

# **Fallow**

Book three of the OMG Terran series Arc

**by**

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*for Jeff*

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## Chapter 1

### *Later that night . . .*

**R**ays of moonlight quietly pierced the layers of scattered clouds covering the valley floor as its silver light poured down on the forest and city below, the light caressing the small room where the two occupants lay nestled close together. Their faces seemed a comparison of contrasts. Keiichi continuing to sleep on in blissful slumber, looking as though Christmas, his birthday, and the Nekomi Teck racing championship had all come to him at once. Beside him his partner shuffled, staring up at the ceiling once more. “Ah!” she squeaked as Keiichi rolled over sleepily flopping his hand across her bare skin.

“Huh? Wha-?” he said slowly opening an eye.

“What? Nothing! I didn't say anything,” she said quickly. It didn't seem to be quite the blissful response he'd been expecting. He nuzzled closer for warmth.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Me? Nothing. What are you doing?” he whispered conspiratorially, cuddling.

“Nothing. You know, just thinking . . . Just, you know . . . thinking.”

His other eye opened. “About what?”

She blushed turning to the side. “About stuff, you know . . . just stuff.”

He was now fully awake - and growing concerned. *She's thinking about stuff? Now?*

She rolled over a bit farther.

*What could she be thinking at a time like this? Oh my god it was awful! And she doesn't know how to tell me!* His heart began to pound. “Uh Bell, could you tell me *what* you're thinking about?” he asked as gently as possible.

She bit her lip turning further away. “I don't really think I can,” she said mostly into the pillow.

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*OH GOD! Everything was perfect, perfect, and now I've gone and ruined it!* Quickly his mind raced through what he considered her most likely responses:

*Keiichi, that was terrible . . .*

*Keiichi, I don't know how to say this, but please let's never do that again . . .*

*Keiichi, are you sure you were doing that right? Because that's not what I had heard it was like . . .*

From there on it only got worse. He was staring intently at the silhouette of her back. "Bell I'm sorry! Whatever it is could you please just turn around and talk to me about it?"

After what seemed to him to be an overly long period she replied, "Well I was thinking about *uh . . . frequency*."

Keiichi felt as though he'd been thrown into freezing water - only to jump up and be struck by an oncoming semi. "Bell I love you! You're all matters to me! Trust me we don't *ever* have to do that again. I promise!"

Belldandy pushed her head deeper into the pillows. "Never?" she asked.

"Never Bell I promise."

Her head came up, tears springing to her eyes clutching her pillow. "Why are you saying that?!"

"Because I love you!"

"That makes no sense! Why are you being so cruel Keiichi? Is it something I've done?!"

Only now did Keiichi begin to realize that perhaps not all was lost after all. "*Cruel? You mean - it's alright for us to be together like this?*" She nodded, putting her head on the pillow beside him. Relief poured through him as though from the starlight itself. He took his first breath in what seemed to him to be a very, very, long time. "*Whenever you want Bell,*" he said leaning back putting his hand to hers feeling the warmth flowing back into it.

"Really?" she said.

"Of course," he replied closing his eyes, feeling the

moonlight pour down onto the futon. "What did you think?"

"It's just . . . I'd heard something different," she said peeking up from behind the pillow.

"Oh? What was that?"

*Later that night . . .*

"I'd heard - once a year."

Keiichi's response could be heard through a large part of the neighborhood. "ONCE A YEAR?!" *Who would have told her that? Certainly not Urd. She would have said the opposite. And it didn't seem the kind of subject she would approach Takumi on. Skuld? Impossible! If Skuld even suspected something like this was going on she would - he* shuddered to think of the possibilities, most of them involving heavy machinery and his more critical parts. *Wait a minute. . .* "Bell you didn't get this information from - *a bird did you?*"

Her head ducked down behind the pillows blushing.

"Well . . . it's hard to talk about these subjects you know."

He smiled relieved placing his hands behind his head, stretching out under the shared space. "I see. Well I think it's little different for people compared to birds."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. For people it's pretty much, you know, whenever."

"I see."

*Thank goodness*, he thought shutting his eyes.

"Keiichi?"

"Yes?"

"So . . . *when-ever*, she echoed." He looked over to see her blue eyes looking back at him over the pillow with unearthly intensity. He smiled back swallowing nervously.

. . .

Late the next morning Urd, Takumi and Skuld finished climbing the steps to Tariki Hongan temple to be greeted by sounds of singing from inside the house. Great varieties of singing actually.

"I'm guessing Keiichi is awake," Urd whispered relieved. "I knew I felt something."

"I'm gonna go see!" Skuld shouted taking off ahead of them.

"Yeah, good . . . *give us a break*," she muttered taking Takumi's hand.

Entering the kitchen, Skuld saw that this morning's breakfast would be like no other. For one thing it seemed her sister had recruited a sizable number of the local animals to assist her in making sure all was perfect that morning. Pots clanged,

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kettles boiled, and dishes stirred to the tune of a surprising number of winged and terrestrial creatures gathered around Belldandy and Holy Bell as they prepared their dishes.

Belldandy turned spotting Skuld in the doorway. “*You’re here! Wonderful!*” she shouted, happily scooping her up in her arms perhaps with a bit too much enthusiasm.

“Uh yeah, hi big-sis,” Skuld replied extricating herself from her grip.

“*Throw me an egg -*” Belldandy said over her shoulder as a Tanuki which Skuld had somehow failed to notice to this point lobbed an egg to her while perched atop the sink. “*One, two, three – yes three big ones!*” she laughed catching them in a metal bowl on the far side of the kitchen. “Look at that Skuld!” she said as though something funny had suddenly occurred to her. “Which one of you likes eggshell in your eggs? Is it you? Urd? Ah well one of you anyway-,” she said merrily picking out what she could before frantically mixing. “Uh sis - *are you okay?*”

“Yes, I’m just making a special omelet,” she answered splashing the mixture down onto the pan. She squinted at the resulting pattern, “It’s like a smiley face-,” she mused cautiously flipping an edge, “and a missing tooth!” At that moment two airborne messengers flew close to Skuld’s head nearly colliding with each other. “*What?* No, use the other ones - the ones with the bamboo pattern,” she said as they zoomed back out through the doorway.

“Umm, you’re *sure* everything’s okay sis?” Skuld asked looking over her shoulder at the rest of the house.

“Of course! Everything is fine. It’s a beautiful day outside. Don’t you feel it?!” She opened the window as several more singing birds flew in.

“Sis, how many colas have you had this morning?”

“Well not *that* many,” she shrugged looking deep inside the cabinet.

“Um, I’m just going to go outside - for a minute,” Skuld said backing away.

A moment later Urd’s head popped into the kitchen, “What’s going on? Skuld says you’re acting weird.”

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“Weird? *Weird?! What’s so weird?*” Belldandy said waving her arms about (rather weirdly) before the gathered menagerie. “It’s a glorious day that’s all. A wonderful, glorious day! The kind of day that makes you want to sing – *la - what? Yes of course you can,*” she said tossing napkins into the air as three birds swooped in causing Urd to duck to avoid being struck by one as they zoomed past her to begin folding them on the table. “*Careful with that,*” Belldandy cautioned the Tanuki as it marched between Urd’s feet into the living room balancing a soy sauce container on his back. The older goddess looked at it twice before turning back to her sister. “Belldandy are you - *drunk?*”

“What? *Pshhht - no!*” she said laughing putting her head against the wall only making her appear more drunk. “Of course not - *mom!*” she said beginning to laugh hysterically now as she heard her own words, “*MOM!*” she howled. Now Urd knew something was up. *That* word never came up between them in normal conversation. She turned her head looking down the corridor seeing reflected light. “Is Keiichi’s door open? Is he awake?”

Belldandy eyes widened, ducking out of the kitchen and through the living room to place herself between Urd and the corridor with surprising dexterity. “There’s no need to bother him,” she insisted. “I think he’s still asleep,”

“I see,” Urd nodded. “He does seem very quiet.”

Belldandy sighed relaxing just long enough for Urd to slip past her. She pranced down the hallway triumphantly peeking into his room. “*OH MY GOD!*” she cried seeing the result. The room looked as though it had been hit by a cyclone. And there in the middle of it all lay Keiichi Morisato, asleep and content curled up under the edge of the futon. His naked body wrapped in the remnant of a sheet. Urd looked back at her younger sister in mock horror, “Belldandy of the Western Winds! Did you - *take advantage of Mr. Morisato?!?*”

Belldandy looked back retreating in the corridor.

“Something happened last night didn’t it?” Tell me. *Tell me, tell me, tell me!*” insisted Urd.



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The goddess bit her fingernail as Holy Bell sprang behind her considering the question. Thinking she nodded, holding up three fingers.

“*Oh my God!*” shouted Urd.

“*WHAT IS IT?!*” cried Skuld running in, hearing the commotion. Urd turned firing at her, instantly dropping her unconscious to the ground.

“*Oneesan!*”

“Oh don’t worry she’ll be fine,” Urd said waving lightly at Skuld’s form slumped over face down on the floor. “This is huge!”

“Uh . . . yes I suppose so,” Belldandy replied folding her hands in front of herself nervously.

“So tell me everything. *Everything!*”

“Well you see, Keiichi woke up late yesterday afternoon -.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And of course I was so relieved to see him -.”

“Of course.”

“Because there was just so much I needed to tell to him -.”

“Naturally. Was one of them your clothes had become dangerously unstable and needed to be removed immediately so that you could make hot passionate love to him?

Remember you’re under oath.”

Skuld’s body began to shuffle on the floor behind them.

“*Huh? Wha-what happened? Why am I on the ground? I remember coming in and then - hey URD did you -?*”

Urd swept back striking as Skuld slumped back on the floor.

“*Urd stop doing that! You're going to stunt her growth!*”

“Ah - short things are cute,” Urd shrugged.

“Well I guess we should finish making breakfast,” Belldandy said reaching for a towel.

“Hold it! We’re not done here.”

“*Oneesan!*”

“But I’m pretty close so far, right? So, how was it?” she said folding her arms.

“Well . . . I mean he - and then I - and then we – *well there was just so much Keiichi!*”

Urd raised an eyebrow, “I see. *So there was a lot of Keiichi,*” she muttered pensively.

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Belldandy looked at her puzzled for a moment before her eyes grew wide. “*That’s not what I mean!*” she said blushing furiously.

“Ah and to think, you guys are only just starting. Wait until it starts getting good!”

Belldandy looked back at her with a smile bordering on panic. “That’s crazy talk! How could it get any better?!”

“Well I mean you’re just starting out. Can you imagine what it will be like when he starts kissing you?”

“*Oh we kissed,*” Belldandy replied assuredly. “We kissed plenty.”

“Really? *Every square inch of you?*”

The goddess stopped her face going blank, eyes suddenly widening as a whole new set of possibilities only now seemed to occur to her. Her toes began tapping the floor. “We need to wake up Keiichi immediately - for breakfast!” she said emphatically.

Breakfast that morning was indeed a more active and confused affair than normal for the household, both with the array of animal helpers in the house and Belldandy and Keiichi sitting across from each other blushing furiously speaking in barely intelligible whispers as they moved items between them.

“How uh . . . *do you like the breakfast this morning Keiichi?*”

Belldandy muttered not able to look at him.

“It’s good, *really, really, good,*” he answered also not daring to look back causing Belldandy to blush even more furiously.

“I mean the food is all - *well I mean not just the food but of course everything,*” he corrected quickly as Skuld’s eyes darted suspiciously between them.

“Seriously what’s going on?” Takumi muttered in Urd’s ear only half-interested. “The kid’s acting weirder than usual.”

“Tai, do you remember the night when you came back from Takkoku no Iwaya?” she replied whispering.

“Yeah, the night I brought you the stone. So?”

“*Afterwards -.*”

“Well afterwards we – *oh my god you’re kidding!!*”

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“What are you two saying over there?!” growled Skuld.

“Why is everyone around here muttering today!”

“Are they? I don’t notice anything,” Urd said innocently. “Do you notice anything Tai? Maybe it’s you? *Can you hear me Skuld?*” she asked purposely changing the pitch of her voice. “What?!”

“Well, I suppose we should take you to a doctor . . .”

“Well if there’s anything wrong with me it’s because I keep getting knocked out!”

Takumi shook his head. “Maybe some sunshine will help,” he suggested ushering them both out looking back at the couple.

“Why do you keep looking at Belldandy?” Urd questioned as they moved into the hallway.

“What? No I’m not!” he said pushing her through the door.

Belldandy waited until they had gone. “Keiichi?”

“Yes?”

“We - we’re doing that again,” she muttered rushing out.

Keiichi looked down at the plate. “*Yes ma’am.*”

...

The next few weeks seemed to fly by as a spring of happiness engulfed the temple. Megumi returned, running from her bike barely able to contain her emotions as she hugged her brother. They sat together in the fall air holding hands at the back of the shed talking for some time until they were interrupted by Belldandy, who shyly stood at the corner of the house. From the wall Takumi watched with relief as Megumi warmly waved over a reluctant Belldandy who cried at their embrace. The three sat together there for a long time talking; about what he could not guess. But then each of them had been on a journey, and now was the time for them to talk it through.

Over the next few days the members of the Nekomi Tech auto club all appeared at the temple, sometimes alone sometimes in groups to verify with their own eyes that Keiichi Morisato had indeed returned.

Arrivals tended to reflect personality, with Tamiya and Otaki appearing the next day, attempting to act casual, almost aloof as they came to the door; yet they were probably the biggest babies of all when Keiichi appeared before them. Hasegawa and Chihiro rushed to him unreservedly, to the point where

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Belldandy had to politely squeeze herself between them. Many of the rest came in groups, which was good for Sayoko who relegated herself to standing, somewhat painfully, at the back; though to Takumi it appeared she wished to be very much closer. As for journeys, Takumi and Urd had their own to make in the form of a mysterious pledge which appeared one day on the grounds of the Nekomi Tech library, providing support for the '*recent and unusual*' water damage which had recently occurred there.

"Uh, another party?" Urd asked returning to the temple that night. It was true that some level of partying was becoming a regular event at the temple of late.

"I think they just like parties," Takumi replied trying to sneak past into Urd's room.

"Let me just check on Bell," Urd said breaking away. As soon as he heard the shouts of '*URD!*' coming from the other room at her entry he knew he should not wait up.

However the next morning he suspected he had missed something seeing the way the elder sisters were eyeing each other. "What's going on Skuld?" he asked pouring tea.

"Oh Bell just has a few naïve ideas about how relationships actually work," Urd interrupted coming to his side.

"Apparently she's an expert now."

"Oh?"

"She believes partners should never lie to each other."

"Should they?" he asked folding his arms.

"Hey, don't you start with me. Otherwise there's a few things I'd like to ask you about –."

"Well, I suppose it depends on the *nature of the thing*."

"Exactly. But *never* lie? I mean that's just crazy."

"I can see I'm going to have to keep my eye on you," he said putting his arm around her and sipping his tea.

Urd waited to prove her point, which came, as it happened, in the form of a letter from Var. After recent events many in the heavens (at least among younger goddesses), were anxious to repair ties with Belldandy; Var among them.

"Big-sis!" Skuld exclaimed picking up the envelope.

"Wax seal. Don't see much of that these days," said Takumi.

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“Who is it from?” asked Keiichi.

“Var. She’s an old friend of mine from school. We . . . had a chance to speak recently,” Bell responded.

He looked at the intricate mandala adorning the card. “Well it’s certainly nice of her to think of you.”

Urd smiled sensing her opportunity. “Well of course she’d think of her,” she said casually sipping her tea. “After all, Belldandy was her first *girl-on-girl* experience.”

Takumi and Keiichi both spit out their tea instantly as the entire group went silent. Belldandy looked down blushing dropping her chopsticks to the floor.

“*What?!*” shouted Skuld.

“Oh didn’t you know?” Urd said innocently. “I just thought I’d mention it, you know in the interest of *complete honesty*.”

Belldandy and Keiichi each tried to speak at the same time only to stop.

*Could what Urd said really be true?* thought Keiichi, trying to imagine Belldandy’s delicate frame leaning back into Var’s strong arms, their eyes turning to meet slowly as their mouths - *What am I thinking?!* he cried sitting up.

“It’s not – *uh* quite as it sounds,” Belldandy replied hurriedly.

“It was mostly Urd’s fault.”

“My fault?!”

“Why does that not surprise me?” murmured Takumi. “Look I think we can all agree that the only way to be certain about this is to go over it - *in detail*,” he said eagerly leaning over the edge of the table. Urd’s eyes narrowed. “*What?* I’m just trying to make sure that neither of you are being innocently defamed,” he explained, his mind going over the possibilities.

“Well, it was just before winter break,” Belldandy began.

“You mean around the Festival of Light?” asked Skuld.

“Yes. It was just before we -,”

“Quiet! We need to focus on the key elements of the story and understand exactly how Belldandy and Var first started wrestling in their pajamas,” Takumi said as the group looked at him blankly. “Oh was I the only one that heard that part?”

“Oh you’re going to hear something alright - *later*,” Urd muttered in his ear.

“Actually there weren’t any pajamas,” replied Belldandy.

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"*THERE WEREN'T?!*" he cried falling over the table.

"No. We were at school."

Despite his momentary disappointment, the vision in Takumi's head now changed to one of Belldandy and Var playfully prancing to school, tugging at each other's ridiculously short skirts. "*Now we've got a story!*" he said clapping his hands together.

"You are *this close mister*," the voice beside him warned.

"Will you two be quiet? Belldandy's trying to explain,"

Keiichi said trying to sound disinterested.

"Well like I was saying, it was just before the Winter Festival when Var and I walked down into the ruins of the old school and . . ."

"*What's bothering you Bell?*" Var asked as they laid their packs together beneath the old stone archway at edge of the campus.

"Oh it's Urd. Everywhere she goes these days she's always kissing, down at the stables, over by the river, under the chestnut tree, behind the apiary -."

"*Err*, could we skip this part please?" asked Takumi. "I'm dying a little bit with each revelation."

"Oh she's making that up," whispered Urd.

"*-Because you always tell the truth*," he whispered back.

"Will you two be quiet please!" said Keiichi.

"Yeah, shut it!" echoed Skuld.

"I understand," Belldandy replied continuing. Fortunately Takumi had no way of knowing how much lower the sun was in the sky now in her story, "*-and even the gondola!*"

"*Wow*. What do you think that's all about?"

"I don't know. Urd says it's about showing your feelings to the person you respect the most."

"*Wow* your sister respects a lot of people."

"I know!"

Var thought a moment before leaning over to kiss Belldandy. Their lips parted as she and Belldandy stared at each other for a moment blinking.

"I don't know . . .," shrugged Var.

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"Maybe we're not doing it right," suggested Belldandy. The sound of tumbling rocks behind them suddenly made them turn. "*What the hell is going on here?!*" cried Urd.

"Oh Urd. We were just-."

"I know what you were just! I think you've had enough '*just*' for one day. You're coming with me! And you - you go that way!"

"I'll see you tomorrow Var," Belldandy said as her older sister dragged her away.

On the road together now the two sisters walked in silence until Busa flew down landing on Belldandy's shoulder.

"Something you want to tell me?" teased Urd.

Bell said nothing trudging on ahead.

"You know I'll love you no matter what your choice Bell."

"Ha, ha, very funny," she said marching off.

"I'm just saying - *a bird, - a girl?* Kinda like you're hitting everywhere around the target," she said waving. "Wait a minute. This is about that boy isn't it?!"

Belldandy stopped, blushing.

"Oh my god. It IS about that boy! The one you met earlier this year. You know he's probably dead by now right? They don't live as long as we do. What's his name - Kenuchi?"

"Keiichi - and he's fine! And that's not going to happen so much anymore, what with unification of realm timelines at the beginning of this year. Or don't you have enough time to study history between kissing? I'm in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade and even I know that! It's modern times after all - 1995!"

"Oh so smart Bell. Maybe I'll stuff you in my backpack the next time there's a test!"

"Yeah, well maybe Dad told you to say all that stuff to me about Keiichi and the surface world - *Daddy's' girl!*"

Urd seemed genuinely taken aback. "Daddy's girl? If anyone's a Daddy's girl around here buster it's you! Besides I've already discovered what I needed to know."

"What's that?"

"*That you remember his name,*" she said clicking her tongue.

Belldandy's face turned red fuming. "Good day Urd!" she said stomping off.

"Oh Bell don't be like that."

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"I said good day!" she echoed storming off as Busa turned with a sweep of his wing.

"Did that bird just give me *the bird*?!" Urd muttered puzzled.

Back at Tariki Hongan temple the participants eyed one another around the table. "Somehow I thought your story would involve more wrestling," Takumi replied glumly.

"You mean like this?" Urd said choking him.

"So - that was what happened after the festival," Keiichi said blushing.

"Yeah," Belldandy replied looking down.

"And you kept track of me?"

Her blushing deepened, "A bit," she replied.

"I'm happy you did. You don't know how much."

"What are they talking about?" breathed Takumi.

"I have no idea. But then I rarely know what they're talking about these days," Urd said putting him in a headlock.



## Chapter 2

### *Winter Solstice*

All the next morning Urd couldn't shake the feeling that someone was following her. Walking through the alleyway she turned the corner, ducking into a passage waiting to pounce.

*"It's almost time!"* Mara cried sticking her head into the space surprising her.

"Mara don't do that!" Urd said coming out. "Time for what?"

"The Winter solstice of course! Are you going to come with us this year? It's going to be a party!"

"Oh I don't know. I was thinking maybe Tai and I would go off on our own for it this year," Urd replied.

"Oh you're no fun," she scowled. "Ever since you took up with that -," but then she stopped beginning to chuckle. "Oh I get it. *Heh, heh, heh.*"

"Huh? What? I don't know what you're talking about" she said shrugging innocently.

*"Oh my god!"* You aren't even going to tell him are you - you freak!"

"Oh it will be fine..." Urd said dismissively. Maybe we'll see you there," she said, her voice trailing off as she walked away down the alley.

"-And they call me twisted," Mara muttered watching her go.

...

"Tai, I was thinking maybe we should go someplace next weekend. Just the two of us."

"Really? Great. Is this to give *them* some space? Because Skuld will still be here."

"No, no. We need time alone too."

Belldandy looked up from the table. "What's this?"

"Tai and I were just thinking about going away on a trip."

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Belldandy's eyes hinted concern. "Urd, do you really think that's a good idea? I mean - *given the time of year and all.*" "We're going to go south," she said sipping her tea. "I think the weather will be fine,"

"Well . . . it's just that *historically* a lot of things tend to happen around this time of year," she said trying to catch her attention. Takumi looked between them.

"Ah you worry too much Bell. We'll be fine. We're going to go someplace low key."

The disclosure seemed to do little to reassure her. "Yes, I'm not sure that's the issue . . ."

"Bell it'll be fine," Urd insisted pushing her out the door.

The days raced by as plans were made and before they knew it the day had arrived. "Alright guys we're off," Urd announced. "Okay well we'll see you," Keiichi said taking hold of Belldandy's hand. "You're sure you won't take Skuld with you?" he asked for perhaps the third time. Beside him Skuld folded her arms frowning.

"I don't think it would be her kind of place," Urd replied throwing her bag over her shoulder. Bell smiled at them worriedly trying to think of something to say. "Well, okay . . . *be safe Takumi,*" she said furrowing her brow.

"*Safe?*" he thought as together they entered the gateway.

"Holy cow, look at this place!" he said on their arrival.

"I know. It's great isn't it?"

He looked behind them, scanning the mountains of the volcanic terrain before returning his view to the lagoon that lay at their feet. "We're somewhere in the South Pacific," he guessed.

"French Polynesia," she replied as he eagerly dove into the waters, splashing around before bounding up the wooden gangway to explore the route to the over-water bungalow.

"And all of this is ours?" he asked. "For the next little while anyway," she said following him in. "You see? You can swim whenever you want," she said pointing to the water entrance in the middle of their new living room.

"*Fantastic.* It's so blue," he said sitting down to watch the placid waters.

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"I thought you were used to islands," she said sitting beside him. "Not ones like this," he replied. To his left he saw the hills fall away to a low-lying isthmus containing the inward-most branch of the lagoon. From there the ground rose once more, climbing sharply to a second volcanic peak as the island swept back toward them. He studied the calm waters that lay before him trying to detect any hint of wake. To the naked eye there seemed to be nothing in front of them, nothing but flat crystalline water. But he knew it was there, perhaps five miles away, the long low row of barrier reefs protecting them, turning this patch of open ocean into the tranquil lagoon before them. "Is this real?" he asked.

"It's real," Urd replied, leaning out the window to catch the sea breeze. "The sun's beginning to set. How about you go into town and see what you can rustle up?"

"Fair enough. How far would you say it is?"

"About two miles that way," she said pointing to the isthmus.

"Alright I won't be long. Don't start without me," he said unloading his pack.

"*No need to worry about that,*" she muttered as she watched him leave.

. . .

By the time he found what he was looking for and returned the sun had already set. He walked up the dock to find it empty.

"Urd? Urd?" he called looking at the moon rising over the water. *There's something about this place,* he thought listening to the strange music now drifting over the water,

*See these eyes so green . . .*

He entered the dark bungalow searching but found nothing. He looked out the windows checking the waters as behind him something slowly began to climb up from the sea.

*I can stare for a thousand years,*

He continued to search the lagoon as the creature silently pulled itself out of the water behind him.

*Colder than the moon,*

"Where in the heck could she - *Whoa!*" he said springing back upon catching sight of her. On the floor behind him he could see her now in the darkness, Urd on all fours continuing to

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slowly move toward him; her wet hair brushing the sides of her face as she moved forward in the darkness.

“Hey – uh you . . .,” he said cautiously, trying to draw her attention. “That’s some - *suit* you’ve got on there. Is that even legal?” he smiled nervously. Urd gave no reply, simply continuing slinking toward him on all fours. It was then he noticed her slit-like like eyes, and something more, something disquieting that brought unease to his heart. He stepped back. “Urd?”

She continued forward saying nothing, looking up at him with a pitiless hunger as she approached.

‘Cause it’s been so long,  
“You do know it’s me right Urd? Urd?!” he said taking another step back.

And I’ve been putting out fire,  
Something is definitely wrong, she’s going strike! he thought.  
- with GASOLINE!

Takumi sprinted away, but he was too slow for a demon of Urd’s lineage.

...

In the shallows a small fish nudged himself forward. Sweeping his fins back and forth he watched his target excitedly, mesmerized by the morsel in front of him as his two companions held back hesitantly. Finally with a flick of his colorful scales he flew forward latching his mouth around the tantalizing treat.

“Hey I’m still using that - *I think*,” Takumi replied shaking the small fish from his finger. Slowly he pulled his arm up from the waters, rolling over on the dock. Seeing the form in front of him he moved forward, pressing himself against the back and sheet in front of him. “Hey you,” he whispered, moving his hands as the shoulders flexed sensuously under the sheets purring. “You were really - YAAA!” he cried as the form rolled over revealing Elegance’s distinctive features. Quickly he dove beneath the nearest unclaimed sheet. “Urd?!”  
“Right behind you baby -,” she cooed as her arms reached up around him.

He turned to face her. “What – what happened last night?”

## Fallow

“What happened?” You - were a tiger,” she said raising an eyebrow.

“I don’t think that’s what happened.”

“Well maybe a bit of a tiger *cub* at first,” she said stretching out beside him. “But once you got going -.”

He shook his head. “I can’t quite remember. I’m a bit fuzzy,” he said trying to recall the evening as bits of imagery continued to flash through his head. “I remember you on the ground and then - “*OH MY GOD!*” he cried suddenly sitting up straight.

“What?” Urd said innocently.

He leaned down to her his voice no more than a whisper, “Urd I didn’t do anything . . . err *ungentlemanly*-like to Elegance last night did I?” he asked fearfully.

“Oh Tai don’t look so concerned - we’re all friends here,” she said looking past him as she and Elegance exchanged knowing glances. He reached down pulling the sheets around him more securely now, suddenly feeling rather exposed. Turning toward Urd Elegance suddenly gasped.

“What is it?!” he asked looking back at her thinking she had seen something in the lagoon. Urd too now gasped, seeing the sets of red claw marks across Takumi’s back.

“Did you see it too Urd?!” he asked turning back before returning his gaze to the lagoon. “I don’t see anything!”

“Oh it’s out there a ways,” Urd said as she and Elegance began exchanging rapid gestures behind Takumi’s back regarding who was to blame. Seeing nothing he turned his attention back to them, only to see Elegance pantomiming what he could only assume was a lion mauling a zebra.

“Uh . . . you hungry Elegance?” he asked as the angel looked back flustered. However he was beginning to take note of the strange impressions in the sand at the front of the cottage.

“What’s all of this?” he asked dragging the sheet behind him as he went.

“What, that? Oh, who knows. Probably just some joggers,” Urd replied quickly. “They’re up here before the sun,” she added trying to get in front of him.

“Really? Because there’s only *one set* . . . and they start *here*,” he said suspiciously scanning the beach. He looked down at the footprints comparing them to his own, following them from the

## Winter Solstice

dock until they ended in a much larger set of impressions farther down the beach. “Urd?”

“Yes hon . . .”

“Did you tackle me last night when I was, oh I don’t know - *trying to escape!*”

“Of course not. What a question! How could you even think that?” she said as Elegance floated behind her.

“I see -,” he replied studying the footsteps. “Then you must have been the one *dragging me back!*” he said pointing to the heel marks dug into the sand heading back toward the house.

“Oh Takumi, we’re on vacation. Let’s not spend time worrying about minor details like who assaulted whom. And in my defense, I’d point out those tracks only go about halfway back to the house,” she smiled.

“*Humph.* I say we go for food. It looks like Elegance is getting hungrier.”

“Good idea. Uh, just maybe put on a shirt. The sun’s very intense here.”

“I know what you mean. My back does feel kind of sore.”

“Well you know - that’s the tropics for you,” she said biting her lip. Together they walked along the path through the undergrowth for about a mile until they reached the edge of town, strolling along the gathered fruit stands lining the road. As was his habit Takumi poked his nose from one stall to another curiously eyeing the fruits on hand. “Urd, you want one of these?” he asked holding up a large papaya.

“*Oh monsieur, please do not handle my melons so roughly,*” cooed the woman beneath a large hat at the back of the stall.

“I know that voice,” Takumi said stepping back.

“But of course -,” she said removing her hat to reveal the queen of Demonkind.

“Ahhhh!”

“Tai, try to work on that - not screaming like a little girl I mean,” Urd said.

“Such a reaction on greeting me! I who gave you life,” Hild replied sweeping her hand down to transform her garb to into something more festive.

## *Fallow*

“Define - *give*,” Takumi said stubbornly, only now observing the scattered members of her entourage present in the surrounding crowd. “Why did you follow us here?”

“*Follow you here?* Didn’t Urd tell you? This area’s a festival place for us this time of year.”

“It is?!” he said turning to her.

“Well, I think you could more accurately call it a timeshare,”

Urd replied. “Still the island’s nice. I have a lot of fond memories of my childhood here. More than I do of - *other things*,” she said with a nudge of her head. “Now what is it you want?” she asked looking around.

“Isn’t it enough for a mother to want to look in on her only daughter once in a while?” Hild asked innocently.

“Since it’s you we’re talking about – no. You may have technically given birth to me - *though even that I’m still looking in to.*”

“That hurts,” Hild pouted doing her best to look sad. “And after I came all this way to give you a gift for the solstice.”

“Doubtful. Besides we don’t want anything you’ve got,” replied Takumi.

“Is that really how you feel my dearest? Because I was thinking of giving you my allocation at the pools of Arsemion.”

“Really?!” said Urd coming forward.

“Uh-huh.”

“Well I mean, why would you do that?”

“You mean beside the fact I’m *extraordinarily* generous?

Oh don’t know, I suppose I want you to be happy - though I’m sure you’ll turn that into some kind of crime against me as well,” she said putting her hands in her pockets as they began to stroll with her minions in tow down the colorful aisles of the market. “As for the pools themselves - well I’m afraid they don’t hold as much enchantment for me as they once did,” she shrugged.

*So the rumors are true*, thought Urd.

“It’s a trick. It’s got to be some kind of trick,” warned Takumi.

“Really? What kind of trick would that be?” Hild asked picking up a passion fruit, waving to the vendor before tossing it to one of her followers on the opposite aisle. “I require no trickery or help to take care of the two of you here if I wished. But as the

## Winter Solstice

solstice is supposed to be a time of peace among demons I thought it would be a nice gift. *No tricks*. I swear - by my own authority."

"Which means nothing," muttered Takumi.

"*It's alright*," assured Urd. "No self-respecting demon would commit such an act during the solstice. Besides if she swears it, it would be an insult to her own honor to break her word."

"*I couldn't have said it better myself*," Hild replied scooping up a coconut and pitching to a waiting demon neither of them had noticed. "You know well the beauty of the pools Urdy. It's up to you. *For one night only of course*. Use it or not as you see fit," she said taking a guava offered by one of the vendors.

Urd paused, looking wistfully over at the far side of the archipelago. "And you swear there's no unspoken trick, no harm done to either of us by accepting?"

"You have my solemn vow," Hild said raising her hand.

"In that case I accept, your generous gift," Urd replied bowing.

"Ah well, what can I do if I can't look out after my own daughter? Oh and Takumi dear, do be careful with that sun. You seem to be peeling a bit," she smiled.

"You can see under my shirt?"

"*I can see a lot of things*," she said waving to her daughter before disappearing into the crowd.

They stood together, side by side at the edge of the vendors.

"Okay she's gone. Now we can take off before they actually try to kill us."

"They're not going to kill us. It's their festival time, it would be too much work. And remember the agreement about no future interference with Bell and Keiichi that Hild had to make? Well we're covered in that."

"You know that?"

"Uh-huh."

"Like you knew *they* would be here?"

"I knew. So what?"

"I don't know, maybe tell me the next time we're dropping in on to a *demon-filled island*! And why are we accepting gifts from her. We can find our own place to take a bath on this island!"



## *Fallow*

“Well to be honest the parties are better. And as long as they leave us alone, who cares. Besides the pools of Arsemion are no common bath. And you heard her proclamation. Her gift comes with no strings attached.”

“I’m not sure that’s a *thing* in her world,” he muttered.

“Relax - have a papaya. We need to go on a long romantic walk before I lose you to the lagoon.”

The day was enjoyable enough, walking the dense jungle paths just the two of them, kissing behind the palms and generally enjoying themselves with Elegance keeping watch. However as evening approached Takumi was still having doubts about their sojourn across the bay. “I just don’t see why -.”

“Because you don’t know anything. Look this place is famous. Famous even among the gods! Do you know how many notable liaisons have happened here? How many deities have - enjoyed the pools?”

“Umm, they clean it occasionally right?”

“Ha, ha. Look there across the bay. You see that point out beyond the rest of the lights? That’s where we’re going.”

An hour later a skiff dropped them off at the shore and they began their climb up from the main road. “Nice and isolated. Looks like a good place for a double homicide.”

“Oh be quiet. Just let your eyes adjust to the darkness. Do you see it? The path?”

He leaned forward. He did detect something. A subtle glow winding its way up the side of the verdant volcanic mountain. And above them, effervescent fumes rising in the distance.

“I take it the uninvited don’t use this path?”

“The uninvited can’t see it,” she said leading the way. Several hundred feet up she finally put her hands over the edge. She turned back as he saw the soft features of her face looking down at him from above in the glow. “These are the pools,” she said disappearing over the top. “And you’ve never seen anything like them,” she echoed.

He followed her over the lip and took in her meaning. The ‘pools’ appeared to be a series of interconnecting domains, each of different size and depth flowing one into the other, drawing down and up at different levels, carved out of the rock

## *Winter Solstice*

either naturally or by some subtle craft he could not tell. In total he guessed its length covered some 50 meters or so, perhaps half that in wide. But these were simply details. The thing which really amazed him was its surface, every corner and curve, every wall and floor was smooth and yet not, polished but with a texture that reminded him of flowstone. The waters too seemed strange. The pools seemed to effervesce with a dim light that came and went in the clouds of rising moisture but he could not perceive their source. Yet it was the water itself which amazed him most of all. Its temperature seemed to be perfect, warmer or cooler, whatever he desired as he moved through the pools suffusing his body with a deeply satisfying feeling of relaxation. In fact, after shedding his clothes he lay in the waters for several minutes before remembering he was not there alone. “Urd? Urd?!” He wandered out to the outer edge of the pool, restrained in by a solid volcanic wall flowing as the rest, the mountain dropping away allowing him to see in spectacular fashion the bay with the lights of the town in the distance, its festival already underway. He pushed away from the wall swimming through the pools, returning to search for Urd through the labyrinth. “Hey you . . .”

He looked up seeing her now through the mist. He had of course always thought of her as beautiful. But somehow here in the pools, somehow she appeared even more beautiful, even more alluring, moving through the waters. She stood still, her hair hanging down loose to her waist, giving him a look that made her seem shy yet at the same time made him consider what men might do to give up their souls. No longer able to contain himself he dove under the water, rising beside her as she splashed around him. “You see what I mean?” she asked. “It’s incredible,” he agreed.

She sank down into the water to her shoulders warming herself, “Some famous couples have spent time here.”

“Really? Like who?”

“Well it’s said that Bell’s parents become a couple here.”

“You’re not saying that . . .”

“That’s the rumor.”

## *Fallow*

He laughed shaking his head. "Well I definitely see the party potential of this place.

"Did you see that bay?"

"I did, I was looking at it a minute ago," he said swimming close her, now definitely more interested in playing with her than searching the surrounding scenery. She reached out for his hands under the water, their fingers intertwining as he drew her to him. "*I love you*," Urd whispered with all sincerity putting her arms over his shoulders.

"Is everything okay Indigo?" he replied hugging her. "I mean seeing your mother today and all?"

"Yeah. Everything's okay," she nodded. They waded and swam together in the pools for the next hour, moving through warm waters to the more remote corners that felt very far away from the world they knew. Takumi leaned back on a shelf immersed in the water as Urd pushed up against him. Reaching up she picked fruit from a low-lying branch over the pools, tasting it as they looked up at the stars.

"Is this what it is was like when the world was young?" he asked moving his hands beneath the water enjoying himself amid the steam and the heady smell of the jungle.

"Who knows," replied Urd, dimly aware of music coming from across the bay. "Perhaps the world was never truly young, for there are always problems to solve. The best we can hope is to take momentary breaks from it."

Miles beyond them down in the town the festival was in full swing. Hild moved among the revelers, each giving her signs of friendship as she walked through the crowd in the nighttime air with her entourage amid the music. It must have gone on like that for almost an hour before there came a sudden loud bang.

The sound of the explosion roused the lovers from their idyll making their way to the outer wall. "What was that?"

"It sounded like it came from the town," Urd said searching the bay.

"Do they usually blow stuff up?" he asked.

## Winter Solstice

“I don’t remember them doing a lot of that, but then I was pretty young and into my own stuff,” she said folding her arms over the wall.

Groups of demons converged on Hild’s position from all sides. Yet by the time they arrived all seemed sorted. “No harm done,” she said waving them off easily as Mara and a number of other first-class demons appeared. They stood back socializing for a few moments before nodding and dispersing back into the crowd. But Mara noticed Hild’s key guardians did not seem nearly so pleasantly disposed. Marek’s eyes in particular scanned the tree line, and she saw Idunn moving from rooftop to rooftop. She watched them for another moment before being pulled back to the party by one of her drunken companions.

...

The next week passed blessedly for Urd and Takumi filled with long scenic walks, afternoon dives in the lagoon and romantic dinners spent under the stars; with a few interruptions from Urd’s demonic colleagues. Generally they seemed pleasant enough at least under the present circumstances, and from them Takumi learned many things about Urd’s past and childhood he did not know before. Despite the interruptions, he enjoyed seeing Urd’s mischievous smile as she relaxed among her childhood friends. Too quickly the idyllic days on the island passed and they soon found themselves back at Tariki Hongan Temple. Or at least Takumi did. Upon their return, Urd and Mara decided to go off into town for ‘supplies’, so that they might speak in detail about their recent adventures for the next few hours. And so it fell to Takumi to sort their gear out. Returning to the temple in the afternoon he saw a small woman approaching him on the road as though she had been waiting for an opportunity. He waved happily until she stepped forward chastising him for several minutes. Helplessly he looked on as she continued finally excusing himself.

“Yes, thank you, thank you,” he nodded, “- *old lady whose language I apparently do not speak very well*,” he murmured climbing the stairs. Reaching the top of the steps he did notice something, music (rather rhythmic music) coming from the

## *Fallow*

temple. "Is that what she was complaining about?" he approached the open doors cautiously, "Well let's see what the old - *Oh my god!*"

For a moment Takumi thought the heat had finally gotten to him. For it must be a mirage. He was sure he had never seen Belldandy like this before. With her back turned she continued working feverishly as her body (her hips at least anyway) swayed to the music as she polished the statues in what he could only assume were someone else's shorts. In his defense his mind simply *acknowledged* that her movements were not terribly dissimilar to aspects of pole dancing. So buried was she in her work that she did not hear him come up the steps, and he could not quite bring himself interrupt her. Behind her the music continued to play:

*The winds of fortune, don't blow the same,*

*She had to get out, and make a change,*

*She had a kid now, but much too young,*

*That baby's daddy's, out having fun - he says I'm on a roll . . .'*

All at once she swept up from under the railing jumping as she saw him standing behind her. They both stood awkwardly now staring at one another. "Um yeah Bell, sorry.

I just heard the music and came to see what was going on.

I wasn't just standing behind you or anything. In fact I think I only just got here! Did I mention I only just got here?"

"Oh. Well I'm giving the temple a good rubbing," she replied.

"Of course that's what you were doing. And there nothing wrong with that," he said to no one in particular.

"Are you alright Mr. Sato?" she asked leaning closer. "You look flushed."

"No I'm fine, I'm good. Just tired from the trip," he said looking to his left and right to see if he was being set up.

She smiled back at him politely, the kind of smile that made him feel weak. "You're probably wondering why I'm dressed like this. I didn't want to get my clothes soiled so I changed. These shorts, they don't fit very well," she admitted tugging them up once more.

*I did not just see her hipbones . . .*

"You see they're Keiichi's . . ."

"Uh-huh. Can't you *make* clothes?"

## Winter Solstice

“Well, I thought it would be more fun to wear his.”

“Yeah . . . *fun*,” he said trying to think of something to say.

“Sorry I’m kind of sweaty,” she said leaning closer. “It’s kind of hot out today.”

*Do not think about what she smells like . . .*

“I must be a bit dirty.

*Boy I hope she cannot read thoughts . . .*

She looked at him wrinkling her nose. “I’m wondering about something -.”

“Bell I have to grab my nuts!” he shouted suddenly.

They both stood silently as Takumi looked back horrified.

“I mean my nuts -. He stopped once more gathering himself.

“I mean, *I-have-to-go-get-some-parts-for-the-motorcycle*,” he said red-faced.

“Oh. Well if you see Keiichi can you tell him I’m looking for him?” she asked looking around.

“Will do,” he replied.

He had readied the bike and was preparing to leave when Keiichi came up the alley. “You’re back.”

“I am anyway. Urd’s still in town with Mara. Anybody’s guess what she’ll be like when she gets home.”

“But it went alright?”

“As normal as anything involving a goddess can be. The place turned out to be a kind of demon timeshare, but they left us alone. Oh and speaking of being left alone, *Belldandy wanted me to tell you she’s looking for you*.”

“Oh, okay,” he said with what Takumi sensed was the slightest twinge of fear in his eyes. Uh, Takumi?”

“Yessss?”

“Is she - worse than yesterday?”

“*I don’t know, I wasn’t here yesterday*,” he smiled evilly. “But if I were to guess I would say – *yeah*. She’s out in the temple you can’t miss her, she’s the one wearing cut-offs.”

Keiichi looked in the direction of the temple weakly. “Oh alright then.”

“Good luck Keiichi,” he said riding off in search of Urd.

## *Awakenings*

No! Don't wake me up. I'm still sleeping," Takumi replied rolling over. Indeed sleep was becoming hard to come by of late, what with the current spirit of enthusiasm pervading the temple, the seemingly unending Nekomi Tech parties celebrating Keiichi Morisato's miraculous recovery (even though it had now been 2 months), and Urd's arrival this morning in which she was anxious to discuss with him all the juiciest gossip from the winter solstice. Morning had now come yet she wanted something else from him!

"Go out and deal with Skuld. She's bothering me," Urd said.

"Skuld's back?"

"Yeah, she just got back from the big 'bike' trip."

"Don't give her a hard time about it. We've been away. You should see her as a loving sister."

"In other words: *can't you deal with her so I stay here asleep?*"

He shrugged.

"Well since you're intent on staying here *dear*, perhaps we can discuss why I'm sensing pictures of my sister dancing around half naked? Something you want to tell me?!"

He squinted back looking up. "That . . . whole day was very confusing to me! I didn't even know what I was looking at most of the time!" he protested. "Just go say hi to Skuld."

"I can't. I have an important meeting with Megumi."

"Meeting with Megumi? She's coming over?"

"Actually she never left last night."

Defeated Takumi wandered out into the hallway, stepping over several unconscious Nekomi members in the process. Peeking into the living room he spied Skuld sitting atop her gear bag.

"Finally!" she said seeing him.

"How was the big motor sports trip up north Skuld? Did everything go well?"

"Pretty well. Sentaro finished third and I think the Nekomi Tech members did pretty well in their event. It was nice to see Naru spend time in the forest."

## Awakenings

"You don't seem that excited."  
"There was this green-eyed girl that kept watching Sentaro."  
"I see. And how did he respond?"  
"He didn't have a lot of time to see her. Since she was standing by the river and got knocked over by a big wave there."  
"Skuld."  
"Hey, who knows how these things happen?"  
"Is he here now?"  
"He's coming tomorrow with Tamiya and some of the others."  
"How did you get back?"  
"I rode back with Megumi. I thought it looked cooler."  
"Great. I wish you wouldn't do that Skuld."  
"If I can handle the Wing I can ride on the back of a bike!"  
"I suppose. And your gear?"  
"Otaki took it in the car."  
"You made him drive back alone?"  
"No. He came back with that girl."  
"What girl? Otaki has a girl now?!"  
"Try to keep up old man. Why are you so surprised?"  
"*He does spend a lot of time with Tamiya,*" he muttered.  
"So you want to hear about how my and Urd's trip went?"  
"I have no particular need to hear about your guys perversion."  
"Hmm. Did you miss us Skuld?"  
"No."  
"Why are you bothering me then?"  
"Because there are things going on here!"  
"What kind of things? You mean the parties?"  
"No. Things!" she cried cryptically. "Like Big-sis only listens to about half of what I'm saying now! What's going on? It's crazy! Has the whole world gone mad? Is it a disease?!" she said frantically.  
"And all this has happened during the 10 days we were gone? What does Keiichi have to say about it?"  
"*Shoo you two, this is where our meeting is,*" Urd said moving them out into the hallway as she sat down with Megumi.  
Takumi frowned taking up his cup. "And where is Belldandy? *I hate it when you shrug like that!*" he called back to Urd.  
The door to Keiichi Morisato's room door slid open as Otaki's head appeared.



## *Fallow*

“Well that’s definitely not Morisato,” he said peering in to see a blushing girl inside. “Have you seen Keiichi?” he asked Otaki.

“Said he was going to make other arrangements last night,” Otaki replied as a form of explanation, careful not to say more in front of Skuld. “You check the garage to see if his bike is here?”

“Good idea,” Takumi replied departing with Skuld. “Hey did that girl in the room look like she was wearing a catsuit to you Skuld?”

“What?!”

“Never mind.”

A search of the garage found that Keiichi’s bike was still there. He turned around puzzled. “*Keiichi!*”

High in the loft at one corner of the main temple Keiichi stirred beside Belldandy. “Do you think we should deal with that?” Belldandy shook her head cuddling closer under the blanket.

...

“You see what I mean?!” continued Skuld.

“They must have gone out for a walk before breakfast,”

Takumi replied returning inside. From the hallway he saw Urd and Megumi excitedly punching the air in the living room as they watched TV. “Urd what the hell are you watching!”

“It’s a prototype of our new show. You’ve heard of Hello Kitty haven’t you?”

“Umm yeah,” he said watching the screen with growing dread as at that moment several innocent characters were splashed with viscera. “Seriously, what the hell is this?!”

I told you, our new show - *Hello GUNDAM Kitty*. It’s good isn’t it?” she said biting into a cookie.

He looked back at her in horror. “Urd this is - *just not right*.”

“Oh fine. I’ve already got an idea for spin-offs.”

“*Spin-offs?* I’m afraid to even –.”

“*Full Metal Kitty!*”

“I really don’t think we need –.”

“*Samurai Champloo Kitty!*”

“Okay now this is just getting –.”

“*Kiddy Grade Kitty!*”

“I’m going now Urd –.”

## *Awakenings*

“No *listen*,” she said grabbing him. “Megumi and some of the Auto Club are already helping me with merchandising. See?” she said holding up several questionable fanservice drawings depicting her creations.

“That is just - wrong on so many levels,” he said looking back. “Each team member has a special power,” she continued, pushing the small stuffed cat toy into his face clawing the air ferociously. Takumi shook his head.

“No? Then what about Love Hina Kitty?!”

“Isn’t that what we’ve already got going on around here?” he murmured. “Look, aside from the copyright lawsuits I see in your future - that one there is obviously just Keiichi and Belldandy drawn as cat Bond characters.

“No it’s not!”

“It’s them with eyepatches!” Just then he looked outside noticing the real Keiichi and Belldandy beyond the window sneaking toward the back of the house. Urd leaned beside him raising an eyebrow. “Hey, nice hair Bell! What did you just -,” he coughed as Urd jabbed him in the ribs. “I’m kidding!” He turned around to catch Skuld’s frowning. “Yeah that confuses me too!” he nodded. His mind would frequently go back to those winter days in the years to come. The temple. Its majesty among the pines and snow. But most of all how they were all together. How that winter the house seemed to become a perfect place for members of the Auto Club to read, or chat, or nap beside the kotatsu. Dinners together and talks late into the night. Perhaps it was the weather, perhaps their recent shared experience over Keiichi that drew everyone together. As January gave way to February Keiichi began work on a new bike to replace that which had been lost. Takumi assumed it was in part to help build up his strength, but as time wore on he became less sure. He opened the garage one morning to find him hard at work. “Something on your mind chief?” he asked quietly sitting down beside him.

“No, nothing.”

“You sure?” he said looking around. “You went through a lot.”

“It’s not that. It’s just – well, it’s *Belldandy*,” he said assembling the parts.

“If it’s Belldandy how big a problem could it be?”

## *Fallow*

He pulled out a feather holding it up.

“Hmm don’t know what to tell you. Maybe she’s molting?”

“Oh be quiet.”

“Look women are complicated. You think everything between me and Urd is always perfect? Believe me, we’ve got our issues.”

“Like what?”

Like – uh never mind,” he said beginning to rock.

“Tell me. I told you.”

He continued rocking. “Well like, you know when the two of you are together and things are about to come to a *conclusion*?”

“I suppose,” he said not looking up.

“Well for us that always happens at the same time.”

He nodded waiting for the rest.

“That’s it,” Takumi replied tersely.

“That’s your problem?” Keiichi turned his attention to the clutch irritated. “Sounds terrible. I can’t imagine how you put up with it. But tell me, are you complaining - or bragging?!”

He resisted the urge to choke him. “Don’t you get it? *Every time*! Every time we’re together things conclude at exactly the same moment. You see what I’m getting at?” he muttered looking around hoping further explanation was unnecessary.

He began to understand. “I see - you think Urd is fak-.”

“Did I say that?! Did I say anything like that!” he said glancing around. “I mean, that couldn’t be the problem – not for somebody like me,” he said defensively. “But um, I mean just in case - you haven’t heard anything have you?” Seeing only a blank expression in his face he continued, “I just wondered if, you know - *something* might need to be worked on . . . or something,” he said attempting to shrug nonchalantly.

“If you’re worried why don’t you just ask her?”

“Ask? We’ve been together a while now. How exactly am I going to bring it up at this point?!”

“Maybe you should have asked earlier. Belldandy and I can ask each other anything.”

“Oh you’re just full of good ideas today aren’t you Morisato,” he grumbled. “Before was – well you know there’s no manual that explains this stuff!” he complained.

## Awakenings

"Actually there might be," Keiichi mused, remembering a book Urd had once showed him - *several times*.

"*Heh, heh* yeah I think I've seen that book," Takumi chuckled.

"But it's all written in some kind of hieroglyphics I can't make heads or tails of. And the illustrations are all rather *technical* in nature, not very focused on *social customs* if you know what I mean. Which reminds me, do goddesses have some kind of fascination with rope?"

"I think what you were seeing are symbolic strings of characters in their language," replied Keiichi.

"Really? Oh thank goodness! Because I was beginning to think - never mind."

In any fair assessment of what subsequently occurred, it's important to point out that Keiichi was kindhearted and really did want to help if he could. After all it's what got him here. So he couldn't be entirely blamed for trying to clear things up.

"*Takumi I need to talk to you!*" he said a few days later sneaking out through Skuld's shoji door.

"In a minute," he replied continuing to stack the wood.

"I'm not sure we have -."

"Dinner!" Urd shouted suddenly appearing at the doorway.

Once inside, Takumi was surprised to find the food already laid out. "Bell won't be back for a while so I was told to feed you - *something*," she said sitting down. "Sit," she said directing the two of them beside her.

*Is that fear I see in Keiichi's eyes? What would he be afraid of?* he thought. "Urd is everything okay?" he asked taking a seat.

"Of course! Why wouldn't it be?" she replied biting into a biscuit as though snapping bone. She looked over seeing Keiichi trying to signal him. "You have something to tell us Keiichi?"

"*Uh, no*," he replied quietly.

"Funny, you always seem so talkative," she said folding her arms. "Did everyone have a nice day?"

"I think I did," Takumi replied nervously. "I mean the -."

"*Fascinating*. Keiichi tell me, if you had a problem of oh say a *personal* nature regarding your partner would you go and talk

## *Fallow*

to them, you know like *a man* would, or would you go talk to *a complete stranger about your SEX LIFE?!*" she shouted.

Takumi's eyes shot open looking at Morisato, "*Keiichi!*"

"Technically I'm not a stranger," he said quickly.

"This is all theoretical right?" Takumi asked.

"*Did you say something Tai?!*"

"Um - just about how lovely you look tonight . . . *dearest.*"

"*Come here!*" she shouted jumping at him.

"*Traitor!*" Takumi cried scrambling for the door as she leapt over the table after him. Several bolts of smoke and flame passed across the courtyard before she had him.

"Now what do you have to say for yourself?!" she said pouncing on him.

"Well you see, I was worried because things are soooo perfect between us. Too perfect. It's a sickness really."

"God are all men as dumb as you?"

"Can't really help you with that one . . ."

"I pity Bell if that's true. You have no idea what makes a goddess tick do you?"

"In my defense Keiichi and I have determined there is no manual available. We've looked on the internet and everything."

"Ugh! Look you, when a goddess is with - well the person they are *with*, they have a certain *response* upon seeing that person pushed to physical states of . . .," she began to shiver thinking about it.

"So it's just a weird goddess kink?" he replied.

"No it's - oh just be quiet," she said kissing him.

Snow fell several times over the next month but it did nothing to cool the mood at the temple. Keiichi now fully recovered was helped daily by members of the auto club and Megumi, who brought him in various bits of needed parts, Skuld and Sentaro seemed sufficiently preoccupied with their own projects, Urd and Takumi tried to stay out of everyone's way; and Bell acted as a house mother to it all. If anything the cold weather seemed to bring them all together. One day in March after Chihiro dropped off a crankshaft and cylinder heads to the temple the skies cleared and the winds turned fair as the group

## *Awakenings*

gathered to play. Urd stood on the porch looking on pulling the shawl around herself against the cool air. She stood by the column taking it all in watching the scene. She felt happy if a bit lightheaded. Putting her hand out on the pillar she felt herself trembling. Steadying herself she felt suddenly weak, kneeling before collapsing on the ground. Beyond her in the yard Takumi whooped as he ducked past Sentaro into the end zone. "Ha! Not so fast now eh deer boy!" he gloated. "Did you see that Urd?" he said looking back at the house. "Looks like the old man still – Urd? *URD!*" he shouted running to her followed by the others.

...

Takumi pulled his knees under himself looking anxiously at the doorway as two more goddesses appeared rushing into the house. "There goes some more!" he complained. "I think I recognized that last one," he said.

"It's Peorth," Keiichi replied.

"Why do more people keep coming!"

"I don't know," Keiichi said for perhaps the fifth time.

"It's been forever! She was fine this morning!" he continued.

"It's been 40 minutes," he said trying to calm him.

Takumi looked around the courtyard silently for several minutes. "You ever notice how we seem to be out here a lot?" he said impatiently.

Keiichi muttered something under his breath.

"You ever think about putting a hammock out here or something Keiichi?"

"You know this isn't our house, right?" he replied.

Inside Belldandy continued to welcome their new visitors.

"We're here Bell," said Peorth coming in.

"Thank you for coming on short notice."

"It's fine. What this all about?"

"It's Urd. She collapsed suddenly a little while ago. We've been trying to ascertain her condition but I'm still not sure. Your mother was a healer so I wanted to ask you your thoughts about the following: I am wondering if it's possible - well if her condition could be related to a secondary emergence phenomenon."

## *Fallow*

“What?! Is that even possible?”

“Well it is Urd we’re talking about here.”

“I see your point,” she said kneeling down.

Outside Takumi had taken to alternating between pacing and questioning Keiichi about the details of goddess medicine. “But don’t they know everything?!”

“I’m sure they’re doing everything in their -.” At that moment Peorth appeared at the doorway. They looked up expectantly.

“Mr. Sato you can -.” He was gone, past her without another word, almost colliding with Belldandy in the hallway.

“How is she Bell? Is she alright?”

“She’s resting,” replied Belldandy.

“But she’s alright, right?” he said searching her eyes.

“You - should speak to her about it.”

His heart pounded as he forced a smile moving off down the hallway until he reached the entrance to her room. “Urd?” he called gently. Propped up on the futon she looked over at him tentatively. “*Hiya.*”

He bowed low taking her up in his arms, pushing his head past hers so she would not see him holding his tears. “Indigo be honest with me. *Are you dying?*” he asked not wanting to know the answer.

“What? Of course not!” she said shaking her head, hugging him back. For several long moments he said nothing simply hugging her trying to slow his heart. When at last he brought his head up meeting her eyes she smiled looking away.

“You’re okay then?”

“Yeah.”

“And nothing’s wrong?” he asked.

Again she smiled looking away. “Well it’s just that *some people* think we may need to discuss our current arrangement,” she said quietly.

“Oh?” he said feeling his heart beginning to pound once more.

“Yes. You see the prevailing opinion seems to be that all of this may be linked to aspects of secondary emergence.”

“Uh-huh,” he replied, nodding at her the way he always did when he had no idea what she was talking about.

“I mean – they think there may be a sprite in our future.”

## Awakenings

Finally the source of his concern a name; a focus. “A *sprite*? What is that? Can it be fought?! Can it be killed?!” he demanded.

“GAAA! NO! It’s - you know, *little*, looks like us. You hold it in your arms?” she imitated, rocking.

Takumi’s motion ceased, his eyes searching hers. “You mean like - a *baby*?!”

“Ah, *baby* - that’s the human word for it!” she said snapping her fingers.

He looked around lowering his voice. “Urd, I thought you said we, *you know*, *didn’t have to worry about those things*?!”

She blushed looking a bit embarrassed. Her eyebrow began to twitch. “Well yes, *but now that I think about it* -.”

“*NOW* - that you think about it?!” You mean after the - and then the - and when we - *Now that you think about it*?!”

“Well you have to understand, this process for a goddess is complex. It involves the whole community.”

“*The whole community*?!”

“Yes, you see for successful conception to occur – it requires the goddesses wishes to align with that of the majority.”

“*They vote*?!”

“Eh sort of. And you see because it’s rare for *more than fifty percent* of the entire community to favor a given union, offspring in the heavens are a rather infrequent event.”

“I’d always wondered why there weren’t more.”

She nodded. “As such *multiple* offspring in the same family are an even more uncommon event. Perhaps no more than twenty percent of unions now have siblings like Belldandy and Skuld.”

“And their parents weren’t exactly unknown.”

“Exactly.”

“So you’re telling me that more than half of *everyone in the heavens* wants us to have a child?! I had no idea we were so popular. I didn’t think half the people in the heavens even knew our names!”

“I’m pretty the sure folks up there know my name alright. But I don’t think that’s what’s going on.”

“Meaning?”

“Well . . . you know I’m half demon right?”

His eyes narrowed.



## Fallow

"And you can imagine that the demon realm's system of voting isn't exactly -."

"Hild."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure she can influence all elements under her control."

"But that would still only give her 50% influence over one parent."

"That's pretty much what I thought," she said biting her lip.

"But, we may not have correctly considered *your* constituency.

"Which means?"

"Well technically you were restored to your current state using her power."

His face grew pale. "You mean Hild -!!"

"I believe so," she nodded.

"*That's why she gave us the pools!*"

"The thought has occurred to me."

"That witch! *Of all the ---!*"

Urd turned to the side putting her head down. She grew quiet.

"Well, that's what I've been thinking anyway. But . . . there's no need to worry. I mean, parents . . . they do have the ultimate say in all this and . . . *well it's - it's not for us . . .*" she said seeing her small fingers curling around one another. He followed the wavering tone of her voice; realizing now how his outburst must have sounded. *No. She think's -. But what to do now?* He thought quickly bending low, beginning to chuckle - then laugh. Her eyes looked over at him.

"Can you believe it Urd?!" he howled cocking his head.

"It's finally happened! *One of the old hag's tricks has finally backfired on her! And in so doing has brought us more happiness than we possibly dared dream!!!* Can you believe it?!" he shouted happily. From the corner of his eye he could see his words were beginning to have the desired effect. Under her tresses he saw her eyes beginning to look back hopefully. He thought she had never looked more beautiful.

"Do you . . . *really think so?*" she asked nervously.

"Of course! Isn't it fantastic!" he cried hugging her to allay her fears. "I mean, I don't want to speak for you of course but -," *yes she is definitely beginning look better*, he thought.

## Awakenings

“Well . . . I guess maybe,” she said twirling her fingers around her hair trying to hold back any hint of excitement.

“Are you kidding me?! Oh Indigo it’s – well it’s so much more than I ever dreamed,” he said excitedly.

Only now did any hint of excitement begin to show in her.

“Well I guess it’s *a little* exciting,” she said allowing a few nervous tears to fall.

“What’s this?” he said wiping her tears.

“I just – *I didn’t know how you would feel*,” she said letting her them fall more feely now.

“Oh you knew!” he replied kissing her.

And so for the next several hours the two huddled together in Urd’s small room, not worrying about the world, or the Heavens, or the Demon Realm, allowing themselves to dream the dreams that all expectant parents do.

“This’ll be great,” Takumi said pulling the blankets around them. “I can teach him how to shoot, how to fight, how to -.” You know it’s possible it will be a girl right Tai?”

“Oh yeah, but as you say we never talked about it but it’s going to be a boy.”

“How do you know that exactly?” she said putting her arms defensively around her stomach.

“Well, you see I didn’t think we needed to have this talk so I didn’t tell you; but in my family it’s all boys.”

“Well since we’re talking about thing I need to tell you - we’re going to have to involve Belldandy in this.”

“Certainly. But why?”

“Well in the first place, the odds of Belldandy and Keiichi ever having a child of their own are not great - or even being formally wed for that matter.”

“I don’t really think the Heavens have much control over that but I defer to your greater expertise on the matter. Basically you’re saying you don’t think they’ll ever be fully accepted?”

“It’s unlikely.”

“And that’s it?”

“Well, I don’t really know how to say this, but when it comes to baby *anything’s* – Belldandy’s got a bit of a problem.” He smiled putting his hands behind his head. “No I’m serious, there’ve been incidents:”

## *Fallow*

*The Gardens of Fensalir – Belldandy, age 4:*

“I said *one* Belldandy – ONE! *Odin she’s making a run for it!*”

“*Come on!*” Belldandy shouted leading the way, running with multiple peregrine chicks in hot pursuit down the hill, two jumping onto her shoulders.

“Here’s another one,” Freya said catching her. “Why are they in your jacket?!”

“*They got tired on the way here,*” complained Belldandy.

Urd shuddered remembering the tale. “There are wild falcons living around Fensalir to this day!”

*The Folkvang – Belldandy, age 7:*

“They followed me!”

“Then why are they in your coat Verandi?”

“They were cold Mom! They’re practically frozen! You see? All these little kittens are shivering!”

Freya put a hand inside her coat, “They’re purring Belldandy!”

*Nekomi - Belldandy age 22:*

“I don’t even want to tell you what happened when we found out that the hospital kept all the babies grouped together in one place!” She still remembered her sister’s frenzied face pressed comically against the glass, eyes wide, fingers unconsciously squeezing at either side.

“Bell, you know these babies aren’t for our use?” Urd said tugging her.

“But, just some, *need hugging,*” she said as they slowly pulled her away.

The next day at breakfast Urd and Takumi informed everyone about the coming event and predictably there was much excitement from almost everyone gathered - *almost* everyone.

“How could this have happened!” Skuld demanded for perhaps the third time that morning.

“Well sometimes when a man and woman love each other very much, they do certain favors for each other -,” Urd began.

“Augh! I don’t want to hear your perverted explanations!

AAAH! Now I’ve got those pictures in my head!

## Awakenings

I thought you were a responsible adult!" she said pointing an accusatory finger at Takumi.

"I'm really not -," he admitted, shaking his head as disappointed as she.

"What kind of precedent does that set around here?!"

"Skuld, I think that horse has already -," Urd began before Takumi stopped her. She'd had enough shocks for one day.

"But Skuld don't you see, it means you will have -," Belldandy paused doing the mental calculation, "a niece or nephew."

"You mean we're going to have to keep it? That's even worse! Isn't here a place where unwed tramps like Urd can give up their kids?"

"We're going to go the traditional route and keep it," Takumi said placing a hand over Urd's mouth blocking her likely obscene response.

"They had a presentation ceremony," Belldandy reminded her.

"Yeah but even you and Keiichi – *oh I can just see where this conversation is going!*" she fumed rushing out of the house.

"Good that'll keep the numbers balanced," called Urd.

Belldandy frowned.

"No think about it, her room would make a good nursery. Or at least a place to keep dirty diapers."

Takumi left the sisters to their debate, following Skuld outside but to no avail. After searching the bell tower, the stairs, and the top of the wall he found Keiichi, Tamiya and Otaki gathered in the back. "Keiichi did you see Skuld?"

"She just took off . . . *on Banpei*," he whispered.

"Man, I wish there was a way we could take her keys to that."

"Tell me about it." He watched Takumi sit down nervously at the edge of the group trying to fit in. "So - at least you know."

"Seems so," nodded Takumi. "Urd says Belldandy's going to go nuts about it so . . . be prepared."

"You and Urd huh? That's heavy," Otaki mused.

"Yeah it's . . . it's heavy," he agreed. "Hey Otaki, who was that girl I saw you with?"

"If you want advice come to us any time," interjected Tamiya.

"I know all about how to handle difficult women."

"Yeah, I heard your typical play is to hide from them in trash cans," Takumi replied.

## *Fallow*

The senior auto club member shook his head, “You’ve got yourself some inaccurate information there. It was a trash *receptacle*,” he said smiling.

Sentaro pushed the bike up the riverbank, surprised to find Skuld sitting against the far end of the shed wall. “What are you doing here? I haven’t seen you since the competition.”

“Why, were you expecting someone else? Someone with *green eyes*?!”

“That . . . she’s just a girl Skuld.”

“We’ll I’m just a girl too. . .”

“No, there aren’t any girls like you.” They were young, from different places and it wasn’t always easy to communicate. But sometimes his offhand words struck just the right note - made her feel as though everything in her world was okay.

“Why are you here? Is everything alright?”

“I just had to get out. Everything’s crazy at my house now.”

“I thought you said things would settle down when your older sister came back.”

“Well I was wrong OK! It’s only gotten crazier. My older sister says she’s going to have a baby! Who knows what will happen? I tell you, it’s a crazy world Sentaro!”

“Geez,” he said sitting down beside her producing a large bag of Pocky. “Here - it’s wine flavored.”

“Classy,” Skuld replied helping herself to one as they sat together against the rising sun.

## Visitors

When Takumi returned inside with the others he spied Urd surrounded by Belldandy, Hasegawa and Megumi in the living room pouring over magazines. Actually trapped in the living room might have been a better description. Though his first instinct was to flee he paused seeing the stress on her face. “What is it Urd?”

She stepped between them, “Tai, it seems babies require a lot of gear to keep them going, and have almost unlimited outfits they can wear,” she mused hesitantly.

“They don’t *need* it. You can just let them wander around in the ocean.”

“Okay, we really don’t have time to get in to your screwed up childhood right now. And that’s just the start of it. I mean where will we live?”

“Well, we can go to the residence.”

“And what is the school system like in that abandoned area?”

“Okay yeah I see your point. But look the seals will probably teach them everything they need to know. And they’re a bargain in terms of babysitting.”

“Ha, ha. I just mean we don’t want our offspring growing up like - *some people*,” she said as Skuld poked her head out.

“We’ll figure something out . . .”

That evening Urd settled back in the bath with Belldandy.

“Bell, I just don’t want to hear any more!” she sighed.

“How could you not want to hear more?” Belldandy replied thinking about all the ways the baby’s things could be configured. “What is it? What’s bothering you?”

“I just . . . Bell be honest with me. What kind of mother do you think I’ll be?”

“A *good one*,” she encouraged.

“Really? I mean look at the history. I’m not exactly the maternal type, and my mother – well we both know she’s not

## *Fallow*

going to win a prize in that department anytime soon. And Tai and I? We don't exactly scream parents of the year."

"There's more than one way to be a good parent."

"*Says the perfect parent,*" muttered Urd.

"You really think so?" replied Bell lost in her own fantasies.

Urd sank lower in the tub. "There's just . . . *it's a lot.*"

"You only feel uncertain because you haven't tried it yet. It will all look better tomorrow."

"Yeah, tomorrow," Urd sighed.

Tomorrow indeed came as Takumi awoke, observing shuffling in Urd's closet. Peering over the covers he saw a small girl turn and look back at him. "Uh, who are you?"

The girl frowned saying nothing.

"Belldandy, we've got a visitor here!" he called.

The door slid opened as Belldandy appeared.

"Do you know who this is?!"

"Well yes it's umm - Urd," she replied.

"What?!" he looked at her more closely. The girl reached up squeezing his nose. "Quit screwing around Urd!" he said as she jumped up running off down the hallway.

"Is it dangerous to . . . well *you know?*"

"I don't think so," replied Belldandy.

"But why is it happening? Is this a goddess thing?!"

"No. I think she's trying to work through her feelings about her childhood."

"Childhood?" He went outside to find her dangling from a tree.

"Doesn't she know that any childhood will be very different from hers?" He walked up unceremoniously blowing on Urd's stomach, causing her to laugh letting go from the branch. He caught her as she fell throwing her over his shoulder. "Well, you're a lot easier to carry in this mode," he said walking back to the house. At the doorway Keiichi yawned before unexpectedly looking directly into Urd's eyes.

"Oh man, not again," he said as Urd reached out her hands to play with his face.

"What do you mean? She's done this before? You were pregnant before?!"

## Visitors

*"Stop it,"* she said slapping his head squirming out of his grip, running outside once more. Takumi spent the better part of the morning searching the grounds, asking the Nekomi Tech members if they had seen a young girl running around before finally spotting her bouncing on her futon.

*"Hey!"* she shouted putting her hair up comically, trying to drape the tee-shirt around her sexily. *"I'm cold. I feel the need for cuddling,"* she pouted looking back at him innocently.

*"C'mere,"* she said encouraging him.

He leaned down her. *"Look I'm going to be honest with you Indigo, I'm not completely comfortable with –."*

*"YAA!"* she shouted jumping on him, riding him like a horse.

*"Giddyap!"*

*"What?"*

*"Go horsey go!"* she yelled slapping his behind.

*"Urd, I'm really not happy about this,"* he said as she drew a towel down around his mouth, gagging him using it as a bridle.

*"MPPPTT!"*

*"Go you lazy horsey, go!"*

*"Urd I'm getting upset -,"* he warned in a muffled voice.

She led him around the bed kicking her heels into his side. *"I'm an excellent rider,"* she commented.

*"Urd, I'm getting pissed off,"* he said starting to buck.

*"Whoa, whoa, he's a jumper, he's a jumper!"* she cried having far too much fun to pay him any mind. *"Yeeha!"* she shouted.

*"That's it!"* he said bucking to throw her off. She flipped over landing on the futon. *"Now I've got you, you little brat"* he said pinning her to the bed. Just then a noise caught his attention behind him. He looked up to see a horrified Hasegawa staring back at him blankly from the doorway. *"Uh, this isn't what it looks like, there's nothing weird going on or anything,"* he said trying to calm her.

*"Yeah I'm just here because this guy said he had candy",* Urd replied helpfully.

He looked at her murderously slowly getting up off the bed.

*"No, no, she's just -,"* he replied creeping Hasegawa but she was gone, running down the hallway.

*"Just here for the candy!"* he said turning on Urd as she smiled.



## Fallow

“Oh relax. What’s the worst she could think?”

“That I bring little girls in here for candy!” he shouted.

“Well sure if you say it that way it sounds bad,” she agreed.

“Remember what you told me you used to do to Skuld? Well it’s *your* bath time now lady,” he said tickling her.

“Ah Tai stop, I can’t breathe,” she cried laughing until she collapsed. He was about to move her when he saw Hasegawa once more in the doorway, mustering her courage to return with Megumi. “I’m telling you he –,” they both gasped at seeing him. “*Did you just knock that girl out? Is – is that part of it?!*” Hasegawa whispered to him.

“It’s not part of anything!” he cried in frustration. “She’s just – **BELLDANDY!**” he shouted.

“Well at least it all worked out,” Urd recounted laying on the couch now at her normal size.

“*Worked out?*” Takumi huffed putting down the plates.

“You’re just lucky Belldandy was so efficient at modifying their memories. Otherwise you would have been carted off t-,” but he stopped sensing something in the trees outside. “I think we have a visitor,” he said.

“*We do,*” Urd replied. “I was hoping you wouldn’t notice as I’m in enough hot water already,” she said going outside.

Up in the trees he saw their guest, “So I see you’re still here mongrel,” said the voice from the courtyard.

“*Of course,*” Takumi replied lifting his head. “Of course it’s time for this little idiot to show up. You know what I think *every* time I see you? *He does have eyes, doesn’t he?* I mean *my god*, how does a man, I mean any *real* man, knowingly leave such a woman? It never fails to astound me. But then, she is a warrior. I’m sure that was intimidating in *many* ways for you,” he observed pleasantly, closing his fists behind him. “Of course it’s natural for *you* to think in such primitive terms,” Troubadour said, plucking a sharp note on his harp. “A creature like you could not hope to understand our relationship. For our love was -.”

“Trust me it wasn’t that epic,” interjected Urd. “More like a short story.”

“Yeah from what I heard a *very* short story,” Takumi smirked.

## Visitors

“That’s not what she means!” cried Troubadour.

“Goodness you seem upset. Must be closer to the truth than I thought,” observed Takumi.

“There’s no need to be impolite,” urged Urd.

“If mister *one minute* wants polite, he should go elsewhere,” said Takumi.

“You know that she’s just trying to look graceful in front of you, right mongrel? But the truth is our love was one for the ages,” he said leaning back against the tree.

“When I was 16 maybe. But time’s shown me there’s a lot more to the world, things you can’t imagine.”

“Perhaps you could guide me then?”

“Is Belldandy’s rule about *no killing* on temple grounds a firm rule - or just a guideline?” Takumi asked stepping forward.

“C’mon now there’s no need for that. After all we’re glad you dropped by, aren’t we Tai?” He huffed in response.

“It gives us a chance to tell you the news. It seems we’re going to be blessed with a sprite!”

“WHAT?! How is that possible?!”

“That answers a couple of questions for me,” muttered Takumi.

“Like why I’m standing here and you’re not.”

“Are you kidding me?! Urd, if you were so desperate for an offspring I would have gladly assisted you.”

But Troubadour had made the unfortunate error of taking his eyes off his rival. Who was now behind him. “*I can see you’re real purpose in coming here today was to get very seriously injured,*” he said squeezing Troubadour’s throat causing his eyes to bulge comically.

“Tai, what did I just say about being polite?! Let him go.”

It took several further threats and bribes to actually make him let go, but when he did there was no mistaking the look in his eyes, “You know someday she won’t be here to save you,” he muttered. “-And on that day, you and your harp are going to have a very uncomfortable music lesson.”

“-And perhaps scaly insects will begin to erupt from your skin,” replied Troubadour.

“How exactly is that going to happen?” he questioned. “I mean with no arms - *or head?*” he said pinning him to the tree.

## *Fallow*

“Okay boys, everyone’s had enough testosterone for one day,” Urd said pulling Takumi by the ear.

“Ouchy!”

“Don’t give me that. Get in there!” she said.

Time flew over the next several months as the new and growing responsibilities kept pace with Urd’s stomach. The temple saw more and more ‘exciting’ shopping trips to all manner of stores as Belldandy dragged Urd from one spot to another searching for ‘much needed’ items. The new parents found themselves increasingly confused but Bell seemed to be on top of it all. However, beyond the walls of the temple the Nekomi Tech auto club members were far from the only eyes watching the situation . . .

It was well after midnight when the Lord of all Demonkind received the summons, descending the stairs to the main level of her citadel. “*This had better be important,*” she said entering the walled outer foyer holding her primary detachment. The guards knew well the beautiful bougainvillea gracing the walls of her Spanish style villa were far more than they appeared and gave them a respectable distance. She opened the door in her dressing gown coming into the torchlight of the waiting assembly in the outer portico.

“Sorry to interrupt. But you told us to keep you informed of any - *unusual* developments regarding the situation on Terran,” the leader said addressing her.

“-And?”

He sighed as several of guards moved to one side revealing the distraught form of Takumi, crouching between two guards wrapped in a black cloak. Her eyes moved to the leader giving him a quizzical look.

“Yeah well. . . we caught this guy at one of the outer gates, demanding to become a member of our guard.”

Hild rubbed her hands to her forehead tiredly. “*I see.* Well I suppose that constitutes a development. What’s this all about Takumi?” she asked folding her arms.

“I urgently request you take me on in the demon realm!” he replied frantically.

## Visitors

"And why would we, or you, want to do that?" she asked scanning him for traces of alcohol.

"Because I'm a monster!" he shouted rather melodramatically.

"I'm not fit to be around normal people!"

"Yeah well that's a *um* . . . kind of relative term around here," she said surveying the guards as she pulled him in.

"You see that guy?"

"Yeah?" Takumi said observing the monstrous guard.

"*Urtog*, what did you have for breakfast today?"

"*Squirrel*," he replied without hesitation.

"Okay that's a *little* weird but -,"

She waved for silence. "Why exactly?"

"Guy had it coming, cut me off on the way to work."

"Yeah I see your point. Might not want to make that guy the crossing guard but -."

"*Follow*," she said dismissing the guards as she retreated inside. "Tell me exactly what you think makes you a monster?" she asked ascending the stairs.

"*A horrible nightmare!*"

She turned eyeing him. "You're a monster because you had a bad dream?"

"You don't understand. It was awful. There was this cat - *being slowly cooked alive!* What kind of person thinks that!?"

"Some say it brings out the fear flavor," Hild shrugged.

"This isn't funny! I have no right to be a parent!"

"Hmm. Let me ask you - was this cat young or old?"

"*What difference does that make?!"*

"Humor me."

"Old. It was just some scruffy old cat. But that doesn't mean its life was any less worthwhile!" he said close to tears.

"Uh-huh. And you watched this cat being cooked?"

"Yes. Don't you see? *I'm sick!*"

"And there was nothing you could do to stop it?"

"I don't know."

She laughed at his stupidity. "Takumi. You really have *no idea* of the meaning of your dream?"

He looked back at her blankly.

"Takumi - *you* are the cat."

"WHAT?!"

## Fallow

“Think about it. *You’re* the cat being cooked. You didn’t kill the cat. You felt sympathy for it. That scruffy old cat slowly getting the heat turned up on it.”

“What are you talking about?!”

“Takumi isn’t it possible you’re just *a little* concerned about becoming the parent of a supernatural being? Concerned you might not measure up? ”

He slowed considered her words. “You really think that’s it?”

“Yes.”

“I, well . . . How did you know?!”

“Because I am the Lord of all Demonkind. *I know all.*”

He eyed her suspiciously. “How did you really know Hild?”

“Odin did the same thing when I was pregnant with Urd.”

Something resembling color began to creep back into his face.

“What?!”

She nodded recalling the memory. “Sleip and I caught up with him on the road out of Sessmumiir muttering something about joining the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps!” she laughed.

“That only means we should *both* be whipped!”

“Perhaps, but I suspect you’ve suffered enough for one night.”

“How did *he* get over it?”

“Well, we talked a bit about what he’d be gaining and losing by embarking on the endeavor. At some point I may have pointed to my stomach saying, ‘*you need to be at least as committed to this project as I am!*’ Also may have helped that my father was a god of war. In any case trust me, you don’t want to miss out on what’s coming. Even if you don’t do it perfectly.”

He looked at her standing there in the moonlight, wondering if he was seeing something in her for the first time. There were times she could be so like Urd. He steadied himself. “Thank you Lady Hild (*Now there’s a phrase I never thought I’d say*). ”

“How can I repay you?” he said in all seriousness.

“Be a good father Takumi. Better than the one you are now.

And get out of here.” Once the escort had taken him, Hild picked up the phone, “Hello Urdy how are you? Oh no reason, I just thought I’d call you and see how things were on your end. . . .”

“*I think I know where he is -*,” Urd muttered putting down the phone as Belldandy stood beside her in slippers.

## Visitors

On his return Takumi seemed to put any doubts behind him over his role in the coming arrival. If Urd had any in him she never spoke it. For these were the days of quiet contemplation, a time of preparation during those calm days of spring. For the Morisato household; and the Auto Club. Today they had all come to the temple following cherry blossom viewing, gathering together in the tearoom to play a board game.

"I'm not sure we're playing this right," remarked Keiichi.

"Of course we are! My armies have already sacked 7 small villages and people are fleeing at their highest levels yet," proclaimed Urd.

"I don't think this game *has* armies. Oh and those people that are fleeing are your own townspeople."

"Hmm, that goes a long way towards explaining my low ruler-popularity ratings. But my country isn't the only one that's weird. What's going on over there?" she said pointing to Otaki's section of the board. "Why do your towns have such a large fashion industry?"

"Uh, just making certain kinds of costumes," he replied.

"And this one over here is just making auto parts."

"What's wrong with that?" replied Tamiya.

"The game is set in the Middle Ages. But actually I'm more worried about the country to my West," Urd said glancing at Skuld. "This chain of bridges -?"

"They're toll booths. I'm building up interstate commerce. Soon you will all be my slaves!!!"

"You've gone mad with power! Light the straw!" said Takumi. Skuld's jaw dropped as her bridges went up in flames.

"That's it! My guys are emigrating to big-sis's country!"

"I knew something like this would happen. I'm stopping all payments to your dragon training school – the teachers are all under contract to me!" said Urd.

"Unfair!" cried Takumi.

"Uh, maybe we should stop," observed Keiichi. "It kind of looks like the world is going into food shortage - apocalypse mode, and I think that phase might upset Belldandy."

"Nonsense! My group has been readying themselves for this all along," said Skuld rubbing her hands together.

## *Fallow*

At that moment Belldandy came in carrying the tea. “What the heck happened?!” she said seeing the state of affairs. “We were doing so well. I was only gone a few minutes!”

“Words to live by,” mused Urd. “*Hey, where are you going?*”

“You said I wasn’t ready the other day,” replied Takumi. “I want to show you my outfit for the game tomorrow.” He returned a moment later as everyone stopped. Keiichi continued to stare as Urd clapped her hands to her mouth seeing his ears and paws.

“What is that?!” asked Keiichi.

“This? It represents your school doesn’t it? Neko Tech?”

“Uh - *no*,” replied Keiichi.

“I thought all Urd’s weird cat stuff . . . you mean that wasn’t even related to the school?!”

“Oh my god he’s got a tail too!” Urd said grabbing the back of his outfit.

“It’s *Nekomi Tech!*” said Keiichi and several others. “You know, the name of the town?!” In response Takumi could be heard muttering something concerning the word Nekomi.

“Okay enough. Get outside you crazy cat!” Urd said playfully chasing him out the front door.

The two laughed as they reached the bamboo gate. “You did that on purpose didn’t you?” Urd said once they were away.

“No, I really thought . . . oh never mind. I do love to see you laugh though.”

“And that’s important to you? To keep me happy?”

“Yeah it’s important,” he said putting his arms around her looking out at the setting sun. “You ever think about this time of day? Whenever I do I think about when we met.”

“I remember,” she replied. “But the truth is I’m even happier now. I can’t believe it but I am,” she said leaning back.

“Me too Indigo.”

“Really?”

“Yeah really. Also one of my other jobs is pointing out strange phenomena – like that!” he said, only now noticing Belldandy standing on the peak of the roof. “What’s she up to?”

## Visitors

“Haven’t you noticed? Belldandy’s become very protective of everyone in the last few months - Keiichi, us, even the Auto Club. Just look at her standing there, like some shipwright guiding us onward. You know what she told me today? *This doesn’t just affect you . . .*

“Well you said she would *need to be involved*.” It’s a good thing she is too. She counterbalances your badness,” he teased. “How am I so bad?” she asked cuddling with him.

“Well, your hair is too long for one. I’m sure that’s against the rules in Heaven.”

“Oh?”

“And you’re *waaay* to sexy. There’s no way that’s allowed up there.”

“Well they have thought about putting a limiter on that,” she nodded. “But I mean, what can I do about that?” she said batting her eyes.

“Well, if they put you next to someone who was a lot less sexy, it might even things out. You know neutralize your natural sexiness to normal levels.”

She was kissing him now. “I don’t know. I’m pretty up there. He’d have to be a real scoundrel.”

“Well we’ll just have to keep our eyes open,” Takumi agreed.

“*Oh my god Belldandy! They’re doing it again*,” cried Skuld.

From the roof Belldandy turned to look at them, but they were already running for the woods. “Leave us be Skuld or you’ll be the first one on diaper duty,” Urd called.

“Gross,” she said going inside.

They climbed the hill, finding a comfortable spot to sit and listen to the party below. Urd sat down wrapping her arms around her knees, “I can still do this,” she said as he came behind her. Below them they heard the members of the Auto Club discover that Belldandy was no longer among them. As they called for her she turned, instead looking in their general direction. Takumi had the strangest feeling she could see them. They watched her depart rejoining the party.

“You know it’s strange. We’re going to have a kid yet there’s still so much I don’t know about your family. Which region of the demon realm were you born in?



“Huh?”

“I mean they must have neighborhoods . . .”

“I was born in Sessrumnir! One of the grandest sections of the old heavens. I lived in a castle when I was small!”

“What?! You were born in the heavens? I thought you were half demon. How can that be?”

“Oh yeah that’s right you don’t know about our history. Well basically there was argument that led to a battle, a lot of things happened, blah, blah, blah and a lot of stuff got split in the process. . . like my parents.”

“Are you kidding?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well it’s just that I know Belldandy told me her parents were married. Wait a minute, was your mom - you know . . .”

“Are you trying to say I’m illegitimate?!”

“Well it’s just that . . .”

“Odin was with Hild . . . *before* Freya.”

“You mean there’s divorce in the heavens?”

“I’m not sure what that means.”

Takumi’s eyes bulged. “You mean there’s *polygamy* in the heavens?! Oh man I can see why they call it . . .”

Urd’s eyes narrowed, “I don’t know what you’re saying, but I have a feeling it’s somehow another dig at my parentage . . .”

“I just mean, your father was formally recognized to be with Hild, then he was recognized to be with Belldandy’s mother?”

“Yeah how else would it work?”

“And your father, Odin. He’s god?”

“Obviously he’s a god.”

“No but I mean . . . he’s God.”

“I just said that!”

“*No I mean -*” He whispered to her for several minutes.

Urd clapped her hands to her mouth. “Ha! Oh right, he would just love that!”

“But, is that right?”

“Of course not! He may be one of the principle councillors but he’s not *the* council!. It’s their combined voice that . . .”

“Okay. But I’m still a little nervous meeting him though.”

. . .

## Visitors

Over the next months spring grew into summer and Urd slept more and more. Takumi would often find her now with Elegance asleep beside her. “And what do you want?” he said one day seeing the angel sitting up blinking her eyes. She leaned forward whispering. “That’s sick,” he replied as she playfully pushed him over. However over the next few weeks he grew accustomed to the softness of her presence, Elegance often sleeping between he and Urd. Slowly the two worked together, gathering the things they would eventually need.

“*Keiichi come here,*” Takumi called from the door of Urd’s room one day. “I need an engineer! I’m not - you know, getting the best of help with what I’ve got here,” he said nodding beside him as Elegance pouted.

“What’s the problem?”

“I’m trying to put this damn crib together. I can’t make heads or tails of the instructions. Apparently babies need them.”

“Well what do we have to do?”

“It says insert pole A onto hole – Elegance smiled leaning forward - *Elegance I swear to god if you say ‘that’s what she said’ one more time we’re going to see how well the inverted form of this box holds angels.*”

“It’s alright I think I’ve got it,” said Keiichi twisting. “Can you push it more on your end?”

“I’ve got a grip on the rod but -*Elegance!*” Takumi shouted once more as she leaned in.

“Well at least you two are working together,” said Keiichi.

“Yeah outside of crib constructions she can be pretty useful,” Takumi acknowledged.

“She’s teaching you stuff?”

“Yeah - *get the book,*” Takumi urged as Elegance snuck behind the bookcase retrieving the old book.

“So what kind of – AHH! Don’t show me that!”

“Eh what’s the problem. It’s nothing you haven’t seen before by this point - am I right?”

“I’m beginning to see why you two make such a good pair,” Keiichi sighed. “Wait is that true?!” he said looking at a page. Though Keiichi’s reading of the angelic script was no better than Takumi’s, the tenor of the book’s figures were fairly easy

## *Fallow*

to interpret. Keiichi averted his eyes, “You’re not using this with Elegance to find out what Urd likes are you?”

“Heaven forbid. What kind of person would even think about doing something like that?” Takumi replied in a conspiratorial whisper rapidly turning pages. “Hey, you know what drives them crazy?” he said looking down the page.

“I don’t want to know!” cried Keiichi.

“Elegance is this true?” he asked to her nodding.

“Keiichi this is nuts. It looks like . . . rubbing between the shoulder blades? Like – the connection with the angel maybe?” though Elegance’s posturing seemed to indicate the reverse.

The cherished days of spring wove their way into summer and with it Urd seemed to pick up, spending more time awake. The change was cause for celebration among the Morisato household as they returned to the eastern shores of Chiba.

“I’m amazed they allowed me in,” Urd pouted lying beside Takumi on the blanket. “Seeing a beached whale here might cause people to panic,” she said under the umbrella.

“Oh don’t be like that. Nobody’s going to confuse you with a beached whale.”

“Really?”

“Of course not. Your skin’s too dark. An Orca - *maybe*,” he said taking a bite from his sandwich as she glared back at him.

“You know I’m kidding . . .”

“But the rest of me is okay, right?” she asked crossing her arms, picking up her leg rubbing it.

“The truth is you’ve never looked more beautiful,” he said kissing her. “That’s why Bell wants you to have that kid. You’re *too* beautiful now.”

“*Idiot*,” she said biting his shoulder.

“The only thing I miss is that we can’t surf today. But seriously are you okay Urd? I mean with everything that’s planned?”

“Part of me wanted to have our new addition down at the seaside residence. But Bell won’t hear of it.”

“I kind of get her point. She tries to act carefree but she’s been on edge lately. I can tell she’s anxious too.”

“She just wants to get her hands on that sprite.”

## Visitors

"No - she's anxious about her big sister, the person that's most important to her. And I agree. Only one thing matters to me Urd, that all my summers are with you," he said embracing her. "Aw."

"I mean it. You remember what we said?"

"I remember Tai," she whispered leaning in.

They were just about to kiss when Belldandy came from behind squeezing Urd's stomach. "Ah Bell stop doing that!" she cried.

"It's just - this is just so much fun for all of us to be here!" Bell said rubbing her.

"Keiichi tell your girlfriend to stop squeezing Urd!" he said turning to see Skuld close behind them, giving him the same look she'd been giving him for months. A look which seemed to say - *'pervert who knocked up my sister!'*

"Everyone starts out this way," Urd said to Skuld following his glance.

"That's a dirty lie!" Skuld spat running off down the beach.

"Alright so a career in medicine for her is probably out," Urd mused.

"And a couple of other things," agreed Takumi.

The end of summer brought long walks and quiet nightly conversations around the fire pit the Auto Club had decided they needed in one corner of the courtyard. Keiichi had protested, but Tamiya and Otaki cast it as a team building exercise. Most nights Urd and Takumi would sit on the porch watching the group, each of them trying to guess what the other was thinking. Tonight Bell and Keiichi too had joined them, though no one seemed to be speaking much.

"This temple is a good place," Takumi said running his hand over the beam. "Looks like it's been here a long time. How did you know to come here?"

"The wind told us to come," Belldandy replied.

"*The wind?*" he asked.

"-And we were here when we were young," Keiichi said taking Belldandy's hand. Belldandy smiled looking back.

"You two must be ready," he observed looking at the night sky.

"Really? It seems to have all flown by so fast," Takumi replied.

## *Fallow*

“Yeah I’m ready,” said Urd. “Believe me when you have to carry around a turkey every day it doesn’t seem to fly by.”

“Are you talking about me or the baby?” said Takumi.

“Not you, without you who would get me ice cream when I need it?”

“Is that a hint?” he said standing up.

“So that’s where the ice cream’s been going. I thought Skuld was just making it up,” said Keiichi.

“Don’t tell her but I’ve developed a taste for it of late,” Urd said as Takumi ducked inside.

“Doesn’t she see you?”

“Oh Tai and I just start talking about kissing and she takes off.”

A shadow from the courtyard came into the light as Skuld appeared. “Are you talking about me?!” she demanded.

“We were just wondering where you were going to live,”

Takumi said coming out carrying something under his jacket.

“Yeah we should be kicking you out soon” remarked Urd. “I don’t think there will be enough room once the new addition comes. Isn’t Skuld’s room to be the diaper disposal area?”

“Big-sis!”

“Don’t listen to them Skuld they’re just teasing,” assured Belldandy.

“Yeah, remember *they’re* the visitors,” agreed Keiichi. “As long as we’re here there will *always* be a place for you Skuld.”

“You see that? I’ll always be here. Because I’m going to outlive you all!” she shouted running off.

“She does that a lot,” observed Takumi.

“That’s her thing now -,” remarked Urd.

One morning soon after, Belldandy was making breakfast at the temple as Keiichi and Takumi swept up the swirling leaves outside. “Belldandy are you doing this?! - *Is she doing this?*”

Takumi called to Keiichi as their gathered piles of leaves continued to defy them in the gusty winds.

But inside Belldandy did not hear them. She was watching Urd through the doorway, sitting up straight in the tea room, her back arching as she watched TV.

“Urd?” she said putting the food away going to her. “What is it?”

## Visitors

"I think it's time Bell," she said pressing her hands to her legs. "C'mon," Belldandy said taking her to her room, sounding as though they were embarking on a sleepover. "*I think it's time!*" she shouted outside. Immediately the boys came in.

"It is?! *I'm not ready,*" cried Takumi.

"*You're not ready?!!*" replied Urd.

They worked to arrange things according to Belldandy's instructions, with Keiichi and Takumi politely removed to the veranda to make room for their coming guests. Keiichi tried to sound casual as they talked outside, but of course he and Bell had previously planned how every aspect of the undertaking would go. Takumi looked up hearing the sound as the sky behind them changed, heralding the arrival of several goddesses, most of whom he did not know but then Keiichi sprang to his feet. "Peorth!"

"Hello!" she said hugging him. "Well, you know why we're here so I guess we should go in."

"Do they know what they're doing?" Takumi said anxiously.

"We're from the Heavens. We always know what we're doing," Peorth replied heading inside.

"Coming from someone dressed in a leather bikini that's not really reassuring," he said sitting down on the steps.

As they sat waiting other visitors began to appear at the temple; first Megumi, then members of the Nekomi Tech Auto Club.

Since none of them had any warning of the day's event they had come ready to help Bell and Keiichi, but soon adapted as best they could - mostly by entertaining themselves in the courtyard. "Sorry guys I don't think we're going to be able to do much today. We're just going to sit here. Takumi's a little anxious," hinted Keiichi. "

"Oh gotcha," replied Otaki. "Hey Mr. Sato, you want to go help me find some herbs?"

"What?! No, I don't want to go get high! Well maybe I do, but I'm not going to! Urd would kill me!"

As he left Takumi looked out at the group, "You know Keiichi I have to say, now that I'm looking at them, I'm noticing a lot of weird stuff," he said.

"I'm sure they could say the same about us," Keiichi replied.

## *Fallow*

"Like that Nazi guy," Takumi continued. "What's up with that dude?"

*"He's not a Nazi guy! He's a History major!"*

"Okay. And what about the guy dressed like Jason?"

"Taro's a Theater major!"

"I don't know. Sometimes I feel like your club is a cover for some . . ."

"I know what you mean dude -," began Otaki whom neither of them had seen coming to stand beside them. "There sure is a lot of sexy cat girl stuff out there . . ."

"And that!" Takumi replied. *"That is definitely not right!"*

He got up going into the house, finding Belldandy speaking with two other goddesses in the tea room.

"Is everything okay Bell? Do you need anything?"

"We're doing fine," she replied.

"Does she want me in there?" he asked.

"She does. It's us who are keeping you out," she said.

"What?! If she wants me in there . . ."

"She wants you in there but I'm not sure it's a good idea. She keeps saying things like - 'He did this, get him in here!'"

"Oh I see. Well you may have a point."

And so once more Takumi positioned himself on the front porch, pacing as Keiichi tried to reassure him. "It's just, I don't know, I feel . . . helpless. The most important thing in my life is happening fifty feet from me and I feel . . . scared somehow - in a way I never really have before."

"It will be alright," Keiichi replied as behind them a dome-like shield began to appear forming over the temple.

"Okay what is that? That can't be good!"

"I think it just means we're entering the end game," Keiichi replied. Takumi sat down trying to clear his mind, trying not to dwell upon fear, time becoming a kind of white noise within which he did not see, did not hear until finally Belldandy finally appeared in the doorway.

"You can go and see her now," she said.

He was up moving before he knew what he was doing. Pushing through the doorway he passed Skuld in the narrow hall.

"Good job Skuld," he said as she continued to wander out into

## Visitors

the daylight, a dazed horrified look on her face as she came into the courtyard.

Sentaro came running up to greet her. "So how did –."

"*Don't touch me,*" she said, her face pale, continuing to stare blankly ahead. "Sit over there – *farther,*" she said squatting down numbly, still staring at the front gate. The two teenagers sat in silence for a moment. Finally Skuld spoke, "You know what Sentaro? Biology is . . . *gross.*"

...

For most of his life Takumi Sato had sought to maintain an image of external toughness, an image which fell away as he appeared now in the doorway of Urd's room. Peering in he could see Urd on the futon, curled up with a small package in her arms. "*Hey you . . .*" he said quietly greeting the tiredness in her eyes.

"Hey you -," she said looking back. "There's someone here I want you to meet," she said moving the blanket aside to reveal the bright eyes and small face below."

Takumi knelt down beside her, tears coming to his eyes. "He's so beautiful," he said. "He's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Are you okay Indigo? Really okay?"

"I'm okay," she whispered.

"*I love you so much,*" he said hugging her. "I never thought I could feel -," he cried holding her.

"*I know,*" she replied.

"He's so perfect," he said picking the child up. "And look at his long lashes, and that thick head of hair!"

Urd smiled watching him gingerly picked up the sprite, wanting him to have his moment but knowing it had gone on long enough. "Takumi . . ."

"And look at that grip," he said as the baby held his finger.

"He's going to be –."

"Tai . . ."

"Yeah?"

"It's a girl."

His eyes shot back at their new family member.

"What?! *Are you sure?!*"

"Uh yeah pretty sure," she said smiling back at him.



## *Fallow*

Now his eyes truly lit up. “Well, isn’t that just the most fantastic thing,” he said kissing her.

The new addition had tolerated the intrusion well. But enough was enough. She had important things to do. Like napping. She looked down her nose at the stranger blinking her long lashes at him, letting him know that her time for such trivial meeting was presently over.

“She looks rather imperious,” Takumi said peering at her as a small hand pushed him back. *There’s a limit to how close commoners can approach.*

“I was the same I’m told,” Urd said taking her back as her small arms gently wrapped around her mother’s. She gripped her mother possessively, her eyes close, but not quite the same as Urd’s. The baby yawned with an attitude of - *I’ve spent enough of my attention on you, now I must sleep*, and with that drifted off to slumber. Soon enough Urd and Takumi were in a similar state, oblivious to whatever was happening in the greater world.

The next morning Takumi rolled over only to discover something was missing. *Baby!* he thought instantly dropping to the floor. *Door!* he realized seeing it open. Scrambling on all fours he shot into the hallway like some deranged animal.

“*Front Door!*” he cried seeing it was open. He bounded down the hallway just in time to see Peorth throw his child 50 feet in the air toward Belldandy. “AAAAAAGH!”

At the scream a startled Belldandy looked over as the package sailed over her head toward the ground.

“AAAAAAAGH!”

He watched as the baby bounced hitting the ground, tumbling as though in a bubble.

“AAAAAAAGH!”

“*God will somebody tell that little girl to stop screaming?*” Urd said coming to the doorway. “Why is there so much screaming so early in the morning?” she said putting her head to the door.

“HAJAWA?” Takumi said still searching for words.

“That was Takumi,” Belldandy said going to pick up her playmate.

## Visitors

“Oh I see. Yeah I probably should have told you. Sprites aren’t *exactly* like babies. Our protections tend to make them a bit more - *springy*. Comes in handy given the architecture you see in the heavens.” Takumi said nothing looking at her.

“She’s very smart Urd - *watch*,” Belldandy said tossing the baby gently in the air in front of her. But whatever trick she was hoping for her to pull off, the child simply smiled mischievously, drifting back down into Belldandy’s arms.

“No, remember? What we were just doing,” she said as she continued drifting back. “Well she was doing it a minute ago, wasn’t she Peorth?” Peorth looked up from the morning glories she was waving in front of the child nodding.

“Okay, if that’s all the excitement - and screaming for awhile, I’m going back to bed,” Urd said as Keiichi waved to Bell.

“Oh that’s right. Urd, Takumi, Hasegawa has been waiting to give you something.” At Belldandy’s remark Hasegawa appeared from the temple steps holding a basket of baked goods. “Something for the new parents. It’s so great to see you again!” Hasegawa said handing the basket over to a somewhat confused Takumi.

“Thank you. *Why is that girl acting like that every time she sees us?*” whispered Takumi.

“*Bell says she thinks we named the baby after her,*” said Urd.

“Her name is *lil’ Urd?*”

“*I told you we’re not going with that name!*” Urd replied. “We agreed on Sora – after Lind’s relation and the reason we met.”

Over the next few days Sora began to sort out the people around her; even if she was still a bit cross-eyed and had trouble holding her head up. There was:

-girl with glasses I want to taste/wear (Hasegawa)

-happy girl (Belldandy)

-girl to nap on (also called Ur)

-girl who looks confused in my presence (Sko/Skul?)

-guy with spark plug I am planning to suck on (Ota!)

-muscles (Tami), who upon witnessing Sora walking along beside him on all fours like a bulldog whenever he was around remarked, “now this is a girl who knows the importance of physical fitness.”

## *Fallow*

- happy girl or possibly Sko's servant (Keiichi)
- guy who's always looking at me (Takumi). Trying to interfere with my relationship with nap girl.
- girl who's tooth I grabbed in a coffee shop but couldn't get it out - either of them (Mara)

Those first days that Fall were the most restful, the most peaceful and fulfilling Takumi had ever known. He quickly became accustomed to the nature of the protections surrounding their new family member, and slowly accepted the fact that a baby flying 50 feet through the air was not an altogether unusual sight in the world of goddesses. Still, he was always happier when Sora returned to the ground, seeing her resting in either Urd's arms or Belldandy's as they slept. Skuld had initially been left alone, but soon baby Sorano began following her around imitating her work, moving her hands as she sat beside Skuld using her own make-believe tools. Yet it was hard for the temple to keep up enough action for Sora's liking (Takumi always had the feeling when he was watching her cuddle in someone's sleeping arms she was merely waiting for them to close their eyes). When she was bored she would protest. "Aww sweet pea, what's the matter?" Urd asked picking up a crying Sora that evening. "I know we're just getting acquainted, but I can't imagine ever giving you up," she said kissing the child's forehead. "Not like that old bat I inherited," she muttered.

"Why are you thinking about that?" asked Takumi.

"I can feel it, she's coming," replied Urd. In the distance the heavens rumbled as the winds to the south grew suddenly wild.

"Maybe it's a summer thunderstorm?" suggested Takumi.

"I don't think so -," replied Urd scanning the entrance to the temple. A moment later winds abated, leaving in their wake the solitary form of the leader of all Demonkind at the top of the stairs. "May I come in?" she said after a moment.

Given everything that had transpired over the last few years there was certainly no reason to let her in. And yet, here she was. And Takumi couldn't help feeling that there was something different about the Hild that stood before them now. She didn't seem to be the same Diamakaicho he had come to

## Visitors

know, more like a lonely grandmother asking to see her child. He realized it could be a trick but somehow he didn't think so; and there was the matter of the assistance she had provided him earlier. In any case he knew it was not his permission to give. He turned to Belldandy who was already beside him. "Bell I understand if you and Keiichi -."

Belldandy stood watching her quietly.

Hild looked between them. "Oh very well - may I come in on this *one occasion* in which I confirm I hold no ill will or intent toward *any member* of this household as per my solemn vow?" she said raising her hand. "I have after all waited the requisite 2 days."

"Two days?" asked Takumi.

"Yeah, nice of you to check on me and see that I'm not dead!" shouted Urd from the porch.

"*Odin's eldest daughter giving birth? Really?* Tell me he *didn't* send the most qualified of his healers," insisted Hild. "Or did he send two?"

"*He sent three -*," Belldandy murmured beside her.

"Well I gave birth to you while we were on a hunt!"

"I thought you said I was born at Sessrumnir!"

"Well Sessrumnir has a *big yard*. Big!"

"You see what I'm up against Tai?!"

He turned to Belldandy.

"It's your choice," Belldandy replied standing beside them.

"But I would let her in. She would not hurt someone on such an auspicious day."

"I agree."

"*Are you guys crazy?!*" Urd shouted behind them on the porch.

"She just wants to see Sorano," Takumi said apologetically.

Urd moved back defensively, baby in hand.

"Is that a yes?" Hild asked turning to Takumi.

"Of course Lady Hild," he said bowing as she passed.

Urd approached, comically turning the baby's head toward her before turning it away. "*There* - now you've seen her. Though I suppose we should show her to you - *given your role in all of this*," she hissed.

"My role?" Hild said clutching her hand to her chest, "*Oh that the magic of my children has fallen so far!*" she cried

dramatically. Seeing her outburst fail to elicit the proper response she stepped forward, stroking the baby's nose and eyebrows as numbers appeared above her head. The baby looked up trying to grasp the curiously floating glowing digits. "Wait what is that? Is that a date?" asked Takumi. "But that's not her birthdate, it's too – *wait. Is that her date of - ?* But that's still not right. It says December 22<sup>nd</sup> but we didn't go to the pools until the 23<sup>rd</sup>. Unless, wasn't that the night -."

"*Ha, ha, yeah* - we don't need to get into all the specifics here, there are children present," Urd said covering Sora's ears.

"Then your offer of the pools - did you know then?"

"Who remembers?" shrugged Hild waving her hands.

"Then it was for some other reason?" asked Takumi.

"Well, there are those who say that the pools confer uncommonly good luck," Hild observed with an unconscious glance at Belldandy. "December 22<sup>nd</sup> - not really an uncommon birthday for demons," she remarked. "I would have thought you'd have figured that out," she said to her daughter's blushing face. "Ah well, now that we have that settled let's see what this future ruler of the world looks like," she said trying to feign indifference. Urd approached and though not normally inclined to hand her over, the title did have a certain ring to it. Sorano looked up at the ruler of Demonkind as though mildly bored until Hild dangled several baubles in front of her. The child's eyes lit up, reaching for the glittering treasures.

"I can see she has a taste for the finer things," she observed.

"And those same regal eyes."

"*I told you she'd mention that,*" Takumi whispered to Urd, having noticed himself the similarity in coloring with Hild's.

"In fact she seems very - *Ahhhhhh!*" Hild shouted as Sora spotting a new treasure in the form of Hild's dangling earring quickly pulled on it.

"She's got a good grip doesn't she?" Takumi said attempting not to smile with the rest of them as Hild untangled herself.

"Not to worry," Hild said smoothly producing a curiously shaped object from her right hand. The glowing amorphous form which Sora's now readily traded for Hild's earring changed its symphony of colors in response to Sora's chewing

## Visitors

on the deformable material. She began having her own intense conversation over it.

“How is she with flight?” Hild said putting out her hand. Keiichi had never thought of Hild is someone experienced in subtlety. However as Sora’s small body began to gently float upward, he began to see the degree to which she could manipulate the elements around her. Up Sora went, 100, 200 feet in the air. Then as suddenly as she had risen she began to fall. Leaning back she headed for the ground as 20 feet from its surface she spread her hands turning to land on her feet, wobbling a moment before taking up her preferred position on all fours. “Well she seems to have inherited my attitude of no fear,” Hild said sweeping her hand to create a small throne in front of her.

“Might be because someone’s always been there to catch her,” Takumi muttered as Sora, noticing the throne crawled up on it. “Ha, finally someone who knows their proper place,” Hild said sitting down next to the child. “Now have a look at this - these are the queen’s treasures” Hild declared magically conjuring objects before her as Sora’s eyes lit up.

“*Boom!*” the child shouted as one after another the objects she pointed to blew up at her command pleasing her immensely. She seemed to have hit the jackpot with her new friend!

“Yeah, no concerns about that,” Takumi said worriedly watching the objects explode into burning embers of light. “Am I the only one finding this kind of disturbing?” he asked. “Well it’s early days -,” Urd said putting an arm around him. “And it’s not like she’ll be spending *a lot* of time with her,” added Keiichi.

“And she has us,” reminded Belldandy brightly. After a bit more playing with Sora, Hild kept to her word and left without incident. But as she did Sora held up the chew toy offering it to her. “Oh that’s for you my dear,” she said touching the child’s nose as Sora happily took it back. Something about the way Hild pulled her cloak around her almost made Takumi feel sorry for her. “Well I suppose I should be getting back. The Demon Realm isn’t very good at running itself.”

“I suppose so,” Urd replied just as awkwardly.

## Fallow

“Take care of the little one . . . *and yourself*,” she said leaving as the winds grew around her.

Urd sat quietly with Sora in her room for the rest of the evening. For Sora the excitement had made her sleepy. But Takumi could see her mother was working on a few things. He sat beside her playing the video game.

“C’mon, admit it. You enjoyed her visit,” he said to her finally. She shrugged feigning interest in his game. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“Just playing,” he replied focusing on the screen.

She folded her arms leaning them over his shoulders, “That cat is telling you to go to sleep.”

“Yeah but I don’t have to listen to him . . .”

She squinted watching, “The Teacher - *really*?”

“*I like to learn things*,” he said smiling back at her devilishly.

“Do you now?” she replied getting into bed.

“We could always play a game?” he suggested.

“What game?” she said sitting up.

“*Demon girl* - and guy who wants to have sex with demon girl,” he replied.

“On your side mister! There are children present you know.”

“So - you were born in a castle.”

“Eh, or on the back of a horse depending on which lie you want to believe from the queen of darkness.”

“Oh come on. She was nice tonight.”

“It was nice of Bell and Keiichi to let her in,” she sighed.

“Yeah, but they have our best interests at heart. Did you see Belldandy when you handed her over?”

She shook her head.

“Her hands were doing that little scrunching thing.”

“She’s holding it together pretty well. Tai?”

“Yeah?”

“We - we’re doing a pretty good job aren’t we?”

“You mean beside the fact that you’ve done all the hard work up until now? I’d say it’s a little early to hand out any awards – we do have the *terrible twos to stripper pole* years coming up, but yeah I think we’ve made a decent start. And we’ve got some good back-benchers to help.”

## Visitors

She settled back in his arms, “When I was young I was always so focused on Bell. This is the first time I’ve thought so much about something else for so long.”

“You don’t suppose that means she’ll go the wrong way now do you?”

“You’re an idiot,” she laughed. “You always make me laugh. Remember when we started out? Did you ever think we would wind up like this?”

“With a kid that’s a superball and a mother-in-law that generates her own weather patterns? Um no - *not really*.”

“Go to sleep,” she said cuddling against him.

“It’s weird. Like we’re all part of this connected thing and it’s still going on. Even right now.”

“Mmm,” she murmured.

“I was pretty close on the superball baby, only I thought it was going to be a fish!”

“I can’t believe I spent nights worrying about you . . .”

Late the following night Urd opened her eyes sensing something in the air. “*Smoke?* Could it be?” Quietly she picked Sorano up, wrapping her in her blanket going outside. There on the veranda she saw him, resting easily in an old wooden chair smoking his pipe as he rocked. “There you are,” he said sensing her behind him as she smiled.

“*I thought it was you dad,*” she said putting Sorano into his arms, seating herself onto the blankets of the opposite chair.

“I take it everyone else is ‘sleeping’ by your design?”

“I thought we might have a quiet moment alone,” he shrugged. The baby continued looking up at the white bearded stranger, considering him with quiet wide eyes. Then considering the matter resolved after a moment of study she yawned promptly went to sleep.

“Ha, will you look at that? Reminds me of you, you were just as imperious,” Odin said as Sora stretched in his arms.

Urd smiled. “It’s good to see you. This all feels so familiar. Nights outside in the open air, sitting on the porch. Someone asleep in your arms like that.”

“Who? Verandi?”



## *Fallow*

"No, I was thinking about mom. The night before the festival. Bell I were so excited - we couldn't sleep and so we snuck downstairs. When I looked out the doorway I saw you smoking that pipe, looking up at the stars with mom asleep in your arms. Those, they – *they were good days*," she said reminiscing.

Odin smiled changing the subject away from Freya. "Any indication of the little one's elemental affinity yet?"

"No not yet. She's probably just taking her time. She's highly selective you know. What do you think?" she asked.

"Hmm. Hard to tell with her parentage. Maybe a bicore," he suggested rubbing her brow.

"Really?"

"At this stage it's hard to judge," he said passing her the sleeping child. "Speaking of mothers, I sense yours has been here to give her stamp of approval."

"Yeah you should have seen her. Didn't even destroy anything. Oh . . . I suppose you did."

"I might have looked in for a moment or two," he confessed.

"Dad - can you tell if, you know . . . Sora will be happy? Will she have a happy life?" Urd asked suddenly.

"I find it best not to look into such things too deeply," he replied. "The interplay of factors is just too complex."

"*Why?*" she insisted stubbornly. "Why is it such a bad thing to try and assure that the one you love is happy?"

"Because I tried it once. It didn't work out so well."

"Mom?"

"Yes - *both* of them." He stood up to leave. "Which reminds me - you should trust her more. You don't really think she would have interceded in a matter as important as your child?"

"*Have you met her?*" Urd grumbled as he leaned in to kiss his eldest daughter before disappearing.

## *Decent*

The next few months moved by in a blur but slowly routines began to fall into place. This morning saw Urd, Skuld and Belldandy with Sora atop her shoulders heading for the small clearing behind Tariki Hongan temple. “She’s getting good at meditating,” Belldandy observed a short time later as they sat together soaking up the fall sunlight.

“I think that’s a bit of an optimistic assessment Bell,” replied Urd. “Since she’s asleep.”

“Is she?” Belldandy said looking around beside her to see Sora’s head resting on her chin despite her upright posture.

“Well that’s no good,” she said gently pushing her over onto her side with her foot. “But I suppose we can use the time to visit with our other friends,” she said taking out a bag of bird seed as Sora lay in the grass.

“Sis these are trash birds! Why are you spending money on them,” Skuld said seeing the oncoming flock of warblers, chickadees and shrikes coming down.

“The color of a bird’s plumage is no indication of it’s worth,” Belldandy replied. “Just look at Sora’s honor guard.”

Skuld turned shocked to see a sudden contingent of well-organized chickadees in a defensive square around her. Skuld muttered something about bird flu as Belldandy continued scattering seed around her, conversing with the winged guests that chose to do so.

“I think I see another big bird coming in -,” muttered Urd.

“Is it an egret?” Belldandy asked excitedly.

“*Not exactly . . .*,” Urd said as Takumi broke through the brush.

“Well there you are! Nice to finally find you! *You’re getting a phone Urd!* Everyone else on the planet can find their loved ones almost instantaneously whereas I have to wait for a favorable wind or a flight of birds to cross your path!”

“I don’t need a phone,” waved Urd.

“I wouldn’t mind a phone,” observed Belldandy.

“Who’s getting a phone? I need a phone!” demanded Skuld.

## *Fallow*

"You don't need a phone," argued Urd.

"Of course I do. I'm a teenager! A phone is an absolute necessity at my age!"

"And if you had a phone Urd I could find out where you *and* my daughter are when I need to. By the way, where is my daughter?" he asked.

The goddesses all looked to find Sora gone. "Dammit she did it to us again Bell!"

"She's getting quite good at escaping," agreed Belldandy.

"Look Urd, some tits!" Takumi said surveying the forest.

"Tai?"

"Yeah?"

"*You have a daughter . . .*" she said disapprovingly causing him to hang his head walking off.

Fully recharged Sora was moving on all fours deeper into the forest toward her next adventure. At one point a sharp toothed tanuki appeared intent on following her until she turned to face him. "*Pika*," she said tapping him on the nose giving off a surprisingly powerful shock. Alone now she followed the sound of a familiar voice until breaking onto the edge of a small meadow, to find Keiichi deep in conversation with Tamiya and Otaki. "What are you guys doing?!" he demanded.

"Look it's not a big deal -, continued Tamiya.

"The little guys said they wanted to do it," added Otaki.

"The machiners said they *wanted to help you with this illegal gardening project?!*"

"Well we might have mentioned it was for the temple . . ."

"That's not growing here and that's the end of it."

"*But Keiichi* - hey where are you going?!"

"I think I just spotted a higher priority problem," Keiichi said sticking his head into the bushes crouching to eye level with Sora. She started reversing gears trying to take off but he caught her by the waist. "I don't think you're supposed to be blazing your own trail out here young lady," he said carrying her off.

At that same moment Urd, Belldandy and Skuld emerged on the far side of the temple. "Dammit!" shouted Urd.

"What's wrong?" said Bell.

## Decent

“It’s that damn cat again! Look at him over there pissing on the flowers! I’ve been at war with him over the last few weeks. I’ll get him this time though,” she said striking downward as the jolt passed through the ground. The charge connected an instant later at the point connecting the cat to the ground, sending the offender flying high through the air.

“Urd!” Belldandy cried extending her hands to sympathetically slow the cat’s downward trajectory, arching it gently beyond the wall. “May fortune smile upon - *WHAAACK!!!*”

They flinched collectively as the cat was instantly struck head on by a speeding tractor trailer rig passing by. Belldandy stood back in wide-eyed shock.

“*Looks like kitty should have wished for more lives -*,” Takumi mused from his vantage point on the roof. Urd looked up frowning at him. Belldandy continued to stare at the empty roadway.

“Okay so your powers are still a bit off,” Urd said trying to dust her off. “Now we know that!” she said trying to sound cheerful.

“The flowers will look better too,” added Skuld awkwardly.

“Yeah!”

Belldandy stood between them holding onto herself.

“*Keiichi returned this by the way – if you’re interested!*”

Takumi said holding up Sora.

“*Sweet pea!* What are you doing up there?” Urd called up pretending to be shocked as Sora laughed. “Throw her to me!”

“I told you we’re not doing that Urd!!”

“Where’s Keiichi now?” Skuld said still tugging on her sister.

“He said he needed to buy some weed killer,” Takumi mused.

The rest of the afternoon was difficult for Bell but at least Keiichi returned close to sunset. “*Oh Keiichi I’m so glad you’re home,*” Belldandy said rushing to him.

“Sorry I’m late. I almost wiped out on a dead cat on my way home. What’s wrong?” he asked seeing her face.

“Oh Keiichi. I’ve had the worst day!”

“Oh Bell, I’m sure it wasn’t *your* cat,” encouraged Urd.

“Yeah your cat was *southbound* the last time we saw it,” agreed Takumi. “*What?*” he said catching her silent glare.

## *Fallow*

As night fell, Megumi and the members of the Nekomi Tech Auto club gathered at the temple. Urd trailed into the house following the sound of the disjointed music to find Takumi and Keiichi side by side in the kitchen competing chopping vegetables. “Tai don’t do that,” she said tugging at him. “Bell will see that and expect us to do that everyday!” she warned as though the idea had only just occurred to her.

He squinted looking up from the cutting board. “Sometimes you worry me Urd.”

“Eh, you’re probably right. You probably should know how to cook,” she said opening the refrigerator to retrieve the sake.

“Where’s Belldandy?” Takumi asked once Urd had left.

“She’s still in my room,” Keiichi replied chopping. “What happened exactly again?”

“We had a bit of a *cat-related* injury in your absence.

“I see. She seems upset.”

Takumi looked back through the open doors to take in the full scene of motley characters. “My recommendation is to send Sora in like a torpedo to pound on her door. That should bring her out of it.” At that moment Sora ran past them down the hallway shrieking like a crazed animal with Hasegawa and Megumi in hot pursuit.

“Yeah, Otaki and Tamiya giving her all that soda probably wasn’t the best idea,” he said watching her come around for a second lap.

“Probably not. But it’s another way to go if Sora fails,” he said.

“I’m not worried about Bell. She’ll be alright. It’s Skuld I want to talk to. Does she seem alright to you?”

“Keiichi, I have to deal with *that*,” he said as Sora came around for lap three. “– *and that*,” he said pointing with his knife to Urd who had just let Mara in as both began drinking. “I’m going to have to leave ‘noticing’ other things in your court.”

As the club members settled down to their own celebrations, Keiichi took the opportunity to slide in behind Skuld hugging her from behind. “*Get off me you weirdo!*” she said pushing back against him but making no further effort to move.

“You know you’re part of all this right?” Keiichi said. “I mean you’re an aunt now.”

## *Decent*

“Uh, don’t remind me. She follows me everywhere, her little hands always grasping at my tools!”

“She looks up to you. She sees you doing interesting stuff. You remember what it was like when you were young?”

“When I was young Urd would leave me and not come back!”

“But Belldandy always found you. So which kind of an aunt are you going to be?”

“She’s not my sister. . .” Skuld huffed.

“But she is your fan. The solider who follows you.”

“A small solider, who often loses her track and goes off on her own adventures!”

“That’s today. Tomorrow she will need someone to talk to. Someone closer to her own age.”

Skuld folded her arms, staring across the room at Belldandy who was trying to show Sora something. “Are babies really so important Keiichi?” she asked looking back at him.

“They’re optional,” he smiled. “And while we’re on it, could you stop giving those mildly disgusted looks to Urd and Takumi.”

“Did they tell you to say that? Ugh, when I think of the disgusting things they’ve done,” she said as her body gave an involuntary shiver. “And they’d better be the only ones! Look at her. Big-sis is better at everything she does,” she shrugged. “There are things she can do and things you can do,” Keiichi said, looking over at Belldandy who continued to attempt to teach Sora how to say daddy.

Sora listened patting Takumi’s head, “Dabo-bi-bok,” she said.

“Hmm. . . well thanks for trying Bell,” Takumi said.

“I think she’s trying to be obtuse,” Belldandy commented.

“You see Skuld? We all have challenges,” Keiichi replied.

Urd and Mara came over to sit down beside Belldandy. “Aw, look at how sweet she looks.”

“She looks like that because you breast fed her after sipping so much sake,” Takumi said as Sora loudly smacked her lips.

“*Bi-bok*,” she said smacking his head.

“Don’t worry she’s got my genes, it doesn’t affect her,” Urd replied as Sora reached up trying to grab imaginary stars. “But

## *Fallow*

maybe it is story time. She wrapped Sora up starting a bedtime story as Sora's eyes drooped.

"-And that's the story of how mommy and daddy went off to grandma's magical castle, - and nobody got hurt," she said.

"Um Urd, people . . . got hurt," Takumi corrected her

"No they did not," she sang to Sora.

"Urd . . . *people definitely got hurt*," he replied.

"Not in a bedtime story time they didn't," she replied.

Mara laughed.

"What's so funny?" Urd said looking over.

"*You got knocked up!*" she laughed falling over drunk.

"Yeah well, what about you that one time. You thought -!"

"Son of a - we're not talking about that!" she said drunkenly trying to put her hands over Urd's lips.

As the evening wore on the games grew louder, as the light of the temple cast itself out into the night. Above them Skuld sat on roof staring up at the night sky.

By this point Keiichi was thankful for the distraction of the auto club members taking over the evening's entertainment as he crept off to his room to sleep. He had not laid there long before the door was pushed open and Belldandy crawled in in a nightgown he'd never seen before. "This is Urd's," she said creeping into bed beside him. "Doesn't fit very well," she muttered pulling the covers over herself.

"Did she and Takumi put you up to this?"

"And Megumi. She thought I should have some sodas," she said pressing against him. "Is it hot in here?" she asked.

"Oh boy." He felt her feet kicking him, "Hey - hey, *Keiichi*."  
"Yeah."

"I was wondering. If my powers, well I mean if my powers - ."

"I think we could live anywhere Bell. Don't you?" he said taking hold of her hand.

"Yeah," she replied moving closer. "It was a good party. "Did you see Sora trying to hold on to the cookie as she fell asleep?" she said her feet still playing with him.

"Yeah, cute," he muttered.

"And her toes. Did you see her toes crinkling?"

"Yeah it's all pretty great . . .," he agreed sleepily.

"You think so? *I think so*," she said happily her toes curling.

## Decent

“What?” he asked lifting up his head.

“Babies,” she replied cuddling.

The following week saw the Morisato household taken over by phones, adopted with varying levels of exuberance. Urd carried it dutifully at her side but little else, whereas Skuld would interrupt every conversation that week with something new she could do with it (*Can we do that?* Urd would ask confused on hearing the latest news. At receiving a reply she would shrug, *well she makes it sound like only she can to that!*). Belldandy’s approach was more measured. Several times that week Keiichi found her sitting alone in the forest surrounded by her winged colleagues puzzling over the phone. A bird on her shoulder hopped down to tap the screen several times with its beak. “Oh I see!” Belldandy said. Another came forward rubbing the screen with his head, cocking his head chirping this way and that. “Yes I think you’re good looking,” Belldandy replied looking at the screen with the bird. “*Here,*” she raising her phone as the air current around them began to grow.

“*Oh now I’ve seen everything!*” Urd said walking up to find a squadron of pint-sized birds suspended in the air around Belldandy, each gliding on the air current perfectly still.

“Hang on I’ve got to get this picture!” she said.

“It looks like the potion was helpful,” said Urd.

“Yes thank you. I feel better now. More myself.”

“Well there’s been a lot going on lately. But I knew things would settle out with your powers. Not that it would have made any difference to Keiichi.”

“He said much the same. I don’t know. Somehow I feel like I have more to lose now. I suppose we both do,” she said looking at the courtyard.

“Yeah, look at them,” Urd replied watching Tai and Sora rolling in the leaves, their hands spread. But Sora soon decided that inserting one leaf after another into Takumi’s mouth, to judge how each one might taste, was more important.

“Could you have ever imagined this?” asked Belldandy.

“I know. When I first met him I thought – *he’s trouble*. But later I thought – *thank god*. I was lonely. Lonelier than I realized. Still, don’t you ever get scared?”



## *Fallow*

“Of Keiichi?”

“Of showing him how much you really need him.”

She thought a moment. “No. Not since that night.”

“Of course,” Urd thought, watching Takumi spit out his latest leaf offering, chasing Sora around the side of the house. She followed looking for the spot they had disappeared to along the back corridor. Approaching her room she heard a voice whispering at the bottom of the open door, “*Hey you - what are you doing out there? It’s cold out there isn’t it?*” She looked through the doorway to find Takumi poking his head out from under a tent made of blankets.

“Huh?”

“*Come in here and be safe with us,*” he called. “*This way. We don’t let just anyone into this entrance do we Sora?*” Sora shook her head. “*Should we let mom in?*” Sora nodded.

“*You’re a fool,*” Urd said crawling headfirst into the cozy tent.

“Then I’m in good company. Come in here and be warm with us,” he said putting his arms around her. Dissatisfied with the arrangement Sora climbed under their arms placing herself at the center.

“Did Bell tell you we used to do this when we were young?”

“I know nothing. All I know is you need some rest,” he said pulling her back to him.

“Maybe I do. . .” she said lying down. Trying to stop her mother’s cuddling position with dad Sora put her hand up, which Takumi quickly put in his mouth.

Urd leaned up kissing him, further displeasing Sora. “You’d better do the same if you want to get that hand back,” she said. Sora thought, putting her foot up to his face instead.

“This kid’s got your feistiness,” Takumi said letting her go.

“Did you see her in back with the leaves? She was doing your eyebrow thing!”

The next morning they all went for a walk in the forest, Urd, Takumi and Sora came up the hill to find Keiichi and Belldandy already there, lying at a 45° angle to one another on their backs looking at the sky.

“What are you guys doing?” asked Urd.

“Thinking about how beautiful the sky is,” replied Belldandy.

## *Decent*

"We were just talking about Christmas. Do you guys know what you want?" asked Keiichi.

"What do *you* want?" Belldandy asked hinting.

"Just you," replied Keiichi.

"Does everyone want that? Because it'll save me some time," Takumi said clapping his hands.

"Nah. I want *stuff*," replied Urd.

"I'm not enough?" he asked setting Sora down between Keiichi and Belldandy.

"Have you forgotten the present *I* got *you* this year?" she said kissing Sora's head.

"I think I did all the hard work on that one," he said.

Urd's eyes narrowed. "Sweet pea do you want to see mommy do a magic trick?" she said as her eyes began to change and Takumi took off. "Mommy's got to go chase daddy for a little while," she said disappearing as Sora squealed.

"Keiichi . . . *what do you really want for Christmas?*"

Belldandy whispered, rubbing Sora's bottom as though he needed any further hints regarding her interests. Below them in the valley Urd caught up to Takumi at the base of a large tree.

"Have I changed very much?" she said throwing back her hair.

"You mean since that first day when you tried to kill me?"

She pouted. "No, you're still the same woman. The same one who took pity on me in that club and allowed me to share in her adventures. Just grown more beautiful," he said kissing her.

The days that Fall seemed magical yet passed quickly. All too quickly. He didn't realize it yet, but there would be nights in the future that Takumi would sit thinking of nothing else, going over every detail in his mind - what they wore, what they said, how they laughed. He would go over each frame, trying to piece together what led them to that day, pondering what if , *what if* . . . But in the end it came down only to this: there was a time before the incident - and a time after it. That was how he looked at it. Perhaps the only way he could without it consuming him. Everything from before he sealed away in some dark corner of his mind, safe from the rest of the world. At least from the world as it was now.

## *Fallow*

The Christmas season had descended upon them in haste, and with it everyone's plans to get their shopping done. Only Belldandy seemed to be making any real progress, walking casually that day down the boulevards of Tokyo alone, searching past window after window looking for the ideal gift. Close to lunch time she stopped in to a shop searching the shelves when her phone rang. She reached her hand down into one of her long pockets wrangling up the phone. "Hello this is Belldandy's phone," she said proudly, still practicing her answer. "*Oh it's you,*" she replied surprised. "*I just thought -*," but as the urgent jumble of words spilled out assaulting her she began to understand that something was horribly wrong. She turned her head listening, looking out over the city in disbelief. Everything seemed to move in slow motion now as her eyes swept toward the clock tower, watching as the second hand closed in on the hour. She had less than a minute. She was in motion now, the phone falling from her hands as she jumped onto the counter running, her body shattering the front window as she turned dropping on the street. With no time to deflect the oncoming transport truck she hit it directly, striking with such force that the metal frame began to buckle, its rear axle rising as she forced it down, stretching skyward toward the harbor. She had lived in this world quietly for more than 3 years. She knew now all that was over. But it didn't matter. She hurtled toward the ship at terrific speed knowing now she had only seconds. She spotted the men on the deck reaching for the device. She was too late.

She made the decision in an instant as the steel of the ship's hull deformed horribly collapsing in on itself under the terrible power of a first-class goddess. Fuel exploded under the force, its energy radiating outward as she fought to control it with everything she had. Above her three Valkyries appeared overhead as though the sky itself had unwrapped them with Lind at their lead. "*PIONA JARN!!*" Belldandy shouted. "*What?!*"

"*MELT THE STEEL!!*" she cried as the two beside her drove the molten form as Lind stabilized its outer surface, the whole of group of them instantly deflecting it toward the volcanic summit of Oshima Island some 50 miles distant burying it into

## *Decent*

the crater. Belldandy's body fell, depleted along with Rota and Mist as they struck the ocean below.

Within an hour in the heart of Tokyo a messenger came in, delivering the report to the commissioner.

"What am I looking at?" he said leafing through the pages.

"The Office of Accident Response says a neutron signature."

"Do we know where?"

"There appears to have been a sizable electromagnetic pulse along the waterfront coinciding with the event. A number of transformers in the area have been blown out."

"Photographic data?"

"Nothing yet probably due to the electrical interference."

"Eyewitness accounts?"

"Most report an explosion, and there's evidence of pressure damage. But we haven't turned up a single person with a solid memory yet. I'm told it may be related to the EM pulse."

"And the neutron signal?"

"They've scanned the area twice but report no evidence of any ongoing radioactive signatures. However . . ."

"Yes?"

"It appears we're missing a ship."

The commissioner bowed his head. "Cordon off the area and search for debris. For now we'll report it as a possible explosion but no more. Such a signal, and so close to the city center. *Kyuushin iishou - nine deaths, one life as they say.*"

As everywhere else, the news that evening did not go unnoticed in the Morisato household. "Keiichi, did you say Big-sis was late?" Skuld asked leaning forward in the tea room with Sora.

"Why?"

"They say there was some kind of explosion on the waterfront." Keiichi came in picking up his phone.

"She's not answering." Skuld picked up Sora coming beside him. "I've got a bad feeling about this," he said calling again.

"Call Urd. Maybe she knows something," suggested Skuld.

"*She's not answering either,*" he said growing anxious. "Did they go shopping together today?"

## *Fallow*

"I don't think so. She said something about going out to look for Takumi." At that moment there came a knock at the door.

"That must be them -," said Skuld jumping up.

"Why would they knock?" Keiichi said shaking his head.

They slid open the door to find Ex and Ere standing in the porchlight surrounded by a small group of Valkyries. The look in their eyes did not reassure him.

"Is - Urd here?" one asked finally

"No." he replied. "Where is Belldandy?"

"We really need to talk to Urd," they said once more.

"Where is Belldandy?" he demanded.

"Where's my Big-sis!" Skuld shouted.

Amid the standoff there came a sound at the gate as Urd and Takumi arrived. The two seemed quiet, as though they had been walking and talking for some time. As they came in the visitors began to coalesce around them. "Urd, we . . ."

"We know. *We're coming now*," she replied.

"What's going on?!" asked Keiichi.

"I see. So you haven't told them," said Urd.

"Of course not . . .," Takumi replied beside her.

"We've only just arrived!" argued Pogn.

Keiichi listened to their back and forth with numb detachment. He had been with them here for the last three years. Yet none of it mattered. Only the girl he had traveled here with mattered.

"Is Belldandy alright?!" he demanded.

Urd and Takumi looked at one another. "She's okay Keiichi."

"Then why are *they* here?"

"*Because they have her under arrest*," replied Takumi.

"What?!" Keiichi and Skuld cried as chaos broke out.

"Tai, what did I say about not inflaming things?" insisted Urd.

"You thought this would all just be ignored?!" replied Rota.

"What exactly is she accused of?" asked Keiichi.

"*Apparently she didn't kill enough people*," replied Takumi.

"Tai!"

"Allegedly," he added.

"I'm going!" shouted Skuld.

"It's a legal proceeding you can't go," reminded Urd.

"*We didn't even have to come here*," insisted Mist.

## Decent

"You mean you can just black bag her?! Nice legal strategy - for The Heavens!" muttered Takumi.

"You said she didn't kill *enough* people. Did . . . she kill someone?" asked Keiichi.

"It's complicated," Urd replied brushing past him.

"Then I'm going with you," he said following her.

"*He's specifically* not invited," Mist said pointedly.

"You get the feeling this is about more than just an explosion?"

Takumi murmured to Keiichi.

"*We need a moment* -," Urd said disappearing inside the house with the rest of the Morisato household. "Keiichi, Tai and I will see what can be done. You and Skuld stay here with Sora."

"Why is he going?" Keiichi said looking at Takumi.

"He appears to have information material to the case."

"*Material to the case?*"

"He says we need to get to Belldandy as soon as possible to tell her things before it's too late."

"What kind of *things*?"

They looked at one another. "We can't tell you that Keiichi,"

Takumi replied.

"Why?!"

"Because doing so would endanger your and Belldandy's future. Now we need to go. We're wasting time."

. . .

Arriving in the gallery of the Main Hall, Urd and Takumi followed their escort until they were led up behind the group holding Belldandy on the ground level. Urd rankled at seeing her in restraints. Even in profile she could tell the strain the events had had on her. "I still don't understand why you didn't tell Keiichi at least what you told me," Urd said as she and Takumi crowded together on the floor with many others.

"Because if he found out about the dead he'd try to save them - and get killed as a result. Thus no Keiichi and Belldandy."

"*Are we ready to proceed?*" called Villi, standing above them on the balcony before the congregation. From the rear of the hall the goddess was brought forward, past the stunned faces of the crowd to stand before the upper council.

## *Fallow*

*“Belldandy. You stand accused of 122 counts premature termination of human life and attempted interference of the Terran timeline. How do you plead?”*

She gathered her strength replying to the crowd. *“Guilty,”* she said as startled gasps broke from a number of those assembled. *“Your defense?”* asked the councilor.

*“I have none,”* she replied. *“None that you would accept.”*

Takumi moved forward behind her but she shook her head.

The councilor shot an uncomfortable sideways glance to the high council and Odin, who sat motionless with the rest of them. *“Please explain your actions,”* he said.

Belldandy looked up at the councilor. *“As is no doubt clear by now, I drew extra-dimensional energy in to melt the structure, acting accordance with the level of threat I observed; resulting in those charges now before the court.”* Urd could hear murmuring in the gallery regarding her bearing, particularly among the older members.

*“Why not just remove the perceived threat?”* the councilor asked.

*“The men? It would still be a violation. Besides, I did not know if what I beheld was the only trigger, and its components are dangerous on their own. No, the mechanism needed to be destroyed completely and sealed. Since I did not know if it would explode I attempted to create secondary shielding with the means available.”*

*“Secondary shielding?”*

*“Reforming the steel in conjunction with the surrounding salt water to act as an X-ray protector and neutron moderator.”*

*“The water depth was only 60 feet, it would have done little.”*

*“If it had triggered as intended nothing I would have done would have made much difference,”* she agreed. *“Rather it was a measure to protect the population from harm during compressive reformatting; as I had only seconds.”*

*“I see. Anything else to add?”* he asked.

She stood silent, alone in the gallery.

The counselor shook his head, *“You have heard it from the defendant’s own testimony. On her own prerogative she willingly interfered with the causal development of a sentient species. This is not her first encounter with such charges. And*

## Decent

within her explanation lie reasoning we have heard previously; from members of the Demon Realm,” he said glancing at Urd.

“*Subtle . . .*,” Takumi quipped.

“*Quiet*,” Urd responded.

Above them the councilor bowed his head regrettably,

“Belldandy, under the law we have no choice but ask for immediate dispossession of your powers and internment in a suitable facility for the duration of your sentence.”

To his left Takumi saw Lind's eyes subtly shift to her own group of Valkyries as the order was read out, their movement slowly beginning to flank Belldandy. Takumi turned his head to the right waiting. But a subtle shake of Urd's head in the corner of his eye dispelled any romantic notions he may have had regarding their potential interference. It was this more than anything that told him it was all really happening. As the court officers came forward to take hold of Belldandy, he walked into the aisle. Urd spotted him but it was too late.

. . .

For Keiichi, the days passed interminably. Then on the third day he saw light over the temple. Skuld saw the light too and they ran toward the source. “What does it mean?!” he asked. “We’ll see,” Skuld replied heading behind the temple with him. They spotted Urd in the meadow walking slowly toward them. “What happened Urd?!” she asked.

She walked past Skuld saying nothing. “Belldandy’s trial is over,” she replied turning her back to Keiichi.

“What was their decision?” he asked.

She looked down unable to face him. “Taking into account her past service and deeds, and the specific circumstances of the incident, they elected to give her a light sentence. One year . . . *for every human life.*”

Keiichi felt sick. “So the time?”

“*One hundred twenty-two years*,” Urd replied swallowing.

He knelt down unsteady. That was it. He sat silently under the trees trying to hear the wind. To hear anything. But he could not. “Can I go - *see her*?” he asked hopefully.

She turned putting her arms around him. “*I’m sorry*,” she said shaking her head. “The sentence has already been carried out.”



## *Fallow*

He stood in the meadow in shock. It had happened. His worst fear finally realized. The one he'd pushed to the back of his mind all this time. She was gone. And she was not coming back. He would never see her again. Numbly he cast his eyes toward the temple. The place that would never be home again. The world seemed to spin, as his words tumbled out. "How – *how could they do that?!*" he cried.

"She decided the fate of 122 people. On her own. That's not something we're allowed to do."

"But those people would have died *regardless* of whether she acted or not!"

"That's not the way they saw it. Belldandy interfered with something we're not supposed to interfere with – the natural course of human development. Something she's come perilously close to previously. That fact weighed heavily on the minds of the council given her current status. I know it seems unimaginably cruel. But from their frame of reference – do you have any idea how many innocent people they've seen die throughout human history? Didn't you ever wonder why they don't help them directly? The awful truth is, if an outside force solves your problems, you are never truly free. You're nothing. We can show, demonstrate and guide. But they won't prevent the actions mankind inflicts upon itself because all that horror, in time, leads them to become more than they were. Growing. Learning. Establishing. In their own right."

"*Assuming they don't annihilate themselves first,*" he said.

"-Assuming they don't annihilate themselves first," she replied.

"Sounds great. But I don't buy it for a minute. Clearly neither did Bell. Perhaps she knew there was something between 'kind parent' and 'throwing people into the water to swim. If they don't, well hey, better luck next time!' Do they really believe we don't have the right to fight for those we love? Or is there something else you're not telling me Urd?"

"Like what?"

"Belldandy told me after her last encounter with the court system how *difficult* it was for *some* people to accept the nature of our relationship; particularly given the nature of her return. I hope this wasn't simply a means to eliminate that problem."

"What are you saying?"

## Decent

“-Because a group like that doesn’t deserve our respect Urd.”

“Now you sound like Takumi!”

“Well I – ?. It was only now he saw Takumi was nowhere to be seen. Where is Takumi?” he asked concerned.

“Oh, don’t even talk to me about that idiot!!” she snapped.

“Why? What happened?!” he asked beginning to fear the worst. She began to pace. “I must have told him at least a *dozen* times how to behave in the Great Hall. *But did he listen?* No of course not!”

“What happened Urd?!”

“Let’s just say that when the sentence was read out he . . . did not react well. This was followed by some yelling, some use of words not normally heard in the Great Hall, several accusations concerning parentage, and an impromptu discussion of the merits of the justice system in the Heavens versus the Demon Realm – none of which was terribly well received. He is currently confined.”

“Oh no.”

But Urd continued muttering, going over it all in her mind:

“I told him, *they’re not looking for input - be quiet!*” But then Ve had to say “humanity must learn its own lessons.”

That was it! Off he went, shouting like a maniac!”

*‘Do you know how many people resided within the blast radius? Millions. Millions of innocent people. Children! Really? It doesn’t matter to you?! What kind of @%#\* sh\*\* show are you running yo here?!’*

“So they grabbed him?”

“Oh no, he kept going . . . Even after I told him to shut up!”

*‘I thought you folks knew everything? Did you know about this? If you did why didn’t you act? Are you complicit? I mean, I’m told there’s an Earth Help Center – where’s the help?! Or does it only hand out maps? Is this your idea of guidance –stand back and watch entire cities burn?! And if it is - if you’ve decided that humanity has just become too much trouble - I don’t blame you. We’ve fallen short - too many times. But if that’s the case - if that’s truly how you feel - if you just don’t care anymore, please . . . please just let those who still believes in us . . . anyone with an ounce of compassion left - to do what they can . . . and help us. Don’t put them in*

## *Fallow*

*prison. Belldandy sacrificed 122 people . . . to save more than half a million. A fact she'll live with it for the rest of her life."*

Now it was Odin's voice that thundered in the Great Hall:

"The reasons have all been explained - even if they are beyond your full understanding. Like all your kind, you naively wish for someone else to fix all of your failures, all your mistakes - ensuring you make even more lethal ones in the future. Like a child you consider only your own immediate injustices, whereas we to look to the survival of worlds."

*"-One in which the individual doesn't matter. I'm beginning to see why some of your greatest members chose to leave!"*

Hushed silence met his comment in the gallery. Urd shivered as Odin's eyes passed over her, a sinking feeling that Sora was now the only thing keeping the two of them from real harm.

*"That - was not the right thing to say,"* she muttered. But of course the guards were already on their way to take him away.

*"God's righteous men,"* Takumi observed sarcastically on their approach. "I thought we were having a discussion. Or is that something else you disapprove of up here?"

"You mistake our role," replied Ve. *"We are not the ones responsible for improving humanity. You are."*

"I see. So the real issue isn't that 122 innocent people died. It's that more than half a million didn't! You know I've always wondered whether you folks were 'all good' or 'all powerful'. I know now it's certainly not the former!"

*"Shut up Sato!"* Lind snapped taking hold of him.

"What are you going to do - kill me *again*?" he asked.

"Killing you wouldn't inform anything, and would matter even less," observed Villi. "Rather reflecting upon your actions may open your eyes," he said, as with a wave he was led away.

"I know your faces!" he threatened, comically pointing as Urd shook her head as he was dragged away.

Those assembled in the hall emptied out until at last only Odin remained in the upper gallery. *"We aren't even all powerful,"* he observed retiring.

...

Several days later, a squad of Valkyries appeared in the courtyard of the Tariki Hongan temple, predictably dragging a

## Decent

package behind them. "Sign for this," Rota said sarcastically, tossing Takumi in front of them.

"And try to keep it out of trouble," added Mist behind her. Takumi brushed himself off straightening up. "Hi guys - did you forget about me?! *In prison!*" he shouted to Urd.

"That wasn't prison," said the ranking Valkyrie. "It was a holding room - *where we keep lost children!*"

Takumi stiffened at their chuckling, "That it does explain a few things -," he muttered. "Well . . . in that case the toys weren't very educational!" he said folding his arms marching off. His eyes met Urd's but he passed her saying nothing, instead going out to the back of the temple in search of Keiichi. He found him in the garage working aimlessly on the bike.

"*Keiichi.*"

Morisato nodded.

"We're going to get her back. You know that right?" he said.

"I know," Keiichi replied weakly without looking up.

"No I mean it. *We-are-going-to-get-her-back!*"

"Of course," he replied focusing on his work.

"I'm serious. We'll get her back whatever it takes. Even if we have to tear down the gates themselves! Don't think we won't Keiichi. Not for one second. You hear me?!"

"Of course," he said continuing.

Takumi watched him retreat into silence.

"*You shouldn't have said that,*" muttered the voice behind him as he left the garage. He turned his head glaring at Urd.

"Do you hear me?" she said as he brushed past her heading for the house. "You shouldn't give him false hope! You think that's helping? He's breaking inside. Don't you know that?!"

"Then we must give him something to re-forge his body!"

Takumi replied testily.

"Are we going to talk about what's really bothering you?"

"Why? You'll only lie to me," he replied angrily.

She stamped her foot to the ground. "*I did not lie!*"

He turned crossed his arms knowingly.

"Alright! We're *almost* indestructible! *Almost*. It's *theoretically* possible that collision with high energy plasma could cause us significant injury. But that's not really a normal circumstance down here is it? I mean I didn't *specifically* say

## Fallow

Sora shouldn't play inside a supercollider either, but I don't really think I needed to!"

"What I heard up there didn't sound very theoretical . . ."

"Look in her present state with all the protections Bell and I have put on her, Sora could literally step in front of the Shinkansen and though I'm sure the experience would make quite an impression on her, she would not irrevocably harmed. Thus I stand by my original statement that nothing in this world can harm us."

"I see. And what about Keiichi? How much did you really tell him about what happened up there?"

"I gave him the broad outline. I told him you acted like a complete idiot."

"You often seem to provide 'broad outlines'," he huffed.

"What did he say?"

"About the same thing you did," she scowled.

"Because we both know it's BS."

"It's not BS, and it's not some random rule!"

"Really? Because *goddess wish granting* would seem to run counter to the 'we can't interfere even if large numbers of people are being killed' doctrine they were busy defending up there."

"Hey idiot, did it ever occur to you that you might not understand everything regarding reasons behind such actions?"

"How could I when I can't even get a straight answer out of my partner?!" he countered.

She was about to say something but lowered her voice as Skuld and Sora approached. "She just woke up," Skuld said handing her into Urd's arms. "Look who's back sweat pea - that pain in the ass we sometimes have to deal with," Urd cooed to Sora.

"*Prison!*" Sora pronounced happily touching his nose.

"It wasn't - oh nevermind!" he said.

"The point is, goddess wishes aren't like rubs on a genie's lamp. They're more like counter-waves patterns in a pond."

"Huh?"

"Remember when you said wishes were 'granted all the time' and I told you they weren't? I said a wish was only granted under very special circumstances?"

"Probably not -," he replied talking to Sora.

## Decent

“Well if you had you’d know their true purpose.”

“Which is?”

“Wishes are only granted under conditions where they counter some *non-natural* element in the Terran system.”

“Non-natural? Wait, *you mean . . . ?!*”

“That’s right.”

“*So every wish* granted here on Earth is an attempt by the Heavens to correct something from the Demon Realm?!”

“Technically correct *any* non-natural element which unduly influences Terran.”

“But then Keiichi’s wish - to be with a goddess like her forever. Why does a goddess need to be with Keiichi? Did a demon do something to Keiichi in the past? Is Keiichi a demon?! Why would they even allow such a wish?! Don’t they want Bell and Keiichi NOT to be together?”

“Perhaps doing so creates even more ripples in the future, things they can’t control, or promotes greater chaos,” Urd suggested.

“Or if they weren’t together, maybe Belldandy would eventually perform some action that . . . *or you*. I’ve always considered you might be a potential world-ender. But in either case they no longer appear to be concerned,” he mused.

“Maybe there are additional conditions controlling such events. Perhaps the current state of affairs opens new paths.”

“Like if Belldandy’s in prison she can’t go out and do whatever she was going to do? And what about Keiichi’s wish with Peorth – granting his deepest desires?”

“Well that one’s easy, since we now know it was simply a means to further his original wish.”

“But why all the subterfuge? If the gods want something done, why rely on conforming wishes to achieve it? Why not just execute the desired order? Why leave it up to us?”

“I have a feeling a system like that kind of defeats the purpose of independent growth. But in cases of big causality-bending events – I’m pretty sure they would.”

“Independent growth! *They* choose which wishes get granted. *They’re* the ones pulling the strings,” he scoffed.

“No they’re restoring order - in a way that doesn’t dramatically upset the system.”

## *Fallow*

“You seem remarkably trusting of them today.”

“And *you* seemed quite close to Belldandy during the trial. And angry. So how about *you* provide *me* with some straight answers for a change!”

“Meaning?”

“*Lithium deuteride, 150 kilotons, half a million dead?* Those *estimates* you were spouting up there seem awfully specific! What really happened Tai? You always said there would be honesty between us. Isn’t that what we promised each other?” He looked at her directly, the wind gracing her flowing white hair. “*You already know -*,” he said finally. “We were all at the temple, all of us except Belldandy who was in the city. She survived the blast but . . . it’s difficult to even talk about the rest. And it wasn’t half a million. It was a hundred thousand . . . *a hundred thousand people gone instantly . . . with half a million more succumbing in the weeks that followed.*”

Urd shuddered. “You and I - we stood outside the temple watching the fireball, its fingers reaching to the troposphere.” He knelt down beside her as though suddenly tired.

“So that was why you knew. You knew because for you - *it had all it had happened before.*”

“Yes. Everything became paralyzed. Between nations things began to happen - *quickly*. Belldandy made it back though, back to the temple. At that point the three of you decided the only course of action was to use your powers to send back a messenger into the past.”

“So Bell, Skuld and I used our capabilities as Norns to send *you* back into the past. Why didn’t Keiichi go?”

“Belldandy was hurt and he would not leave her. If one of *you* were seriously hurt in the attempt, we would never have another chance. You said I could make it. Things were . . . chaotic. I won’t pretend I understood what was within the rings the three of you drew in the courtyard, but Skuld said something about the size of the phenomena disrupting the stability of the temporal field. As such you couldn’t send me back with the normal level of accuracy. Since time was of the essence you decided to send me back as close to the event as possible.”

## Decent

“Why didn’t we send you back to an even earlier point, to give you more time?”

“Skuld said the farther back we went, the greater the potential for inducing variable changes. Given the stakes you decided you couldn’t risk even slight variations in context or place. You must have been right. At least *this* time Belldandy saved the city - despite her own horrible outcome. So you see, I was responsible for what happened to her.”

“You mean you were the reason she knew where and when?”

“Yes. Except I get to go home to you and Sora; whereas Keiichi will never see her again.”

“Which was why you wanted to get to her this time as soon as possible,” she said putting her arm around him.

“Yes. Obviously there was no reason for her to be *intercepted* the first time. I didn’t anticipate for her to fall into the Upper Realm’s hands so quickly during this current iteration.”

“You mean you were hoping the three of us could convene one more time, using knowledge gained from this iteration to change things more - *subtly* in a further loop.”

“Given the situation I think there are multiple ways we could have achieved that outcome knowing what we know now. I wish Belldandy would have let me tell them about the role I played - how she knew; it might have mitigated things for her.”

“She declined because she knew it wouldn’t have altered her punishment. She knew it was a violation either way; and could only have caused trouble for us.”

“And now they’ll never see each other again.”

“Never is a long time. When Belldandy gets out – we’ll work to make things right.

*“One hundred and twenty-two years from now . . .”*

“Yes, and of course it is terrible. But we must support them and give them hope. And use the time to plan.”

“Wouldn’t they just block anything we’d do?”

“Belldandy will have served her time at that point. She can’t be re-arrested unless she performs some new infraction. And there are all *kinds* of reasons Norns might need to visit the past.”

“You mean we could work a deal with the Demon Realm?”



## Fallow

“Or induce an effect so subtle it’s beyond any reasonable detection. Who can say? Perhaps even someone from the Heavens may help. But we have plenty of time to work on it.”

“Alternatively we could just try to *break her out* now . . .”

“*Sweet*. But you clearly have no idea what we’d be up against. The security where she is would be well beyond any of us.”

He frowned leaning against the tree. And now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think they will *reset* things?”

“You mean wipe out the city? I don’t think so,” Urd replied.

“Why? They clearly don’t care about human life.”

“I’m not sure that’s fair, but essentially it would create several problems for them. One: Belldandy has been punished.

Changing the timeline now raises the technical issue that she would not have performed any crime under such circumstances; and so would have to be released.”

“So? Why wouldn’t they do that?”

“The reality is that the imposed punishment also solves the thorny problem of the relationship between she and Keiichi.”

“You’re kidding me. That’s cold. Do they care so much?”

“It’s not the first time they’ve tried to separate them. It happened once before, in the time before I knew you. They have a long memory, and usually get what they want. At a minimum it pushes the problem further down the road, making it much easier to deal with.”

“As in – aww *if only humans lived longer*. . .”

“Perhaps. But I still have one question. When you came back this time; why did you seek out Bell? Why not me?”

He looked out over the forest. “She was closer,” he said finally.

“*Tai* . . .”

“Alright maybe feelings did factor into it. But we’ve never had so much as we have now. I didn’t know how it would turn out.”

“I see now why you were so angry in the Great Hall. You blame yourself. You *knew* the council members weren’t going to do anything – because you’d already seen it.”

“Yeah,” he nodded. They walked on to the store discussing their plans. As the weeks passed Sora grew day by day. But none of their talks would bring Belldandy back, and nothing they did could change the fact that she was gone. Indeed, in

*Decent*

those days none of them knew it would be years before any of them would see Belldandy again.

## *The End of All Things*

The years took their toll on Tariki Hongan temple. On all of its inhabitants really. First of course was the shock they had to deal with from the Nekomi Tech members when informed of Belldandy's absence. They had decided to tell them that she had been forced to return to her home across the sea; and that she would not be coming back. This was followed by several months of club members encouraging Keiichi to go after her with all manner of impractical suggestions. However most eventually accepted the situation when Keiichi told them, "The truth is, I can't get to where she is now." The men in particular made their own interpretation of his words and that seemed to put an end to it. But Belldandy had been a big part of the auto club's shared adventure and without her; well it just wasn't the same. People seemed to have less to talk to one another other about, priorities changed as the clubhouse . . . began to grow empty. Only Megumi seemed dissatisfied with the explanations as given. "Was it - something about your time at the hospital?" she asked. "Something you could not get over?" Through it all Keiichi remained silent, for he could not tell her the truth. He could not tell any of them. Could not say what he longed to tell them, that things had been going so well for the two of them . . .

As for the temple new patterns began to emerge there too.

"*It's going to be longer than I thought,*" Urd remarked one day to Takumi as she sat in the shade atop the temple wall.

"What do you mean?"

"It's Keiichi. He's changing," she replied. "He's . . . it's like he's performing; not really living."

"Can you blame him? He lives quietly now it's true, but I think she still keeps him going. It's why he continues to keep up the temple, I believe. I see him walking, talking to himself as he fixes things. *What would Belldandy think,* I hear him mutter. At least Megumi still comes by once a week. And some

## *The End of All Things . . .*

of the others. I think I saw Sayoko's car last week, though it didn't stop."

"And Skuld?"

"Yes it's true, she does seem to have gone into full-on teenager mode. Hard to get a word out of her these days, coming and going as she does like a waif in the night, hiding out with Sentaro in the shadows of the riverbank. But she comes home eventually, and I see Keiichi talk to her now and then - so she's probably alright."

But the truth was they were not the only ones who were changing. Every few weeks Takumi would suggest some new plan or approach which would be quickly shot down by Urd, explaining the complications deeming it unworkable. Weeks would go by, then another plan would be hatched, only to meet the same fate. And each time he returned he was more and more obsessed than the time than before - and with it something else grew. Keiichi could see it. A lowering of his attention to things in the here and now, and of care to those around him.

Fall that year found Urd and Takumi walking side by side down the path leading behind the temple. "A grim memorial," he observed as they walked. "It's been two years."

"I don't need reminding!" she said suddenly. "Do you think I don't keep track of every day myself?"

"Here comes Keiichi, let's not fight," he said.

More and more often now Keiichi heard the raised voices of Takumi and Urd in corners of the temple, disagreements on approach, wondering if he was somehow at the center of it. Things came to a head when he caught Takumi and Skuld attempting to duplicate gateway setpoints and passwords within the system. As Takumi and Urd began another fight, Keiichi dragged Skuld outside, "*Are you crazy?! What do you think you're doing?!*" he shouted.

"Why?! Why won't you let me try?!" she cried.

He put his hands on either side of her dark hair, "Don't you understand what could happen? I don't want to lose anyone else! What would I do if something happened to you?"

## *Fallow*

Skuld stared back into his concerned eyes and began to cry, leaning against him, letting him hug her as she broke down. “*We need to look out for each other -*,” he said to her nodding. Things inside were also coming to a boil. “I can’t believe you drew her into this. Don’t you even think about your responsibilities?!”

“I think about nothing else,” he replied.

“You don’t seem to – or about anything lately! Those gateways guarding Belldandy are sentient. They can’t be spoofed by the approaches you two were attempting.

“I didn’t realize you were such an expert.”

“Do you think this is a game? Do you know what could happen? You have a child! I thought we agreed on what we were going to do?”

“So we’re really not going to talk about it?”

“About what?”

“Your mother,” he replied. “This *has* to be her work.”

“First: The High Council would have corrected any such extra-corporal influence. Second: In case you’ve forgotten, following Keiichi’s brush with death Hild is forbidden from doing *anything* that interferes with him or Belldandy – forever! And beyond that, why do it now? What would she have to gain? Inciting a war doesn’t make it easier to see her grandchild.”

“You don’t think someone at her level could have done what *we’re* talking about doing?!”

“Maybe we should go see her,” said Urd after a moment.

“You think she’d tell us anything?”

“I think it’s harder to lie when you’re playing with your grandchild,” she replied.

“Just as long as it’s in our plane. The last time she visited she talked about how the Demon Realm would be a much better environment for Sora.”

“I think she was kidding.”

“Do you?” he replied.

A few days later Urd, Sora and Takumi found themselves lying at anchor off the Nigishima Bay lighthouse.

“*Is she meeting us here?*” Takumi inquired of one of Hild’s rather stoic attendants as he paced the deck of the boat.

## *The End of All Things . . .*

“She’s just arrived, *I feel her*,” Urd replied. A moment later the queen of all Demonkind appeared from below deck. Moving gracefully Urd watched her quietly sheath her weapon before appearing before them. “Expecting trouble?” she asked. “I’ve just been traveling a bit,” Hild replied picking up Sora. The day was pleasant enough, the air not too hot and the sky clear with Sora running around the deck to see what new forms of marine life Hild could entice to circle around the boat as they traveled up the coast. “It’s a lovely day,” Hild observed, scanning the green coast as she passed between her attendants. “We wanted to ask . . . *about Belldandy*,” Urd said at last. “Now that’s a name I would have thought I would not hear again,” Hild replied playfully tossing Sora into the air. “So it seems she can retrieve herself from the higher planes, but not prison?” she asked brightly. “She’s not *trying* to escape,” Takumi replied testily. Urd stepped in front of her catching Sora. “So you *do* know something about it?” “Why? Are you concerned something is not as advertised? But they do such a good job of advertising up there,” she teased playfully biting Sora’s hands. “I’m simply saying an individual of your – *experience* would likely have considerable knowledge concerning any potential source of *irregularities*,” Urd replied patiently. “You know - like the kind of *reprehensible vermin* who would even think of doing such a thing?” Takumi added through gritted teeth. “Who indeed?” she replied looking at Sora. As the boat rounded the peninsula, the shockwave echoed suddenly, causing them all to look at the sheer coast as a huge chunk calved away disappearing into the sea. The sheer volume of the mass caused a titanic wave of seawater to rise before them like a huge monstrous beast. Takumi heard Hild’s shout as he turned seeing a second monstrous wave bearing down on them now from the opposite direction. *Of course, the shockwave moved at the speed of sound striking the opposing wall to generate the second wave, he thought.* He reached out but the boat was already tipping, sliding down the face of the massive wave. He hit the railing and then the water, landing

## *Fallow*

with the rest of them in the deadly churning sea. Instinctively he caught his breath before being dragged under, the swirling torrent dragging him down as though from unseen hands. He pulled with all this strength trying to reach Urd. He saw her rolling, disappearing into the blackness as he tried to reach her. But the tumbling currents of the great waves were too much. They were becoming separated as he felt his breath starting to go. Then a second powerful blow radiated through the water, a feeling of compression passing through him as all turbulence around him ceased. The waters simply stopped - their region of the sea becoming as though a great eerie pond. Sensing light, he looked above himself to see Hild floating in the waters above him, surrounded by six of her retainers all illuminated like points of glowing light. Was he starting to hallucinate? He felt the tug and began to rise, higher and higher until he broke the surface of the water sputtering.

He tried to make sense of the shouting around him and the commands being given. From above something passed between he and the rest of them. Gone was the clear day, replaced now by dense fog around them, an effect he assumed of the water cavitation he could see at his periphery. Thirty feet behind him Urd's head broke surface of the water as a beam of light above evaporated the water perilously close to them. Urd raised her hand as instantly through the distant haze he saw the lightning connect, seeming to evaporate the target in the sky as objects plummeted to the ground.

"Get them out of here!" he heard Hild command behind him.

"Sora!" Urd shouted.

"*I've got her,*" Hild called as Takumi realized now that many voices seemed to be approaching, though in the fog he could not tell their distance. They seemed to be coming from all sides, warriors from the sounds of it.

"*Ready!*" came a shout on his left.

"*I've got her!*" Urd yelled at his side.

He saw light coming from the water below them now, the sigil's symbols growing clearer as it rose. An instant later they were gone.

## *The End of All Things . . .*

As Keiichi and Skuld sat in the calm of the veranda that afternoon their peace was shattered as the group suddenly sprang from the waters of the pond.

“What the hell was that?!” Takumi shouted jumping out.

“Tai I don’t know!” Urd replied pulling Sora from the pool.

“Did Hild just try to kill us?! Was that some sort of lesson?!”

“If she did she’s now one member less! Skuld please take Sora inside,” Urd said pulling herself out.

“Those warriors, what was that?!”

“I don’t think they weren’t there for us.”

“That’s does it! We’re obviously not safe here. Sora was almost fish food today!”

“And what would you suggest?” she said heading for the house.

“We talked about it before Urd. But I want you to do it now.”

“You’d like that wouldn’t you?!” she snapped turning to him.

“What are you saying?!”

“Isn’t the *real reason* you want us to go is because you’re feeling weighted down? Trapped. With a responsibility that’s more than you imagined. Or wanted! You resent the fact that you’re longer free to move as you once did, with Sora and I holding you back!”

“What the hell are you talking about?!” he fumed. “That’s not true. How could you even say that! *Look at me!*”

In that moment they should have stopped; to think. But they were too similar in that respect.

“*Of course it is!* Now I’m a mother and you don’t see me the same way. That’s why you’re different. I’m not as desirable as I once was!”

“That’s nuts! You haven’t changed at all – *literally!*”

“I’m just the old ball and chain -,” she continued, “the person you have to come home to!”

“Whatever this is Urd stop it. *I MEAN IT!*”

“Just admit it! *You don’t love me the way you used - !!!*”

The slap came suddenly turning her head. He hadn’t meant to. He hadn’t meant to do anything that day. He didn’t know why he was angry. Maybe it was Sora, maybe it was Belldandy, maybe it was himself. He had meant to do things differently; perhaps for a long time now. To say different things . . . kinder,



## *Fallow*

gentler things. But he was here now and its effects before him. In that moment he saw her eyes - a look of shock but something else too, confusion; hurt by the one person she knew would never hurt her. It was that which cut him open to the core, freezing him in place unable to move, a cold piercing pain far more devastating than any physical harm could do. “Urd . . .,” he stammered looking at her stunned, “*I - I’m sorr - UGHH!*” he groaned slamming to the ground as Keiichi tackled him. He looked up as his punch caught him by surprise. “Okay I deserved that,” he said shaking his head but –! *HEY!*” he cried as Keiichi punched him again, causing his head to snap back, his mouth spitting up blood. “Alright Keiichi I am really starting to - !” he growled after receiving a further blow. Tossing Morisato to one side he rolled on all fours pouncing, raising his hand only to stop when he saw Skuld’s shocked expression. He turned away from them to search the house, but realized Urd was already gone.

All through that day Takumi maintained his silent vigil in the courtyard, sitting forlornly in the outer gardens as the skies darkened. By afternoon the clouds had given way to light rain. He sat in the courtyard listening to the echoes of distant thunder trying to search for any clue about Urd until darkness finally enveloped him.

The next morning the skies had not improved as he sat beneath a tree that had served as his nights’ refuge. The rain had stopped but large clouds continued to loom overhead, blown by mountain winds. He sat patiently by the temple wall hearing echoes of thunder in the distance. Keiichi and Skuld kept away. Alone he recounted everything that had happened in his mind, noticing how desolate the temple looked now under the grey skies. As light came on the next day he finally detected movement beyond him in the main temple grounds. He lifted his head but all that appeared out of the gray gloom were a group of Valkyries, seemingly appearing from nowhere by the main gate, standing before him like ghostly apparitions. Something in their appearance filled him with a sense of dread. “*Takumi Sato,*” Lind called pulling back her cloak. “I would have words with you,” she said.

## *The End of All Things . . .*

"*Then speak,*" he replied irritably, looking out from the shadows of the tree.

"It concerns - Urd," she said as the Valkyries gathered close behind her. In his peripheral vision he saw Skuld and Keiichi come from inside the house.

"*Yes?*" he replied waiting.

"Perhaps we could speak - *over here?*" she said approaching.

"You're fine where are," he replied.

The Valkyries looked at one another uncertain as to how to proceed. "I'm sorry to tell you of this Takumi. But she . . . *she is gone,*" Lind said softly.

"Gone where?" he asked as rain fell silently around them.

The Valkyries shuffled looking toward the house. "*Her - that is to say her life energies . . . have dissipated,*" Lind tried again gently. Behind him he heard Skuld gasp as Keiichi stepped out from under the porch into the full shadow of the rain.

Takumi ignored her. In that moment he ignored everything, her words, his own trembling hands, the cries on the steps behind him. Everything but the rain. He put his mind there. *It can't be true. No of course not. How could it be? How dare she.* He wiped his face finding his voice, rising to come out from under the tree. "I'm surprised she went to the effort of pulling you all into this," he stammered. "We've had our problems of late it's true, but if she wanted to stay out she should have just said so. If she wants to stay away, she should say that too. If she's mad, if she wants to me to suffer – let her say it straight out!" he shouted to the heavens. "If she wants to stay out all night with her friends – so be it! There is no need for such antics!" he spat beginning to shiver.

"*Why does he not understand?*" Sigrun whispered to Lind. She shook her head unsure.

He wandered out blindly now into the courtyard continuing to search the heavens, "You win Urd!" he cried. "*You win. I admit it, I was wrong. About so many things . . .*" he said rambling. "You wanted to teach me - *and you have.* Now just come home Urd. *Please, just come home . . .*"

Keiichi stood in the rain, his eyes beginning to tear.

Takumi looked up at them doing his best to smile; a weak pathetic smile. "The truth is I don't even remember what I was

mad about . . . probably something stupid - some stupid thing," he said his own tears beginning to fall. "*Just please come home,*" he whispered. He seemed to waver, then drop to the ground. Keiichi rushed to his side. "Thank you for coming," he said over his shoulder. "We'll manage things from here. I'm sure you know the way out."

The group stood still unmoving, shifting uncomfortably in the courtyard. "Actually there is one more matter to discuss Keiichi Morisato," Lind replied reluctantly. "*Concerning Skuld.* In light of . . . the present situation, it is felt that she should, return with us."

"Keiichi? Don't let them take me!" Skuld said panicking.

"*I want to stay here with you!*" she cried.

Keiichi reached behind himself calmly motioning for Skuld come and take his hand, holding it tightly behind himself, between her and the Valkyries as they began to spread out.

"Of course I'm happy to let Skuld make whatever decision she is comfortable with," he said evenly, holding tightly to her.

"However as you can see it seems she would rather remain here with me at the temple at present."

"I'm afraid it's not that simple," Lind replied coming forward.

Keiichi felt Skuld's cold small hand tightening. "I see," he replied. "Well unless you're planning on reducing the members of this household by one more today we should probably leave it there. Because only way you're taking her from here is - *over my dead body.*"

"I'm sure you're aware we - *Morisato could you please tell your colleague to stop doing that!*" Lind shouted, as in their altercation Keiichi had lost track of Takumi, whom he now realized was attempting move into the periphery of her vision. She looked at him seeing it in his eyes, if not exactly a reason to live, then certainly something to do in lieu of dying.

Judging the distance between them Keiichi saw Lind move her hands uncharacteristically, motioning for calm.

"This is unwise Keiichi. We are only trying to help," she said.

"Thank you," he replied politely. "But we've had quite enough of your help over the last few years."

Keiichi took a step back as Takumi took one forward, both watching as Lind surveyed the courtyard. She knew of the

## *The End of All Things . . .*

problems in the heavens and didn't want to spread them further, which injuring either of them would likely do. "There is no need to settle the matter today," she said after consideration. "We will take our leave - for now." Keiichi watched Takumi stare at her, giving her the oddest look before stepping back. A moment later they were gone as silently as they had come.

"Keiichi what's going to happen?!" Skuld asked in tears. He put his arms around her taking in from the rain. "We're not going to worry about it right now. Go inside. I'll fix dinner in a little while," he said.

"Make no mistake Morisato," Takumi echoed bitterly from the trees. "They'll be back. Tomorrow. The day after. Who knows? But they will be back. And what then will you do?"

He came to stand beside him under the trees. "That doesn't matter right now. I want to talk to you. About Urd . . . and your daughter. *I'm so sorry.*"

"I know. But there is no need. She was your family too. And that part of us is . . . I just can't talk about it now. *Not now.*" "I'm sorry for punching you."

"No you're not. But it's fine. Because you were just doing what you thought was right. As you always do. I hope you can always do that for Skuld. Now let me be." He sat down watching Keiichi disappear into the house.

Well into the afternoon of the next day Skuld was still in her room with Keiichi questioning. They had talked late into the evening the previous night about all that had happened and what they should do. Skuld stared outside.

"What about him?" she whispered.

"Don't worry Skuld. He'll come in when he's ready."

"But shouldn't we do something?" she asked.

"It's hard to explain. It's just something he has to work through himself."

"They came back so angry after seeing Hild. What happened? Do you think she told them something about Big-sis?"

"I don't know. I hope not. But when he's ready he'll come inside." But Takumi did not come inside. A day passed. Then

## *Fallow*

two. Even the return of the rain did not make him take shelter. Finally Keiichi brought out a bowl of soup in the afternoon.

"Here. It's not much but it's warm," he said setting down the covered bowl beside him. Takumi sat, slapping the bowl away without warning sending it clattering across the stones.

"*How Morisato?*" he muttered angrily. "Belldandy has been gone for more than two years. Yet still you stand. Urd's been gone for two days - yet the pain of it is more than I can bear," he sobbed. "How? How can you be so strong? It makes no sense. How can you stand there and endure it when I cannot?!" he cried bitterly.

Keiichi leaned down taking hold of Takumi's jacket drawing him close. "*Look back there,*" he growled. Takumi's gaze shifted subtly between the two of them, to find Skuld at the edge of the house, her fingers pressed along the corner of the wall watching them from where she thought no one could see. "If I fall, what do you think happens to her?" he asked. Takumi looked down silently.

"I don't care what you do. Just don't bring any more pain into her life. If you're going to be here, act right," he said letting him go.

The next morning Skuld went outside. But the courtyard was empty. When Keiichi rose he saw it too but said nothing.

"Would you like to come with me? I need to get a few things."

"No, I'll be fine here," she replied.

"Trying to keep me from harm? That doesn't seem like you," he smiled.

"We both know that if they come and make a sincere effort, your being here won't make a difference. If it happens I . . . would rather you didn't have to see it. Not with everything that's happened," she said tearing up.

"I meant what I said."

"I know. And I will always treasure it Keiichi."

They looked at each other for a moment.

"I will see you when you get back Keiichi," she said finally.

"*Of course,*" he replied riding away.

Skuld walked the temple grounds alone that morning searching. Eventually she found what she was looking for up in a shallow

## *The End of All Things . . .*

cave, on a hillside behind his old grave. Takumi was talking, muttering to himself:

“Perhaps we could make a deal with Hild? No - we don’t know what happened; don’t know if we can trust her. That’s probably where Urd and Sora went. Might not be safe. I wouldn’t expect any help from her in any case. After all the Valkyries are doing what she wants, removing all goddesses. Besides what do we have to bargain with? We have nothing she wants. No, she won’t help us . . .” Then he caught sight of her. He stared for a moment before speaking, trying to lure her out from under the trees. “Come here,” he motioned.

Skuld didn’t know why, but for the first time since the night she met him she felt uneasy in his presence. She turned half toward him but came no closer. “It’s okay. I- I’m fine where I am,” she replied.

“I just want to ask you something,” he said moving slowly forward, speaking evenly. “*Yes, she could do it,*” he said as much to himself as her, “*She likes gossip. It could work. But it’s still a risk. She might not want to get her out,*” he muttered. “What is it you want?” Skuld asked.

“You know your friend - the girl in leather?”

“Peorth?”

“Yes, yes – *Peorth*. Do you think you can get her to come here . . . to the temple?”

“Why?”

“Just tell her I want to talk to her. About important things. Things that others do not know . . .”

He sat patiently, waiting for several hours until he saw Peorth arriving on the east section of the temple. *So it begins*, he thought. Skuld watched as the two of them spoke, Takumi sitting immobile, gesturing only occasionally with his hands as he told his tale.

“I can’t render a verdict on this,” Peorth said finally.

“No of course not. Please bring back whomever you feel is necessary. It’s just that - Urd told me you were a very important person up there. That you would be the one to speak to if the time ever came.”

## *Fallow*

She straightened at his words. "I suppose there's a ring of truth in that," she said.

"Oh and one other thing. I see no reason to involve them in this," he said with a glance at the temple. "I wouldn't want to raise their hopes to no purpose."

"I understand," Peorth nodded. "I will return soon."

"We'll see," he murmured.

Keiichi had intended to simply go for supplies. But after stopping at the overlook he and Belldandy used to frequent he decided instead to go see Megumi.

"What's up?" she said seeing him ride in.

He shook his head trying to keep it all in. "Urd is gone."

"She's gone too?! Did she go to join Belldandy?"

He nodded wiping his eyes.

"Oh Kei!"

"And now there's a question of whether I can take care of Skuld. She says she doesn't want to go, she wants to stay but - *I don't know*. I promised Bell . . ."

"I don't think you owe her anything Kei," Megumi said stubbornly. "After everything that happened between the two of you, she just up and leaves?"

"I told you it's more complicated than that."

"Look, I'm sure she feels guilty but – wait a minute! What does Takumi have to say about it?!"

"Looks like he's gone too. It's all coming apart Megumi."

"Kei whatever's going on . . . I think maybe you should move in here. For a while at least," she said taking his hand.

"I don't know. I'll think about it."

...

Takumi removed himself further up the mountain to gain a better view of the temple, relieved Keiichi had not returned when he saw Peorth and Lind arriving near the front gate. Still, he told Skuld to stay out of sight just in case.

"I did not expect to see you again so soon," Lind said as he came in from the west side of the garage.

"Didn't you?" he said cocking his head as though trying to size her up. "Somehow you seem more confident today," he observed.

## *The End of All Things . . .*

"Some things are easier when I don't have worry about others," she said walking up to him.

"Is that what it is?" he replied continuing to stare.

"Perhaps we can turn to the matter at hand," suggested Peorth.

"I'm told you have new some 'new evidence'?" said Lind.

"You know what happened that day but not why. Who do you think drew Belldandy in, providing her the time and the place?"

"She made no mention of it at trial."

"Of course not. She pled guilty and put it all on herself. In order to protect us."

"So *you* say," Lind echoed.

"You mean you don't know what happened? Am I the only one who knows what really happened?!"

"Don't be absurd! Of course the High Council knows the truth.

"Then you should ask them."

"I wouldn't presume."

"You're a good foot solider aren't you Lind? Just do what they tell you . . ."

"-And you suppose this will make a difference?" she asked.

"That is not for me to say," he replied humbly. "But I would suggest it offers a . . . *graceful* exit from the current situation, given that it mitigates a portion of her guilt. In other words: I am the solution to your problem. After all, this whole situation must have caused - quite a bit of turmoil in the heavens.

Lind's eyes narrowed. "What makes you say that?"

"*Because you are still talking to me -*," he hissed. "Belldandy has been punished, the sentence passed will be fully served. All parties involved have been brought to justice. No one has escaped judgement. It all sounds tidy to me. And during the period of the sentence, I'm sure you can keep her out of view."

"You mean down here?"

"Perhaps."

"A detail which allows Skuld to stay put."

"Hmm that hadn't occurred to me."

The warrior scoffed. "Your plan is not as clever as you think."

"Clever or not is it a deal? It does have the added benefit that you won't have to go down in history as a person who dragged away a crying little girl."



## *Fallow*

"That is the difference between you and me, Mr. Sato. Valkyries do their duty whether *or not* it's difficult."

"Oh I know. *I've seen-*," he replied.

"Perhaps you've seen too much?" she observed.

His questioning gaze returned. "Truer words were never spoken. But then if so, isn't it better I'm out of the way?"

"I have to wonder, why are you telling us this now?"

"To help you achieve justice."

"To help us? Is that why you're doing this? To help *us*?"

"Perhaps not, but what difference does it make? I'm giving you the truth. The complete truth. Do with it as you please. Though even in this plane of existence we've heard the rumors of – disquiet. I remember in the court room I was not the only one who seemed 'surprised' at the sentence. And I know now that disturbance is far greater than even I realized."

"I think we are done here."

"Not quite. I want to ask about . . . Urd's disposition."

"That - her father has already taken care of it."

"Has he now? Tell me, how exactly did you become aware of her fate?"

"Don't go down that path Takumi Sato. For it will only bring you pain."

"Why? What really happened to her?"

She remained silent.

There were many things he could have said in that moment.

But he knew now was not the time. For time itself was precious now. At least it was for those he was trying to help. Only after would there be time to grieve for Urd and Sora, time to find out what really happened. Following agreement on the details of the transfer, the two parted ways.

When she had gone Takumi sat down, drawing breath having a long last look at the temple. He thought of all that had happened there since he had come. "*Oh Urd . . .*" he murmured looking out at the trees.

He arose early in the next morning, packing his things away before ritually bathing, trying to memorize every detail of the house. He passed out on the steps only to find Keiichi already waiting for him. "It's hard to get the drop on you these days Keiichi," he observed squinting in the sunlight.

## *The End of All Things . . .*

Morisato simply shrugged in reply. "It's not that. It's just that I talk to people."

"Skuld told you we had visitors yesterday then? I was trying to find out more about Urd and Sora."

"Did they tell you anything?"

"Not really. I'm sorry to leave you like this Keiichi, but all things considered I think it's best if I go off on my own. Thank you for everything."

Keiichi looked at Takumi, who appeared suddenly old in the sunlight, noting with concern that he carried no pack with him.

"I just want you to know you will always be welcome here," he said swallowing hard. "I can't begin to . . ."

"-Me as well," Takumi replied walking out into the forest.

Keiichi paused a moment, then returned inside.

He found Lind waiting for him at the appointed place.

"You did not say goodbye to them. You didn't really say anything."

"If things go as planned I won't need to. If not, what difference will it make? The truth is no one there will really miss me."

"Then let us go." She raised the gate and they stepped in.

Before he knew it he was moving, walking forward down a brightly lit open corridor, illuminated from the skies above, a fantastic city of interconnected rings of towering vistas at different levels above the ground. He looked out catching glimpses as they walked, seeing the river turn and twist below them, its blue waters spilling down into tributaries over the uneven ground. Above him he saw overhanging vines of the green roofs closest to him, hung with flowers he could not place. A part of him longed to be able to stand there forever, taking in the view of the city and the mountains beyond.

"Keep moving," instructed the voice behind him.

"Where are we going exactly?" he asked.

"As you say, what difference does it make?"

"I suppose none, given that Skuld has informed me high level Valkyries always keeps their word," he said hoping the statement might stem, or at least prune, any *alternative* plans she might have.

## *Fallow*

“We are going to the place we must, the prison subsection of the Valkyrie hold.”

“Are all prisoners kept there?”

“No,” she said without elaboration.

As he now caught sight of sections of a large building on the walkway ahead he began to notice the looks on the faces of those they passed. “Why do they look at me like that? Of course, I suppose it’s to be expected in matters concerning someone like Belldandy.”

“It’s more than that. They identify you with Urd.”

“I would have thought they’d have gotten used to her.”

“Normally yes. But reports of Einherjar in the Western provinces have put Hild and her kindred on everyone’s mind.”

“I was told they are Hild’s army,” he ventured.

“So it is said,” Lind replied.

*Why is she doing this? Has Hild gone insane? Is there another problem? Does it have something to do with Urd? Perhaps Bell and Keiichi can figure it out,* he thought.

They walked on as the walls of the stronghold began to close in around them. The walkway’s airy vistas starting to close off as it gave way to more substantial structural surroundings. Lind directed him down the ramparts, to the lower reaches of the section that indeed seemed more prison-like. But as they continued down one of the lower hallways his spirits lifted when, he saw a familiar face at the far end of the darkened corridor. Peorth appeared, escorting Belldandy with her arm around her. He smiled seeing the familiar buckwheat tresses, the face he had not seen in more than two years! But something was different, her eyes seemed dull as she shuffled, forward leaning on Peorth.

“What is this?! Is this a trick?” he said suspiciously.

“She’s alright,” Peorth replied assuring him. “She’s still waking up from stasis. She will be fine in a little while.”

He approached her looking into her eyes. “Belldandy?”

She looked back, the recognition coming slowly. “Takumi?”

“It’s me,” he nodded. “You need to get going. These people are going to take you home,” he said with a look to Peorth.

Only now did she seem to become aware of her surroundings.

“What’s going on? Why are you here?” she asked.

## *The End of All Things . . .*

"It's not important. You need to go with her now," he said pushing her along.

But Belldandy was beginning to come around. Her movements started to slow.

"We don't have time for this," warned Lind. "We are pushing it as it is. If the prisoner doesn't . . ."

"Keiichi's waiting for you Bell. If you don't leave now you will never see him again," he said.

Something appeared in her eyes, "Mr. Sato . . ."

"Forget that name," he said shaking his head. "If you ever had any faith in me, if you ever believed in me, even the slightest bit. *Please go.*"

She tried to right herself, looking between them confused.

"GO!" he repeated pushing her away, moving off into the darkness with Lind.

Takumi had prepared himself for everything up to this point.

*Up to this point.* But now he knew he didn't have any idea of what was to come. Alone now in the dim light he felt suddenly afraid, closing his hands at his sides trying to hide it from Lind. "*Step down,*" Lind told him above the pit.

"Down there?" he asked as she nodded. He dropped down into the close-walled pit. He couldn't imagine Bell had spent over two years in here. And he . . . he didn't want to think about it. Something, some kind of fluid began to inundate the pit.

"Calm your breathing," Lind said unsympathetically from above him.

"She's right. Don't fight it," Peorth said appearing now behind her as the feeling of constriction grew. "It's taking you under," Peorth said in reply. "The sensation is something like . . . *dreaming,*" she mused searching for the word. The fluid continued to fill in around him drawing him down into the blackness. It was certainly not like dreaming. More like drowning he thought. The fluid passed over him as he pushed his head back gasping once, then disappeared.

## *Fallow*

In Takumi's opinion it was not like dreaming. But then it wasn't like prison either. The first thing he noticed was that he was leaning on his knees, sitting on the damp beach under grey overhead skies. He looked around but was uncertain as to where he was. He rose unsteadily looking at the sky, then the hills around him but could see no walls. It was cool here, but not impossibly so, pine trees - probably somewhere in the Pacific northwest he guessed. Do they really think placing me here will keep me from returning? But then, what did he really have to return to? Whatever was happening at Tariki Hongan Temple now he truly had no business with it, if indeed he had ever really had any at all. Food and shelter were a priority now he thought, but he found a few things climbing the coastal hills over the next few hours. However as he did he began to realize that all was not quite what it appeared to be, for he saw no evidence here or in the distance of towns, or indeed people of any kind. The domain seemed vast and empty. Had Belldandy been here? Had she walked these empty hills? Or was the domain unique to each individual? The more he watched the endless ocean waves the more he considered it the latter. At sunset he wrapped himself up building a fire, sitting down, realizing this was indeed prison. His own kind of living hell. Though his cell was large, he was alone. He holed up that first night in the most stable place he could find, the rock wall above providing protection from the elements, the break high enough above the damp sands of the beach below. But as he settled in now he knew his real challenge was only beginning. At first he busied himself with what Bell, Keiichi and Skuld might be doing, but soon even these thoughts grew dark. For Belldandy would now know what had occurred, and all that had transpired as a result. None of them would be anxious for his return. And it was this he had to deal with now. For he had time. Time to think about all he had pushed out of his mind. All

## *Fallow*

his thoughts of Urd; and of Sora. For months grief ate away at him, nightmares too in all forms - of what he could have done, of what had really happened to them, of their judgment, awakening each time only to find they were no longer beside him and he was once again awake and alone on this barren coast. He cried out his regret knowing no one could see him. By now he knew he did not need to eat per se to survive; but caught what he could out of habit or comfort. Still he knew he was getting weaker. Something within him was dying. In time he willed himself to try and forget, forget everything he was, everything which had occurred, everything causing him pain. wishing only to remain still. And so he moved less and less each day, huddled immobile like a part of the landscape around him. He remained like that for weeks, months, perhaps years it was so hard to tell in this place. He knew now the true hell was not fire, it was absence, the absence of all love. And then one day there came some subtle change in the wind, moving slowly, almost imperceptibly onshore from the depths of the great ocean. It took hold of something, like a wave rolling over deep in his brain. He began to walk, first inland then along the coast. His first excursions were tentative, returning to camp every day, then every few days until finally he set out, leaving forever. He began to move north in no particular path. Existence behind him he walked on, carrying only his most cherished memories, a form watching the world's changes, air rushing over the mountains to meet him, echoes of waves reflecting the movement of whales passing seaward, cold downdrafts ferrying seabirds as they swept over him by the thousands. And always he pushed forward. At the end of each day he stopped, listening upon the waves each night. But what was he listening for? *Echoes from Tariki Hongan Temple? Words from his sensei? Urd's voice? Sora's?* Even he did not know. He awoke one morning to find himself atop a ridge overlooking a vast cove below. There was something about it that made him hesitate. He climbed down the rock face wandering the tidal marks, and then he saw it. At first he could not believe his eyes. He bent low searching their direction. But they were there. Footprints. Footprints in the sand. He put his own foot beside it sizing it up. Yes it was slightly smaller,

## *Fallow*

definitely female. Of course he had no way of knowing how long they might have been there but still, it made him feel less alone somehow. He began to wonder if he might have been wrong about the nature of the confine. Perhaps Belldandy *had* been here, walking this very beach and now, now he had found some remnant of - ! He froze looking up at the distant end of the cove. There on the cliffs above him stood a dark figure illuminated against the skyline. It was Urd! Even at this distance he was sure of it. She was standing alone on the edge of the cliff almost motionless searching the horizon.

He took off at a dead run toward the end of the cove. "Urd - URD!!" he shouted. Approaching the figure seemed to notice him, only to disappear over the far wall. "No! Wait!" he cried tumbling into the sand. "I'm sorry - I'm sorry!" he said. "About everything, about everything I've done!"

It took him time to recover, and to breach the heights of the wall, but when he did she was nowhere to be seen. He searched the ground but could find no trace of her.

That night as he huddled by the largest fire he could build, he looked out to sea talking to himself bitterly. "Of course she has every right to be angry but to not even talk to me? Not even acknowledge my existence?" he protested forlornly.

He moved on the next morning, searching her out. Over the next few weeks he would spot her here and there, catching glimpses of her, always ahead of him, always beyond his grasp. His shouts and pleas to her were to no avail, her eyes turning blankly to him. Finally after some time she seemed to gravitate to a localized region, appearing now occasionally both in front and behind him. But by now he had learned. He knew he would never catch up. And so he stopped, abandoning the chase. He sat alone, despondent on the cliffs refusing to move. In time she did come closer. Several times he chased after her, but always with the same result. He tried pouring out his heart to her, when she was close enough. But even giving all his words, all his regret she still gave no reply. Eventually his mind turned to other thoughts. Why does she say nothing? Why is she alone? Even if she wanted to hurt me surely she would say something. An idea began to form. He was being toyed with. Why or by whom he did not know, but he was

## *Fallow*

being toyed with. That wasn't Urd. It was some kind doppelganger, a pale shadow of her designed to torture him. She would not leave him here like this – no, how could he have thought it? And she wouldn't leave Sora. He should have seen that. He was getting slow.

No, this was something else. Entertainment for a purpose he could not guess. He sat on the beach staring out to sea growing angry, imagining their laughter in the heavens as his anger grew. Confronted with his lack of response the doppelganger drew closer trying to tease him into response. But he would not take the bait. He would no longer respond. The anger within him grew to monstrous dimensions. He seethed with hate. *Do they think this is funny? The terrible loss and pain of my loved ones? Of everything I hold dear? How dare they!* His frame began to tremble, his rage now uncontrollable blotting out everything else in his mind as he focused on the cage that held him. *Toy with me here? I will tear it all down! I will tear it apart and destroy you ALL!* he thought furiously throwing himself forward in a blind rage. He leaped like an animal charging the sea itself. And it worked. For the sea gave way as he clawed, charging over it like an animal over open ground. He continued out of control, leaping to tear at the sky itself. And the sky did seem to give way, ripping open as the light gave way to darkness, the land below him falling away too as he fell, fell into nothingness, down, down into an immense pit of blackness below him, falling until at last he landed upon the solid floor. He reached his hands out scanning the floor of the dark interior of the chamber, moving sand to reveal the large groove carved directly into the iron mantle. Then he sensed it. He turned seeing above him a large pair of luminous eyes staring down at him. Violet eyes that sent a chill through him. When finally he could again form what could be called rational thought, he found himself sitting alone on the beach; questions swimming through his mind:

*Is Hild secretly running this prison? Does she want me dead? No, that doesn't make sense. If she'd wanted that she wouldn't have saved me that day. And I can't believe she would harm Sora or Urd. But why toy with me now?* For he knew if he was honest, he had already been confined in this place for a long



## *Fallow*

time. He knew years had passed. *In fact why bother with me at all if she knows Urd and Sora are dead?* And it was this which now gripped his mind. *There is no way she would! The only reason she would bother with me is if she is somehow uncertain as where Urd and Sora are – perhaps thinking I might know something that could help contribute to her search. Of course it could be someone else, but who?* If the leaders here wanted a question answered they would simply ask him . . . in one form or another. Still there were aspects that gave him pause, things that didn't make sense that he tried not to think about. Though he found in time he could temporarily disrupt aspects of his surroundings, he never had any additional contact from an outside entity, nor did he ever see the doppelganger again. And yet whether by accident or design, his contact with the interloper had changed him. For some reason he no longer felt completely alone in this place. His patterns changed. He began to run, to swim, to strengthen himself. So too he began to practice the old ways more rigorously now, meditating on the lessons his teachers had taught him, going over every aspect in the expanse of time. And when he was strong enough, prepared enough . . . he began to think of her. Of course she had always been there – hovering out of sight in the back of his mind. But here under the spreading pines now he confronted her, on these shores he accepted his guilt and culpability fully. And though the pain of it at times felt as though it would kill him, it also gave him a fragment of what he was looking for; some true undistilled semblance of what their life was really like - in all its complexities. Only after a long time in that wilderness did he dare gaze upon the full extent of her impact on his life, the true dimensions of her reach over the vast emptiness that now lay within him. That fallow zone in which nothing - nothing of its kind would ever grow again. He opened his eyes beholding the endless sea, beginning to understand the empty lands around him. Still he comforted himself in the knowledge that it was a sign of the breadth of their adventure - though parts of him wondered if Urd would have described it the same way. Confronting the emptiness did however allow him to finally see, see clearly what he had hidden away for so long. He began to play over their life together in his mind, the

## *Fallow*

features of her hair, where they had walked, her smile, the look of her sleeping face. In the places where he walked he now drew monuments to her, planted flowers in spots she would have liked and . . . in time - let his pain flow to the surface and out into the endless sea.

He was not whole of course, nor particularly well-balanced. There were parts of his life he never thought about. Sora was never in his thoughts. For he could never let her come to the surface. The danger to his mind was just too great.

Still there was structure to his days now, he was growing stronger, and within him some purpose to his life. He began to think once more about the world he had left behind, and what he would do when he returned to it. For vengeance was not something he had forsaken, merely put aside until he was strong enough - until enough of him had returned. *Oh the things he would do to those who had harmed his loved ones*, he promised. Wherever they hid he would find them, and they would come to know the full meaning of pain and suffering. None would be spared the measure of his hate. *I will get out* he thought. *I will get out*. And when he did, he would find out what really happened to Urd; no matter whom he had to break. Even if it killed him. He would know - and in his view, set things right. He began to meditate, to train, to run harder than before. Where he had been lackadaisical now he was focused, working to build his skills. The rhythms of his life returned as he worked the circuit, an animal in its pen. But hate did not consume him. It was simply something that lived within him. And within the endless span of time before him there was time for other things too, time to remember, remember love that had touched him in all its forms, love that had changed him, love that had brought him to the place he was today. There were times not so different from this when they sat together on the beach, shoulder to shoulder whispering promises under the moonlight. He thought about Keiichi, Belldandy and Skuld too, hoping they were well.

Until at last one day many years later, after endless flights of days he felt a voice like warmth inside him, like an unseen hand on his shoulder. "*Takumi?*" asked the voice. "Yes?" he answered dumbly to the voice inside his head.

## Fallow

"Do you know where you are?"

"Where I always am," he replied.

"Do you feel my hands?" asked the voice.

"I . . . ?" *This is definitely something different*, he thought. He had not conjured this voice in his head. His body felt strange.

"*I'm getting something*," he heard the voice say.

The world seemed disorienting now, his vision stabbed through with panes of light. "Is this . . . the real world?" he asked.

"All experience is real," another voice behind him said.

He turned looking for the source of the voice, finding it belonged to a woman in a uniform. Vague things he could remember about her, none of them terribly good. Yet something was different now. What was it? *The scar*, he thought watching as it ran through her left eyebrow. *She doesn't seem to be much help. What was her name?*

Takumi tried to focus. He could see there were two of them now as he bobbed against the wall. The place appeared bright. They seemed to be speaking, "Well his eyes are open - I *think* he's awake. "Do-you-know-us?" asked the more womanly of the two. *The one with the scar . . . yes I think I remember her. She - was she the one who told me about Urd?*

"A lot has happened since you've been away," Peorth said leaning down.

*Leather - what was her name? Bands of leather and the one with the axe. Yes I remember*, he thought. "Your name is . . . Peorth. And you . . ."

"She is Lind."

"Yes -," he said nodding.

"You have served your time and have been released. Where would you like to go?"

"Go? I want . . ." *No this is the real world. In this world she is - I want - I want . . . no she's gone - the one that was my life*, he thought. "I remember now," he said sadly. "It was some kind of -," he struggled to rise disoriented. "Take me to Keiichi Morisato." *Yes, he will know what to do. It will be good to see him, to know everything worked itself out for them at least.*

The goddesses looked at one another concerned. "You . . . do understand where you are, don't you? You've been held here for 118 years."

## *Fallow*

For a moment he seemed puzzled at their response, "I don't care how long I've been . . . *of course*," he thought as the reality of it struck home. Now he understood. He shuffled away as though looking for a means of escape among the high walls. "You - couldn't even do that for them could you?" No, too much to ask for," he muttered bitterly staring at the walls. "*It wasn't our call Sato!*" snapped Lind.

"I'll bet you give that answer a lot around here," he mused. Lind took a step toward him but Peorth stopped her. It was then Takumi gasped, the realization setting in. *Belldandy! Oh no. . . She must be heartbroken.* He didn't want to think about it. "Take me to see Belldandy!" he demanded. In the deathly silence that followed he turned to see Lind and Peorth exchanging somber looks. Icy fingers of fear now began to close themselves around his chest. "Belldandy . . .

"*No . . .!*" he pleaded shaking his head.

"-Is no longer in this world," Lind replied.

From that moment everything began to move in slow motion for Takumi. Strange sounds echoed in his head. He knew not whether he was truly awake or sleeping. He seemed to be drifting, falling. It couldn't be true. But why would they lie? He felt unsteady. It must be a misunderstanding. . .

"What?" he said weakly

"I'm sorry," murmured Peorth. "So very sorry."

"*That's not . . .* it's not possible. I mean - she survived the explosion . . . it's not possible," he murmured absently."

"What is he talking about?" asked Lind.

"I don't know," replied Peorth. "It's possible he suffered more damage than we realized. *I'm sorry you had to find out like this,*" Peorth said sympathetically. "But I'm afraid it's true." *Of course*, he thought. *She must have followed him into the void when Keiichi - when his time came.* He looked at the light walls in front of him. The dizziness he felt would not go away. For he knew now everything was gone. Everything he had held onto . . . hoped for. *All gone.* He wished he could just return to the hole they had found him in. But of course he could not. He walked ahead of them blindly in silence, realizing he had no idea where he was going within the timeless corridors. Yet he no longer cared. For they were all

## *Fallow*

gone now. *All of them.* Everyone he had ever known, ever cared about had been washed away by the sands of time.

"I don't care what happens anymore," he said. "About the heavens, demons; about any of it. Do what you will with me.

If there is anyone in this world who yet knows the name of Takumi Sato let me look upon their face." He seemed suddenly old to Peorth; for indeed now he was.

She held out her hand encouraging. "*Come -*," she said leading him slowly through the corridors of the Valkyrie subsection Yggdrasil complex to the city below. "*This way -*," she said as they passed down a corridor open on one side to the river below. As they walked on approaching the small arched room he found himself actually becoming excited, hopeful at what he might see. But as he now entered looking at their faces he saw only strangers looking back. For him it was the final blow, knowledge that the past was truly gone. He turned away sadly, walking to where he did not know.

But though Takumi Sato had not recognized the faces before him the reverse was apparently not true. He heard the cup tumble from the girl's hands, crashing to the floor behind him as she flew forward. "Takumi? TAKUMI!" she screamed. He turned but the girl was already on him, throwing herself into his arms hugging him tightly. "IT IS YOU!" she sobbed.

He hugged her back confused. Yet there was something, something familiar about her – like the smell of water hyacinth after the rain, like the flowers that grew long ago along the riv-SKULD?!!!" He pulled her back looking at her more closely now. IT IS YOU! He could see it now. She had grown, taller and more beautiful but it was her alright. The girl he had known so long ago. He hugged her tightly, squeezing her like an island of recognition in an unfamiliar world.

The girl smiled pushing against him. "I knew one day they would let you go, that you would come back!" she said.

"Come, there is much I need to show you," she said wiping her tears, pulling him back into the room. "There are some people I want you to meet," she said taking his hand. "This is - um well, now that I think about it this will be a bit confusion but – this is Takumi," she said sheepishly introducing him to the young man.

“Uh . . . what?”

Takumi Mo-ri-sa-to,” she whispered.

He looked at her puzzled. “You mean - *Bell and Keiichi?*”

She nodded. He could see it now. He smiled shaking the man’s hand. “You have your father’s good looks -,” he observed.

“And your mother’s (*how best to say it?*) - strength,” he said finally. The man nodded politely, before glancing briefly at Peorth and Lind in the outer hallway behind them. Something about it made Takumi suspect that he had inherited quite a bit from his parents. *I must speak to him at the first opportunity*, he thought.

“*And this -*,” Skuld now said as though she had kept the best for last, “*is Sorano.*”

If she had expected him to smile, or even hint at recognition she was disappointed. Instead Takumi stepped back, scanning the room slowly as though considering it in some new light.

“Who?” he asked continuing to scan his surroundings.

“Um - your daughter,” Skuld whispered concerned.

He smiled stepping back uneasy, his eyes checking those around him. “*That was a nice touch -*,” he said to no one in particular. “I mean - aging up Skuld, not making her look too familiar. Yeah, it was a nice touch,” he said growing angry.

“Takumi -,” Skuld called out nervously.

“Morisato too. After all, what would I compare him to?”

Peorth was a good choice too as I never really knew her well.

Nice try - almost perfect,” he replied bitterly. “But whatever game you have planned you can end it now. Take me back to my cell, if indeed I ever left it.”

“Takumi we’re here,” Skuld said trying to calm him.

He pushed her to one aside. “Did any of you *animals* really think for one second I could forget the death of my own daughter?!”

The imposter jumped in front of Skuld her eyes flashing, “I don’t really care what you believe old man. *I am Sorano Sato!*” she growled.

“Okay maybe her mother and I didn’t *really* think that one out a lot in terms of naming,” he admitted.

## *Fallow*

The girl snarled stepping up, but then he caught her glancing at Lind. "Oh do you take your instructions from her? Are you one of her agents?!" he snapped.

"I don't take instructions from anyone!"

"I can vouch for that," interjected Morisato.

Takumi turned on him. "You think this is funny?" he said.

The girl leapt between them. "Don't even think about it!"

"Hey jumpy, you seem to jump in front of a lot of people - rather like someone else I know. Maybe the two of you trained at the same place?"

"*Maybe we did,*" she breathed, her eyes starting to turn. "The truth is I've got nothing to prove to you or anyone else! I don't care if you love me or not - if you've forgotten me or not!"

*How dare they!* he thought his anger flaring. *How dare they try to use the image of my daughter for their game. I'll teach them not to play games!* he thought, quickly catching the imposter by the throat as he bit down. The girl shrieked in surprise.

"WHAT THE -?!" Faster than any could move Lind was in motion, slamming Takumi against the far wall with such force it would have shattered human flesh. She stood above him now her face white with rage, her fists trembling only barely able to contain herself, "If you *ever* touch her again – *I will end you!* *Do you hear me?!*" she roared leaving to attend to the girl.

"Ten are you alright?" she said kneeling beside her.

"I'm okay," the girl replied holding her throat.

"Stop, you don't understand!" Skuld said coming between the pair and Takumi. "It's just – he's confused! He doesn't understand what's happening. He's been away a long time. Just give him a moment . . . *Look!*" she said.

Indeed something was happening. Takumi tried to stand against the wall looking unwell, making it only a few feet before collapsing. "See? *He's starting to remember.*"

Skuld was right. For contact with the girl's demonic blood had begun to disseminate within him, connecting him to her thoughts, igniting long dim memories. Memories of the daughter he had never let himself grieve for, fearing it would destroy him. The totality of it now flowed over him and it was too much. "SORA!" he cried out to himself in pain.

## Fallow

Skuld put her shoulder to her, “You always wanted to know about your father. There he is. If you wish to truly know him, now is the time,” she said.

The girl looked over at him uncertain.

“Ten – *no*,” urged Lind.

But slowly the girl stood up, tentatively moving toward the figure as he lay against the wall. When she was near he reached taking hold of her, pulling her in. “Sorano!” he said holding her tight. “*My lost little girl*,” he wept hugging her.

She put her head down cautiously next to his letting him hug her, not realizing until that moment how much she needed his love. There was something of his hold on her that felt like the warmth of the sun. A part of her hoped it would never end.

He looked at her, his eyes really seeing her now. Something in his smile filled her with confidence, causing her heart to glow as he put his hands to her head. Only a moment ago she had felt such fear and dread, and now . . . now she felt as though she had come to the end of a long journey.

Takumi smiled warmly stroking her hair, “Where - *is your mother?*” he asked hopefully.

“I - I don’t know,” she said shaking her head.

Sorano saw his face change, his eyes becoming more distant.

“I see,” he replied. “And you know nothing as well?” he asked turning to Skuld.

“No. Nothing more than we learned that day,” she replied.

Sorano looked over silently to Tai for support. ‘*So he was just searching for information on her.*’

‘*Let’s not judge the situation too quickly. Remember what mom and dad said about him,*’ Morisato echoed in her mind. ‘*He’s bound to be a bit off after so much time away. Still I saw the embrace he gave you. I feel kind of jealous. So don’t look so stressed. The old bird will see it and freak.*’

She smiled. ‘*You’re an idiot. Need proof? Look at what they decided to name you after! And I told you not to call her that!*’ She heard him chuckling in her head. ‘*We knew already from inconsistencies in their stories it wasn’t going to be pretty. Though it does give me some insights into you however. At least you can celebrate Father’s Day now.*

‘*You think there’s really a card for what he is?*’



## *Fallow*

They smiled together until she noticed Takumi staring at her. *'Oh crap! You think he can read our minds?!'*

*'I doubt it based on what mom and dad said about his history. She probably is though -,'* Tai said drawing Sorano's gaze to Skuld, whose eyes were now narrowing on them. Takumi too was now watching.

"I think we can all agree we've had a rather long day," Skuld said leading Takumi out. "I think we will retire to our quarters now," Skuld said politely to Peorth and Lind.

"Of course," Lind replied, putting an arm around Sorano as she passed. *"Are you okay?"* she whispered.

"I'm okay," she nodded.

"Call me if you want to talk about anything later," she said.

"He's really my father?" Sorano asked.

"He is," Lind replied without further comment.

"I look forward to our next meeting - *goddess*," Takumi said to Peorth as he passed.

Skuld kept them together, herding them down the busy corridors stretching around the exteriors of the buildings, traveling up and down several levels over spectacular scenery as they walked toward the western part of the city. Several times they had to pause, going back to retrieve Takumi who had stopped to look in awe at the vistas of huge trees and strange flowering vines growing both below and above him from the surrounding structures and circular causeways. When they arrived at the set of multilayered apartments projecting from the rock wall rising from the valley floor, Takumi once again stopped to take it all in. "I can see why you live here!" he said approaching the glass walls from across the causeway; happy for the high rock to finally shield him from the bright sunlight. As Skuld crossed, someone shouted to her from their balcony below. "Hey Skuld, what are you doing up there?!" Skuld leaned over the stone railing causing Takumi to recoil, forgetting she could levitate. "Chrono! Ex! You know who this guy is?!" she said proudly holding him over the edge like a pet. They looked up squinting. "Hey, it's that guy!" they shouted. "It is!" she replied.

"So glad we did that!" Takumi said hauling himself back to the center of the walkway. He entered the upper dwelling still

## Fallow

feeling unsteady. “Guys if you don’t mind, can I take a shower? And not because you almost threw me off that bridge. You do have showers here, right?”

“Uh yeah, clean water is kind of important here you know,” said Sora.

“-Especially if you’re one of the neighbors hoping Miss Au Natural here doesn’t close the curtains,” added Tai.

“That was one time!” shouted Sora.

Her father looked over at her unimpressed.

“I’ll guide you,” Skuld said leading him toward the back as Sora and Tai began chasing each other, “*Making me look bad!*”

As soon as they were alone Takumi muttered, “I assume *they* don’t have anything useful to add to my inquiry about Urd?”

“You mean Peorth and Lind? No. We don’t know anything more about what happened than the day you left.”

“Well there’s always tomorrow for answers,” he growled.

“Just don’t start trouble okay?” she said passing him towels.

“A lot has happened. You need to be careful. I’ll explain later.”

“*You know me Skuld,*” he replied letting the cold water pour down over him.

“Yes, *I do,*” she sighed quietly watching him.

Sora was waiting for her upon her return. “So what’s the deal between the commander and my father Oba-san?” she asked.

“Ah, it’s complicated Sora. Lind tried to kill him once - or so I heard. But then she was the one who brought him back to the temple when he *actually* died. So they’re kind of even.”

“*WHAT?*” Sora shouted.

“But I know we buried him, I did the work on the headstone.”

“*WHAT?!*”

“Yeah it was a long time ago - before your mom and dad really hooked up . . . *at least I think it was.* When were you born again? Anyway I’m sure it was *after* he got cooked saving me, but *before* he was Hild’s toy in the underworld, so. . .”

“What was life at Tariki Hongan Temple *like* in the old days!!! Has he ever NOT almost died?”

“Eh – *no, not really.* Actually come to think of it, they all kind of seemed to be in trouble most of the time. The important thing is I was usually there to save them.”

“Wow it’s good you were there Oba-san,” Sora observed.

## Fallow

“Good indeed -,” Takumi said reappearing from the shadows.  
“You forgot to mention how you saved Belldandy and took out two Valkyries on your own when you were 12.”

“I was 15!” Skuld shouted.

“WHAT?” cried Sora and Tai together.

As evening settled in Takumi seemed content to spend his time outside, watching the city from the bridge, fascinated by the night’s view from their vantage point. “*The really nice part is to the north,*” Sora said behind him. He turned to find both the younger members of the Morisato household on the bridge.

“Looks pretty good to me,” he replied trying get his head around all of the breathtaking architecture.

Skuld’s call finally brought them in. As they all sat together on the floor now, each became acutely aware that it was the first time they all had a chance to really see each other clearly.

“So . . . the two of you grew up at Tariki Hongan Temple?”

Takumi asked finally.

“Yes,” Sora and Tai replied.

“Please tell me it was bliss,” he said glancing at Skuld.

“Most of the time. Though sometimes it *did* get a little windy around there.”

“Like when?”

“Like when Keiichi did one too many favors for Sayoko, or I always knew winds were coming when I heard the words ‘*he’s your son*’.

“Hey!” complained Tai.

“Like that one girlfriend of yours -,” Sora continued. “Mom never actually *called* her a trollop, but I remember she made Keiichi give you ‘the talk’ about what constitutes a *nice girl*.”

“Oh yeah? Well what about your ‘band trip’?”

“Oh I remember that!” Skuld said as Sora began to blush. “I came in just when Belldandy was saying – *now I’m not going to ask what went on during the trip but-*”

“I am!” scowled Takumi.

“Oh come on! It’s hard to measure up to her standards. You know what I want to know? Was Belldandy *really* such a paragon of virtue when she was young?”

“I’m sorry to tell you she absolutely was,” replied Takumi.

## *Fallow*

"You see?" snickered Skuld.

"Uh-huh," Sora replied suspiciously. *And Skuld?*"

"Whenever *I* saw her she was always very proper with boys," Takumi replied, happy she did not have his awareness of dates.

"Humph! And Mom?"

"-It's getting kind of late, you probably want us to turn in don't you Skuld?"

"That sounds about right. I'll make up a place for you in the -."

"I'll be fine here," Takumi replied curling up on the couch.

"Are you sure?"

"I've slept outside on the ground for the past 118 years. At least in my mind - which is sort of the same thing. I'll be fine."

"Okay," Skuld said laying out the sheets. "Remember what we talked about."

"Of course," he replied. "*Hey Skuld . . .*"

"What?"

"*You grew up* - just the way Belldandy said you would," he whispered closing his eyes. She stood in the doorway smiling at the back of his head as she dimmed the lights.

That night Takumi caught what sleep he could. But early in the morning he arose, silently slipping out the front door. A quick search of the outer wall in the dim light revealed that in lieu of proper ID he would have to climb down to his target. A nerve-racking prospect to be sure, but the volcanic rock composing the wall was solid, with good hand holds. He made his way down to the lower balcony quickly. There he waited for his target to arise. When she did an hour later, he had only one question for her, "Where do I find Lady Peorth?"

As she did every morning, Peorth walked to work on one of Yggdrasil's main concourses. This morning however after feeding the birds she paused, electing instead to detour to the park, walking on until she was in the heart of its wooded depths. She wandered until she found her favorite secluded spot beside the pond. Crawling up on the large flat stone she sat, going over it all in her mind once more. The previous day's events had stirred her up, made her think of things she preferred not to. It had begun when she got home. '*When are*

## *Fallow*

you going to get serious and start a family?" her mother had asked.

'Oh Mom, it's too soon for that,' she replied holding the phone. 'To be with someone like that you have to -. She thought about Keiichi and Belldandy. She thought about all of it . . . thought about the last time she had held Keiichi Morisato's aging hand. 'Peorth, you need to let go now.' She looked down into the pool, confused as to why she could not see the surface clearly; only then realizing she was crying. Still it was good. Good to remember. *Perhaps now they -*

"Hello Peorth," said the voice from the other side of the pond.

"Mr. Sato!" she replied quickly turning away.

"Indeed," he said emerging from the trees. "Sorry to intrude. I - just wanted to thank you for all your kindness in everything you have done. It could not have been achieved without you."

"I wouldn't say that," she replied demurely.

"Truly it was you who gave them their happiness," he said.

"Well, I just -, " her tears began once more.

"I'm sure it was a complicated decision. I won't pretend I understand all that was involved."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," she said rising.

"In any case, we are all very grateful. And I don't wish to be a further burden. Which brings me to another matter. Now that I am . . . well out of this society's care, I assume I can return to the surface world? That's what your kind call it, isn't it?"

"Certainly. In fact only yesterday we were discussing -."

"How to get rid of me?"

"Well I don't think we would have put it like that exactly . . ."

"But given the concern, can you send me back? As I wouldn't want to cause any undue disruption, perhaps you can put me down toward the edge of town?"

He caught her glancing at him suspiciously as he followed her back onto the main concourse. "And of course feel free to tell Skuld where I've gone - when you get the chance," he added quickly. "Though I suppose they could use a break from me after my performance yesterday," he added casually. "Don't worry too much about that, you had a lot to adjust to," she said guiding him to the platform. "This will put where you want to be at the edge of town."

*Fallow*

“Thank you, Lady Peorth, he said bowing. A moment later he was gone.

“Where is it he went?” asked the voice behind her.

“Augh! What are you doing? Are you following me?!”

“No. I - just happened to get some information on where he would be,” replied Lind.

“He asked to be put down at the edge of town,” said Peorth.

“But the truth is there’s only one place he would be going.”

## *Return to Tariki Hongan Temple*

Takumi knelt scarcely believing the ground beneath his feet; at first almost afraid to rise. He stood up looking around at the landscape. No, it was real. He had returned. He looked to his right seeing the deeply cut hillside, before him the curving asphalt road ahead. To his left he saw the valley below. The town was still there. Off in the distance he could just make out the gleaming towers of Tokyo beneath the clouds. They were different, but they were there. He sniffed the air. It seemed cleaner than he remembered, the town quieter, unsure if it was a good thing or a bad thing. He walked on through the streets of the city unnoticed by the townsfolk, one small fragment of the world, but a fragment with purpose. He tried to remain calm walking toward the old road leading to the temple, or at least where the temple should be, finding it with scarcely a backward glance. As he reached the slope of the hill a part of him hesitated, keeping his eyes on the road, afraid to look up. “You won’t find out by standing here,” he muttered. He walked on keeping his head down until the curves grew familiar. He came around the last curve finally summoning the courage to look up. As he walked on he could see the generous boughs of great trees gracing – *something*. A few more steps and he saw it, a corner of the main temple’s blue tile roof peeking through the leaves. *It’s still there, or at least a corner of it is*, he thought. Before he knew it he found his steps quickening, walking, then breaking into a jog. Though the interior was hidden he could see the outer wall was still intact. He reached the bottom of the steps, racing to the top. And once there, he could see it all. It was intact! All of it. The house and the temple! He knelt down at the temple’s threshold kissing the ground, having no idea why he was so relieved. It was only an old temple he told himself wiping his tears as he touched the ground. But for him it was far more. It was a symbol that Belldandy and Keiichi’s goodness had not been washed

## *Return to Tariki Hongan Temple*

completely from the earth. He rose examining the temple more closely now. No it wasn't simply intact. He could see now the whole of it had been actively maintained. Several of the house's eaves which he and Keiichi had discussed replacing (but never did) had been repaired, as had parts of the stone path. He breathed a sigh of relief as he headed for the house. "*You there - stop!*" came the sudden shout beside him.

Takumi froze, as much from the sound as surprise, turning to find a short monk scowling at him from the other side of the low bamboo gate. "Um, I'm not going to do that, but you're welcome to finish up whatever it is you're doing over there buddy," Takumi replied.

"I'm not your buddy and I told you to get out! What are you doing here?!" he demanded.

"Me? I'm just going to go have a quick look at this house over here," he said paying him little attention.

"No you're not. That is a holy site!"

"*Look chief,*" he said rubbing his face, "I've had kiiniiind of a long day, plus I live here. So why don't you just finish wiping down the temple and take off!"

"Don't be ridiculous you demented vagrant. I am telling you for the last time - get out before I throw you out!"

Takumi began to smile, "Yeah. . . I would *really* like to see that. Seriously, you and what army do you think is going to make that happen?"

Before he realized quite what was happening the monk struck the stone steps several times with his staff, causing the doors of the temple to immediately open as a large number of similarly dressed monks, far more he thought than the temple could reasonably hold, began to pour out into the courtyard. He did a double take as they assembled. "Did - we add some extra levels in there while I was gone?" he asked trying to look inside. The monk struck the ground once more as they all drew down into a fighting stance. He stared at the group, perhaps a bit paler than before, looking between them and the temple. "Yeah that's - cool and all, but I think I really need to get going," he said growing mildly annoyed. About that time a monk unceremoniously threw a rock at him. But Takumi's reflexes had not slowed and he caught it, crushing it in his



hands. "You see that? Your neck's going to look like that in a minute!"

"Kentaro!" shouted the voice behind him suddenly.

"Why does everyone keep doing that with the shouting?!" he said jumping as everyone else immediately knelt low.

"*Lady Skuld!*" the head monk cried bowing low.

"*Lady - Skuld?*" Takumi echoed, smiling as he turned.

She blushed walking past him toward the congregation. He noted with interest she was dressed now as something a Miko might wear. "It's alright Kentaro," she said slightly embarrassed, waving to them to get up. "*I told you before they don't have to do that,*" she whispered to him. "This man - will be staying here a while," she said sounding official.

"Are you sure Lady Skuld?" The monk said not believing his ears. "This vagrant is not suitable to be on these grounds. *He's not bothering you is he?*" Kentaro whispered coming closer.

"Eh, No. You see, the fact of the matter is . . . this man is Takumi Sato." The revelation seemed to reverberate through the group causing significant consternation.

"*What?!* No he's not!" Kentaro cried with surprising confidence looking off to one side. Takumi noticed a number of other members now seemed to be doing the same thing. He followed their gaze, looking slowly toward the side of the temple, his eyes suddenly widening. There - etched into the wall stood an imposing visage of each of them, standing together like true deities. He chuckled surveying the powerful gaze of his own likeness, horrifically idealized as he stood next to Urd, arm around her at the right side of the group.

"That's not him," Kentaro definitively, though studying the portrait now he seemed less certain than he had a minute ago.

"Wow, you know you *hear* the word hagiography," Takumi said looking at the mural, "- but it's not until you really see it up close that you realize . . ."

"*You're not helping -*," Skuld muttered.

"Oh right. *I am Takumi Sato,*" he bellowed lowering his voice, straightening his shoulders in a transparent attempt to imitate his likeness more closely.

The majority of monks looked back at him shaking their heads as they wandered off.

## *Return to Tariki Hongan Temple*

“Hey I didn’t know it was going to be picture day okay!” he said defensively.

“But great grandmother -.”

“Wait - *WHAT?!?*” cried Takumi.

**“Kentaro we don’t need to get into all this here,” Skuld began.**

“Anything *else* you forgot to tell me Skuld?! Sorry *Lady Skuld*. As a matter of fact *you - who was your great grandfather?*” he demanded pointing a finger at Kentaro.

“Assuming it to be a dig at his own parentage Kentaro proudly replied, “My great grandfather was Sentaro -.”

“*Sentaro Kawanishi! Of course!* So, I guess biology didn’t turn out to be so *gross* after all, did it Skuld!” he shouted. She looked back at him red faced. “And who are all these guys? They can’t all be related to you. Wait - *are they ALL related to you?!?*”

“Of course not!” she snapped. “Kentaro – we will be using this place for a few weeks. Please let everyone know. And you - *get over here!*” she said taking the path toward the residence.

“Why didn’t you have me come down with you?” she asked as Takumi followed along behind her keeping pace with her shorter stride.

“Because I didn’t want you to see my reaction if the temple wasn’t here. I know it’s only an old building. But to me it was a symbol, the embodiment of all of your family’s caretaking here on earth. To me this place will always be your true home, the house of the sisters; the place where I came to know Urd and her family; the place where Sora was born. I was afraid to find that good washed from the earth. But I see now that some things are hard to destroy.”

“Some,” Skuld said raising her hands as all the doors and windows of the residence now opened, fresh air washed throughout the building. “It is for those reasons and more we protected it, repaired it, supported it. Though in truth I must thank Kentaro and his brethren, our small assassin friends, and the machiners for most of that. I haven’t been here in 12 years, though Sora and Tai visit from time to time.”

“Why is that?” he asked.

She looked to the mountain, “I told Sora and Tai to follow in a few days’ time.”

“Why?”

“Because I want time alone with you of course,” she said clapping him on the back. “A lot has changed since you went away. We should discuss it. But first let’s open the house.” They worked together preparing every aspect. It made a part of him happy to see each of the rooms, lovingly preserved much as he remembered them. It did take a bit of getting used to for him to see Skuld, now an adult, being able to use her powers so capably. As they finished he put his hand to Urd’s door, not wanting to open it until later. He turned in the hallway to find Skuld standing there, without judgement. That too is something that has changed, he thought. As night fell they sat together on the steps eating the noodles they had bought, as they were both still terrible cooks.

“Oh I almost forgot,” Skuld said getting up. “I promised Tariki Hongan’s overseers I would put the green tea and anko mochi out by the bell. They go crazy for those,” she said going inside. “Don’t put food out in the courtyard,” Takumi complained. “Rodents will get it.”

“Trust me they won’t. Nobody takes *their* food.”

“How do you know?”

“A few decades ago I put out some food out early. The next day it was gone, but I found in its place the carcasses of several overly curious red squirrels lying there with throwing stars in them. Personally I think they left them there as a message to the others. Also I think I saw Hikari wearing a red squirrel coat about that time,” she said ducking inside.

“I see. So they’re still quite vicious,” he said his eyes following her until he caught something in the trees. He looked again but it was gone; if in fact it had ever really been there.

“Something?” Skuld asked appearing suddenly behind him.

“Huh? No, nothing. I was just thinking how big some of these trees have gotten,” he said hiding his thoughts as she descended the steps walking out to the courtyard. “What did you say about us?” he asked upon her return.

“You mean about you and Urd?”

“Yeah.”

### *Return to Tariki Hongan Temple*

“Uh well, we told everyone you two had decided to move. You know, new research opportunity and stuff. It all had to be done quick, quick, so no time for a party.

“I see.”

“I even forged the occasional postcard from you guys.”

“Nice, he muttered sarcastically.

“Well what did you want us to do? Point them to the burial markers on the mountain? I mean . . .”

“I know what you mean.”

They talked late into the night until Takumi knew it was time to go in. “Skuld I’m just going to . . .”

“I know. Sheets are in the closet. Let me know if you need anything else,” she said.

“Thanks Skuld.”

He opened the door going into Urd’s room. Sliding it closed behind him he laid down atop the pile, looking around as though it had all been a dream. But this was the room he had been so happy in. The same moonlight flowed through the window. He tried to imagine her sitting across from him, tried to imagine what she would say, and what he would say to her now if he had the chance. He picked up her potions one by one trying to remember, his hands moved over the contours of her clothes. Finally he laid down sadly pulling the sheets around him. But sleep was predictably hard to come by, his mind flashing over a series of images both real and imagined in the past 120 years. He awoke early the next day, hiking the mountain to gain a view of the temple from the slopes, walking until he reached the site of his old grave. He saw now a series of additional markers hidden with his in the forest floor.

Keiichi and Belldandy were a little way off, with he and Urd side by side. But he saw now a final set of two markers.

Removing the leaves he saw the first was Sentaro Kawanishi, who had passed in 2067, 65 years ago. But the other was someone named Senichi Kawanishi, born 2035 - her son! It had to be. He looked for the final date - 2120; 12 years ago. That was why she had not come back. With him gone there must have been little reason to return. He knew the feeling. Seeing all of the markers laid out in front of him made him feel tired; as though he had outlived his time. He sat down beside

## *Fallow*

Keiichi Morisato's marker for a long time, meditating upon his thoughts and what to do.

"Takumi!" he heard the call finally from the temple.

"*I'm here Skuld,*" he replied appearing from the forest moments later. He walked down through the back gate patiently, going into the courtyard to hug her tightly. In some way she would always be that little girl to him.

"What's this all about?" she said letting him go.

He said nothing of what he had seen. "I – just wanted you to know I'm ready," he replied folding his hands.

"For what?"

"*To know,*" he said soberly. "To know everything that happened after I left. If I'm to live in this world I'd best know how it came to be."

She nodded taking his hand, leading him to Keiichi Morisato's room. Looking around the room Takumi tried to make sense of all its mementos of Bell and Keiichi's life. But doing so only made him think of Skuld and Sentaro for some reason, walking together across miles of beach in the long days of autumn.

Skuld watched him wondering what he was thinking. She had worried about when they would reach this point, and now it had come. "*Don't look so nervous,*" she said opening the closet to reveal rows of binders. It wasn't all bad," she said pulling down the first of them laying it on the floor before him.

Takumi nodded sitting down beside her, drawing his breath.

"*There are so many things,* too many perhaps that I have forgotten over time. But I remember that day like it was yesterday. You had been gone for several days, we knew not where. Keiichi and I kept busy, hoping that the Valkyries would not come. That afternoon we were working in the shed on the bikes when I heard something. Like the sound of footsteps on loose stone."

'*You see? I told you he'd be back,*' Keiichi said standing up.

'*Stay here. I want to talk with him.*' I watched him walk down the side of the house turning the corner. Then I saw it, the look on his face, and I knew."

"What?"

## *Return to Tariki Hongan Temple*

“That it was not you who had returned. The tools dropped from his hands and I ran. Ran as fast as I could down the side of the house that seemed to take forever, running as I reached the corner to see them, the scene I could not believe all at once, them embracing there in front of my room. Then a moment later it was all of us, tumbling together crying, Belldandy hugging me. Keiichi was a man of deep affection, but that day was one of the only times I ever remember seeing him crying so openly, as though everything he’d held inside for the last three years just came pouring out.

“And then?”

We just knelt there together for what seemed like a long time, hugging each other as though we were the last three people on earth. Our bond strengthened between us that day. Belldandy she was muttering something, saying things we couldn’t really understand in that moment. But in time we put it together. About how you had made some sort of exchange for her, about how they had released her so that she might return to us. Finally Keiichi whispered something to her, and I knew he had told her about Urd and Sorano. *‘I knew it had to be something like that,’* I remember her saying as she buried her head in Keiichi’s arms. *‘It was the only thing that could have made him leave.’* The shock of it all seemed to weaken her. But from that point on everything was different.”

“What you mean?”

“I don’t know - *different*. When she began to fade Keiichi’s actions became bold, he picked her up without hesitation taking her into the house. He kept it all going, nursing her back to health over the next few weeks. Yes from that point on there was a noticeable shift – because from that point on they were truly together. Over the next few weeks she regained her strength moving more, rising more. Then one evening as he gathered his things to leave I remember her suddenly calling out, *‘Please don’t leave me.’*

‘No need to worry . . . *because I’m never leaving you again,*’ he said kissing her. “Can you imagine the old Morisato doing something like that? He was so earnest!”

“No,” Takumi replied honestly.

## Fallow

“And that was the beginning. The start of the next phase of our lives. Well - are you ready?” she asked.

“For what?” he said giving her a curious look.

“This was from about a year later -,” Skuld replied turning the page. Takumi averted his eyes leaning back. The white of the page was blinding. He wondered why she would show him such a thing, but then he noticed several black outlines toward the middle. Looking closer he saw a girl’s grinning face, *no* - there were two faces actually. He squinted looking harder, seeing a girl had her arms wrapped around Keiichi’s neck squeezing him crazily. Wow, that girl looks just waaaay too happy. *Must be Keiichi’s sister*, he thought. As for Keiichi, he looked both happy and scared in equal parts. He now realized there were a number of other faces crowding the picture. Megumi and Keiichi stood out simply because everyone else around them seemed to be dressed in pure white.

“Wait a minute? *Is this?!!!*”

“*It is*,” Skuld said smiling. “Big-sis and Keiichi’s wedding!”

“Megumi seems more excited than Keiichi.”

“She almost was!” Skuld laughed.

“He looks a bit nervous,” he smiled.

“Wouldn’t you be?”

“Assuming most of the people I don’t know in these pictures are probably gods . . . yeah I’d be a bit nervous. *Oh wow look at this!*” he said turning to a full page picture of Belldandy and Keiichi posing for their wedding. “If I didn’t *know* she was a goddess – I’d say ‘she was a goddess’! She would make angels jealous . . . *and probably did*,” he murmured.

“Yeah they looked good that day.”

“Where was it held?”

“Here.”

“What?! Here at the temple?! Man I barely recognized the place!” he said scrutinizing the pictures more carefully.

“Well it helps having Heavenly decorators,” she said. “They covered the all the courtyards with white rose petals several inches deep, and lined the inner walls with garlands.

“Yeah, I really don’t recognize it,” he said continuing to stare.

“Those flowering vines descending on all sides of the temple throws the eye off.”

## *Return to Tariki Hongan Temple*

“That was Peorth’s work,” Skuld replied.

“*Where is* – oh yeah, I see her here.”

“Didn’t recognize her with so many clothes on?”

“Well, a strapless white evening gown is still not really the norm at a wedding. Not a bad looking woman really . . .”

“*Yeah*,” Skuld agreed turning the page.

“I assume this is Keiichi’s parents?” he said seeing a picture of Megumi standing with several people.

“Yeah that’s them.”

“Something weird going on there but I’ll leave it . . .,” he said noticing the apparent disparity in their age. “Who’s the person officiating?” he asked seeing a picture of Belldandy and Keiichi kneeling down.

“The priest who’s *actually* in charge of Tariki Hongan temple.”

“Oh.”

“Looks like the Nekomi Tech Auto Club members were having a good time,” he said turning the pages to see Hasegawa laughing in mid-clap and Tamiya and Otaki picking up Keiichi and Bell as the other Auto Club members cheered.

“*As usual* . . .” Skuld replied turning the page.

He saw pictures of Tamiya looking surprised, of Skuld and Sentaro standing side by side dressed up, of a small girl holding up a ring to Belldandy. There were a predictable number of photos of people wanting pictures with Belldandy, including one of several female warriors gathered around her flexing their bare arms beside her more slender arm.

“Wait - do Valkyries have tattoos?” he asked observing the interlocking triangular pattern on each of their upper arms.

“Err, some groups do. That’s the Valknut. Kind of a good luck charm for them. I suppose you’ve never seen Valkyries in their formal attire,” Skuld replied.

“Hmm. I see your Dad made it. *Nice*. The wedding must have come as something of a surprise after sentencing his daughter to a term longer than Keiichi’s –.”

“He was *also* the one who approved your transfer, so I think he deserves a break. Besides I don’t think anything is really a ‘surprise’ to Dad. I told you - things were different after she came back. The two of them wouldn’t take no for an answer. But I also believe that Urd’s loss affected him very deeply. I



## *Fallow*

think in the end he wanted his remaining daughters to be happy. Still, they had to go through some pretty crazy tests.”

“All in all it looks like it was a very good party.”

“Oh, it went on for a few days,” she replied.

“I see. And I see you and Sentaro standing together in some of these - off in the distance, on your own.”

“Well, after Big-sis and Keiichi got married, things . . .”

“You don’t have to explain to me Skuld. I’m sure you needed someone to talk to about everything that was going on.”

“I did because - *a lot of things* were going to go on and, well we needed to talk about things; how we felt about the future and stuff.”

“And stuff?”

“Yeah. This book here – is the next in the set.”

To Takumi’s eyes, things around the Morisato’s residence seemed to have settled down and taken on a sort of domestic routine. Parties with the Auto Club seemed to continue, they entertained, both seemed to be working hard. But he was sure Skuld must have felt a bit left out by it all, even if Keiichi and Bell tried to include her. He looked at the pictures more closely now. “Skuld, is everything with Keiichi and Belldandy okay? She seems to be sitting out for a number of these games.”

“You don’t use your eyes, do you?” she said pointing to a photo of Belldandy on the porch, her hand around her stomach.

“Tai?!”

“*Yeah.*”

He smiled turning the pages. Yes, it was going to happen alright. He saw the pace of the Morisato’s preparations increasing, more people coming over to help build things. He saw Peorth visiting more frequently with others of the realm he did not recognize. And then . . . “*Skuld look at you!*” he said seeing her holding the baby, looking only slightly less dazed than the day Sora was born. “You became and aunt!”

“Yeah it was a crazy day. I was soooo nervous. Keiichi too.”

“I’m sure.” There it was, a picture of Bell, Keiichi and the newest addition wrapped up with their faces close together. Pictures followed of Keiichi, Skuld and Megumi running around trying to keep things together, cooking, shopping and eating. Later, Belldandy carrying baby Tai into the forest as he

### *Return to Tariki Hongan Temple*

tried to grab at things. Takumi saw other pictures too, a group of goddesses, their faces pressing in with the baby in a circle, so many that he could barely see Belldandy. Another showed Hasegawa and Chihiro playing blocks with the Tai, Otaki holding the baby on his lap, sitting on the roof of Tariki Hongan temple at sunrise with a girl he'd seen earlier, her hair longer now.

"The next year flew by," Skuld said looking over his shoulder at the pages. *"Those were good days.* And then, just when we thought things couldn't get any better – they did. Have a look at this –," she said turning the page.

At first he could not understand why she thought he would be interested in it. A dozen or so members of the Auto Cub appeared to be gathered together on the steps of the temple toward evening. Their faces and clothes looked dirty, as though soiled by ash or smoke. Then he realized he did not recognize any of their faces. He studies the picture more closely. "Their outfits. They're all similar," he said.

"Yeah it's hard to see under all the soot. But you're missing the best part," she said tapping the lower center of the frame.

He studied it carefully now, seeing the small eyes staring back at him, held firmly by the arms of the group's leader.

He stopped dead. "Wait a minute! Is that?!"

"Yeah. You should be able to recognize your own daughter!"

He saw now his mistake. They weren't Auto Club members at all. They were a group Valkyries. Dirty and soot-faced they sat on the steps around Lind! Though her mouth was straight he could she was happy, beaming as she held the child.

"So then this –?"

"Was taken on the day they recovered her from the Demon Realm."

He stared at the picture intently now. "How did they find her?"

"I don't know exactly, word was they got a tip and both teams went in. From what I heard it was pretty hairy too," she remarked. "But Lind brought them all out with no losses."

"Did she now?" he replied examining the muscles of Lind's arm wrapped around the child. "How did Sora react?"

"She didn't know what to do the first couple of days. She was pretty freaked out. Every time Lind moved to leave she put up

her hands not wanting her to go. So Lind stayed with us for a while. But then she seemed to realize ‘these people are not going to eat me’ so she settled down. She also made friends with Tai. She must have thought, ‘hey there’s another small person here’, so they got on. You see?” she said pointing. “Yeah. Looks like you got the worst of it,” he replied seeing them playing hide and seek around her sleeping body. Another picture caught them peering in at things in Skuld’s room. “They only got to be more of a handful as they aged I can tell you. But I had time to grow into it.”

He studied the photos as she talked. Except that these pictures seemed to convey more than they appeared. More than scenes, they seemed to convey feelings and atmosphere as well. He wondered if it was simply his imagination or a kind of enchantment, realizing there were still many things about the goddesses he still did not understand. “Lind seems to be present a bit more in these later photos,” he observed.

“Yeah, for Keiichi it became a kind of a running joke. At the time it used to kind of annoy me, Lind’s habit of always quietly poking her nose around the house to see what we were up to. Sora could always tell before the rest of us when she was around, always running around onto the grounds yelling *wind*, *wind* what you bring me?”

“What did she bring her?” he asked.

“I don’t know, the usual stupid stuff, a special rock, a tree branch, you know. She always pretended to be there in some ‘official’ capacity, walking around rather uncomfortably.”

“But obviously waiting to see Sora.”

“Of course. Though she would never admit it. Sora would come out trying to copy her mannerisms, marching around behind her. Lind would pretend to be annoyed, chasing her around but they both enjoyed it. You can see some of that here,” she said showing him a picture of Sora holding up a flower to Lind explaining to her all about it, Lind’s eyes narrowing as she listened. Another showed Belldandy and several goddesses sitting on the veranda talking with their children with Sora on Lind’s lap.

“So she took an interest in her.”

### *Return to Tariki Hongan Temple*

“Yes. But the funniest part was one night when Lind was here late and Belldandy was putting the kids to bed, ready to read them a story. Sora held up the book to Lind, wanting *her* to read it to her.”

“What did Belldandy do?”

“She took it well, but Keiichi did have to give her a couple extra kisses that night.”

“Great.”

“Well, it makes sense doesn’t it? I mean Belldandy was busy with Tai in those days and . . . Sora didn’t really have a Mom. She looked up to Lind. The truth was they got along well.”

“So you’re telling me –.”

“She definitely looks up to Lind as a kind of Mom now.”

He looked over at her less than pleased.

“Well hey I wasn’t going to do it!” she said exasperated.

“Of course not. You were busy hooking up with Sentaro!”

“That wasn’t until 17 years later. At least that’s when we got married. I stayed and helped Big-sis and Keiichi with Tai and Sora until they were grown.”

“A small Urd looking up to Lind - the world really has gone crazy. Does she know that Choppy almost killed me!”

“I told her when she was older.”

“And what did she say?”

“Oh, we don’t have to go into all that.”

“No?”

“She said you must have done something wrong.”

“Did she now!”

“Well at least Lind never badmouthed you to her.”

“Did she ever praise us?”

“*Can’t say I ever remember that . . .*” Skuld muttered. “Look, she could have done much worse with respect to a role model.”

“Really? Was Sayoko somehow unavailable as a mother?”

“What’s really bothering you?” Skuld asked shaking her head.

“Or is this just what it’s like to get old?”

“While I was inside I had a peculiar experience. Something that never recurred during the rest of my time there. Hard to know for certain but - I can’t seem to shake the feeling it may have occurred around the time of Sora’s rescue.”

“What kind of ‘experience’?” Skuld asked.

## *Fallow*

"I don't know. I can't make sense of it right now," he said.

"What happened after you married Sentaro?"

"He worked for an outdoor sporting goods company so we moved to Hakuba, where he handled mountain biking and ski jumping," she said opening another book.

"Look at all that snow! You're a real mountain girl Skuld!" He said seeing them standing together, two small figures in the immense alpine whiteness. "Is that from your house?"

"Yes. He liked the overlook it had on the town."

"The two of you look happy. What did Keiichi say?"

"He said it was time we pursued our own happiness."

"Must have been a big change though. For all of you."

"Yes and no. Remember, for us travel is a little different. While we wouldn't do it in populated areas, between our own houses is a simple one-step operation. Because of that Big-sis and Keiichi would often have breakfast with us in the morning; and Christmas Eve was always at our place. In fact, in the beginning they kind of visited too often."

"Oh, I see."

"Then two years later this little guy was born," she said showing him far too many pictures of the baby - most either showing Bell and Keiichi enthusiastically holding or Sora and Tai less than enthusiastically holding the baby.

"Senichi Kawanishi."

"That's right, she said kissing a picture of him with his father.

"Did you see them much after that?"

"I can't tell you how many times we suddenly had 4 extra people for dinner."

"I see," he said leafing through the later pages. Sora seemed to be in her early twenties now, Keiichi in his forties.

He turned the page and suddenly the feeling seemed to change. There were pictures of people hastily gathered, bearing scattered looks of anguish and concern. But it was the picture of Keiichi standing alone, his jacket beside the bike that truly struck fear into him. "Skuld . . . *what is this?*" he asked looking up only to see her eyes watching him.

"That was . . . *the day we lost Belldandy* of course."

"But - that's not right. She died with Keiichi didn't she?"

"Who told you that?" she said surprised.

## *Return to Tariki Hongan Temple*

“Well . . .,” The revelation struck him like an icy blade. *No one had.* He had simply assumed it.

“Keiichi lived another 24 years after Big-sis . . . *my precious sister passed away.*”

The room seemed to be spinning. “But that’s - *impossible.* How? How was she lost?”

“The way you all were - you, Urd, Belldandy, you were there one day, the next you were not.”

From within Takumi suddenly felt a deep stabbing sadness. He had never considered the effect from her perspective. He had only ever thought about himself. He found himself hugging her, whispering, begging for forgiveness. “How did it happen?” he said finally.

“There was no warning if that’s what you’re asking. She said she was going on an errand and would return. When she did not Keiichi grew anxious. Eventually the Valkyries came to the temple and told us the terrible news.”

*Just like Urd,* he thought. “And then?”

“I - don’t really have clear memories of that time. We were all in a state of shock. Keiichi did his best to try and support us but he . . . *was not well.* It seemed to drain everything from him. He and Tai – they had a number of conflicts over what to do. Because I was in Hakuba with Senichi, who was three at the time, Sora played a big role in keeping things together here. During that period she seemed to fight almost constantly with Tai. But I think it also caused her to grow closer to Keiichi. I know they talked more. She seemed to listen more to him.”

“And his son?”

“He was angry. He had lost his mother. For a while it seemed he might lose his path in life. But in time Sora managed to pull him back. He appeared to find something within himself. The experience made them closer. I don’t know the details, but eventually he and Keiichi could sit and talk once more.”

“How did you explain Belldandy’s loss to - *everyone else?*”

“We told them there had been a terrible accident while Belldandy was away visiting her home country.”

He still could not fathom it. “The repercussions in the Heavens must have been huge.”

She looked at him as though he was insane. “*Huge?*”

## *Fallow*

Takumi - *that was what started the war.* Urd, and a number of other things had been simmering a long time but - *that* was the spark that set everything off.”

“War?” If Takumi Sato had believed his long incarceration in the absence of Urd represented the depth of his despair he was beginning to understand how disastrously mistaken he truly was. “What war . . .?”

*“The war between the Heavens and the Demon Realm.”*

Now he knew what it was that had been nagging him at the back of his mind all this time. Lind’s scar, Skuld’s nervousness, the weapon she carried at her side, the fortifications he had seen that morning outside Yggdrasil.

Now it all made sense. He returned, scanning the pictures to confirm his suspicions, “Skuld when I came here, did I expose you to danger?”

Skuld smiled, but it was not an easy smile, her hands sweeping over dark hair. “I speak of events that occurred 94 years ago. I assure you Tariki Hongan Temple is quite safe,” she replied proudly. “It’s been thoroughly reinforced using my, Sora and Tai’s powers. It would be a foolish demon indeed insane enough to come here looking for trouble. They have enough to worry about I think, *given that three-quarters of the demon realm now lies in ashes. May they all be destroyed . . .*”

He felt himself shiver at her words. “Uh, don’t you guys have some rules that prevents any actual -.”

“So great was the mourning upon Belldandy’s loss that the old ways fell apart completely. It seemed the demons wished for anarchy, and we provided it to them . . . in abundance.”

Takumi said nothing, trying to scan the remaining photographs. As he suspected Lind’s scar appeared about that time. But it was Morisato he was really interested in. When he came upon pictures of him some time after the memorial it seemed to confirm his suspicions. Still it was hard to tell from pictures alone. “What did Keiichi think of this ‘war’?”

“Keiichi - was confused. I loved him dearly but he didn’t see the whole picture.”

“And you and Tai did?”

“How did you know?”

## *Return to Tariki Hongan Temple*

“Call it a feeling. I assume he wanted you to have nothing to do with it?”

“He just didn’t want anyone getting hurt. It wasn’t that he . . . I wasn’t a little kid anymore. I had children of my own!”

“A three-year-old. All the more reason to stay out of it.”

“She was my sister!”

He could see where this was going. “I’m not even going to *ask* what happened with Sora. I’m sure Lind had just *all kinds* of helpful ideas for her.”

“Not as many as you might think. Among us she was the one who spoke the most with Keiichi during that period. It was about that time she began to get more curious about you.”

“Oh?” he said looking through the pictures, stopping at one that caught his eye. Keiichi and Sora seemed to be sitting together in front of the bike, from the sun and waves he guessed it was somewhere on the east coast of Japan. It was a windy morning, something about the rock formations looked familiar. But it was Keiichi’s look that struck him most. It was as though he was looking directly at him. Takumi stared at the picture trying to read his eyes, like a message out of time. *There must have been so much he wanted to.* . . . He realized he was being ridiculous. He turned the page. “I see more of Peorth in these pages,” he said stopping at a picture of her and Keiichi walking together under the setting sun. “Do you think they ever . . . ?”

“I don’t know - I don’t think so. But they had a lot in common as time went on. Keiichi needed someone to talk to about things, someone who could understand it all, who knew all the principles. But I have to say he was strong in those days. I knew he felt concern but he never really showed it. His club friends came and went often seeking his advice. Some did well, Hasegawa became a celebrated writer, Otaki married the president’s daughter and they had a big family up north. Tamiya and Chihiro kept Whirlwind going . . .”

Takumi swallowed. “And at the end?”

“Keiichi was surrounded by all of us at the end. Peorth was the last to say goodbye. Not a bad way for a human to go really. Five years later I said goodbye to Sentaro,” she said looking away. “But I stayed here in the human world for much of the next half century.”



## *Fallow*

“Because of Senichi.”

She nodded. “He had three children, Daichi, Kento’s father, is still alive; as are Akemi and Aiko. Akemi is in fact a noted engineer in this world.”

“Grandchildren. I never would have guessed it.”

“And Kento welcomed his son Hayate this year.”

“To think there are that many troublemakers in the world. You must be terrifying as a grand-/great grandmother.”

“After Sentaro passed in 67’ I returned to Tariki Hongan Temple. For most of the next fifty-three years I was here.”

“Until twelve years ago.”

“Yes. Since that time we’ve mostly been in the Heavens.”

He looked over the last of the photographs in the book. The last picture was of three of them standing in the temple courtyard at the end of day, with all the lights of the structures out. In his mind’s eye he imagined Bell and Keiichi dancing together in the outer darkness.

“And the demon realm?” he asked.

“Much of it now lies in ruin, little more than a smoking hulk in most places. Only one group still appears to be largely intact, and their numbers are relatively small.”

“Who are they?”

“The Fallen.”

“What are they?”

Skuld shrugged. “Who knows? They may have been part of Hild’s elite guard; perhaps something else. In either case it does not matter. Soon they will be gone and concern us no further.”

It was the coldness of her words that made him shiver, largely because of who they came from -Skuld, the little sister of Belldandy, who had grown to be . . . who knows? Certainly someone far different from the girl he left that day at Tariki Hongan temple.

“It is late, the sun will be up soon. We should retire.”

“Indeed.”

## Chapter 9

### *Afterglow*

Morning came far too quickly for Takumi's liking. As he rolled over in Urd's room he heard voices in the hallway, "*Shh! You'll wake him up!*"

*"I'm not the one making noise. You are!"*

"Both of you shut up," Skuld said sliding the door to her room open. His head on the floor, Takumi slid open his own door peeking out to get his bearings. Looking down the hallway he suddenly noticed a face standing over him. For a second he thought it was Keiichi.

"Hello," Tai Morisato said as he leapt to his feet.

"So you and Sora have come down?"

He nodded as they looked at each other awkwardly.

"So . . . they named you after me. Bet you're feeling a bit ripped off," Takumi said picking up the album beside him.

"A little," Tai replied smiling, only to spot Sora glaring at him from around the corner. "I just mean – I kind of thought you'd be more . . . heroic - *if you know what I mean.*"

"I tell myself the same thing," he chuckled striding outside.

Sora came around the corner smacking Tai in the head, - *If you know what I mean.* Ugh!"

"Well I don't know what to say to him!" he complained watching her hesitate at the outer doorway.

"What are you waiting for?" said Skuld giving her a nudge.

"I don't know -," she replied shrugging.

"How many nights have you ask me? If you ever wanted to know him, now is the time."

Nervously she stepped out on the veranda sitting down next to him. She looked at her hands, then up at the trees, then sideways at him tapping her fingers. "*Dad?*" she said finally.

"Yes?" he replied putting down the book.

"I . . . I don't want to disturb you."

"Don't worry. I've had quite enough time to myself lately," he replied. "What's on your mind?"

## *Fallow*

“Well, I mean if you’re not too busy, *what was mom like?*” she said, her voice filled with emotion on finally summoning the courage to ask.

He stood up looking at the clouds. “You don’t remember?”

She shook her head sadly. “I was only three when, *when . . .*”

“Well let’s just say she knew what she was about.”

“What does that mean?” she asked furrowing her brow.

“It means she didn’t let anyone tell her what to do.”

“Including you?”

“*Especiallly* me!” he laughed.

His smile seemed to relax her. “Well . . . how did you meet?”

“They didn’t tell you?”

The outer door slid open. “How could I tell her things I don’t know you weirdo?!” Skuld demanded.

“Eavesdropping - *nice*. Well the first time we met she tried to crush me with a large rock. Several in fact.”

“*Really?!?*”

“Yeah. Then she dumped me in the back of the garage . . .”

“*She did?!?*”

“Hey you were lucky to get that garage mister!” Skuld howled.

“I was,” he agreed. “Because that was where I saw your mother and Keiichi clearly for the first time.”

He saw her eyes light up. “Belldandy said mom swooped in and saved all of you.”

“Well your mom was a bit iffy on taking me with them initially. It took her a little while to realize how *into me* she really was -.”

Sora smiled.

“The truth is I was lost. I didn’t know it then; but I was. I came to this land looking for something. Something outside of me, and within me. When it came along, I followed. Eventually that path led me to Belldandy. But the true path was toward your mother. There was a fight, Bell and I were losing. I assumed it was the end. Then suddenly there was a light from above, a great dark force in the night sky. A dark avenging angel that miraculously saved us.

“You thought mom was an angel?!?”

“I suppose I still do,” he said looking at the clouds.

“They say she was very beautiful.”

## Afterglow

"Yes she was very much like you," he said seeing her out of the corner of his eye. "She was the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," he said remembering. "But she was much more than that," he said drifting off.

"They say you two were crazy about each other," she muttered looking down into her hands blushing.

"*We were*," he nodded. "Often at the expense of others I'm sure. *But then she was . . .*," he stopped, putting his hands to his head as his tears fell quietly. For so long he had kept it out, remembering her only at a distance - not really remembering. But now at the temple with Sora beside him he could no longer keep it out. He sobbed, for himself and all that had been lost.

"I'm sorry!" Sora said sitting closer to him. "I didn't mean to upset you!" She thought of how to change the subject.

"Is it true, well I mean some people say that . . . she fought the underworld to bring you back?"

"Yes. There weren't many like your mother. She fought your grandmother and cut through half a dozen of her top lieutenants in the heart of their realm to get me back."

"I can't even imagine it! She must have been quite a warrior."

"Yes, she was fierce warrior, as fierce as your grandmother. She used to say I was her rock but the truth was exactly the opposite. It was she who held us all together, protected us and kept evil away. She was . . . we all relied upon -," he began but his emotions preventing him from saying more.

"I'm sorry to ask about this."

"No it's fine. It's - it's good to remember," he replied. "It is time we had a proper talk about it."

This was what she wanted. To know about them, about their life together. There was so much Skuld would not tell her.

"And - what was I like?"

"You? On our first meeting I thought you were rather imperious. You sent me away with a look in your eyes. Then when you were older, you would always crawl up when we were talking adding your own indecipherable contributions." "She's still like that," Tai commented.

She smiled wrapping her arms around her legs. "Well . . . what was Skuld like in those days?"

## *Fallow*

“Skuld? Who knows? She was always sneaking off with Sentaro in those days.”

“A total lie!” Skuld said sliding open her outer door now.

“I was the one that had to keep it all running!”

“She might have done that a bit,” Takumi pondered. “Your Mother and I had a place on the coast. Did you know that?”

“Yeah, Skuld told me,” Sora replied.

“Have you ever been there?”

“I’ve been there a couple of times. *After* . . . in the early years when Keiichi was on his own there - was a lot going on. Everything seemed to be falling apart and I couldn’t handle it; couldn’t handle anything. One day Keiichi said we needed to take a ride. We rode for a long time until we reached the coast. We walked the shoreline and he pointed out your and Mom’s place. Sitting down he started to explain many things to me, how I was part of something greater than myself. Just because I couldn’t speak to people any longer didn’t mean their efforts weren’t still pushing me forward. He said, “your mother commanded fundamental forces of nature, your father drew demon’s power to him and subsumed it. You are their daughter, so you have nothing to be afraid of. Plus you had the benefit of Belldandy; and I suppose Skuld and I helped a bit too.” He told me to imagine my future, not be held back by the past. It gave me the confidence I needed to go out and find Tai, and in time put his and Keiichi’s relationship back together.”

“So our place is still there?” he asked.

“A powerful earthquake struck that region about 40 years ago so much of it is in ruins.” She saw a shadow cross his face.

“But, several of the walls remain. Do you want to go there?”

He shook his head looking out at the pond. “No. You, Tai and Skuld - that’s all that matters to me now,” he replied. “It must have been a lot to grow up here. I suppose I’ve been a very derelict father.”

“Belldandy explained things to me when I was old enough.”

“Oh? He wondered what she had really said. “Then you had a good life growing up with them here?”

“Yeah. Skuld was a great aunt. She was always so crazy. Still . . . to be frank she’s not really great at the Mother stuff. Especially when I was little. One day when I was hanging out

## Afterglow

by myself in the trees after Tai was born Lind came by, seemingly appearing out of nowhere as she so often did. She'd come by the temple to look in on the family but found me instead, looking down at her as I hung upside down watching her cross the forest floor. She looked up at me surprised, her eyes narrowing. *'You shouldn't be able to see me,'* she said. *'I was trying to be quiet.'*

Well I did!" I shouted at her continuing to swing.

"Her face broke into a smile as she plucked me down out of the tree. Strange, I don't remember what we talked about that afternoon except her final comment: *'You can do that because you have the instincts of a warrior.'* From then on whenever she would come by I would hear her call, *'Where's that little warrior?'* and of course I would come running from wherever I was hiding. In time I came to realize I truly looked forward to her visits; and I suppose she did as well. For it was something that was mine alone. In time she became a kind of mother figure to me, keeping me on the path, chiding me when I screwed up."

"Yes, well be cautious of replacements Sora. They may not be as good as the original."

"She's the most honest person I know."

"Is she?"

"How could you even think that there is something wrong with her?"

"Let's just say I wonder how good she is at telling the *whole* truth," Takumi replied.

"Well maybe you're not entitled to hear the whole truth!"

"-Speaking of whole truths, when were you planning on telling me about that other matter?"

"What other matter?" she said looking up suddenly.

"The other matter that's out there watching us," he replied.

Sora's eyes went wide, "You ratted us out Skuld!"

"I did nothing of the kind!" Skuld replied before suddenly shouting, *"HE KNOWS?!"*

Takumi shook his head, "Every generation thinks it's the first to discover love. And the most clever at it. I would have thought Keiichi's stories would have disabused you of that."

## Fallow

"I'm not skulking," Morisato replied appearing beside him so suddenly it made him jump. "*Only standing guard.*"

"Does she need guarding?" Takumi asked looking up.

"He means from demons," Skuld replied. "But no they can't get in here."

"Yes from what I hear that group's been culled considerably."

"*She always needs guarding,*" Tai shrugged standing closer to her.

"Don't believe him," Sora replied narrowing her eyes looking much like her mother's.

"What about the time you left with that band for a week? Mom and Dad were freaking out!"

Sora's face grew red.

"-And Belldandy had to give you that talk when you returned," Skuld remembered.

"Guys there's no need to bore our *guest*," Sora insisted waving.

"Belldandy giving a sex talk? I can't imagine," Takumi mused.

"Well she certainly talked a lot about not giving 'boys' the 'wrong idea'," Skuld muttered.

"Did you give them the wrong idea?" he asked.

"*No!*" she said shaking her head looking to Skuld and Tai for support . . . which seemed lacking. "Maybe once - possibly twice - at most!"

"You see? I told you - *constant guarding*," Tai nodded.

"I am *so* going to punch you," Sora replied chasing after him.

Takumi stood up watched them go.

"Hard to believe she's 121 years old and he's 117," Skuld said behind him.

"And you?" he asked turning.

"One hundred thirty-six, in your years."

"That's crazy."

"It's a fact of our existence. Beyond a certain point we don't intrinsically age. If Big-sis and Urd were alive today they'd look exactly as you remembered them."

"Except that they never got the life they deserved. Urd was only 34 the day she left. Belldandy . . . in her fifties?"

"Fifty-two," Skuld replied.

## Afterglow

He nodded. They stood side by side silently for a moment. "Something tells me you're not here simply to recall dates," he said.

"No," she said drawing out the envelope from behind her.

"What's that?"

"A letter. *From Keiichi.*"

"What does it say?" he asked.

"I don't know."

Takumi turned the letter over in his hands, debating whether to open it. He knew whatever was inside would only bring him pain. But then perhaps Keiichi wanted to tell him something, something he didn't want others to know? Of course it could be to curse him, he hadn't made things easy before he left. But with all that had happened part of him secretly longed for his council. Hesitantly he opened the letter:

*Takumi,*

*I know that one day you will read this, read these words because you found your way out, found your way back from where you have gone. Regardless of anything. I know this because I know you will never stop. There is no way I can express how truly sorry I am about Urd - and everything that happened after. She was the bright fire, even now I sense her spark on the darkest nights. But then we both knew what a unique and remarkable woman she truly was. As for yourself, though Bell and I do not agree with your decision, you have our eternal gratitude for what you have given us. Belldandy and I now have a son! Can you believe it? I'm as surprised as you are. Also, Sora has been found and is here with us. Skuld will explain all. Bell and I have done what we can to keep them all safe and strong. Since I will not be there to greet you, I wish you peace in your time Takumi. I hope that you find the children well, and all of you find a way to live together, far removed from the terrible troubles of our time.*

*Keiichi*



## *Fallow*

Strange to be reading this so many years after the fact he thought, when events were still so fresh to him. He decided it must have been written in the first years after Bell's return.

"Thank you, Keiichi. You were a kind soul. I hope you will not judge my actions too harshly now," he said folding the letter. He stayed outside climbing onto the roof as the others prepared dinner, watching the lights of the city below.

"What are you doing?" asked Sora climbing up some time later.

"Just thinking, about all of you," he replied.

"Oh?"

He nodded reclining on the roof tiles, watching Tai Morisato in the courtyard calling to the birds under the big tree, whispering to them before they flew off.

"What is it about him?" he asked.

"Tai? Well after Belldandy, Keiichi was a mess. I mean he tried to hide it but he was a mess. And then there were all these people trying to crowd in around him about it – Skuld, Peorth, some other woman I don't even want to talk about."

"Sayoko. She was a favorite of your mother's as well."

"Well I - I don't know why I got so jealous. I said some terrible things to Keiichi. Both Tai and I did. It's just - I mean you don't know what kind of mom Belldandy was. She really loved us - all those nights she would sit in bed reading with us on their side of her, her hands on our little heads, I - !" she began to cry. "*Sorry - I'm sorry!*"

"No I can imagine, part of it anyway."

"But then, I apologized to him. And he . . ."

"Told you not to worry, that everything was okay."

"How did you know?"

"Experience. And Tai?"

"He just left."

"Where did he go?"

"Skuld's, the Heavens, the streets of Tokyo . . ." It was during that period that Keiichi took me to the coast and we began to talk much more about everything. About you, about the people who came around after Belldandy's passing."

"Like who?"

"Peorth mostly."

## Afterglow

He leaned in closer. “What did they talk about?”

“He told me they were just friends, yet when I would see them they would often be standing off outside the temple speaking in hushed tones. I would try to listen in the trees when I could.”

“About what?” he asked, cursing himself for not interrogating Peorth further when he’d had the chance in the Heavens.

“It was about me I think; or what Belldandy thought of me.

Things like – ‘but Sora returned, perhaps Urd’ – and ‘their actions have secured out future Keiichi, what have we done to secure theirs?’ It made me feel guilty - I know I got her killed!”

“Certainly not Sora. Given the information she possessed at that point Belldandy must have known where she was going was dangerous.”

*“But still -.”*

“I don’t know why she did what she did Sora, but she certainly knew what she was doing. *The part I don’t understand is why she would do anything to risk separation from Keiichi or Tai?*

It doesn’t make sense. The only thing I can figure is that whatever happened was far more dangerous than she anticipated. Perhaps an altogether different situation than what she had planned. Like maybe someone she trusted turned on her. That might also make sense in terms of what happened to Urd.” *If indeed Urd is really dead*, he thought. *‘But Sora returned, perhaps Urd’ . . . after all Belldandy had a similar thought. If she did, who was it that was waiting for her? And why?* He looked at Sora. “How does this relate to you and Tai Morisato?” he asked.

“I told you, I felt guilty. The light of our lives had gone away, and all of us: myself, Tai, Keiichi, Skuld, were left in darkness. Now Keiichi was whispering about the past. I didn’t want him to go away. I saw now how lonely he was. Skuld and I were important to him but Tai . . . I had to get him back. I began to look for him everywhere. *Leaving messages for him* - everywhere. Places only he and I would know to look. Then on my birthday Keiichi took me for a ride into town at night; just the two of us fooling around. When we returned Tai was waiting for us outside in the alley, saying he’d been left behind. I just laughed jumping off the bike, but when I came up to him I could see he was really upset. It was then I understood – we

## *Fallow*

had both been left behind. I just put my arms around him, I don't really know why. I began to understand then why I had really been looking for him. Yes, I guess that night is when it really started for me. That night was when I started to fall in love with him."

"And after that?"

"I made excuses so Keiichi and he spent more time together after that, they worked in the shop on this and that. I suppose I felt a little left out at the time. One night he was waiting for me, 'I came back for him,' he said. 'But the reason I could is because of you,' he admitted putting his head against me. And from that point we began. Began to live our lives."

"You two are different. You've never had any regrets?"

"No," she replied.

"Then I'll say no more," he mused trying to take it all in. There was so much, so much to get his head around. He looked up as the breeze swept around them. As if the air itself was waiting.

"You know what I'm going to ask you right?" he said.

She nodded looking over the now dark courtyard.

"*What do you remember?* About the time you were with Hild," he said softly.

"I – don't think I can help you," she replied.

"Just tell me anything you remember. Even if it's just a feeling. You know I was here the first time Hild saw you? Your mom didn't want to show you to her."

"Really?!"

"Yeah, they had a complicated relationship. Perhaps all mothers and daughters do," he mused.

"I only remember bits and pieces of my time with her."

"Well sure, the years between 3-5 aren't exactly the best for memory," he agreed.

"You know It's weird sitting here talking with you about this."

"Why?"

"Because all the stories I heard about my father were like - RAWR! A statue of you on the temple – fighting Hild and the demon army - going into the underworld . . ."

"Well technically I didn't have a choice on that last one but I get your point. And now you see me and think - he's just some old man."

## Afterglow

“Yeah! I mean no - I mean, you just seem . . . I don’t know.”

“There’s a lesson in there somewhere. Things have a tendency to get mythologized over time. The truth is we were just people fighting for what we loved - and love can make you do some *pretty* crazy things sometimes.”

“Don’t I know it -,” Sora muttered under her breath causing Takumi to frown. “It’s exactly the same with Hild.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, all the stories I’ve ever heard about her describe her as this malevolent super deity. But that wasn’t the way I saw her at all.”

“Must have met her on a good day,” Takumi sighed. “How did she appear to you?”

“Like . . . like an old woman who lived in the forest. Like some wizard wandering the woods.”

“You didn’t live in a castle? A stronghold?” he said puzzled.

“No. We were always in the forest from what I can remember.”

Takumi’s hopes rose. “Perhaps you are remembering your mother? I mean you were young, they both had long white hair, possessed similar body types and were both powerful conjurers. Maybe you were traveling with her. This woman, she never walked with a private army? A group of bodyguards? Never lived in a citadel?”

“No. But I don’t think it was mom. It *felt* different. I don’t know how to explain it. I would always be looking at the decorations in her hair. She would show me things about how to survive in the forest, passing through portals she would create. She taught me all kinds of things, secret things, small magic, how to listen to the woods, work with animals of the forest, to tell good water from bad. These things were very important to her I think. I always remember her as a kind of majestic conjurer. Sometimes when I was tired she would call or summon animals. Then I would ride on the back of a bear for a while. Don’t get me wrong. I knew even then she wasn’t completely benign.”

“What do you mean?”

“There were times she would tell me to go on ahead. And when she caught up to me later I knew she had ended someone.”

“How?”

## *Fallow*

"The smell of blood on her clothes. Burns. From the pursuers."  
"Pursuers? Did they come frequently? Did you ever *see* these pursuers?"

"Sometimes they came. No, I never saw them."

"You're sure? For instance did they have uniforms, like – like any you've ever seen? Or maybe something else?"

"No."

"And you camped? For how long ? Days? Weeks?"

"A long time I think. We roamed the mountains for what felt like years."

"Why camp? And for so long? Why not go back to the comfort of the city?"

Sor shrugged. "I don't know. We moved from place to place."

"When did it end?"

"We were moving a lot in the last few weeks. Then one day she said we would have a race down a forest path deep in the mountains. She said there was a magnificent palace at the other end."

"Palace?"

"I was kind of into palaces in those days."

"And?"

"She told me to run in the direction of the rising sun. She told me to run as fast as I could and not stop. Run quickly and she would follow."

"That was it? Nothing else?"

"I ran and I ran. I remember thinking I had never run this far ahead before. I wondered if I should turn back. I turned, but there was fire, as tall as buildings behind me, everywhere was being consumed. And so I ran, faster and faster as fell things closed in on me from the distance. I began to run once more but the shadow followed faster. I had never been so scared. I thought it would overtake me, but just before it did arrows of smoke seemed to come in from high overhead, descending from a great height as they screamed past me to the ground around me. For a moment battle raged all around and I felt a pair of hands come around me as a cloak came over me. I looked up and saw a woman in blue and grey and felt a bright light. '*I have you,*' she said.

"And that was Lind?"

## Afterglow

“Yes, as I would come to know. She took me to the temple and began to wash my face and, well you know the rest.”

“Belldandy must have been beside herself when you arrived.”

“I definitely remember her. I’d never met anyone like her before, or any of them for that matter. For a while I didn’t believe my good fortune. For the first month I kept thinking it must be a kind of trick and kept looking for ways to run back to the forest. Skuld was eventually put in charge as my minder,” she said, turning to see her climbing onto the roof behind them. “She must have loved that,” Takumi observed as she came and sat down beside him.”

“Yeah, but eventually I put pattern recognition on Banpei so it all worked out,” Skuld replied.

“It just picked her up?”

“Scooped her up and ran her back, but yeah.”

“But I’d still run,” said Sora. “Eventually I would often hear *‘where are you going little one?’* It was the same Valkyrie who had rescued me, standing in some glade or stream in front of me. It got to be a regular routine. Keiichi used to say it was because I wanted to see her, and because she wanted Belldandy’s home cooking,” Sora laughed.

“What stopped the running?”

“Keiichi. One day he picked me up carrying me around the waist beside him like a sack of potatoes back to the house. He asked me what was bothering me. I sat on his knee and we talked for a long time. We . . . used to talk a lot, even when I was little,” she said starting to cry. “Sorry. It’s been seven decades but sometimes I still - just miss him so much.”

“Speaking of missing you -, Skuld interjected directing her gaze to the courtyard. Down beside the pond beneath the candlelight Morisato was busy playing cards with three diminutive assassins. “Gotcha!” one of them shouted.

“I’d better go check on him. He always loses to them,” Sora said.

Skuld and Takumi sat side by side for a moment, quietly enjoying the night air.

“Well? What do you think?” she asked finally.

“I really don’t know,” Takumi replied shaking his head. “The whole thing is damned peculiar. If she was traveling with her

## *Fallow*

mother, why wouldn't Urd come back to the temple, particularly if she was in trouble - even if she hated me?! If it was Hild where were her retainers? Is it possible that Lind was wrong in what she reported to us that day at the temple?"

"That doesn't seem likely. To me it sounds like she *was* traveling with Hild during the two years she was away."

Takumi nodded. "The vision I had during that period did seem to have something to do with Hild. But that would imply Hild was present when Urd . . . *I just don't buy it.*"

"Perhaps the two of them did get into some kind of terrible fight? Maybe Hild tried to take Sora. Or maybe Urd did something very unwise."

"With their personalities anything is possible. But *kill* her? And if she took Sora why let her go later?"

"Have we considered the alternative possibility? That there is something out there *more powerful* than Hild?" asked Skuld.

"It could explain what happened to Big-sis."

"You forget I've actually glimpsed into her power. The magnitude of - it's difficult to see how anything could have overwhelmed her."

"Unless she did it."

"In either case the key is finding Hild."

"Do you think she'd even tell us the truth?"

"It doesn't matter. If she's gone that far her look will tell us."

He suddenly turned looking at the trees.

"*What is it?*" asked Skuld.

"It's nothing," he said continuing to stare. His gaze moved down, spotting Sora, Tai and the ninjas as they continued to energetically gamble under candlelight. "It's late," he said standing up. "We should get some sleep."

After another night of fitful dreams Takumi awoke early the next day, searching the closet for his old staff. Quietly creeping outside, he took up position between the house and temple, setting his staff before him as he faced the alley. "What are you looking at?" he muttered to the silent statue. "A man has to start somewhere," he said flipping the staff with his left hand into his right, striking forward before reversing his stance with his hips striking the opposite direction. He continued on

## Afterglow

like this, striking to his right then left quickly before turning to the quarter angle, repeating the entire process. Again and again he practiced the motions as he had since he was a child letting his mind wander, his thoughts eventually turning to Sen - *practice so thought and action are one*, he would instruct - *be fluid, flexible in your approach until the proper moment - do not root yourself to the ground*, his sensei would admonish him as he moved from one exercise to another. From around the side of the building Morisato appeared, gauging his movements in silence. Watching him he believed now for the first time he was indeed watching the man etched in the temple wall.

“Something to add Mr. Morisato?” Takumi said turning to him. Tai Morisato smiled coming forward. “What movement is that?” he asked.

“The 8-sided defense for multiple opponents,” he replied. “The aim is to maintain complete focus on one point at a time, vanquishing before addressing the next point in the path.” Tai nodded raising his hands, directing stones simultaneously on all sides.

“*Yeah, I can’t do that -*,” Takumi replied returning to practice. The noise brought Sora out. “Have either of you seen Skuld?” “You mean I wasn’t the first one up?” Takumi asked disappointed.

“She went up to the glen with Kento,” Tai said pointing.

“Did she have *the package*?” Sora asked excitedly.

“It looked like it.”

At this news Sora rushed on up the path as Tai and Takumi followed. When Takumi finally reached them at the glen he saw Skuld standing in the center, proudly carrying an infant in her arms.

“My god Skuld, did you have *another* kid?!” he said astonished seeing the baby.

“This is baby Hayate you idiot!” she replied handing him back to his father who Takumi recognized now as the head monk.

“Should have known from the bald head,” he observed.

“Sora, I know I said you were the cutest baby ever, but now that I see baby Hayate . . .”



## *Fallow*

"It is a cute baby," Takumi admitted. "*Must get it from his mother,*" he muttered. He watched as Sora took up the baby, walking off with Tai as the two looked around before kissing. He watched them as they stood together at the far end of the meadow waiting and soon saw the reason why. A portal of light arose in front of them and Lind and Peorth with it. Sora approached happily carrying the baby as the four began to chat. Takumi continued to watch them silently.

"I told you," Skuld reminded him.

He said nothing looking to his left. "There's no such thing as having too many goddesses blessing your child," Kento remarked looking back. He nodded as Sora passed the baby to Lind who took him up uncomfortably amid Sora teasing until Peorth finally relieved her. Takumi stood smiling until her look reminded him of something.

"Mr. Sato," Lind called upon seeing him, suspecting it was merely an excuse to extricate herself from her current situation.

"May I speak with you?"

"The last time you said that it wasn't good news," he replied tersely. They walked until they were a short distance away.

"You know of the ongoing problem with demons," she said.

"You mean your war."

"It's not *my* war. However . . . given your *specific nature*, it has been suggested you may possess particular skills which – could prove useful in locating individuals who may still be at large. As such you could play a significant role in helping to bring the current conflict to a close."

"You mean by helping you prosecute your *90-year* war?"

"The great majority of which is already over," she replied.

"You wouldn't just be trying to get me killed, would you commander?"

She smiled, or at least the closest thing she could manage to a smile. "At one time perhaps. Now – no."

"Because of Sora?"

"It would bring her unneeded sorrow."

"Commander you've been direct and courteous with me so allow me to return the favor. I've been away a long time. My concerns are here. Exclusively. I want nothing to do with your war – just like Keiichi," he said walking away to join Skuld.

## Afterglow

“*Here* is what’s at stake,” she shouted before returning to Peorth. “Keep an eye on him Peorth,” she murmured. “Make sure he doesn’t go back into old ways.”

“It has been years,” Peorth replied. “Time changes a man.”

“Depends on the man,” replied Lind.

...

“Skuld, does it ever kind of weird you out seeing ‘Keiichi’ and ‘Urd’ kissing like that?” he said looking across the glen.

“Eh, I’ve gotten used to it,” she replied continuing down the footpath toward the garage. “Remember I’ve seen those two longer than *the real* Keiichi and Belldandy.”

“I never thought about it like that,” he sighed following her. Skuld ushered him in, closing the door behind her as they stepped into the garage. “What’s on your mind?” she asked.

“Skuld, what do you remember of the day the Valkyries came?” he replied.

“Only you and Keiichi fighting.”

*Why did I fight with Urd that day? he thought. I was so terrible to her. I’ve tried to seal it off – to not remember. Was it the trial? The lack of progress on Belldandy, or something else? No, the truth is things hadn’t been right between us for a while. The trial revealed to me she could be killed. I didn’t confront my fear then – so we fought about Sora. And after meeting Hild it flared again in full. She said I was using it as an excuse – that I no longer loved her and I snapped.*

“Skuld, the day Urd left where would she have gone? Who could have possibly gotten the drop on her? And with her child?! It had to be a high demon, god or gods. Wait - are there *other things* even more powerful than them in your world?”

“Such things would be rare entities indeed,” Skuld replied.

He rubbed his head. “Do we know if anyone – *anyone* showed any injuries of *any* kind on that day - burns, cuts, bruises?”

“A little hard to check after 120 years, but I can look into it.”

“Ask your father. He should be willing to receive you, and have at least as much interest in the matter as we do.”

“Don’t you think he would have already investigated it?”

“*Indeed*. The question is - does he know anything? And if he does, is he willing to lie to you point blank about it. I’m

## *Fallow*

guessing - *no*. If Urd really did go somewhere that day to try and affect Belldandy's release, wouldn't it have been natural for her to go to someone in the high council?"

"That doesn't seem likely. Any contact with the council would have been reported," said Skuld.

"If things were operating properly."

"- Except that Sora was found in the Terran realm, and says she remembers grandma, which suggests Urd went to see Hild."

"But would Hild really have killed her? Her own daughter?!"

"We know what she's capable of but I see your point. Even I doubt it," said Skuld.

"What's more, why would Urd even attempt to go there after everything that happened that day concerning Hild? How would it help her?"

"Maybe she went there to confront her?"

"Or someone wants us to think that."

"I don't know. The problem for me is that if Urd met some truly evil entity, why would they leave Sora alive? It feels more like something Hild would do."

"Which brings us back to . . ."

"Maybe it was an accident? What did Lind want with you?"

"She says she wants me to assist their efforts. Which I'm guessing means help find Hild. But that would mean . . . she does not know where Hild is," he said ruminating.

"What difference does it make? You should help her if you can," she said. He watched the back of her head tilting as she assembled the metallic rings of the spindle. His eyes narrowed.

"You say you remember only Keiichi and me fighting but - did something seem off about Lind that day?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Something I saw just now - *I don't know*.

Is there anything you're not telling me Skuld? Anything more I should know."

"Like what?" Skuld said looking up at him.

*At least she looked up at me, he thought. If she hadn't I would've . . . but maybe that just means she knows how to read me. The truth is I feel as though I'm still asleep. There are things here that just don't make sense. Things that don't add up. Like Belldandy. Skuld says was the spark for this war but*

## Afterglow

*she was always a force for peace when I knew her. Would the people that supported her really annihilate others in her name? Skuld says the war is righteous. But she also revealed Keiichi kept them away from it while he was alive. Why? Wouldn't he be the most active in pursuing justice for Belldandy? Did it get out of hand? And what about Lind. She says the demon realm is largely beaten. Yet she clearly fears some aspect of their prowess. Is it Hild, some weapon unknown in my time, perhaps some aspect in the Heavens I'm unaware of? And this demonic group that 'may be' intact? Which is it? Are they on their last legs or a dangerous fighting force? None of it makes any sense. Something is missing. Something I cannot see. I need clear eyes, away from this place If I'm going to track my way back to Urd. But how to do it without freaking them out?*

In front of him Skuld continued to work on the brake caliper with expert care.

## *Highland Camp*

NO! I don't approve this," Skuld shouted from the porch. He looked up seeing her long black hair with the house behind her, riven with signs of wear and yet, there were sure signs of its long term recovery; like a long dead tree showing the first tentative signs of life. He closed his pack rechecking everything in the courtyard as the shadow came over him, standing up to smile at the girl who had grown to womanhood before his eyes.

"Why are you doing this?!" she demanded once again.

"Don't worry Skuld I'll be back. I just need to check on a few things."

"Funny. That's exactly what big-sis said, on the day she died."

"Unlike her I will come back Skuld. I promise."

"How? How exactly do you think you're coming back? Are you more adept at facing things than Big-sis?!"

"No. Which I'm hoping will give me the edge."

"WHAT?!"

"Urd and Belldandy were prominent targets. I doubt anyone is looking for me. *Especially after all this time.*"

"Yeah well - maybe we should keep it that way!" she shouted.

"At least let me come with you."

"You are the last person I want coming with me."

"Why?" she asked stepping back, her feelings suddenly hurt.

"Think about it. Urd? Belldandy? Maybe it wants you too."

"If someone did they would have gotten me a long time ago."

"Except they didn't. Which suggests you haven't been in the right place."

"Meaning?"

"My guess is Urd and Belldandy were lured somewhere, either because they had to be, or because dealing with them elsewhere would have drawn too much attention. Which reminds me - have you ever felt you were being manipulated to go

## *Highland Camp*

somewhere, but for some reason or accident you didn't go? And if so, who asked you?"

"Hmm, other than the times the kids tried to work the word 'ice cream' into the conversation when they were small - I don't think so. And even in that case, since it worked most of the time I think we're safe."

"Okay," he said picking up the pack.

Skuld's small frame stood stubbornly in his way. "You know I could put my foot down and stop you if I wanted," she said.

"I'm sure you'll be keeping an eye on me," he said walking around her across the courtyard. "We don't know where Urd and Belldandy went off to. But you know where I'll be. It's just these mountains here. Besides, you want to know what happened as much as I do."

She stood at the gate thinking up her last arguments, "You know you're not great, but you're kind of all we have left."

"Don't worry Skuld I'll be back soon. No one's looking for me, and I can't find the answers I need behind these walls. Or with you standing over me."

"Perhaps. But then again, maybe they'll just kill you."

"Hmm I hadn't thought of that. Well I'll see you in a few weeks Skuld," he said heading out the back gate.

Skuld muttered something in reply following, "And this is really worth it to you? Your life?"

"I need to know what really happened to her Skuld. I need the truth. No matter its cost," he said starting to climb the hills.

"And then?" she asked.

"Oh don't worry about that Skuld, I've got a plan," he replied searching his way tentatively up through the bushes.

"Good. Tell it to me."

"Well. . . parts of it are still kind of in flux," he said disappearing into the undergrowth.

"*Idiot*," Skuld muttered watching him go.

"That's it? You're just going to let him go?" said Sora appearing from under the trees.

"Don't get excited," Skuld replied. "He's not the first thing I've tracked. Have you already forgotten your teenage years?"

## *Fallow*

Takumi ascended the hills behind the temple until he reached the old trail, moving along ridgeline northeast then north until reaching the Kobotoke pass. Over the next week he walked the mountain trails, moving continuously as he headed northwest into the slopes of the National Park. The climb gave him time to think and clear his head. He could see much of it now, set out like some perverse set of dominos falling one into the other: Belldandy's loss, the ignition of the war, and Keiichi's withdrawal from the Heavens, ultimately resulting in Skuld's isolation and the eventual abandonment of Tariki Hongan temple. Yet somehow she wouldn't let it be destroyed though, probably because she both loved and hated it; the place that had brought her so much joy and sorrow. Her last connection to the human world and her sisters.

His thoughts turned to Belldandy. He knew one thing now for certain. Whatever she had gone out to face that day she must have thought it posed a grave threat to their or the realm's existence. It was the only way to explain putting Keiichi and her son's happiness in jeopardy. But where was Odin in all this? His eldest daughter perishes, then Belldandy and he doesn't act? *Why?* Was it some rule, some constraint I still don't know anything about? Yet Skuld did say Bell's death started the war, a war in which the old rules against killing seem to have been thrown out. Was that Odin's doing?

It's possible Skuld might not have wanted to relay any information that could be seen as tarnishing Keiichi or Belldandy's memory but – neither she nor Lind seemed to know anything concerning those responsible for such acts. He needed more. But for that to happen he needed whatever it was trailing in the miles behind him to come a bit closer. He first felt it the morning he crossed the pontoon bridge at Tozura, continuing at a steady pace until he reached Mount Kumotori that evening. Yet still it hung back. He pressed on hard through the pine forests along ridgeline for the next two days, hiking until he reached Mount Kobushi. There he rested for a day recuperating, time enough to demonstrate he was truly alone. The next day he prepared carefully, setting out until he saw the peak of Mount Kinpu rising before him. He set up camp well off the trail in the shadow of the south face that

## Highland Camp

night building his fire, shielding it well, making sure all was ready as he walked to the edge of the cliff wall. Standing with the forest behind him he looked into the valley below. *"There is food -,"* he said calling behind himself finally. *"And you are welcome to it."* Still the woods behind him remained silent. "I have no weapons - no money," he said.

"I bear you no ill will," he continued extending his hands on either side of him. "You have nothing to fear from me -," he murmured quietly.

*"What a relief!"* replied the shadow behind him sarcastically.

*"I was hardly able to control my fear . . ."*

Takumi turned as the traveler came within reach of the fire's light. *"I know you . . .,"* he said leaning down to pick up a bowl, setting down the utensils. The being before him appeared much changed from the last time he'd seen her. Her frame was leaner, the hair more tousled, the cloak more worn. But there was no mistaking it, for her eyes still held the same irascible fire. It was her, the demon Urd had once called friend. "Your name – it's Mara is it not?"

"I'm not surprised you remember me," she said sitting down self-satisfied, helping herself to the food.

"Oh and there's bread," he said tearing off a piece throwing it to her. She looked it over, biting into it suspiciously.

"You didn't eat as well last night, or the night before," she said.

"I was saving up for a special occasion," he replied.

"So why are you out here?" she said. "Not happy with your *designated* life at the temple? Not fitting into the program?"

He kept his temper in check. "Just wanted to have a private peaceful conversation with those kind enough to visit after all these years," he said evenly. "Based on what I heard, I assumed Skuld would not be inviting you in anytime soon."

"Oh no, not her. She's a true believer," Mara replied.

"Of what?"

"Whatever they are selling," she replied. "But then I suspect you know all this."

"All I know, is that something was laid up in the trees outside the barrier at the temple. Something bigger than a squirrel."

*"Yeesh.* If that's true we're more screwed than I thought," Mara replied.



## *Fallow*

“My real question to you is, why are you here? I don’t know anything. Given the length of my incarceration I can’t possibly know anything that would benefit you. And my powers are far below yours.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” she said reaching for the last of the cooked sweet potato. “I suppose you’re an easy meal,” she observed. “Then again maybe I’m just here for payment.”

“Payment?” he asked preparing himself.

“Yeah payment! You guys put me through a hell of a lot of trouble you know! Especially with everything that’s going on!”

“Like what?” he said puzzled.

“Like getting presents to Sora on Christmas! Like watching that play that Keiichi and Bell put her in when she was little. I mean I know she was only a flowerpot but – *god* that was tedious! I mean I’m aware it was only a bunch of little kids but I’m just saying - *I was very aware I was watching a play!*”

Takumi smiled in spite of himself. “It sounds like you deserve a medal Mara,” he agreed.

“I haven’t told you the worst part!” she continued. “There were so many Valkyries in the audience because of - well you know - I was sweating bullets in the front row the whole time! Still I did what I could,” she said helping herself to the Tequila Takumi had put between them. “But it was hard looking after her! Especially with the maniacs she has decided to surround herself with.”

“*What’s going on down there?!*” they heard suddenly above them. “Do you have a fire down there? That’s illegal!”

“*Shut-up!*” Mara replied throwing a rock at the voice in the darkness. “*Don’t make me come up there and kill you!*” she complained. Takumi joined in as for a moment the two miscreants threw rocks in the darkness like idiots.

“Um would you really - do that?” he asked.

“Well I’m kind of drunk, and it *is* comfortable by the fire.”

“We could be making problems for ourselves.”

“Eh, we’ll be gone tomorrow,” she shrugged drinking.

“And that’s why you sought me out? Because you made some sort of promise you made to her?” he asked, trying to see what lay behind her eyes in the darkness. “Do you know where she is Mara? I’m desperate to know -,” he said, supposing now was

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the best chance he'd ever get. “

“No. And that . . . can't be good.”

“Yet still you came,” he said admiringly.

“Don't even try to understand what holds demons together Sato. It will only frustrate you,” she said taking another drink.

“True,” he replied taking a sip from the bottle. “In truth I can't understand anything. Not in *this* world. Everything I thought we would have, the two of us together, is from another time.

But that time . . . *is gone*,” he said growing quiet.

“*Oh don't be like that!*” she said swiping the bottle back.

“No, everything is broken. *It's all gone wrong!*” he cried.

“She warned me you might be like this,” Mara muttered rummaging through her bag. “Where is it? Ah yes - here it is.”

“What could you give me now that could possibly make any difference?”

“But this is not from me,” she said taking out the pouch, pulling from it a small crystalline shard whose interior glowed with an azure brilliance in the evening light. “She said it would bring you back if I gave it to you. Do you see?”

He looked at the fragment uncertain. “Is that? *But how?!*”

“I brought it out of the Demon realm long ago.”

“I thought the whole of the stone was vaporized.”

“Much of it was,” she said holding it up. “What's left is only a fragment, a mere shadow of its former self. And yet its true substance remains, uncorrupted, just as strong as the original. Just as bright because, nothing can dim its true essence - *the perfect within the imperfect*,” Urd used to say, her voice growing tight. “Though it shattered under the strain, it continues to shine just as brightly as before. Why? Because it was all part of the same thing, forever indivisible. And so every part no matter how small holds the same essence; the same power. You would do well to remember that, for our lives are long. It was something you once believed. Something I'm sure she still hopes you do.”

Takumi took the crystal replacing it into the pouch. “Once upon a time,” he said.

“Isn't that how most stories start?” Mara questioned.

“She told you to give this to me if -.”

"If you got lost," Mara nodded. "But you're not wrong in all of it. For the world outside is indeed broken. More broken than you know. Some of it you suspect already. But there is more. Somewhere deep down, I think you know the truth."

And so we come to it, he thought. "Which is?" he asked.

"They are lying to you Takumi Sato . . ."

He watched Mara hold the blanket over the fire to capture its heat, looking for a moment almost angelic in the light. His eyes moved over her worn clothes. "If that is so why aren't you in your capital; given all that's happened? You could have sent word from there. We could have met somewhere - safer."

"And where would that be?" she replied finishing her bowl.

"As for the capital - it fell ages ago," she said.

"The capital of the Demon Realm is gone?!"

She pulled the cloak around her, "I would have thought your friends would have told you that," she said. "Interesting. But then, perhaps you're not as friendly with them as you suppose." She must be lying, he thought. But why? "Hild put up no defense during the attack?"

Mara looked back surprised. "The Daimakaichō had long since disappeared by that time."

"Disappeared?! Where to? What happened to her?"

The demon's eyes glittered in the firelight. "Who can say?" she replied. A deep sense of fear began to creep over him.

Belldandy and Hild? The world began to seem quite different now, the mountain more isolated. He wondered if he had misunderstood Mara's intentions in coming here tonight.

"There are those who say the agents of Yggdrasil took her."

"Do you believe that?" Takumi asked.

"I did. For a long time. It was many years before I ascertained the truth. Hild was pulled far afield on a certain day, a day which is no doubt carved into your mind - drawn out into the forest on some urgent business," she said staring into the fire.

"To meet with Urd?"

"That is the rumor."

"And then?"

"I'm sure you know the rest."

"Hild and Sora."

The demon nodded.

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"It's strange. I had a dream about her. I think it was right about the time she and Sora parted company. What do you know about what happened after that?"

"Well, there things start to get a little fuzzy. Sora returned, Hild . . . *did not*."

"Which is why you think the Heavens has her?"

"I did for a long time. Except then several of my superiors began to search for her – quietly of course. Why would they do so if they *knew* the Heavens had her? And so I grew unsure. And it was during that period that other things began to grow, unwelcome things as the demon realm grew – less stable over the next few decades. Right up until the day *they* came."

"You say your superiors searched. Could they have suspected that Hild might have gone off to pursue her own agenda - find Urd, get Sora back, etc.?"

"Without the power of the demon realm? I doubt it."

"You said *they* came. Who was it that came?"

"A force from the Heavens. They broke through the Demon Realms defenses directly above the citadel."

"How could that be? I was led to believe such a thing was impossible; for either side!"

"I as well. Yet I know it happened, for I saw it with my own eyes. I was on the outskirts of the city the day it happened. Fortunately. But then, perhaps they had help."

Takumi shook his head feeling unsteady. He couldn't believe it. *The demon capital?* "What happened when they came?"

"*Every one* of the central towers were thrown down. Without warning their forces tore through the dimensional gate over the citadel as their army poured in. They stabilized the breach as more followed. Wanton was their destruction of all that lay before them. On that day powers that would normally have worked against them failed; for reasons I do not know. We fought to hold them, hold them off from the citadel and the city. But they were too great. Soon all the lands as far as the eye could see where aflame. From there their terror spread to every corner of the realm."

He found it difficult to believe. "The citadel's loss was so important? You make its loss seem greater than the citizens."

## *Fallow*

Her countenance grew dark. *“It mattered to us Sato. It was the symbol of our new life!”*

He felt his thoughts racing trying to make sense of it all.

*Careful. Why is she really telling me this? To get me on her side? Or some other purpose? Some kind of test to see what I know?* “If Hild was gone decades before the attack, who was in charge of the city defenses?”

Mara’s eyes narrowed. *“They. The watchers.”*

*What the hell is she talking about? Is this the truth or a lie? But why would she lie? Especially now? What difference could it possibly make?* “These watchers, they fought on the front lines?”

Mara’s smile became even more ghostly in the firelight. *“Ha - no. Not until there was little choice.”*

*“Where did they come from?”*

*“There are always those who are dissatisfied, particularly in the Demon Realm,”* Mara replied.

*“It doesn’t sound like you were a fan of theirs.”*

*“No,”* she said warming her hands around her cup.

*“Is that why the Heavens were able to overrun so much of the Demon Realm?”*

*“Demons are strong, individually stronger even than Valkyries. But we’ve never been terribly good at working together. Too much want of personal glory I suppose. Not unless we have very strong leadership. That is why the realm has always had a single unified leader, despite our high respect for personal freedom.”*

*“So you’re telling me the trouble wasn’t just with the Heavens. There was some kind of civil war within the Realm itself?”*

Mara nodded wistfully looking at the night sky, *“And in time, there was little left.”*

*“What happened to those that remained?”*

*“Depends. Those like myself with sufficient knowledge of the Terran realm fled here, mostly scattered as individuals making it harder for either side to track us down. Not an efficient allocation of resources you could say. Not for a single demon. Not yet anyway.”*

*Should I press her about Hild and Urd? Why would they meet that day if they did? Especially with Sorano in tow? Was it to*

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*tell her about my actions? Or did she think Hild might possess some special knowledge about Belldandy's circumstance?*

"Mara can I ask you something? Is there any way Hild might have been able to get Belldandy released from Yggdrasil?"

"From prison? I don't see how," Mara replied. "Hild has immense power over her own realm, but no one would be granting her any favors in the Heavens. In either case, I can't imagine anyone capable of helping Belldandy not already having contacted Urd long before that day."

*She's right, he thought. "Wait could Urd have -." He didn't want to think about it. Hild's capture in exchange for Belldandy's - and somehow it went wrong? Hild did wind up with Sorano but . . . What was Hild's plan? And where is she now? Did she have something to do with Belldandy's fate?*

"Sora told me that she and Hild traveled together for a long time in the forest until she was found. Does that make any sense to you Mara?"

"Found? Or set up?" she replied.

"What do you mean?"

"Ask yourself, do you think Hild would *voluntarily* give over her only granddaughter to an enemy?"

He shuddered to think of it. For he had glimpsed her powers and knew the fight she could give would be truly horrifying.

"I see you're getting the idea," Mara said rolling over searching his pack as Takumi spied a tattooed on her ankle, perhaps a hint her past. "Do all demons have those?" he said.

"*Hey!* What are you looking at?!" she hissed running her tongue over a fang. "You mean you haven't seen Urd naked yet?" she countered.

"We were taking it slow," he said sarcastically.

"I can see why she likes you," she laughed. "*Weirdo always did have a strange taste in men,*" she muttered. "I'll tell you this much Sato. Be careful in whom you place your trust. Things are not as they once were. Bell's family does not have the reputation it once held."

"Why is that?"

"-Two sister's disappearing under mysterious circumstances? People think it's weird. The whole family's choice of partners they think is odd too. Factor in Urd's reputation was never

## *Fallow*

great to begin with and Belldandy's role in the beginning of the war - the result is that many people in authority are not fans of the family. Some regard them with outright suspicion, despite their widespread support on Terra."

He nodded, yet crossed his arms walking back to the canyon wall, looking out at the lights of Kosshu and Yamanashi a dozen miles distant. "You're probably lying Mara but let's put it to the test," he said finally. "What Christmas presents did you get Sora? Speak quickly!"

"I can tell you one I enjoyed the most," she shot back. "I was just getting this really nice mahjong set packed up for her -."

"Mahjong? You mean as in gambling?"

"Hey sometimes you need to make a few quick bucks, even in the third grade - and you don't want her to get suckered so you need to start young. Anyway, I was almost done wrapping when I spotted one of my ex-employees sneaking around in the bushes. Of course I wanted them to know just how 'great' it was for me to see them again, so I decided to glue them to the top of the box as an additional decoration. Which looked great by the way. But wouldn't you know it, just as I was finishing one of the other little bastards jumped out and jabbed me in the - ah well never mind!"

"But at least Sora got the gift?"

"Oh yeah, though it did take a little while to get her off."

"And Belldandy's pint-sized minions never came to your place for revenge?"

"Well I keep a lot of hungry cats around, you know -."

"So you'd have me believe you're like Santa Claus these days, simply handing out gifts?"

"I consider myself more of a Yule Lad actually."

"Which is?"

"Well it depends. See there's specializations. Like Tekkjarstaur, who harasses sheep -."

"I don't wish to know anything further -."

"-And Giljagaur, who hides in gullies, waiting for an opportunity to sneak into the cowshed and steal milk!"

"You're making this up -."

"-And Stúfur who steals pans, eating the crust left on them."

"I'm not sure who works out worse in that deal -."

## Highland Camp

“-And Þvörusleikir the spoon-licker who steals and licks spoons!”

“Well at least they’re clearly named, though that last one might actually be Urd.”

“-And Askasleikir the bowl-licker who hides under beds, waiting for someone to put down their bowl.

“There seems to be a lot of *licking* in these stories, which I find disturbing -.”

“Hey they’re not all like that! There’s also Hurðaskellir the door slammer - who likes to slam doors!”

“That’s idiotic!”

“-And Bjúgnakrækir the sausage-swiper, who hides in the rafters snatching sausages that are being smoked!”

“Well who doesn’t like a good smoked sausage -,” he laughed.

“-And Gluggagægir the window-peeper, who looks through windows in search of things to steal!”

“Stealing seems to be a big part of these Lads MO.”

“Oh yeah stealing’s the main thing! Like Ketkrókur, who uses a hook to steal meat!”

“You demons got a lot of problems, don’t you? I can’t even imagine what the outfits look like -.”

“- And Kertasníkir who follows children, in order to steal their candles!”

“As long as it’s candles I suppose it’s fine. You do know what century this is right? Man, if that’s your idea of Christmas I’d hate to see what you get up to during Halloween,” he muttered.

“Of course the gifts are part of it too. If it helps. Did it help?”

“Of course,” he replied taking the pouch. “I miss her.”

“Do you?” Mara asked.

“Of course I do!”

“Then what are you going to do about it?”

“Not sure there’s much point now,” he shrugged.

“Oh you definitely need help in this,” Mara observed.

“Why is that?”

“Because you’re a *terrible liar* Sato!” she laughed taking another swig of tequila. “I doubt you could fool *Skuld*, and you’re trying to fool the likes of me?!”

“You?” he replied his eyes narrowing. “I can’t even figure who your real enemy *is*.”



## *Fallow*

“At this point? *The world . . .*,” Mara replied.

“Why?”

“Oh you’ll see. You will definitely see . . .”

“Do you have some sort of plan?” he asked.

“Uh-huh. Go back.”

“*Go back*? What is there off these mountains for you to go back to?”

“I didn’t say *I* was going back. I said *we* were going back. Now let’s get some sleep.

. . .

The next morning Takumi awoke early, crawling close to Mara to consider his next move. On the one hand the smart thing to do would definitely be to strike, drawing power from her to both strengthen himself and see into her thoughts. Most importantly it would allow him to know for certain if she had been telling him the truth about any of it, perhaps even allowing him to see things she might have held back. *Tempting*, he thought. But then she was Urd’s friend, and he was also aware it could be a trap. After all he was uncertain of her true speed and strength, and it would *definitely* inhibit any future interactions if she was on his side. In the end he decided not to risk it, a move which turned out to be wise as Mara awoke suddenly beside him, noticing his close proximity to her. She eyed him suspiciously. He thought quickly of something to say. “*Mara*,” he said leaning down.

“What?” she replied sitting up.

“Your friends from last night, it looks like they’re back,” he said pointing to the ridge, only to surprise himself to see that there were indeed people heading toward them.

“What? That? Don’t worry about that,” she said yawning.

“*What?!*”

“I want to sleep a bit more,” she said rolling over. “Wake me when they’re closer.”

“*Mara . . .*”

“Oh alright,” she said raising a hand, as immediately a large batch of rocks began tumbling down as though set in motion by an earthquake. As the slabs began to fall people moved off, taking cover as steeper parts of the path tumbled down.

## Highland Camp

"You're sick -," he said witnessing the destruction. "You know this is all kind of like a national landmark?"

"It's a gift -," she replied continuing to gather her things.

"Besides rocks have been tumbling down here for a *long* time."

"Looks like we're not going that way," he observed.

"Yeah, and neither are they. Sometimes the only way out is through, right?" she remarked

"Hey, who told you that! Did Urd tell you that?!"

Mara only laughed.

"That's personal stuff! What else did she tell you?!" he said alarmed.

"Hmm you look kind of concerned Sato," Mara observed.

"Come on. We have more than a few mountains to cross today," she said heading out. Within an hour they had crossed the Spine and collected clean water from ice gullies that lay along its shadow. Just before midday they reached

Ogawayama, affording them a spectacular view of the surrounding peaks. "You're a good hiker," he observed removing food for their lunch. "I wouldn't have expected that." "Yeah, but I'm freezing my ass off up here! And there's still a long way to go! I think I'm going to go on up ahead and find some warmer shelter," she said impatiently.

"Unlike you I can't fly. At least try not to be seen Mara. I have a strange feeling people flying through trees still freak folks out even in this time period. And if you're going to go, at least take the tent! I can give you some of the food as well."

"*You're* going to give *me* advice on not being seen?! Believe me when I don't want to be seen I'm invisible," she said as he handed over the tent and a bag of assorted treats. "Keep heading that way. You'll cross a trail, then under the north-south power lines. A few miles ahead of that you'll cross the road. At that point you only have about a mile and half left," she said rising. He watched her float, zipping through the trees below as a child in a group ahead of him began to point excitedly. Takumi could only shake his head continuing to walk. The hike was long and the sun had almost set when he reached the summit of Mount Yokoo. To perhaps little surprise he found no Mara. He sat down considering his options.

## *Fallow*

"It took you long enough!" he heard suddenly from the distance. He looked down over the side of the peak to find nothing. Nothing but trees. "Mara?" he called.

"Ah having difficulty seeing me? Come down. About a hundred yards ahead of you," she said.

Tentatively he navigated the steep terrain but still saw nothing. Then he smelled the fire. "Mara?" he whispered.

"Keep coming -," she said. A moment later the fire sprang before his eyes as he almost fell over onto her and the tent.

"Wa - *what?*" he said looking around, only to see Mara seated calmly around the fire eating salty seaweed chips in front of the tent. "How did you do that?!"

"I bend the light so it casts no shadow and no reflection. Once done, the volume within the created lens 'disappears.' It's similar to what humans do with a paraxial multidirectional Rochester Cloak."

"Why didn't you do that *last* night?!" he asked.

"I didn't know everyone was going to make such a big deal about it! Besides it takes a fair amount of power. But it's fine since we only need the firelight for a few hours."

"-And as for the food, you're going to need to slow down. I only have enough for three more days."

"That doesn't matter, we can use it all up tonight. We'll be off the mountain tomorrow."

"Oh? And where will be going?"

"About three miles from here. There's a place I want to - visit," she said, rubbing something he could not see around her neck.

He nodded wondering at her words, reaching into the pack to remove the remainder of the snacks. "Here," he said handing them over. "Tonight we'll eat well by the fire."

They took in the last of the alcohol, feasting on hard cheese and anything they could skewer and roast over the fire, mostly summer sausage and marshmallows. Not exactly the most balanced diet, but neither of them were terribly picky.

"During the time I was away did you visit Bell and Keiichi often?" Takumi asked.

"Not too much -," Mara said, experimenting with roasting the chips. "They had a tendency to collect rather problematic guests (Lind, Megumi . . . Banpei) at times, but I did go

## *Highland Camp*

occasionally for some of the smaller celebrations in the beginning after Sora returned. What was that, a hundred years ago? Still, Bell was cute with the kids. I remember Sora running around her one time, running like crazy in circles, just running with her hands out.” Mara smiled at the memory. “I don’t know why I remember that . . . My turn. Did you ever take Urd camping?”

“You mean like this? We went to the ocean a lot but no - now that I think of it we never really did.”

“Ah so I’m one up on her!” Mara remarked.

“I suppose. *My turn*. Who was it that told you about Urd’s loss?” he said suddenly.

“I -.”

“Why do you hesitate?” he asked leaning in as Mara realized too late he was now close enough to bite.

“The Watchers told me,” she replied reflecting.

Slowly he raised his head. Whatever its meaning he saw there was no lie in her eyes. *No, now is not the time to play that card*, he thought. He looked away to the forest letting the moment pass. “It’s good they informed you,” he said sitting up. “After all - you were her friend.”

## *The Fallen*

The next morning Mara led the way, seemingly anxious to get going, if indeed anything she did could be described in such a manner. True to her word they walked over the snowy ground for only several miles before descending the north side of the mountain toward the valley below.

“Do you know where you’re going?” he asked after a while.

“Oh yeah, I used to – Damn it! These guys can’t seem to remember the whole mountain doesn’t belong to them,” she said stopping in front of a chain-link fence that stretched before them across the slope. “This place, it’s all owned by a big company now catering to foreign guests. Locals like me, I guess we get in the way of their plans,” she said looking at her new enemy the fence. “*I knocked this down years ago*,” she snarled.

“Uh-huh,” Takumi replied inspecting it. “It looks fairly new. *How many years ago was that exactly?*”

“Let’s see, I know it was after Skuld was all proud, yapping on about her brat . . .”

“That was almost a hundred years ago!”

“No, no, I mean the third one . . .”

“You mean her *great* grandchild? The one who runs the temple? That was still 35 years ago!”

“Ah yeah, time gets away,” she said looking around.

As she did Takumi saw Mara was not the only one inconvenienced by the chain-link fence crossing the hillside, noticing groups of local children riding their sleds down what little of the slope remained on the far side of the fence, cut off from the long slope of the hill. Still they did their best, sliding down on their little boards one by one, only to walk back up again and repeat the little run.

He had no idea why it bothered him so. “Why did we come here again?” he asked looking away impatiently.

## *The Fallen*

"I guess I came to like the scenery up here. At least the way it was before they started dividing it up. In the old days we . . .," she stopped suddenly. "It doesn't matter. Who cares why I like it, I don't need to explain myself to you," she said looking toward the ridge unconsciously pressing the medallion around her neck between her thumb and forefinger.

"You alright Mara?"

"What? *Yes*," she stammered. "This used to be open hills when I first came up here. But then it was bought up to become a commercial ski property by some friend of Belldandy's."

"Some friend of Belldandy's?" he asked his ears pricking up.

"Friend, enemy - *somebody*," she waved. "In the Aoshima group. I don't really remember," she said continuing to scowl.

"Trust me, sometimes the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

"*I see*," he replied watching the children bang into the fence.

"Something about that bothers you?" he asked.

"No. Nothing bothers me anymore Sato," she said cynically stretching. Yet as she did, he noticed the air itself seemed to groan before him, as the fenceposts creaked before snapping down their length as one section after another of the fence began to fall, sliding down the hill grooming the slope as it descended before them. Takumi smiled as mischievous hope began to bloom in the eyes of the watching children. It didn't take long for the pioneers of the group to begin taking off down the whole length of the hill.

"Are you in danger of becoming a good person Mara?" he questioned.

"What? *Hell no!* You expect me to climb a fence? I told them to take that down years ago!" she said marching on.

"So you do know these slopes well then?" he said.

"Oh I know these slopes," she said chuckling, before laughing demonically. He followed along nervously. At the bottom of the slope he saw what he suspected was the true target of their hike. Mara walked down, entering the narrow cozy alpine bar which stretched lengthwise along the shining slopes. Takumi followed her inside, watching her move down the bar with an ease of familiarity. He was sure it was mere paranoia, but he had the strangest feeling some of the bar's staff were looking at them strangely.

## *Fallow*

Mara sat down, gliding through the menu, complaining about the price before ordering kusu and a glass of ice. Takumi sipped his drink watching her, reflected in the window's sunlight as she calmly rolled her iced awamori looking out at the mountain happily; perhaps nostalgically. Her hand went once more to the medallion around her neck.

"Happy memories?" he asked after a time. Her eyes narrowed as though it was a sort of sin to reveal anything about oneself. "May I look at that?" he asked motioning to the necklace. He thought she would decline but after a time she removed sliding it over to him to his surprise.

"I want this back," she said passing it to him.

He turned it over to see now it was a locket. Just as he feared it was stamped with a chrysanthemum on one side, a peony on the other. "Mara, what do you do in this world; *now* I mean?" "You think I worked for them? Of course not!"

"But this -."

"It belonged to a friend of mine," she said. "It was given to me a long time ago."

Takumi opened the locket looking inside. He had been so consumed these past weeks by his own quest he'd scarcely stopped to think of what other people had gone through all this time, that they might have had their own lives; their own stories lived. "Is this him? Handsome man," he said respectfully. "What was his name?"

Hiro . . . Hiro Nakayma," Mara replied slowly.

"The tattoos on his arms and chest; and the symbols on the case. They are -?"

"Yes. He was a yakuza lieutenant. At least when we met.

The area up here was - *open* in those days. I guess he was looking to break free . . . I suppose we both were.

"You met here?"

"Uh huh. And so, in time we decided to walk away from it. We ran for years on our own."

"And they just *let you go*? My experience with both of your groups tells me that's unlikely."

"Well, perhaps *let us go* is a bit much. Let's just say the loss ratio didn't make sense after a while." Mara smiled thinking back on their days, of holding onto the back of the bike as his

## *The Fallen*

enemies careened after them. *'Here,'* she shouted directing him down the side road.

*'That doesn't cross the canyon!'* he replied.

*'You're going to have to trust me!'* she said as they accelerated past the cliff edge 'miraculously' jumping the chasm to drop down onto the other side. Their pursuers – were not so lucky. *'Hah',* Mara said observing the aftermath. *'You know what's funny about that? I think we owned the contract on most of those dudes. Double win!'*

*'You – you're kind of different aren't you?'* Hiro replied.

From there, there were days of waking up beside one another, of springtime walks and Mara pouncing on him from under piles of leaves. True, there was the occasional stabbing or unrepentant demon to deal with, but Mara was as quick with a knife as he was - *'No, just hold him a little longer! I have to finish this!'* she said completing the circle, igniting and vaporizing their opponent. *'Can we do that?'* Hiro asked.

*'Yeah I guess so',* Mara shrugged walking away from the burning embers. Mara smiled thinking back, looking out the window. "There were a few 'accidents', attempts by his organization to take him out, but he was quite cunning for a human. And of course, so was I. For myself there were also some planned incidents - they just didn't work out for my former employers quite the way they anticipated. After we dealt with them one final time - they didn't send anyone after that."

Across from her Takumi shuddered, thinking of the damage such a pair might have done to convince both the yakuza and the demon realm to stop pursuing them. He carefully pushed the locket back to her.

"Did you ever tell him? I mean did he ever know you were - ?"

*"Of course! We were together, we shared everything. I mean it would have been rather difficult not to, right? Although for the first month I did try to explain away my reluctance around shrines and good luck charms as some kind of overly religious upbringing."*

"He used to tell me . . . that we were both demons in a way," she mused starting to tear up. "That's why he gave me this,"



## Fallow

she said picking up the locket. "He said in the end I was the only thing he needed to belong to."

"And after that?"

"We made our escape. We traveled widely - for a long time, traveling, both of us just trying to forget, forget everything . . ."

"With all that's happened, please tell me you had a good life."

"We did, for a long time. But well . . . ah you know humans," she said looking away. *They just -*," her voice trailed off blinking her tears away.

"*Yeah*," he nodded. "I take it he's up here somewhere? Nothing could be done?"

"That kind of power went out of the world when the realms collapsed," she replied sipping her kusu. "Fifteen years ago this August."

"I'm sorry."

"It's in the past," she said trying to convince herself it had no hold on her.

"Must have been strange. I mean you . . . you haven't aged a day since the last time I saw you."

"It is the same for us all. Once we achieve our adult form we change very little. If Urd were alive today she would look exactly the same as she did when you last saw her."

The pair spoke for several minutes until Takumi's feelings of unease returned. "Mara I'm getting a weird vibe."

"Ah you're paranoid."

Slowly he looked around, gazing over Mara's shoulder. "No, some of these folks are definitely giving us hard looks," he said, following their gaze until he noticed something behind the bar. He stood up trying to get a better view of what it was until - ! His face grew pale. "*Mara why is there a wanted poster of you behind the bar?!*" Spotting the notation below which read - '*Do not let in regardless of year!*'

"There can't be, they don't do 'wanted' posters in this country. At least I don't think they do . . . you know actually I don't know," she mused. "Probably something they mocked up themselves. . ."

"Not our biggest problem right now!" he said seeing men approaching them now from either direction as he scanned for possible exits.

## *The Fallen*

“-I mean they can’t *still* be mad about that. It was a decade and a half ago. I’m not the criminal - *they’re* the criminals, charging 18 dollars for these drinks,” she muttered irritably.

“Um, what was a decade and a half ago?” he asked seeing they were almost upon them.

“Blah, blah, blah there was a bit of an altercation, a fire broke out and I . . .”

“*Behind you!*” he warned.

“You think I need your help?” she asked blindly slamming her glass directly into the head of the nearest attacker behind her as they dove onto her. The men came from both sides now. “*Well I’m starting to get bored of this place -*,” she said as a general melee broke out as Takumi tried to extricate himself looking for the exit.

“In fact, *I think I’ve had enough\**,” she in a sing-song voice.

(\*Mara: performing a terrible rendition of Rhianna, West and McCarthy’s – Four, Five)

“Mara what are you doing?” he asked.

“*Might get a little drunk -*,” she continued.

“You don’t really have that attractive of a singing voice -,” he said looking between her and the oncoming guards.

“*I say what’s on my mind . . . might do a little time*,” she continued paying him no mind.

“Whatever you’re doing - I don’t I like it!” he said getting punched as he threw one of the guards off.

Yet as far as Mara was concerned, she appeared to be having a good time, “*Cuz’ all of my kindness*,” she continued, tossing another guard into the bar, “*gets taken for weakness-*,” she crooned felling another guard with an elbow strike.

He shook his head, hearing the words she and Urd had sung in ages past here in the middle of all her insanity in this small mountain bar; in this strange time and place. It made him feel somehow connected to her.

But the full force of the guards were upon them now.

“*Now I’m four-five seconds from wildin’*,” she chimed happily punching several in the group as the all-out brawl began.

“Do you have any plan Mara - EVER?!” he asked head-butting one as more came running. But she simply continued singing insanely as several more dove on top of her, taking her into custody as he fought his way to the door. Outside he escaped to

## *Fallow*

the trees, kneeling down watching. *What am I doing?! I should have known better! She's always such a force for chaos*, he thought. He sat outside in the snow, watching for some clue as to her whereabouts. Eventually he saw a car being brought around out front. A moment later she was brought out, arrested, hands bound behind her back. But in spite of it all she simply stood there singing, casting an eye on the upper slope, taking pleasure in the children's fun and chaos she had created as the men gathered around her. But Mara only smiled gently; content to simply live in the moment. As they opened the car door she shuffled slowly forward in the snow. She continued on but seemed tired now, tired of fighting, tired of many things. Perhaps that was why she had allowed them to take her. Maybe she really was alone now. Perhaps she simply needed food and a place to sleep. As they dragged her forward to the car she looked up, quietly singing:

*"And I know that you're up tonight*

*- thinking how could I be so selfish,*

*But you called about a thousand times,*

*- wondering where I've been,"*

*Now I know that you're home tonight,*

*- thinking how could I be so reckless,*

*But I just can't apologize - I hope you can understand,"*

Something in her words drifting over the snow laden pines pierced his heart as she disappeared into the car; her plaintive voice making him feel suddenly terribly alone. He sat there in the snow thinking. Then, gritting his teeth, he reluctantly stood up from his hiding place making his voice heard:

*"If I go to jail tonight - promise you'll pay my bail,"* he replied singing as the guards spotted him rushing forward. *"Cause they want to buy my pride - but that just ain't up for sale,"* he continued as they grabbed him handcuffing him.

Mara simply smiled through the car window as they shoved him into the back seat with her for their ride to jail. Together they regrettably sang as they began their ride down the mountain road into town. *"Cause' all of my kindness - gets taken for weakness,"* they sang together.

"You two, shut up! You're both in a lot of trouble!" the guards in the front said as they approached the peak.

## *The Fallen*

"*Somebody is,*" Mara nodded agreeably, but before Takumi could question her the path beneath them grew slick as the car veered over the edge of the road, traveling down the open mountain slope at an ever-increasing rate. "AAAAAHHH!!!" everyone but Mara screamed simultaneously in the car.

"What's the matter boys?" she said laughing manically as she broke the handcuffs from behind her back putting her arms around her would be captors as they careened down the hill.

"Aren't you ready to die? *Because I am.*"

"AAAAAHH!" They all screamed even louder.

"Mara I'm not sure I can survive this!" Takumi said as the car now went momentarily airborne.

"Oh? I can," she shrugged smiling at them all.

"Is this - Mara . . . tree, tree . . . another tree!" he shouted as the car shot down the slope.

"Just get out of here!" the guards screamed, instincts for self-preservation blotting out all other thoughts.

"But I thought you were taking us to jail?" she teased as the car narrowly missed another tree careening down the slope. "Well if you guys aren't going to drive, I guess I'm going to have to," she said moving her hands as the car flipped over on its side before going completely inverted, skidding until it came to an eventual stop at the bottom of the hill. "*Okay then,*" she said kicking the locked car door with her feet causing it to rip from its hinges. "*Ride's over boys.* My friend and I are just going to get out *here,*" she said calmly snapping Takumi's handcuffs.

"And if either of you happen to be smarter than you look, you'll forget you ever saw us," she said as Takumi scrambled for solid ground. "And if I ever come back there and find that stupid fence is up again -!" she began shouting.

"Mara, time to go -," Takumi said pulling her. They walked on through the brush a little way before he asked, "Do you have any idea which way to go?" he said looking back at the mountain.

"The same place we were going before you started screaming like a little girl. We're going into town."

"*That* was not going into town!"

"Sure it was. You wanted me to walk down here? When there were perfectly good cars and drivers available?"

## *Fallow*

He walked on saying nothing, following her as they moved across fields dropping down into the river valley to hide themselves for half a mile before climbing up into a strange village. He approached the structures slowly. "Did you do something Mara?" he asked.

"Like what?"

"It doesn't look like we're in Japan anymore," he said walking.

"Nice, isn't it?" Mara replied strolling the stone path under the proud trees leading them past a merry-go-round into a warren of European alpine style buildings, balconies and workshops.

"What is all this?" he said.

"Moegi village."

He looked back to find he could still see Mount Kinpu.

"Hiro and I, a few years into our adventure, found ourselves taking refuge in this place. The people that were here at that time took us in. There were artists from many places. We stayed helping them for a while, and had some adventures of our own with them." She passed her hand over one of the beds of well-tended flowers close enough to the building to still be in bloom. "In time we helped bring money to -."

"*Mara?!'*" called a voice up ahead in one of the workshops.

"Yes, it's me Heidi," Mara replied coming forward.

The old woman came out from the shop's interior looking at her astonished. From her dress he guessed she was some kind of metalworker. She looked up wrapping her arms around Mara's frame. "I can't believe it! It is you, you old hound of hell!"

"Yeah . . . it's me," she replied hesitantly as though she was speaking to her mother. "I know it's been a while. Are . . . is everything okay here?" she asked sheepishly.

"Oh we're making out alright love," the woman replied taking her by the hand and leading her down the path back into the warren of houses. "*Better than you are at any rate -*," she said with a look at the broken handcuff cinches adorning Mara and Takumi's wrists.

"This - is not my fault," Mara complained raising her hand.

"But *he* might need some help getting out of his if you don't mind," she said looking over the workbench.

Takumi followed them to the far corner of the workshop.

## *The Fallen*

"I could punch out the rivets," the woman said eyeing the circlets. "Though it might slip and cut his hands."

"Do I get a vote on any of this?" Takumi asked. "Why don't we just see how yours goes first Mara?" he said as Mara broke her own cuffs off with her bare hands.

"Alright then, maybe . . .," he began as Mara put his hands flat on the counter.

"I'll drill the rivet out instead," she said picking up a large drill.

"Just - give me a shim and I'll slide it under the ratchet,"

Takumi said watching their preparations.

"You know this is a fairly respectable place now Mara," Heidi said drilling not hearing him. "Should we expect people to come looking for you at some point?" she asked removing the first rivet.

"No, I think we left them with the proper impression," Mara replied. "We'll only be here tonight. We didn't come here to complicate everyone's day."

"Nonsense, everyone will be thrilled to see you! You should have seen her in the old days, she and Hiro, returning like pirates every now and then keeping the place going."

"Well this place - *it was nice of you to let us stay.*"

They were soon tucked safely into a loft in one of the A-frame buildings. Then Mara disappeared outside, to cheers of some of the older residents as he heard much drinking and carousing with her old friends. He listened to the music thinking about Tariki Hongan temple, which felt a world away from here. He wondered how Skuld, Sora and Tai were doing. But of course they would be fine. They had been for many years. He looked out the small window feeling alone. *Should he call? Would it matter?* He fell asleep, and in his dream Urd was beside him. 'You've been asleep to long,' she urged nudging him. He looked into her eyes and woke up. It was early and Mara was nowhere to be seen. Pulling on a blanket he went outside searching until he eventually found her, muttering drunk against a tree beside the merry-go-round.

"After you - the world goes around, only the faces change," she murmured to herself sadly. She opened her eyes looking at him. "We think we're in charge - but we're not," she muttered.

## Fallow

“-Because we’re all part of something bigger,” Takumi replied.

“That’s what Bell used to say anyway.”

“Yeah, she did used to say that,” Mara nodded agreeably.

“Come on. You need to get some rest,” he said picking her up.

Moving her he noticed the flower design on the tile beneath her. *So that’s where she put him*, he thought.

She slept fitfully as he kept watch over her, trying to make sense of it all. Mara spent most of the next day recovering with friends, but late in the day she made her final goodbyes. “Do you guys need anything?” she asked Heidi.

“We’re fine. Don’t worry. If anyone comes asking, I’ll tell them I saw you heading toward Nagano. Unless that’s the way you’re really going!”

“We’re heading back to Tokyo.

“Do you want to take the truck? Or take your violin in the Hall of Halls?”

“Her what?”

“Didn’t she tell you? She’s quite the violin player.”

“-*her and Satan*,” he muttered.

“We’ll be fine,” Mara replied. You keep it. We’ve got a car waiting for us . . . back a ways.”

“We can’t drive that!” Takumi protested.

“Of course we can. *It’s fine*,” Mara said heading out.

“You know, I notice you and Urd both have a tendency to say ‘*of course*’ and ‘*it’s fine*’ - a lot!” he said following her. “Your friend Heidi was nice. Did you have a good time visiting her?”

“Her name’s not ‘Heidi’. It’s *Hidey*, you know because she was good at hiding things Hiro and I brought back.”

“You’re kidding?”

Mara smiled walking on.

“You’re messing with me Mara,” he said accusingly. “That makes me trust you even less . . .”

They arrived at the crashed car surveying it, “Oh it’s not so bad,” Mara said looking it over.

Takumi walked up, checking the crushed side and windshield now shattered in several places. “It looks good because it’s almost nighttime. They won’t let us drive this!” he said.

“Oh it’ll be . . . *nevermind*. Just help me push it over,” she said as they toppled it. It was about this time a police car pulled up.

## *The Fallen*

"Mara, you don't have some invisibility covering this do you?"  
"Ah, they're probably just coming to give us support - there's a lot of support among police."

"Somehow I doubt it . . .," he muttered waving awkwardly as they drove up giving them a hard look.

"What, you've never seen a busted-up patrol car?" Mara cried.

"Some punks pushed ol' Betsy off the road. My partner and I are just here to bring her back. On our day off!" she added remembering their lack of uniforms. "Yeah, lot of good times with ol' Betsy," she said narrowing her eyes patting the car. The two officers looked at each other, neither knowing quite where to begin. "You can't drive the car in that condition."

"Oh come on, stuff happens all the time. Let me show you," she said quickly pushing the officer's car off the side of the road down into a ditch. See how that happens?!" she yelled. Mara you're an ecological disaster?!" Takumi said running.

"Hey if I wanted to hear some rules of the road I'd -."

"Live in society like a *normal person*?!!"

"YEAH!" she agreed running faster.

"So what's the plan now? *Run* to Tokyo?!"

"See the pool beside the river ahead? Get ready to jump!"

A moment later they arose inside the darkened back room of a music club. "*Man that's convenient*," Takumi muttered getting his bearings. "But where are we now?"

"A bar I know in Isezakichō. We should be fine here."

"*You* might be. Just drop *me* at the temple."

"Are you nuts? I'm not going anywhere near that place!

Especially these days. Too many good luck charms. Stay here and have a drink while I sort a few things out. I'll buy. You can get a train back to the temple anytime." She ducked out the door as they entered the main club. "*Take care of this guy*," Mara said passing the bartender.

"Mara, when did you - ?" was all he could get in before she disappeared into one of the back rooms.

Takumi picked up the drink he was offered, wondering once more if the real reason she wanted him to stay was simply due to loneliness. He rested against the bar listening to the music, wondering as he took in the scene how many more like Mara may have left the demon realm in all the time that had passed,



## *Fallow*

if indeed anything she had said was true. Still the boyfriend seemed real enough. But would the Heavens really hunt down people like her? He shook his head wishing Urd was at his side so she could explain it all to him. She had been with him the last time he'd been in a place like this. That seemed a long time ago now. He tried to suppress the ache in his heart now spreading throughout his body. He needed to maintain some measure of control. He looked out at the dance floor realizing Mara had not returned. He was about to go look for her when the bartender gave him a shove. "*Buddy*," he said passing him the phone. He picked it up scanning the text:

'YOU ARE ABOUT TO DIE!'

He snapped it closed scowling. *Funny Mara*, he thought, scanning the bar nonetheless. But he saw nothing amiss. He started to hand the phone back when it buzzed once more. He read the message - - '*DUCK!*'

Only Takumi's preternatural speed saved him, flinching just as the axe bit deep into the pillar a fraction of an inch above his head. The next instant screams erupted on all sides of the bar as he struck at the object in front of him at full force jumping away, crashing out the back door off balance into the street before racing away down the alley like a madman. As the screams faded away his only thought was of escape. Whatever it was that had struck at him was serious. He flew down one alley after another at top speed to get away, running until he had put considerable distance between himself and the bar. *What the hell was that?!* he thought, panting as he leaned down trying to catch his breath in the darkness of the street. He rose just as the metallic whistles caught him from an impossibly long distance, slicing through his shoulder and upper thigh as he dropped unceremoniously to the ground. He rolled throwing the nearest trash can, but the creature was already almost on top of him, striking twice with a bladed weapon narrowly missing him each time. The dark creature surged forward and down but Takumi kept beyond his blade for another instant. He reached out wildly for a metal trash lid, slamming it between him and the creature but the blades he now saw were claws which dug into the top of the lid in an instant. *Dammit! Whatever it is it's stronger than me, I can't*

## *The Fallen*

*keep it off and I can't get close enough for a bite!* Snarling the creature's claws now tore the lid in two, rising for the fatal blow. It lunged just before going completely limp collapsing on his chest. Takumi looked back horrified at the creature and its apparently glowing green tongue. Peering upward the whole of its body then began to move, as though from a dispossessed will, lifting and moving free of his body before being thrown to one side into the garbage. "*Logi!*" the dark figure behind them said as the creature burst into flame, its ashes blowing away. He now realized the 'glowing tongue' he'd seen was actually the emerald colored head of a spear whose owner had pierced through the creature's skull, killing it in a single stroke. Though appearing crystalline, the nature of its glow made him suspect it was an artifact of considerable potential, likely harder and sharper than anything he knew. The hooded figure stood silently before him, her emerald eyes looking back at him in the darkness as he scrambled to his feet.

"Bell? . . . . *Urd?!!*" he ventured.

"*No,*" the shadow said beginning to retreat.

"*Who are you?!!*" he shouted as the figure walked away down the alley into the night.

"*The Fallen -*," the figure replied disappearing into shadow.

"*Wait!*" he shouted. But he was alone now in the alleyway.

## *The Black Dragon*

Slowly he looked around before making his way back to the temple. But he had walked less than a block before lightning struck the transformer, blacking out everything around him. It was then the winds began, lifting and flowing as they drew in water vapor from the surrounding bay, spinning a web of fog bathing the streets as it came toward him growing to a fever pitch. “Tariki Hongan Limited?” he asked.

“You look like you need it,” Morisato replied appearing with Sora out of the darkness.

“The two of you look good together, very mysterious -,” he shot back, still wobbling from his recent encounter.

“We need to go. He looks worse than I imagined,” said Sora.

“Smells worse too,” observed Tai.

“Hey, that’s because I was lying in garbage – wait that sounds even worse,” he said departing with them.

On the roof of the building Mara stood patiently watching them go. “Well, what do you think?” she asked Idunn appearing beside her.

“Yes, I sense it too. It’s possible.”

“Then what do we do now?”

“Wait,” she replied raising her spear.

“We may not have the option based on tonight’s events.”

“Yes, *perhaps using the demon’s portal system was not the best approach.*”

“Hey, they could have gotten us on the train too! And then I’d be fighting them all by myself! You want that?! This section of town is supposed to be clear!”

Together Takumi, Sora and Tai made it back to Tariki Hongan Temple. “You’re hurt,” Skuld exclaimed jumping up from the veranda waiting for him. “What happened?”

“I was attacked by something in Isezakichō.”

“Isezakichō? That’s area’s not safe!”

## *The Black Dragon*

"I thought you said your side was *winning*?"

"Only the forests on the far side of Mt. Fuji, some parts of the southern islands and a few districts in Tokyo are unsafe. The whole rest of the country is secured!"

"You said you were hiking," interjected Sora.

"I was until I ran into Mara."

"Who?" Tai and Sora asked in unison.

Takumi shot Skuld an accusatory glance. "They don't know who Mara is? And who exactly are the Fallen?!"

"Those wounds need work, so does the rest of you," replied Skuld. Sora - run a bath for him. Tai - see what we have on hand for healing. There's no time to lose."

Soon enough she had led him to the bath, easing him in.

"Is this appropriate?" he asked as she shut the door. "The old Skuld would have had a fit at the mere sight of this."

"Are you kidding me?" she said tossing him a towel. "It's 2132 and I'm a hundred and thirty-six years old! By this point in time I've seen so much . . . *stuff* that nothing bothers me."

"Perhaps you've seen more than is good for you," he muttered.

"And you need help."

"And you need *them* out of earshot."

"I told you I don't know who the Fallen are."

"And Mara?"

"What benefit is there in getting them confused?"

"Confused? So Mara was right. It is kill or be killed now - with you folks intending to do the killing."

"Why would you listen to her about anything?! Has she *ever* told the truth?"

"She said the Valkyries struck first, they and *other* people -."

"Struck first? They killed my sister! Several actually! How much longer did you want me to wait?!"

"She says there was more to it, that she was outside the city on the day their primary defenses were mysteriously breached . . ."

"Wouldn't she just! I don't care what she says! I did what I had to do to keep my family safe. With you out that should be our priority now."

"Speaking of keeping people safe, how did those two know where to find me?"

## *Fallow*

“How did *they* know where to find you? When you jumped through the portal system it was like firing a rifle into the air!”

“So as soon as I used it –.”

“-We knew you’d changed locations suddenly. And since *you* don’t know how to use such a system –.”

“You knew I was with someone else.”

“Yeah. Though I never dreamed it would be Mara!”

“Let me explain. When I was here at the temple, I could tell there was something out there, something outside the boundary. I just needed to –.”

“And you didn’t think it might be a good idea to tell me?! You didn’t think it was a little suspicious that you could feel something out there we couldn’t? Did it ever occur to you that it might be trying to *lure* you outside?!?”

“We’ve lost a lot in this. A little risk taking is in order.”

“I’m not even going to think about what you really mean by that.”

“Well I didn’t die.”

“Good, I’ll put that on a shirt for you. Oh - I can’t even look at you right now. Go to sleep!”

He awoke the next day to find Tai and Sora gone. “Where did they go?” he asked peeking through the kitchen door.

“They’ve gone to set up a surprise,” Skuld replied continuing her cooking.

“They’ve decided I’m too much trouble and are planning on returning me to the place you found me?”

She looked up smiling. He liked how the sun played off her hair. “You asked about the Seaside Residence. I thought we’d go there today.”

“Because -?”

“Because I want to talk to you about something.”

“But you said you didn’t want us going outside the barrier?”

“My only concern is about jumping from place to place *outside* the barrier. People jumping from the outside *behind* the barrier is fine. Which is exactly what we’ll do if we run into trouble today.” He watched her go into Keiichi’s room, searching is closet before fetching his jacket and going outside.

## *The Black Dragon*

“Is that what I think it is?!” he asked as she rolled out Keiichi’s BMW RS45.

“It’s been rebuilt several times over the years, but yes.”

“You’ve done a great job,” he said running his hands over it.

“A part of me keeps thinking I’m preparing it for him,” Skuld replied. “For when he returns. That maybe someday far in the future he’ll come back and finish this bike.” She looked up watching the clouds draw in close to the mountains. “I know I’m not making any sense. *It’s just a feeling*,” she said standing up in Keiichi’s jacket. She looked like an outlaw to him in that moment, a refugee from another time.

“You know I didn’t tell you, but in his later years Keiichi became kind of deified, especially among the younger riders. The guy living in a mountain temple – holding onto a love that grew into legend as time went on.”

“I suppose that’s who he was,” Takumi replied getting on.

“So your plan is to *drive* out to the residence?”

“Yeah. I’m not in a hurry.”

“Because a portal to get us there might be problematic?”

She nodded starting the engine. The winds over Hachioji cleared as they made their way through metro Tokyo and across the Aqualine bridge to reach the Chiba headlands, cresting the hills above Katsuura to descend to the coast.

Takumi walked the beach until he reached the remnants of his old home, its walls resting against warm sandstone cliffs. He sat down among the tumbled down walls, remembering all that had brought him to this point. Skuld sat down to join him, resting her back against the north wall which still stood intact.

“The sea’s memory is so vast,” he said looking out at the ocean waves. “In the eyes of the Pacific what is a hundred and twenty years? And yet for us everything has changed,” he mused.

“Was this visit supposed to make me feel better?” he asked.

Skuld reached down taking his hand, “I want you to think about something. About coming back to the Heavens with us. Even if it’s just for a little while.”

“Is that where Sora and Tai are?”

“I asked them to look into getting some land, we could set up a small place. A place where we -.”

## *Fallow*

“Go back? You can forget about it for me Skuld. I have my own issues to settle here. I understand your desire to protect them. You’re in the middle of a civil war, one that’s been going on for more than 90 years it seems. One I have a feeling Keiichi was not in favor of. But I don’t want it. Not if it means not knowing. Even if it hurts.” At that moment they heard a sound above them on the beach. He watched the reflection in Skuld eyes. “Ours?” he asked.

“I don’t think so,” she replied.

If it had been the old days with he and Urd he would have had few concerns. But it wasn’t and he’d always felt protective of Skuld. “Stay here,” he said as her eyes narrowed. He swung around the seaward side of the north wall lightly as the two strangers came into view. “Are you the guys?” he asked conspiratorially, trying to appear as harmless as possible as he walked down toward them. “No? Hey, I don’t judge - I mean you’re just two guys walking alone down a deserted beach. . .” Even from his vantage point it was hard to miss their malevolent aura.

“Out of the way old man. We’re here for the Black Dragon!”

“Yeah I’ve got no idea who that is, but you’re not leaving here with anyone,” he said his eyes growing dark. In a motion he lowered his hand forming the layered sword. They rushed him in a standard formation as he swung, one diving under the sweep of his blade as the other smashed him to the ground as he tumbled. “Watch out Skuld they’re -!” he yelled before the other hit him once more sending him flying end over end through the air landing on the sand some fifty feet away.

“Oh for Pete’s sake!” Skuld cried jumping out, charging them as the whole of her outer skin began to change, a fine flat pattern of serrated black diamond covering her. Around each thigh Takumi saw a holstered blade, but as she drew them he saw their shape change, sweeping to become more drawn out as though a whip. The strands seemed to work their way through the air, coursing and reversing as though responding to their master’s very thoughts, striking her assailants sending them tumbling.

“The master will have your bones - the final part,” one cried.

## *The Black Dragon*

Skuld ducked two of their snares but the third caught her body, wrapping around her in a tight glowing chain. She struggled fighting against its pull as it drew her to her knees. "Time to strangle this little bird -," said the one closest to Takumi.

"You must be pretty stupid trying to attack me here," she wheezed, drawing a sheen of water over herself turning it to steam, seeming to disappear into the mist.

"*The Black Dragon*," they cried, pulling on the chain as it twisted somewhere in the dense fog. Ominous sounds began to move here and there around them. Though she could never control the wind at the level of her sister, Takumi suspected this was well within her power. He had almost recovered enough to rejoin the fight when he saw her flails move once more, cutting the mist to catch her opponents, throwing both high into the air. But something else caught his attention. Feeling the shadow pass over him he turned, now catching sight of the truly monstrous wave approaching the point.

"SKULD!" he cried as she threw her attackers forward toward the pinnacle rocks releasing them. She raised her hand as the titanic wave split, diving forward to cover Takumi as the wave passed them by, hitting and accelerating her hapless targets like toys before striking the razor-sharp tower rocks with its mass of an entire ten story building collapsing upon them; receding only to reveal bloody fragments in its wake. Takumi looked on, surveying the fomenting devastation feeling himself shake before passing out. "*Takumi!*"

...

He awoke some time later, comfortable under the covers in Urd's room at Tariki Hongan temple. He turned over rustling under the sheets, trying to judge the time of day as he sat up. "Are you alright?" asked the voice beside him. He looked up overjoyed to see Skuld's face. "Skuld thank god," he said reaching up. "I had the most terrible nightmare. People were coming after you and you became some kind of monst-," he grew silent as his hand slipped down her neck to her shoulder, feeling the black diamond armor adorning her. She looked back at him uncertain. "You mean this?" she asked. "I suppose you recognize it. After all it was Urd's originally." "It was?" he said taking a closer look.



## *Fallow*

“Yes. It’s a modified form of her dragon scale armor. After . . . well, after everything that happened I modified to fit my frame, integrating it with some enhancements of my own.”

He saw in that moment what she was. What she had truly become. A master of mechanics whose powers were boosted still further by her own species of magic. A technologically advanced warrior, driven by vengeance. He wondered what the three of them were capable of ‘accomplishing’ in their last hundred years together. “Then, on the beach . . .,” he began. She nodded. “Foolish of them to attack so close to such a body of water but then I suppose they thought they could break my concentration. As it was – *I broke theirs*. Given what they did to my sisters and mother I think that was a mistake, don’t you? But there’s no reason to worry now. We won.”

Perhaps it was the finality of her words that chilled him more than anything. He wished he knew what Belldandy, Keiichi or even Urd would say in his place. “Won? Is that what winning consists of now?” he asked. “We don’t even know what that was all about. When I was with Mara she seemed to indicate there was some kind of civil war going on. And the person who saved me in the alley called themselves The Fallen.”

“Who cares?! When has Mara ever been on the level *or* told the truth to us? Or any demon! They killed my mother, they killed Big-sis, they killed Urd – at what point are you going to realize there is no living with them?!”

He paused uncertain of what to do. Then he saw the coat she’d worn, folded with care in the corner of the room. “Was that Keiichi’s opinion?” he asked. “Even after Belldandy died?” She looked away staring out into the courtyard.

“You two were together a long time after it happened. What did you say - 24 years? Even married, even with a 3 year old, even with Sora and Tai you; two must have spoken of it.”

“*Yes, we spoke,*” she nodded answering slowly. “Because I knew Keiichi. Better than any you.”

“I’m sure that’s true. And he wanted -.”

“I told you he wanted us out of it. But his opinion was not genuine. He just wanted us to be safe.”

“Are you sure? What would Bell have made out of all of this?”

## *The Black Dragon*

“You think she would have done anything different?”

“I don’t think she would have lied to her children.”

“Don’t act like you’re here for some higher purpose! Our goals are exactly the same!”

“I’m all for punishing the guilty. I’m just not ready to commit genocide to achieve it. Which reminds me, Mara said you were in the front lines when the initial assault on the capital began.”

“Oh is that what Mara says?!”

“Is it true?”

“Here’s the truth. The Demon Realm killed by mother and sisters. Did you really think I was just going stand around and let them finish off the rest of my family?! No, I refined my skills. I’m sorry if I’m a disappointment to you. I’m sorry if I’m not the little girl you remember. But the truth is at this point this is only going to end one way - when their realm is ashes under our feet! I don’t know why you’re against me. I’m doing the best I can. At least I was there for Keiichi . . .” she said drawing her legs up under her small frame.

“What? I’m not against you. You’ve done an amazing job - and all on your own. You’re the only reason any of this is still standing. You think any of us could have done any better? None of us could have done the job you did. I just . . . need to know what happened. Even if it hurts. Even if it kills me. Because we both know that I was the one who really killed her. If she hadn’t left that day . . .”

“Yes, you acted terribly. But I think something else was going on. A couple of days before, I – just happened to be passing by you understand, when I heard her arguing with on the phone with Hild, saying things like: why are we meeting there? Is there a problem? Should Sora come?”

“It’s funny, whenever I think about it now I can never see it clearly; I only see her eyes. *And yet . . . there was something*, he thought. *When we came on board that day she said something like – expecting trouble? And Hild said – just doing a bit of traveling. Wait, maybe there was! The night Urd and I were at the Pools there was an explosion in town . . . could it have been going on even then?*

“Why did you and Urd even go to visit Hild that day anyway?”

## Fallow

“We were going to find out if she played any role in setting things in motion. Or might be willing to make a deal.”

“You mean what happened to Big-sis? Did she?!”

“We were attacked before we found out. But I don’t think so.”

“What makes you say that?”

“It’s hard to explain. *I* – it was her smugness. If she’d been involved I think she would have acted differently.”

“And yet that same day . . .”

“Yes.”

“Who do you think really got to Urd?”

“For a long time while I was in confinement I thought it was Hild. I thought maybe some sort of fight broke out between them, perhaps about Sora which escalated. Maybe Hild wouldn’t allow her to go to the Heavens. But it didn’t make any sense. If Hild saw us as a problem she would have taken us out on the boat when she had us both. Indeed, when I saw the waves that day I thought that’s exactly what she was trying to do. Yet it was her who sent us back to Tariki Hongan Temple safely. No, it was something else.”

“I think so too. After things settled down in the months after Belldandy’s return I had Ex show me everything. Entities like Hild moving between realms creates a huge energy signature. Yet on the day . . . well the day it happened, Hild appeared in this realm only seconds before Urd’s signature collapsed.”

“Meaning Hild might have been late to the party; by either accident or design. But it still doesn’t explain why Urd would come after everything that happened that day. How long after that did Hild jump away?”

“That’s the strangest part. According to our records - *she never did.*”

“Never? Not even after Sora returned?”

“No,” replied Skuld.

“So at a minimum that would seem to confirm that all the time Sora spent with Hild happened here on Earth. But why? She could have had anything in the Demon realm,” he mused.

“Skuld, from the information you saw, can you confirm that Urd was *definitively* - ?”

“I can only say her signal vanished completely Takumi. That is most consistent with a loss of her life force.”

## *The Black Dragon*

“But it’s possible, she could still be out there.”

“Careful Takumi. Thoughts like that will drive you mad.”

“But it does torment me Skuld. Every moment! The thought that she might be sealed somewhere. That at this very moment she’s in need!”

“I understand Takumi. But honestly based on everything we know, it doesn’t seem likely.”

“Are you certain?!”

“There are some things we don’t know, especially about the higher orders of magic within the Demon realm; mostly because they don’t always respect the same rules we do regarding the fundamental forces of nature. So it’s always possible (however unlikely) they may have created some twisted form with altered properties.”

“That’s why I’m searching for Hild. She’d know what happened to your sister, and now you’ve told me she was there that day. If anyone knows anything it’s her. The one thing I can’t understand is, why isn’t she looking for us?”

“You’re supposing she’s not the one who did it,” replied Skuld.

“Besides even if she *is* taking some action, do you really think she considers herself in need of *our* help?”

“You have a point,” he replied glumly. “Tell me about Keiichi.”

“Huh?”

“Was he happy? I mean in his later years. Given how it ended I’d like to know – if he thought it was all worthwhile.”

“We talked a lot in those days. In the end it was just me and Peorth with him, he’d sent Megumi and the kids away. Then he asked Peorth to leave and told me to look out after them all. And to thank you when I saw you.”

“Did he really say that?”

“He might have added, ‘Try not to let him burn it all down,’ but it don’t remember precisely. I think he was happy. Despite everything. Because he knew eventually he would be reunited with Bell.”

Takumi started to say something but stopped, hearing footsteps outside on the veranda.

“I heard you had some trouble,” Tai Morisato said sliding open the door to the room.

## *Fallow*

“Not really,” replied Skuld. “The reflective armor held up. Did you get everything you needed?”

“I think I found some spots you will like,” he replied.

They spoke as Takumi overheard news in the background of a giant wave spotted in Chiba prefecture that day on the TV.

Hearing more voices he pushed open the outer door to see Sora outside standing with Lind, watching them as they talked until he fell asleep.

He awoke the next day to find himself quite alone, alone yet quite sure he was quite sure well-protected as he stretched, standing up walking across the courtyard barefooted only to be interrupted by the ninjas riding frogs as they chased crickets out of the temple proper. “YAAA!” they cried leaping forward “*God this place is a weird place -*,” he muttered to himself as a rustle in the trees ahead put him on edge. He squeezed down between the branches. *It’s inside the barrier so it should be alright*, he thought peering ahead.

Leaves rustled as the wind rose up, a cloud of blossoms gathering as though risen a single human breath. Takumi stood up taking his guard.

“I do not come for trouble,” the voice murmured as the blossoms fell away revealing the form of Troubadour. “In truth she was a superior woman. I - am sorry for your loss. You’ll never know how much it affects my heart,” he said standing silently.

“I believe you,” Takumi replied bowing, placing his arms peacefully over the branch.

“If you need anything -.”

“Fashion advice won’t help me,” he replied.

“Indeed. But many things fall upon the plum blossoms which lie upon the earth, just as many notes float through their petals in the air. There are more fell things in the realm of the plum tree spirits than you might imagine.”

“*More indeed*,” he said looking to the outer forest wondering where Mara was at that moment.

“You know what I want. And if you do not possess it, then search the winds, search the mountains, search the skies, search all within your power to find what I seek!” he hissed.

## *The Black Dragon*

"The name you seek is - *Sirsemion*," Troubadour replied.

"You are certain?" he asked.

Troubadour nodded. "Long have my eyes been upon him."

"Demon?"

"A *very* powerful one."

"One of the Fallen?" he asked.

"I do not think so," he chuckled grimly.

"Then you know who they are?" Takumi replied.

"Those who first departed with Hild to conquer the Outer Chaos. Yes. They fought until at last that place became . . ."

"-The Demon Realm!"

"Indeed."

He felt his heart race. "I met one of them. One of The Fallen. She had emerald eyes, and a spear to match."

"It sounds like Idunn. They say she was Hild's right hand in the old days. When there was still a Demon Realm to run."

"And now?"

"Sirsemion and his jackals rule. If you can call it that."

"I see. One more thing. Is Mara one of the Fallen?"

"She was only a child when she left. But her mother did go with Hild. Do you - need my assistance Takumi?" he asked.

"You've done enough," he assured him. "I'm sure finding that name you put you in far more danger than you have let on. I will manage from here. However, in the event no one comes back; please look after the temple."

Tai Morisato crossed the bamboo fence to find Takumi sitting patiently in his mother's old meadow, meditating quietly.

"Skuld said you asked about my father last night," he began.

"Did she?" he said pretending to feign disinterest. "And where is your partner in crime today?" he inquired.

"Sorano? She likes to sleep in."

"*Does she?*" he replied without expression.

"I mean - you can see through the crack in the door up there as easily as I can."

"I suppose." - *though I suspect you to watch far more than I do*, he thought.

"You know my father told me things about you," he shot back.

"Oh? What sort of things?"

## *Fallow*

“He called you the grey wolves; you and Urd both.”

“And what does that mean?”

“That you were both powerful guardians at the temple, and could be helpful, but that you usually had your own agenda. So tell me - *what is your agenda now?*”

*He's Bell and Keiichi's kid. It would be silly to underestimate him*, he thought. “I am sitting here thinking - considering how best to ask that which I must ask.”

“Something about my father?” Morisato asked

Takumi could no longer put it off. “About your mother actually. Can you tell me where - she is buried?”

“What son does not know where his mother is buried?”

“Then tell me . . .”

## *Buried in Stone*

“So this is the place?” Takumi asked stepping out behind Tai as they appeared under cloudy skies on the southeastern side of the island.

“We shouldn’t even be here,” Skuld said walking beside him following Tai and Sora up the hill.

“I thought you were winning,” Takumi muttered.

“This a bad place,” Skuld remarked by way of reply.

“Because of Belldandy?” Takumi asked.

“And because it’s the spot where the demons almost got Sora.”

“What?” he replied stopping. “Are you kidding me?! Doesn’t it strike you as odd Belldandy met her end on the *same* island Sora was rescued from? Is she right Sora?”

“I - I don’t know. Something was chasing us, closing in I think. We jumped to another location - then she made me leave.”

“Why was Bell even here? She must have been looking for something.”

“No one knows,” said Skuld.

“No one?” he questioned.

“C’mon. The tree is this way,” Tai said urging them forward.

“The tree?” Takumi asked.

“It’s up ahead . . . *up there*,” he said pointing.

Takumi saw it now. Ahead of them stood a large tree rising from the surrounding forest. Even at this distance he could tell there was something peculiar about it. Approaching it the forest grew more fair, more green as they came within range of its limbs, ferns marking the path through the underbrush to its base. Reaching the trunk he could see it appeared to have weathered several attacks, perhaps from vulcanism; perhaps something else. As though someone had tried to hack it. Yet no scar on it seemed long-lasting or deep. The tree, as the forest surrounding it, appeared to grow stronger and evergreen. He put his hands to it, standing alongside Tai who rested against it. *So this is the true power of a goddess*, he thought feeling



## *Fallow*

warmth emanating from it, or perhaps it was just his imagination. He tried not to think about it being the last connection to Belldandy on the planet. "It's almost like it's humming," he said moving his hand upward.

Skuld reached out placing her hand on the tree, as instantly an image sprang forth. They looked on at the ghostly visage stunned, an image of Belldandy poised serenely before them.

"Big-sis!" Skuld cried jumping back and the image dissipated.

"I think this is something else," Takumi replied putting his hand on the tree once more. But no image was forthcoming.

"Have you ever put your hand on this tree Skuld?" he asked.

"Of course we have!" she replied.

"Have you ever seen this?"

"No of course not," Skuld said replacing her hand on the tree; still without result. Only when Tai reached out once more did the serene image return.

"So I guess I'm really not needed. I don't blame her," Sora said to herself dejected.

"I'm not so sure -," Takumi replied suspiciously. "Here, take my place," he said. But as she did the image faded.

"You see?" Sora replied.

Still he was not convinced. "Skuld, let me take your place."

But the image did not return. "So I and the two of you are not enough," he mused. "Tai let Skuld take your place," he suggested. The image returned causing Sora to brightened almost to the point of tears. "So it *needs* you, I and Skuld, and at least *one* of our young comrades. Otherwise - nothing. Does that configuration mean anything to you?"

"No."

"-It *means* there was no way we could see this message until you were released," replied Tai Morisato.

"But I couldn't see it alone -," Takumi observed. "My guess is you're right Skuld - *this is a bad place*. Without at least three of us here there seems to have been no point in showing us whatever it is she wants us to see."

"If that's what this is at all," remarked Sora. "It may be a trap! Remember they tried to get Auntie Skuld only a few days ago!"

"Please don't call me that," said Skuld.

## *Buried in Stone*

"If that's true then they made a *big* mistake," observed Tai.

"Because Sora with you and I here - these oldies are protected beyond their wildest dreams!"

"Supernova?" asked Sora.

"*Exactly*," replied Tai. "In either case, if it has something to do with Mom or what happened to her I want to know," he said.

"*Should I be worried about that discussion?*" Takumi asked Skuld.

"I'm not sure," murmured Skuld. "They're both quite powerful, on the scale of Belldandy and Urd themselves. But more than that they're - in sync. They may have explored means of concentrating or fusing their power."

"Hey old man, are we doing this before the entire demon army shows up?" Tai asked impatiently.

"Right. Let's do this," he nodded, raising his hand. They stood quietly in the grove as the ghostly apparition reappeared. He was surprised how much he had forgotten about her, her kind eyes, her patient countenance as she seemed to bow turning to raise her arm northward. She was pointing, pointing toward – (BOOM!).

"*Down!*" Takumi cried as the air burst swept over them, the explosion shattering the surrounding calm. Through the damaged trees they could see a lone warrior approaching over the uneven ground. ". . . *I always wondered who it was that would come*," Takumi mused gravely. "*Now I know . . .*"

The smoke cleared as the Valkyrie brushed past him calling on Sora, "*Come away from his place Leaf*. It's not safe here. Powerful energies are at work in this place!"

"Are there now?" Takumi replied coolly. "Energies not safe for her – *or you?*" he said watching her.

Tiredly she turned, "I've had enough of your interference Takumi Sato."

"I'm sure you have," he hissed.

"What are you getting at?" asked Skuld.

"- Just that I find it strange how she always seems to be at the right place at exactly the right time. Tokyo, Urd, The Citadel, and I'm going to take a wild guess and say *she* was the one who told you about Belldandy's demise. "When we came here I knew *someone* would come. I just didn't know who. And

## Fallow

now here you are – *Lind* the great *protector* of the peace in the realm, come to guide us; come to help us through all our troubles,” he growled.

“Why are you being like this?” demanded Skuld. “She’s only trying to help!”

“-Is that what she’s doing? I seem to remember her wanting to take you away from Keiichi and the temple not too long ago. But that was her first mistake.”

“You seem intent on creating problems,” Lind murmured coming toward him.

“-And you know all about problems, don’t you commander?” he retorted. “How to reduce their numbers - *make them go away*. Heaven’s guardian - of all its dirty little secrets. . .”

“What are you getting at?” shouted Sorano.

“Nothing. Far be it for me to question the motives of the great commander. I simply find her interesting – yes, *interesting* is the right word. A psychologist might call you *fascinating*.”

Lind bristled at the taunt but ignored him. “We should depart and remove ourselves from this place.”

“If Lind says so, we should go,” insisted Sorano.

“Oh? Is that what we should do - *One Wing*?” he continued mockingly. “That’s what they call you isn’t it? Because of . . . *your angels*.”

Lind’s irritation was growing palpable. “What is it you want?! Out with it!” she hissed turning on him.

“Something that’s been bothering me a *long* time. That day - the day you tried to take Skuld from us. I saw something, something I knew I could never convince them of, and so I never spoke of it. But I saw – *fear* in your eyes. Why? You had an entire squad of Valkyries against Keiichi, Skuld and myself. So what was there to fear? I could not fathom it. But then that’s the problem with giving people time in your prison – *it gives them time to think*. And I had time. The *years* we were deprived of Belldandy’s company, Keiichi and I had many evenings on which to speak. And it was then I remembered - the night he told me a story about a most peculiar goddess. I admit - it took me a long time to figure out the truth, much longer than it should have. But I know Lind - *I know*. . .”

“What are you saying?!” yelled Skuld.

## *Buried in Stone*

"Haven't you ever wondered why she's stronger and faster, even than the other Valkyries?"

"Because she's the best," Sorano snapped defensively.

"*Right*. She and her *two* angels. Why is that exactly?"

"Because . . . she is one of the greatest Valkyries," Skuld stammered.

"Really? Belldandy didn't have two angels. Nor Urd. *Nor any senior goddesses I've ever heard of - and I have looked.*"

"*Shut up -*," whispered Lind.

But he would not be quiet. He was now quite beyond being silenced, "Tell me commander, what is the name of that angel of yours? You know the one I mean. The one with the *red* eyes. *Cool mint*, isn't it? I find that . . . *interesting*."

Watching Lind's growing discomfort Sorano now leapt to her defense confronting him. "Don't you dare say anything about my, my - !"

"I hope you're not going to say *your mother*," he replied contemptuously. "Because I have a few things to tell you about 'your mother' . . ."

Takumi moved to defend himself, but the Valkyrie was far too quick for him, her hand around his throat picking him up, squeezing the life from him. He struggled for breath but it mattered little against her superior strength. "*What are you going to do Lind?*" he wheezed. "Kill me? . . . *The way you killed Belldandy?*" Those around him froze in shock. Lind's face grew sallow, her eyes widening. Instantly she released him as he fell to the ground. "*How could you even think I -!*" "*She killed my mother?!*" Morisato said as the winds around them began to swirl.

Takumi looked up to see the equal measure of shock and horror in Lind's face. "*No -*," he choked out shaking his head. "*But I wasn't certain of that until just this moment!*"

"How do you know now?" demanded Tai. "Because she let you go?!"

"No. Because if she had killed Belldandy most of us would be dead now," he said slowly standing up.

"Why would you suspect her at all?" Sorano shouted angrily.

"*It's time commander -*," he said. "Time for all the lies to end. *Time to speak the truth.*" Lind looked down shaking her head.

## Fallow

"I never told you this, but I respect you commander. I do. I can't imagine what it must have taken to leave everything behind, to walk away from everything you knew."

"Please . . . *no*," she said her eyes beginning to tear.

"How old were you? From Urd's descriptions, you couldn't have been more than -."

"*What are you saying?!*" cried Skuld.

"That she is no goddess. At least she wasn't born one. Unless I miss my guess she's *the most completely transformed demon in history*." The group looked on in shock waiting for some sign it was untrue. But Lind said nothing, turning her back to them.

"Cool mint isn't an angel, is she? At least not originally. She was something that came with you out of the demon realm. And when you attained your current status and Spearmint became your angel, did it cause some kind of instability due to your unique makeup? Was that the origin of the One Wing effect? Is that why they let you keep Cool mint? Because it somehow stabilized and strengthened the overall architecture?" Now everyone fell quiet. Everyone except Sorano. "Is it true?" she asked approaching.

Lind choked back her tears, "*I'm sorry Leaf. Sorry I couldn't tell you . . .* sorry I couldn't be everything you deserved," she said crying.

Sorano threw her arms around her, "You silly old bird," she said hugging her. "You're the only mother I've ever really known. What possible difference do you think it could make to me?!"

Lind turned putting her arms around her, "*Leaf . . .* thank you," she said holding her, the closest thing to a daughter she would ever know in this world. "They found me half dead on the outer reaches of the frontier and eventually made a place for me. It was kept a closely guarded secret, even at the highest levels."

"That's why you're stronger," observed Takumi.

"Individually we are stronger than goddesses. But they trained me to become stronger still."

"That day in the courtyard. You hesitated because -."

"Because in your highly agitated state I thought it likely you would attack upon any further provocation regardless of your chances, and in the ensuing frenzy might make contact with

## *Buried in Stone*

me, which would have strengthened you tremendously while creating potentially catastrophic consequences for everyone else.”

“Yes I imagine that would have been difficult to explain had that happened - as would your reluctance to get involved had things escalated. Which brings up the most critical question. *Do you know who killed Belldandy?*”

“No, nor Urd since it will be your next question,” Lind replied.

“You are certain?” he asked catching Morisato’s eye.

“The truth is we’re no closer to understanding what really happened to them than on the day it occurred. That is the truth Sato. *Whatever you might believe.*”

“Show her what we’ve discovered,” exclaimed Sora.

They stood together on the hillside, watching the image of Belldandy as she once more raised her hand pointing north.

“Of course. She’s pointing home,” assured Lind.

“She’s pointing toward the volcano!” Takumi shouted. “As you can clearly see. What’s up there?!” he demanded.

“I don’t know, and after all these years it doesn’t matter. What I do know is . . . this is not a good place. We should be on our way. For there are strange things afoot here,” she said listening to the woods.

“It matters to me,” Takumi replied. “And Belldandy apparently.”

“We cannot know her true intent - or even if it *is* her intent.”

“I said the same thing,” agreed Sora.

“Because you’re thinking objectively,” muttered Lind.

“I’m going to the mountain, with or without you,” Takumi declared.

“I am too,” agreed Tai.

“As am I,” nodded Skuld.

“Have you given any thought to what MIGHT be up there?”

“I know that if we don’t go we will never know.”

The warrior paced, “At least let me go in front,” she said proceeding.

“I’m going with you,” Sora said ascending with her.

As they walked Skuld dropped back beside Takumi as they trudged on up the route. “You could have told me your plan,”

## *Fallow*

she said. "You took a big chance back there with everyone's life," she whispered.

"Did I? I assumed no matter what happened she wasn't going to attack Sora. And because of Sora's attachment to Tai, I anticipated both of them were relatively safe. Leaving her only two choices: either she would attack you, or me. If she attacked you I believed the chances were good I could get a hold on her somewhere with Sora and Tai's help, strengthening myself in the process. Of course as we heard, she too is aware of that possibility. Therefore I assumed her most likely course of action would be -."

"To try to kill you first."

"Indeed. You saw how I reacted when she charged."

"You moved to protect your core."

"Exactly. *What's going on up ahead?!'*" he called out.

"Lind has asked us to hold up here," replied Tai.

They watched as Lind walked ahead of them, slowly moving through a grove of scorched trees.

"Do you need me to come in too?" Sora asked worriedly.

"No stand back Leaf. Let me do this part alone," she said.

"Tai come up behind me, just in case," Sora said raising her hand, creating a narrow gap between her thumb and forefinger.

"Looks like a large stand of trees killed by a previous pyroclastic flow," Takumi observed.

Lind moved in further. "There's an evil wind here," she said.

"It's going to take more than burned trees to frighten us off,"

Takumi retorted.

Eventually satisfying herself she pressed on with the group close behind. Between them and the mountain the forest rose now into a shallow hill, the path descending on the far side into a deep defile which submerged into the water; ahead before them lay a dark roughly circular pool approximately 100 feet in diameter.

"End of the path -," Lind said looking back.

Takumi walked on approaching the edge of the volcanic pool,

"We need to get it out; all of the water from the pit," he said.

"That may be unwise. It could be covering something," said Lind.

"We'll know when we *uncover* it," replied Takumi.

## *Buried in Stone*

"I'd be more comfortable going back for a team," said Lind. "I'm sure you would. But I think we've had enough secondhand reporting for a while. And as to your comfort, it doesn't concern me, only removing this barrier".

"It might be better to wait," Sora suggested trying for some middle ground.

"Anyone who doesn't want to proceed can go," Takumi said searching the rim for the best way to drain the water.

"*Tai you're pushing too hard,*" Skuld whispered.

"She can stop any time she wants," he replied brushing her aside. "So can any of you for that matter."

"*Tai . . .*"

"I'll empty it by hand if need be! I didn't come this far to be stopped."

Lind began to ascend with Sora at her side. *It will be alright,*" she said to Sora's uncertain eyes.

"-And if something should happen to them in our absence?" she said looking back at Tai.

Below them Takumi, Skuld and Tai stood along on the south crater rim, "You can move it can't you Skuld? Or should I go get a cup?" he asked.

Her eyes flashed skyward. "I don't think it's going to be an issue -," she said stepping back. The flash that struck from the heavens came faster than the eye could follow. In an instant the waters froze before being struck by the terrific blow, the sound echoing as shattered blocks of ice rained down around them.

"DRAW!" Morisato shouted, as together they drew out successive blocks of ice until the floor of the pit revealed itself.

Now cleared, Tai quickly climbed down reaching the bottom pressing his hands upon the floor. He chuckled grimly running his hands through the material. "*Sand,*" he shouted up to them. "Nothing but sand," he muttered disappointed.

"*No,*" Takumi replied dropping down beside him. "For you see - *I've seen this this part of the story before,*" he muttered.

"Move it away. There is something buried underneath."

Tai raised his hand as they drew back, winds beginning to tug at them as the sands were pulled toward the center of the cavern, drawn up as a whirlwind. Using his considerable power he drew it all from the cavern floor, pulling it up and out



## *Fallow*

dissipating in all directions. Beneath him now he could see that there was something, something unnatural, some strange fusion of rock and metal beneath his feet covering the entire surface. "Look!" Takumi said scrambling across the floor to push his hand down into the the depression running the width of two fingers along the floor. Gathering his strength he looked up to Sora above him along the rim, asking the question which had sat heavily upon his heart all this time. "Is it . . . a 'U'?" he said scarcely able to breathe.

Above him Sora looked down shaking her head. "*No - an 'H'.*" Takumi's blood ran cold closing his eyes. He had hoped. But now he knew he was wrong.

"So now we know . . . *what became of Hild,*" Lind said coming to stand beside him.

Takumi looked at the floor of the cavern numb.

"It is as I feared. A magma vent. In which they buried her.

Buried in a tomb by her own people - *the savages.*" She shuddered. "At least now you have your answer."

"They - threw her in?" he asked.

"I'm quite certain she didn't go willingly," Lind replied with a certain satisfaction.

"You mean she was buried alive?" he asked walking to investigate the symbol at the center of the crypt.

"*Far worse -*," Lind murmured. "For you see this is no normal vent. It plunges beyond our world, falling into the emotive core of the Demon Realm."

"You mean, like a Demonic gate?"

"No, a gate can be traveled by those with proper knowledge and privilege. This - falls directly into the central core of the Demon Realm itself. Haven't you ever wondered what powers the Demon Realm? Or why those in the Heavens fight so hard against it? Why we are opposed to those who side with it? Because the core of the Demon Realm is - chaos. The Primal Chaos of the universe."

"You mean this vent -?"

"Connects directly with that primal chaos."

"It was *constructed* by someone?"

"Perhaps. I suspect it was set up as a trap. The only thing powerful enough to hold a creature of Hild's power."

## *Buried in Stone*

“Why would they do that if she was their leader?”

“The Demon Realm is all about freedom,” Lind said sarcastically. “Don’t like your current leader? Kill them . . . *if you can*. Even from what little the Heavens reports of their history (which I’m sure is a sanitized version), Hild has survived more than a dozen assassination attempts during her reign. Don’t believe me? When she left to establish the lower realm she brought with her five members of the high council. By the time it was incorporated no more than *two* were still alive”. Lind surveyed the hellish chamber. “At least it explains why we didn’t know she’d been killed or moved off-world.”

“So someone wanted to remove her, but didn’t want you to find out?”

“It would appear so.”

“I see. In that case we need to open this -,” he said tracing the edge of the seal.

“*Are you insane?!*” Lind cried. “That would open a path to the core of the demon realm. Believe me there’s no reason to see whatever is left in there, and whoever sealed her would certainly be alerted to our presence. Besides - this is the best news we could possibly have. It means defeat of the Demon Realm is all but inevitable. It explains why their attacks have become so erratic.”

“*But does any of it make any sense?!* Why would they do this? *Why?!* There is something here we can’t see, something hidden that she alone may know. We must try to find out!” cried Takumi.

“Then I’m afraid I have some bad news for you. The seals on the tomb confine the occupant to the core of the Demon Realm. It’s the only thing that could have contained her from breaking free. Do you have any idea what lies in there Takumi? *Primal chaos - beyond anything you could imagine*. Nothing subjected to that power could withstand it for long. It corrodes everything, destroying it, melting it away until there is nothing left; nothing but madness. If there’s anything left of her, that is what it is now. *Pure madness*. And this tomb is old. Whatever happened here happened a long time ago.”

## Fallow

"Then there's no harm in looking is there?" he said pressing his hands to the seal.

"You don't seem to understand. There is no way I will let you open that tomb. For there is much of Hild you do not know. She was once a brilliant general and chief tactician in the Heavens, and she knows *much* of the ways of the Valkyrie. As such she is far too dangerous to let loose; even if only a fragment of her remains. Leave her there - *where she belongs*," Lind scowled.

"You're just trying to keep me from Urd."

"*No Sato!* You don't know what she is. *Not really.* She was once a Valkyrie! *The Valkyrie who killed Belldandy's mother - my commander and friend!*" she said close to tears, her words echoing in the chamber, the pain as fresh in her heart as the day it happened. Its venom now fully seized her, "*She's a murderer!* She deserves her fate!"

"And that's all you really care about isn't it Lind? *Revenge.* Right from the beginning. Why didn't you attack during her rule? *Because the council wouldn't let you, would they?* And why? Because the council saw what you couldn't, that she kept the balance of power. The current situation must be quite favorable to you, Lind. It gives you and your allies a free hand to exact whatever revenge you believe her followers deserved. Don't think I don't know about your strike on the demon capital! Tell me, how many met their end that day? *When the long-held doublet rule finally fell?* Your, *unique* features must have proved invaluable in identifying a means to get in."

"*In repayment for those who killed Belldandy.* They who removed a last shining fragment of hope and ripped open the wounds of the world? *I didn't lose any sleep over it,*" she said. "Except you assumed it was done by Hild's forces. And that's who you went looking for her that day didn't you? Did you injure her in the raid? *Did you even see her in your raid?* Does it matter you may have been playing into someone else's hands? Or did you know she was already entombed at that point?!"

"That's not fair Takumi!" shouted Skuld.

## *Buried in Stone*

“Isn’t it? Did you wonder why Keiichi wanted no part of it? Did you even listen to what he had to say when you returned? Yes, I know you were there as well Skuld.”

She gasped. “You don’t understand. *Big-sis* . . .”

“*-Wanted you to be better than us Skuld.*”

He turned to the group. “I think I understand now why Belldandy’s message couldn’t be read without all of us present. I believe she knew or suspected something in her final moments that we do not. Something buried here. But to get it she knew we would have to work together.”

“Belldandy was well aware of who killed her mother. Why would she want this opened?” queried Lind.

“Why indeed,” replied Takumi. “And as to her mother – Hild once showed us an orb she said killed her.”

“*Us?*”

“Urd, Belldandy and I.”

“Convenient no one can confirm your story.”

“Just thought you might like to get to the bottom of it, you know, before you killed anyone *else* over it,” he shrugged.

“With everything I hold dear standing in the balance? No.”

“You cannot stop me from opening it.”

“I hardly need to. For you possess neither the skill nor power to breach a seal of that magnitude.”

“I wonder. Perhaps we should see who’s the better predictor – you or Belldandy? That is if I can get a little help.”

Skuld looked between them but soon walked to Takumi’s side.

“If Big-sis has pointed the way there must be a reason,” she said folding her arms. Takumi looked over wondering if it was her true desire, or simply guilt over his knowing of the citadel.

“My mother’s wishes outrank your commands,” agreed Tai coming to stand with them. Sora hesitated before walking to Lind’s side.

“Thank you Sora.”

The young goddess put her arms around her. “I meant what I said. I could never have asked for a better mother. But I’m going to help them open the seal.” She hugged her tightly.

“There’s nothing in my life that could ever replace you. Ever. But I need to know out what happened to my mother. I’m sorry if I disappoint you.”

## *Fallow*

“It’s not that. We have no way of knowing if things are still as when Belldandy set them.”

Takumi placed his hand upon the central section of the seal as Lind watched closely. A moment later it began to glow faintly. “How? It was not you who placed her into that - *HILD!* So, I’m not the only one with secrets. I always wondered about the means of your return.”

“I was given form by her power it’s true,” he admitted. He pressed on the seal but it did not move, as now Sora, Tai and Skuld put their hands to it. For a moment the seal seemed to hold but then the sigil ignited, sending faults radiating outward. Pressing on the central seal they rotated it 30 degrees counterclockwise then clockwise before it fell away to the magma beneath. They backed away as the floor began to fall inward in all directions to the magma until fully 70 percent had been subsumed. Now there rose a sudden fount of lava intruding upward carrying with it horrendous scream of agony echoing in the chamber, only to fall back into a burbling mass. They looked on but saw nothing. Nothing but endless billowing plumes of lava gurgling in the pit.

“*You see?*” Lind said surveying the grim infernal scene.

“That’s all that’s left now, the endless flow of the demon core, its power corroding its victims, eating away at their souls until there is nothing left. Nothing but primal chaos and madness.”

The group shuddered taking in the awful sight before turning to go. Only Takumi remained, his eyes desperately searching the endless upwelling plumes of magma for some presence, some hint or sign. Eventually even he could see it was hopeless. The flowing river of molten rock continued to boil as he turned to join them. “*Perhaps deeper in the realm there is -!*”

The shriek caught them by surprise as the entity burst forth from pit, its formless shape tumbling onto the ground before them. Everyone froze. Slowly the molten mass attempted to draw itself up, flowing away several times, attempting to will itself forward lurching toward them. “*Takumi!*” Lind shouted taking her guard, seeing he was caught between them and the creature as it drew near.

## *Buried in Stone*

“Stop! We’re not your enemy!” he said raising his hands. “We – we’re the ones who freed you!” he shouted, his voice rising higher in pitch with each step the creature took toward him. “*You . . . have a remarkable grasp of the obvious,*” the form rasped. The sound reverberated as a low rumble, garbled and wandering in its tenor but he could tell it was her. Slowly she continued toward him, part of the form outstretched now, reaching out until the closest part was little more than a point before his forehead. “Focusing the core of my mind for so long seems to have left me with - *a bit of a flutter,*” she rumbled reaching him. “Ah there it is - *I remember now,*” she said drawing back as the magma transformed into fingers then a fist, the change taking hold, the miraculous transformation passing down her arm and chest, over her torso and across her body. A moment later it was complete, as he now stood face to face with the naked form of the ruler of all Demonkind. She raised her arms on either side of her, pulling a red garment from what appeared to Takumi to be the very walls of the chamber itself. “Ah, that’s better,” she said to no one in particular, flexing her fingers as the cloak drew around her, her irises still retaining a disturbing cat-like property. She turned taking in the rest of the group as a smile flashed across her face. But just as quickly Takumi saw something come and go in her expression. She tilted her head. How long has it been?” she murmured to herself. “*Sora?*” she questioned looking at her finally. “Yes it’s me Grandma,” she replied embarrassed. Hild strode around the edge of the cavern hugging her tightly. “Look at you!” she said rubbing her head with uncomfortable familiarity. “Oh dear you look so wonderful!” The Demon Lord let her go, taking in the scene before turning to address Takumi, “Well I would love to stay and chat - but I have just soooo many people to kill,” she said moving off. “Still think this was a good idea Sato?!” hissed Lind standing by the entrance. “She’s leaving Takumi! What’s your plan?” warned Skuld. “Um well, I thought maybe you would want to help us Lady Hild?” he suggested humbly. “That’s your plan!” cried Skuld. “*It’s good to want things -*” Hild replied reaching the exit.

## Fallow

“Great plan Sato! We just gave the Demon Realm *back* their greatest commander!” Lind scowled.

“Well of course you must do as you please Lady Hild,” Takumi said bowing behind her. “I mean if this is *truly* how you’d like things to remain for *all time*,” he said.

In the doorway the shadow of the Demon Lord halted. “What do you mean by that?”

“I just mean that no matter what you do from this point onward, no matter how many people you kill, it won’t change the fact that you were *beaten*. If you’re happy with that version of events then I suppose -.”

Something between a sigh and a growl was heard within the confines of the cavern, “*I have a feeling I’m going to regret this*,” she muttered turning to him. “And what is your plan?”

“First things first. *Where is Urd?!?*”

“You’re right, first thing’s first!” she said smacking him, her blow sending him tumbling against the far wall. “Doesn’t feel good does it?” she said leaning down.

“No . . .,” he said standing up only to fall down once more.

“But, I think you know I’ve spent every day since attempting to rectify that error.”

“I’m not certain how useful you’ll be in that regard.”

“Really? Because if you’re so good how come we had to *thaw you out of a volcano?!?*” he cried.

Hild bristled, “As it happened they caught us on a swimming day and . . . not all of us move at the same speed,” she said with a look to Sora. “Of course my *real* mistake was not taking their malevolence seriously enough during the winter solstice.”

“The night we were at the pools! Urd and I saw an explosion in the city!” said Takumi.

“Yes. Though I think we can agree now that was nothing compared to what they pulled off two years later.”

“Tokyo . . .”

“Problem was we didn’t know it at the time, given their efforts to keep their fingerprints off it. But I know it now.”

“*Convenient*. But I still have a few questions,” said Lind.

Hild dismissed her. “Oh and let’s not forget the role you and Belldandy played in all this,” she retorted.

“The role *we* played?” inquired Lind.

## *Buried in Stone*

“Of course. When you and Belldandy buried the remains of the people you pulped into Oshima’s caldera, you did the Watchers a favor – well I doubt *they* would see it that way but it’s true.

Your *early* arrival interrupted their plans, inadvertently capturing them and thus keeping them off our radar.”

“How is that exactly?!” she demanded

“Because in amongst those you crushed -.”

“I let you get away with that once!” Lind scowled.

“-You managed to bury them together with the bones of the ship,” Hild continued. “If only you’d been more thorough . . . *Killing* them would have informed us of their presence immediately.”

“What are you talking about?!”

“Yes, what are you talking about?” echoed Takumi.

“Belldandy arrived with only *seconds* to spare.”

“Hmm, not brains of the contingent I see,” replied Hild.

“What she means is given the period in which it happened had they been killed it would have triggered a response in the doublet system – with both sides knowing something was up.”

“Meaning non-Terran entities were aboard the ship yes. Which I believe would have prevented a great deal of suffering.

Wouldn’t you say Takumi?”

“*My god*. You mean . . .?”

“Yes. As it was the arrangement kept them ‘inactive’ (and thus out of sight) for the better part of the next two years.”

“Why?” said Takumi.

“I assume they spent most of that time digging,” replied Hild.

“What?!”

“She’s kidding,” replied Skuld. “They must have spent the majority of that time healing from the tremendous level of damage Big-sis’s implosion inflicted on them. Perhaps in place. After all, they clearly intended to jump away a second before the blast. That didn’t happen, and due to their proximity to the device they must have suffered terribly as a result. If that’s true, when they got out they must have been none too happy. And went looking for revenge.”

“Yet for them it seems every misfortune has a silver lining. For during that time they discovered something nearby. Forty-five miles to the south on this very island they found something



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they could exploit. Something they could coax and develop. The anomaly upon which we now stand. And so they waited for their opportunity. Two years after Tokyo they decided they'd found one. A chance to get me while distracted, my grandchild, and Belldandy's sister all at once."

"The day you returned to meet us on the yacht."

"Yes. Not the best meeting spot as it turned out."

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't you noticed? The place we met at that day is 190 miles almost directly due east from this location."

"But why go after you? Weren't they taking a big risk?!"

"For reasons I won't get into now, I suspect assassination was always their ultimate goal. So coming after me eventually was inevitable. In addition, they knew if we ever identified their role in the Tokyo detonation we would come for them. So it became imperative for them to strike first; *before* we discovered their role and acted."

"- And yet they missed," Lind observed in a manner that made their heads turn.

"Yes. But fate gave them a second chance that day."

Takumi lowered his head. "How did Urd find you that day?"

"It was *I* who found *her* when I sensed something was wrong with Sora."

"And how did you know that?!" asked Takumi raising his head.

"Yeah how *did* you know that?" echoed Sora.

"Why have you been quiet for so long?" inquired Skuld.

"Oh for Pete's sake, those two have been making out in the chamber entranceway for the last ten minutes," muttered Hild.

"*Hey!*" complained Tai.

"Not cool grandma!" protested Sora.

"The question remains . . .," said Takumi.

"Grandparents prerogative", shrugged Hild.

"*You mean* you put some kind of tracking imprint on her when you visited us at the temple! Didn't you promise us you wouldn't do that?"

"I believe what I said was: *I confirm I hold no ill will or intent toward any member of the household and will do no harm*," she replied. "When I sensed trouble I acted. And when I arrived as they say, 'all hell broke loose'."

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“Urd?” he asked with quiet desperation.

Hild shook her head. “We were together in the heat of it for a moment, but it was all I could do to get Sora out. As soon as we were secure I convened a meeting of my - *senior staff*. They could find nothing. Given the nature of these recent events I wasn’t prepared to risk any more members of my family. So Sora and I went off on our own.”

“Sounds like that meeting didn’t occur in the demon realm,” Takumi pressed. “Also, am I *not* part of ‘the family’?”

“By that time you had already made your own plans – well beyond my dominion of control. Also no,” she replied. “Given the circumstances, I preferred to do my own work, both in looking for Urd and teaching Sora.”

“What she really means is: her group was much more concerned than she’s letting on - and they didn’t know how deep the rot in their organization *really* went,” Lind speculated. “So cynical -,” replied Hild.

“But it would answer the question as to why you didn’t just go to the demon realm when all this happened,” said Takumi.

“-Or why she didn’t pull in her bodyguards,” added Lind.

“So you stayed on Terran during your time with Sora?”

“Well if she’s going to run the place someday she might as well see how it works,” replied Hild.

“Hard to know if she’s telling the truth,” muttered Lind to Skuld. “But if she is it might explain the relative calm we observed in the demon realm over the following 10-15 years.

“So you just gave it all up?” inquired Takumi. “Ruling the demon realm?”

“Well, the job’s not a glamorous as it sounds. I left several ‘hunting’ operations to my trained associates and transferred day-to-day management of the realm to those most qualified. Things seemed to stabilize. But given what had occurred we were always on guard. For I knew they might be watching, waiting for another chance. Eventually that was what happened, somehow they deduced my location and gave chase. We took flight, but eventually they got ahead of us, ultimately cornering us to this island. Its energies made me think it might provide some protection. Clearly, I was wrong. Things reached

## *Fallow*

a state where I had no other option but to let Sora go – and alert the Heavens.”

“It was *you* who alerted us?!” questioned Lind.

“It seemed preferable to your normal response time.” she replied.

“-And then they caught you,” Lind smirked.

“*Caught* is a relative term. They ambushed us here with more than 300 trained disciples. But I assure you I made them pay very dearly for it.

“A total lie - as usual,” Lind said dismissively.

“How do you know?” said Tai.

“She didn’t seal 300 people! And she certainly didn’t kill them. If she had -.”

“-It would have been felt in the doublet? No I didn’t kill them. After all, we all know *I’m not the one* who broke the covenant . . .”

Lind seethed as Hild cocked her head, “But why do you wonder? After all, you’ve seen the result with your own eyes.” Lind looked back at her puzzled.

“Surely you passed the slopes of the mountain on your way here, did you not?” she said stepping forward.

“Yes but -! Lind gasped suddenly, her eyes wide in horror.

“What is it?” said Skuld.

“The grove of denuded trees . . . *you didn’t!*” she breathed.

“I’m surprised one versed in Valkyrie Fire would even need to ask,” Hild smiled. “When the Watchers converged on me they were many. And their traps well prepared. When it was over they were . . . *fewer.*”

“That sense of dread I could not pin down in the forest. Now I see. It was because -.” She stopped unable to go on.

“I’m guessing, I don’t want to know?” asked Takumi.

“You’re right,” said Skuld. “Ever see what happens when lightning strikes an organic object? Kind of like that, except her attacker’s couldn’t defend themselves as it pierced through their hearts linking them.”

“She used the Valkyrie Fire, a force normally used to heal but employed it in some corrupted manner, conjoining it with her energies to burst through the hearts of her enemy, striking like branched lightning connecting them, fusing their bodies and

## *Buried in Stone*

souls,” said Lind. “The resulting amalgamation was confused and powerless, no one part strong enough to form a cohesive whole. The trees of the ghost forest.”

“I don’t see the problem,” shrugged Hild. “They wanted to be part of something greater. I simply granted their wish,” she observed grimly.

“Perhaps we could resurrect some and find out what they know,” suggested Takumi.

“Well, that’s a bit like paint -,” mused Hild. “Easy enough to mix pigments together. But *un*-mixing them? That’s . . . a problem. Alas when it was over there were less than twenty remaining. But with sufficient power and skill to entomb me in my depleted state.”

“I suppose the devastation of their ranks she describes could have taken them years to recover from,” remarked Lind.

“During that time they would likely have grown more cautious, fading into the background until they were ready to strike.”

“Yeah I can believe they didn’t want people coming here,” muttered Takumi. “If word got out that hundreds of their followers got incinerated in such a gruesome manner - it might put a bit of a dent in their recruiting drive.”

“It still doesn’t explain Belldandy,” Skuld said suspiciously.

“Why did she come here, alone and without an escort?”

“Of that I have no explanation,” said Hild. “I always did think her too naïve for her own good.”

Skuld and Takumi exchanged glances. “One more victim of the Watchers?” he asked

“Possibly,” Hild replied.

“For enemies of yours you seem to be aware of suspiciously little of them,” Takumi observed.

“Well, I’ve been a bit busy lately . . .”

“And what about you Lind? What did you know of all this?”

“I knew of Urd’s dissipation, as you’re aware, I knew of Sora’s call for help; and I knew of Belldandy’s demise.”

“But nothing of Hild?”

“No. If she didn’t jump realms with Urd and Sora, and her assailant’s placed her here in this realm rather than killing her - there’s no way we would have known anything further.”

## Fallow

"Sounds like these 'Watchers' knew what they were doing. Maybe it's time you tell us what we're really facing."

"Put simply. *Evil*."

"You mean like you?"

Hild smiled. "No, not like me. Like something you've never encountered before . . . evil, whose goal is only one thing - *power*, through the primal force of chaos. And they will do anything to achieve it."

"So . . . *you, basically*," he reiterated.

She closed to within a hair's breadth of him. Me? I think you'd find there are plenty of things I wouldn't do to living beings."

"Really? 'Cause it seems like you'll do quite a bit," said Lind.

"We created Demon Realm to counter the hierarchical tyranny of the Heavens. To secure individual freedom! Our purpose has always been clear."

"Your approach to 'freedom' looks a lot like chaos," said Lind.

"I was thinking the same thing," said Takumi. "Maybe you and these Watchers are really on the same team?"

"Laugh it up hyenas," replied Hild. "When you meet them you'll know the difference. For mercy is not a word in their vocabulary . . . " At that moment the air seemed to still.

Takumi looked at the others, his skin beginning to crawl.

"Perhaps we should - !" Down from the rim of the caldera something dropped into the pit, striking the ground between him and Hild. Everyone jumped as the figure rose. At the same time in the entranceway Sora and Tai froze as a silent hand gripped their shoulders. "AUGH!" they cried as Tai tumbled the air currents powerfully in the confined space of the entranceway, causing their assailant to hit the wall before spinning upside down. "*Sparkle Fairy?*" Sora inquired of the ungainly figure looking up at her from the ground.

"*Sparkle fairy?*" everyone repeated in unison.

"It's a long story-," Mara said scrambling to her feet. "She caught me one night and I had to tell her something!"

"So you told her you were a 'Sparkle Fairy?'" Takumi mused.

"Eh, kids will believe anything," Mara shrugged.

"*There's no way you got into the temple!*" Skuld hissed.

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"But you didn't have her sleep in the temple every night did you?" Mara replied. "Sometimes she was outside, having an outdoor adventure in her princess tent!"

"As fascinating as all this is we have an appointment to keep," Hild said embracing the figure beside her.

"*You*, the woman from the alley," observed Takumi.

"You know this person?!" asked Skuld.

"I caught the tail end of a run-in he had with one of the Watcher's creatures," Idunn replied in response to Hild's stare.

"Once I sensed your trace on him I followed, keeping him in one piece hoping it would pay off."

"I take it this is not a Watcher?" said Lind.

"If she was you'd be dead by now," replied Hild.

"You don't remember me?" Idunn asked, wiping her own brow in the position of Lind's scar.

The Valkyrie's eyes narrowed, "Whatever did this came from *behind*."

"Maybe don't attack people in their homes," she replied.

"- Not to interrupt, but I must say it was nice of the two of you to *finally* show up," Hild observed.

"You didn't exactly keep us well-informed of your whereabouts after you went off – and we did have a few minor distractions like a civil war in the Demon Realm *and* war with the Heavens to fight so - it kept us busy. *Which reminds me*," Idunn said drawing her spear down on Skuld and Lind.

"Whatever this is about we don't have time for it now," Hild said scanning the structure of the cavern. "Unless we all plan to become permanent attractions here."

"So this one - isn't Sparkle Fairy?" Sora asked of the intruder at her feet.

"She's kind of your godmother," Takumi said as Mara beamed.

"She is?!"

"I - don't think there were a lot of choices," he replied.

"Hey!"

"And now?" Skuld asked, taking up position in front of Tai and Sora.

"Now Tai and Sora get out of here," Lind demanded.

"Whatever they're planning, you've played your part and then

## *Fallow*

some,” she said, unnerved by the current numbers of powerful demons; attempting to get them out while she could.

“*Can* they leave?” Hild asked her companion.

“I think we have control of the situation,” Idunn mused.

“What does that mean?” asked Takumi.

“It means that when you opened the seal you set off a signal, one attracting unwelcome visitors. A signal we are currently suppressing,” said Idunn.

“That only helps us if you did it *before* the seal was broken!” The demon shrugged.

“In other words -.”

“I’ve been on you since shortly after you reached this island.”

## *Under the Mountain*

He came as quick as he could, arriving as close as he dared to the caldera. He directed his backup to the periphery outside the pit, knowing that whatever he might find inside it would be easier to maximize his advantage (or at least his story of it) if he were alone. He approached the entranceway cautiously. He could simply not imagine who or what would be causing trouble now; after all, it had been ninety-four years since they had disposed of the last visitor to disturb this place. But on arriving he was relieved to see there was no need for concern. Everything was in order, with nothing but a deranged man hammering the floor.

“Open, OPEN I SAY!” the man shouted, desperately pounding the floor as he knelt beside the sigil.

“You - are in the wrong place,” Sirsemion said walking toward him malevolently. The man continued hammering the floor not looking up.

“I know where I am,” he replied.

“What is this about?” the demon demanded.

“You know. *Urd*. I want her back,” the man said.

“You . . . wait. You’re *Ta-ku-mi*, aren’t you? Yes I remember that name. She kept crying it out. I couldn’t understand the rest . . . alone in the dark. At first I didn’t know what it meant. Then I understood, she must be calling for someone - someone she hoped would come for her - but of course you never did.” Takumi looked down saying nothing, trying to blot away his tears. For he was completely undone by his words.

“Does it bother you to hear?” the demon said smiling.

Takumi felt himself trembling. So many nights during his imprisonment he had promised himself what he would do if he ever came face to face with the instigator of his misery, the one responsible for Urd disappearance. But now in the presence of this creature grief overwhelmed him. He could not even summon the strength to look at him. For whether he liked it or



not, he was no longer the man he had been all those years ago. Time had changed him; no longer willing to risk all that remained in order to ease his own suffering. Here in the chamber, he had no chance against the monstrosity before him. And there was Sora to consider; Skuld and Tai too. He rose unsteadily. *"I'm done with you,"* he said sadly, finally walking away.

"Smarter than you look . . .," Sirsemion mused. "Leaving will certainly extend your life - for a little while. You're sure you don't want to hear - the details?"

Takumi wiped away his tears. Though he had prepared himself for this possibility, the words the creature spoke still sliced through him like a knife dissecting to the bone. Even after all this time he still had no defense against it. He walked on blindly toward the cave's entrance trying to reach it before breaking down completely. But it was no use. The pain was too great. He stumbled.

*'So it is as I was told,'* Sirsemion thought. *'Disgusting.'*

With great effort the man rose. "I said I'm through with you," he said reaching the entranceway. *"But I don't think she is,"* he murmured passing out of the chamber.

Siremion's eyes shot to the seal, but of course it was already far too late. *"No, no - there is no need for you to move,"* the voice purred behind him like some great demonic cat.

"HILD!" That - that's impossible!"

"For you perhaps. But me? . . . well, who knows what's impossible for me? When you place yourself against someone like me it's best to expect the unexpected. The trinary spell your group used against me that day was good. But give me *a century or so* to think about it and . . . you'd be surprised the improvements I can make." Her spell had paralyzed him from the neck down, its strands entwining him as though held now by talons of steel. She strolled now to face him as he looked at her with unbelieving eyes; his face a mask of terror.

"It can't be! The seal is-."

*"Inescapable?"* Is that the word you're searching for? Clearly you have no idea whom you are dealing with. She stepped close examining him. "They say the pain within the core of the demon realm is *unendurable* . . .," she said reaching down to

## *Under the Mountain*

take up a piece of volcanic rubble. "Ah but we know that's just an old wives tale, don't we? After all, I endured it - *for more than a hundred years*," she seethed. "Though to be fair I *did* have something to hold on to. I wonder if your level of resolve is similar?" She watched his eyes, flickering over the edges of the walls. "Oh, if you're waiting for your associates to join us, I can assure you they won't be - *ever*."

The true dimensions of his predicament began to set in upon him as she continued to pace. "As I'm sure your slow-witted mind is now beginning to consider, there is of course one rather *significant* drawback to entombing one in the core of the demon realm: Anything which is not destroyed - only grows *stronger* with time. So if an entombed entity were ever to escape - ah but why worry about that?" she smiled shaking her head. "I think you begin to see why *entombment* is so rarely employed - risked only for those you *truly* wish to suffer." She looked at him as though trying to discern the choicest cuts of meat. "But who would ever worry about such a thing? I mean it's not like the victim could open it from inside; or could they?" she said as though reading his very thoughts.

*'It was not possible. IT WAS NOT POSSIBLE!'*

"But enough about the past. It appears I interrupted your prior conversation. It seems he didn't want to hear the tale you had to tell. But I'll listen, if you like," she said staring somberly. "To lead you must. Children, they start so . . . and then . . . *ah but you hope anyway*," she muttered to herself.

She reached out as the false floor fell away, volcanic plumes now rising behind them in the chamber. The terrible force of the flames and magma now moving as though a living entity, a wall of molten rock ready for its next victim. But in that moment Hild did not seem to be herself. She seemed slowed, aged, contemplative.

"It's strange . . .," she said turning. "I put such thought into what I would do when I . . . and yet now - now I all I want . . ."

"PLEASE! I'll do anything!" cried Sirsemion.

"*Anything?*" she murmured hopefully.

"Of course Lady Hild!"

"Very well. They'll say I've gone soft, but in the end -."

Hope flickered in his eyes. "Really?"

## *Fallow*

She nodded at length. "I've grown tired," she said, her shoulders sagging. "Grant my request and I will let you go."  
"It is yours!"

She turned raising her hand, her palm face up. "Just give her back to me . . . *give back - my little Urd* - and I will let you go."

It was not an order, not even a threat or command. It was simply the request of a mother, wishing for her departed child. Sirsemion's face registered nothing but shock, blood draining from his face as fear, terrible power grew in his eyes. The muscles of his face began an awful twisting and trembling, beginning to weep as the full knowledge of the depth of her loss, and the irreversibility of his own position set in.

"*Lady Hild*," he pleaded, "*I -*"

She waved her hand as the flesh of him was instantly burned away, his body engulfed by the embrace of the searing flames of the demon realm, denaturing muscle and charring bone.

If Sirsemion had been human that day it would have been mercifully quickly. But he had the great misfortune on that day of *not* being human, and so his sinews melted, fusing to bone before a new and far more terrifying presence as the unyielding tendrils of the core of the demon realm embraced him, consuming and suffocating him in pain and madness as it drew him downward, down into the core with chilling finality as new seal now appeared on the floor of the volcanic chamber. Hild walked out into the cool air of night still a few hours before dawn to find Takumi.

"So it's as we feared?" he asked.

Hild looked away saying nothing. "It appears we will be going with your plan," she said. "Though I have a few notes . . ."

"From the screaming I heard I take it I won't have to go in there and chop him to pieces?"

"No, he's gone. And he's not coming back."

"Are you sure? You did. How did you get out by the way?"

Hild fixed him with a wry look. "Well, you see the Demon Realm is a bit more autocratic than the Heavens -."

"You don't say."

"- As such, and because the leader of the realm is responsible for any/all of its members' actions, the ruler of the Demon Realm has power over all actions cast."

## *Under the Mountain*

“So that explains how you could *modify* his work. But Sirsemion and his idiots didn’t know that?”

“I’m sure they did. Their miscalculation was in assuming there were no remaining *external* representations of me.”

“So your interest in me wasn’t altruistic. Heartwarming. Do you know how Belldandy found this place; or why she came?”

“No,” she said watching the others approach. “She may have just been at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Takumi eyed her suspiciously as Idunn, Mara, Lind and Skuld now came down the slope toward them; Tai and Sora having been sent on to the temple for safety. “Well isn’t this a cozy crew -,” he said observing their intense mutual glaring.

“You should know that these are the ones Hild, *the very ones* that led the attack reigning destruction down on our realm,” said Idunn.

“The very same,” agreed Mara.

“You mean *after* you guys killed my sister? Both of them!” shouted Skuld.

“As even you can see now that wasn’t us!” snarled Mara.

“Either that or we just sealed your patsies,” said Lind.

“Leave it,” Hild said approaching her old friend as Idunn lowered her spear. “It doesn’t matter what they think. If I didn’t say so before, you did a magnificent job. The fact that you’re here suggests you were successful after I left in containing the Abyssal insurrection and its ensuing chaos.”

She nodded, leaning on her spear, “The Watchers and their sympathizers kept us busy for 2 years after you left. Then all went quiet. I can see now why. You must have taken out a good chunk of his command structure. We looked but . . .”

“No need to concern yourself with that now,” Hild said.

“We, the Realm, began to recover - looking for the leaders, searching for you. We were making progress. Then, twenty-two years later, without warning . . . all hell broke loose.”

“*Belldandy*. A parting gift from Sirsemion,” Hild mused.

“It seems so. And so for the last 94 years we have been at war with the Heavens . . .”

“I admit my prior fiasco with Urd made me fear repeating the same errors. Following the attack she became my highest

## Fallow

priority, for I knew they would kill her. I could bear no one else to do it given the risk and avoiding their tracking.”

“What about the army?” asked Takumi.

“They were needed to aid our forces in the demon realm,” replied Idunn.

“And now?” asked Skuld.

“We believe we have a plan which could set things back on the right track, provided we work together - scary as that thought might be,” Hild muttered looking at the collected crew.

“How? I don’t have any more sisters to kill,” snapped Skuld.

“I see one,” growled Mara.

“Except that her back isn’t turned, which seems to be the only way you can get them,” observed Lind.

“Speaking of unprovoked attacks, how many fell to you the first week you invaded the Demon Realm?” asked Idunn.

“Look if we’re going to start re-litigating who killed who we’re going to be here awhile,” mused Takumi.

“*Shut up!*” they replied.

. . .

Takumi and Skuld returned to the temple to find Tai and Sora deep in conversation around a blazing bonfire in the courtyard.

“What are you trying to do burn the place down?” asked Skuld.

“Just be happy it’s the only thing we’re seeing,” said Takumi.

“Gross,” they replied.

“We lit the fire to bring everyone in -,” said Tai.

“Let’s face it, it’s big news,” said Sora. “Hild has been found!”

“You mean *released*,” Skuld corrected with a look to Takumi.

“-Who told us a couple of things we should know!” he added.

At that moment the ninjas appeared out of nowhere, one on the temple wall, one on the roof and one sitting atop a bird.

“Hey stop that,” shouted Tai pointing. “We talked about that!”

“Maybe the wrong target was hit?” suggested Takumi.

“- And maybe it wasn’t,” replied Skuld. “I still don’t trust her. I mean she’s basically Satan!”

“There are things that seem strange I’ll admit,” agreed Takumi.

“The whole business of Belldandy seems odd. She just *happened* to find the tomb? And Hild said she knew nothing about any of it? Seems unlikely. Something doesn’t ring true.”

“Tell them Sora. *It’s time*,” Tai pleaded.

## *Under the Mountain*

"If you know anything about this - it's way past time!" Takumi said sternly.

"*It was all my fault!*" Sora cried. "I'm sorry! I'm the reason she died!"

"How is that possible?" Skuld said kneeling beside her.

"It's true. One night - after the Valkyries brought me to the temple Belldandy asked me about it, a spider-like scar she noticed over my ribs when she was bathing me. I told her it had been bright red right when I had gone into the forest with Hild; and that she had used her power to minimize it. After that it stayed in the form Belldandy had found it. But on my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday it once again grew bright. That was when Belldandy knew something was wrong. She knew I was weakening."

"Did you know about any of this Skuld?" Takumi asked.

"Skuld had a 3-year-old at the time," Sora replied. "Belldandy told Lind and together they searched. They thought it might be related to Hild, or at least she would know how to treat it given what she had done. Over the following years they searched for her trying to investigate its source. We now know that Belldandy was the first to eventually discover Hild's resting place."

"I still don't see why you think you're responsible for her death," said Takumi standing on the other side of the fire.

"Anything could have happened to her on that day."

"*No*. On that day - the day she died, the scar on me faded, disappearing entirely, and never returned. I think somehow she gave her life to heal me," Sora said.

"Did you tell anyone?" Takumi asked.

"I told Tai," she said as he took her hand. "I told him he and Keiichi must hate me!" she cried as he hugged her.

"Disappeared on the day she died? Maybe it was something from Bell all along?" Takumi mused.

"No, knowing Big-sis if it was something she had had control of she wouldn't have waited 7 years - even if it meant her life," said Skuld.

"I suppose you're right. Something she found at Hild's tomb? Hild certainly didn't say anything about it."

"I don't think we should rely on her for much," replied Skuld.

## *Fallow*

“Still, it seems unlikely given the condition we found her in, and the fact that it faded when - well when it did. There’s only one thing that makes sense -.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” replied Skuld. “Big-sis must have encountered one or more of the Watchers that day.”

“I have to agree,” said Takumi. “They would have been at the right time and place to attack Sora. Why do you think they went after Belldandy?”

“If *you* buried something like Hild in an everlasting Hell-pit, do you really think you’d want people coming around investigating it?” asked Skuld.

“I suppose not. Hild said something about suppressing a signal. Belldandy may have unknowingly triggered their alarm when she found the tomb and they overwhelmed her.”

“*Or vice versa*,” said Tai.

“What do you mean?”

“If mom went to the tomb and found nothing that could help Sora she must have deduced what actually happened.”

“Which is?”

“It must have been one of the Watchers, likely the one that killed Urd,” Tai said as the evening winds grew wild.

“Knowing that she likely waited, even given the risk, knowing it would be her best chance to get the drop on the creature that hurt Sora. You say they overwhelmed her, and in the end that might be true. But from her point of view she knew Sora’s time was running out. Whatever she did that day, it did remove the curse. And I’m quite sure they didn’t hand it over to her voluntarily.”

“Meaning?” asked Takumi.

“-Meaning during combat they must have gone into a death spiral at some point, their interlocked power drawing each other down until . . . their goals were achieved.”

“Achieved?!”

“Their goals were different,” said Skuld. “Sirsemion undoubtedly wanted to survive above all else. Belldandy by contrast was willing to hold until she broke through the demon’s core engram encoding, allowing her to shatter his active programs; no matter the cost. To do that, to break

## *Under the Mountain*

through a being at that level they both must have been close to death at that point.”

“I’m sorry Tai!” Sora cried hugging him.

“She made her choice, the one she would have made for any of us,” he said. “They must have hit her with everything they had. But she knew it would be the best chance.”

“The harm she inflicted on them must have been grievous,” observed Skuld.

“I pray she did exactly that,” Takumi said grimly. “Just as I hope he burns in everlasting pain now. It would explain why they weren’t on the front lines when you attacked the Citadel, or how Heaven’s forces made such rapid progress in the years that followed.”

“-And another could be they were cowards, or we had better leadership,” retorted Skuld walking off.

“Either way it freed me. What do you think?” asked Sora.

But Takumi was focused on Skuld, watching her as she bypassed the door, exiting around the side of the house. Slowly he got up and followed her. “Something on your mind kid?” he said, finding her watching the stars outside Keiichi’s old room. “I just don’t understand. Why - why she didn’t contact me that day? That was always the problem. I was always the little sister. I was never *really* special to any of you.”

Takumi had feared this day might come. More specifically that he would have to be the one to have this conversation with her.

“That’s not the reason Skuld,” he murmured.

“Yes it is! I was never the most important thing to any of you! There was always someone else, always *something* else that was more important. And so I was always the one left behind until finally - *finally* I was alone. *That’s why . . .*,” she began to cry hysterically.

“You’ve got it all wrong,” he replied. “They *protected* you for the simple reason you were the future none of us could be.”

“*You don’t need to lie! Just get out of here!*” she cried.

“I’m telling you the truth. We should have told you a long time ago, but you were too young when I went inside. I assumed they would explain it at the proper time. Belldandy loved Keiichi. Of course she did. But she also knew that in being with



## *Fallow*

him she was making a permanent choice. And she knew clearly the consequence of that choice.”

She looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

“In marrying Keiichi, Belldandy knew she would never sit on the high council, or *any* council in the Heavens. I mean, could you imagine such a thing happening under the circumstances?”

“I suppose not. But you and Urd -.”

“*Even before* everything happened Urd and I knew there was no future for us in the Heavens. Don’t you see? Your sisters knew that you were the *only one who had any real future there*, and as such it would be *you* who would eventually lead the family, protecting all of us. They all acted the way they did to make you strong, strong enough to one day lead and go on without them; because you were the only road that led to the future.”

“Except I married Sentaro.”

“Which is probably why they never told you any of this. By that point any such plan was so well and totally screwed up that everyone had probably given up on the family. I take it the plan to break you and Sentaro up didn’t work?”

“WHAT?!!!”

He gave her a smile. “Belldandy’s failure to contact you that day probably had more to do with the fact that you had *your own family* to look after, and she knew she would need someone to look after Keiichi if anything happened.”

Skuld looked back at the stars and he sensed something distant in her. Something that made him feel uncertain. He wished he knew her better. But time had run out. *Funny*, he thought.

“I understand what she did,” Skuld replied. “It was her duty to look after us. I just wish -.” She stopped, walking away.

His eyes narrowed trying to perceive her thoughts. “That she hadn’t prioritized Sora?” he asked.

“No, not that. You’re going to have to hold things together here with her for a few days.”

“You’re going to the Heavens with Tai? Do you think he needs help?” he said trying to understand the feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“Mmm. No. I want to go see Lind.”

## *Under the Mountain*

"You think she'll be a problem? She seemed okay when we discussed things on the island."

"*Seems* and *is* are two different things," she replied.

"We haven't talked about how all this will affect you," he said shooting her a sideways glance.

"You mean you think I might not hold up my part of the bargain?"

"I didn't say that," he replied, unconsciously moving several steps closer to her.

"You needn't worry," she said turning to face him. "I have my own reasons for seeing this through."

"Mind telling me?" he asked as casually as possible.

"Sentaro was taken from me earlier than I had hoped. If we're successful -."

"I understand."

They walked on, out the back gate and down the alley talking for some time.

In the courtyard Tai Morisato and Sora sat alone now, quietly watching the dying flames of the fire. Hearing the receding voices Tai rose to go but Sora caught him by the hand. "Stay with me," she said.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'm scared," she replied.

"I'll be fine," he shrugged. "And Lind will be there."

"It's just . . . so much of their plan depends on you."

"Don't worry. No matter what happens I'll make it back to the rendezvous point like we agreed."

She squeezed closer holding his hand. "I don't know. It always seems like, for us . . ."

"I know," he said kissing her head. "Come on let's go inside."

Morning found Takumi outside in the courtyard studying the temple, its trees, and Skuld as she packed through the open shoji doors. He looked away embarrassed as she looked up catching him.

"I - just wanted to ask you something. Can - I take this?" he said awkwardly, producing a picture from inside the jacket of he and Urd, looking back at the camera as they stood akimbo

## Fallow

together along the seashore. "I lifted it from Belldandy's book," he admitted.

"I suppose so," Skuld replied. "Are you ready Tai?"

"I am," he nodded entering the room.

Following a hesitant kiss between Sora and Tai (which Takumi feared he would never get used to), Skuld and Tai took to air and were gone, leaving only the two of behind on the porch.

"Funny. Last night Skuld told me *she* was the one always being left behind," Takumi said watching the sky.

"Did you two have a good talk?" Sora asked.

"I hope so," he replied. "She certainly did more hugging than she normally does. She told me I could take Keiichi's jacket."

"For *you* it's Keiichi's jacket. For *me* I will always remember it as Skuld's. After he was gone she would always wear it when it got cold, whenever she was out working on something in the garage."

He nodded sitting down beside her. "Well she was fond of him. Much more than she would ever let on to any of us."

"I suppose." For a moment the two sat quietly side by side listening to the echoes of the forest. "*I'm going to miss you dad,*" she said finally, pressing a braid of her hair into his hand.

"You'll never even know I was gone, except for the fact I might become a slightly better father. No guarantees though."

"After - *after it's over*, can Lind still be -?"

"-Your grandmother too, assuming she's not busy instigating the world's downfall or getting locked away in some dark corner of the underworld," he replied.

"*And Tai?*"

"That's a more complicated discussion, one I'm sure others will weigh in on. But in the end no one can tell you who to love."

She looked at her feet, shifting. "Alright. I'm going to let you go now," she said rising.

"Do what you need to Sora," he said as the winds rose.

"Lind will know where to find you if the time comes."

"I don't doubt it," he murmured watching her go. As she disappeared into the clouds he kissed the braid putting it into his pocket.

## *Under the Mountain*

...

Peorth leaned back at the Earth Help Center, casting her arms behind her surprised at Skuld's sudden approach. "What brings you here?" she asked. "Everything alright at the temple?"

"I just need to check something - *in the back files*," she said.

Peorth's eyes narrowed. "What kind of *thing*?"

"Something relating to Keiichi's happiness," she whispered.

"You know you're welcome to search," she said leading her into the archives.

"It's not that simple," Skuld replied stopping. "I need to use your account," she said.

"A super-user account?"

"Yeah. The highest one I can get my hands on," she nodded.

"Keiichi's happiness. A problem with your new addition?"

"I hope not. And Peorth - don't tell anyone about this."

...

Within the Miyakejima caldera, the pit had become a hive of activity. A team of The Fallen had almost finished removing any *excess refuse* as Idunn put it as they prepared the site.

"You alright?" asked Idunn casting a wary eye over the area.

"I'm fine," Hild replied sitting peering over the crater rim.

"Because you look anxious. You're not nervous to talk to him after all this time are you?"

"Of course not!" Hild replied dismissively.

"Good. Because if anything *he* should be nervous to talk to *you*."

"I know."

"I mean all the procedures *you* suggested are the ones that -."

"I said I'm *okaaay*, I don't need a pep talk," she said looking off as they both laughed.

"We've come a long way, haven't we?" Idunn said looking up at the stars.

"Give or take a few civil wars," Hild replied. "*Don't think that won't come up* -," she muttered.

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to. With Sirsemion gone we've moped up most of the remaining leaders, the realm is essentially -."

## *Fallow*

“And what about the territory we’ve lost, to say nothing of the people? No this is the only way; if they can hold up their end.”

“You think he’ll go for it?”

“Two of his daughters? I’d say he’ll go for it. But who knows what he thinks these days? In truth it’s not him I’m most worried about.”

Idunn sighed still looking at the stars. “You were their chief strategist. The high council will always be nervous around you, no matter what the deal is.” Idunn leaned her head back closing her eyes. “Do. . . you ever think about -?”

“The past? *No*. What would be point? We made the best decision we could on a path to freedom. I wouldn’t do anything different.”

“*Me either -*,” admitted Idunn crossing her arms.

. . .

“Did you contact him?” Skuld asked looking up from the screen as Peorth entered.

“It seems Tai is on his way there now,” Peorth replied.

“Good.”

“Do you want me to stay?” Peorth asked.

“No,” Skuld said shaking her head looking at the screen.

“I’m sorry,” Peorth said finally.

“Me too,” Skuld replied sadly.

The day wore on as Skuld reviewed the archival data until her reverie was broken by the entrance of a group of Valkyries.

Looking over the back of her chair she recognized them all too quickly. She crouched down but they had already seen her.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the flying squirrel,” said Kara coming in with Syn beside her. “What brings you here?” she asked placing a heavy hand on her shoulder.

“I’m looking into these records to see if there’s an archive picture that accurately captures the look on your face as you flew over the wall crashing into the sea,” Skuld replied peering into the pages.

“What did you say you reject?!” Kara hissed picking her up.

“I said - is it book day at the apiary? If so the kids section is two floors down,” Skuld replied sitting back down.

## *Under the Mountain*

"No we birds of a feather just have to search this place from time to time to keep the rodent population down," replied Kara. "Careful or we might have to turn you into a meal," she said leaning down beside her.

"*What is it you've got there?*" asked Rota coming up with Mist behind them. "Well, if it isn't the world's most dangerous engineer!" she said looking her over.

"-And only getting more dangerous with time," she replied.

"Your friend seems to be looking for a story. I could tell them as story - one about a couple of dodos who flew over the cuckoo's nest to land face down in the surf!"

Rota and Mist bristled.

"What's she talking about?" asked Syn.

"Who knows? She's crazy. Let's get out of here," said Rota trying to usher them out.

"I guess you're right. There's no need to bore people with ancient history," agreed Skuld.

"I'll tell you when I leave," said Kara.

"*No, she's right. All of you - out!*" called Herja appearing with Pogn and Puror.

"Pogn you fink!" shouted Kara.

"Hah. Your sub-commander just gave you an order," said Rota.

"I said *all* of you. If you have time to goof off here then you have time to help at the citadel." Following some staring between members of the group they dissipated.

"Sorry," said Herja. "You know how they can be in a group."

"Uh-huh," replied Skuld returning to her book.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Just looking into a few details," replied Skuld.

"About what?"

"*My sister,*" she admitted. "How she died," said Skuld.

"I heard - they got the one responsible," said Herja. "The one who killed Belldandy."

"Yes."

"Did he say why he did it?" she asked.

Skuld shook her head. "We never found out. It was another demon that got him in the end."

"I see. I guess it's ended then."

## Fallow

Skuld nodded. "It's just, there was always one thing that bothered me about it," she muttered. "How did Big-sis know where to find Hild? I mean she left that day like it was any other, with no word to me or Keiichi; no special precautions. It always struck me as strange. Almost like she was *informed* of the information on the spur of the moment."

"It may be possible to find something in the communications logs," she suggested.

"No I've already tried that," said Skuld. "*Nothing*. It seems there were no communications from the Heavens to my sister that day."

"Puzzling."

"Yes. Until I searched *her ground-based records*."

"What?"

"You know, the records on Earth. *The ones you didn't erase*."

"What are you saying?"

"*Don't*. Don't even open your mouth!" Skuld said rising.

"It wasn't until I considered Urd, the day she died. *Then I knew*. You see I had a conversation with Hild, something I'm sure *your partner* told you couldn't happen - and she told us she arrived to find Urd and Sora *already* in trouble. You don't remember do you? After Belldandy was released, *I asked you* about Urd's movements the day she died; given you were 'on duty'. You said Urd was *told* the location of Hild's jump; location she was killed at. Something which was documented by Terran Command; so no one questioned it. Only Hild, Urd, your partner . . . *or you* - would know it was a lie!"

"We detected Hild's jump and I informed her of the location - that's all! Wasn't that the location where she was found?"

"Yes, but not for the reasons you claim. Hild came *after* Urd's arrival - because *you* sent her there - into a trap! Once I heard Hild's story I knew neither Big-sis or Urd would have gone to such a location on a demon's word; it had to come from someone from here. That's when I knew Sirsemion had help from our side." Skuld pressed her hand to her body as her outer layer began to change, revealing the hardened dragon scale armor. "I'm not asking you Herja. I already know the *what*. What I'm trying to understand is - *why*? Why did you do it? Why did you hurt my family?" she said withdrawing her blade.

## *Under the Mountain*

Herja stepped back appraising her, “You must have quite a high opinion of yourself, knowingly trapping yourself in with a Valkyrie,” she replied. “I’m told you’re a capable engineer. But I think you’re going to find *this* level of combat to be on an entirely different level,” she said raising her hands drawing together a strand of light.

“You know the whispers Skuld: There must be something wrong with the family. I mean - *two* sister’s disappearing under such mysterious circumstances? Imagine what they’ll think – *when it’s three.*”

“I came here prepared not to leave; *let’s see about you,*” Skuld replied baring her teeth. “Especially when it involves my family!”

“Yes, let’s find out,” Herja said as the ball grew white hot.

“And you’re wrong about Belldandy. She found that place all by herself.”

“Then why hurt her?”

“She was acting in opposition to our plans. She had been for a long time. I mean it’s not like we could risk Hild getting out. She notified me she needed help. I just made sure it didn’t arrive.”

“The person who could undo all your good work . . .”

“You’re right,” Herja smiled. “Just like your older sister.”

“I know *exactly* where I’m going to put your skull on the temple grounds,” Skuld snapped putting a bookshelf between herself and Herja. “But before I do - Are you crazy? What is it you get out of all this?”

“That’s easy,” Herja replied. “*I get to remove evil.*”

“Who? The Watchers?”

“No. They understand. *The Fallen.* Those of mixed divinity.

“You mean Hild’s army?” she said watching her carefully.

“They are *not* her army. She may have given them a home, but they are not hers.”

“Yet Hild wasn’t going to help you.”

“Of course not. Not when her inner circle is made up of them.”

“It wasn’t them you were trying to get?”



## Fallow

*"In a perfect world perhaps,"* Herja replied edging closer. "But they are not our priority. Hild's mongrels are locked out of the Heavens. *Those two* on the other hand . . ."

Skuld gasped understanding. *"Sora and Tai!"*

"-We couldn't just leave them," Herja shrugged. *"We had to get rid of them. Of course, it would have been so much simpler if we just killed her that day. But as you know Hild showed up and ruined the party - creating yet another problem for us."*

Skuld blinked not believing her ears. "You mean Tai . . ."

"Well let's face it, I doubt he would have been born if Belldandy had stayed put."

Skuld steadied herself trying to keep her focus. *"Before I definitely kill your unsuccessful child murdering ass I need to ask, why Sora and Tai?"*

*"They could return to the Heavens, their children definitely so."*

"You didn't come after my children," Skuld said scanning the exits.

*"Your children stayed where they belonged and possessed a human lifespan. So it was tolerable."*

"Lady - you are seriously messed up. -And lucky you didn't try harder for them after Urd and Belldandy were gone!"

"It's true that after the removal of your sisters there were a lot of eyes on them, and you did become bothersomely protective of them after that," she said moving to counter her. "But the truth is with Urd, Hild and Belldandy gone we would have gotten them long ago; had it not been for the interference of -."

*"The One-Wing?"* a voice whispered murderously behind her.

Herja turned but Lind struck first speaking quickly: *"Herja I bind you and prevent you from doing harm,"* she said striking as the sigil burning itself into her. "Wherever you are henceforth, I will know." Skuld had never seen her more terrifying, her face like the countenance of death as she forced the Valkyrie commander to the ground. *"You went after my daughter?"* she said searching her eyes as she held her.

*"She's not -,"* Herja began as Lind squeezed until bones began to yield. "I - I'm not alone. There are more like me! If anything happens to me - they'll know!"

## *Under the Mountain*

"*I'm counting on it,*" Ling replied. "And we will root them out, *every* one. Shall you tell me their names? *No?* Then we're finished here," she said throwing her back, away from Skuld. "You're going to kill me?" said Herja. "We do not kill our own sister, nor do we act as juries unto ourselves. No, I'm not going to kill you. I'm going to cast you out from the Heavens." She drew her hand up as they disappeared.

The three of them arrived in shadows of the petrified forest. "Where is this place?" asked Herja. "The only place left for you - *Earth,*" Lind replied. Herja stepped into the woods. "I'll simply return." "I'd be cautious in that," Lind warned standing with Skuld. "Yes, I wouldn't book any travel plans just yet," said the voice appearing from the trees along with several senior demons. "What? Where is this?!" "The tour where you get to pay your respects to your old friends," replied the demon sitting in front of her. "*Goodbye Herja . . .*," Lind said descending the path. "You - you're leaving me here because of Belldandy?" she asked to Lind and Skuld's retreating forms. "Why would we care about that?" Hild said to her demons. "No this is about the *other* murder you've admitted to being involved with . . . well that and the attempted murder of my granddaughter." "HILD!" Herja gasped. "Yes," she replied leafing through her notebook. "Well we seem to have sufficient witnesses here for the trial - is there anything else we need before we wrapping this up?" Hild said to those around her. "We need independent confirmation that her words are indeed the truth," Idunn reminded her. "Oh I can do that," Hild said with a wave of her hand. "After all, *I know* I didn't arrive first there that day. *Here -*," she said tearing out a page from her notebook. "I have a note with my name signed on it and everything," she said letting it fall to Idunn's feet. Do you have any counter witnesses? *No?* Well

### *Fallow*

then -," Hild snapped her fingers, igniting the goddess only to have her coalesce into a brightly glowing sphere of light. In the distance Skuld stopped sensing the brightness of the ignition. "I thought you said Valkyries don't act as juries," she said to Lind. "That they are tried by a jury of their peers." "She *was* tried by a jury of her peers," Lind scowled as they ascended.

## *Once and Future Past*

Tai moved quietly as he passed along the uppermost spiral of the causeway extending around and through the High Spires, the great meeting hall and council chambers of the High Council on his way to the North Eyrie; seat of Odin's power in the city. Stopping at the north branch he looked away south at the city's library, majestically surrounded by its garden rings, their flowing vines stretching down to the reaches of the Vimir River below, its waters spilling down from the plateau creating canyons farther south. He breathed the air happy to be back, yet was sad he had no one there to share the view with.

Returning to his task he could see from this elevation just how big the northern mountains standing above Fensalir really were. The Vanir mountains from which his grandmother had come. He wondered if his mother had ever - *his mother*. He stood taking a long last look at the great shield wall to the west, barely able to make out their home from here. "Wait for me Sora," he muttered continuing on.

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"Well if it isn't my errant dance partner," Takumi commented looking up from his knees as he continued polishing the wood planking of the temple.

"Well if you'd carry a phone *like any normal person*, it'd be a lot easier to save your life," replied his visitor from the trees.

"I would have, but some maniac took me on an extended tour through the Japanese countryside, got me arrested and then threw me down a mountain."

"That's not what happened! Besides you loved it. I would have hung around, but the clientele started to get a bit *choppy*."

"I assume it was you who directed that spear maiden in my direction? The one who keeps coming out of nowhere?"

"*Be careful how you describe your saviors*," Idunn replied behind him.

## Fallow

"Augh! Stop doing that!" he cried. "Where's Banpei when you need him. *Wait*. Does she still have Banpei?" he asked looking around.

"What kept you?" said Mara dropping down from the tree.

"Just doing a little housekeeping for Hild," Idunn said walking over to the pond to wash her hands.

"Anyone I know?" Mara muttered kneeling beside her.

"No one who'll be missed," Idunn replied.

"So *nothing* at this temple burns your feet?" Takumi asked watching the two of them freely wander around the courtyard.

"You have to stop reading those circulars from the Heavens," Idunn replied.

Above the temple, Lind and Skuld sat in the meadow watching the scene below. "It - was my fault," Lind said finally.

"What are you talking about?" said Skuld.

"You heard her. Bell called her. Do you know why? Because I wasn't there. I was here at the temple, playing with Sora."

"I did hear," Skuld said putting an arm around the Valkyrie.

"That's how I know you're what kept Sora alive. C'mon,"

Skuld said leading her down toward the house. They descended the slope to find Idunn awaiting them in the courtyard. The three stood in awkward silence for a moment in the calm sunlight as Mara and Takumi looked on from the porch.

"Did I miss something?" he asked after a moment.

"*Heaven forbid*," Idunn replied. "C'mon Mara let's go, before these *heroes* attempt any more 'justified' acts."

The goddesses stiffened behind them. "And do say hello to my little sister the next time you see her," Idunn added over her shoulder.

"And who might that be?" asked Lind.

"Fulla," Idunn said descending the outer steps.

*Of course. I should have known from the eyes*, Lind thought.

"Who's that?" asked Skuld.

"It doesn't matter," Lind replied as the winds grew and they were gone.

Skuld motioned for Takumi to follow her. "It's nearly time for you two to be on your way."

He nodded. "What will you do?"

## *Once and Future Past*

"I think I'll stay here. Maybe go see baby Hayate," she said giving him her jacket.

"What's this for?"

"Take it with you - to remember me by," she said.

"It won't fit."

She smiled looking between the two of them. "You sure?"

"Okay maybe it does fit," he said putting it on slipping his arms around her. "But I don't need any mementos of this place."

"If - if it all works out you can give it to her . . . in your time."

"Is that the way you think of her?" he asked giving her a hug.

"Sort of. It's been a long time. I almost can't remember that girl," she said hugging him back. "Tell her it's a gift from her future self."

At that moment Lind appeared behind them looking less than impressed. "I guess it's time to go," he said putting his head to hers. "You gonna tell me where you and she went?" he asked.

"I'll say goodbye here," she replied.

"I take that as a no."

"Best of luck Takumi," she said walking to the house.

Walking to the gate he turned to give one last look at Tariki Hongan Temple.

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Tai continued through halls of the Eyrie making his way to the South Terrace, known as the Oculus of the Winds - Odin's personal library. As he had anticipated entering the Eyrie had posed little problem as few had wanted to interrogate the grandson of Odin. Walking along the outer rooms with their views of the city he finally found what he was looking for. On the floor below him as he followed a bend in the wall there seemed to be an older room opening to the south. After several more minutes of searching he found his way into the dimly lit cozy room, its south wall an open terrace overlooking the great buildings of the city and the river several hundred feet below. Quickly he began to search the room, its irregular walls holding books pressed in many native tongues, interposed with artifacts both inspiring and terrifying. Yet it was near one of the columns next to an open book that he finally found what he

## *Fallow*

was searching for. He picked up the staff gingerly, looking at the myriad of flickering fibers within its core.

"You're going to want to handle that carefully," instructed the voice behind him as Tai turned raising the staff.

"Should we sit down? Or did you plan to just steal and go?"

Odin asked lighting his pipe taking a seat in his chair.

"Of course not. I came to speak to you," he said handing him the staff. "You know about everything that's transpired?"

"Ah well, some of it's come into focus relatively recently," he admitted leaning back. "The question is, what should you and I do about it?" he asked.

"I know you'll help us," Tai replied sitting at his feet.

"Well, that's complicated. I know what *she* wants, and what some *other* entities want. But what do *you* want Takumi?"

"Not me, Sora and myself."

"I see. Then there's something you should know. If the deviation is reset, there is *no* permutation of that future within my sight in which you and Sora exist."

He nodded. "Did you imagine it would change our answer?"

"Parents hope for the best for their children. I'm not sure -."

"Is it surprising children would wish any less for them?" he said walking to the edge of the terrace taking in the city below, feeling in the gusts of wind the briefest reminder of his mother's embrace all those years ago. "In that future, the one of which you speak, we may not exist. But our mothers will live. *Both of them.*"

Odin stood up peering down at him. "You seem quite sure I will assist you."

"Yes, I told them as much. Even without your sense of justice, without what we know now and without Lady's Hild's request; I knew you would help us. Because of who you are. Because you taught us that true freedom is allowing one to choose. Regardless of your own feelings, I knew you would respect our decision. Because without it, we are not truly free."

Odin put his hand on Tai's shoulder, "I'm glad we had this chance to speak . . . *Mr. Morisato*," he said raising his staff. He drew his hand over the cords of the staff. "This is that which you seek," he said drawing out a single thread. "Let it pass from this place, from the halls of the Heavens to the core

## *Once and Future Past*

of Hild's domain. Send it on the winds from here and Hild and I will do the rest."

Then Takumi Morisato bowed before him and took up the thread. Odin watched him disappear over the terrace for the last time, his heart tinged with the emotion born of age, watching the color of sky as the clouds enveloped him. Despite the long years of his life he realized there were times when time itself was too brief. He sat back on his knees now preparing.

Five miles east of Kamogawa Sora saw Tai streak through the sky overhead, appearing at her side outside the seaside residence. He wrapped his arms up in hers. "It's as you suspected," he said drawing the thread to her. "Once it happens, nothing is guaranteed,"

"Did he say anything else?" she asked.

"Only what you expected – I'm not sure this is what your mothers would want."

"Then I suppose it's a good thing they're not here to argue," she replied whisking the fiber away, extending it through the air on this path toward Lind.

"You going to tell them?"

"What do you think?" she said taking his hand. "It would only bring them pain. I'm not going to tell them anything. Because it's *our* decision to make," she said.

Takumi sat atop the derelict remains of the Yokohama Marine Tower with Lind, watching as her ears came up looking suddenly to the east. "Here it comes," she warned, catching the cable as passed.

"This is the epicenter, you're sure?" he asked.

She looked at him ruefully. "Some things are hard to forget," she replied. "In either case we're close enough to the epicenter here," she said passing the thread northwest toward Skuld at Tariki Hongan Temple.

In the courtyard of the temple Skuld stood ready, mindful of the catchment circles drawn out upon the sand, assisted by her three ninja helpers as the fiber flew down within her grasp. "Now!" she said igniting the circles as the fiber turned, arcing



## *Fallow*

upward over the mountains to the southeast as it passed, straight as an arrow toward the coast over the waters of Sagami bay toward Oshima Island.

Above the remains of melted steel, Idunn and Mara sat waiting, passing the thread directly by them as it came, pressing it onward toward its final destination on Miyakejima.

“Don’t look so nervous,” Idunn jibed. “You think we’ve got it tough? She has to talk to *him*. . .,” she said looking south.

“I suppose that’s true,” Mara sighed following her gaze.

Hild waited patiently on Miyakejima, taking hold of the thread as it approached. “The primary area of affect on Terran has now been linked,” she said seeming to speak to no one in particular as she completed the symbolic set points for her Circle of Warding with the other hand. “Am I not speaking loud enough? Perhaps your hearing as well as your eyesight is going with age?”

“I hear you . . . Diamakaicho,” came the reply.

“Oh is that the way we’re going to play it? You’d never guess there was a time when I practically *ran* the place.”

“*Practically?*” came the reply.

She smiled in spite of herself. Somehow he could always do that to her. Even when she didn’t want to.

“*Link with the Demon Realm - established,*” she heard from above her. She drew her breath looking up, looking beyond the skies of Terran, beyond that world to another one; a place she used to call home. Even at this distance she could still see the greenery, the faint colors which existed nowhere else, twinkling spires that . . . She looked away brushing her cheek.

“*I’d say the place is not the same without you,*” Odin said looking over the city, “*but then we both know that . . .*”

She shrugged. “It had to be done. You find a new tenant yet for Sessrumnir?”

“It – seems to be happy where it is. There don’t seem to be a lot of takers anxious to take it on.” She felt a draw on the fiber, pulling back to feel the tension. “The grove of plumeria you planted have gone wild and spread, but they’re still there.”

## *Once and Future Past*

For a moment it felt like old times. She thought of herself in the old days, down in the stables, coiling rope feeling the tug from above, the two of them passing messages. But that had been a long time ago; and these were not old times. She looked up sadly.

"You could come back you know."

She shook her head. "Even if that was a real offer we both know the others would never accept it. No, for all kinds of reasons there is no ship that can carry me back to that place." She moved her hand drawing up fire as if to indicate the gulf between them. "You know, it hasn't been terribly orderly down here over the last century," she said after a moment, trying to change the subject. "I thought order was your big thing?!" "It's on the list -," he replied good naturedly. She thought she could feel him smiling.

"I just mean with everything that's happened I'm amazed you didn't come for me yourself. If not for my sake, then for your own."

"I knew you would never forgive me if I got you out, especially if you could do it yourself. As for the Heavens, the demon uprising was never a serious problem here given the Valkyries. As for you and I . . . the real damage had already been done – *or so I thought*. And so I encouraged Takumi's deal to go forward, knowing the likelihood you could reach him if you were still alive due to his . . . *nature*; if indeed any of it was even his idea in the first place. When the punishment was served I had him watched, knowing you would draw him to you if you were able. We just needed to wait. Besides you - had lost a daughter. *Our daughter*. Whatever my thoughts here, whatever I may have felt, I believed you had a right to administer judgement. Which I assume has been done."

"He's alive Odin," she replied feeling his reproach. "Perhaps even now if he is strong enough . . ."

Something in her words made him shudder. "My true error, my true mistake was not seeing the echo of the problem in your realm here. I suppose we, didn't want to."

She fought the desire to say anything obvious, choosing instead to adopt a more magnanimous tone. "The Heavens looking into our affairs? No, you simply didn't want to start a civil war."

## *Fallow*

“And for it Belldandy . . . *I never could have imagined it.* But it’s not for me to bother you with. Afterwards . . . *afterwards*, the forces set in motion were beyond even myself, Vili and Ve to control. And so ultimately there was a civil war, another thing I failed to prevent.”

She tugged back gently on the braid, “You and I may be the only ones who think in those terms now. Yet even we are not all powerful. So there’s no point in holding yourself to such a standard. We can’t control everything. How many times have I said it?”

“*Many . . .*,” he replied.

“Well . . . those uncovered in the Heavens. Have you learned anything more of their nature?”

“An archaic cult worshiping physical manifestation of the unknowable primal force, from which the first ontological structures are composed from which all reality emanates (in their view), realized through a hierarchical series of vaults or treasuries, each populated with members of the *first emanated beings* or *Watchers*, who ‘guard’ the gates of these treasuries. Knowledge of their names and methods allows one to pass through these vaults or *emanations* on their way to *ultimate knowledge*. Each treasury is bound by a specific seal, protected by 12 ‘emanations’ who guard its three-fold gate. You know nothing of this?” he asked.

“We’ve got our own ‘cultist’ problems here. Why?”

“Knowledge of their names and specifications allow these guardians to be bound and contained. I find it - *fortuitous* the first thing Lind did upon encountering her was to perform such binding on her. We were unaware of this until recently. Unless of course it was something she knew *from earlier in life*.”

“Hmm. Are we going to ruminate on the past or fix it?” she said finally. “Not everything that warps the natural order arises from down here.”

Odin looked out at the city he knew, perhaps for the last time.

“We know the direction the current path goes. If we alter it, there is no guarantee that things will be -.”

“I know . . . *I know*,” she replied. “But I also know who they were, and what they were trying to do. Each generation struggles, trying to build its own city upon a hill. As a parent I

## *Once and Future Past*

wish it to succeed. Perhaps that is selfish, perhaps parenthood itself is, but . . . *let us give them another chance*,” she said.

“I won’t pretend I’m without feeling in this, but for myself there’s no choice to be made. We know now the natural arc of Terran history was perturbed by unnatural means; both above and below. It must be corrected.”

“I hope you remember that. You may have a hard choice to make in the future.”

“I’ve made it before,” he replied.

“Then I give my consent -,” Hild said initiating the power flow up through her end of the cable.

“*I as well*,” Odin replied as the power poured down over the causeway from the Heavens.

“I guess they reached an accord,” Idunn said leaning back, watching as Hild’s charge raced toward them, passing overhead on its way to the Tariki Hongan Temple. “Stabilize the field,” she said raising her staff. “It only needs to last a minute or so.”

Holed up at the Seaside Residence, Sora and Tai watched as a strike like lighting came down from the heavens, rushing by them as it coursed back toward Tokyo Bay. “It’s beginning,” he said.

“*Funny*,” there are so many things I wanted to say to everyone. *So many things I . . .*

“*I know*,” he said holding her. “Do you - want to make out?” he asked cheerfully.

“Today I think it’s okay,” she said leaning in. “Give me a kiss - to last for all eternity,” she said hugging him.

The energetic burst came over the mountains striking Tariki Hongan Temple as Skuld’s set points held. She watched as it traveled off in the direction of Tokyo with a faraway look in her eyes. “*Maybe . . .*” she said standing on the rooftop of the temple with the ninjas.

“This is it!” Lind called, her ears perked up atop the tower as the two forces approached. “Hang on!” she shouted as the initial collision slammed before them. But the shockwave was

## *Fallow*

too great and Takumi lost his grip falling backward. As he did he saw Lind, still holding fast, the look in her eyes as he fell. After all without him there would be no one else to remember, at least no outsider who could speak of her true parentage. Then she was lost to him amid the increasing brilliance of the flash. He felt the ground coming up. But then a surprising thing happened, at least to Takumi. He felt hands behind him, holding him, rising him up. It was her, she had let go, swooping in to catch him. "Reach out!" she cried extending her hand, the brilliance now so bright he could make out nothing before him. "Follow my lead!" she said holding on to him. He looked back, taking in the landscape below. "Don't look Takumi!" she accelerating forward, as below him the wave began to flow, changing everything in its path. The last thing he remembered was Lind shouting something just as the shrieking light enveloped them. Then nothing.

Lind felt herself, floating, drifting in the winds. From where she did not know. Then a faint sensation of tugging, and of rustling around her. Tentatively she opened her eyes to see blue sky before her. The turbulence along her arms and legs caused her to look down, seeing now several gulls close to her, desperately trying to pull on her - *up*? It was only then she realized her disorientation; she was on her back falling through the skies toward the ground. She rolled over aligning herself, trying to get her bearings; the slopes of the hills below approaching fast. *What was I . . . ?* Takumi! She cast about searching the skies, locating him a hundred years to the south as they fell together toward the ground. Pouring on the speed she caught him as they hit the ground, tumbling over and over dissipating the energy of their approach. Lind got up, shaking off the dirt of their landing as Takumi sat up dazed.

"Well?" he said after a moment.

"The air . . . feels right," Lind replied smiling at him smugly in the cool breeze. "Just before we jumped. The look you gave me. You didn't think I was going to -."

"The thought may have occurred to me - briefly. Why did you? I mean, why leave someone knowing your secret?"

## *Once and Future Past*

"It no longer holds power over me," she replied getting to her knees. "And unlike you Takumi, I do not simply serve myself."

"Any idea of where we are?" he asked looking around.

"The shockwave pulled us off course. My guess is we're in the foothills above Kanazawa."

"How to you know?"

She pointed due west, toward the unmistakable outline of Mt. Fuji. Then east showing him their current view of Tokyo Bay.

"I suppose that does narrow it down a bit," he muttered. "So we know *where* we are. Now we just need to know -"

"*There you are!*" said the voice coming over the hill behind them. The sun of the late autumn air shimmered as it caught the first of the strands of her hair swaying, cascading along the slope of her neck as she walked, the whiteness of her hair surging into him much as the first time he saw her. He sat there doing nothing; simply blinking stunned. Then her eyes came over the hilltop and he knew, knew it was truly her. He pushed off, throwing everything he had into movement, leaping up rushing to her, rushing to get back to the person he had walked so far to find.

Urd's smile grew nervous seeing the intensity of his rushed approach to her. "*Urd!*" he cried almost tackling her.

"Well, I'm happy to see you too," she said hugging him back.

"Tai you're shaking! What is it?!" she asked holding tighter.

He wiped away his tears. "It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter anymore now," he said squeezing her.

"*Did she do something to you?*" she asked. "Did you do something to him?!" she shouted to Lind. "And why are you smiling? Aren't Valkyries genetically incapable of smiling?" she said.

"*Times change,*" Lind replied taking flight.

"What does she mean by that? Seriously are you alright? You seem - really shaken up," she said giving him the once over.

"I just really missed you," he said tiredly.

"You saw me *three hours ago*," she said squinting.

He smiled back, "It seemed – like a lot longer," he said putting his head down to hers. "*I'm sorry Urd.*"

"What are you sorry about?" she whispered to him.

"For everything. Everything I screwed up," he sobbed.

## *Fallow*

"What have you screwed up?" she said hugging him.

"I lost sight of - but you still believed, you kept the fragment - and I should have . . ." he rambled.

"What are you talking about?!"

"*I just* - I just want to tell you, I'm going to do everything better, With you . . . with Sorano . . ."

"Who?" she replied looking at him.

"Sora, our -, " but now he slowed, carefully watching her eyes.

"We don't have a daughter . . . do we?" he said finally.

"A daughter?! Well I mean - is that something *umm*, we're thinking about?" she said flustered.

He reached into his pocket slowly pulling out the braid. "We never went to that demon island in the South Pacific did we?"

"How do you know about that?!" she said surprised.

"*A guess*," he replied sadly. *That was why she was . . .*

He looked out at the world, but somehow it all seemed different now. He wondered what else had changed.

"I thought about going," Urd assured him, "but Keiichi hadn't fully recovered and Bell, well she was worried about what might happen so . . . We can go next year if it means that much to you."

"Wait a minute. Belldandy *is here*?"

"Well she's downtown. That's why I came looking for you.

We told her we'd help her get ready for the Club party after she finished her Christmas shopping. Remember?"

He looked at the bay as fear now began to grip him. "It's almost Christmas?" he asked.

"Of course. What's wrong?"

He felt dizzy. "What time is it?" he said almost afraid to ask.

"Almost noon. Why?"

It felt as though he had just looked to one side, only to see a huge standing wave. Petrified, just standing there. But now that he has seen it its collapse began. Huge and unstoppable.

"Give me your phone!" he cried.

"Don't you have one?" she asked. "I thought that was the -."

"No I - don't!" he shouted beginning to dial.

"Who are you calling?"

"*Hello . . .*"

## *Once and Future Past*

"Belldandy!"

"*Oh it's you . . .*," he heard the voice say. Behind her he could hear the innocent sound of holiday music in the street.

"Bell listen!" he yelled starting to speak. But then he slowed, hesitating. "Was this the start of it? For us?" he murmured.

"*Hello . . . ?*" Belldandy continued.

He contemplated a moment more. Then Takumi closed his eyes, shutting off the phone.

"What are you doing?" asked Urd.

He let the phone fall to the ground, crushing it.

"Are you crazy?!" she demanded.

But he appeared not to hear her, continuing to mutter to himself, "Is this what she meant? And do I trust her?"

Belldandy's close, but she's got a good chance. Keiichi and Skuld are at the temple. If it happens the low-lying hills will likely shield them. The same goes for Urd and I here. Leaving only . . .," he looked out over the bay once more.

"That's it! I don't know what's wrong but I'm getting you out of here now," said Urd.

He nodded. "No matter what happens now, we don't need to be here." He looked out at the waters. "Was that an act of faith - or selfishness? Even I don't know," he said kneeling down taking her hand. "I only know that you're here now."

"*I am here.* Whatever's wrong Tai, I'm here . . ."

"*I know,*" he said leaning against her.

"So what's wrong?"

"So very much," he replied.

He was right to be concerned. For at that moment five men discreetly masked themselves as they walked an isolate section the deck of the ship making their final preparations. As they approached the forward cargo hold beyond midships they came across the old woman bent down searching the deck.

"*Kitty . . .*," the old woman called.

"Ma'am you have to leave," demanded one of the group.

"I - lost my kitty," she explained bending down continuing to search paying them no mind.

"Ma'am we need to clear this area!" the man said more forcefully.



“Kitty!” she called louder.

The man at the front looked back for directions. Behind them the leader looked around nodding. Without warning the man in front drew and fired point blank at the back of the old woman’s head. Yet to his surprise, and the surprise of his colleagues, the round seemed to stop dead, hanging in midair beside the old woman’s head. She raised her index finger wagging it at him. He rose to fire once more, but with a flick of the old woman’s finger the bullet snapped back to its owner grazing his face.

Alarmed now everyone drew their weapons. But before they could fire the old woman closed her fist, the weapons growing instantly white hot. Amid howls of pain they dropped uselessly to the deck. A backward sweep of her hand and the door to the hold behind them swung open. “*IN!*” she commanded in a voice that felt as though it struck the spine. “Not you!” said the woman to the leader as the rest of the pack took refuge inside. Another sweep of her hand and the door closed behind them, her fingers bending as the steel obeyed her command, deforming hinges on both sides of the compartment.

“Hello . . . *Sirsemion*,” the old woman said pulling off his mask as she rose. Pulling off her own disguise her voice changed as he now looked her full in the face.

“Lady Hild!”

“Indeed,” she said coming close. “I believe – you and I need some private time to chat . . . to *discuss* things as it were,” she said moving her finger on the deck as a sigil appeared, it’s light growing until the portal had formed. “Oh don’t look so scared,” she said seeing his face. “Trust me, it could have been much, much worse . . .”

At that moment the ship suddenly heaved to, listing to one side as cargo shifted and alarm bells began to ring.

“*Dammit!*” Hild muttered grabbing her captive throwing him down into the portal as she steadied herself.

“That’s your big plan?” she cried looking out at apparently open sea. “*Rock the ship?!* Yes I know, you’re probably thinking ‘such a disruption will cause them to check things thoroughly . . .’ These things have detonators you know,” she said pulling an object out from beneath the tarp in front of her. From the far the side of the ship three wet Valkyries reluctantly

## *Once and Future Past*

rose before her now. Rota and Mist looked at each other pensively behind Lind as she held out her hand. "Call it an education," Hild said throwing her the device. Hild sat back watching the trio as they rose higher and higher in the light of the sun, doing her best to enjoy the remainder of the day as the ship sailed on, continuing into port with alarms blaring. She closed her eyes trying to think, about the fragments of the past she wished to remember, those she wished to forget, and what it all meant for the here and now. She would let Idunn and her staff deal with their captive over the next few days. For now she just wanted to walk the streets of the city, strolling Tokyo with new eyes, wandering its alleyways looking for a café where she might have lunch with her daughter.

Behind the walls of Tariki Hongan Temple, Takumi waited anxiously with Urd for the other members of the Morisato household to appear; still not quite believing he was there. She watched him sitting up on the roof, staring at the great towers of Tokyo until the skies grew dark. Then hearing something below he saw Belldandy appear from inside the house (realizing he had forgotten about that mode of goddess travel). He scrambled off the roof to meet her, looking her over trying to remember every feature of her face, surprised at how much he had forgotten. "Hello - Mr. Sato," Belldandy replied amid his continued staring. "Is this about the phone call this afternoon? I assure you the line just when dead," she said. "I know," he said putting his hands to her cheeks. "Try to ignore it. He's been like that all afternoon," Urd said. She was about to inquire further when the sound of a motorcycle caused him to bound off toward the alley, dashing down to meet Keiichi and Skuld as they rolled up. "There you are!" he said hugging them both. "Don't worry we got the stuff you wanted!" Skuld said shaking him off as together she and Keiichi took out the packages. "No I don't care about that at all!" he said walking in with them. "It's just - so good to be here," he said overjoyed to see them, turning away to walk out into the courtyard once more staring over the city. Amid some mumbling behind him he

## Fallow

continued to watch the stars cast down on the lights of the city until, convinced at last the threat had passed; he laid down to go to sleep. After all - it had been quite a long day.

Over the next few days Takumi scanned the papers for any curious news, news which was not long in coming. For stories soon surfaced, alarming stories regarding authorities investigating mysterious circumstances surrounding the apprehension of a group of men; men in possession of 'dangerous materials'. It appears no one had been hurt - luckily because the group had gotten 'stuck' inside one of the compartments and were 'without critical infrastructure necessary to carry out their plan.' *A full investigation is ongoing.* He smiled at pictures of them being led away, certain he could make out at least one of the on-shore bystanders. It was then a sound outside altered him to what he'd been waiting for. Walking out on the veranda he found Skuld pacing the courtyard, standing with her arms behind her back.

"Now this is a familiar sight," he said spying her by the tree. "Is it?"

"Very much so," he replied.

"Are you gonna to be weird today too?" she asked. "Urd says it was because Lind got you *goofed up*."

"She - no, nevermind. Let's get some food tonight. Anything you want. *For everyone*. My treat. We'll have a party, just the five of us and I'll explain everything."

She regarded him dubiously.

"Oh and before I forget I want to give you something -," he said removing his jacket.

"You want to give me your jacket?" she said eyeing him.

"Well actually it's your jacket. Or maybe Keiichi's. I'm not really certain of it's providence."

"My jacket? It doesn't fit me," she said.

"Someday it will. Besides you insisted I give it . . . to you," he said puzzled.

"From the future?"

"Well technically for me I suppose it's the past," he mused watching her try it on.

"Was I powerful in the future?" she asked trying it on.

"So much so you scared me," he replied honestly.

## *Once and Future Past*

Though she tried not to look it, she seemed pleased, pulling up the arms as she ran off admiring herself in her new coat. At the top the ridge she folded her arms overlooking the temple, considering in that moment her future self and all she might be. Who would she really become and what would she invent? Was this really from her future self? She dug her hands into her coat pockets but found nothing. Frustrated she leaned back gripping the collar, the arms, the waist. Nothing. She started to take it off but felt something along the upper lining of one of the pockets. A bit more work and she had it free, holding its serrated edges up in the afternoon light. "Dragon scale," she muttered looking at the deep reflective rainbow hidden within the dark armor. Slowly she turned it over her hand, only now seeing the layer-specific etching. Slowly she read the message once then again disbelievingly, her eyes beginning to tear. She ran down the slopes heading for Banpei holding the message tight:

*Sentaro. T wave inversion. Brugada syndrome. 60 yrs. You can save -.*

Takumi turned his head hearing her go, watching as the flying wing ignited. By the time she returned it was dark and they had all gathered inside. As Takumi had promised Skuld saw all forms of take-out food scattered here and there in the tea room. "We've only just started," Belldandy said handing her a plate. "It's fine," she said as several of the diminutive temple residents looked up guiltily having already dug in. Belldandy looked over her sister once more. "Are you alright?" she asked. "You look upset."

"No, it's okay now," she said tucking in beside her.

"Boy this place is becoming a temple of secrets," Urd said reaching over them for another shrimp. "It's almost like we have interesting lives."

Takumi smiled hugging her warmly.

"And what's up with you?" she said leaning over him for more noodles. "I swear Lind goofed him up. He hasn't been right since. I think they got into Otaki's special herbs. Is that why she was smiling?"

## Fallow

"No. I'm just happy see you all. To see you all here. Together. What you all mean while we . . . while we can all . . ." he shook his head wiping his eyes.

"I told you to stop doing that," said Urd. "At least not until I've finish a little more of this . . ."

"Take all the time you need Indigo."

"Alright I think I'm ready," Urd said leaning back on him.

"Just make sure you're a comfortable pillow."

"So you have something to say?" Belldandy said seriously.

He nodded. And with that under the cozy lights of Tariki Hongan temple Takumi Sato began to tell his tale, telling the members of the Morisato household a most curious story . . .

. . .

The clouds of the mountain had descended, ringing the temple in a wreath of mist late into the night as he finished his story.

"And that was why -," Urd asked.

"Yes," Takumi replied.

"Hmm. Interesting. I thought it was good," she said.

"What do you mean you 'thought it was good.' *It actually happened!*"

"Sure. Except the part that didn't."

"*It all happened!*"

"So you're saying Skuld - oh sorry, '*Lady Skuld*' was in charge of everything?"

"She was the one running Tariki Hongan Temple when I returned yes," Takumi replied defensively.

"That part's completely realistic!" Skuld insisted.

"*Please*, protecting the temple with all her human relations? We all know that part is completely unrealistic. I mean can you imagine her doing *IT*?"

"Shut up Urd!" shouted Skuld.

"I think she would make a great mom," interjected Keiichi.

"And Belldandy was a criminal?" Urd continued.

"Well I mean - *we* didn't think she was," he said looking at her.

"Bell?"

"I could kind of believe that," Belldandy acknowledged.

"See? She said '*kind of*'. It means she doesn't believe you."

"I don't care if you believe it or not," he replied.

## *Once and Future Past*

“Oh and nice of you to put your name in there,” Urd continued.

“That’s what they named him!” he insisted.

“Which brings us to the most unrealistic part,” Urd said ignoring him. “*Me getting killed*. Nobody could get me.”

“Probably just got her by playing to her ego,” muttered Skuld.

“What was that? Though Hild did contact me this week and does *seem* anxious to meet me for lunch,” Urd wondered.

“Perhaps I’d better bring more protection just in case – maybe Skuld since she’s such a deadly –.”

“In the future she is!” cried Takumi. “Okay now I’ve told you everything – everything except the part where you got fat.”

“What?! Did I?” demanded Urd.

Takumi smiled as Skuld started laughing.

“No seriously did I? Did I Tai?!” she said following him into the other room as he went to bed.

...

The next morning Takumi rolled over, only to find Urd staring at him under the covers. “*Did I?*” she whispered.

“Yeah - when you were pregnant,” he smiled back at her.

“Did we really have a kid?” she said suddenly sincere.

He nodded rolling in the covers. “She was beautiful. Just like you.”

“Tai, was she - ?”

“She had your hair,” he replied.

“And . . . was I -?”

“You were a good mother, yeah,” he said putting his arms around her.

“I – I know it’s just a story but, how . . .” she said, asking the first of many additional questions that morning.

Above them on the shelf sat a single stone, that which Takumi had discovered in his pocket upon his return, carved in Sora’s hand.

Over in the Morisato bed a similar conversation was going on, as Belldandy stuck her head out beside Keiichi. “But what do you think Keiichi?” she continued. “Do you think that . . .”

“I don’t know, he seems to believe it. At some level it could make sense. I suppose it’s real for him,” Keiichi shrugged.

## *Fallow*

Belldandy bit her lip, touching her fingers together gingerly.

“Still, it was nice to hear about . . .”

“What?”

“*Baby*,” Belldandy replied finally. “He said we -.”

“Well we can’t be sure of anything,” he reminded her.

But Bell was already well into her imagination, “I’ll bet he had a little head of hair like yours,” she said. “What do you think his eyes were like?”

“I’m sure Takumi has an answer for you,” he replied.

“I think I probably carried him like this -,” she said snuggling against him.

...

“I trust you received my gift,” Hild said overlooking Tokyo Bay from atop the Yokohama landmark tower.

“Rest assured we were waiting,” Idunn replied approaching behind her. “Looking over your triumph?” she asked.

“Ah, it would have been too much work to rebuild it,” she muttered as they both smiled.

“Not to mention a fair amount of our business comes from this city,” Idunn added. “No, I think we should put a little statue of you up somewhere. . .”

“I’m immune to your teasing. Besides *he* had a plan - his paid pigeons dove under the ship.”

“You’re kidding? Well he always was kind of minimalist. But as to the rest - how did it go?”

“I seem to be missing a granddaughter.”

“I see.” They stood side by side for a moment, together in silence. “It was a tough call. For everyone. Perhaps . . .”

“Perhaps nothing. We know what they really want. But they won’t win. *Not in the end.*”

I’m sorry Hild. But for Urd, it gives you more time.”

“Yes, and for that I’m thankful. They stood together looking to the East. “Remember how this was in the old days?” Hild said finally. “Nothing but trees . . .”

“And mosquitoes,” Idunn reminded her. “You know our current detainee isn’t our only problem.”

### *Once and Future Past*

“No indeed. We know now just how serious the problem is. And to extinguish it, well . . . But don’t worry. It’s a new world now, and everything is going to be different,” she replied.  
“You’re planning something big?” Idunn asked.  
“*Massive*,” Hild muttered.

A dozen miles away, Skuld and Sentaro continued to run free along the Tama river floodplain. Skuld ran her hands over the river grass, knowing now that something new was growing. But then that’s what it is to be young - and carefree. The years that followed would be good, at the temple, and for Nekomi Tech crew. The calm would not last forever of course, but that is a story, for another time. . .

END

The OMGTerran Arc completes in Book IV:

**Oh My Goddess: WILL**



