't think she'd be holding information back.

The topic was such a sore subject, none of us wanted to poke about it. Sexual abuse was a sensitive topic, and after watching Aki deal with his past and having a few setbacks, I didn't want Crimson to keep looking back at what she'd experienced.

"I think we should let ChiyoChi handle this," Haru suggested.

Aki sighed but slowly nodded. "I agree. She would know how to bring up the topic. I also think Crimson will need therapy for what just happened. Her mental state won't be well after what Hakua did."

"It's just blow after blow for Crimson. When is she going to get a break?" Quil grumbled.

"Why don't you guys just give her one?" James huffed.

We looked up at him and I gave him a displeased look. "What's with the attitude, Mr. Bipolar?" I huffed back.

"You guys are saying you should do this and that, yet you're not doing any of it. You guys wanted her to have a break, but you should have been more strict and not let Hakua come to begin with. I swear you've suggested she does therapy, yet again, the topic is being brought up now. You say you want to give her a break, but I can guarantee you'll want her to get back to training so she can defend herself. You guys are always contradicting yourselves."

"How the hell do you know all of that?" Yoshi muttered.

"And are we being lectured by Mr. Bipolar? Please Ancestors, help us." Malachi cringed at the outspoken thoughts.

James looked annoyed but continued. "Who cares how I gather my info? I'm a fox."

"Yup, totally explains it," Haru mumbled but James ignored him.

"When Crimson wakes up, let her talk to ChiyoChi. That's the first thing you guys need to do. No excuses or lovey-dovey shit."

We didn't say anything, but I could feel that my friends hated the fact we were actually getting lectured by James. He did have a point that Crim's therapy was non-negotiable. It was just weird coming from him. Even my wolf was annoyed with the situation.

"Then one of you take her out or something. Let her live and forget about all the shit she's gone through. I doubt all of you can go with her and, to be honest, she may need some one on one time anyway. Let her get a drink or paint or do something normal. Give her an actual break to just feel like a human again."

*Feel like a human again...*

With James words, it kinda of struck a chord inside me. This whole time we'd been doing our best to give Crimson the crash course of how to be a shifter, but we'd never given her time to adjust.

It's been a go-go train ride with no stops for her to absorb what she's been learning and adapt to this change. She wasn't born as a shifter but as a human, and we'd neglected the fact that she would need breaks to fully accept her new life.

"We haven't really let Crim enjoy herself for a bit. The hot spring trip should have helped, but her fight with Hakua made it go south," I admitted.

The others nodded in agreement and from their expressions, James' words were sinking in.

"I'll take her out," Malachi announced. "I think Hottie needs some time to relax and I have a few ideas on what we can do. I think after her therapy, we'll have a general idea of how bad the situation is. Maybe a few days off for her just to recoup would do some justice."

"That would have a positive effect on her for sure. Just to let loose and forget what's going on around her for a few days," Aki added.

"I believe you all are going to need a break. I suggest a few of you take some time or rotate between groups. Haru especially, with all the healing you've been doing," Jiyuna suggested.

Yomato nodded. "I also agree with this. James? When do you think you'll be needed."

"Not sure. I requested two weeks off. I can check in to make sure my services aren't needed. I also want to make sure I'm not being followed in any way, so I'll deal with that. I'll keep you posted," James replied.

"Are we working with him then?" Quil asked.

Yomato thought about it for a moment before he replied. "I believe it's time we made an alliance between groups. I understand you guys and James don't get along well, but if we want to get through this breach of privacy, we're going to need all the help we can get. James is a reliable source."

"Before we do this alliance thing, how can you trust him not to turn on us too?" I asked.

James answered. "Before taking on this mission, I made an oath to never

betray Homatomashi. It's still valid. As long as my intentions remain positive and with the overall goal of Homatomashi having a better future, I won't get penalized by the oath I made. Besides, Crimson apparently likes you guys, so I don't have much choice but to suck it up with this alliance," James commented.

"Is there even a nice side to him?" Malachi whispered to Quil.

"I doubt it," Quil replied.

"You two really suck at whispering," James grumbled. Yomato smiled and clapped his hands. "Then it's settled. For

now, the focus is on recovery and figuring out what's going on within my palace walls. I want to ensure that whatever plan you all make, someone must be on guard and watching Crimson. One or two of you can keep her occupied, but there should always be one close by on guard. White-Eyes may act like he doesn't want Crimson to claim the last crystal for her pocket watch, but he'll need it complete if he wants to use it for his own selfish reasons. We can't let him have his way. Understood?"

"Hai, Emperor." We all spoke in unison; even James voiced the same response.

"If Crimson needs me or her mother, you know how to contact me," Jiyuna pointed out.

"Yes. Thank you, Sir," Aki replied and bowed his head to Jiyuna. We all followed suit, and James gave a slight nod in acknowledgment.

"It's getting late. You may all take tonight off. Hotaku and I will be heading back," Yomato confirmed.

"We'll escort you back at least," Yoshi noted.

I nodded my head. "I'll come with."

"Very well. Arigato," Yomato replied.

We said our goodbyes, and I walked to Crimson and gave her a soft kiss on the forehead.

*Rest up, Crimson.*

## CONFESS THE TRUTH AND PROTECTORS



~CRIMSON~

"This is...different," I mumbled, looking around the training room.

"I decided it would be good to switch things up today.

Training isn't only about the physical aspect." ChiyoChi gestured for me to come in.

As apprehensive as I was, I couldn't deny her, closing the door as quietly as I could and taking a better look at the room before me.

The lights were dimmed and there was a large circle of candles that burned brightly to light the room.

What caught my attention most was the large blank canvas in the middle of that warming circle of candlelight.

The lump in my throat made me swallow as my heart hammered in my chest. My eyes gazed along the white canvas, my fingers twitching in both excitement and misery.

*When was the last time I had laid a single stroke on paper? Let alone a beautiful canvas such as that.*

My eyes trailed down to the empty stool and along to the side where various paints and watercolor equipment were laid out for me.

I should have been excited—thrilled to be able to do my passion as one of my training sessions with Master ChiyoChi.

Yet, I stood there frozen in place. My heartbeat was fast, the blood



pumping so loudly my ears rang, and my palms were sweaty. I ignored how my breathing had picked up and the slight tremble in my fingers.

*Fear.*

I was terrified to paint, but I so desperately wanted the escape. A week had passed since the incident with Hakua, but it felt like a blur. Two of those days were spent sleeping and a third day was spent in bed to ensure I didn't have a mental breakdown.

Even now, I still couldn't accept what had happened. I didn't want to believe my friend, someone I'd known for the majority of my youth and early adult life, could possibly stick around with the intentions of one day killing me.

Maybe I couldn't accept it because I'd never do that to someone. To spend time with a person with the hidden intentions of one day eliminating them from this world. I'd loved Hakua as I would a family member. She was like a sister to me. I guess that's why her betrayal hurt me so much.

*A pain so sharp I could have killed Malachi because of it.*

The guys had been super supportive during my recovery, and I was even more surprised to see James watching over me when I'd woken up. He was asleep, sitting on a chair next to my bed, but it blew me away that he was physically there. It felt like I was seeing a completely different side of him, but I held back my rekindled love for him because I didn't want to be hurt again.

Even with the knowledge I'd been holding back from them, I simply couldn't open myself up yet. I wasn't ready. I didn't know if I would ever be ready. Though, I was so tired of holding back. Exhausted that I couldn't do more than simple loving gestures. My body yearned for more skin to skin and to be connected on a deeper level that would be the perfect escape from all the built-up stress and tension.

But the thought always brought the memories and nightmares to the surface, and I didn't know how I was going to fix it.

*Would painting what happened...make me feel better? Make me face my reality?*

With the bomb at the palace, Homatomashi had been a mess. Mother had come and seen me and Dad would come whenever he could, sometimes three times throughout the day to make sure I was really "okay," but I told him to focus on the problems at hand. Hakua's betrayal revealed that there was a clear breach in our current system, and it had to be fixed once and for all. Storm and Erica were contributions to such chaos, and Hakua had put the icing on the cake.

I wanted to assist in any way I could, but the guys said I needed a session with ChiyoChi today.

I assumed it would be fighting.

*Not this...*

ChiyoChi noticed my unconscious attempt to stall. She walked up to me and ever so gently stroked my head like a mother who would comfort her child. I didn't get why it comforted me so much; my Kitsune felt the love from the simple touch and was doing her best to stay calm even though I was super anxious.

"I understand you may not want to do this, Crimson, but just try it? Sit, and if you don't feel like painting, we'll do something else," ChiyoChi suggested.

"I...what...if the painting is...graphic?" I tried to figure out the proper words to say. I honestly didn't know what I would draw when I sat down, but I was confident that if my brush touched the surface of that blank canvas, I wouldn't hold back. *I couldn't*.

"It can be anything, Crimson. Detailed. Bare. Whatever you want to portray on that white surface, you can go right ahead. Just let yourself enjoy your love for art," ChiyoChi assured me.

I nodded and swallowed the lump in my throat, my eyes turning to focus on the stool and then alternated between the canvas and paint supplies. With

a bit of a push from my Kitsune, I took a step forward, followed by another, until I was in front of the large 24 x 30 framed piece.

I lifted my hands to tie up my hair, thankful I'd brought the white ribbon with red incantations that I'd sneakily taken from Aki. I was really borrowing it, but I knew he wouldn't mind.

Looking once at my white short-sleeved shirt and blue shorts, I took a few calming breaths. It was getting easier to wear shorts now, especially when I knew I'd be indoors and around people who I assumed would keep me safe. Even with what had happened, I decided it would be one of the many things I wanted to work on.

My Kitsune strolled over until she was at the border of the surface, sitting down to watch me closely as well as giving me moral support, which made me smile. I didn't care that my ears had appeared or the feel of five tails swaying back and forth behind me.

I ignored the apron that was on the side of the table that displayed all the supplies laid out. The new equipment ignited a hint of excitement through me, making me wonder if ChiyoChi and the others had bought all of this for me.

*To give me this one moment to paint freely. To paint how I felt.*

Picking up the brush, I allowed myself a few seconds to enjoy the smooth feel of the black wood and flicked the fine bristles against the back of my right hand.

I took a few steps back and stared at the blank page, my mind zoning everything out. I felt like I wasn't in the training room anymore. I was back in the dungeon, back where the pain started.

*The truth happened...*

Out of all the times I'd envisioned what happened to me, whether it was by choice or within my nightmares, I was swimming in fear. It was as if I simply couldn't function, and watching what had happened only left me feeling raw and broken all over again.

This time, I wasn't scared. It was like a calming peaceful feeling ran through me. This time, even though I felt like I was in the darkly dimmed dungeon, my hands pressed against the wall as I waited for my reward; I knew I was safe.

*I could tell that the world surrounding me now was a vision within my mind, and it was time to face it.*

I finally took a calming breath and prepared what I needed. I wanted to portray every emotion.

***My anger, sadness, desperation, agony...pain...regret...and freedom.***

Drawing and revealing what I'd been holding back all this time would maybe free me from the cycle I was in. The constant spiral of emotions that kept hindering me from enjoying the love that surrounded me on the surface.

With a trembling hand, I dipped my brush into the black paint, deciding I didn't need to pencil out the sketch. I knew what needed to be drawn. It was vivid before me. The events that followed in that dungeon after the round of whips ruined my back and made my flesh bleed in agony .

**My reward.**

All I needed to do was press the brush onto the white surface. The moment I did, I was lost in those memories as my hand began to move of its own accord. It was time to tell my story. To show the world why I was struggling.

**There was more.**

**So much more.**

***No one knew how deceiving Storm was. No one knew who Erica was. No.***

## ***One. Knew.***

My anger soon took over, and even though my eyes filled with tears and blurred my vision, I didn't stop.

*No...I couldn't stop .*

So much pain. So much hurt. Just SO MUCH.

I didn't want to deal with this anymore. To deal with the random throbs and aches that would haunt me. To deal with the panic attacks and breakdowns that coursed through me from a simple touch that went far lower than I could handle.

I needed to be FREE, and this was my only way out. I could feel the heat increase around me, but I didn't care. Let the fire around me burn. Let it feel my sadness. My heartache.

## **My sorrow. My regret.**

I couldn't let that bastard take control of me anymore. To let it ruin my relationship with my men anymore. To destroy the newly-kindled bond I was making with my real father and my sweet mother. This was my chance, and I wasn't going to let it slip through my fingertips.

Stroke after stroke, dip after dip, the colors merged together, and my emotions splattered on the page. The echoing screams that haunted me in my dreams returned, but it was like a symphony for me, and I allowed it to help me portray what needed to be revealed.

I don't know how long I stood there, or how I even finished the piece until I took a few weak steps back and looked at the complete image before me.

My tears rolled down my cheeks as I tried to remain stand- ing, sobs escaping me as I let the brush that I held fall to the floor. I felt something warm wrap around me, and I thought it was ChiyoChi until I lifted my head up to see something more spectacular.

"Fushichou..." I whispered, my eyes growing wide at the oversized phoenix hovering above me. She lowered her flaming head until it pressed against the right side of my cheek.

I lifted my hand to touch her burning feathers, the heat doing nothing but tickle my flesh. My sobs increased, and I fell to my knees and wept.

I could feel my other familiars; Chiryoshi lowered to sit on my shoulder that moved up and down as I cried, while Urufu and Mizuko both moved to lay their heads on my lap.

I was a complete mess, but I didn't fight the tears that left my eyes. I was so fucking tired of crying. So tired of holding back. I missed my old life. I missed being human and simply living my life without fear.

Something brushed my left cheek and I opened my eyes to see ChiyoChi kneeling before me. "Let it out, Crimson. It's okay to say it now ."

"But...but...they'll judge me. They'll think I'm a slut or some- thing. They won't love me anymore."

"It wasn't your fault, Crimson."

"Then why does it feel like it? Why can't I be touched without freaking out? Why...can't I show my love without crying?" I sobbed.

"Because you're afraid the truth will leave a scar on your relationships, Crimson. You'd rather keep the pain inside and not hurt anyone else. Revealing the truth will hurt them, and that's why you've been holding back, right?"

I moved my head up and down in response. "They've hurt enough...I don't want them to hurt anymore. I don't want them to feel pity for me. I...I didn't want to..." I trailed off.

ChiyoChi cradled my face, Fushichou moving out of the way while Chiryoshi left my shoulder to hover closer to Fushichou's head.

"Crimson. You are the victim. Erica hurt you. You didn't ask for any of it. You didn't ask to be kidnapped, abused, and raped. You. Did. Not. Want. It. Your men know you'd never betray them. They know how loyal you are.

They know ."

"If...I tell...you. Can you tell them? I...can't...say it twice...not yet. I don't know when I'll be able to. I want to...but...it's so hard," I vented.

I NEEDED to tell someone.

To get the words off my chest instead of letting it kill me. ChiyoChi wouldn't judge me, but I was scared if the guys knew, they wouldn't love me anymore.

*Maybe if ChiyoChi told them, they wouldn't blame me. They would still love me.*

"I can do that. I'll tell them later, but for now, it's just you, me, and your familiars. We'll never judge you. We love you and care for you. We want you to be happy again, Crimson. That starts with getting everything out."

I looked into her eyes that were a wonderful mixture of blue and purple. They were glossy, and I knew she meant every word she said.

Opening my mouth, I let everything out. Starting from the moment I woke up in the dungeon. I told her about the whipping, the insults, the touching, and fingering. When I reached the second round of whipping I'd endured, I didn't know if I could finish.

ChiyoChi pressed her forehead against mine, allowing the tears that had escaped her eyes time and again, to fall once more. "It's okay, Crimson. Say it."

"Erica...Erica...wasn't..." I took a deep breath and decided to let it out.

"Erica wasn't female. Erica...is Eric and...he raped me as in...actually...you know," I whispered.

ChiyoChi leaned back and nodded, doing her best to hide her shock.

With those words, I explained everything else. Everything that had happened.

The way he'd pinned me against the wall. The pain that came with each thrust. The way I wished the guys would come and save me. How helpless I'd felt and how I wished I'd died after all of it was over.

I mentally had wished the guys wouldn't save me. I'd wished Aki and my dad wouldn't have kept such a close eye on me. I'd wished Urufu would have let me drown in the bathtub when the thoughts entered my mind. I'd wished to be forgotten.

I told her everything and cried my eyes out. I'd never felt so naked. So bare in all my entire existence. But here I was finally telling my story, and for once in a long time, I felt free.

Surrounded by my familiars who took me in as their Master and loved me just for the broken me and ChiyoChi who was willing to listen.

She didn't pity me. No, she cried with me. Comforted me. Held me like a Mother would. Even though I had my mom, it didn't feel right. THIS felt right, as did my Kitsune's comforting presence. This was a safe place and my story could finally be told.

I could move on.

The truth was out.

I was raped by a man who'd wanted nothing in the world but to be a female.

*A man who was looked down upon for wanting to be a different gender. A man who wanted to love Storm, regardless of his identified gender. A man who couldn't have such a wish, because "women" didn't marry the same sex, and unless he revealed his true identity as Eric, he'd always be denied the life he wanted as Erica.*

*Erica was a man, and I could finally accept the reality that he wasn't the victim.*

**I, Crimson Jiyuna, was.**

**I was the victim.**

\* \* \*



## ~QUILLIAN~

MY FISTS HIT the punching bag again and again. I needed the escape and an outlet for my anger. If I didn't I'd shift, and I wouldn't give a shit what I burned. I'd go to N.R.O and burn everything and everyone by myself.

I heard the door of the training room open, but I didn't care. I kept punching the 8th black bag of sand, wishing I could claw it to pieces instead. Not like I hadn't done just that with the other seven.

"If you want to cry, it's better to do that than ruin every punching bag in this damn place."

If my dragon was out, he'd turn his head and burn James to ashes. Since he wasn't, the least he could do was unleash our claws and, just like that, the punching bag was now ruptured and pouring sand to the floor. I took a deep breath before I turned to face him.

"Out of all the people, they sent you to come to interrupt me?" I complained.

"No one sent me and last time I checked, you didn't eat at all," James grumbled. I noticed the bag in his left hand, which from the smell of it, contained a box of food.

He walked over to put the takeout on the bench before he slid his hands in his black jogger pants. He wore a dark red t- shirt and had a few wristbands on his right wrist.

Turning back to look at me he shrugged. "Stop destroying shit and eat."

I rolled my eyes and changed the subject. "How's Crimson?"

James frowned and I noticed the glint of anger that flickered in his red orbs. "Fast asleep. Aki's staying with her and Itsuki and Haru are on watch."

"Will she sleep through the night?"

"Haru added a sleeping pill to her meds. She should sleep well through the night with no issues," James replied.

"The others?"

"Malachi went for a run. Yoshimitsu is having a deep discussion with the Emperor. Jiyuna's cutting shit at the outdoor training area, and my ass is only here to give you food because dragons are apparently savage when they don't eat."

"Who told you that?"

"Malachi."

"They really trust people too easily," I grumbled.

"Nah. Lion's and kitsunes are the most perceptive shifters out there. Just because they agree with a person being around, doesn't mean they're foolish. Why do you think Crimson snapped on Hakua? It wasn't just her situation. Her Kitsune reacted."

"Hmm..." He did have a point. I wasn't there to fully grasp the situation, but Crimson was hard to push to the point of snapping. "I'm not hungry."

"Liar."

"Just go do something productive and stop bothering me." "Or you can just admit you're angry that none of you knew

Erica was a male and hurt Crimson."

I clenched my fists but looked away. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction that he was indeed right. I wasn't angry. I was furious. If there were truly a way to revive the dead, I would have done it in a heartbeat to make Erica...or ERIC pay for what he did. He hurt OUR Crimson. He touched her and fucked her against her will. He broke her, and now she desperately wanted to be fixed.

Most importantly, we didn't realize it until now. THAT was what was really bothering me. We'd ignored the fact that Crimson needed therapy in exchange for training her to help her forget.

*How would the wound ever heal if we left it half exposed?*

"Did you know?"

"I heard...but I didn't think it was true. It wasn't until after killing him that

I found out."

"You should have brought him in for justice."

"For you to burn him up into ash? I doubt you would have done that much," James said in an annoyed voice. "If you think being bound to the earth is butterflies and rainbows, think again."

"That punishment isn't enough!" I seethed.

"Being eternally bound to the earth where the days are like intense infernos of the sun's heat, and the night is frigid cold like the surface of the moon itself. You watch as people walk the surface and you're invisible while your suffering continues on and on. He can beg for eternity and, until our world ends, he'll be stuck in that same cycle. I think that's far more than enough."

I was silent, knowing that being earthbound was much worse than people stated. *I hadn't known it was to THAT extent.*

"Let's be real. Because Eric was Erica, or a female as you will, the situation in your guys' minds wasn't as serious," James suggested.

"That's not fucking true!" I snapped, my Dragon roaring in response.

"Maybe, but as an "outsider" that's what it looks like. You guys didn't put Crimson's mental health as a priority. You listened to what she wanted. Or what she thought she wanted. She assumed that if she got stronger, the nightmares and her fears would just float away like it didn't happen. Let's think about it. When someone is raped in our culture, as in a male raped a female, what's the common thing that happens after a report is made? Therapy. But because Crimson was "healing" and voiced she was okay after a female "raped" her and she'd had a few weeks off, you guys knew therapy was a good option but delayed it."

I didn't reply, knowing my anger would do the talking rather than my logic. He had a point and that just pissed me off more. James sighed and walked forward until we were face to face.

"I'm not putting the blame only on you guys. Everyone is to blame. Even

I'm to blame. If I looked into Erica...Eric more, I would have found out. The problem is dealt with now that she finally vented what she was hiding."

"How...could you tell?" I whispered, lowering my head to the floor as I attempted to hold back my tears.

"Gut instinct? Crimson...she's just a true gem in a field of stones. She's selfless and would do anything to have everyone around her be happy. Didn't matter who it was. Her parents, her alcoholic boyfriend...as long as someone else was happy, Crimson would hold her sadness in until she couldn't anymore. I've watched it enough times to know, but you guys will be able to tell soon enough."

James reached out and placed a hand on my shoulder. "Stop beating yourself up. Crim will get better. She's taken the first step. She needs you guys to be strong and not treat her differently because you know the truth. Treat her like an equal and do the things you guys used to do. Let her remember the good things in life and that you'll never leave her."

"For a Bipolar Asshole, you love lecturing people," I mumbled.

"I'm actually smart when I want to be," James grumbled. "Turn around for a second," I whispered.

He didn't question me as he removed his hand from my shoulder and turned around. He stood there and waited, which irritated me, but I gave up fighting any more. With a sigh, I took a step forward and lowered my head to his left shoulder.

My first set of tears fell, and I whispered, "Tell anyone and I'll kill you."

"You have my word," James replied.

With those last words, I let the tears fall, hoping I'd be able to be a better lover to Crimson. That we'd all be better lovers and most importantly:

*Be better protectors.*

## FREE TO DANCE THE NIGHT AWAY



~CRIMSON~

"*I* don't wanna go," I whispered.

The soft touch of Aki's lips pressed against my forehead, helping my creeping anxiety to settle at the level it was.

He held me a bit tighter, and his tails added an extra sheet of security before he spoke. "Crim. It will be fun."

"I don't know if I'm ready yet," I confessed.

Today was Friday, two days after I'd revealed the truth to ChiyoChi. I knew she'd told the guys what I'd shared with her, but I didn't know whether they were affected by it. They were acting normal, or at least I thought they were, and I didn't know whether to feel relieved or even more anxious.

Aki had stayed with me all yesterday. It wasn't like we did anything spectacular. It felt almost like a normal day. Normal as in my lifestyle before I'd officially become a shifter when the guys had newly entered my life.

Aki and I had a warm bath together, and though I was a bit nervous in the beginning, it was a little easier to be in the bath with him and actually kiss. I could handle back massages again, and Aki took advantage of this, making sure I got the best massage from him.

We then headed for breakfast, which I was surprised to see we weren't alone. I'd assumed the others would be doing their own stuff and no one else would be home but Aki and me. However, everyone was there including

James, which again, left me a little surprised.

I didn't have any hopes he'd stick around this long, but I wasn't going to act like I wasn't pleased about it.

He did love pissing off all the guys, but it seemed he got along with Haru the most, and Aki and Itsuki were second and third. Maybe it was because Haru and James were both fox shifters.

*Who knows?*

Either way, it felt nice to all eat together instead of being in my room eating either by myself or with just one of the guys.

We then went for a walk after breakfast and spent a good portion of the morning looking at the commissions and trying to schedule it all out.

I knew my schedule was up in the air, especially with our current situation, and we had no idea when we'd have to go get the final crystal, but Aki reassured me that within the next eight weeks, this would all be over. That was the plan.

*Eight weeks before we faced N.R.O.*

The afternoon was spent painting. I was apprehensive at first, but Aki and Yoshi had brought a bunch of smaller canvases and all my paint supplies from my place in Nokamoto here.

Once I was in a comfortable position and my familiars decided to appear and surround me, it didn't seem that hard to try. Even Fushichou, who I called Fushi for short, joined in all his phoenix glory. He was able to change to a smaller size that was almost the same size as Chiryoshi. With both of them sitting on my shoulders and Urufu and Mizuko sitting on each side of me with their heads on top of my crossed legs, I'd gotten to work.

It amazed me how I'd forgotten what painting always did to me. It helped me escape into a reality I knew wasn't real and let me enjoy bringing out my imagination onto a blank page.

All afternoon I painted, Aki quietly staying on the bed and watching me the entire time. I'd assumed he would have napped, but my Kitsune seemed to

acknowledge he was watching, her excitement level was high all afternoon long as she rolled around in my mind.

She was happy. My familiars were happy. And surprisingly enough, I was happy.

For what seemed like a long time, I was actually happy and content for that afternoon, painting away different commissions and enjoying my moment of tranquility.

That evening, Aki and I just talked, and I had the courage to repeat what I'd told ChiyoChi. It was easier, and I didn't shed as many tears, but what touched me the most was the way Aki simply held me and listened to every word.

*Every word, every sob, every whimper that left my trembling lips.*

I'd been so afraid of them judging me, for looking down on me after what happened since that's what society did. That's what the papers did whenever "another" prostitute was raped and tried to seek justice. I assumed it would have been the same with me. I assumed the guys would take Eric's side and blame me for what had happened.

It wasn't simply the wrong place at the wrong time, or as if I was wearing something provocative to lead Eric on. He kidnapped me and did horrible things to me, yet my mind told me that the guys wouldn't care. It was such a silly error of judgment but was so strong in power that my silence was the only thing to helped me get through each day.

I'd felt like I was suffocating within myself, and thanks to ChiyoChi and the guys for suggesting that I have a change in my training, I'd finally faced the demon I was afraid of the most.

I'd fallen asleep after that but had promised to go out with Malachi the next day for some fresh air. The others said I needed a good break, and that started with trying to go back out into civilization.

It sounded like a good idea last night, but after being awake for 30 minutes consciously thinking about it, I wanted to back out of it.

Aki ran his fingers through my long hair, prompting me to lift my head up to look into his green eyes. "I think you're more than ready, Crimson."

"But..." I trailed off, trying to think of a perfect excuse but coming up with nothing solid. "What if I freak out."

"Malachi will be right there. He won't leave you alone."

"But what if he can't calm me down. What if I make a scene and he can't do anything. I don't want to disgrace him. I'll just stay home."

*Ya. Staying home would be safer.*

Aki gave me a remorseful look, leaning down to give me a kiss on my nose. "You won't freak out, and if there's a slight chance you do and Malachi can't console you, I'll be there."

"You're coming?"

"I'll be 'there,' if you get what I mean," he replied.

"You don't need to come. I feel bad."

"I'm on guard duty." He winked and gave me a kiss on my right cheek. "I volunteered to come."

"Won't Malachi be mad?"

"Malachi agreed for me to be on guard." Aki smirked when I pouted my lips, trying to find yet another excuse. "Crim."

"What if I just fuck this up?" I mumbled.

"You won't. This is just a first step and it's okay to trip. We'll make sure we catch you," Aki vowed. I met his eyes once more, my ears twitching a few times as my Kitsune moved comfortably to the edge of the surface to add her support.

"Gomennasai," I whispered.

"Why are you apologizing?" Aki asked, lifting his hand from my hair to stroke my cheek with his thumb.

"I keep...repeating myself. One minute I'm excited to try something and then...the next I'm all depressed and want to back out. I know I've been a pain or repetitive...I'm trying."



"You're doing no such thing. I don't want you thinking that way." Aki pulled me into his arms and kissed the top of my head; his hands trailed slowly down my bare back.

The slow movement was relaxing and made my current three tails sway back and forth. It was nice that most of my wounds were healed now, and Haru was going to do a final assessment tomorrow. It was even more satisfying to know I could be touched there again and having Aki demonstrate that with his touch reminded me that I was healing.

*I am getting better.*

"Just try to have fun, Crim. Let yourself go and don't think about anything but living the best life. Think of today as your last time on earth and how you'd want to spend it. Also remember, I'll be there if you need me."

I nodded against his chest before I pressed my lips against his flesh. "I love you so much."

"I love you even more."

We remained in a tight hug for a minute before Aki whispered, "Are you going to shower first?"

"Ten more minutes of cuddle time," I replied with my eyes closed. "And I want a bath."

"With me?"

"With you."

"You're getting used to those."

"I am. Not ashamed of it."

"Never want you to be," he murmured. "Ten minutes and a nice hot bath to start the day."

I made a small sound to tell him I agreed, wanting to continue enjoying the sound of his heartbeat while my tails moved back and forth. He went back to stroking my back at a slow and calming pace, and I decided to enjoy every second of this.

*Just think of today as your last. Be free to do what you want.*

**Live.**

\* \* \*

"I NEVER EXPECTED you to be able to drink so much!" I gawked at Malachi who grinned and took down his 20th shot.

"Lions have extremely fast metabolisms," Malachi replied. His confident look made me giggle as the loud music pumped through the packed club.

I was so thankful that I hadn't chickened out on my date with Malachi. It started off with him taking me out to breakfast. We sat and simply talked about random things, like how Malachi liked his eggs sunny side up, which he said his parents used to think he was weird because the rest of the family loved them well cooked.

We'd finished breakfast and went through a stroll around Homatomashi. We looked at different landmarks; Malachi knew all the history regarding each place before he took me to one of the famous art museums I'd gone to with Aki last time. With the Winter Festival approaching in a few weeks, the gallery had transitioned to fall artwork. They even had some of my art pieces that had been transferred from the art gallery from Nokamoto on request of the Emperor himself.

Malachi explained Yomato had no idea it was me until Jiyuna told him last week, and now the Emperor wanted a whole gallery made for my art work when I was ready to return to doing my passion. That would also be after I caught up with my commissions, which included a long waiting list.

Either way, it excited me to think people still wanted my artwork. The image I'd drawn the night that I talked to ChiyoChi would be kept in storage until after the peace talks were established.

The guys were working together with the Emperor to create a campaign regarding sexual rights for men and woman and to heighten the consequences of rape for all—regardless of gender, race, or type of being you were; human

or shifter.

I knew I wasn't ready, but I was offered a position on the justice team. It would be a set of teams that would ensure peace was maintained across Japan and would soon branch out to international affairs when the time was right.

The issue with prostitution and the rights of woman as well as men would be reviewed and addressed with the help of my parents, the emperor, and other peace associations who tried their best to remain neutral until people were proven guilty with evidence.

Malachi also talked briefly about the recent discovery of women who were similar to ninjas and had Masters they had no choice but to follow. Some were physically and sexually abused, others were used to conduct their own missions and eliminate anyone who would cause conflict with their Master.

It was a complicated topic, and Malachi said he didn't know enough to confidently discuss it, but Yoshi, Aki, and the others agreed that we wanted to find these victims and put an end to it all. Maybe even give them the freedom they desperately sought but were never given the chance to experience.

After our talk, we enjoyed walking around the parks that still had cherry blossoms and then went for dinner. I thought we'd go home after that, but we'd passed by a club I used to go to years ago, and I simply couldn't resist the urge to go in.

We were both wearing decent attire; Malachi wore mustard colored khakis, a white dress shirt and his hair straightened and left down which gave him a smooth, softened look without losing his masculinity.

I, on the other hand, had donned leather pants, black boot like heels, a white shirt that was thin enough to show the black lace bralette I wore beneath, and my favorite leather jacket. My hair was up in a ponytail with a black ribbon with gold incantations, and I was even wearing the charm bracelet I'd gotten for my birthday.

We'd settled at the bar and began drinking, enjoying the loud music and the energetic atmosphere. It was rather weird that I felt safe here, or maybe it was because I was with Malachi. My Kitsune could sense Aki nearby, and that was an added comfort to me and was allowing me to let loose and enjoy the night.

I was finally having fun and now that the music had changed to the perfect dance beats, I was debating whether I would be willing to dance. *To enjoy dancing with Malachi at a more intimate level.*

"Do...you want to dance for a bit?" I asked shyly, thanking the bartender who brought us another set of shots.

Malachi smirked, and it could have been the alcohol or the amazing multi-colored lights of the club, but he looked ten times more handsome as his eyes twinkled with joy.

"I'd love to dance with you Crimson. It's been a while."

"Did you use to dance with Storm?" I asked. It was a weird question to bring up, but I was curious.

"Nah. Hip-hop and stuff like that weren't really her thing. I'd just come by myself at times to keep up with my moves for future competitions."

"Competition?"

"Champion for years. I could have gotten a scholarship and been on those talent shows as a judge if I wanted to," Malachi revealed.

"Um...I can move my hips...?" I blushed, realizing I was no hip-hop champion. Malachi chuckled softly and leaned over to give me a deep kiss. It was unexpected, but my body responded without a second thought, my lips moving with his.

I didn't even realize we were French kissing until we were both out of breath and needed a moment. Malachi's seductive expression made my stomach knot and reminded me how desperately I needed a good, fulfilling sex session. I'd neglected my personal pleasures because I felt I didn't deserve to be pleased.

Yet, now that I'd realized I wasn't in the wrong, it had rekindled the fire inside me and made me want to be touched and make love again. Was I at 100%? Not yet. I wasn't even sure I'd last this date without a breakdown, but I wanted to try.

*Trying was better than doing nothing but wishing.*

"That's more than enough," he whispered against my lips. With one last clink of our shot glasses, we threw back the burning hot vodka and headed for the dance floor.

Malachi took the lead, maneuvering us through the dancing crowd to the perfect corner that was balanced with the volume of the music and lighting. It wasn't hard to dance with him, and before long I was grinding against him to the rhythm of the beat.

Even though his hands were on my hips and his hot breath teased my flesh, I was too far gone to care. In all honesty, I yearned for this. To be lost in the sounds that engulfed us and let the alcohol remove all my troubles, leaving me feeling empty and light while I allowed my body to enjoy this moment.

I'd forgotten how it felt to please my men, loving how my closeness turned Malachi on and he wasn't afraid to let me feel the hard bulge in his jeans that pressed against my ass. I wanted him so badly, but each time I tried to think about it, I pushed it away.

It wasn't until the music slowed and I turned in Malachi's hold to face him that my feelings hit me all at once. The love in his sky-blue eyes was so raw and pure, it shook me to the core.

He loved me. Truly loved me after everything that had happened. I could have killed him, and he'd still look at me with those same passionate eyes. Even knowing every single detail, he could still dance the night with me. He could still hold me in his arms and kiss my neck with intensity. He could bring me into a world of equilibrium and that was what I needed.

His left arm wrapped around my waist, pressing me against him as his

right hand reached out to cradle my face.

"You're okay, Hottie. I'm right here and I'll never hurt you." He whispered so soothingly I couldn't help but let my tears fall.

"I love you so much..." I said softly .

"I know, Crimson. Just as I love you." His reply was followed by a tender kiss to my lips. "You know that, right? That I love and adore the strong woman before me."

"I'm not strong."

"Yes, you are, Crimson. You are the strongest woman I know, and nothing will stop you. Not the past, nor the present. No one will stop you from reaching the future you're destined to live."

I leaned up and kissed him hard, and he kissed me right back, lowering his right hand and wrapping his other arm around my waist. After the heated kiss, he hugged me, shielding me from the world as I cried. He let me be vulnerable yet made sure that no one else would see that side but him, and I was truly thankful. I was grateful to have such amazing men, and I wouldn't get tired of saying it.

*Arigatou Gozaimasu, Malachi.*

\* \* \*

I DIDN'T THINK Malachi and I would stay the night at a hotel. Yet here we were, the both of us naked and facing each other at the end of the bed, while the soft sounds of music flowed through the dimly lit suite.

I wasn't afraid of Malachi, but I wouldn't deny I was nervous. It had been weeks since I'd had sex, and it would be the first time I'd do the deed after the incident with Eric. Malachi decided to do things differently. His arms wrapped around my waist as we pressed our bare bodies together and simply danced to the slow yet sexual R&B music.

The slow Jazz rendition of 'Ain't No Sunshine' came on and it seemed to

make this moment perfect. Malachi twirled me around and my back pressed against his. I was slightly afraid by the position, wondering if we'd do it like this, but Malachi whispered into my ear for me to relax and to simply follow his lead.

He knew my insecurities and I needed to let him do his thing. The sexual tension was thick between us, and it felt like it had been years since we'd seen each other or even been this close in proximity, which was false yet felt so true.

We were grinding again at a slow swaying pace, and I could feel Malachi's cock grow hard with each movement. He concentrated on licking and nipping my neck, humming to the song once in a while and allowing me to relax in his embrace.

When he tugged at my ear lobe with his teeth, I moaned, loving the shivers that ran through me, the feeling almost foreign to me.

That simple sound seemed to ignite the both of us and we were lost in fast pace kisses as our hands roamed over one another.

I didn't know when we'd ended up in the bed, but I didn't care. I was pumped with the dying need to be fucked, and I didn't want it to be ruined by the dark thoughts fighting to get through. Fighting to ruin the mood and what seemed to be the one chance I'd get to enjoy with Malachi before we went back to business at hand.

When his cock reached my entrance, the head of his length gathering my arousal as the perfect lube, I froze. The thoughts came crashing then, my fears and my screams, but I closed my eyes to try and shut it out.

*To shut them up from ruining this. I needed this!*

"Crim."

I opened my eyes to see Malachi's calm expression, watching him lean down to give me a soft kiss on my lips. "Breathe and keep your eyes open. Just look only at me. Don't listen to anything else but the music and my breathing," he said softly .

My stalling didn't faze him, and the look on his face told me it never would. I could break down and cry and he'd comfort me and try to make this work. He knew how badly I wanted this. How desperate I was to have this one escape that I knew would lead to many others. I wanted him, and I couldn't let the past stop me anymore.

"Okay..." I whispered. With my approval, he slowly inched himself inside me. I bit my lip to hold back the moan that almost escaped. Malachi filled me up and more, and it felt ten times better than I'd expected. It didn't hurt like the past. It wasn't the reason why tears left my eyes.

I was crying because I was happy. I'd passed through another hurdle and now my real reward was enjoying this experience with a man who loved me. He didn't want to hurt me. He wanted to show me that sex was a pleasurable activity for the both of us. Sex wasn't a reward for being a good sport. It was an action that rewarded both parties with mutual agreements who cared for one another.

He leaned down and kissed me hungrily, while his thrusts moved in and out of me, building up the pleasure I'd been desperately yearning for. To reach a climax out of my own accord and not for someone else's satisfaction.

It wasn't long till my tongue darted into his mouth and caressed his. As one arm was wrapped around his neck to keep our bodies close, the other was playing with his smooth hair that I was so thankful he didn't cut for my sake.

Our hips moved at the perfect rhythm while our mouths were lost in passionate intense kisses. I didn't care about the tears that stained my cheeks, and I buried the fear into the ground where it belonged. I was safe in the arms of my lover and he wanted to give me as much pleasure as I could handle.

*I want every bit of it.*

"Faster, Malachi," I moaned, and he didn't delay.

"Crim...sweet love, you feel amazing," Malachi growled.

Our eyes never left each other, and I felt the familiar coiling in my stomach as my pent-up pleasure began to build stronger and stronger. My



moans were loud and quick, and Malachi's were just as loud as he moved faster. My hips moved to meet each thrust halfway, and we let our bodies do the talking. To exchange our feelings and ultimate passion for one another.

"Crim. Crim....Crim." Malachi repeated my name over and over again and earned him a moan from me as I tried desperately not to cum so soon. I wanted us to cum together, to experience the pleasure we'd both been waiting for.

"Malachi...I'm...going to cum. Ah. More. More!" I begged, pulling his head down to smash his lips against mine.

Our moans were muffled in each other's mouths, and I closed my eyes as I struggled with every nerve within me to hold back.

Malachi broke the kiss to grunt and he moved even faster, thrusting in and out of me as his breathing quickened.

"Crim...fuck, cum baby," he ordered, thrusting himself so deeply that was all it took to throw me over the edge—the intense orgasm washing over me with such power and strength, I screamed his name in pleasure.

"Malachi!"

"Crimson!"

His load shot inside me, filling me whole as I arched my back and let the aftershocks take over me.

We both collapsed on the dark red sheets, Malachi pulling out slowly before he shifted to rest on his side.

He didn't delay in pulling me into his arms, his body heat giving me the comfort I needed as I cried.

"Shh, it's okay Crimson," Malachi whispered into my ear and I nodded, holding him tightly.

"Thank you, Malachi. Thank you so much."

He kissed my forehead and comforted me while I shed what felt like the last of my tears.

I could feel pleasure again. I'd be able to share myself with the others

again. I would eventually return to normal, and that simple thought was the bringer of happiness.

*I would be just fine.*

## DAY OFF AND DUAL COMPANY



~CRIMSON~

"That should be good. No more scars here," Haru announced, sounding relieved but tired.

Looking over my shoulder to look at the mirror, a small smile formed on my lips as I stared at my perfectly smooth skin, not a scar in sight.

"Haru...that's amazing." My voice was barely a whisper and I felt so grateful to him. I would be able to wear whatever I want and not worry about prying questions from people about the large and multiple scars on my back or thighs.

Haru and I were in my bedroom and he'd been doing a final examination of my wounds. I didn't think he'd actually be able to get rid of my scars when he suggested it since healing took a lot of work and energy.

Today was another rest day and I was scolded into relaxing and essentially not lifting a finger. Malachi and I hadn't come home until early in the morning after another round of amazing shower sex. The moment my head hit the soft pillows of my bed, I was out and didn't wake up until Haru and Quil had to wake me up to eat lunch.

It was just us three today at the shrine. James was guarding since he lost at Rock-Paper-Scissors, and Aki and Malachi were having a training session with ChiyoChi. Itsuki and Yoshi were at the palace helping with the clean up and making sure the riots were under control for the day .

Since the bombing at the palace, the people of Homatomashi weren't having any more of it and were now rioting in the streets. It was soon called the "March for Peace Movement" and the existence of N.R.O went public real fast. Of course, many of us already knew about N.R.O, but now that people realized Yomato the Emperor was at risk, they weren't putting up with it.

It was a good thing to have so many people's support, but it also brought up the many risks of innocent people getting involved. With all this happening, we had to start thinking whether we even had eight weeks left before facing N.R.O.

I personally doubted it, but James stated he'd look into it and see if there would be an opening. N.R.O. always did some type of celebration of their creation during this time of year, which meant their defense would be lowered to at least 50%.

To White-Eyes' knowledge, I'd been severely hurt by the bomb incident and was on "life support" so, to James' assessment, White-Eyes was celebrating more than ever and not caring about the little marches going on.

We wanted to get him off guard and that was what the guys were working on. I didn't like that I was being left out of the planning, but I would be useless if I didn't follow instructions and actually rest up.

After a few days of resting, I'd be able to go back to training and preparing for our ambush. Besides, I liked that I got to hang out with Haru and Quillian today.

Quillian had gone downstairs to make something quickly for James, which was really cute. Was I going to tease him about it? Hell ya! At least they hadn't killed one another yet.

I turned my attention back to Haru who sighed. "Now just your thighs and we'll be done."

I frowned at his pale expression and patted the spot next to me on the bed. "We can do it later. You're pale, Haru."

He blinked and looked in the mirror to see if what I said was true. "Maybe five-minutes rest."

I gave him a look, but he just smiled and sat next to me, slipping his hand into mine. "You okay?"

"Yes. Better than okay. I...didn't think you'd be able to heal the scars. I'm really grateful, Haru," I whispered.

He smirked and leaned over to give me a sweet kiss on my lips. "You're welcome."

"I hope he chokes and dies on a fish bone."

We both looked to the doorway to see Quillian enter and close the door, looking peeved as ever. "Always has to act like a smart ass."

"I'm assuming James gave you an intellectual way of saying thank you?" Haru questioned with a grin.

"He can go fuck himself," Quil huffed and pulled his shirt off.

"I had to put clothes on because of him and he can't even say thanks. I'm gonna kick his ass one day. Just you wait."

"Uh huh," I replied, my eyes more interested in his lovely abs than whatever he just said.

"There you go distracting Crimson again." Haru chuckled and I blushed, looking away to hide my flushed cheeks.

"I wasn't distracted!"

"What did he just say?" Haru asked.

"Um...something, something James sucks. I'm putting clothes on." I dropped my gaze to the white towel around my waist. It was easier for Haru to work with me not wearing clothes, but now that he was done with my back, I could at least wear a shirt or something.

"Is Haru done with your thighs?" Quil asked.

"Not yet. I was taking a breather," Haru admitted. "I think I've been using my power a bit too often."

"Yomato told you to slow down," Quil noted.

Haru shrugged. "I am resting."

"Sure." Quil rolled his eyes, but then his gaze lingered on me for a long moment. "It's just her thighs left, right?"

"Yup," Haru replied.

I smiled and turned slightly so Quil could see my back. "The scars are gone, Quil. See?"

His expression softened as a smile formed on his lips. "Looks perfect," he praised and walked over to where Haru and I were both sitting on the bed.

"Haru, you did a good job."

"Of course I did."

"You're overconfident." Quil sighed but still looked super happy. He stood in front of me and leaned down to give me a deep kiss. "I think we should finish your thighs though."

"Are you gonna help?" Haru asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I could," Quil replied with a seductive grin that made my stomach flip. My Kitsune poked her head from her curled up position, her ears twitching in excitement. She then stood and started running around excitingly.

*Great. My Kitsune is encouraging me to have fun sexy times.*

"I think Crimson's Kitsune's excited." Haru chuckled when I tuned back into what he said.

"She is not!" I countered.

"Your ears and tails are out even with your hair up," Quil pointed out.

I groaned, noticing the twitch of my ears, and looked back to see the six tails that were now out. I mentally cursed.

*Really? Couldn't at least wait till I put clothes on. Now my towel isn't doing much justice on my backside.*

My Kitsune stopped to stare at me with those cute eyes of hers and once again I gave up trying to scold her.

*You're such a promoter.*

She happily replied and began rolling around impatiently. Haru and Quil

exchanged a look before Quil sat down on my left side.

He reached out and tugged the ribbon gently, loosening it until it fell from its hold, releasing my long silver and black locks that now reached my lower back.

I'd yet to decide if I would cut it or at least trim it, but the benefits of long hair when it came to other pleasurable things was beginning to excite me.

"I guess you don't need this anymore," Quil whispered before he leaned over to kiss me. I moaned in response, unable to stop the low sound while I slowly closed my eyes and kissed him back.

I didn't know why I was so comfortable with kissing him so deeply when Haru sat right next to me, but the thought of having them both sitting next to me was making my imagination go wild.

*And I'm not sure if I wanted to stop whatever was brewing between the three of us.*

We broke the kiss and I turned to see Haru's pleased smile before he leaned in to give me a steamy kiss of his own. Now I was really excited and had to squeeze my thighs together in an attempt to ignore the pulsing arousal going on between my legs. I didn't want to give myself away, but I also didn't want this to end.

I always wondered what a threesome would be like, and now that the potential option was there, I was curious and wanted to experience it with these two men.

There was still a little fear trickling inside me, but this time I shut it down right away. I wanted this now, and I wasn't going to let the past hinder me. Malachi had already proven that he and the guys wanted what was best for me, and I wanted to be able to return the favor by pleasing them for taking care and loving me for who I'd become.

We broke our kiss to catch our breaths. "Can...we um...do more of that?" I whispered, feeling slightly embarrassed for asking. I didn't know how this was going to work, as it was already beginning to make me slightly nervous.

Haru grinned and Quil smirked. "We'll lead the way, Crimson," Haru soothed.

"Just have faith in us." Quil winked. He leaned in to whisper in my ear while Haru stood and removed his shirt. "And if you need to stop at any time, you say so. Understood?"

"Hai," I replied, staring into his eyes to assure him I was actually listening and not distracted by his husky voice that was doing more than just tempting me—tingles running through my lower region once more.

"I bet we could multitask," Haru suggested, and I turned my gaze just as he lowered his boxers and revealed his long length. *Damn...*

When I'd given him a hand job at the hot springs, I knew he had a long length, but damn, I was impressed. And I already had a grasp of what Quil's looked like from my vivid dreams and a few glimpses after our shared bath time.

Quil rose and lowered his shorts and boxers in one go, and I couldn't move my gaze away from his cock, giving it the same attention as I did Haru's.

*Double Damn...*

I licked my lips and my gaze moved back and forth between to the two of them, unsure who to please first.

Quil chuckled. "You don't need to choose, Crimson."

"I don't? I can't...well um, how am I supposed to please the both of you?"

"A few ways," Haru replied with a pleased smile. "But first, thighs Crim."

He moved back to sit next to me, as did Quil, and I couldn't help but stare at Haru's cock and notice how hard it was.

*How am I going to concentrate?*

"Crim."

I turned my head toward Quil, who reached out and slid his hand across my cheek, steadying my head before he pulled me into a deep kiss. My mind completely forgot my question and I shivered at Haru's warm touch; his hand



landed on my chest and slowly trailed down between my breasts to gently tug at my towel.

I felt the soft fabric leave me, but I wasn't worried as I continued to kiss Quil as he slipped his tongue into my mouth.

I moaned at Haru's touch as he took my perky breast into his mouth and began to suck it while his hand slowly skimmed down my stomach to my right thigh.

Quil bit my bottom lip, and I opened my eyes as he tugged it softly, his hungry gaze locked onto mine. My eyes fluttered closed and another moan escaped me when Quil's free left hand began to fondle my left breast just as Haru's right hand grew warm at my thigh, telling me he was truly multitasking, which was both impressive and damn sexy .

I couldn't even think straight from all the different sensations running through me while Haru was somehow healing my thigh and expertly sucking on my breast at the same time, teasing my nipples. I couldn't ignore his left hand that was keeping me sitting up; his hand supported my back but still made little swirls to add to all the teasing.

When Haru was finished giving my right breast some love and attention, he moved back up my body, leaving kisses behind before Quil and I broke our heated kiss.

They switched roles with ease as if they were on the same wavelength. Quil was still playing with my left breast but he now moved his hand down to my thigh, and it grew hot as he started healing me and amping my desire simultaneously. I didn't even delay in turning my head and smashing my lips against Haru's inviting ones.

This dual action was amazing, and I was so wet and throbbing, I was dying to enjoy the both of them if that was possible. I'd never done anal, and I still didn't know if I was ready for it. I was willing to try it if the guys were down for it and I didn't freak out.

When Quil was done, Haru broke the kiss and we pressed foreheads

together while we caught our breaths.

"I...really want both of you...but I've..never really done two guys before," I confessed, and pulled back to stare at anything but their gazes.

I didn't know if that was something shifters were qualified to do, and I'd been pretty satisfied with one on one, but having a threesome felt like a next level adventure that I really wanted to attempt.

It could have been a stupid way of beating down my fear even further within myself and eventually conqueror it, but now that I had the courage, I really wanted to try it.

"Like, I don't know if I'm ready for it, but I want to try." I glanced down and noticed the scars that were once on my thighs were gone, which made me smile as I reached out to touch the smooth skin.

"Crimson."

I looked up to see the both of them sporting broad smiles that warmed my heart.

"Let's try it," Quil whispered.

"And I'll make it as least painful as I can." Haru winked, causing a blush to rise on my skin but also putting a smile on my face.

"Arigato guys," I whispered, thankful that my scars were gone. It felt as if this was like a mini celebration and I was about to enjoy it with Quil and Haru.

I stood and ran my hands through my hair, my tails vanishing from sight but ears remaining in place. I noticed the guy's eyes taking their sweet time enjoying my naked body before Quil moved to my front side and wrapped his arms around my waist.

"You want to do this standing?" he asked.

"I...don't know," I admitted, thinking about it for a moment. "I think maybe laying down would be easier?"

I didn't know what I'd enjoy more, but the thought of standing was sending shivers through me and it wasn't the exciting kind.

"Laying down it is," Quil whispered and gave me a warm hug. "We'll be gentle. Just relax." He rubbed my back slowly, and I nodded into his shoulder while I inhaled his gentle aroma of lingering cologne.

I heard the drawer of the nightstand open up and we pulled back to see Haru take out a packet of lube. Quil moved to the bed first, lying on his back before he used his finger to gesture for me to come to where he was. With a smirk, I climbed onto the bed until I was hovering over him, my hair draping around him as I lowered my lips to his.

We kept up our kiss while I positioned my opening above his cock. He broke apart for a moment, and I took that opportunity to slowly lower myself onto him. He moaned, and I sighed at the fulfillment he gave my aching pussy; I leaned back down to kiss him once again.

I heard the tearing sound of the lube packaging, and Quillian slowly trailed his hands down the sides of my waist and stopped at my hips. I could tell he was being cautious, not wanting to trigger anything, and that made me feel even safer and relaxed with what was to come. They didn't want to hurt me. They wanted to give me a moment of dual pleasure.

I felt Haru's hand on my back, and I broke the kiss to lean back and turn my head to meet his lips over my shoulder. He kissed me nice and slow and Quil took up pleasing each breast once more as I tried to stay still and not over excite myself.

"Crim...I'm going to slide inside you now. Remember, if you want me to stop, just say so and I'll pull out," Haru whispered into my ear and left a sweet kiss on my neck.

"Okay," I replied, trying to catch my breath.

Quil paused and leaned up slightly and I turned my attention to him. He reached out to stroke my cheek and gave me a quick peck on the lips. "Just relax. It'll feel really good in a moment."

I did as he asked, allowing my body to relax as I tried to focus on Quil's eyes that were a lovely mixture of purple and pink which told me he was

aroused. Not like I didn't feel how turned on he was with his cock inside me.

I felt the head of Haru's manhood at my anus, and I bit my lip but kept my eyes on Quil's. Slowly, Haru inched himself inside me, and I expected to feel some sort of pain, but it was a comforting fullness and warmth before I moaned, closing my eyes as my pussy tightened around Quil's cock which prompted a moan out of him.

We both took deep breaths, trying to calm ourselves and Haru filled the rest of me. "You okay, Crim?" Haru asked.

"Yes," I gasped out, feeling both their cocks. I was amazed Haru's length had fit the whole way.

"We're going to start moving, Crim," Quil warned.

"Okay," I replied, my body still relaxed and ready.

Haru moved first, slowly inching in and out of me, while his hands gripped the side of my waist. Then Quil began to move, and it felt fucking amazing. The way their cocks pumped in and out of me, starting off in opposite movements; Haru slid in while Quil pulled out.

Quil kept my lips occupied while Haru leaned down and sucked at my neck. They began to move faster and in unison, and I had to remember to breathe.

"Yes. More. Faster!" I begged and was rewarded as they both increased their pace, making me gasp and whimper. This was so much more; the pleasure pulsing through me grew and grew with their combined thrusts that got deeper.

The room felt hot and it wasn't long before we were all sweating.

Our moans grew so loud that I bet even James could hear us even through the closed door.

"So close," Quil grunted.

Haru panted. "Crim, love. We're going to cum soon."

I merely nodded, my erratic breath and moans were the only indication of how close I was. I couldn't think or speak, I was just on a cloud of pleasure.

In moments I'd reach my release and I wanted to enjoy every second of it.

"Quil. Haru. Fuck. So. Deep. Please." I forced the words out through breathless gasps, feeling myself reach the edge of my climax.

They both pulled out almost completely and, with ease, slid back in so deeply, that was all it took to make me climax; a scream exited my throat as I arched my back and came. My eyes closed in pure euphoria and Haru and Quil cursed together as they thrust inside me two more times before they both found their release.

Feeling their hot cum fill me triggered yet another orgasm that vibrated through me, and Haru quickly wrapped his arm around my waist to stop me from collapsing on Quil, the both of us trying to catch our breath.

"Shit," Quil breathed, and I couldn't even reply as I tried to come down from my high. Haru slid out of me first before he picked me up so Quil could slide his cock out of me as well.

I finally opened my eyes and saw Haru's wide grin as he leaned down to kiss me. "I think we should take a bath." He chuckled. "We came a lot more than I expected."

"I second that. As long as we get to do it again," Quil added. I chuckled and Haru rolled his eyes. "Sex addict."

"You enjoyed it too!" Quil countered.

"I never said I didn't." Haru winked and, with me in his arms, headed to the bathroom. "Catch up."

"Really?! Ugh...now I know how Malachi feels," Quil whined, which made both of us laugh.

I looked up at Haru and he noticed my gaze, stopping for a second to meet my eyes. "You alright?"

"Yes. That...was amazing," I whispered and leaned up to kiss him. "Thank you...for being patient with me."

"I'll always be patient when it comes to you, Crimson. Always," he whispered back and gave me a loving kiss that made me smile with delight.

*I was healing, and it felt nice to see the progress.*

## THE POWER OF NINE TAILS



~CRIMSON~

"*A* ki- mhm. You're being a distract—mhmm. Ugh." I groaned and pouted my lips so Aki couldn't kiss me for the millionth time, and he chuckled, placing a kiss on my neck instead which made me giggle as I uncrossed my arms.

"Alright, I'll stop," he whispered but pulled me into a hug. "I missed you."

"I missed you more," I replied, hugging him tightly as the warm breeze passed by us.

The past two weeks had been spent alternating between resting and training. Aki and Yoshi had been the busiest out of all of us.

In the last two weeks, the people of Homatomashi had initiated the March For Peace, going around the different cities in Homatomashi to spread the word and encourage the victims of N.R.O. to come forward and share their stories so justice could be delivered.

Of course, with such actions the crime rates increased even more and that's why Aki and Yoshi were there to assist with making the marches as peaceful as they could.

Apparently, Aki was more than enough but on occasion, depending on the size and areas, the others would join in. They always left two people behind, one of them usually being James who'd been cooperative this entire time.

We'd talked a few times when one of the guys gave him a few hours to

relax after a long guard shift, and though I didn't fully trust him yet, I didn't resent him. He was helping us figure out the best time to try and take down N.R.O. and after a bit of explanation from the guys on James' role in all of this, I was willing to forgive him.

*Though I kicked his balls during training as payback.*

Today was my time to spend with Aki during the day and tonight with Yoshi. Aki said he wanted to go to a place where we could actually shift into our kitsune forms, which was something I'd yet to achieve. Aki said he'd help me, but he didn't think I'd need to fully shift on our mission to N.R.O.

Not with how narrow the path could be, both inside and outside of their apparent mountain base.

On our way there, we'd talked about what the base would potentially look like. Aki explained that Haru was working with James to try to override the seal on him. Both of them would shift into their fox forms and use some special cunning communication to try to get as much information out of James as they could.

It was slowly working, and they were making a plan to make this mission as smooth and causality free as possible, but they hadn't solidified the plan just yet.

"I want more time with you," I mumbled into Aki's kimono.

He pulled back to give me a sad smirk before he kissed me comfortingly. "I know, Crim love. I don't think we'll get much more than this afternoon."

I frowned at his words and he pulled me into another hug. "Why?"

"One week," he whispered and scooped me up with ease. He walked me over to the nearest cherry blossom tree and lowered us to the ground. I sat on his lap and he secured his right arm around my waist, keeping me close to his warm body. I noticed his three tails were glowing just slightly and I looked up at him to see his serious gaze as he stared forward.

"One week? As in..."

Aki nodded, confirming my suspicions. "One more week left until we raid



N.R.O. James and Haru went today in their fox forms and James was able to help make a map of the entire place inside and out without overriding the seal on him."

"Seriously? The seal doesn't work on shifter forms?" I asked, feeling completely shocked about such a discovery and how it hadn't been figured out yet.

"I think it depends on the shifter type and size. Foxes are an average size, but you notice Haru and James are a tad smaller. With a bit of magic, thanks to ChiyoChi, James was able to say certain things in a short period of time. It's technically not against the seal if they're talking fox," Aki explained.

"Wow. That's amazing then. But I guess that doesn't allow James to say who White-Eyes is?"

"No. I don't think it's someone we know personally. That's essentially what James was able to say. He can't state anything else."

"Why do we only have a week left?" I asked.

"Because James said they're planning a huge raid on Monday across Homatomashi."

"Shit...wait. If they're planning...doesn't that mean most of their people will be setting things up Sunday night to be sneaky." Aki smirked, looking proud of my swift thinking. "Exactly. Which means that the base will have two thirds fewer guards.

Perfect night for an ambush, if I do say so myself."

"White-Eyes will be there for sure?"

"Yes. James guaranteed it. Apparently, he has some medical condition, so he can't be far from the base too long? He couldn't say the specifics, but we'd be able to get him when he least expects it if we plan it right."

"What about James? Isn't he going to get hurt if he betrays White-Eyes?"

"Quil contacted the elderly woman who gave you the charm bracelet to weaken Storm's essence from bothering you," Aki revealed.

"She can do something?!" I exclaimed, a bit of relief running through me.

Aki's expression softened. "Yup. She can potentially override the mark he has that binds him to White-Eyes. If all goes well, he'll be free to do as he wishes and won't be affected if we end up having to kill White-Eyes."

"No way. Does James know?" I asked.

"Not yet. We kind of wanted you to go with him and let the Great One deliver the news. He has to go on Sunday morning so it's nice and fresh. It will be the strongest and have the highest protection for the mission."

"He'll be so happy," I whispered.

"It was Quil's idea." Aki shrugged.

"Except for the fact they hate each other's guts, they're sure nice to one another," I mumbled, noticing a few times that James would be scolding Quil to eat instead of being a dragon breathing ass hole and Quil just throwing insults but accepting the food James brought each time.

I turned slightly in Aki's embrace, wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling him down for a passionate kiss. It was a little unexpected, but I was really grateful to them.

I didn't know if I was ready to have James be a part of this relationship I had with the others, but the guys were making it so much easier and I was beyond thankful for their acceptance. James was hard to understand but finding out everything from the beginning really helped with me with potentially giving him another chance at being with me, as long as I could date the others as we were now .

"Why are you pleasing me?" Aki whispered against my lips.

"For being amazing. You and the others. The last 5 months have been a rollercoaster and it just feels nice to be loved whole- heartedly by all of you. Even after all the ups and downs, you guys still love me. You cared about me as a human and as a shifter, and I couldn't be more thankful."

"I should be thanking you for having a heart of gold," Aki murmured and kissed me back.

I smirked against his lips, the both of us enjoying our little moment. My tails popped out and began wagging back and forth in excitement, probably due to my Kitsune who practically hopped up and down in place.

I broke the kiss to giggle as my ears twitched. "My Kitsune won't stay still."

"She's excited to show you her awesome skills," Aki said softly, but I noticed he grew quiet for a moment.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I have to tell you something, but I don't know exactly how to say it."

"Is it bad?"

"No. It's just something...I don't tell people."

"The guys know?"

"Yes."

"Hmmm....did Storm know?"

"No."

"Oh..." That intrigued me.

*Something he's told the guys but never told Storm.*

"Why didn't you tell her?"

"I...well my Kitsune really didn't trust her enough. I never go against my Kitsune's instincts, so I decided not to tell her." "Is your Kitsune fine with me knowing?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because you wouldn't put us in danger."

I stared into his eyes, noticing by his expression that he was serious about this.

"I'd never want harm to come to you, Akihiro," I vowed. My Kitsune came right to the surface then; my tails multiplied to six and my Kitsune stared intriguingly at Aki whose eyes shifted to an amber color and his tails began to glow brightly .

We just stared into their mesmerizing eyes and it seemed like something clicked between them without saying words. Aki's eyes blinked a few times, slowly morphing back to their green appearance while my Kitsune pulled back and was now extremely happy.

Probably the happiest I'd seen her as she ran and rolled around.

"What...did he tell her? She's like extremely happy," I pointed out, giving Aki a confused look.

He smiled and leaned in to press his forehead against mine. "Don't be mad."

"Why would I?"

"Because I wanted to tell you sooner...but I was scared," he admitted.

I reached out to run my hand along his cheek and he closed his eyes, taking a few breaths as I continued to stroke his left cheek.

"I won't be upset," I whispered and gave him a reassuring kiss.

I could tell he was nervous, and I simply wanted him to know that I loved him and would support him no matter what.

*He'd been there and supported me through my ups and downs. I could at least listen to his concerns and give him my support. If the guys already knew, it couldn't be that bad.*

Aki nodded, giving me a peck on the lips before he urged me to stand. We both stood, and I stared intriguingly at Aki as he closed his eyes. His three tails began to glow even stronger, the gold, orange, and red colors growing stronger with each second.

What made me gasp and my eyes widen was when I watched his 3 tails multiply to six, then to nine, but my eyes went as wide as saucers when the final three emerged.

*Aki's...no way. He's a...Wait. Is there such thing as a Twelve-Tail Kitsune?*

My Kitsune practically squealed and went on a rolling spree in my mind before she ran right to the border of my mind and prompted all nine of my

tails out, which felt weird when I was in a slightly calmer state compared to the time I'd faced Malachi in the spiral of black cherry blossoms.

"You're a Twelve-Tails Kitsune, Akihiro?" I asked for confirmation as if my eyes were deceiving me or I was dreaming. "Is that a term? I mean...is that even possible? Is that even a race?"

He slowly nodded, looking a bit nervous. "I...haven't told anyone. The guys only found out because of a certain mission and vowed not to say anything."

"So you're some super rare breed? Wait, why is my Kitsune over the moon about this?" I asked.

"Uh...well...um."

"Akihiro?"

"You're...kinda...one...too." He mumbled the words so low I almost missed it. I just stood there like he'd spoken German or something, and my Kitsune paused in her rolling to give me an excited look like she was so happy I finally knew.

"Back up. No...wait. That...how?"

"Crimson, English." Aki gave me a sympathetic smile and I groaned, not even realizing I'd switched languages.

"That's impossible."

"What is?"

"Me being...twelve...LOOK! I have nine. See?! Count. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9! Not twelve." I tried to defend myself and Akihiro chuckled.

"Um. You have nine for now, but you will have twelve when you've unlocked all your Kitsune powers."

"Nani?!"

"Hmm. Maybe I should have explained this better before telling you," Aki mused out loud, looking a bit concerned.

"How are you a twelve-tails? How can you be one? Are we even allowed to say that out loud? I mean, what if someone is watching or listening?" I

looked around as my ears twitched to try to hear if anyone was near.

Aki smirked and wrapped his arms around me. "You're really selfless, you know that?"

"You're ignoring my initial question," I mumbled but melted in his hold.

"It's a bit hard to explain and I'd rather spend time running around with you than explaining."

"Will you explain it to me when all of this is over? Like a detailed essay format explanation?" I leaned back to look up at him.

"As detailed as you want after a good round of sex."

I laughed and shook my head. "Whatever works."

He gave me a kiss on my forehead and stared down into my eyes. "You already know Nine-Tails are rare. My Kitsune wasn't comfortable with telling Storm because there was just this feeling that we couldn't? I didn't care much if she knew about me being a Nine-Tails, but twelve was out of the question. You, however, I trust you, and you'll be able to unlock yours with some extra training with ChiyoChi."

"So, I won't need that for our mission?"

"No. We'll be fine, but you need to at least shift," Aki reminded. "Just get a feel for it."

"Alright. What am I supposed to do exactly?" I asked as we pulled out of our embrace.

He smirked and moved forward. "Just let your Kitsune have her way. No restraints or anything." Aki winked.

I pouted my lips and my Kitsune kept rolling back and forth once more in utter excitement. "She's rolling around."

"She's super happy still?"

"I guess so."

"Hmm. I know." Aki kept his smirk as he stretched. "First one to reach that mountain has to treat the other to green tea ice cream."

I gawked at him and my Kitsune stopped mid-turn to blink in shock.

"Ice...cream." My eyes moved to look in the direction where Aki was pointing while my Kitsune got up and walked over to stare intently at the faraway mountain.

"Aki? How am I going to reach all the way over there? That would take days."

"It will take ten minutes if you shift." He gave me a cocky grin, which pissed me off.

"That's not fair. Doesn't shifting have instructions? Where's the manual?" I grumbled. I watched Aki begin to move away from me.

"Don't know." He shrugged, and his eyes began to glow a vibrant amber. "Guess someone will owe me an ice cream date." He then turned and began to run forward before I could even reply.

"Akihiro!" I shouted, and my Kitsune sat back to pout.

*You can't really be pouting now. Don't you want ice cream? GREEN TEA ICECREAM?!*

My Kitsune looked like she was debating on it and I groaned. "If we win you get a whole day with Aki's Kitsune. An ENTIRE day. You can even have sex."

Now THAT got her attention, her remaining tails popping out as she gave me a happy expression. I sighed, shaking my head.

"Unbelievable," I purposely said out loud.

My Kitsune ignored me, running to the surface, and I flinched at the sudden pain that ran through me and the eerie sound of bones cracking.

I closed my eyes, waiting for the pain to pass as I felt myself go from standing to all fours; my tails seem to double in size.

When the pain finally settled and began to dissipate, I opened my eyes. I had to close them immediately because everything was ten times brighter. It was like the colors had all intensified.

With caution, my eyes opened once more, and I stared at the vivid colors and how breathtaking everything looked. All my senses were heightened

from how amazing the soft grass felt beneath my paws to the numerous scents that hit my nose all at once.

A part of me felt like I was in control as I was when I was human, but it was as if I sat in the back seat and my Kitsune was my driver. She began to stretch as our tails started to glow a bright pink; pink magic surrounded our four paws almost like glowing fire.

With a few testing steps, we were moving towards the mountain. I was left speechless as my Kitsune did her thing, our body going so fast that everything was almost a blur.

Our paws barely touched the ground, and when they did, it was to only elevate us through the air and accelerated our speed.

Within four minutes, my eyes caught onto Aki's white body and my Kitsune sped up to match his pace. Aki noticed, turning his head slightly to meet our gaze and he looked more excited, his amber eyes glittering with happiness and compassion.

It wasn't long before we were side by side, playing around as we hopped on rocks and trees before we'd levitate in the air with our flaming paws. It was difficult to explain, but I felt so free like we had no burdens ahead of us and all we had to do was enjoy this very moment.

When we got close to the mountain, I sped up, my Kitsune's competitive side coming out as we began to run faster and faster. Getting to the very top of the mountain was a breeze, which in human eyes would have literally been impossible to achieve at the time frame and with no equipment.

Our paws slowed as we gradually came to a stop, and we turned around to sit and wait for Aki who reached the top in less than 30 seconds. He strolled over to me before he stopped and nudged his head against mine in affection praise.

His body was immersed in light and, once it dimmed, he was in his human form once more, clothed and all. I tilted my head in confusion, wondering how the hell we'd switch back.



Aki reached up to stroke my head and I lowered down to sitting position, enjoying the way his hand was currently scratching behind my left ear, which was now super itchy.

"You're adorable," he whispered and kissed my cheek. "Want to know how to change back?"

I almost missed what he said, too caught up in my current relaxing state. I wanted to switch back, but my other ear was now itchy, and it seemed like a hard decision on what was more important.

Aki chuckled at my indecisiveness and dropped his hand to use the other to begin scratching the back of my other ear, which made me relax once more and my tails swayed back and forth at a lazy pace.

Once he was done, he patted my head. "Ready now?"

I got up and stretched before I sat patiently, waiting for him to explain.

"Just think about your human body and envision yourself switching places with your Kitsune. It feels like you're in the back seat of a car almost and she's the driver, right?"

I nodded my head in response, and I got sidetracked by looking at the colorful sky.

"Crim?" Aki sighed and had to stroke my head a few times before I turned my attention back to him. "Remember, switching back. We can do more sightseeing in our Kitsune forms next time we go on a run."

That got me excited and I gave him a pair of hopeful eyes in response. His expression softened before he continued. "Just think about your Kitsune moving to the back seat and you moving to the front. Try to go slowly because it will hurt if you go too fast."

With a nod of my head, I did what he explained; envisioning my Kitsune meeting my gaze from the front seat and she slowly hopped over to the back. I took my time climbing inside the car to the front, and by the time I settled in the front seat, I felt only two legs on the ground.

I opened my eyes slowly, waiting for the vibrant lights to hit my senses,

but the colors seemed dull in intensity which made me realize I was back to my human form.

"Oh, I'm back!" I cheered, putting my hands up in the air in triumph. I looked at Aki with excitement and his eyes slowly trailed down my body. I gave him a confused look when his green eyes locked onto mine, appearing a bit darker than before. "What?"

"Uh. Well firstly, you're speaking Japanese and not English," he announced.

I pouted my lip as I tried to figure out how I didn't catch that. My Kitsune yawned and almost looked like she was laughing to herself before she strolled to her corner and curled up into a ball to sleep.

"And?" I asked.

"Uh...hmm. We need to get you special clothes." Aki spoke more to himself than to me.

"Huh? Wh..." I began but lowered my eyes to see I was standing there butt naked. Like LITERALLY naked on the top of a fucking mountain where any bird in the sky or shifter in the woods could see my damn butt cheeks, breasts—the whole package.

*Oh...My...AH!!!!*

My face was burning red and I didn't even know where to hide in an attempt to cover my properties. *I can't believe this.*

"This is so embarrassing..." I mumbled, giving up in my attempt to try and find some type of bush to hide in and let my head hang low. There wouldn't be any damn bushes on top of a fucking mountain, and did I mention it was COLD?!"

Something soft fell onto my shoulders and, in seconds, I was being hugged by Aki.

"Don't give me such an adorable look, Crim," he whispered, holding me tightly against him.

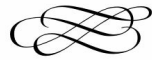
"But..."

"I've seen you naked plenty of times." He pulled back to look into my eyes. "And each time I'm turned on at how beautifully attractive you are."

His lips met mine before I could reply, and I slowly closed my eyes as I kissed him right back. Aside from fulfilling my apparent goal of being naked on a mountain and shifting into my Kitsune form, at least I could also cross off passionate hot sex with Aki on a mountain off the list.

*Loud. Passionate. Hot sex.*

## DANCING ON WATER



~CRIMSON~

“*T*his is so frustrating!” I huffed.

"It really isn't." Yoshi chuckled at my frustration, walking back towards me with his perfectly dry Montsuki verses my completely soaked kimono that now weighed a ton.

After my afternoon session with Akihiro, which ended with us watching the sunset together while curled up in our Kitsune forms, we came back for Yoshi to take me on our dinner date.

I'd been starving, especially after all the energy used to shift twice in one day. Not to mention my body was aching like I'd had sex for hours with at least three guys, something I'd yet to do, but it sure felt like it.

Aki explained it was normal and it took a long time before it wouldn't "hurt" anymore, but fuck, I felt like a crippled person and would totally NOT shift during our mission at N.R.O. The aches and pains were so not worth it. Having sex for the first time was better than this.

Thankfully, Haru had woken up from his nap and gave me a quick healing session before I got dressed and Yoshi took me out.

Dinner was amazing, especially for my empty stomach. It consisted of a buffet, and I got to watch a mini traditional dance ON water! Let me emphasize ON TOP OF WATER. I didn't care how foreign I looked with my wide eyes and gawking expression as I watched the most beautiful woman I'd

seen in a long time move on top of the clear fluid surface and dance with two large fans in her hands.

It was a stunning experience and we didn't leave until I begged Yoshi to teach me how to dance like that and bring me back there again to watch another show.

Thanks to my excitement, Yoshi brought me to the beautiful clearing Itsuki had shown me a few weeks back. I did have to admit Itsuki had brought me here because I couldn't lie to Yoshi. He didn't seem mad, but I bet Itsuki was going to get lectured later.

Yoshi had explained the basics to me on how to use the water element to my advantage as well as the air element to assist my body with the floating aspect. It was similar to sword dancing, but it still cost a lot of energy and concentration. Yoshi said with practice it would become like second nature to me, just like sword dancing, but getting the hang of it was the problem.

Now after two hours of trying, I was frustrated. seeing that Yoshi was completely dry, looking like the male Mona Lisa in his blue and gold Montsuki, verses me in my white and pink kimono that was so drenched I wondered if it was see through at this point, I just wanted to go home.

"You're cheating!" I huffed.

"I'm not cheating." He chuckled and walked back to where I was standing dripping wet.

"C'mon. Try again. I'll help you."

I bit my lip stubbornly but was determined to try again.

*I can do this! I'm an SSS magic affinity badass with a pocket watch! GET AT ME, WATER! I'm going to own you!*

Yoshi was literally on the verge of laughing his head off and I gave him a look.

"What?"

"Are you giving yourself a mental motivational talk?"

"Damn right I am!" I declared.

He grinned and slid his hand into my wet locks to pull me into a deep kiss. As upset as I was, I wouldn't dare miss out on kissing Yoshi. I'd missed him just as much as I had Aki, and I really hoped this silly lesson that I had brought upon myself would end with steamy hot sex in the shower or something.

He released my lips and trailed his tongue along my bottom lip before he kissed me one more time. "Just take a deep breath and put all your concentration on the water. The wind element is comfortable with you because of your sword dancing experience. It will aid you once you have the water element down."

"Okay," I whispered, and I placed my hand in his. We moved to the edge of the water once more, and I took a calming breath and closed my eyes.

I envisioned the water before me, its transparent surface almost luminous in my mind as it glowed a bright teal aura all across my vision. I could see Yoshi in front of me and feel the warm breeze pass by as if telling me that it was here and ready when I was.

"Crim? I'm stepping back," Yoshi warned, and I merely nodded, not wanting to lose my concentration or current vision.

He took a step back and I took a step forward. He moved his other leg back and I moved my other leg forward. Step after step, I could see our energies, Yoshi's a beautiful sapphire outline. Each backward step he took created a wonderful gold effect on the water.

I knew my outline was pink of some kind, and I could feel my ears were out this time while my tails spread from my back. It didn't distract me in the least, only helped heighten the sounds around me. Step by step I kept going, feeling the wind swirl around me over and over again.

I felt Yoshi's hands slip from mine, but I didn't pay attention to that. I was focused on the wind that moved around me that was a mixture of greens and blues and the glowing water beneath my feet.

"Crimson?" Yoshi asked, his voice filled with wonder. I didn't get why he

was so shocked, but in my vision, small pink petals began to rain down upon me. It made me lift my head up and I opened my eyes to the fresh pink cherry blossoms that fluttered down on me.

I watched them in awe as my eyes grew wide in shock, and I couldn't help but reach up and allow them to fall onto the back of my hand. When I lowered my head, I met Yoshi's alluring eyes, those sapphire orbs beginning to shift to gold as if they were dancing between colors.

I could see the love in his eyes as well as the pride that flickered through them, but the longer we stared at one another, the darker his intense gaze became. He slowly licked his lips as his eyes lowered to mine and, without a second thought, he took one step forward and leaned down to kiss me.

My eyes fluttered closed, but the vision of us in my mind never faded. Our energies swirled together; the gold and sapphire mixed with pink and whites, all while the pink cherry blossoms fell down on us and the wind blew around us. The water remained as our platform as I lifted my hands to press on Yoshi's chest and he rested his hands on my hips.

We were lost in our joined union, and everything felt perfect making me zone out on everything but us. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed Yoshi's touch, and from the way he captured my mouth with his, I knew he missed me as well.

Our kisses grew deeper, and it wasn't long before he tugged on the tie of my soaked kimono and loosened it. I let him remove it from my waist and lowered my arms so he could slide his hands beneath the cool cloth and pull it from my shoulders. The material didn't drop to the ground, not in my vision anyway.

It was carried by the warm breeze that passed, carrying the fabric to shore while we continued to kiss. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed my now naked body against his, wanting to feel his warmth and subconsciously wishing he was naked too.

We broke the kiss when we had no more oxygen to spare and we pulled

back to stare into each other's eyes while we caught our breath.

"Crimson," Yoshi whispered and I gave him a pleased smile.

"I think it would be hard to enjoy more pleasurable activities on the water."

He smirked and let go of me for a moment before he looked around. "We could go back home."

"Takes too long," I smirked.

"True." His eyes took another long look at my nakedness.

"Can't have sex on the water?"

"We could...but I don't know if you'll last," he teased.

I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms over my chest which helped cover my hard nipples from his view.

"Last as in how long we have sex or last as in standing on water? See?! I'm doing jus-" I began but just like that I completely lost my vision as quickly as a snap of my fingers and I shrieked.

Yoshi reached out to catch me, but I dragged him along into the water, both of us submerging into the cool water.

I popped my head up first, followed by Yoshi, who shook his head a few times before he blew a stream of water out. He slowly looked at me and I couldn't help but snicker. "Oops?"

"You totally did that on purpose."

"I did not! It was uhh...my Kitsune! Yes."

My Kitsune poked an eye open, looking unbothered by me using her in my defense, she closed her eyes again and went back to sleep.

*Thanks, Kitsune.*

Yoshi didn't look like he believed me, but I kept giggling before I swam back towards the shore. I watched him pass me and walk out of the water while I continued to float.

The wind had carried my kimono to one of the large tree branches, hanging it up to dry. My gaze moved back to Yoshi who began to strip out of



his clothes, and I bit my lip hard to see if I was really watching my Yoshi take every piece of clothing off under the wonderful moonlight.

My cherry blossoms must have loved it because they once again began to fall down on us, and Yoshi turned to see my hungry gaze, which made him smirk. "You're really enjoying this."

"Very much," I whispered and positioned myself on my back so my breasts purposely poked out from the water. Yoshi's eyes lowered to them and he turned around to let me enjoy the sight of his erect cock.

*Please let there be a way to have sex on water cause I want this man now*

He slowly made his way back into the water, swimming towards me. I let my legs submerge and swam to close the distance; my arms wrapped around his neck and his arms wrapped around my waist.

We pressed our bodies together and he lowered his forehead to mine, our lips barely touching as we seemed to stay afloat in the water without moving our feet.

"I don't think I can wait till we get home," he murmured, his half-open eyes meeting mine.

"Me neither," I whispered.

"This may be a bit complicated."

"I like complicated...and sex."

Yoshi chuckled. "I love you."

"As much as I love you?" I teased with a wide grin.

"More." He kissed me very gently. "A lot more."

"Maybe I need to show you just how much I love you then," I suggested.

"Maybe you do," he agreed.

With those final words, we kissed again, deeper this time as we let the water keep us from drowning. I didn't care how we had sex, I just wanted to feel Yoshi inside me and enjoy our unity after so much time had passed.

*The forest heard our moans and cries of pleasure, like music serenading*

*the moon.*

## THE BATTLE STARTS NOW



~CRIMSON~

"Shouldn't we be heading towards the mountain and not here with this old lady?" James grumbled in Mandarin.

I sighed and shook my head. "I can understand you, and just stay still already. You always get all cranky when you're close to anything sharp."

"Do not! You won't even tell me why the hell she has to poke me," James complained, giving me a nervous look.

"It's for a good reason, Now hush and respect your elders," I scolded, giving him a look.

James pouted his lips like a little kid, but he didn't move or say a word as the Great One began to clean James' arm.

The old woman, or Great One, gave me a sweet smile before she got to work, and I pulled out my phone to check the time. We had a few hours until we'd all have to meet at the secret hidden entrance at the N.R.O. base. Everything was in place and all that was left was to get James a new seal mark that would override the one White-Eyes had on him.

My phone buzzed, and I noticed the text message from Itsuki.

***Cutie Itsuki:***

"Can I call you real quick?"

I decided to just call him back instead of text, wondering if it was something super important since Itsuki didn't text me as often as the others did.

"I'll be right back. Making a phone call."

"You're supposed to hold my hand," James whined and stared at the needle with fearful eyes.

I gave him a sympathetic look and sighed. "Great One, can you please give me five minutes?"

"Sure. I need to finish something for you to drink as well." She gave me a broad smile and put the needle down to walk over to her stove where she was making some weird thick liquid that made me want to run away rather than dare attempt to drink whatever it was.

James sighed in relief. "I'm saved."

"You're still getting it," I noted, and he just looked away which made me smile. I walked over to him and placed a kiss on his forehead.

"I'm calling Itsuki real quick."

"Okay..." he whispered as his cheeks grew red. "Don't take too long."

"Hai hai," I replied and walked out of the cozy home and dialed Itsuki's number. He picked up on the first ring.

"Hey."

"Hey. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Itsuki replied calmly. "I...just wanted to hear your voice, that's all."

"Do you miss me, Itsuki? Or are you checking on me to make sure James didn't whisk me away and Quil doesn't want to call me for the 20th time?"

"A little bit of both, though I did really miss you." He chuckled.

"I heard that!" James called out from the house.

I rolled my eyes. "Stop using your fox hearing to snoop or I won't hold your hand."

He was silent, and my ears twitched when they got his quiet whimper which was super cute.

"He hates needles?"

"Terrified," I stressed.

"That's surprising, and I'm purposely telling Quil so we can use it against him if he pisses us off."

"You do have a diabolical side," I commented and Itsuki chuckled.

"You guys both okay?"

"Yes. The guards are at the entrance of the resort and Great One put up a barrier just in case. We won't be long," I assured him.

"When this is done, can we go out?"

"Ohhh. Itsuki wants first dibs on a date with me," I purred.

"I do. I have to be smooth now before Malachi gets back and tries to use his sizzling hottie powers on you," Itsuki replied in an amused voice.

"That's very true." I giggled, knowing Malachi would be the first to try to take me out when all of this was over. It would probably end up in some type of fight and I knew Haru would somehow slide through all of it unharmed and take me out if Itsuki didn't ask me at this moment.

"I'd love to go out with you, Itsuki."

"The whole day?"

"The whole day," I assured him.

"Good. I better go before Yoshi realizes I'm on the phone.

He's in his Emperor mood."

I laughed this time, knowing exactly what Itsuki meant. Even when Yoshi was in "Emperor" state of mind, he was still compassionate to me, but the other guys got it hard.

"Stay out of trouble. I'll see you in a bit."

"Love you, Crimson."

"Love you too, Itsuki," I replied with a smile. We said

goodbye to one another before he hung up. With a wide smile, I turned

around and walked back into the home to see James sitting patiently for me.

I lifted an eyebrow at his cute pouting expression and I presented my hand to him. "I'm here to deliver my hand holding services," I teased.

"So mean," he mumbled but reached out to hold my hand tightly. He moved over slightly, and I sat down next to him, knowing this would take a bit of time.

Great One walked back and got the needle ready once more and James turned his attention to me. "If you're going on a date with Itsuki...can I be next in line?" he mumbled.

I blushed and slowly met his shy gaze. "Please?" He practically begged.

"If it involves our usual bar and drinking, I'm not going," I pointed out.

He shook his head.

"No. Maybe we can go see a play or dance? I know you're interested in traditional dances and all since you did sword dancing. I wouldn't mind going."

"A real date?" I question. "We'd hold hands? Like this?" I asked as I lifted our joined hands with emphasis.

He slowly nodded and surprisingly pressed his forehead against mine.

"We'd hold hands like any other couple and take cute selfies. I'd cherish you like the diamond you are, and I'd be honored to show my affection in public if you'd give me another chance," he whispered.

He didn't wait for me to reply; his lips softly pressed against mine. I closed my eyes and kissed him back, feeling the passion in the movement of his lips, and I knew he truly meant every word compared to his empty promises from the past.

I broke the kiss to whisper against his smooth lips. "Okay...just remember to ask the others." I winked at him when he gave me a grumpy look, but I knew he was happy by the way his red eyes glimmered.

The sound of the needle turning brought us out of our moment, and we both turned to see Great One's wide smile. "Ah younglings. I remember when

I was your age. Stupid and in love."

"Hey." We spoke in unison which made the old woman laugh.

"Brace up hand holder. I'm going to start and do NOT move. This takes a lot of magic and concentration."

"Yes, ma'am," James replied, looking nervous once again.

I leaned in and pressed a kiss on his cheek. "You'll be fine. I'm right here," I whispered to him.

He nodded and squeezed my hand tightly.

"I know. Thanks, Crim Baby."

\* \* \*

"ALL DONE."

"I thought I was going to die," James complained, resting his head on my shoulder.

"Aww. You survived big guy. Now, off my shoulder. You're heavy," I whined.

"You need to show more mercy towards me," James grumbled but lifted his head from my shoulder. I squeezed his hand and he took the time to look at the new mark on his left arm. "Now that I got this crazy tattoo, what does it do?"

"That seal will override all seals placed on you since birth. Whoever has control of you and tries to ask you to complete a task against your will, it will activate and nullify the seal placed by them and anyone else."

James was silent as his eyes grew wide and his mouth dropped. "W...what?"

I squeezed his hand and placed my right one on top of our joined hands. "When White-Eyes tries to control you, the seal on you will be broken. He won't be your Master, James. You'll be free to do as you wish. That new tattoo will cut the strings that keep you chained to White-Eyes. You won't be

a puppet anymore. You'll be free." I spoke as soothingly as I could.

James slowly looked up to meet my eyes. "How...why? Whose idea was this?"

"The guys. Aki told me about it and after our date last week, we all discussed it. Quil reached out to the Great One so she could gather all the materials needed," I explained.

James just stared at me blankly, trying to process what I'd just said. Great One chuckled and looked toward me. "I'll give you two a moment."

I nodded my thanks, watching her leave her little home to give us a moment of privacy.

"Why?"

I turned back to study James whose head was hung low. "Why are you guys nice to me? I was a horrible boyfriend to you. I was horrible to them. I worked for a man who has killed thousands of people. Why are you guys being nice to me? I could get you hurt or I could betray you. How can you possibly forgive me so easily?"

I reached out to lift James' head with my hand under his chin, and his glossy eyes locked onto my softened ones. "You didn't have much of a choice, did you?"

He swallowed and shook his head side to side as a tear escaped his watery eyes. "No."

"Then, can we blame you? It's not fair that you had to be involved in this. You joined to help Homatomashi. You never expected it to be long-term and the result to be White-Eyes' right-hand man. You had to do your duty as a double agent, and as shitty as a boyfriend you were...you did it to protect me. Everything you've done, one way or another, was to protect me. Even though I still want payback for leaving me on the mountain."

"You kicked my balls for that!" James countered. I arched an eyebrow and he groaned. "Fine."

A smile formed on my lips, and I reached out to wipe the tears that left



James' eyes as he blinked. "It's weird being loved again..." he whispered, closing his eyes and leaning in to rest his head on my shoulder.

I wrapped my arms around his broad shoulders, pulling him into a hug. "You know I never stopped loving you."

"I know...and I'm grateful for that." He held me tightly as he quietly cried. I knew he was crying out of happiness, but it felt nice to know our actions were well received and it touched James' heart.

Great One eventually came back once James had calmed down and fed me the most horrible drink I'd ever had in my entire life. We'd said our thanks and goodbyes and she wished us good luck.

I was currently sucking on a lollipop to try and take the taste out of my mouth as we headed back to the entrance. So far, it wasn't working which was making me cranky.

"What kind of nasty drink was that. Whose idea was it?!"

James gave me a remorseful look as he ruffled his hair. I only needed one glance to know he was guilty.

"Spill."

"Trust me on this one."

"Ugh." I groaned. "If I never gain my taste buds again, I'll make sure Mizu and Urufu attack your balls," I huffed.

He stared at me in utter fear. "That's...not nice," he muttered.

"You know what's not nice? Making me drink whatever that shit was. You won't tell me what it does?"

"I'll protect you. It's my back up plan."

"Back up plan."

"You'll understand."

"James, please don't kidnap or kill me again. I've had enough for my lifetime." I sighed.

He reached out and slipped his hand in mine, causing me to stop and give him a look.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He pulled me into a warm embrace, which left me a little stunned.

"Um...James? You okay? Did you hit your head when I wasn't looking or...?"

"No matter what happens tonight...trust your instincts and...I love you." He whispered the last part with so much emotion I wondered if he was going to cry again.

"James?" I whispered, but he didn't say anything more, holding me in his arms like it would be our last time.

With a sigh, I relaxed in his hold and hugged him back.

"I love you too," I said softly.

*It's now or never. The battle starts now.*

## WHITE EYES AND THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS



~CRIMSON~

"*F*uck...I can't believe we got separated," I mumbled to myself, my ears twitching over and over again as I tried to listen as closely as possible to any hint of breathing other than mine.

Reaching the mountain was a breeze, and thanks to the detailed map James had made, we had gained the element of surprise.

We were together in the beginning, everyone fighting and moving as a unit until we reached the halfway point, which led to a wide open room with various shifters. Needless to say, we all scrambled to protect ourselves and to avoid the onslaught of bullets and other weapons that were flying our way.

I let my instincts guide me while I used my dual swords to protect me. All the training that I'd done with Chiyo, Father, and the guys was finally paying off, and I held no remorse as I sliced through my attackers left and right. I wouldn't let them kill me because I didn't deserve it.

As we spoke, Shifters across Homatomashi were raiding the spots where N.R.O. had planned to ambush at daybreak Monday morning, but I knew no matter what, there would be casualties.

Even though I was confident in my abilities, I had a terrible feeling in my gut that things weren't going to go in my favor.

*My gut instinct is never wrong.*

Now that I was alone and getting closer to the final floor, my fear of

death was beginning to bleed through me and I knew I'd fight hard not to die. I had too much to live for and I promised Itsuki we'd go on a date when all of this was over.

*Yup, priorities.*

I turned to my left and noticed the hall was full of mirrors. I began to cautiously walk down it, watching my image on the walls. My glowing pink tails were helping light up the hall, and as I continued my walk down, my eyes lingered on the anklet I still wore.

My Kitsune noticed my curiosity, which was a bit odd for me seeing as I knew why it was there. Or why it should remain on my ankle.

*"I could help you."*

The voice that seemed to slide through my mind made me sigh.

*You can't help me.*

*"I can, and you know it."*

*Are you going to possess me?*

*"Maybe."*

*Then why would I possibly cut that anklet off?*

*"I know White-Eyes just like James. I know he wants what I created. The least you could do for me is give me that moment of revenge."*

*You think you're the only one who deserves revenge? All the people he's killed before you. You're one of the reasons why we're even here. You're a part of this problem.*

*"I'm aware..."*

*That's all you have to say? You're aware?!*

*"What can I do..."* I hadn't realized I was pacing until I stopped, noticing the hint of remorse in her voice. *"What I did while living...was wrong. I was selfish and only thought of my own happiness which...in the end, I never got to enjoy, now did I? I wanted to love and be loved. Yet I thought Erica would be the only one for me. I closed myself off and didn't think anyone could help me out of this situation. N.R.O...it wasn't mine. Not originally...but I could*

*have tried to run away. Try and fight my circumstances. Yet, here we are. I'm a dead essence that is slowly slipping away from you with each passing day. Can't you give me one last shot to help you? You know as well as I that I can be helpful somehow."*

*Promise me you won't cause me to die.*

*"I, Storm Yuna, promise to not contribute to your death."*

*I don't get why I'm letting an essence make an oath. Does that even count?*

*"Who knows?"*

My Kitsune didn't seem displeased with the idea, which was enough reassurance for me to lean down and use the tip of my sword to cut the anklet. A weird sensation ran through me, making me shiver, but I rose up and took a deep breath.

*"Don't make me regret this Storm."*

*"I won't," she vowed. "Now get moving. White-Eyes is in the next room."*

With a nod, I strode towards the door at the end of the hall, walking with confidence in my power and strength. Next week would mark six months since that night when I'd bumped into a thief who dropped the pocket watch that belonged to Storm Yuna.

That one fateful moment led me to find out who I truly was. It led me on a path where I met a group of amazing men and found out my true past and where I belonged. I'd gained not only my Kitsune and powers, but a group of familiars to lift me up when I was down as well.

Here we were, to not only gain the final crystal and make my pocket watch whole again, but to also bring righteousness to Homatomashi by ridding it of N.R.O. once and for all.

There was a good chance I wasn't ready, but I never would have been ready. It wouldn't matter how many weeks, months, or years were involved. This moment would change everything, and I simply had to give it my all.

To do this for the sake of Homatomashi's future. For MY future with my

men by my side. I reached the black door, my gaze landing on the jeweled doorknob.

*Akihiro, Yoshimitsu, Malachi, Itsuki, Haru, Quillian, and James...no matter what happens inside these walls, I hope the universe lets you know how much I loved all of you. Thank you for loving me through the times I didn't love myself. Arigato for everything.*

With those last thoughts, I took a final deep breath, reached out for the doorknob, and opened the door to face my destiny.

\* \* \*

THE DOOR slowly closed behind me, and my eyes scanned the large pure white room. Everything was squeaky clean, almost like I was in a hospital ward and it wasn't allowed to have a speck of dust anywhere.

All the furniture was white, which instead of giving off a pure vibe, it made me cringe and a shiver ran through me like I'd been here before. My heart was pounding rapidly and my palms sweaty with just a few steps.

The familiarity of this place was making it hard to breathe like I was suffocating, but I couldn't understand it. My brain felt foggy, but I fought the urge to close my eyes. *What's going on? What is with this place?*

*"It's my fault,"* Storm whispered, her voice filled with heartache and sadness.

*Why is it your fault? I don't get it.*

*"This place...harbors bad memories for me. You're being affected by it,"* Storm explained.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and my Kitsune ran to the surface to help calm me down. With the help of my Kitsune, we took a few deep breaths, and I felt the pocket watch on my chest grow hot. I kept it invisible, not wanting to reveal it just in case White-Eyes was hiding, but the crystal was indeed in here.

"You finally arrived."

I didn't turn immediately toward the sound, my left hand beginning to tremble for no explanatory reason. I didn't understand how Storm could have such a strong negative reaction when she was the CEO of N.R.O.

*Why are you afraid of White-Eyes?* I needed to know. That would be the only way to figure this out.

*I mean, did he hurt you? Touch you? Abuse you?*

"Turn around and your question will be answered."

I did just that, turning around to face the person who sat at what looked to be a dialysis machine.

My eyes grew wide and I had to blink a few times, unsure how it was possible as the memories and scenes from the past rushed through me like a wall of bricks. I blinked a few times, and now my whole body trembled in shock as I tried to piece everything together.

"Wait...that's not possible. You're dead," I pointed out. "I mean...you have to be dead."

"Why? Because Storm said so?"

I gritted my teeth and Storm's essence took over, pushing me and my Kitsune back as she gained control. She inhaled a few calming breaths to help us and slowly clenched our fists to help them stop their uncontrollable tremble.

She looked into the man's pure white eyes and whispered, "Otosan."

*Wait wait wait. OTOSAN?! I thought you said your father was dead? I mean it was on the news and in the records and well, everywhere. Your parents died. How is he alive?*

"How interesting this is. To think my daughter killed me and her mother and ended up reviving me. I guess she had second thoughts after the first few knife stabbings."

I forced myself to take control and my Kitsune growled at the fragile looking man that was hooked up to multiple machines. He was skinny, a tad

too skinny compared to the man who'd accompanied James and killed Storm in cold blood.

Literally, everything about him from his corpse like hair and his extra pale skin was nothing like I'd remembered. It was only his pure white eyes that gave me a hint of the same person I'd seen from the memories I'd witnessed in my dreams and when I'd almost died. Yet, just entering this room had triggered a different set of images and scenes that I'd never seen before, and it began to piece everything together.

*It made me realize why Storm was as fucked up as she was.*

"How are you alive?" I asked again, wanting to hear it from him rather than concentrate on the memories flooding my mind.

"Shouldn't you be more focused on your last crystal?" he countered.

I bit my lip and glanced over to my right, noticing the bright velvet red box on the middle shelf of the pure white empty bookshelf .

"I'm well aware that it's right there in the velvet box, White- Eyes. Now, tell me what the catch is," I declared. My swords were attached to my back for easy access, but it was getting harder and harder to stand still when my last crystal was calling out to me. It needed me to claim it. It was tired of waiting for us and my fingers were itching to grab it off the shelf.

"Nothing really. You just have to listen to my story and pass my simple test."

"Simple as in?"

"Claim your crystal, listen to my story, and fight my challenge. That's it," he stated.

I could feel Storm's uneasiness.

*"There's a catch."*

*Of course there is, but I need that crystal. I'll be stronger with it.*

*"My father plays dirty. Not fair in the least."*

*I figured.*

"How about this. I take the crystal, you allow me to put it safely where it



belongs, then I'll listen to your story and be up for your challenge."

"You don't want me to see where the pocket watch is," he indicated with a weak grin on his face.

"Ding ding ding. Aren't you a smart old man?" I sighed. "If you were in my position, you'd be just as precautious."

"True. Fine. You may take the crystal, leave this room to place it wherever you wish, and come back to this room."

"Aren't you afraid of me running away?"

"You're too honest to do such a thing, and with my daughter's essence within you, she's too prideful to run away from me. Not when she could kill me again with her bare hands."

Thank goodness I had more restraint, having enough power to hold Storm back from resurfacing.

*He's ticking you off on purpose. Don't let him get to you.*

*"You don't know what I know," she spat.*

*I've seen enough to piece it together.*

With a nod, I agreed. "Very well. I accept your offer," I vowed.

He nodded and lifted his frail hand, gesturing for me to do what I needed to do.

I moved to the shelf and with my Kitsune and even Storm's assistance, I knew there was nothing spelled. He was literally allowing me to take the velvet case. I reached out and hesitantly placed my hand on it, waiting for some reaction to follow, but nothing happened.

Instead, the watch continued to burn against my chest until it was almost unbearable.

*I need to put the final crystal in.*

*"Do it fast. Move to the door," Storm advised.*

I moved at her command and was out in seconds.

*"Stay where you are."*

*Why?*

My back was currently against the door, but I hadn't stepped into the view of the mirrors.

*"Stay in the dark. He'll be able to see you through the mirrors. If possible, use that petal stuff."*

*Why is he letting me add the crystal?*

*"He can't input the crystals. No one can but you." Oh. Well, THAT makes sense. So, he wants to essentially take the watch from me after I've inputted all the crystals.*

*"Bingo."*

I closed my eyes and concentrated on my magic, and I sighed at the soft cherry blossom scent that tickled my nose.

I opened my eyes to see the wall of petals that kept me out of sight in front of me.

*"That's good."*

*Wanna explain what your dearest Papa just said while I do this?*

*"No."*

*Not helpful, but okay.*

*"He...wasn't a good man. Neither was Mother."*

"I'm only basing the next set of words from what I saw...but was your father the original leader of N.R.O.? When you were young, they trained you night and day, essentially fucking over your childhood until one day you had enough?"

I felt the flicker of sadness run through me, but more importantly, I felt her regret.

*"I introduced Erica as my friend. I guess it was a stupid mistake of me at the time...but I wanted just one friend who understood where I was coming from. One friend who'd get it. My parents were against it...and the fact Eric...was already confident on who she wanted to be, they didn't want that negative influence on me."*

*I could see the events playing out in my head, and I gripped the velvet box*

*as I tried not to feel sympathy for her or Erica in the matter.*

"They tried to kill Erica," I stated not as a question but a true fact.

*"It started with locking her in our basement. They would lock her there all day and night and until I finished all my training, that was when they would let her out. Erica's parents didn't care about her. They gave up the moment she was confident in her sexuality. She had nowhere else to go. I'd sneak food from dinner or when my parents were asleep and let her sleep in my room until the brink of dawn. That was the cycle that kept going...until Father used alternate methods to push her away."*

I bit my lip hard and closed my eyes, needing a second to breathe. "Erica...the way she is...is because your father would whip her...right?" I whispered.

*"He'd do more than that. 100 lashes was the start...and I guess you can see where it went when Erica stayed."*

"He...didn't..." I trailed off.

*No. I won't have sympathy.*

My Kitsune was just as stubborn as I.

Regardless of Eric's past, he didn't get the right to do what he did to me.

*"He did. He did really bad sexual things to Erica...that's why she turned out the way she did. I can feel your anger...and it was wrong of me to have...made you feel bad."*

I summoned the pocket watch to reveal itself, the silver watch becoming visible around my neck. I took it off and stared at the surface, ignoring my trembling hand.

"What happened that lead you to kill your parents," I asked with a cold tone.

*"If I didn't, they would have killed Erica. They were tired of her sticking with me. No one ever stuck by me. My parents would push everyone away with the impression that I needed to focus on becoming stronger. Yet Erica stayed. No matter what they did, she remained by my side and my parents*

*weren't going to tolerate that any longer. They were going to throw acid on her...I couldn't let that happen, so I used a spell to throw it on my mother. She died, and my father went ballistic. I told Erica to get help and things spiraled out of control and...I killed him."*

"Is that why he's the way he is now?"

*"Yes. I regretted it. I...just didn't want to die. I didn't think I deserved it and I was angry. When he stopped breathing, it took me 45 minutes to revive him, but the damage was done."*

I sighed and slowly opened up the velvet case to reveal the final jewel- a teal green crystal. I took a moment to appreciate its outlook and a wave of relief ran through me. *Finally.*

"What happened after?" I asked, taking the crystal from the secured slot of the box.

*"Well...they took him in for recovery and he was left as you see him."*

"Why did he look different? When he killed you. Why did he look younger and healthier?" I questioned.

*"Because he'd use magic potions. They have a few hours longevity, but it me an she's in a weakened state for a long period of time after. That is why today was the perfect time to attack N.R.O because his next potion doesn't get delivered until the morning."*

"So we have a chance." I slowly inputted the crystal in its slot.

*"Maybe. I feel there's still something up his sleeve. My father isn't one to play fair. L et's go back."*

I felt her essence ease back a little and I merely nodded in response. I lifted my fingers from the now complete watch; the teal crystal began to glow brightly as the wind whipped around me.

My eyes widened when a bright light shot out from it and I looked up to see the large flaming teal figure that resembled a dragon. Its multicolored eyes met mine and I couldn't move because of the intense power flowing off him.

There was no hesitation in the name I'd give him. "RyuJinnSu."

It stretched out its dragon wings and lowered his head inches away from mine. My gaze never wavered, my turquoise eyes on his current amber ones that soon switched to a purplish pink. He lowered his head until his forehead pressed against mine and my shoulders relaxed as a smile formed on my lips.

"Welcome home, RyuJinn. I'm sorry for taking so long," I apologized.

He made a low growl in response, but I could tell he accepted my apology and was happy to be reunited where he belonged.

The watch continued to glow, and the other familiars came out in their glowing figures. Chiryō and Fushi floated around my head while Mizu and Urufu stood at my feet. I glanced around at all of them and took a deep breath.

"This is it, guys. I don't know what's going to happen when we get inside, but I want you guys to stay inside the watch unless I desperately need it. I won't let him have you. He'll hurt innocent people and we can't have any of that. I'll do my best to survive whatever challenges he has for me, and together we'll leave this place. Then you'll be free to do whatever you like. Does that sound like a plan?"

I needed them to trust me on this one because I wouldn't dare let White-Eyes have them. We'd finally made it this far, and I wanted to give them a new life. A chance to do good like they wanted to do and not be silenced and hidden.

*I want them to enjoy life as my familiars and have that sense of freedom and partnership. Not being used as tools of destruction.*

They all nodded before they pulled back into their designated crystals. The watch was still warm, but it was a comforting warmth that signified their wholeness. With ease, I hid the watch once more and then let the petal wall fall.

Without delay, I turned back and opened the door, entering the room to face whatever challenge was waiting for me. My eyes landed on a pair of

familiar red ones and I stopped in my tracks in confusion.

"James?" I exclaimed, noticing James was standing next to White-Eyes, a displeased expression on his face. I knew without words that James didn't want to be standing there, nor did I get how the hell he got there, to begin with.

"James. My right-hand man." White Eyes grinned. "He's the only decent one who didn't discard me like all the other 'loyal' guards before him."

"Why is James here?" I asked with a stern look, trying not to look into James' eyes. I knew if I did, whatever challenge would come my way would put me at a disadvantage.

*Especially if I had to kill him.*

"I'll tell you once I say my story."

"You tried to kill Erica after abusing her for being a guy and not abandoning your daughter. Even after you raped him and touched him constantly, he stayed," I revealed. My eyes caught a glimpse of James' shocked expression and he slowly turned to see White-Eyes grit his teeth.

"Those are lies."

"They can't be lies when I could see it. The one thing you must have not known about having a bit of some else's magic essence left in you is that their memories come with it and if given permission, the person hosting their essence can see it. I've seen everything White-Eyes, so try to give a more believable story," I declared.

White-Eyes slammed his fists on the arms of the chair he sat on and glared at me. "You judge me just like everyone else!"

"Should I not? Do you know what it feels like? To be touched without permission? To be raped?! As little sympathy as I have for Erica, what you did to her was exactly the reason why she turned the way she did."

"HE! He was a fucking MALE! He didn't deserve to be near my daughter! He was a bad influence and it's even thanks to him that she wanted to neglect her duties. This was MY company! I was supposed to run this, and

I wouldn't even have allowed you to be alive if it was my way! But NO! The moment I became a disabled burden, everyone turned a blind eye. STORM did this to me!"

"You got what you deserved. You tried to kill her not only because of Erica. You wanted to do something," I revealed.

*"He needed my soul. I don't know why. But that's what I remember."*

I could see from her memories that he did mention her soul for something, but for what?

"You wanted to use her soul for something. What was it for?" I questioned, narrowing my eyes at him. "Do not lie this time."

He appeared as if he'd explode of anger; the veins in his hands looked like they would pop and the needles that were currently supplying him blood would shoot out.

James looked just as intrigued as his gaze lingered on White- Eyes. "Master...what is she talking about?"

"It's her fault...she's the reason why I need to do what I do."

"Do what?! You keep pointing the blame at Storm, your daughter who you tried to kill and eventually did kill. WHY did you need her soul?! Why is she the reason?"

"When that pathetic child killed me, she ripped a part of my soul with that disgusting magic of hers!" He practically hissed.

"Huh?!" I replied.

"Nani?" James stated, looking just as confused as I. "You can't rip a soul in half."

"*You can...*" Storm whispered in my mind which made me hold my tongue.

*What?*

"Storm was supposed to be my prodigy. She was supposed to follow in my footsteps once N.R.O. reached its peak of success and more so. We'd taken every step to give birth to a child who'd be more powerful than both of

us. To be able to take lead and take over when my wife and I passed on. She should have been my legacy, yet that he-she bastard ruined it. He distracted her and thanks to their fickle love, my wife was murdered by her and I was rendered like this. I'd taught her how to retrieve souls from the body and use them as power. Instead, she used that same spell to try to use me for power."

I was completely shocked, and James didn't say a word either; the two of us just stared at him with gawked expressions.

"Shocking right? You've heard of necromancers. Or better yet, Soul Benders. I doubt you children would know about the second term, but those are individuals who can retract a soul from a body and use it to their will. Some can retract the elements they had and use them like they were born with them. The possibilities with soul bending are endless, and yet, she dares take half of mine to use against me."

"How...you can't be alive with half a soul?!" I whispered.

"Oh you can, Crimson Jiyuna. You have a bit of my daughter's soul left in you."

*What...?!*

I swallowed the lump in my throat as I tried to wrap my head around it. "I have her essence."

"No. The part within you is the bit of her soul she'd been smart enough to retract into her pocket watch," White-Eyes declared.

Storm took over then and gave him a venomous glare. "You took my soul! You got your payback by letting that man right there kill me. But you didn't stop there! You waited till I was on the verge of death, came back and pulled my soul out to use in your plot for overtaking Homatomashi!"

A small grin formed on our lips as she laughed. "But I fucked that up, now didn't I? I put a spell to make sure that if you did try to steal my soul, a good chunk would go into my pocket watch. You figured it out pretty fast and that's why you sent that thief to steal my watch from my corpse! But karma has its ways of interfering with your plans and that pocket watch



landed in Crimson's hands, the same child you made a deal with Konashi to take her soul upon her 23rd birthday when she died from not having her powers."

Now I was lost, the information and memories flooding my mind while her words slowly sank in and just kept putting the puzzle pieces together.

"My soul isn't at rest, or in the realm waiting for our ancestors to come down and judge us. It's in YOUR possession. Just like all those thousands of souls you've extracted for centuries to keep you alive. Every prostitute and villager who went missing was delivered to you and you extracted their soul to keep you alive. THAT'S why you're a sitting duck right now because you assumed Crimson's would be next, which would not only give you all her power but also deliver the last bit of my soul to satisfy that sick notion of yours. You need Crimson because with her SSS affinity, not only can she use Soul Bend, but she'll also be able to retrieve the other half of your soul and inevitably make you immortal."

"That's impossible!" James snapped. "Soul Bending is a born gift and is only used at certain ceremonies."

"Yes. You're right. However, that wasn't enough for my loving father. He wanted a powerful position, and not a position used at sacred ceremonies to help those clinging to the earth to move forward and the good stuff. His born gift had power, and he wanted to use it to gain control of all Homatomashi and eventually other countries. Because I'd gained the same gift, he could have just used my soul and made himself even stronger. But Daughter dearest ruined his plans and now he's a rotting living corpse who doesn't want to leave. That's why you pump blood in you to rejuvenate your body, but you'd die without those potions which are human souls."

I took control again, and I had to take a shaky breath. Every- thing she said was true and I was having a damn hard time accepting such truth. James moved away then and turned to face White-Eyes. "You never said that. You said people abandoned you after you became disabled and turned their backs

on you. You wanted revenge and N.R.O. was supposed to revoke the bad people who put you in this predicament. Yet, you put yourself here."

I could tell James was doing this more for show than anything, knowing damn well White-Eyes was sick in the head, but with all this new information, he really was an evil person trying to dominate the world.

"I was the victim! NOT that child! She should have been killed! Yet they took her side because she had power! You think they would listen to me with this fragile appearance versus a little girl who wanted to protect her stupid friend?! They took her side because she'd benefit and those who wanted a higher position in N.R.O. would get it if she was the leader. She took everything away from me! Half my soul, my dream company, my vision. EVERYTHING!"

"But you forced me to kill her and take her soul. So you're admitting that Storm hasn't moved on but is in some place with all these souls extracted to one day use as physical magic power to ensure no one defies you when N.R.O. takes over Homatomashi and unleashes war on the world."

White-Eyes couldn't answer, his eyes glared at me and James cursed. "You should be reported. No, this whole shit show should be over with."

"You'll defy me?" White-Eyes questioned.

"I've never been fully dedicated to you! You fucking raped me whenever you were at your strongest! You let Erica tie me up and do whatever HE wanted and put a seal on me so I couldn't reveal who the fuck he really was. You used everyone around you all down to this moment. Erica tried to kill Crimson because you swore in exchange for Crim's soul, you'd free Storm's and put her soul back together!"

I looked at James who was trembling in anger. "You think I've been blindly following you like the fool you've made me be. Well, your fool plan has failed. Right as we speak, all your followers are being arrested, and that plan of bombing multiple areas of Homatomashi which included the Emperor's palace has been discovered and nullified. It's over."

White-Eyes looked stunned by his words and James turned away to look at me. "Crimson, leave."

"Excuse what? I'm not leaving," I snapped back and looked at him with pleading eyes.

*I can't leave you!*

"Just g-"

"James Hamilton, take out your sword."

My eyes widened when James body went rigid and he cursed, his hand reaching for the right side of his hip where in seconds, a sword materialized. He pulled it out of its scabbard and aimed it at me.

I lifted my gaze to see his fearful one and I looked at the tattoo that he'd gotten from the Great One, waiting for it to activate, but it didn't.

"You think you're the only one who has an upper hand. You think I didn't know what you were doing? You're so attached to that woman like a fucking dog. I asked you multiple times to kill her and yet you couldn't. You loved her and would do anything to keep her alive. You really thought I'd give you freedom? Unless I die, you'll never be free from me. That Great One thought she could help you. I guess she didn't factor in that if she dies before the seal is activated it becomes ineffective."

"No...you killed her!" I snapped.

White-Eyes laughed then, the sickening sound made my stomach turn.

"Easy prey and a delicious soul to add to my collection."

White-Eyes continued to laugh and, with a sigh, he looked at me as James shook, trying desperately to fight off the hold on him.

"Seeing as my story means nothing to you, why don't we end this. James. Kill Crimson Jiyuna by striking her in the chest."

I lifted my hands up to grab my swords, but with a blink of my eyes, something went straight through my chest; James' wide tear-filled eyes locked onto mine. He stood there before me, my mind attempting to catch up as to how he'd gotten to me so quickly.

White-Eye's cynical laugh echoed around us while I tried to take a breath, feeling the warm liquid that I knew was blood begin to stain my fighter's outfit.

"No...no," James whispered, tears rolling down his cheeks and I bit my lip.

*Storm...*

*"Do not fear. I'll make things right. I'll...try...please....forgive me, Crimson."*

James pulled his sword out then, and I let out a weak scream before my knees buckled.

I fell to the ground just as I heard the doors open.

My Kitsune ran to the surface then, and my eyes locked onto White-Eyes.

**I won. That's what matters...right?**

*Yet, I still felt like I'd lost the battle as I took my last breath.*

## CRIMSON STORM OF HOMATOMASHI



~CRIMSON~

*I* stirred awake, feeling something lick my cheek while something else nudged at my forehead. "Five more minutes."

"Woof!"

"Woofa!"

Opening my eyes, the first thing I noticed was the cherry blossom tree above me. The warm breeze passed carrying a few of the pink petals with it, and the fresh scent flowed into my nose and left me even more confused.

It was night time, the sky above that peeked through the branches of the tree was a dark blue with multiple stars. Urufu head popped into my line of vision and she began to lick my left cheek while something licked my right, which I figured was Mizuko.

"Where...am I?" I croaked, feeling disorientated. My body was tired, and I fought to sit up, but my eyes were beginning to close. Something nudged next to me to keep me from falling to the side, and it took me a few minutes to gather enough energy to open my heavy eyelids once more. I looked up to see a teal like a creature, its scales a mixture of teal, sapphire blue, and purple.

*Dragon?*

"RyuJinnSu?"

He lifted his head to look at me, blowing a stream of smoke from his nostrils before he leaned in to press his head against my forehead.

"Hey, you," I whispered. "Thanks. I don't feel too well." "Kiku."

"Bru-Ra!"

I lifted my head with RyuJinn to see Chiryoshi and Fushichou hovering around us. I took a slow look at all of my familiars and noticed the pocket watch that rested against my chest. I also noticed the very purple-red scar on my chest that triggered what had happened who knows when.

"How long...have I been unconscious?" I wondered.

"Seeing as time is super fast here compared to the living world, only a few minutes."

I lifted my gaze to see Storm standing near the cliff, making me realize I was back at the hilltop and sitting under the cherry blossom tree.

I tried to stand or even move, but I whimpered and RyuJinn let out a puff of smoke which I figured was his way of telling me to stay still. For added measure, Uru and Mizu put their heads on my lap to force me to stay put.

Storm turned around and walked towards me, stopping a few feet away. She wore the same outfit like our last encounter in this place; the traditional kimono with white and sapphire blue petals. Her silver strands were left down, and her silver eyes locked onto mine.

"Storm..."

"Crimson," she replied with a soft smile. "Seems you should thank that ex-boyfriend of yours."

"Huh? James...what did he do?"

"He's smart enough to always have a backup plan," Storm praised, turning her head to look at the horizon of floating souls.

"What do you mean?" I asked weakly.

"Did you know the Great One has nine lives?"

"Huh? She's a cat shifter?"

"Bingo. Father didn't know such information and ensured she was captured and killed. The people delivered a soul to him, and he had it like he normally does. He didn't know that wasn't her soul, but a fabricated one. The people hired to kill her worked with James. Sure, Great One lost one life, but she still has eight lives and is currently helping the guys keep your soul from leaving your body as you heal."

"No way...but heal? There's no way I can heal from that wound."

"Ah right. He never told you what that nasty liquid was for." Her expression softened as she looked at me. "The liquid you drank was an immortality drink. It's commonly used by Kings and Queens right before war. It's essentially how many royalties survived the wars when they were struck down. It gives the individual 24 hours of being immortal. Any wounds you take will heal while giving the impression the person is dead. The only side effect is your hair goes silver." She winked at me and I stared at her long hair.

"That's why ..."

"If you lived a life like mine...with a father like mine...death is normally at your door." With a sigh, she looked back at the horizon. "You feel weak because a part of your soul is here right now while your other half is on the side of the living. I just wanted to let you know that...and..." She trailed off and faced me before I watched her kneel on the ground and bow her head to the floor.

My jaw dropped and my Kitsune tilted her head in shock. Even my familiars all turned their attention to her and I could feel their mixed emotions of confusion.

"Gomennasai, Crimson Jiyuna," she apologized before slowly lifted her head to continue. "When I died...I was angry but more importantly, I wanted revenge. I thought if I manipulated the people around me, and you, I could get what I wanted. I craved happiness and was so blinded by my determination to acquire it, that I lost sight of all the opportunities I had."

She took a deep breath and continued. "I harbored a lot of hate within

myself. Hate for the situation I was born into and the life I had to live. I just wanted to be happy. To be able to play and be like the normal kids and be given free rein to love Eric for who he wanted to be. We didn't ask to be what we were, but we wanted to make the best of our short lives. Yet...in the end, we never got that chance because we were too focused on seeing through tunnel vision, rather than looking all around us."

She lifted her head to the sky and whispered, "I once wanted peace. I truly did, because it meant I wouldn't have to kill or hurt people anymore. I was tired of it. Exhausted of being a tool for everyone else. Yet, when I died, I thought I could use you to exact my revenge because I didn't know what else to do. I didn't know what love was until I met Erica...and to be honest, he didn't know how to show his love or compassion because it had been beaten into him that a reward was earned when he validated someone or accepted lashes from my father. He shouldn't have done what he did to you...and I apologize on his behalf."

She bowed her head again and rose up. "Having a bit of my soul reside inside of you made me realize what a fool I'd been. I was surrounded by men who accepted me and could have easily helped me, yet I didn't want to take the chance. I ignored the love they could have given to me, for Erica, when I honestly could have shared with them the truth and worked together to get us out of this mess. I should have trusted them, and this is my result."

She looked at my familiars. "I also should have allowed my familiars to guide me back on the right path. Even though I was doing wrong, you stood by me, even when it pained you to do so. I'm sorry for treating you guys like prisoners in my pocket watch rather than companions who could aid me in the problems I was dealing with."

The five of them were quiet, but I knew they accepted her apology. Their silence was because Storm was no longer their Master, so her words held little weight to them anymore.

"You should go back now. You can't stay here much longer," Storm



suggested.

I wanted to get up, but my body felt so heavy.

"How?"

"Just relax and close your eyes. Think about the people you love, and you'll return to the living. Your familiars are using their magic to be here with you, but they're also waiting for you on the living side."

"Storm...can I ask you one more thing?" "Sure."

"What happens now? I mean...you're stuck here? All these souls are stuck here?"

She gave me a sad smile and slowly nodded. "No choice, really. You'll need to talk to the Great One to get a full explanation on Soul Bending but finding a Soul Bender is very difficult. The one who helped Father did it as a favor, but that was only because he was still technically in power and he's left the country. Also, no one would possibly take the task to free all these souls."

"But...they're innocent," I countered, trying my best to stay a bit longer.

"Yes...but the person who put us here is gone. What obligation does anyone else have to free thousands of souls? Soul Bending is extremely draining on the body and requires a water dance before other rituals to release a certain number of souls. It would essentially take a year, one ceremony every month to release hundreds of souls. It's too energy costing with no benefit on the Soul Bender."

"Can I do it?"

She blinked and turned her head to stare at me in shock. "Why would you?"

"Because I can? I mean I CAN do it, right? You have the gift. When your soul leaves, will that gift remain?"

"Yes...but-"

"Then I'll do it."

"You have no obligation to."

"Don't need one. I don't think it's fair to you all to be here." "I will remain

here."

"Why? Are you bound or something?" I asked.

"No...but...I hurt you all. Why would you free me?" She gave me a conflicted look and I sighed. "I forgive you, Storm Yuna."

She knelt there, speechless at my words. I continued. "What you did was wrong...but you realize that. It's also thanks to you that I'm alive. You could have let your father strike my soul and take over my body. Even as a half soul, you had the gift like your father and could have gone stealing souls while running your empire. You could have chosen to become like your father, but you didn't and that deserves forgiveness. Everyone makes mistakes. Everyone commits sins...but everyone deserves forgiveness."

Tears formed in her silver eyes and she bowed her head again. "Arigato...Crimson."

A small smile formed on my lips and my eyes began to close.

"Storm...we won't tell the public who you really were. I'll keep your legacy as it is...maybe stick with the name Crimson Storm so people don't forget the sacrifices you did make for our country, and for keeping me alive. I don't know how long it will take me to learn and do Soul Bending...successfully. But...I will. As long as I breathe...I'll bring change, and eventually help you cross over."

I opened my eyes just slightly to see her nod as sobs escaped her. With a smile, I whispered, "As for Eric...I forgive him too. I don't know if it will be ever possible to undo him being earth-bound, but I'll try. I don't know what awaits either of you when you leave this earth one day, but I hope...I hope...the ancestors will be...just as forgiving..." I trailed off, my eyes coming to a close.

Before my mind drifted into the dark abyss, I heard Storm Yuna's final words.

***"Sayonara, Crimson Storm. May your legend live on and the next path you***

*take, lead Homatomashi...no, the world, to a brighter future."*

\* \* \*

### **ONE MONTH LATER...**

"OH, HELL NAH! How the sizzling hell did Mr. Bipolar snag a second place spot in dating OUR Hottie?"

"Our? Our as in me too, McHot whatever you are. Sit the fuck down, it's dinner time!"

I watched Malachi and James duke it out as they attempted to set the dinner table.

"It's Hottie McHot Pants, dammit!" Malachi huffed.

"You're so loud. Sit your sizzling ass down already." Quil sighed, looking annoyed.

"Quil! You're my boy! Why aren't you defending me?!"

"Fair is fair. He asked her before the rest of us." Quil sighed again.

Haru chuckled as he brought a large bowl of rice to the table. "He was smooth."

"Smooth like a baby's butt," James emphasized with a smirk. "Fuck you!" Malachi snapped.

"Why is everyone so loud?" Aki whined, walking into the kitchen looking like he just woke up, his tails out and his ears twitching a few times.

Yoshi, who sat at the head of the table, sighed. "Ignore them. They're arguing over who gets to take Crimson on a date now that she's off bed rest."

"Oh. I guess I'm third then." Aki yawned, walking over towards me.

"Huh, THIRD?!" Malachi and Quil exclaimed while James shrugged.

"Aki asked when Crim woke up if they can go on a date and she told him

there was a line."

Aki nodded, reaching my side to lean down and give me a sweet kiss on the lips. "Hey." He whispered.

"Hey. How was your nap?" I asked, my tails happily moving back and forth while my Kitsune ears twitched at his closeness. My Kitsune was running around happily, feeling excited at Aki's presence.

"It was good until a few loudmouths woke me up," Aki replied and pulled the chair to sit on my right side.

I turned to James who chuckled and sat on my left side. "They're just upset I'm smarter than they think."

"We are not!" Malachi announced.

"I can agree with Malachi on this one," Quil added.

"Fourth," Haru declared.

"Fifth." Yoshi yawned.

"Sixth," Itsuki who walked into the room announced.

There was a moment of silence, and we turned to Quil and Malachi who just looked pissed off.

"This is so unfair," Quil grumbled.

Malachi nodded. "It's okay. We're better together anyway.

We'll just take Crim on a double date and get her a tub of green tea ice cream. She'll love us forever."

"She's right here." James sighed, using his left hand to point at me.

"And she already loves you guys, so I don't see how the bribery is helping your case," Aki added.

"Whatever!" Malachi and Quil said together and we all began to laugh.

"WOOF!"

"WOOFA!"

"KIKU!"

"BRU-RA!"

I turned my head to the door and smiled at the entrance of my familiars;

Father, ChiyoChi, and Yomato entered the kitchen. "We're back," Father announced. "Your Mother is on her way

with the Great One, so we can start without them."

"When are we gonna find out her real name?" Malachi asked. "When you all are able to take the bottle from her head

during training. You guys embarrassed us last time," James noted.

"That wasn't our fault!" Malachi countered.

"Who would have thought that a 100-year-old elderly woman could be so fast," Haru mused.

"You guys just thought she was called the Great One for show?" Itsuki shook his head and sighed, taking a seat. Malachi and Quil helped to get the remaining dishes.

"We got proven wrong," Yoshi replied.

"Ya, with our asses beat." Aki cracked his neck. "I'm still sore."

"You're always sore," Malachi commented.

Aki rolled his eyes. "That's because I'm doing an excellent job in other departments."

The others snickered, and I blushed before I elbowed him in the ribs.

"Ah! Crim?!"

"My dad is RIGHT there?!" I huffed. "And we haven't even done anything!"

"Hmph. He knows that. Ow...my ribs are broken," Aki complained.

"You're so dramatic." James sighed. "I'll break them if you want to prove a point."

"I don't," Aki said plainly, looking annoyed.

James shrugged with a cocky grin. "Good."

"At least you all get along," Yomato pointed out.

"We do NOT get along," Malachi declared.

"Of course they get along. They're just like this because

Crimson's awake. You should have seen all the tears shed earlier. I have a

video!" ChiyoChi said with a sweet voice.

"VIDEO?!" the guys exclaimed. My familiars crowded around me, as I watched the guys attempt to sweet talk ChiyoChi into deleting the footage of them apparently sobbing together.

*Hmm. RyuJinn? Are you not joining us?*

I felt my pocket watch grow hot, and a light teal glow came from his jewel, catching everyone's attention. In seconds, a small ball of light shot out from my watch and emerged a little dragon.

"Roar!"

We were all silent at the adorable mini sound that was apparently supposed to sound intimidating. ChiyoChi and I squealed.

"SO KAWAII!"

"That's so not intimidating." James sighed. RyuJinn looked at him and let out a puff of smoke through his nostrils before he began taking a deep breath.

"Oh HELL NO! NO breathing fire!! No, no." James was out of his seat and running over to where Malachi and Quil were.

"Why the fuck are you coming over here?!" Malachi snapped. "Every man for their damn self," Quil huffed.

Itsuki took advantage of the situation and sat down where

James had been seated, and the three of us watched them run out of the kitchen as RyuJinn chased after them with his mini flame throwing breath.

"Ah. They shouldn't tease RyuJinn. He doesn't like being in that form," I pouted.

"RyuJinn will be fine. I think he enjoys torturing them." Itsuki chuckled.

"Probably," I replied and giggled.

"Let's get ready to eat?" Aki asked.

"Hai!" everyone replied. We waited for the others to come back; RyuJinn purposely sat in front of my empty plate to stare daggers at Malachi, Quil, and James who sat opposite from us.

"So...what's the plan?" Yoshi asked.

"For now, we celebrate Crimson's recovery and then we will officially announce Crimson's new role as a Mage."

"Wait, what? You mean I'm going to be doing what Storm had been doing? Like...traveling Homatomashi to bring peace? I doubt I'm ready for that."

"You will be trained, but you will be officially presented to Homatomashi. You deserve to claim the praise as well as the rest of you for stopping a plot of war," Yomato explained.

We exchanged glances and we all turned to James who gave us an uncomfortable look. "Why is everyone looking at me when I didn't say anything?"

"I guess that means he's included, huh?" Malachi sighed dramatically.

"At least Aki can deal with him," Quil grumbled.

"Why do I have to deal with him?" Aki asked, looking confused.

"Because you 'understand' him," Yoshi noted. "Plus, you have the extra patience," Itsuki added. "Agreed." Haru sighed.

"Coming from Haru and Itsuki make it sound ten times worse," I mused.

"And I'm right here?! I'm not that bad!" James stressed.

"Uh huh," we said in unison, and Yomato chuckled while ChiyoChi and Jiyuna both smiled.

"I won't stand here and say that things will get easy now. We have a lot of clean up to do and that includes finding those who worked along with White-Eyes to give him the resources he needed. This means you will have harder encounters, some that will test your limits."

Yomato looked at each of us before his eyes landed on me and a smile formed on his lips. "However, you will grow stronger. Myself, the Council, and our resources from across Japan and around the world will assist when you need them. To gain peace is one thing, but to maintain it, is a whole other struggle. I believe the men and woman sitting before me can achieve amazing things and create a legend that many will look back to one day in our history

books. So, I ask you all, will you help Homatomashi become a better place for everyone? Young and Old, Male or Female, Shifter or Human?"

The guys all looked at me and a determined smile formed on lips.

"I, Crimson Jiyuna, accept your offer Emperor of Homatomashi. My men and I would be honored and will hold our positions with pride."

Aki leaned in and whispered. "I thought you said you'd go with Crimson Storm."

"Oh..." I replied, looking at the others' encouraging expressions. "Right."

I cleared my throat, noticing Father's grin and ChiyoChi's wide smile. Mother and the Great One entered the room, quietly moving to stand with the others in the corner as I turned to look at Yomato again.

"I, Crimson Storm, accept your offer. We will start a legend about peace and help Homatomashi be a safe place for all, young and old, rich or poor, shifter or human. We will help bring peace and create a world where everyone can be loved and accepted. Most importantly, we'll fight for the freedom everyone deserves to experience."

With those words, I knew that today started the beginning of a whole new adventure. I was excited for the journey ahead, with my men, familiars, family, and the new friends I knew I'd make in the coming future.

***My name is Crimson Storm, and my Legend has just begun...***

**THE END.**



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