**Balance of Power**

***A commission for Paradox043, aka Pipfox***

**Part 1: Hidden Talents**

*A ripple.*

Infinitesimally minute. Equal in power to a tiny pebble dropped through mirror-still water: the world barely disturbed by it.

But something more

Uttering a quiet chirp of inquisitiveness, he felt his mortal form roll slowly onto its feet, standing statuesquely still upon the rooftop he had been lazing upon. His large eyes closed, but they weren’t what he was seeing with.

He was – *there. Into a world of blurring light and pinpricks of glittering brightness.*

The creature cocked his head, a claw tightening its grip on the concrete as he drew himself further out: further into the abyss. There was a slight cracking sound beneath him, but he did not hear.

*Better now.* *He could see the world – or at least, this world – in its entirety. A galaxy of glimmering, gleaming sparkles, shining against the blackness of the anti-space they rested in. Each and every star in this galaxy was an individual consciousness, leeching through realities to pulse within the darkness. Matter, the physical world itself, had been strung between the vast jewellery-box of life like a web, linking everything within it. The sight was unimaginable, horrific, beautiful.*

*The creature barely spared it a glance right now. He’d spent a long, long time with nothing to watch but the convulsions and dances of the Void. It was the physical world that he wanted now. So move quickly, quickly...*

Another faint tremor, and this time, from his vantage point infinities above the world of minds, he saw it move. Or rather, saw it glow.

*It almost felt like...*

*No.*

Regardless. He frowned, tracing the disturbance back to its source. *There. A pinprick of fire, its flame lifted in song, hissing, glowing... calling.*

And he realised what had worried him about this. It was the tiniest of changes to the fabric of the world, barely even noticeable even to him... but that wasn’t important. He could sense now… it was small, yes, but it was the equivalent of a single toe, testing the water. If the world was ripe, the rest of the intruder would come cannonballing in.

*But the power needs its master.*

The creature tensed, absently feeling his heart stop in his chest, but he ignored the numbness for the time being. Its master? Yes... Here?

No, not in this world. Surely. He had made sure that there were none who could hope to challenge his dominance.

*Oh?* hissed a morphing, capricious tone, coiled and insidious inside his mind. *And how so? You sensed the Void, and the powers of those within?*

A soft snarl broke the silence of the high air. Dark talons flexed with frustration, and the concrete split. *But this... whatever it is... it hasn’t got anything.* ***Yet.*** *This* ***is*** *the power, pushing through.*

*Finding itself its owner.*

*No!*

*And – he was* back in the world of the physical, the creature stretched slightly, force of habit opening his lungs once more, restarting his idling pulse. His eyes opened slowly: dark, slow-burning violet and glimmering, pristine gold side by side. They narrowed.

The most powerful Shard in existence smiled slowly, raising vast wings which could have almost covered a bus on each side.

Whatever this was, and whoever it sought... it was going to be *fun.*

He leapt.

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*And meanwhile, the song searched. Setting in motion wheels which had been crafted so long ago... drawing close.*

*Tick.*

*Tick.*

For some reason, Josh found himself a little annoyed at that. The grand old clock upon the wall of the room he was currently sat in, scratching awkwardly at the collar of his borrowed suit – too large for him, of course, everything was – seemed content to leave out the other half of the sound native to waiting rooms everywhere. No *tock.* It was as if it wanted to draw on the silence as long as it could.

He swallowed a little nervously, wondering if he ought to sit up straighter upon the expansive chair he’d perched himself on. The room seemed to ooze a discreet, tasteful sort of power: hanging velvet curtains, a selection of fine paintings, thick, shag-pile carpet in a somewhat brooding shade of burgundy... no expense had been spared here.

The young fox tapped his fingers nervously on an armrest, finding his gaze returning to the imposing clock as he waited. Josh was an arctic fox: tiny by any species’ standards, really. 5’4” with a lightweight frame which barely topped a hundred pounds, and his snowy fur - thick, soft and silky – might have amounted for a good proportion of that meagre weight itself.

At least, it was mostly snowy. After considerable arguing after his birth, the term he’d eventually been branded with was simply Xenochromia: for while the rest of him was the pure white of the *vulpes lagopus,* this vulpine’s chest, the tip of his ears, nose and tail, and the small fleshy nubs of his pawpads, were all a quite unmistakable shade of lavish purple.

It was bizarre, the medical community remarked. Inexplicable. Unique. Josh’s mother had been a pure-breed arctic fox, his father likewise, and so on and so forth all the way backwards for generations. And then he’d come along, in a sudden garish twist of fate. Violet furred and heterochromatic to boot: one eye was a bright, gleaming gold, the other the lilac hue of glittering amethysts.

He looked the thick silkiness of his chest now, peeking open his shirt. The violet hues gleamed gently in the semi-dark of his clothing, feeling soft and warm against his flesh. Josh smiled slightly, tugging it closed again – perhaps it was a little vain, perhaps not, but he loved the colour - and leaned back in his seat with a sigh.

What was he *doing* here?

The letter had simply come two days ago: a discreet envelope of creamy, high-quality paper, politely and patiently noting that an unforeseen record had come to light, and he should meet with the manager of their local branch (local? He’d had to travel all the way to the District’s capital to get here!) as soon as possible, to examine the contents. They had apologised profusely for the lack of swiftness with which they had acted upon the details, which implied that this – whatever it was – had been here for quite a while... but what *was* it?

Josh’s family were not wealthy, or of any kind of noble descent, and no-one had done business with Montague and Chancer – the organisation itself - as long as any could remember. The high-class bank was known for specialising in the sort of assets which were at particular risk of becoming someone *else’s* assets, but he had never known of anything like that. In summary: he was simply... stumped.

And now, he was here.

The fox felt his tail swishing idly, tickling his ankles as he sighed again, curling up slightly in the seat. It was comfy, at least... he should-

“Mr Fawkes?”

Josh almost fell out of his seat, uttering a short squeak of alarm as he grabbed frantically at the armrest. “What?” He looked up, trying to rebalance himself, as well as suppress the flush of embarrassment with always seemed to tinge his fur at every opportunity.

The receptionist, a burly lizard with rust-red scales and a rather stylised crest – they were in season this year, weren’t they – smiled politely at him, indicating the heavy double doors ahead.

“Ms Brockheim will see you now. She apologises profusely for the delay, of course.”

“O-of course...”

Josh swallowed, trying to quell the wriggling his stomach, and stepped up to the doors, pushing them open with a nervous squeak.

“Ah, Mr J. Fawkes – that is correct, isn’t it?”

Catherine Brockheim – it said so on the gold-embossed plate cresting her expansive desk, a forest’s worth of dark mahogany - smiled at him and stood up, reaching over to shake the bemused vulpine’s hand.. She was a raccoon, her smartly-striped tail curled neatly behind the rich, high-backed chair, the black and white a neat contrast to the tasteful navy suit she wore. “Excellent. I’m very, very sorry about all this confusion, sir. Montague and Chaucer extend their humblest of apologies to you, and of course we will offer a substantial-“

“Wait!” Josh blinked, blushing again as he realised he’d interrupted. “Oh... sorry... but, look, I don’t... I don’t understand what this is actually *about*. At all. Have you... received something for me? Do I owe you money? Just, I...well, um… what *is* this?”

The raccoon frowned, her expression softening and reaching a little more natural state. “Ohh... you know nothing about it, then?” She padded back behind her desk, motioning at the vulpine to take a seat in front of her. Josh complied, feeling his tail twitching with interest as he nodded animatedly.

“Yes. I haven’t got a clue. All I know was this... this letter.”

“I see... “ Brockheim grimaced. “Again, I must apologise on behalf of the bank, Mr Fawkes. We understood that you would be... well, allow me to explain, then.” She steepled her fingers, the trimmed claws glinting in the rich autumn sunlight. “Now. Two weeks ago, we discovered a record which it seemed we had overlooked entirely since it was first created. It named you, Joshua Fawkes, as the sole owner of the contents of Safe #46, in this holding block down below this building. The record stipulated clearly that you should be allowed access to this safe as soon as possible.”

Josh blinked, curling his tail round onto his lap - it wasn’t always considered good etiquette, but he found it the thick, warm softness a constant comfort – and frowned, wrinkling his small brow with confusion. “As soon as possible? But you’ve only just discovered the record now?”

Shrugging wearily, the manager nodded. “I don’t know how. It’s from before we upgraded to digital, and it hasn’t even been dated – we have no idea how long ago you were supposed to receive this, I’m afraid.” She hesitated, sounding embarrassed. “We… do know, however, that Safe #46 has been filled for... for almost two decades.”

The fox stared at her. “Are you... are you telling me that this has been there for my ...my entire life?”

Shoulders twitched helplessly. “Again, I can’t tell you. But it sounds like it.”

There was a pause.

“…We had the safe brought up here for you.” The raccoon smiled a little awkwardly, reaching under her desk. “Figured you wouldn’t want to waste any more time.”

“No… it’s fine…” Josh frowned as she brought out a steel grey box, about the size of a cereal carton, looking to all the world some absurd military-grade jewellery box. “Hmm. Heh, okay… Whatever it is, it’s not very big, then.”

Brockheim gave a mock gasp of indignation. “This is inch-thick, tension-reinforced steel, thank you very much. Highest quality, by Armstrong Steelworks. Nothing’s going to get at it unless you have – “ a flash of silver as the surprised vulpine fumbled her easy toss – “the right key.”

“The right key” was a similar style to the safe: solid, heavy and about as malleable-looking as mountain stone. Josh eyed it thoughtfully, looking over the box before him. “Well, here goes...” His pads brushed the edge, and the sound *whispered.*

*Yes… return us… render whole that which was sundered…*

The fox blinked, amethyst and topaz shimmering in surprise as they flashed behind lavender lids. “Wh… what was…”

“What was what?” Brockheim had adopted a formal stance behind her desk again: ensuring that the way the safe was opened, she wouldn’t be able to see the contents. Her short muzzle wrinkled in polite confusion. “Are you okay, Joshua?”

“Just Josh…” he muttered tersely, slotting the key into the small slot on top and twisting it sharply - with a sudden zeal: *yes, at last* –feeling the clockwork clicks as the various bars inside whirred into place. The sound throbbed through the fox’s skull like a machine’s heartbeat, sending a sticky gush of saliva to his mouth and a wave of butterflies to his belly. Suddenly, Josh knew that he wanted nothing more than to open it, to open it right here right now - *and regain his property.*

With a final mechanical whirr, the lid moved up slightly. Slim fingers scrabbled hungrily at the edge, lifting it with a soft gasp of anticipation.

The black velvet lining the inside was like a night sky… with a single cluster of stars at the centre. Glittering, a tiny galaxy of gold.

Slowly, his fingers trembling faintly, Josh reached out and touched the ring. It felt warm, as if it had been lying in a shaft of summer sunlight all day. The smooth surface seemed to send a shiver up his arm, a tingle which rippled through the vulpine’s slender body. He swallowed, and picked it up, almost expecting to find the thing too heavy: it *looked* too heavy, as if he was not seeing something small, but something immeasurably vast, from an immense distance.

But no, it was the perfect heaviness: light and yet comfortingly weighty, seeming to fit in his hand as naturally as if it had been made for it.

Brockheim politely averted her eyes as Josh raised it up, feeling the strange tingle pulse and fade… although it might just still have been there. He brought the thing close, holding it delicately between finger and thumb.

The ring was oddly small, as if designed for a wearer of less than considerable stature. The core – a simple, clean-cut circle, looked like ivory, but on closer inspection it appeared to be marbled through with an oil-like rainbow of pale colours, gleaming iridescently as they caught the light: mother-of-pearl, perhaps? Regardless, even Josh’s inexpert knowledge of jewellery could identify the band which rimmed it: finest quality polished gold. He felt himself draw in a breath at the shining surface, seeing a tiny, auric-tinted fox stare back at him in its reflection.

Twisting it gently, the real vulpine blinked as his double was suddenly cleaved into by a set of gleaming amethysts – eight of them set around the golden band, cut like shining studs of violet, which sparkled as Josh brought it close to his eyes. The thing was beautiful, an elegance of form which somehow awed him. It was a thing of perfection.

The real world, in the form of Ms Brockheim, coughed politely. The vulpine started, nearly dropping the ring with a strangled squeak of alarm. “Oh! Um… right… sorry.”

“It’s… perfectly fine.” But the raccoon’s umber eyes were concerned. “You do realise you had been looking at that for nearly ten minutes now, though…”

“What?” Josh looked at her, then at the clock. “Oh. Strange…” He shrugged, twirling the little band of beauty between small fingers. “Well, um… I’m afraid… I’ve never seen this before in my life.”

*Yes you have.*

“And you have no idea who placed it in here?”

“Entirely anonymous. No record at all. Which is another anomaly – we obviously don’t allow that. People have to register the account in a name, after all. But all we had for this one was this instruction, that it was to be given to you as soon as possible – and even that was squirreled away in our archives until a few weeks ago.” Brockheim shrugged helplessly. “It’s a major failure on our part, is all I can suggest. We only hope you won’t press charges.”

“What?” The fox blinked. “press charges-no, of course not! I had no more idea of this than you!” He smiled uncertainly, still fingering his newfound possession. “Thank you. Is that all, then?”

She nodded. “All we have for you. And that looks like an truly *exceptional* piece of metalworking – my brother runs a jewellers, you see, so I know a few tricks. A real high-quality piece.”

Josh grinned, in spite of his bemusement. “Heh. It feels like it.”

“Indeed. So, would you like it placed back into storage? Your account is still valid, so we could just slot it back in…”

“NO!” it came out as a shout, and the manager flinched back instinctively, her striped tail fluffing up in alarm. Josh flushed under his fur, wincing as he clapped his hands over his mouth. “Oh... sorry! It j-just… it just came out…”

“It’s fine.” Although she still looked apprehensive, her rounded ears cocked slightly. The snowy vulpine felt his own drooping slightly as he grimaced. “but no… I want to keep this.” And he knew that he would have shouted again. The ring would *not* be placed back in that box. *It had been waiting there for him already, for such a long, long time.*

Josh shivered, feeling the violet hues of his chestfur fluff up slightly. Slowly, with grave, delicate care, he slipped it onto his ring finger. It fitted *perfectly,* gliding over the silky fur to rest between joint and knuckle, warm against the pale lilac of his pawpads. *Home.*

He felt a sudden burst of that warm, sunlight tingling strike through him, unable to stop his newly ornamented paw from clenching with the sensation as a shudder shook his small body. It was a second of sudden, intoxicating joy. “Ah…”

“Er… well, I think that’s everything.” The raccoon had noticed this, her head slightly cocked with confusion. “Thank you for coming to us, and… are you *sure* you’re alright?”

“Honestly?” murmured Josh quietly, gazing at the ring, which still felt blissfully warm, nestling against his fur – *it matches me, doesn’t it? white, gold and purple… ­* “I… I think I’ve never been better.”

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“Wrong…”

He intoned softly, watching from a rooftop half a mile from the sunlit window of the manager’s office. No natural creature could hope to see with such clarity… but as the little fox so apparently oblivious to his observer could attest (even if he didn’t seem to know it): being unnatural was where the fun was. *Better? Joshua… you’ve just showed me that for whatever reason… you don’t remember. You’re here, and you’re a nothing.*

“This will be… my *pleasure.”*

And it would – oh, it *would*. The being smiled again, beginning to pace the makeshift balcony as he considered. This wasn’t just personal, oh no. The young vulpine had, in the fleeting instant he caressed the little mind – no time for more than a preliminary examination, lest there be more surprises in store for an unwary telepath – transformed near-instantaneously into that blazing, sparking catalyst of need and fascination:

*Focus. His focus, the anchor for his mind. By thy thought shall ye define my own.*

And right now, what was the thought?

*Vengeance. No, nothing as noble as that.* ***Vindication.***

He smiled greedily… and then the smirk faded.

There was more, of course. That ring. Joshua wasn’t powerless. He just didn’t know what he had. By the sound of it – or at least, the sensation: while he had not touched upon the vulpine’s mind, fearing a trap, Brockheim’s had been an open door, and his own observatory for the entire conversation – by the sound of it, the fox was truthfully in the dark about the exact properties of that ring.

That ring…

It had been a sun - no, a *supernova -* of absolute, total brilliance in the Void. So much power in so tiny a shell. Blazing as brightly as his own birth-scream, all those aeons ago… almost all the ability which the being which looked like a fox had contained last time. Whatever had happened to the vulpine, he could still be very dangerous.

“But does the hunger care?” he muttered softly, bitterly, long sinuous tail twitching grimly behind him. Defeated by his own nature: for of course it didn’t. Nothing was beyond his desire. He could feel the lust now, feel the pulse of hot blood thundering in his body, intoxicating, physical: **alive.**

The ache of world-hunger would never, ever fade or die. It wasn’t his curse, something which could be defined. *He* was simply *it’s* product.

Sighing softly, he looked back for the little creature (he was adorable, really… that silkiness of fur, vibrant purple and snowy white looked simply… *delicious,* and the monster cackled at those lovely eyes:of course, the original would have been unable to show off a bit like that, no matter how aware he was or wasn’t.). And was that on the wind, the faintest hint of a sweet, clean scent almost akin to vanilla. *Vanilla?*  *My dear… you are such a sweet little thing.*

Joshua *(what is this Josh nonsense? I seemed to remember you were rather…* ***insistent*** *last time)* was still walking, poring eternally over the ring. He sensed the power in it, that was for certain. Best to begin soon… and besides, how could he resist?

This was going to be such fun.

“…It’s my turn now, Joshua.”

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It happened so *suddenly.*

The train journey back had all been going perfectly. Josh had managed to grab a lone seat with some proper legroom, settling back to switch on his headphones, the ring still warm on his finger. He’d spent a while looking at it again – the thing still made no sense at all, concocting a few playful theories: a secret benefactor who believed him to be the chosen one, who would rise up to save all civilization when the time came, a message from his future self sent back in time to aid him, an ancient artefact of unholy power which had been gifted to him by dark and murderous gods letting him unleash horrific powers of destruction… but the thing just nestled against his finger, seeming to almost caress his flesh with every movement. It was beautiful.

His hometown, Melchester, was a good two and a half hours from the district Capital, so it was a long journey across the forested plains. The little vulpine managed to grab some sleep, curled up on his seat in the manner of his feral cousins, lulled by the rhythmic thumping of the wheels, his ring clutched close to his heart… and then:

“..chester... this is …Me…chester…”

“What!?” Josh tangled his tail between his legs, nearly fell of the seat with a squeak of alarm, and stumbled to his feet. “No!” He scrabbled for his bag, almost tripping over a fellow passenger’s leg with a muffled “sorry, sorry” – the owner, a handsome rabbit, didn’t even acknowledge his unwitting assailant - and managed to get to the open doors just in time. “Whew, that... was... what.”

For there wasn’t a sign. There was, in fact, no station or even a platform. Just lush, sunlit forest, an expanse of emerald right in the middle of nowhere. The fox frowned, leaning out to glance left and right: yep, there was nothing here, all right. He pulled back in, seeing a weathered old leopard down the carriage in the smart green of a ticket collector’s uniform, and mumbled, “Um, hello? I think we’ve… got… the… hello?”

No reply. No reaction. The bristle-furred feline simply stared straight ahead, his gaze blank and unseeing. Josh looked at him – a mere few seats away, there was no *way* he hadn’t noticed - and raised a small, purple-padded paw, snapping his fingers with a quiet *smack* as the ring hit flesh.

Nothing.

He looked round, starting to feel worried, and realised that the catatonia seemed contagious. The carriage was as silent as the grave, everyone completely and totally blank. The world’s stillness was excruciating.

“Wh-.”

And then it happened. A solid band of hard, strong muscle wrapping around his undefended ankle, clamping shut with the impenetrability of a set of handcuffs, and pulling. Up, out of the open door, into the air. *High* into the air.

He screamed. But no-one heard.

Meanwhile, up ahead in the driver’s cabin, a sparrow blinked, shaking her head slightly as the gentle, nudging influence left her at last: a movement which was echoed by every other inhabitant of the train. Already, the doors had shut and the powerful engines were picking up speed once more. Nothing had changed, nothing was out of the ordinary.

Save for one passenger, who would never get off the train at his station.

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The vulpine tried to summon a scream of terror, emerald leaves surging around him (a blur of silver flashed past, somehow even faster, but he could barely even notice through the shock), trying frantically to curl into a ball, protect his extremities, save the pain. He knew the impact would ripple through his delicate skeleton like an earthquake. The ground would be so hideously hard. “AAAA-“

But he struck something else instead: something solid and firm, but soft, silky soft and gentle with a flash of silver and pale blue again, making the disorientated vulpine whimper with disorientation as the world whirled again –

*-* and he hit the ground at last. There had been a slight deceleration with that sudden protecting shield of what might have been fur, or feathers, or something else which was beyond both, but the impact still hurt tremendously. Josh slumped in a heap of snowy fluff and groaning vulpine, his bruised body setting up a tirade of horrible complaints. His vision swum with sparkles. The ring seemed to be pulsing against his finger – or maybe it was just his own fluttering heartbeat.

“Ugh…” he whimpered feebly, rising to his knees. “What… what was…”

The train tooted in the distance, and the vulpine’s mismatched eyes widened in horror. Leaving? Leaving without him? “What the-oh. Oh hell… Wait!!” He scrabbled at the leafy ground, trying desperately to pull himself to his feet.

“That’s right.” came a reply from behind, no, from right *above* his prone form. “No.”

The voice was… unimaginable.

It was without doubt the lowest Josh had ever heard, a deep, rumbling tone of velvet smoothness, with an unearthly undertone which he could only describe as *purring.* The tones were silkily quiet and soft, the pronunciation flawless. It was at once utterly unnatural and the most sensuous sound the surprised vulpine had ever heard.

It was the voice of a demon, a fallen angel, a monster.

But before he could hope to turn or even raise his head slightly, Josh was pinned down. Hard. The pressure spread softly over his entire back, shoulders and head in one stunned second, pressing him firmly into the leafy ground. Not painful – not *yet*, for the weight had that disturbing quality which implies that it can increase more or less indefinitely - but enough to pin him, crush him, and choke his cry of alarm into little more than a strangled squeak.

“That’s it, then? A squeak? Adorable.” The impossible voice had moved forwards, in front of him now – yet still invisible, for the hold had trapped the fox’s head helplessly. His eyes could just make out some kind of grey, pillar-like object a few metres in front of him, but it was blurry and out of focus. And the pressure was growing. He managed to summon another squeak, squirming forwards… but going nowhere.

“Quiet now, little one.” A sharp burst of pain as he was squeezed just a tiny amount too much, leaving him subdued and trembling, to articulate pleas for air – ignored.

“Do you know,” continued his silver-tongued, unseen captor, “I estimate it’d take very little more pressure for your ribcage to start snapping. Once that’s happened, it’s easy. Organs pulp, veins simply burst, muscle is crushed and effectively minced, and within a few inches, everything you are has become little more than a rather gory stain. Charming, isn’t it?”

The speech seemed to ease his terrible crushing very slightly, and the vulpine squirmed forwards to free his muzzle, croaking out a feeble whisper. “P-please… d… d-don’t… I-”

Josh froze, and a low laugh sounded from above.

Something was tracing itself along the base of his skull, teasing the thick snowy fur. It felt hard, terrifically strong, and sharp. Very, very sharp. He whimpered weakly, unable to form any more words.

“Oh, hush yourself, Joshua. If this is all some elaborate charade, I think you can drop it now.”

The razor-tip of that huge, vicious claw probed his neck gently, tickling the nub of his collarbone, and the creature above him sighed gently.

“I wouldn’t even need to press down, you know. I could just move this forward a few inches, and…” The rest of the sentence was all too clear. Josh swallowed. His ring seemed to be actually squeezing his finger now, pulsing and hot as he managed to squeak out a few more helpless words.

“N-no… wait, p-please… I don’t understand…”

“You don’t?” He felt something thick and silky brush teasingly over the back of his legs, making them twitch with their frantic, helpless struggles. “Well, I suppose I’ve established a working relationship between us now. Up you get.”

A slight, almost playful squeeze which made him gasp with choking pain, and then, wonderfully, *blissfully*, the pressure lifted. Josh shuddered with relief, hunching over as his bruised, aching lungs finally filled with air, sweet, glorious air. He felt a collection of powerful thuds as his mysterious captor moved back, but could not turn round, clutching his tail close to him and wheezing frantically. “I-I…*huff…* I don’t… wh… who *are* you?”

*Find out,* sang a voice of temptation in his mind, and then the alien rumble echoed it. “Find out. I’m right behind you, my dear.”

The fox wiped his muzzle with a small, trembling paw, his soft fur shivering on his skin, and looked round.

The gryphon smiled.

Josh’s paw, ring glinting desperately upon it, slowly fell to the leafy ground. His little jaw slackened as well, open and too stunned to even mouth words as the fox stared.

It sat upon massive haunches, looking down at him with a head larger than his entire body – well over twice his height – twelve feet? More? Definitely more if you counted the colossal wings stretching out behind it, folded tidily but at readiness, almost radiating a sense of poise and power. More unbelievable still, though, was that this creature was not bipedal, in the manner of a normal Sentient *(although oh hell’s teeth, how can ”normal” even apply anymore?),* but a feral beast, it’s great body looking like it might clear sixteen feet in length when it was stood fully – sheer *tonnes* of solid muscled flesh, thickset and powerful, and yet with an unnerving gracefulness of form which was at once alluring and terrifying.

Slowly, the vulpine got to his feet, barely feeling able to even blink as he kept gazing at it: unable to glimpse anything beyond the massive, mythical beast.

It’s pelt – plumage? – was a pale, sleek shade of silver – oddly reminiscent, Josh seemed to hear himself thinking, of the otherworldly shimmer of purest moonlight - long and thick and with a slight glossiness indicating an incredibly *silky* texture, so smooth and fine he couldn’t tell if the creature was covered in feathers, fur or some bizarre composite. The thick coat covered every inch – save for the monster’s foreclaws - these were instead were sheathed in a smooth, scaly skin of deep grey, ending in obsidian-black talons which *were* indeed at least the length of his finger – and almost exploding in a great fluff of soft silkiness upon it’s huge chest, where the colour faded sleekly to an icy shade of pale sky blue. The new, vibrant hue spread down its long underbelly, the interior of its vast wings, the crest of the two large, pointed ears which rose elegantly from atop the monster’s head, and the large tassel at the tip of the long, sinuous tail which trailed around from behind the monster, twitching idly as it watched him back with a faint smile playing around the edges of the huge, cruelly hooked beak. Watching him from beneath a strange headdress, a wreath like some Alympion champion’s coveted crown of olive leaves, made of a gleaming bronze. Watching him… with two large, ferociously intelligent eyes: one deep violet, and one golden.

Josh blinked, slowly raising a hand to his own face. *No…* but yes. The two of them were like mirror images, despite the sizes and the strange, semi-avian structure the creature’s eyes possessed with a mesmerizingly iridescent “double iris” effect, their eyes were just so… *similar.* Golden and purple. One pair widened in shock, alarm, growing fear; the other slightly narrowed, gleaming with a dark amusement. Watching.

“Finished?” The gryphon spoke again, the thrumming purr of its tones making Josh’s small body tremble – no, not its, *his,* for that growl had to be male. The fox blinked, as if he’d just woken from a trance, and stumbled back a step, trying to formulate words, before settling rather lamely on a trembling whisper:

“D-dear g-g-god… you’re *huge*.”

The eyes gleamed. “Certainly compared to the little thing you are right now, Joshua.”

“I-I…” the vulpine swallowed, clasping his hands together as his . “I d-don’t… it’s just J-Josh, you know…”

“No.” The creature stretched languidly, getting to his feet as he began to pad slowly towards his captive, towering over him. “It’s Joshua. Or at least it was. But you don’t remember, my dear… you don’t remember anything, do you?” He shook his huge head, almost sadly, and then dipped it in an odd sort of bow, his low voice accelerating ever-so-slightly. “Well, in another way… that’s rather pleasing, really. Let’s just summarise: My name is Goldeneye.”

The forest seemed rather quiet all of a sudden. A smile spread over the gryphon’s beak. As he continued in the same smooth tones. “Yours is Joshua – considering that you seem to be entirely powerless, I think we can forgo the “Lord” - and… well, you are… *utterly* at my mercy.”

Josh stared at him, and Goldeneye smiled again in a cruelly devilish smirk, and leapt.

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He’d never had a childhood. Oh, he had memories of them, but the memories in question were outcasts of the minds of other people – hardly much to go on. Goldeneye had been birthed into a fully formed consciousness in an instant, a tumultuous explosion of nascent thought suddenly creating his shattered approximation of sapience.

However, the gryphon was more than aware of the concept of rough and tumble, and just because he was fully grown and his opponent less than a fiftieth of his bodyweight didn’t mean he couldn’t. He cackled with glee as the little fox was bowled over by his leap, crushing Joshua into his thick feathers, rolling, tossing the gasping, flailing vulpine into the air and snatching him back out , catching and flipping in a whirl of silver-blue feathers and strong claws until finally, the two of them came to a panting, slumped halt in a vast heap of fur, feathers and disorientated trembling.

The tiny vulpine had lost his jacket and half of his shirt buttons, the natural violet of his chestfur peeking out at his captor as he staggered to his knees, whimpered, and fell back into Goldeneye’s plumage, sinking into the thick featheriness with a shuddering groan. “O-oh… o-oh n-no…”

Yawning playfully, the gryphon raised his head, a large wingtip reaching down delicately to caress his prisoner’s trembling head. “My, that was *fun,* wasn’t it?”

“P-please…” came the only answer, terror flaring sparkle-bright inside the fox’s mind as Josh managed to lock two tiny paws onto his flank, raising himself to his knees, and blinked, his head clearly still spinning from the attack. “I d-don’t… I promise I w-won’t tell anyone about you… j-just…”

“Oh, no…” sang the gryphon, nuzzling his capt5iveback down against his body with his great beak – *yes, that’s right, just there...mmm*. “You won’t tell anyone. You see, Josh… even if your little mind is squeaky-clean of ever meeting me, mine… isn’t. The thing about me is that I *do not* forget. And it doesn’t matter how we parted… I have a great deal of… “unpleasantries”, so to speak, to return to you now.“

“Wh-what?” Josh hugged his knees and tail, nestled helplessly against his captor’s side with his eyes on his toes, and Goldeneye felt himself begin to purr very quietly, the blissful flames of warmth soothing his splintered consciousness – physical contact was always so much better to sate his desire. Curling his powerful form a little more around him, he kept watching the shivering vulpine as his feathers seared with relief with every touch. The joy of a focus, stabilising and empowering his wild soul. He smiled as his plaything went on, stuttering his words with fear. “I-I… I don’t kn-know what you mean! I’ve never seen you before in my life! A-and…” strangely, the gryphon could suddenly feel a slight, pulsing increase in warmth, as if blood was running close to the surface of the fox’s skin, “…w-well, something like you, I think I would have remembered…” he chuckled nervously, swallowing as he looked up to meet the gryphon’s gaze once more. “Y-you know… y-your eyes are-“

“Shush.” Goldeneye was unable to suppress a smirk as the little fox flinched away, his eyes wide and fearful. *Very good. I wondered if you’d recognise these...*“And yes, Josh, you’re correct. You have never seen me before in this little life of yours.” He grinned. “In *this* life. Because we have met, and although I don’t know why you don’t remember… I know it’s you. How could I forget those eyes…” he stroked the side of Josh’s face, giggling as the golden and violet closed like hidden jewels to avoid his talons, trembling helplessly. “After all, they gaze right back at *me* as well: every time I look in a mirror.”

“What? I d-“

“I said *shush.*” The gryphon injected a little menace into his tones, letting the low growl hum through them both, and Josh actually tried to squirm further into his warm feathers, curling up a little more as he clasped his hands together again, holding his tail close with a fearful whimper. Goldeneye smiled again. “Good. Now, even if you did happen to be a normal arctic fox who simply suffers from an entirely unique fur pigmentation condition which does not exist in nature *and* heterochromia… you’re him. ” He stroked the trembling vulpine’s skull, smiling gently as Josh cringed away, gnawing on his fingers with pale terror in his eyes. The gryphon smirked. “You’re him. And yet you’re utterly innocent and unknowing of everything *he* was– I’m certain of that. In short, little fox... you’re mine.”

And with a chuckling, casual smirk of glee, he shifted back to the swirling abyss of his Voidsight and leapt right into Josh’s mind.

Shards are complex and lethally unstable creatures, and Goldeneye was perhaps the most powerful of all... and thusly the most chaotic. A lesson he had learned swiftly, and all too painfully. But true to his nature, living was all too precious to him – and that meant *adapt, evolve, find a way to survive and experience the ecstasy of reality.* Handily, reality provided one: once the gryphon had found a mind of enough interest, he was able to *anchor* his own to it, feeding off the latent emotion and thought radiating from the unwitting consciousness to fuel his own stability.

In other words: he survived via total, burning obsession. By learning to love and lust for innocents. And when he could dance freely in the head of his focus, the pleasure, the power, the godlike mastery of self and other alike, and above all the sheer *clarity of mind...*

The gryphon hissed softly, feeling the tiny vulpine shudder and gasp in his embrace. *Oh, Josh... I would have walked into a trap willingly, had it bait like this.* His captive could hear him clear as music, right inside his skull, and he *felt* the disorientated, shaking reply.

*Wh-what? O-oh... m-my head... how are y-you...*

*How? Simple. I’m inside your mind, my dear. Can you feel me?* The gryphon cackled, soaring through the cascades of raw thought within his captive’s little soul, his mental eyes burning with greedy delight. *It’s so beautiful...*

“Ahhh... n-no...” Josh whimpered, slumping back against the feathers. “B-but... W-wait..you... you... the train...”

*Oh, Josh. That’s...*

“...very clever.” Goldeneye stretched again, beginning to stand once more as he felt his anticipation – *want to feel him, feel him close and warm and trembling -*  flare hungrily inside his chest, but he pushed Josh away, grinning as the vulpine fell over again with another squeak, his tail curling around his ankles. “Yes, that was me. A little trick, shall we say... overwhelm and suppress all the consciousnesses on board. A blanket trip to oblivion.” He smiled at the train tracks, silent and unroaring a few hundred feet from where the two of them sat. “Oh, no, they’re all fine, my darling fox. No-one remembers a thing. And no-one remembers *you...”* the beast crooned the word, long silver tail twitching behind him. “I’ve got you all to myself now. And you’re right, really. You’re not Joshua. All of that’s gone, somehow and somewhere... and all we have now is Josh Fawkes, little arctic fox with a truly *delicious* vanilla-and-purple pelt, a wonderful tail, and a very nervous, adorable disposition. And all mine….” He nuzzled the vulpine’s chest, twitching aside his somewhat ragged shirt to rub the great beak through his violet fluff of chestfur. Yes, it was vanilla. Unique, adorable, and utterly delicious.

“W-wait!”

The fox rose to his knees, still shaking with fear. “Y-you... I d-don’t know what you mean about me, b-but you haven’t got everything.”

He held up his right paw, the little fluff of luxurious snowy fur trembling a little around the shining, sparkling ring.

The Void was *dazzled* with it.

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It was hot now. Not enough to burn, but enough to remind him: *here, here, home, safe.* And the metal was actually pulsing – he was certain he could feel the rippling, squeezing, panicky convulsions, even though when Josh looked at it, seeing the shining metal and pearlescent surface, the thing was absolutely still and silent.

He *knew,* somehow, that this was connected to all this. Whether it was this “Joshua” character he had once been... or *whatever* had happened... the ring lay at its heart. The vulpine swallowed, looking at it and then at the huge beast before him. Goldeneye was watching it as well, his expression unreadable. Josh gulped again, but did not lower the ring.

“I-I don’t know what this thing is... is it... is it part of what you said before?” Perhaps he should have made a threat, but *oh dear Catalyst,* the gryphon could read his mind. No doubt he knew that it was useless upon Josh’s trembling paws: no knowledge, no power. He tried to quell the thoughts, feeling almost transfixed by the thing once more, his terror only increasing somehow as it fuelled it, *feeling* just panicked and fearful as he was. “Wh-what you s-said I… I was…”

“Is it part of your earlier life?” Goldeneye’s eyes were not leaving the ring... was it just the fox’s feverish imagination, or were his eyes glowing just a little as he stepped forwards with a soft smirk. “Why, my dear Josh... it is a very fascinating thing, certainly. Let us see...” He took a step forwards, ignoring his prisoner’s cringing, and gently took the fox’s entire arm between two talons, bringing the thing close to his eyes with a soft purr of curiosity. Up close, the gryphon was even more alarming and alluring – the sheer size of him took Josh’s breath away: he had to dip his head to simply place it close enough to the upraised limb, those tender touches belied a strength far, far beyond any natural creature, and everywhere Josh looked he saw more of that heavenly-soft feather-fur composite, the thick, fluffed clumps, exuding the strange, strange*ly* delicious musk of his captor. He shivered, and was uncomfortably aware that it was not simply because of terror.

*Intriguing...* Goldeneye’s voice hummed inside his skull again, making him tremble, a trailing hindpaw slipping as the fox fell against the beast’s great chest again with a muffled *oof*, nearly vanishing within the sheer thickness of the plumage. It was very warm, very soft and silky, and almost comforting.... but he couldn’t do more and whimper, pleading that something might save him... *for you know what he’s doing, Josh. Ring or no ring. You belong to this monster...*

“Correct. Good thinking...” The gryphon’s voice was absent, his eyes still locked on the ring... and Josh caught a faint flash of thought – a sudden spike of emotion on Goldeneye’s part, betrayed through a slowly growing rumble deep, deep inside his captor’s chest:

*Power... but not just power... it’s as if he’s locked it all away. Fascinating...*

“Power?”

The gryphon blinked again, and looked down at him with an almost paternal expression. “Oh, yes... So much power...” He turned back to the arcane piece of jewellery, the low purr again breaking through. “I would love to find out the story behind all this...”

“O-oh?” Josh swallowed, his tail curling up to let him cuddle it as he managed to pull his arm back, feeling the hot pulses running up and down his arm. “L-look... please, I don’t anything about this... if you’re so interested in th-the ring, th-then...”

*(No.)*

“...just...”

*(No!)*

“...just h-have it!”

***NO!***

He tried to speak again, but felt a sudden spark seem to channel right through his entire body, emanating straight from that ring – a feeling of pure desperation. The sound rattled inside his skull, less a word than a concept, a denial of screaming absolution which jerked his muscles away, thrusting him out the gryphon’s clutches; unusually, did not try to restrain him as the cry rattled through his head. *NO!*

“Yes...” Goldeneye’s violet iris had widened around it’s abyss-black pupil. “Oh, Josh... that’s delightful. You really think...” he paused, and started to grin. “As a matter of fact,… oh, yes. I think I’d be delighted.”

“You can have it!” Josh ignored the scream, already uncaring – what was the strange ring now, when he might survive this? “I-I don’t kn-know what it does, b-but please… you, you can have it!”

No reply, no expression that he could perceive. The vast avian cocked his head slowly, large blue-tipped ears twitching back and forth.

*Please.* They weren’t words, more pulses of pure emotion right inside his soul, the flickers of the silent ring. *You can’t… I’m yours…*

“I-I… “ Josh swallowed, watching it with a sudden urge to laugh – *I’m talking to a* ***ring****, for god’s sake!*-“I don’t know w-what you are, but I d-don’t want this…” His fingers tightened around it, and the gryphon drew in a sharp breath, leaning forwards, almost looking intoxicated. Josh hesitated.

“L-look. M… Mr G-Goldeneye… p-please, y-you can have this… if you p-promise to let me go…” He felt the thick, silky violet of his chestfur fluff up at those words: *let, me, go. Please.*  Hope. The feeling was at odds with the sickening ball of horror which seemed to be crouched on his finger, desperate, pleading, *alien* in its terror*.* The fox swallowed, his tail fluffing nervously, and held out the thing of eldritch beauty. “I-it’s all yours… just… d-don’t…”

The gryphon closed his eyes, opened them; shut them once more. He smiled, beginning to slink once more towards his captive. “Oh, very good… I think, my dear, that we have an accord. You give me this…” Goldeneye opened those twin orbs of gold and dark amethyst and dipped his head, nuzzling at the shivering vulpine’s arm with a greedy chuckle. “…and I will do whatever you ask me to.”

Josh frowned. “I-I… you promise?”

“I swear upon my very existence.”

The fox gulped nervously. “And –wait! You used that… that telepathy thing… what if you just make me say yes?”

Goldeneye tutted. “So cautious. But Josh, I swear I will not touch your mind. Not at all. I just want this ring, you see. Okay?”

Biting his knuckle, Josh tried to think over it. It was his best option – and it depended on the honesty of this… *thing.* He drooped, feeling helplessly bound with every movement, and nodded slowly. “…Okay.”

The vulpine felt a sudden, roiling climax hit him as he raised his paw, the beseeching, hissing, cornered terror nearly driving him to his knees. “Nngh…” But slowly, his fingers grasped themselves around the shining golden-and-pearl band, studded with those beautiful purple gems, and in a single motion pulled it off.

*No...*

The sound faded into nothing.

Goldeneye uttered a low, soft, rumbling noise of pure alluring desire, and the fox trembled as he held it out. “Here…”

*He promised*, he reminded himself. *He was being sincere… he’d do anything I asked him. A-and as long as he lets me go free…* But the gryphon’s grin was unnerving, as a talon flicked up, looping into the little piece of jewellery to snatch it away. The moment it left his fingers, Josh felt somehow drained, his shoulders shivering as he fell back, standing huddled as his captor let the ring slide down his dark talon… for about an inch, before it stopped short. The avian claws of Goldeneye’s eagle forelegs had to be about the thickness of his own wrist – something he should have thought of. “Oh. Um. H-How will it… fit… on… the…Oh.”

The words trailed off into silence. The beast sat back upon his massive haunches, raising the claw up to his eye level, and the jewellery *rippled* - for real, this time. Josh looked on in total awe as the thing morphed itself, melting and widening like some surrealist dream of a jewellery to flow over the middle claw of the gryphon. It was fighting the change, he could see it in the angry bulges and bunches of matter as the thing dripped over the obsidian of Goldeneye’s talon, but it was losing. The gryphon’s eyes were closed again, his breathing deepening as massive, bellow-like lungs hummed with pressure within that feathered chest. The morass of gold, amethyst and pearl swirled over his scaly skin, settling at last as an oversized band of gold – more like a bracelet, to Josh’s size – ringed with the same violet stones as before. It flexed one last time, trying to squeeze and crush its new master as the old owner looked on, bewildered and fearful… and then the ring was still.

Goldeneye opened his eyes, the irises glowing faintly. “Good…” he breathed, raising the thing to his beak. A long, surprisingly pink tongue reached out, teasing the item. The gems flickered, but no longer malevolently. It was his.

For a long moment, the two of them looked at the ring. Then Josh swallowed. “S-so… c-c-can I…”

“Leave?” The gryphon turned his head to him, settling back down with his prize curled docilely around his talons. “If you wish.”

The fox blinked. “J-just like that? No tricks?”

“I told you, Josh.” Goldeneye smiled benevolently. “I have this now. I will willingly do what you ask me.”

“I-I… er… okay…” Josh walked a few steps forward, still expecting to feel those terrible, powerful paws on him at any time… he suppressed a whimper, and turned around, remembering where he was: terror had erased his short-term memory until now. But *god… he simply froze them all…*

He had to get away. Just follow the train tracks, and something should come along. And *don’t* look behind you. Don’t. The fox could feel his captor’s gaze, he was sure of it. He took a step forward…

…and then in once smooth movement, his body spun around on its heel and his muzzle smiled at the beast. The words came easily, cheerfully, coy and playful.

“As a matter of fact, I think I’d rather stay here, and let you do whatever you want with me for the rest of my short and ultimately doomed life.”

Goldeneye smiled as the vulpine clamped his paws over his mouth, looking horrorstruck. “Oh really?” He smiled, raising his powerful form once more. “Well… if you *insist*…”

“N-no! No, I didn’t! I didn’t mean that!” Josh took a step backwards, and then another, nearly tripping over his thick tail as his tattered shirt finally gave up the ghost and fell off his body in scraps of ragged fabric, leaving his thick fur bared. “Y-you... you told me you wouldn’t... you wouldn’t i-invade my mind! Y-you made me d-d-do that!”

“Correct in both cases.” The gryphon was bearing down on him now, slinking forwards with a terrifying predatory grace in every coiled muscle. “I did make you do that. And I did tell you I wouldn’t deliberately affect your delightful little soul... and Josh, I didn’t.”

The vulpine blinked, feeling confusion reign over his thrumming fear for a few seconds. “B-but... but how...”

Goldeneye stood still, mere feet away from him, until his whimpered protests trailed off. Then he spoke, easily and jaunty – tones which could not hide the outpouring of outrageous glee behind his voice. “How is perfectly simple. I didn’t affect your mind using my telepathic powers, Josh. But what I did do is affect it using *this.”*

The ring sparkled on his upraised talon, no longer fighting: a willing ornament.

Eyes fixed on it, the vulpine clutched his tail, open-mouthed in bewildered horror. “T-t-that thing can... it can do that?”

“Josh...” Goldeneye flexed his claws greedily, “this ring contains almost all the power you once held. It's a reservoir of pure Void energy – and a positively *oceanic* one as well.

Josh felt himself moving forwards, still staring at the glittering band. “It... it’s got power?”

“Enough to forge new stars.” The gryphon winked, the effect more than somewhat unnerving on one so massive. “You were a *god*, after all. There is only one downside.” He held the fox’s gaze for a second, purple and gold to purple and gold, and continued, “You see, it’s locked away, with only a single siphon to let it free. Unless it’s original master finds how to use the key, this ring can only be used... on you.”

Josh gaped.

“I can’t unlock anything more than that – but really, I’m not complaining.” He ruffled his thick feathers, the edges of the vast, argent-and-azure wings trembling with suppressed desire. “Not when I tell you that the power this ring has over you is... absolute.”

His voice returned at last, with a half-paralysed cry of, “It’s... it’s got... what?” Now Josh was right before the gryphon, still staring at the bracelet-sized ring, his shoulders slack with amazement. “I was a... no, wait, it’s…it’s got all this power... and I j-just gave it... t-t-to *you?”*

“Yes.” A slow, cruel grin spread across Goldeneye’s face, spanning edge to edge of his great beak. “I’ve made a few individuals my own personal property over my physical lifespan – even if most of them haven’t served for very long – but in your case, you have just given me the capabilities to make my dominance of you... *absolute*.” He cocked his head slightly, as if bowing. “Thank you very, *very* much.”

“N-no... no, you can’t...” Josh whispered, feeling his muscles slackening and beginning to tremble. “You... you can’t have... g-give it back... give it back!”

His left hand grasped desperately at the band of ivory and gold, trying to tug it off the gryphon’s claws The touch sent a tingle through Josh’s stomach, and he pulled harder, desperate to get it free. “N-NO!”

“Naughty.” came the reply, coy and amused, and then Josh’s arm split.

Not a cut, not even a chunk of flesh coming off. The entire thing – flesh and blood and bone alike – simply tore itself into two long pieces with a noisy *schlarrp* of flesh – two half-arms ending in a repulsively *grotesque* parody of a paw: two fingers twitched feebly at the end of one half, with another two plus the vulpine’s delicate thumb on the other. The pain hit him with all the force of a wrecking ball, and the gryphon’s toy tried to scream out loud, but his throat choked up instead, and a crimson spray splattered Goldeneye’s claws as Josh fell back, clutching the ruin of his arm, howling in abject agony.

*It was just so* ***sudden…***

He writhed on his back, clutching the bloody “arms” to his chest as every movement sent another wave of absolute excruciation through him. The earth shook, and then Goldeneye was standing right over him, watching his pain with a detached interest. Josh moaned, trying to crawl away but unable to stop looking as the gryphon raised a gory claw to his beak and licked it slowly, greedily clean. His large eyes closed with pure pleasure.

“PP-...PLEASE!” Josh felt on the verge of passing out, his body beginning to shake uncontrollably. His vision was dimming, dulling, fading, -*but the agony stayed. How? Wasn’t death supposed to be an escape?”*

“Please?” He managed to open teary eyes to see the great beak, mere inches away from his split limb, and whimpered desperately, blood seeping over his fur.. Goldeneye ignored it. “Little Josh, I’m just beginning to test the capabilities of all this. I would never be normally able to affect your physical form so easily... and so you have to understand, you’re mine. In every way *imaginable.* And the chance for “please” came a long time ago.”

Josh sniffled in terror and pain. “I-I... I don’t... I-I don’t understand... wh-what have I done t-to deserve this... I-I’m not... I wouldn’t h-hurt y-y-you... p-please”

Suddenly, the same pressure he had felt before was spread solidly over his legs, trapping them in warm, soft, *crushing* flesh. He looked down, moaning as a sharp splinter of excruciation lanced through him, and saw the thing which had introduced him to his torturer: a single massive, feline paw – considerably wider than his entire torso, certainly enough to trap the little fox’s legs, the soft, pale blue flesh flexed slightly to enjoy his desperate wriggling, those claws – evidently retractable, black as obsidian, and a full four or five inches long – slipping out to tickle his navel. Goldeneye hissed, pressing his beak up close. Quite expectedly, his amusement was gone: now there seemed to be naught but fury. *“What – did - you – do?”*

With every word, Josh felt another inch of flesh burning up with pain. The gryphon snarled again, his words now coming florid and furious. “Now let us see. Various things, really. I broke my ribcage seven times during our encounter, lost two of my limbs and most of my blood, and could barely even heal them – your meddling was crushing my regenerative powers. Plus ooh, a hundred or so more injuries, each designed *simply to cause pain* – just because you knew that would be best to disable me. You did hurt me, Joshua.” He pressed the tip of his beak to Josh’s purple-black nose, forcing the trembling fox to stare into his slitted eyes. “But you know the worst part? The part which burns, razor sharp and clear? You won. You stood over me, slumped and near the closest I could come to some form of death. I *lost...* I lost my control. To *you.”*

He snarled softly, feeling the shuddering vulpine try to mumble a response, and cut him off. “I survived, of course. I don’t know if I can really die. But that didn’t matter. *You* gained control over *me.*” The gryphon growled. “That isn’t how it works. It can’t be. And you... you *beat* me.”

Josh moaned again, feeling another bolt shoot through the ruin of his arm. “B-but...”

“Shush. Or I’ll vanish your tongue.” Brutal, but terrifyingly effective: the vulpine fell silent, still sniffling feebly. Goldeneye smiled.

“Good. So you see... this is all about taking my own pleasure, from the source of all that pain and fury. Not revenge – that has some noble ideal of justice behind it. Pure, simple vindication is what I’m doing, my dear.” He licked the fox’s chin, almost tenderly, and shivered as the blood was washed away. “Now, you have another arm, don’t you...”

“I-I...” Josh swallowed, feeling his intact arm trembling, almost seeming to come alive as it huddled close to him, trying to hide. He opened and shut his muzzle a few times more, still shaking with fear, and fell silent again. The gryphon nuzzled his stomach, slurping occasionally at the odd spot of blood – a rather pleasant sensation until you knew what it actually was. Sensing himself twitch weakly, Josh slumped back, looking up at the sky. Everything had gone mad. He’d been a... a god, somehow managed to not just defeat this... this *monster...* but actually *humiliate* him, and then he’d ended up as Joshua Fawkes (*Josh!)* an innocent young fox with strange fur colouring and a ring, – no longer his, though, oh god why did he ever give it to him? How could he ever trust those horrible eyes? – a young fox who was now about to pay for all he’d done before he even knew it. He swallowed, instinctively feeling himself trying to cuddle up to that cruel beak, and fell back again. This was it, it seemed. He couldn’t believe it. Not now, not already. *Please...*

He just wanted to make people happy.

*Make them smile...* oh g-god, please...

Josh opened his eyes again, staring helplessly at the ring which now defined everything he was, and closed them once more, making the jewels of his irises sparkle in the light gleaming from the gryphon’s beak. Everyone had a right to be happy...

And *he’d* done that – he, whether Josh or Joshua, had done it. He’d been so *horrible* to this creature... maybe it was right...

*No!*

*But... what good will* no *do? At least you might relieve this guilt you’ve carried so unknowingly...*

The fox mumbled something, feeling his tongue rebel against every syllable. His arm ached, his tail twitched, but his soul seemed to lighten slightly.

“Hmm?” Goldeneye brought his head up, great, blue-crested ears cocked as if in confusion. “I’m sorry?”

Josh sniffed weakly, looking up at his tormentor’s vast form, and clenched his small teeth together “...O-o... okay.”

The gryphon remained impassive, although the constant shimmering of his eyes seemed to increase. Then he said, “What.”

weaklyJosh shrugged, managing to lean up a little bit, his ruined arm still cradled to him. “I-I said... okay. If I did all this... i-if I really hurt you like that... i-it’s only right, isn’t it? I-I suppose I couldn’t get a trial, s-so an eye-for-an-eye m-might seem th-th-the best way...” He swallowed back a sob. “B-besides... at least y-you’ll be happy.”

Goldeneye’s muscles seemed to tense, his whole huge, silver-feathered form twitching in a single, simultaneous ripple. He opened his beak, closed it again, and licked along it, glistening pink flesh flashing smoothly over the scythe-like edges. His eyes were flickering.

Expecting a reprisal, the fox cringed away, and when none came he went on, “S-so... so... okay. Take me. Use me f-for whatever y-you want... I-I just want *someone* t-to be happy because of this.”

The gryphon stared at him, and ignoring all his screaming instincts of self-preservation, Josh raised his uninjured arm, presenting it like some devotee, giving an unsettling offering to this new deity of his.

Goldeneye blinked once, slowly.

\*\*\*

*What.*

It was like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, catching him totally off guard and striking past his defences with all the power and precision of a cobra – a power *at least* equal to his own. Goldeneye felt his mind... *shift.* White hot and instantaneous, the force of it cracked him open. The only reason he didn’t scream was that he was too stunned to do so.

The fox’s mind was unearthly; there was not a single speck of doubt now. He had *felt* that pulse, that divine fluttering, and then... Josh had hit him where he could not be hit. *Sympathy.*

Sympathy for you, abomination. Goldeneye felt another wave of impossible tenderness hit him with every word. He was nearly blown away, his composite soul shuddering viciously... but instead it just morphed.

Light over splinter twirling through each other again and again, the fox before him changing: not pain, gentleness. *No...* and he flipped over. New hunger: the focus, the desire, the hunger was there. but new. Replicated in kind. In kindness.

*Yes.*

“Yes.”

Still shivering and sniffling, josh looked up him. “Y-yes? Y-you mean you’re g-going to…”

“No.” The gryphon felt himself standing up, slowly, his limbs curiously heavy and ponderous with some sensuous emotion. “To my utter, total astonishment, it appears I’m not.”

“You…you aren’t?” Josh sat up slowly, still trembling and clutching the gory remnants of his arm. “B-but…”

Goldeneye looked down at him again, breathing out a soft sigh of frustration. “It’s all changed, my dear. You may not know it, but you still pack one *hell* of a punch.”

The fox sniffled weakly, his small forehead wrinkling with confusion as his scent, sweet and fresh, spread over the gryphon’s tongue. But now the terror did not enhance it as it once had... he was new. Goldeneye felt the ring pulsing gently on his finger, still in time with little Josh’s heartbeat, and flexed the well of energy inside it. *There, little one.*

With a rather nauseating sound which the gryphon could only imagine as *schrrlch,* the two gruesome halves of Josh’s arm came together once more, and resealed. Flesh knitted together, ivory bone morphed from splinters to whole, and within less than a few seconds the ghastly injury, so hideous and painful, had been reduced to naught but spattered line of crimson across the little vulpine’s forearm. Josh gasped, staring at it, and slowly pulled himself to his knees, staring in amazed awe at a fully functional limb. He flexed the fingers experimentally, clearly dreading another sickening spike of agony, but the thing was without doubt... whole. The gryphon watched in two worlds, lazily coiling a tendril of consciousness through the fox’s mind, as Josh gasped, a silent explosion of pure, utterly untainted relief flooded through him. He got shakily to his feet, and seemingly without thinking catapulted himself straight at the gryphon, burying his tiny frame in Goldeneye’s thick, silky feathers. “Thank you...th- thank you, o-oh, oh g-god, thank you so much…”

The sensation, accompanied by a slapstick-esque *thud,* nearly made Goldeneye’s great legs give way. He was *here.* Against him, nuzzling, still high on relief and pain, burning his flesh with raw joy. The gryphon knew for certain now: it had all changed. He dipped his head, nuzzling gently at the fox’s shoulder, and to his frank amazement there was nothing more than a slight pulse of fear within his captive’s soul. Josh snuggled into him, nearly weeping with relief, still flexing the new tendons and muscles of his healed arm, and the gryphon felt the ring-bearing claw raise, lightly caressing the small back of his darling focus. He began to purr.

Presently, Josh realised what it was he was doing, and swallowed, trying to stumble back... whereupon he sharply noticed the talons wrapped firmly around him. The little vulpine whined slightly, craning his neck to look up at his captor. “U-um…I…oh.” He drooped, nestling glumly against the gryphon’s chest. “I-I suppose you’re still going to…going to…” Josh swallowed, trailing off, his sweet vanilla scent thick in the air.

Goldeneye eyed him back, feeling the pleasure growling deep within him, and spoke softly. “No, Josh. I should congratulate you, really… no-one has ever managed to do that to me before. No-one. And then along comes you, little foxie, and what happens?”

He felt the fox wriggle slightly, trying to answer – the fear was still there, that was for certain, faded and tinged with a wild, desperate hope but not yet gone by any means – and closed his eyes, soothed and at a curious peace, listening with ears cocked. Josh’s voice was barely more stable now, his words still squeaked out with nervous energy. “What h-happens? I… w-well, I don’t know… what *has* h-happened?”

“Simple.” Goldeneye breathed softly. “You stunned me, Josh. When you accepted – no, not just accepted, but willingly gave yourself to me… you turned everything inside out. My mind, you see,” he let the fox shift round, leaning against his captor as he nestled apprehensively within the thick fur, “is a very, very strange and complicated organism. In essence, it’s so unstable that to survive at all, I need to be able to experience other souls: souls positively ripe with emotion. Terror is such an intoxicating flavour, and allows me to fulfil every one of my lusts without holding back… but with you, that one moment of pure unexpected selfless kindness… broke me.”

He felt the soft little breaths of his captive, quickened with anxiety and awe, and went on, “I’m new now, Josh. It was fear I wanted before – so much fun as it is – but suddenly, it’s a more subtle, more encompassing emotion driving me.”

“A-and? What wa-” the fox’s words were broken off as Josh squeaked in alarm, being lifted off the ground by the gryphon’s claws. Goldeneye smiled, clutching his captive to his chest. The featherweight frame was as nothing before the power of his muscles… power growing with every word he spoke. Ah, this was *heavenly.* And he didn’t even want the bright slash-scars of pain now: it was enough to simply dance here amidst the little fox’s mind.

His captive wriggled round, still trembling so deliciously, and managed to haul his head OUT of the trapping, stroking clutches of the gryphon’s claws. “But, please... I don’t understand what you mean... what do y-you w-want with me?”

Smirking a benevolent smile, Goldeneye dipped his head and watched his tiny captive. “My dear Josh... I just want you. You understand? Not terrified, not in that delectable agony, just... *you.*”

The vulpine swallowed, shying away from his eyes, fear still flaring mirror-bright inside him. “I-I... so... wh-what are you going t-to do?”

Goldeneye paused a moment, smiling idly, and nuzzled his little fox once more. The sweet vanilla scent filled his belly with a ravenous, starving ache, but it was as absent as the roiling tides of the void: he ruled it; no longer vice versa. He licked up a spot of Josh’s own blood, and nipped coyly at a large purple-tipped ear, chuckling as the vulpine shivered at the touch – but no longer completely unwillingly, the snowy creature nuzzling up a little against his beak. “Well... I seem to have left you stranded several leagues from anywhere. How about a ride home?”

He grinned warmly. And hesitantly, nervously, trembling with anxious forebodings... Josh smiled a small, weak smile right back.

The ring pulsed.

**End of Part 1**