

I opened my eyes and caught my breath.

Always, the dreams are the same. Fire and blood, death and screaming. A moment caught in time so very long ago. I had seen many more since that time, but the first wound cut the deepest. So it always goes.

I stood up and dressed myself, my motions rote and mechanical. A simple grey kimono with a delicate floral pattern embroidered in black and white. Comfortable, casual, not suitable for leaving my home, but perfectly appropriate otherwise.

Having dressed, I went to the shrine. Set in a small room to the side, where visitors seldom had cause to inquire what lay behind that door, it was a relatively small and humble shrine. A wooden torii, made from a naturally crimson padauk, stood just inside the door. At the other side of the room was a simple wooden altar.

I took the bowl of inarizushi from the stand by the door and walked to the altar. I cooked the inarizushi before I went to sleep, the same as I do each night, so that now I could place it on the altar as a fresh offering, the same as I do each morning. On either side of the bowl a wooden fox statue seemed to watch with sightless eyes as I placed the fried tofu between them. One statue held a fox cub in its mouth, while the other rested one paw upon a carved jewel.

As I did each morning, I touched my own jewel, set in a fine golden chain around my neck. It brimmed with power, vibrating gently against my fingertips. There was a shimmer to the stone that had nothing to do with reflected light, although in the daylight it was barely noticeable.

Not all kitsune keep a star ball, although it is traditional. Many younger kitsune don't. It takes a great deal of effort to create one, and though it does make one stronger, it also comes with a dependence that many of the younger generations prefer to avoid. There are many, many stories of kitsune investing too much of themselves in their star balls and dying from the loss of them.

Reassured once again that I was in no danger of this fate, I knelt before the altar and began to pray, as I did each morning. The same position, the same prayer. *Let my family be at peace by your side,* I prayed. *Let my daughter come home to me someday. Let me be cleansed of sorrow and of anger.* A simple prayer, but heartfelt. The best sort of prayer, I felt.

There was a part of me that wondered whether there was a purpose to it. I hadn't spoken to my deity in nearly three hundred years. No one had spoken to Inari in that time, nor had anyone an idea what had happened to the kami. I still felt lost and alone, lacking guidance in a world where I needed it more than ever.

But the inarizushi was still gone from the bowl each day.

After I had finished that, I stood and adjusted my kimono, making sure that it was neat, and then walked out of the shrine and down the stairs into the public area of my home. Every motion was precise and graceful, turned into a ritual by thousands and thousands of repetitions.

Ritual, tradition, and routine were the cornerstones of my life. They were a refuge when a thousand years of life pressed too heavy on my mind, and I could not help seeing fire and death in my mind's eye.

In the kitchen Katsunaga was almost finished making breakfast, as he usually was by the time I arrived. He's too restless to sleep long or deeply, and he's made a point of cooking for me ever since he realized he could irk me by doing so.

In truth, I no longer objected to it, though it would be more in keeping with tradition for me to do the work. Katsunaga was much better at it than I.

"Good morning, dear," he said in English as I entered the room. "Any word from our absent lord and master?"

"No more than ever," I replied in the language of my youth. It was Japanese, or more accurately a distant ancestor of modern Japanese. Very few people understand it these days. Even Katsunaga had needed several months of practice to become comfortable with some of the antiquities of the language.

"Pity," he said, with obvious and genuine disappointment. It isn't obvious to a casual observer, and it took me nearly twenty years to realize, but Katsunaga was as devout a follower of Inari as I was. He simply didn't feel the need to discuss it. He lived his devotion every day, playing the role the kami had given us as kitsune.

I had always suspected that he was responsible for the disappearance of my offering each day. I had no intention of asking him, though. Even a false hope was preferable to true despair.

"It is what it is," I said, stepping past him to grab a bowl of food. It was a simple meal, fried tofu and udon with a koikuchi soy sauce. Very traditional, with none of the modernizations or foreign influences he often introduced to his cooking.

"True," he sighed, taking a bowl for himself and following me out to the dining room. "But I still hope that things will change one day."

"I know," I said, setting my bowl on the table and returning to the kitchen for tea.

He caught my hand as I set his cup in front of him. "Don't lose hope," he said seriously. "I don't want to see that happen to you. Things will get better again."

"I know, love," I said, sitting on the floor across from him and reaching for my bowl.

I did love him, for all our differences. I had dallied with humans in my youth, as many young kitsune did. It wasn't hard to see why. They were so vibrant and full of life, burning brightly in the night. And, like all my kin did eventually, I learned that such dalliances can only end in tragedy. Our natures are too different.

This was better.

I ate my breakfast with, if not great joy, at least contentment. Thoughts of death and fire were far from my mind.

Later, I was sitting at a table folding an origami crane. It was a simple task, rote and repetitive, something I had done ten thousand times or more.

It was another shield against dark thoughts, essentially. My people had needed to know about what was happening in Russia, as it was now growing serious enough to present a serious threat to the lands we had traditionally protected. I had agreed, since there were so few other kitsune capable of gathering information from the area without losing their lives.

I had gone, and seen what there was to see, and reported it back to my cousins and peers. There were so few of us left from the old days. I had outlived so many of the kitsune I knew in my youth, and so many others had gone their own ways over the years, that there were now hardly any left. But I had shared what I knew with those who remained, as well as my elders and a handful of gifted younglings. They would spread the word further, ensuring everyone knew what was to be done if the problem couldn't be resolved soon.

It was a necessary task, and one that I didn't regret. But now I couldn't get the images I'd seen out of my mind. There had been bodies, burned and crushed, torn limb from limb or simply *dead* with no signs of how they came to be so. So many bodies. Fires had smoldered in many places, even in areas where the fighting had ceased hours or days earlier, hiding the moon behind a pall of smoke.

It was far, far too close to remembering what had happened to my own family. Thus the origami. Anything, to give me a refuge from those memories.

Katsunaga knocked on the door, stepping inside a moment later. "I'm sorry, dear," he said. "I know you're busy, but I think you'll want to see this."

I made two more folds, then set the completed crane on the table by the others. "What is it?" I asked, turning in my chair to look at him.

He handed me a plain white envelope of the sort that had become the standard among humans in recent years. "Aiko replied to one of your messages," he said.

I stared. I almost asked whether this was his idea of a joke, but no. He wouldn't do that. Not after the first time.

Eventually, I reached out and took the envelope. It was only through great discipline that I kept my fingers from shaking as I opened it and pulled the piece of paper out from inside.

It was a simple note, with no great meaning to the words. But it was in her handwriting, and she called me *Mother*.

I pressed my lips tightly together, returned the note to the envelope, and stood up.

"What are you doing?" Katsunaga asked, hurrying to follow me as I left.

"What do you think?" I asked, more snappishly than I usually would have. "I'm going to see our daughter. Something's gone very wrong."