

The Road to Change: The Tale of Nichole and Kenji (MtF, FtM)

By FoxFaceStories

A Commission for AI

A lifetime has passed since the defeat of the Demon Lord. Nichole Dawnwood, eldest child of Queen Melanie and King Alister, is now a grown woman ready for courtship. But Nichole has received omens that she is to be the reincarnation of the Demon Lord, and flees to the Spirit World for answers. With her long-time crush Kenji beside her, new transformations and much-needed answers await them both.

The Road to Change: The Tale of Nichole and Kenji

The black-armoured grasp of the Demon Lord held Nichole around her throat, squeezing the life out of her.

"You are just a vessel," his voice echoed, not just aloud but into her very mind.

"Hollow and small, awaiting my glory. Give in."

"N-no!" she cried, barely able to get the words out. She looked around in a frenzy, but everywhere there was fire. The capital of Astrea, refounded by her father and mother, the King and Queen who had first defeated this dark villain, was now a gutted ruin. Crowds screamed as hungry demons descended upon them, tearing their flesh asunder. The sky was red and filled with ash. Everywhere, the flames roared, consuming all that she loved. Still, she held on.

"Surrender. My glory will reawaken in you."

"I w-won't give in!"

He slammed her against a pillar, which toppled from the castle tower of Astrea and plummeted down into the fires below. The flaming eyes of the Demon Lord were fixed upon her, but as he twisted her body by the neck, it was clear that he was showing her something. Another body that lay upon the steps of the tower, broken and ruined. A warrior's body with the colourful attire of a samurai from Taiva. A warrior with fox-like ears to indicate kitsune heritage.

"Kenji!" she gasped. "Oh Gods, Kenji! No!"

"There is only one way to save him, child. You do not have the strength. Only the power of a Demon Lord resurrected can bring him back. This is his fate. It is preordained. As is yours."

And then he turned her body further, to show her one last grotesque display. One that shook her to her utmost core.

"You will destroy all you love, Nichole. All you love, unless you surrender . . . or die."

He squeezed her throat. This time, the muscle gave way, and it collapsed in his grip in a bloody vice. She barely had time to whimper before the Demon Lord crushed her spine.

“AAGHH!”

Nichole woke screaming in her bed, her skin slick with sweat. Her room was still dark but for a single ever-burning magic candle on her dresser. It was clearly before morning, but it took her far too long to realise that: the dream was simply too present in her mind.

“Just a n-nightmare,” she told herself. “Just a terrible dream.”

The door burst open as guards filtered in, followed by Grandma Greenwood, who scuttled in on her spider legs, her large thorax blocking the exit momentarily before she squeezed through. Despite being Nichole’s grandmother, she looked to be in her late-thirties at the most, and had a sword at her side, having found that she could be quite a formidable force ever since she’d been turned from a normal human maid into a beautiful drider by the Demon Lord’s forces eighteen years ago.

“Nichole! My child, are you alright?”

The young woman burned with embarrassment, brushing away her cheeks. “It’s okay, grandma. I’m, I’m fine. I just . . . I had a bad dream, that’s all.”

Grandma Greenwood looked around at the soldiers. “It’s fine, just a dream. Thank you for your alertness. Someone go tell my son and the Queen before they worry.”

The beautiful black-skinned drider shifted closer to Nichole, holding her close with her more human-like upper half. Some people were put off by driders still, though Astrea was a multicultural and multiethnic city more and more each passing year, but Nichole had grown up taking rides on her. She thought her arachnid grandmother was *beautiful*, especially her skin; it was like the darkest night sky.

“Another one of the same nightmares?” her grandmother asked.

Nichole nodded, feeling pathetic.

“Would you like to talk about it? I could spin you a new scarf while you tell me?”

The eighteen-year old princess chuckled a little at this. “I do like that trick, but no. It’s okay. I just need to be braver.”

“Well, I don’t know anything about being a princess, my young one, but I do know that bravery comes when we learn to rely on others as well. Maybe you should tell your parents, at least.”

“I will,” Nichole lied, before bidding her goodnight with one final hug. Her grandmother was always close by and concerned for her.

But Nichole didn't want to tell anyone the truth of her dreams, the horrid fears they instilled in her. Eighteen years ago, her father and mother had given up their genders to defeat the Demon Lord, and in the end had become the proud King and Queen and formed a mighty, ever-growing brood of princesses and princes, of which she was the eldest. But was he really gone? Had the Demon Lord truly been defeated, or had his magic gone elsewhere? Nichole had been experiencing these nightmares for a year now, and in her research had discovered that, according to the date of her birth, she had almost certainly been conceived on the very same day that the Demon Lord was vanquished.

Supposedly vanquished, that was.

Nichole brought out her sketchbook and began to draw beneath the candlelight. It always soothed her, gave her a purpose and sense of hope amid her dark thoughts. And she was truly talented, bringing to life imagery that pleased her parents and the many ambassadors who received them as gifts. Even Lady Skara was deeply impressed.

Still, her thoughts remained steeped in fear. Because what if her dreams were something far darker? What if she *was* the Demon Lord reincarnated, his evil ready to grow inside of her and bring back his dreaded rule into the world? The dreams were becoming more powerful and ever-more vivid, and she dared not tell anyone her fears. She continued to sketch, turning the possibilities in her mind. They would think her mad, or *worse*, see her for the darkness she truly was destined to become. No, she couldn't tell them. Not ever, especially her parents. Not when the last thing the Demon Lord had taunted her with was the sight of their dead bodies hanging from the tower.

With horror pounding in her heart, she looked down and saw that very sight. The princess gasped, throwing it to the side.

She'd been sketching the death of her parents the whole time.

King Alister Dawnwood frowned when Nichole made her proposal. He was a handsome man, looking to be in his early twenties, with blonde hair and bright blue eyes. It was a bit silly, Nichole thought, remembering that this man who looked just a few years older than her was actually her father, but the magic of her parents' victory over evil and their establishment of the kingdom of Astrea had rendered them seemingly immortal, or at least very long-lived. Still, if what they'd told her about their progeny potentially inheriting such a boon proved true in a few years, she supposed any children she had might feel the same way someday . . .

"My dear princess, are you sure you want to travel alone? You are a princess, after all."

"Yes, but father, you weren't always royal. Before you changed, you were a peasant woman! And then a warrior of the Dawnway Estates!"

"That was a long time ago, my dearest. I've almost been a man longer than I've been a woman, and the same for being a King."

Nichole turned to her mother, who was watching their interaction. They were in the throne room, but the daily entreaties had been dealt with, and now it was just them and several of her younger siblings, the latter of which were being attended to by the staff. Her mother, Queen Melanie Dawnwood, shifted her newborn - Nichole's latest little brother - to her other breast. She had gorgeous brown hair and olive skin, the same brown hair and light olive skin that Nichole had inherited, though the young princess had her father's blue eyes and soft curls. The Queen was also the very image of regal maternity; it was often joked around the palace and in the city that half the population boom for the kingdom took place in the royal bedroom. Nichole could never imagine having so many children, unless . . . unless Kenji wanted that.

"Dear," Melanie said. "I know you want this, but you must take a carriage. Or at least a faithful companion."

Alister's eyes went wide as he looked at his wife. "Mel?"

The Queen shrugged. "Don't give me that look, my love. We both set out when we were just a little older than Nichole, and we faced far greater danger. Simply wanting to go to the edge of the Spirit Realm is hardly the same. Lots of our citizens make the pilgrimage just to see the Wildwood Tree Circle that forms its gate."

"Which they can't get into," Alister said. "Because they're not magic like you are."

Another shrug. "And Nichole here isn't a person of magic beyond some rudimentary castings, right?"

"Exactly!" Nichole said, seizing upon this moment. "I just want to see it again, father, this time without a big royal escort. For my sketchings. better understand this realm and the beauty you worked so hard to preserve."

The ruling couple shared an amused look, and the king gave way.

"Fine!" he said, in a flippant way that seemed to speak of his far less noble origins. "Perhaps I am simply jealous, being that I do not have so many adventures anymore thanks to your mother here giving you so many sisters and brothers."

"Oh, that is a dance for two, my love," Mel said sarcastically.

Nichole cringed. "Ew! No more royal bedchamber talk, please!"

The loving couple held hands and rubbed their noses together, just to tease their eldest daughter.

"I'm serious! I might actually run away!"

“Ha!” Alister laughed. “Fine, but I want you protected. Your mother had me back when she was a young mage. I want you to have protection too. And given that Kenji of Taiva is currently representing the magical beings of Taiva, and his shrine maiden parents, I imagine there’ll be no complaints about him being your companion.”

Nichole froze. Normally, she would leap at this opportunity. Kenji was handsome and soft spoken and he wrote *poetry*, by all the Gods. On the few nights she didn’t have terrible dreams about the Demon Lord, she instead had ones about him. Now that she was eighteen, some of them were more . . . scandalous. Not exactly princess-like, though given how her parents were with one another, perhaps she’d inherited a dirty mind from one or both of them. There was just something about him doing his morning exercises in his hakama, or training in his samurai armour, that just *did* things to her.

But he’d also been in her nightmares, his broken body at the feet of the Demon Lord, the man she had a deep crush on murdered while trying to save her from her dark destiny.

“Honey?” Melanie asked. “I thought you would have wanted this?”

“I - I do,” she said slowly. It was obvious; Kenji had a connection to the Spirit World, being half-kitsune. He would be necessary to get her into that other plane of existence for her plan to work. “I was just . . . thinking about him.”

Her parents exchanged a warm, knowing smile. It irritated her, how much they obviously realised her huge crush on the man.

“I think I understand,” Alister said, still smirking. “Very well. We shall contact him. Stay safe, and be well. And if there’s any sign of trouble-”

“I know, I know! You’ve both trained me, remember? I can handle myself.”

She gave her parents both a hug, longer than usual following her nightmares, and then walked away hurriedly. There was no time to lose. She needed to be purged of her Demon Lord essence as soon as possible, and only the Spirit World could accomplish this without anybody knowing. Still, she heard her parents whisper to one another as she walked away.

“Did she seem alright to you, my love?”

“Just fine, Ali. She’s smitten, like I was with you. And still am.”

“Awwwww.”

Nichole was nervous in Kenji’s presence. It took her a while to realise why; despite knowing one another their entire lives, she had never been entirely alone with him like this, and now they would remain alone - together - for several days. It filled her heart with a tingly sensation, like a whole swarm of bees had taken residence up inside of it. It didn’t help that

he was so, so very handsome, and his stoic manner only added to her appreciation of him. He was in his blue and white hakama - white on top, blue below - and his hair was pulled back into a Taivan-style bun. His eyebrows were thick, his jawline soft and hairless unlike the usual men of her own Astrea, and something in that softness made him even more manly in her eyes; like he was not just a trained warrior and spirit mage, but also a being of poetry itself. Or perhaps it was just that she attributed all these fine qualities to him because his shoulders were so deeply attractive. She'd only seen him practice his exercises shirtless once, and she'd had to get a servant to fan her in the aftermath. Now there was no fan, and there was no servant. There was just Kenji on his horse, and she on her fine steed, the pair of them moving along the forest path together in near-silence. She kept waiting for him to break it, but that was a foolish hope: Kenji could ride for days without saying a word. He was a meditative young man, keen-eyed and more likely to listen to the call of the sparrow and find beauty in it than fill a void with silence.

Naturally, it fell to Nichole to speak, her words tumbling out thanks to her sheer nervous energy.

"I'm really glad you're coming along, Kenji. I mean, I know the King and Queen asked you, but you could have said no. Well, I know you wouldn't have said 'no', but you might have said something like 'alas, I must apologise, but I have commitments in Taiva' or somesuch. Or just not responded, since you're so silent, and given a shake of your head and a bow or something. Not that I think you would be rude, just that . . . er, I'm very glad you're here, is what I'm saying."

Kenji smiled softly and nodded, the pair of them alone on the road, the forest on either side of them and the tree limbs above them, forming a tunnel-like canopy.

"I am glad to be here, also," he said. And after her massive verbal vomit, that was *all* he said.

"You are?" Nichole asked, cheeks blushing.

"Yes."

"Um, great. That's great! So . . . why did you want to be here?"

"The gate to the Spirit World is fascinating. I would like to see it."

"Oh," she said, shoulders falling a little.

"And because you are my friend, Nichole, and a woman I very much admire. Escorting you to see it would be a great honour, and a greater pleasure."

Oh *Gods*, he was so good. He delivered the words so sincerely, and it made her giggle lightly like some kind of foolish tavern girl half-drunk at the bar.

"That's . . . thank you, Kenji."

They continued riding in silence for several minutes, though it was far less awkward now. She could even feel Kenji occasionally looking at her, and it was hard not to look back.

Princess Nichole had a mission, though, and she had to keep her mind focused upon that. She could feel the Demon Lord's metal hand around her throat, his gauntlet *squeezing* tight, filling her with *him*.

"Why are you really going to the Wildwood Tree Circle?" Kenji suddenly asked. It jolted her thoughts out of that dark place.

"I - I told you. I want to see it and sketch it. To feel part of the journey my parents took, and to understand the Primal Magic of the world."

Kenji nodded, and seemed to find that answer satisfactory. They rode again for some minutes, though it felt more awkward again, somehow.

"Would you like to tell me the real reason, Princess?"

Nichole pulled her horse to a stop and looked to Kenji, who was still gazing at her. "What do you mean? Are you calling me a liar?"

"I would name you no such thing. But you are concealing the true reason for this visitation."

Nichole grew frustrated. She folded her arms beneath her chest and frowned. She was dressed in a riding outfit, but one that was still resplendent, with a royal diadem upon her head. She hoped it would make Kenji back down, but he remained stoic as ever; even his fox ears were unmoving. Not even twitching in the slight wind.

"What makes you think there's another reason?" she asked.

Kenji looked about thoughtfully before answering, as was his habit. Then, he pointed.

"There is a beautiful ember tree by a hot spring. Five minutes ago, we passed a clearing that gave a wondrous view of Mount Hope. An hour before, you turned down Taiwan sweetcake and honey-candy when I offered it to you."

"S-so?"

Kenji raised one eyebrow deliberately. "Princess, you *never* turn down sweetcake and honey-candy. And you never pass up an opportunity to sketch a sight of natural beauty. My people write poems about Mount Hope. We name her Misaka-san, a woman of great power. You would not fail to notice its impression unless you were undertaking an urgent mission. So, I therefore conclude we have a deeper purpose here."

His fox ears twitched.

"You wish me to take you through the spirit gate in the Wildwood Tree Circle."

Nichole's jaw dropped, until she remembered her royal training and corrected her posture and expression. "How did you - oh, damn it all! You're so expressive! Yes, damn you - pardon my crassness. Yes, I need to get into the spirit world. I - I can't tell you why, however. I was going to tell you when we got there, I promise."

"But you can't tell me why. Nor your parents."

"No. I'm sorry. If you can't-"

"I'll take you," he said. "And you can tell me if you wish or not."

Again, that flood of warmth in her heart. "Thank you, Kenji."

"But I will remain with you, and keep you safe."

This time, a flash of memory. The Demon King over Kenji's broken body.

Give in, Nichole. You will cause this, unless you give yourself over to me.

She shook her head, narrowing her eyes. "Let's keep going."

They camped for the night. Nichole was more than curious as to how they would go about this, but Kenji was an utter gentleman, pitching his tent far from hers. Impressively far, in fact. As in, in the surrounding treeline of their clearing far.

"Isn't that a little too much?" she asked him. "I won't bite, I promise. And I doubt you have a fox's jaws, right? I mean, not that you're a fox. I know you're a kitsune and everything. You know what I mean, I think."

He smirked, clearly amused by her embarrassed gushing. "Don't worry. I have my mother's fox ears. I will hear you if there is trouble. But I prefer to, uh, be further in the woods. To myself."

Nichole accepted this, even if she'd harboured more than a few fantasies of *at least* seeing him shirtless, or perhaps just via silhouette in the light of his tent. Instead, she was left feeling all alone, though at least he'd assembled the tent for her after much of her own confusion as to how it worked. How had her father and mother ever done this? It was too much!

It only occurred to her when she lay in bed, ready to sleep, that Kenji had actually stumbled in his words when explaining why he had to keep his distance. What had got him nervous enough to possibly say 'uh'?

The Demon Lord had Nichole by the throat, holding her over the tower, ready to let her fall. Ready to let her be reborn into *him*.

"You are but a vessel, little would-be Princess. A receptacle for my darkness. NOW GIVE IN!"

He let go. The woman screamed as she fell, descending into the scorching fires. In that moment she was consumed, ready to be reborn.

"NO!"

Nichole woke with a fright, her heart pounding quickly in her chest, her body covered in sweat. She had squealed, she just knew it, because Kenji was outside her tent calling for her. His voice was high and reedy, panicked for her, and for a moment she thought she saw the shadow of a woman outside of her tent, but then her vision cleared and the tent flapped open.

“Nichole! Are you alright?”

She covered herself in her blanket, her brunette hair a mess, tangling around her shoulders. Kenji immediately looked away out of respect.

“I’m sorry. I thought something was wrong. You were screaming. Forgive my intrusion.”

“It’s okay, Kenji. It was just . . . a bad dream.”

He nodded slowly, still not looking her way. “I will make you breakfast, Taivan style. There is no better.”

He closed the tent flap, leaving her to calm her breathing and focus on the present. She looked out her tent flap and looked around. It was a beautiful morning, and the field was full of butterflies. A far cry from the horror of the Demon Lord threatening to spill forth within her broken soul.

“Calm down, Nichole,” she told herself. “You can do this.”

She exited out into the clearing once she had changed her clothing and done her hair. With a flutter of magic, she cleaned her body. She was no expert like her academic little sister Tessa, but she could perform some rudimentary incantations. The best were learned from her mother; long camping trips were made easier by always remaining clean and fragrant. And yet . . .

“What smells of sulfur?” Kenji asked, sniffing the air.

“N-nothing!” she exclaimed, running the incantation again. It left her in a sour mood. “Let’s just eat and get going. I need to get into the Wildwood Gate. Soon. Please.”

Kenji regarded her. He’d set out his mat for his morning meditation. And yet, without complaint, he rolled it back up.

“Understood,” he said.

“Oh, Kenji, I didn’t mean-”

“It is no problem, Princess.”

It was the first time she had ever seen him on edge. She stepped forward and brushed his shoulder with her hand.

“Kenji, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you this morning.”

“That is . . . fine. I was simply alert.”

“You were my knight in shining armour, huh?”

“We don’t do shining armour in Taiva. We prefer colour and art upon our armour.”

She giggled at this. Kenji could be such a literalist sometimes, not understanding more Astrean phrases. Her human mother was a magnificent aunt but could be quite . . . haughty. Convinced of the superiority of Taiva.

"Hey, Kenji," she said, twirling her stray brown hair with one finger. "This morning, when you 'rescued' me from my bad dream, I could have sworn you looked different. I mean, I only saw your silhouette, but-

"You had just woken," he said quickly. "Did you hear my voice break when I spoke to you? I am embarrassed, but I felt more like a wailing kitsune than a man in that moment."

She smiled. "Well, thank you."

She let her hand linger on his shoulder, and only after she realised how close their faces had become did she pull away.

"We best be going."

The Wildwood Tree Circle was a magnificent sight. Three ancient Wyr Trees coiled around one another, their bases swollen, their trunks bending upwards and twisting to join at the top, like a warped natural pyramid. In the clearing beneath them were various holy stones, each inscribed with ancient runes that radiated with Primal Magic. Queen Melanie had uncovered them with her power, and King Alister had cleared the way with his magic sword, the one that had once belonged to the great Emperor Touma, blessed with many loving wives and a great many progeny. As usual, there were a few pilgrims here to pay respect to the unicorns who could be very rarely seen here, as well as the mythical and mystical Child of the Forest who embodied the very soul of nature itself.

"We shall wait until they go," Kenji said. "And then I can cross us over. I presume you want secrecy?"

Nichole blushed. He could read her too well. "You presume well, Kenji. Thank you."

He briefly smirked. "I know a thing or two about shrines. Come, they're taking the nature path now. What do you know about the Spirit World?"

"Um, less than I'd like? Tessa's the real expert. And little Sara, of course, but she's a total nature lover, even more than I."

The young man grit his teeth a little, as if physically wincing from her lack of knowledge. "It's a good thing you have me along then."

"Give in."

Kenji lying broken, this time upon the forest floor.

Nichole sucked in a harsh breath, briefly overwhelmed by the image. She took a step back and turned, wiping away the tears that were just starting to flow.

“Princess? Nichole? Did something hurt you?”

“I’m f-fine. Please, take me to the Spirit World. You’re right. I do need you.”

She needed him *alive*. She’d have to do this right, and purge the Demon Lord from her body before he ever got the chance to surface.

Kenji took her hand. “Let’s go now. I know the right order of runes, and I can attune the magic necessary to activate them.”

He led her down the bank and towards the Wildwood trees. The runes were indecipherable to her, but Kenji moved around them, brushing them with his finger tips. There was an elegance to his movements that she couldn’t help but appreciate.

“Just watch,” he said.

“Easily done,” she replied, looking at him.

He turned back with a smirk. “I thought you might enjoy this.”

Was he flirting with her? It was so hard to tell with him sometimes. Still, he placed his hands upon parts of the different stones, whispering words in an ancient tongue that made them light up with the green energies of the forest. Slowly, the trees around them began to groan and shift.

“Stand in the middle,” he instructed her. “My Princess.”

“I am not *your* princess, technically, Kenji.”

“I often think of you as such anyway. Now stay.”

Her heart thudded in her chest. The Spirit World awaited. A place to purge the essence trapped inside of her. And Kenji was choosing now, of all times, to flirt with her? Did he think that made her feel better, when she kept seeing images of him dying? God, she wanted him. She wanted him to hold her and make her safe, but *he* wasn’t safe so long as she had this corruption inside of her. It needed to be gone. Only *then* could she tell him the truth. Only then could she say the words, “I love you.”

“Oh Great Spirits, allow us to see your realm, that we may pay respects to it and show our deepest care and humblest gratitude!”

Kenji clapped his hands together and bowed. Nichole had barely been paying attention, so lost in thought was the young woman, but she quickly widened her eyes at the sight of a great light blooming before them.

“You may enter, mortal kin. Take care, the Spirit World is unlike your own, unburdened by constancy or shape.”

And with that, the light bloomed. Nichole tensed, briefly afraid, but then she looked up with disappointment. “It didn’t work! Kenji! We didn’t even leave the Wildwood!”

But Kenji was gone. Nichole looked around, only to see something strange: the leaves in the trees were turning from green to a blood-red, and then to other colours. They

spilled like ink into the sky, forming a living painting that reflected her own visage until it joined the sky like a great cloud.

“Oh,” she said.

Of course. How stupid could she be? The gate was constant, but beyond it . . .

“Kenji!” she yelled, moving through the forest. There was music in the air, and strange creatures shifted and crawled along the trunks, looking like monkeys with the heads of birds. The tree branches parted to give her way, but then closed up behind her, preventing any travel back. Even the grass was wrong: it shifted and moved *with* her, as if desperate to ensure her feet were comfortable. When she reached a more open canopy, she could see islands floating in the sky. Some even had houses. One had what appeared to be a summer elf casting out a hook from his rod . . . only the hook went up instead of down, where it splashed into the sky, forming ripples, as if the sky was just a great pond.

“Ohhh, this is a lot to take in,” Nichole said. “Where in the Black Mountain is Kenji?”

She moved through the strange, mystical forest of the Spirit World. There was a draw that she could sense, a pull in a particular direction. A knot inside of her needing to be unfurled.

“Okay, so that’s where I need to go,” she murmured to herself. “A place to get rid of this corruption. But where is Kenji?”

She stepped further into the woods. Leaves got up and walked away at her approach, and strange laughter echoed through the gaps in the trees. It was like walking between seasons; the forest was suddenly in winter, snow everywhere, but within a few steps it was bright spring once more, buzzing with bees and filled with flowers. She wanted to sketch it, and continued to clutch her satchel, desiring to do so. But the pull was what mattered. She couldn’t indulge in such nonsense until the evil inside of her was gone.

“This way,” Nichole murmured. “I have to go this way.”

It was like some kind of gravity, pulling her forward to a single point. The princess wasn’t sure if it was an entity directing her there or simply her own will manifesting as she’d once heard could be the case in this plane of existence. Either way, she knew in her heart that this was the path to purge herself of the Demon Lord’s influence. She stepped through a large log tunnel, the tree hollow far larger than any could possibly be on the regular plane of existence, and finally came across somebody.

To her surprise, it was a Taivan woman. She was looking about, gazing at the mystical surroundings, and didn’t see Nichole for a few moments. It gave the princess time to take her in. The woman was a kitsune like Kenji, with bright orange fox ears. Only she had a fox tail as well, and wore a crimson-coloured kimono that left her looking breathtakingly beautiful. Her hair was long, straight, and silky, bound up at the top but still long enough to fall down to her waist where it was let loose.

"Hello?" Nichole spoke.

The woman turned, a large naginata instantly manifesting in her hands via magic. Nichole squeaked and fell backwards onto her rump, holding up her hand.

"Please, spirit, don't hurt me! I mean you no disrespect."

The woman's eyes widened. Then, to Nichole's abject confusion, she took off in a great sprint, moving with a grace and speed that was beyond any human, out into the treeline and beyond. She was gone in a flash.

"That was . . . strange," the princess uttered. "I guess the spirits are shy today."

She got back up and looked around, sensing that pull again. Yes, she had to veer slightly left. There was something urging her forwards. Something *pure* and beautiful.

"My princess?"

Nichole spun on the spot. Kenji was emerging from the treeline, wearing his blue and white hakama. His hair was more messy, and there was an agitation in his movements.

"Kenji!" Nichole cried. She *ran* to him, uncaring about royal posturing while in this strange and otherworldly place. To the man's complete surprise, she literally *leapt* into his arms, holding him tightly. "I was worried about you."

"I was too, my princess."

She let herself down, blushing but still smiling. "I'm not *your* princess, you know."

"You are," he said, one hand on her arm, which he pulled back quickly.

"I just saw the strangest thing, Kenji. A kitsune, like you, only female and wearing a blood red kimono. She was very beautiful, but she ran off when I tried to speak to her."

Kenji was oddly less interested than she expected him to be. "I suppose there are bound to be some kitsune here. My full-kitsune mother is a spirit. Was it her?"

"No, a very different woman. Are you not interested?"

Kenji shook his head. "I wish only to accompany you."

Again, that warmth. That hesitation.

"Kenji, there's something . . . inside of me. I have to tell you. I think . . . I think the Demon Lord is trying to reincarnate within me. To take me over and destroy my family, and all their allies, you included."

Kenji cocked his head to one side. "Explain."

She told him as much as she felt comfortable. She hadn't planned to tell him, but Kenji was the one person she felt completely comfortable around; he was so stoic and calm that he could weather the greatest of storms and keep the most explosive of secrets. Still, she found herself crying as she spoke, even here, in this most beautiful and mysterious of places. She held back sobs as she described the image of his broken body, of her parents hanging, of the Demon Lord's cruel taunts and prophecies. By the time she was done telling

her sordid tale, she was sitting on the forest floor, her arms around her knees, rocking slightly as if a child again. She wanted to *be* a child again.

Something was suddenly put in her hand; a small crinkled treat. The crinkle was wrapping paper, but what was inside was yellow and smelled wonderful.

"Honey-candy?" she asked.

Kenji smiled warmly. He knelt down and actually placed a hand around her shoulder, hesitating just a moment before doing so. "They'll help calm you down, my princess."

She took one and placed it in her mouth. Instantly, she was hit with the most delicious sugary nectar, one that did indeed calm her just as he'd said.

"Gods, that's good."

"Isn't it just? One day, perhaps, Astrea will make candy like this."

She leaned against him, just a little. "One day."

"Yes . . . in a few millennia, when they recognise Taivan ingenuity."

At this, Nichole giggled and elbowed him in the side, taking him by surprise. He fell to the side, and she collapsed on top of him, her body against his. It was then that she realised her soft chest was pressed against his hard muscles, and both of them were breathing heavily. Very, very heavily in fact. Nichole had never before been so aware of the fact that she had breasts, and judging from the way Kenji looked down to take in the sudden and accidental view of her cleavage, he was pretty confronted by it as well.

And then she felt a sudden hardness *elsewhere*.

"Oh Gods, sorry!" she cried, leaping off of him.

"I apologise humbly," he replied, standing and bowing several times before turning away. "I, uh, had a hidden dagger. I keep it for . . . protection."

They both had their backs turned to one another. Nichole swallowed, struggling to keep her thoughts to herself. She knew she had a habit of rambling when nervousness took her.

"Kenji, you know that I have . . . feelings for you," she said, looking up to the sky, where a river coursed through it, floating and twisting and turning against gravity.

"I . . . had hoped," Kenji replied after a moment's hesitation.

She didn't dare turn around. Not yet. "You hoped?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Um, is that all I get?" she said, smiling sheepishly, still with her back to him. Her cheeks were far too red. "Just 'yes.'"

"Yes, very much."

She laughed. She couldn't help herself. She giggled so much that one might think she was almost going mad. "You are the most taciturn person I know, Kenji! I'm asking . . . do you have feelings for me?"

"My princess, please turn around."

Slowly, she did so. Kenji was facing her, but he had withdrawn a small sheet of paper, upon which was the most artful and neat calligraphy she had ever witnessed.

"A letter?"

He shook his head. "A *haiku*. It is . . . how I find expression. Like with your wonderful sketching."

She stepped closer to him, staring up at his handsome face. "What does it say?"

Kenji spoke softly.

*"No mere princess she,
A soul of vibrant colours
She holds all my heart"*

Kenji looked away for a moment, clearly a little embarrassed.

"It is a work in progress. The true *haiku* must distil all of one's emotions into a single moment, but you have too many layers, my princess, that I am afraid I cannot ever capture the intensity of-

But then her lips were upon his, and her hands upon his cheeks, her feet upon her toes so she could reach his face. Kenji was startled for just a moment, but then he returned the kiss softly, his arms encircling her, *fulfilling* her in a way that was beyond how she had imagined it. She could feel the strength of him, the certainty in his body, the training that had sculpted it, and the compassionate nature of his mind that had softened it.

Finally, they released, and only because Nichole felt such a warmth in her body and in her breasts that she was afraid of being far, far too spontaneous for any princess to be. Kenji was looking at her, and she couldn't help but push her strands of brown hair behind her ear.

"I - I'm sorry. I've been thinking about doing that for a long time, and also I couldn't find the moment, and there's been this whole Demon Lord fear in me. I really like you, Kenji. I always have. But if that was too much, then it really was! We're on a mission and I should have let you finish and-

Kenji leaned forward and planted a soft kiss on her forehead. It calmed her as much as any honey-candy, perhaps more.

"The interruption was good. I was rambling."

She giggled. "You were rambling? Gods, that's what a ramble is for you? What must you think of me"

"The world."

She wasn't sure it was possible to be more in love with him, but there it was. She grabbed him and kissed him again, then leaned her head against his chest. Gods, he was

tall. Tall and muscly. Even in her lovey-dovey thoughts she was starting to feel scandalously aroused. Clearly, she'd inherited that from her royal parents. Much as she loved them, their bedchamber was *far* too active, and everyone knew it.

"Thank you, Kenji," she said. "For everything. I know where I need to go now, to purge myself. Can you stay here and-"

"I am coming with you."

"You can't. In the visions, I hurt you. The Demon Lord breaks you. I can't risk that."

"Then I shall risk myself. I am coming with you. Besides, the Spirit World is unpredictable. It can illuminate . . . change. I will escort you."

She knew then that she couldn't get rid of him. "Fine," she said. "But let me lead the way. I feel the pull of destiny. I know where I need to go."

Kenji gave a soft bow. "Then I will follow, my princess."

This time, she didn't correct him. She was his princess, and he was her valiant samurai protector.

They camped again, though doing so in the Spirit World no doubt came with some risks. Kenji played his shamisen and even showed her how to hold it and use it, and beneath the brilliant night sky above there was a deep romance to the moment. It didn't hurt that the night sky was ethereally vivid; Nichole had heard of the mystical northern lights, but never travelled to see them. Here in the Spirit World, the night sky was a dance of blues and greens and purples, and many light spirits floated among them as if caught in the very tide of beauty. Nichole sighed and leaned back, for once content not to be afraid. Kenji was helping her hold the shamisen, his strong body behind her, and it was more comfortable than she could ever imagine.

"You're incredible," she told him.

"And you are . . ."

He hesitated, then became alarmed.

"Kenji?"

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice cracking. "I should return to my tent. This is - this is improper conduct out in the wilds!"

His voice cracked again, and it would have been humorous were it not for the fact that he got up quickly and retreated to his tent, which once again was far, far from hers. Nichole was left feeling utterly confused. Was she being too daring? Was she making him uncomfortable?

“Stupid, Nichole,” she muttered to herself. “Stupid, stupid. He’s Kenji. Everything has to be done right. He’ll want me to talk to my parents first, organise a blessing for our courtship. He’s so . . . traditional.”

Still, she couldn’t help but feel she was missing something.

The Demon Lord held her by the neck, squeezing tightly. Kenji was still broken, and her parents were dead. The screams of Astrea haunted her, as did the burning eyes of the black-armoured Demon Lord.

“You are nothing. Your quest is hopeless. Turn back now, Nichole. You cannot succeed. Give in!”

But this time, for the first time, Nichole found herself smiling.

“You’re afraid,” she said.

When he crushed her throat it was with such anger that she woke instantly, choking a little until she realised she was conscious. After a few moments of panic, Nichole smiled again. “I’m on the right track,” she told herself. “He knows I can stop him.”

She left her tent in high spirits, once more cleaning herself with magic. Kenji had made a magnificent traditional Taivan camping breakfast, and they ate together, though that awkwardness had returned.

“You don’t have to run from me, you know,” Nichole said. “I like the comfort of you. The feel of you. I won’t make anything scandalous. And I promise we can court one another properly according to your customs and mine when I’m returned. I mean, if we are to be married one day, I could even have a Taivan wedding! I like the white kimono and the white face painting. I think it’s beautiful.”

Kenji smiled. “And you would look more splendid than the rising sun. I am sorry. I was . . . distracted by something.”

“A Taivan thing?”

He pointed at his ears. “A part kitsune thing, of sorts. Perhaps I shall tell you one day. When we are married.”

He returned to eating, not even giving her a meaningful glance. Somehow, in his own way, that made it all the better for Nichole, filling her with such delight that she had to tap her feet and get out her sketchbook just to deal with it. He’d said it so matter-of-factly, as if now that they’d expressed their feelings truly, it was as prophetic as the world continuing to turn and the arrival of Spring. They liked one another. They *loved* one another. Though she realised, as she sketched his handsome appearance, sitting on a log in this vibrant clearing with its many falling purple petals, she hadn’t actually told him that last part.

"Kenji?" she said.

"Yes, my princess?"

"I love you."

This time, his smile was so big it showed teeth. A true rarity.

"I know," he replied. "But I have loved you since I first heard your voice."

"And saw my face?"

He shook his head, then gestured to his fox-ears. "No. A part-kitsune can hear a singing princess from a far distance, long before he sees her."

"And what did you think when you saw me? Back when we were children?"

"That you were a kami. A spirit. A blessing upon the world."

She shuffled over to him and kissed him softly on the cheek. "You know, you don't talk nearly as much as I do, but you really make every word count. Me, I just ramble."

He looked down at her sketch and took it into his hands, setting aside his breakfast first.

"You speak with this," he said, his tone leaving no room for interpretation. It was *fact*. Gods, he understood her.

They were crossing a forest filled with pale white trunks and bright leaves when they heard the laughter. It was ethereal, childish, and *everywhere*. Kenji had his hand upon the hilt of his katana, ready for anything. He put out a hand to Nichole, warning her to stay back a little. They were closer, she knew. They could reach the point of purification *today*. She had to take another honey-candy just to calm her nerves over it, but now . . . something else was with them. They had just reached a stream with a small bridge across it.

"We ask for passage through your forest, spirit," Kenji declared. "We mean no offence if we have trespassed. We did not realise it was occupied."

A voice echoed through the woods, a male voice that was high and reedy.

"Oh, but it IS occupied, humans! It is, and you ARE trespassing!"

"Then we shall retreat, and offer our deepest apologies, and find another way."

They turned around, only to face the exact same sight behind them as before them; the bridge across the stream. Turning again, they faced it once more. Direction had become meaningless.

"But since you ARE here," the spirit continued. "Then we can play a little game. You see, I am a spirit of change! Of truth! Truth is in change, you know. Change and acceptance. Secrets are forbidden here. I cannot permit liars to cross without having my fun with them."

"We hold no lies," Kenji said.

“Liar! One of you is a manifestation of change! I can smell it! I can sense that you are not what you say. Something is inside of you, growing even as we speak, ready to burst forth and you KNOW IT!”

Nichole felt a shiver run down her spine. “It’s me,” she whispered to Kenji. “He senses I have part of the Demon Lord inside me. His essence, growing.”

“No, my princess, it’s not that. I’m . . . sure of it.”

But Nichole knew that it was. And she also knew that the Demon Lord had wrought much destruction upon the Spirit World, gouging out much of its magic and corrupting it, twisting it into his foul Domination Magic. Many spirits were wounded, or even truly perverted and corrupted by his actions. If a spirit knew this was inside of her . . .

“Do you know the nature of the change inside me?” she asked.

The spirit’s voice giggled. *“I truly don’t. I simply know one of you is HIDING it, and I cannot take that. Speak the truth, and I will let you pass. Fail, and I will test you, hee hee! Oh, I do like a test!”*

Nichole gripped Kenji’s shoulder. “We can’t tell him the truth,” she said. “If any other spirit other than the one that can help me, if it is a spirit at all, finds out about me . . . they’ll never let me leave. Or worse, they’ll cast me out to become the Demon Lord in the material plane, and seal themselves away for good.”

Kenji nodded. “Then let us run!”

They sped through the forest, dashing over the bridge as quickly as they could. Kenji was so much faster, but he kept pace with her, urging the princess onwards and ensuring she was safe. Still, the voice giggled.

“How rude! It seems I must expose your lies! And how else, but by showing you the magic of CHANGE!”

Suddenly, a wind whistled through the trees, gusting up beneath Kenji and Nichole and launching them up into the air. The pair landed with a thud, tumbling head over heels, but before they could get themselves back up, a stream of violet and red petals aloft on the wind whisked across their forms. Magic rippled and sparked from their touch, and Nichole found herself gasping as her body began to swell and change. Fur spread across her skin, white and soft, and with a squeak, a new tail pushed out from above her backside. Her clothes altered, becoming more like a ranger’s outfit, albeit one that left her increasingly furry midriff completely on display. Her ears migrated to the top of her head, and an adorable snout pushed out from her face, the princess’ nose turning black and shiny. Even her teeth and nails changed, becoming sharp and predatorial.

“Kenji!” she cried, groaning as the fur spread across her whole form, even her hands taking on a more paw-like configuration. “S-something is h-happening to meeee!”

“Since you travel with a part-kitsune, why not make you a full furry one too, heehee!”

She tried to focus her own meager magic to end the transformation, but there was no incantation she could think of, and she was no expert on Primal Magic like her mother. Soon, her practical travelling outfit, still a fine Astrean noblewoman's set of wears, had become a humble (and far too short) leather skirt and leather chest wrap, the latter of which held in a pair of furry breasts that were noticeably larger than they had been before. Her entire form was covered in pale fur, like that of a warm mink coat, but as alien as that was, it was not nearly as much as having a snout and a tail, the latter of which was swishing behind her, practically out of her own control. It felt so long and so . . . fluffy!

"K-Kenji! Please tell me you know how to - AGH!"

She leapt back quite a large distance thanks to her powerful vulpine legs, having been utterly shocked by the sight of the figure next to her. It was a white marble statue of a gorgeous and very naked woman, except that this woman was *moving*, her mouth expressing shock as she looked at herself. She had short hair of the same marble substance, and a fine figure, the kind all male artists love to sculpt most, but she was certainly not what Nichole had expected at all.

"I'm so sorry!" she said, getting up off of all fours, which was how she had landed by some fox-like instinct. "I was thrown nearly twenty feet by magic. Are you a spirit? Did you see where Kenji went? Who is transforming us?"

The woman made a series of frantic gestures to herself.

"What? You know where he is?"

The woman tapped her head, then pointed at herself. Clearly not getting her point across, she stopped hiding her breasts and overall statuesque nakedness, and instead made a Taivan kata pose, then proceeded to mimic drawing out a katana.

Nichole felt like an idiot. "By the Gods, Kenji! What's he done to you!?"

She ran to her love and embraced the new woman. Her skin was indeed like stone, but it was also incredibly soft, and oddly comfortable despite its hardness.

"Can you speak?"

The statue woman that had been Kenji shook her head. It gestured to Nichole, and it took a moment for the princess to realise that she was asking for covering for modesty.

"Oh, yes! Of course! Take my coat!"

The marble woman draped herself in it, then gestured outwardly to the forest in exasperation. She was clearly annoyed, and Nichole couldn't blame her.

"I understand. I'm frustrated too. I'm a weird fox woman!"

Suddenly, Kenji raised an eyebrow, then folded her arms. Nichole smacked her own forehead.

"Oh, sorry! No, I like your foxiness! I just - I'm completely covered in fur right now, and the tail is a lot! I don't exactly feel like Princess Nichole at the moment."

Again, the statue gestured to herself.

“No, I get it. You must be feeling much stranger. You know, it’s funny, but I almost feel like you’re familiar, somehow. You look a bit like-”

But then Kenji grabbed the woman’s arm and pulled her onwards. The living statue gestured further into the forest, towards where Nichole had been leading them.

“Got it! No distractions. Keep following the path and get away from the spirit. That should break the transformation, right? Right, Kenji?”

Kenji gave a shrug that said ‘I really hope so but I’m not sure,’ and then kept tugging Nichole forwards anyway. The statue’s footsteps thudded heavily upon the ground; clearly she weighed a lot more now than she had before, but there was a grace and elegance to the new marble-skinned woman’s movements, to the point where Nichole was almost jealous of them.

“You know, I may be all furry and foxy, but *you’re* surprisingly graceful in that form, Kenji! You’ve definitely got a feminine side!”

Kenji said nothing, and Nichole continued to lead them onwards, hopefully away from the spirit, which wasn’t turning them back to the bridge anymore, at least.

“This tail really is odd! I better not be furry forever! It’s h-hard enough to deal with my hair as it is! My maids would never stop brushing me!”

They continued to run, only to reach a clearing where the trees turned golden in bark, and flowers grew directly from their branches instead of leaves. Finally, the effect seemed to leave them. Kenji’s body and clothing began to shift, and Nichole too felt her form begin to alter, her fur withdrawing.

“Oh, thank the Gods!” she murmured. “We must have escaped that spirit. I was beginning to think I’d never have my face back or - whoah!”

She fell to the ground, the bones in her legs suddenly going limp. Kenji reached down and caught her, but now *he* was the one growing hair along his length.

“My princess!” he grunted, holding her in his grip.

“Kenji! My legs!”

They were joining together. Fusing, in fact. At the same time, Kenji’s body was swelling, rippling with hairy muscle, his skin turning grey. The man groaned, howling in discomfort as his eyes shifted to the centre of his forehead and began to fuse together. Nichole gasped at the sight of this, but quickly turned her attention back to her body as her clothing shrank yet again. Her legs formed a single appendage, one entirely alien to her, but when it started sprouting lovely pink scales she soon realised what was occurring.

“M-m-mermaid! I’m becoming a mermaid, Kenji!”

Her feet flattened, extending out to become impressive fins, and fins of that same pink colour grew upon her forearms as well. Meanwhile, Kenji continued to grow, muscle

piling upon him and his gut filling out. He extended to seven feet in height, then eight, then nine, and then beyond *ten* feet, and yet he was almost as wide as he was tall. Huge tusks grew in from his lower jaw, jutting up menacingly, but it was his single eye that dominated. Nichole was now easily carried by him, his grunts and gasps far more baritone and bellowing than they had been moments before.

"What has happened to me!?" he boomed. He was wearing just a loincloth now, but all the appeal of that image for Nichole had disappeared with his new, grotesquely giant and wide appearance.

"You're a cyclops!" Nichole said, only to clutch her throat. "Oh Gods, I sound like I'm singing. I must be a siren mermaid. Kenji, can you marry me? I mean carry me!?"

He grunted in agreement, holding her in his arms as he ran. It left her tail flopping about uselessly and her mostly unsupported breasts in a seaweed wrap bouncing more heavily than she would have liked, but at least they were moving again.

"Heehee!" the spirit of this forest giggled. *"So determined to get away! So afraid to share the truth! Can you truly be together when you are so afraid of what lurks within you!?"*

"SHUT UP!" the pair of them shouted. They stumbled through a thick grove of trees, but Kenji stumbled, hurtling forward right into a shimmering emerald lake. He immediately began to sink, his body too heavy to hold him. Nichole burst to the surface, tail automatically working to keep her aloft. She was clinging to Kenji's form, straining to keep his head above water.

"Help! Spirit! Change us back! He's drowning!"

"Teehee! A shame the truth cannot be shared! The inner workings of-"

"I'm the Demon Lord reincarnated!" the new mermaid screamed. "I have his essence inside of me. There's your secret! Tell all if you must!"

Kenji slipped lower. He was trying to push her away. To free her from him. Foolish samurai sentiment: she could currently breathe in water!

"Demon Lord? Haha! What a foolish lie!"

"I am connected to him. I bare this to you! Feel the connection with your Primal Magic now that I have exposed it. I promise you I'm speaking the truth!"

The weight of Kenji was pulling her back down.

"Nichole," he gasped. "Get free!"

His head plunged under, and she lost her grip on him. At the same time, the Spirit's voice changed, turning to fear as it sensed Nichole's connection. *"The Demon Lord? No, it can't be . . . I was wrong. Change is bad. Change is bad! All is lost!"*

A harsh gale of wind shot through the forest, stripping the trees of their lustre. The mischievous spirit was gone.

“Damn you!” Nichole screamed. With a flap of her tail she dove down into the water, her mind racing as she tried to think of a way to get Kenji to freedom. It was already so foreign to her, being a mermaid, having a single limb for a lower half, and such a large one at that. Still, the spirit was at least good enough to gift her with some aquatic instinct, because she swam to the bottom of the lake where Kenji was floundering, struggling to shift his heavy body out of the muddy lake bottom.

“Oh Gods!” she cried, her words carrying underwater just like a siren’s. “Kenji! Don’t panic! I’m coming!”

The large brutish cyclops her love had become recognised her with his single eye, but bubbles were streaming from his mouth.

“Oh God, oh - oh *fuck!* Um, I have an incantation Tessa taught me. Mostly useless, but it could lighten your load!”

She weaved her hands, speaking the words underwater, hoping that it would still work. A golden glow extended from her fingers, and instantly Kenji was made lighter just as he pulled free of the last of the mud. Unfortunately, his single eye began to close, his body thrashing from air deprivation.

“No! NO!”

The magic was fading. Her tail was beginning to shrink. So too was Kenji’s body restoring itself. She gripped his arm and swam with all her might, pulling him upwards. The fins on her arms began to fade, but still she screamed and pulled, urging him upwards.

“Don’t die, Kenji! Just hold on!”

But then her gills evaporated, and all that was left of her air was what she had moved through her lungs. The princess grunted, her legs separating but her feet still had fins, allowing her to move with greater speed. She pulled Kenji to the surface and then dragged him up onto the grassy bank beside the Spirit World lake. She felt like she was going to throw up, her chest was in so much pain. Her clothes were as they had been, and the same was true of Kenji’s, though his sword was gone, lost to the lakebed.

“Kenji! Please, Kenji!”

She mumbled through an incantation, one meant to unblock airways. She used it just for frivolous colds during the winter season, but now she used it with greater power upon him. All at once, the man began to cough, and water streamed from his mouth.

“Oh, thank the Gods!”

Kenji coughed a few more times, and then his eyes fluttered.

“N-Nichole . . . you saved me. Th-thank you. I owe you a life debt.”

“None of that Taivan nonsense, Kenji! Oh Gods, are you alright?”

The man nodded slowly. “Just need . . . to rest. Recover. Is the spirit gone?”

“Yes. He’s gone. Come, let’s get our tents set up. It’s the afternoon. We can take a break. You need to sleep.”

Kenji was unconscious. He was weakened, but as far as her magic could tell, he was going to be fine. Nichole had helped him change into new clothing from his pack, and had done her best to avert her eyes. She couldn’t help but notice *some* things, however, such as his powerful abs and lovely shoulders. She had blushed furiously, but in the end had preserved his modesty and her own as best as she could.

They were camped inside a small cave of sorts. Beyond it, the strange calls of spirits and beasts not of the material plane sounded. Nichole had set up some basic wards to protect their position and disguise it, and these she was more practised in. She settled down to sleep beside him, the stars returning to the sky once more, though it was impossible to understand if there even was a traditional day/night cycle here. She reached her hand on Kenji’s cheek, just for a few moments.

“Get well, my love,” she whispered.

They were sharing a tent this time, but there was nothing scandalous about it. She wanted to monitor Kenji, to make sure that he was safe and well. Even princesses of legend, renowned for their chastity, would stay by a knight’s side to help soothe their ills and see them through the darkest nights. In that way, the young princess felt more royal than she ever had.

“Love . . .”

The word had come from Kenji. His eyes were still closed, and he appeared to be falling back into sleep again, but the meaning was clear. Something in Nichole’s heart melted.

“I love you t-”

A flash.

A horror.

Her parents hanging. Kenji’s body broken. Astrea in flames. The Demon Lord ascended. His eyes gazed into her, and then suddenly *she* was looking through them, her armour black, her stature tall and her figure powerful and unnatural. She was gripping her old body by the neck, the Nichole that had been her bleeding and terrified.

“P-please!” the apparition of herself cried. “You don’t have to do this!”

Nichole wanted to scream, to stop, to pull herself back from the brink. But she was no longer in control. Instead, malevolence shook her, a desire to destroy. To hurt. To remake the world in her cruel image, a cruelty she had never known and yet felt the urge to commit.

"I don't have to," she said, the Demon Lord's bellowing tones mingling with her own. *"But I want to. It's time to give in, Nichole. It's time to become something greater."*

She gasped, the vision falling away. That pull, that draw, it was urging her onwards. If she didn't follow it . . . the worst would occur. The Demon Lord was so close to manifesting within her and destroying everything she held dear. The princess rose and knelt over Kenji's sleeping body.

"I love you," she whispered, kissing him upon the forehead. "But I need to do this alone. I'm sorry."

"N-Nichole," he murmured, opening his eyes for just a moment.

"Sleep," she replied, squeezing his hand.

She left the tent, strengthening the wards one last time to ensure that Kenji was safe, and then headed into the unknown. Destiny was urging her forward, pulling her towards the site of purification. It was in her blood now, in her mind. She followed its direction, moving through the mystical trees and beyond the flocks of strange spirit birds. Soon even the creatures of this plane began to thin and then disappear entirely, until there was nothing but the eerie silence of the forest, a treeline absent of any other form of life. The sky was a dim red here, and the blackwood trees gave a greater sense of ominousness.

"I won't become you," Nichole whispered to herself. "I will remove you. I will cut you out." And then she left the treeline, and beheld a fantastical site.

It was a wide, perfectly circular clearing, immense in size, perhaps three thousand feet or more in radius alone. The blackwood trees encircled this clearing as a perfect circle, and there was nothing within but tall swaying grass reeds moving in the gentle, ethereal wind. The grass reeds, and the single tree in the centre of the clearing. It was tall and beautiful beyond measure, tall and blooming with flowers of all colours. Its branches swayed gently, and thousands of petals fell from it continuously as if they were a slow-motion waterfall. The silence of this place radiated, beautiful and terrible. Even the wind was without sound. There was only the clearing, and the tree in its centre.

"Give in."

"Never," Nichole whispered. "You're desperate. You're afraid. You know this is your end."

She moved forwards, stepping into the grand circle and slowly moving closer to the tree. It was grand, and difficult not to marvel at, to take in the sight of its shifting petals, the way they changed colour, as if the tree had taken on the essence of a living rainbow. When the young princess stepped beneath its branches, a light and warmth touched her, and the Demon Lord's presence within her seemed to fall away. She exhaled. Nichole hadn't even realised how long she'd been holding on to that terrible pressure.

"I'm here," she said. "I . . . I've come to purify myself. I have something wrong within me. It was seeded there a long time ago. My birth was . . . a mistake. My entire conception was a mistake! But if I can be rid of this . . . please, take it from me."

She reached out a hand and touched the bark of the tree, connecting to it.

"Please, take this from me."

"I can," came a voice, like a thousand choruses at once. *"You need only open yourself to me. Open your soul, and I can take this from you. But there will be a hole within you. You will die."*

Nichole blinked. "I - I'll die?"

"Yes, you will die. The Demon Lord's presence is too strong. I can feel the great and terrible evil. But if you allow me to fill you in return with my essence, I can fix you. You will be rewarded with great power, this I promise you."

"Will I still be me?"

"A new you. A better you. One without this evil. But you must open your soul to me, that I may leave this place and take residence inside you. A kindly tree spirit. You will have great power, Nichole Dawnwood."

Nichole bit her lip. "That . . . that sounds wonderful."

"Indeed. Now, allow me to embrace you, and then give yourself over to me."

The branches descended down like snakes. Nichole stretched her hands out, allowing the beautiful flowers and the tendrils they sprung from to curl around her wrists, waist, and ankles. She closed her eyes, feeling the harmony of the tree. This was where the pull had come from. This was the site, the spirit, that would cleanse her.

"Okay," she said. "I am ready."

"Good. Keep your eyes closed. This part must be carefully done. Allow your spirit to open. Imagine an opening in your soul, a parting, like a river that enters into the very recesses of your heart. Manifest that in your being, Nichole. Allow me to enter and purify you of your corruption."

Nichole exhaled again, focusing her mind as carefully as she could. She imagined the hole in herself; it wasn't hard. She'd felt it all her life.

"Very good. Now open up. Let me enter."

The tree's power was immense. Whatever spirit was trapped inside of it, it was powerful and old. It began to trickle into her being, and Nichole winced at the pain that followed.

"It . . . hurts."

"It will burn. Trust the process, child."

More pain followed. It began to lance through her. Nichole gasped. This wasn't at all how she imagined purification would feel. The young woman grit her teeth, trying to ride it

out. But something was . . . wrong. Anger was boiling inside of her. She wanted to lash out, to burn this tree. She hated it, and she couldn't understand why. It felt like it was trapping her, despite her being here of her own volition. Yes, it was *trapping* her. She needed to escape it, to roam free and be independent once more. To marshal her forces and extend her reach and rule this world as it should be ruled, with fire and domination, with magic and with the sword. This was a *prison*. A prison!

"Wh-what's happening to meeee!?" she groaned.

"It is just the purification, child. The Demon Lord's influence must be cleansed, and will rail all the hardest while inside you."

But Nichole was struggling against the tree's pull. "N-no! That's not it at all! I feel - you're not the tree! The tree is your prison! What are you? Let go of me!"

"You are hysterical. Keep focusing. Open your soul. Give in."

Give in. Those two simple words let slip by the spirit, and everything suddenly made sense. Nichole stared up at the tree in all its beauty, then around the great circle where nothing else grew.

"This *is* a prison," she said. "And you are the prisoner! *You* are the Demon Lord! You were never in me, were you?"

Darkness flooded into her, darkness and pain. The tendrils lifted her up.

"I bonded my essence to the Spirit World long ago, foolish girl. Your parents annihilated me, undid my glorious return, but part of me remained trapped here, ready to be reconstituted. Those pathetic unicorns twisted my ritual, however. I was trapped here, stuck in these roots for all eternity, all spirits warned not to go near me. And yet I lingered in the material plane after my death just long enough to feel the creation of new life. As I was cast into this plane, I formed a thread to you, linking you to me. Had it not been for all that accursed primal magic, I could have been reborn. You were never my vessel, child. But you will be. NOW GIVE IN!"

The full hate and raw dominance of the Demon Lord ran roughshod over her, igniting her body in pain. She screamed, but no spirits were nearby; none would want to be close to even a trapped Demon Lord, knowing the pain he had inflicted on their realm.

"I w-won't give in! I'd rather die!"

"You have nothing. You are nothing. And you have no one."

"I - I have my family!"

"They are not here."

"I have Kenji!"

"Weakened and distant. He cannot help you. You are alone."

But even as the dread Demon Lord's words echoed through her mind, piercing it painfully as if from a lance, someone spoke, softly and yet with an edge of sharpened steel.

“The Princess is not yours, fell demon.”

Nichole turned her head, expecting Kenji to be coming to her rescue, but instead it was the kitsune woman in the crimson red kimono. She moved with the wind like she was born upon it, her movements quick and slightly crouched, as if she were something beyond mortal. Her long black hair extended behind her in an arc, and her delicate features were focused entirely upon Nichole, even as a long naginata manifested magically in her hand.

“Who is this that dares approach!?”

Nicole gaped. “I have . . . no idea.”

But the woman advanced, faster than any mortal woman could, or mortal man, for that matter. She threw her naginata ahead of her like a spear, digging it into the earth, and then used it to vault herself up into the air like a silent wraith. Her tail grabbed the staff, pulling it back into her hands, and within an instant she sliced the tendrils that were holding Nichole’s left hand and left foot.

“YOU DARE!?”

The tendrils moved to envelop the woman, but she leapt off of a branch and sliced the other tendrils, causing Nichole to fall to the ground. The woman managed to catch her, but the pair rolled back, stumbling upon the tree’s roots.

“Are you okay, my princess?” the woman asked.

My princess. It was the second time in just a few minutes that Nichole had formed a revelation from two simple words. Only this time, the realisation was far sweeter.

“K-Kenji?” she asked.

The woman looked away, embarrassed. “I am *Kaede* in this form.” She grabbed the princess and pulled her back, dodging an outreach from a branch, a tendril trying to grip her. The pair tried to run, but they were within the shadow of the great tree, and it was moving its many branches to block their exit entirely. ‘Kaede’ twirled the naginata, trying to cut them an exit.

“But how? I don’t understand-”

“I am half-kitsune, born of two women! This is a chaotic part of myself I keep hidden. I’m sorry for deceiving you!”

It all made sense; the spirit in the forest had alluded to one of them having something within them. It had been Kenji, not her, all along. It explained some of the unusual things she had noticed about him.

“I’m sorry, for bringing us to our deaths! Kenji - Kaede - this tree contains the Demon Lord’s essence! I was wrong - he tricked me!”

Kaede focused, twirling in a circle to cut down the tendrils. Nichole shrieked; she was not used to this kind of action. But the woman was moving with even more grace and

elegance than her male half, her kitsune form unnaturally quick. She threw out her weapon and then extended it in a wide arc, but the tree kept extending itself.

"You cannot escape. You will be my vessel, Nichole. Give in!"

"NEVER!" she cried.

But circumstances said otherwise. They were being hemmed in, and as the tree shed its beautiful flowers, it became gnarled and thorny, twisted and ugly as the Demon Lord's soul. Acid leaked from its limbs, forming pools that blocked their escape, and soon Kaede was fending off seemingly a thousand attacks. The gorgeous lithe woman gasped as one tendril caught her, then another. They dug their thorns into her, and Nichole cried out as one got her too.

"Leave her alone!"

"She is a child of two of my enemies, shrine maidens who pushed against my power. She will suffer greatly, as a woman and as a man."

Kaede began to tense, clearly in terrible pain but as stoic as she had ever been as Kenji. She freed herself from the tendrils for just long enough to give one last mighty sweep with her naginata. A small window of opportunity was cleared in the carnage right before the tendrils grabbed Kaede again. Nichole was freed, and her way out was right there.

"My love!" Kaede yelled. "Run! I'll be okay!"

She wouldn't, Nichole knew. She was fulfilling her duty; there to protect Nichole from danger, as she had been tasked. But the princess could not let that happen. Whether the woman before her was Kaede or Kenji, she loved them. And now that she knew she had been deceived by the Demon Lord all along, she refused to let him win.

So she ran right out of the tree's reach until she was upon the plain once more, at which point she stopped and turned.

"Demon Lord! Let her go, and I'll let you have me!"

The tree shifted in the wind. It was gnarled and wrong now, a desiccated parody of what it had once been, just like the Demon Lord himself.

"That is . . . acceptable."

"And you must vow never to hurt her, or him. Whichever form they take!"

"Agreed. Come forward. And this time, give in, truly."

Kaede was trying to scream something, but her mouth was muffled by a tendril. At the moment Nichole entered the tree's embrace once more, the kitsune was hurled to the side, beyond the tree's reach.

"Nichole, no!" she cried, but the tendrils coiled over, blocking her out. Nichole steadied herself, focusing on her love for Kenji, and now Kaede, and looked up at the prison of the Demon Lord.

"I'm ready," she said.

The roots extended from everywhere, enveloping her as if in a cocoon. The Demon Lord's power entered, burrowing through her, extending his dark reach. She could feel the weight of his power upon her, the horror he had planned for the world, the cruelty of his desires, the endless pleasures of his domination magic. All the humiliations he had to offer.

"And now, my vessel, it is time to free me."

Nichole breathed out, ignoring the pain. *"No,"* she thought back. *"It is time for you to go."*

"What?"

She had never been a master of magic like her mother, nor a great swordsman like her father. But Nichole knew connections. She had helped raise her siblings, and helped manage the court, and there was Kenji, of course. This connection to the Demon Lord had been there her whole life, slowly growing in strength, and she knew that now.

Just like she knew that a connection goes *both ways*.

The tree groaned and shuddered. She found the whole, extending her spirit outwards, flooding it back towards the tree rather than the reverse. The Demon Lord raged in her head.

"What is this? What are you doing!?"

Nichole opened herself further, baring her soul in a way that the Demon Lord never could, and could never imagine doing. She saw him now for what he was.

"You are small, not me!" she raged. *"Trapped here, alone and frightened. Desperately trying to take the place of a young, scared woman! You are a shadow, just a remnant of the figure you once were, and there is no hiding that anymore!"*

Another fit. The tree tightened its grip on her, the thorns cutting into her skin. But Nichole was in a place beyond pain. She could feel the Primal Magic in her soul just as her mother had spoken of many times, and it was far more powerful than any domination magic, especially from a vile, weakened prisoner such as this.

"I am the ruler of this world. I am your nemesis, child. I am your destiny."

"Kenji is my destiny. Kaede is my destiny. I'll forge that destiny myself with the one that I love. You? You can go back to the void where you came from. I'm ending our connection NOW."

The Demon Lord screamed, but it was a scream born more from terror than rage and hate. More tendrils tried to seize her, but Nichole poured all of the love and hope and connection she could summon into the tree, all the antithesis to the vile creature that the Demon Lord had allowed himself to become. With one last psychic cry in her mind, the villain's essence was annihilated. In the end, he was destroyed not with a bang, but with one final pathetic whimper. A fitting end, for one such as him.

Nichole fell to the ground. The tree's roots retreated, their thorns withdrawing. She clasped herself. Her skin was bloody and parts of her clothing were torn, but she was alive and she was breathing. Kaede ran to her and, without a word, immediately began seeing to her wounds.

"My princess," the beautiful Taivan woman said, already applying the necessary bandages and tearing strips from her kimono to help wipe away the blood. "Is it you?"

"It's me, Kaede," Nichole said.

The woman stopped, staring into her eyes. "How can I know that's true?"

"Do you have any honey-candy on you? Because I could really go for one right now."

At this, the woman smiled and embraced her.

"I thought I had lost you."

Nichole clung to her, tears leaking down her cheeks. "Not lost, Kaede. Not lost at all. I think I've finally found myself."

Nichole's wounds were gone. With their combined magic, they were able to take them away, but for a single mark; a clean slice by a thorn that left a long line down from the bottom of the left ear to the midpoint of her cheek. The last mark the Demon Lord had, and would, ever leave upon her. Neither could repair it, but Nichole didn't mind so much. Some foolish girls in court would consider it ugly, perhaps even something to be hidden away. But as she observed her reflection in a nearby spirit pool, she found herself smiling. Already, she could imagine Alphonse thinking the scar was the most wonderful thing ever.

"I am whole," she whispered, rubbing the thin scar. And now she had the evidence to prove it. She returned to Kaede, who was sitting on a log, looking nervous. It had been a day, and they were back near the Wildwood Tree Circle once more.

"Are you ready to return, my princess?" Kaede said. "I can turn back into Kenji when needed. It's just that, when I am him for too long . . . I can shift back unexpectedly."

Nichole reached out and took Kaede's hand, holding the beautiful kitsune in place. She stared into the other woman's eyes, recognising that same magnetic darkness in them as Kenji's had.

"Kaede," she said softly. "You told me that you would say more about your . . . condition. But for the last day, you've been silent. Well, more silent than usual. I guess, um, I was just wondering . . . if you could tell me more? I mean, you've been Kaede this whole time."

The beautiful Taivan woman looked away, a little embarrassed. "I have to be. When I'm Kenji too long, I have to be Kaede for some time."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I was afraid of what you might think. You know I love you, Nichole, but this is why I am distant. I am . . . different."

Nichole giggled a little. "Please, I'm different too!"

"Not like me."

She placed her hand on the woman's soft cheek. It made Kaede's fox tail swish a little. "What do you mean, my love?"

Kaede frowned, then took a seat upon the nearby log. For quite a long time, she was silent, and Nichole had to bite her tongue to avoid going on a long nervous ramble about how it was okay to share feelings and the like. She knew her Kenji - her Kaede, she supposed - had his or her own way to process things. To get the right words in alignment.

"I was born like this," she finally said, gesturing to herself. "A kitsune girl. And then, one day, my mothers were shocked. I was suddenly a boy. Over time, they learned that the unique circumstances of my birth meant that I was both. It was ordinary to me. Do you understand, my princess?"

Nichole shook her head. "I . . . I'm sorry, I don't."

"I am not Kenji. And I am not Kaede. And I am both. And I am more than both. I am . . . neither man nor woman. I have never felt truly like either, even though I am both. I am something more . . . fluid, one would say. I have written hundreds of haikus trying to explain this even to myself. Even when I am Kenji, I am also Kaede. And when I am her, as I am now, I am not fully female either."

Nichole sat down beside her and took her hand. "Is there a way to cure this?"

Kaede pulled her hand away and looked into the distance. "Why would I want to cure it? There is nothing wrong with me. This is who I am."

"Oh, of course! I'm sorry, I know that! I thought you just meant that . . . I thought you were seeing it as some kind of curse. It's not! I know it's not!"

Kaede smirked a little at her rambling. "It is in part, I suppose, for it is why we cannot be together."

That made Nichole surprised. "Whatever do you mean?"

Kaede gestured to her beautiful kitsune form, so lithe and elegant, her features like something out of an ancient Taivan painting or prized woodcut on display in the palace.

"Nichole, I am not always Kenji. I will not . . . I will only be someone you are attracted to half the time. Sometimes less than half the time, sometimes more. I cannot be your Prince, in that way. And I would not ask you to be with someone you could only feel that connection to half the time. It would be half a love for you, and . . . half a life for me."

It was by far the longest she'd ever heard Kenji/Kaede speak. The kitsune frowned, but her stoic manner brought only one tender tear to each cheek. Even her posture was less rigid and poised. All the little things that she knew in Kenji she knew in this woman.

But *Gods* she was beautiful. So very, very beautiful. And sincere. And vulnerable in a way she'd never seen her love become.

And it made Nichole burst out into broad belly laughter, the kind that was very unprincess-like. Kaede looked at her like she'd suddenly grown a second head. Her expression turned to one of indignation.

"What is so funny?" she asked.

"I'm sorry!" Nichole laughed. She ran her hands through her curly brunette hair, still cackling. She had to breathe slowly a few times just to calm herself. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she repeated. "It's just, well, I have a secret of my own, Kaede. Something hidden away inside of me as well."

"*Another* Demon Lord?"

"I didn't have the first one!" she said, giggling. "No, it's just . . . when I first saw you as Kaede, here in the spirit world, do you know what my first thought was?"

Kaede shook her head subtly, so Nichole shifted along the log so that she was almost snuggled up against the other woman.

"I thought . . . that is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. She is entrancing."

Kaede blushed a little. She looked away briefly, clearly hiding a sense of pride at this comment. "That is . . . good to hear. I often hoped another woman would find me beautiful. I do not have many female friends."

Again, Nichole laughed. "No, you're not getting it. I thought you were *entrancing*, you silly, wonderful part-kitsune. Elegant. Graceful. *Magnetic*. Gods, how many more words must I use to describe you, Kaede?"

"I . . . do not understand."

She gripped the other woman's face and brought it closer to her own.

"Kaede, I was, and still very, very much am, *attracted* to you."

And with that, she kissed Kaede, just as they had kissed the first time. Only this time, her lover's lips were softer, her touch gentler. It was like tasting a different kind of sweet dessert, Nichole's very favourite meal course, such as a sweet peach pie instead of honey-soaked pears. Distinct, not the same, and yet equally wonderful. In fact, as they kissed, Nichole realised that the difference between Kaede and Kenji was like experiencing different aspects of them, tasting a unique expression of themselves. The other woman moaned softly, a sound Kenji would never make, and that too made Nichole aroused. She cupped the other woman's breasts, which were soft and slight, yet most certainly present.

They were perfectly formed, and Kaede certainly appreciated it, because she moaned again, this time louder, her voice delicate and demure.

But they knew not to go any further. Not in this place, and especially not given how traditionalist Kenji/Kaede could be. Yet still, they felt one another, and even as they did so, Nichole felt her love's form change, Kaede's muscle definition growing in, her flowing hair shrinking back, her height growing. Even her lips changed, as did the feel of her face. Where once there was softness, now there was comforting hardness; a protective manliness now enclosing her safely.

She parted her face from her love, and there was Kenji again. The look in his eyes was one of awe, and his lips gave way to a radiant smile which lasted just a brief moment, but was like the promise of a new age to her eyes.

"You . . . I had no idea. I've never met a person who likes, well, both, before."

Nichole giggled. "Then you weren't looking very hard. I love all of you, my Kenji. My Kaede. And I wish you had told me!"

She slapped him on the shoulder lightly, and he smirked.

"I wish I had now, as well. You truly don't mind?"

"I love you wholly. All parts of you. And besides, did the kiss just now with both your forms not satisfy you?"

He looked at the portal. "Nothing will satisfy me, until I can call myself your husband."

Her heart skipped a beat. She felt like she was about to float off of the Spirit World floor, just like one of its denizens.

"And my wife sometimes, as well, right?"

"That too, would be my greatest honour."

This time they shared just a brief yet tender kiss, one filled with promise. They stood together, walking down towards the planar gate that would start them on their journey home. Kenji fell silent again, but in that comfortable way that she loved. Nichole rested her head against part of his shoulder, unable to stop smiling in his presence.

"So," she asked. "Why a naginata when you're a woman?"

"A man *must* use a katana in my culture. But . . . naginatas are very nice."

She chuckled. "No greater reason?"

"Need there be?"

"I guess not. Hmmm. What if, when we get married, you end up as Kaede? Would you be willing to walk down the aisle in a white dress?"

"No."

"Oh."

He smirked. "It would be a white kimono. And no, I would not be averse to it."

“Ooh, that I’d like to see! We could have two weddings! Oh, an Astrean one with me as the walking bride, and a Taivan one . . .”

The pair walked into the gate, Nichole still hurriedly discussing their eventual wedding. The future finally seemed open for the pair of them.

The End