

Mortality

Book two of the OMG Terran series Arc

By

Samuel Jacobs

for Tony

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The world we inhabit is a difficult one in which to find true beauty. But within the realm of the mind, the domain of thought can bring forth a paradise bounded only by imagination. It is a power which allows survival in even the bleakest of landscapes, truly a vanguard against the vicissitudes of humanity . . .

Hild, the first power

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Chapter 1

Expectations

Keiichi continued to creep down the hallway, *“It’s after midnight why am I doing this?”* he thought putting his hand to his heart once more attempting to quell its pace. He stopped listening, but the late summer air remained perfectly still outside. *What am I going to say if I’m caught here, coming to a girl’s room under cover of darkness?* There was certainly no reasonable explanation he could offer to Skuld, or even Belldandy for that matter if they saw him. It was just . . . well he wanted to see her. *Was that so unreasonable?* After all, they’d been through a lot the past year. Why should he be afraid to visit her in his own home? Hadn’t their relationship gone at least that far? *If that’s true why are you so concerned? Why do you check on her when everyone’s asleep?* He knelt down at her doorway. *What difference does it make what everyone thinks - including my own sister?* “I don’t care,” he muttered. *Then why do you think about it so much? Is it because there’s truth in their words? Don’t the last few months feel as though things have been slipping backwards? After all, she no longer falls asleep in your arms* -. “Stop. Stop it! I just want to see her that’s all,” he hissed. Pushing open the door he saw her, resting comfortably on her own small futon, head turned to the side, hands tugging the printed covers gently around herself. Carefully he followed the pattern of her soft breathing. *Bell I love you so . . .*

Far away under the cedar canopy Urd rolled over in her own framed bed. “Tai?” she called sleepily. *Gone. Where is he off to now?* There seemed to be no end of things which took him away from this place these days. Struggling up against the morning light she pulled over her nightgown, pushing her way out the sliding door to the weathered wooden deck overlooking the surrounding forest below. From beyond the railing she eyed the embankment forty feet below, the sloping

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earth leading down a hundred yards to the streambed below. A shake of her hair and she was over, dropping to the loose soil sliding freely down the slope. Reaching the small stream she followed its meandering course through the pines as it passed along the eastern confines of the old dojo she currently called home. "Well, let's see if any of my fans are up yet today -," she muttered crossing the fallen tree serving as an impromptu footpath to the far side of the stream. Sure enough within minutes of her arrival small heads began to appear from behind rocks and around the edges of surrounding trees, as one by one the neighborhood children took note of her. As she had almost every other day that month she pretended to pay them no mind, swinging around the base of the tree beginning in song:

*If I were a boy - even just for a day,
I'd roll out of bed in the morning,
throw on what I wanted n' go. . .*"

She swept back around the tree continuing,
*Drink beer with the guys - and chase after girls,
I'd get with who I wanted, and I'd never get confronted for it
- 'cause they'd stick up for me . . .*

Jumping to the flat stones lying on and about the stream she crossed to the other side continuing her performance for the poorly hidden audience;

*Oh if I were a boy - I think I could understand,
How it feels to love a girl, I swear I'd be a better maaan!*

She dipped back dramatically with her arms outstretched, her silvery hair thrown back, dancing without care through the thicket of trees. For in these days Urd was happy - and it showed. Perhaps that was why she cared so little about how she appeared in front of these children. The echo of the goddess's voice soon brought out half a dozen more over the far embankment. Down they came, if for no other reason than to see what the mysterious stranger who had appeared in their midst would offer today, a form of free entertainment that never failed to disappoint.

*I'd put myself first - and make the rules as I go,
'cause I know that she'd be faithful,
waiting for me to come home - to come Home!*

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With each moment her gestures became more and more exaggerated, sweeping through the clusters of children who ran squealing for safety at her approach. High above on dojo's main steps, Naru looked down at the scene silently, watching as the scantily clad woman continued cavorting across the wet stones. Crossing her arms she leaned against one of the dojo's mighty oak pillars shaking her head. It wasn't so much she had any *particular* problem with the woman. She seemed likable enough. Takumi was obviously infatuated with her. It was just, well . . . *was she really good enough for him? For her Taku-chan?* There was something about her, something that just didn't seem quite - *proper*. No, it wasn't just that. It was her rather ostentatious lack of what one might call humility. *That was it*, she thought. *It's her almost conceited sense of self-assurance I find somehow irksome.* Yet deep down she knew the real problem was Takumi. Time had taught her that he was every bit as stubborn as this 'Urd' appeared to be. And so it seemed prudent to act cautiously for the time being in any attempt to change the current situation. She looked back to the ravine. *Really, dancing like that in front of children? What would the neighbors say? And why on earth is she talking about a boy?!*

Above her on the roof, a pool of rainwater suddenly sprang to life as the form of Skuld emerged. Quietly she crept up lying on her stomach at the roof's edge, hiding quietly beneath the cool pine branches monitoring her older sister's performance in the ravine below. "She thinks she's so great," scowled Skuld.

At that moment Urd's voice reached its crescendo as she jumped gracefully in the air. "*Oh if I were a -WAAAAA - Splash!*" she cried slipping over the stone and into the icy shallows of the stream. Bursting up from the waters an instant later she leapt to the shore shivering like an angry cat suspiciously eyeing the ground around her. Cursing she flung off the frigid wet nightgown, tossing it casually aside on the nearest tree as she sputtered to push back her wet mane of

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hair. Every child froze in silent awe as she began her slow naked ascent back to the dojo.

“*GAAAH!*” spat Naru catching sight of her, running down the stairs and out the school’s lower level bathrobe in hand.

“*Urd!*” she cried.

Urd looked up at the old woman blankly continuing to climb.

“Oh It’s alright Naru -,” she said misunderstanding the woman’s wide-eyed look of concern. “Children need to observe perfection if they’re ever to truly understand it.”

She fumed throwing the bathrobe over her, fervently hoping none of the young visitors would think to relay the day’s events to their parents that evening.

“*What the hell is wrong with you perv!!!*” came the sudden shout from above. Both Naru and Urd flinched at the sound, looking for its source. Spotting her Urd’s eyes narrowed.

“Little girl come down here this instant!” Naru shouted, also spotting the girl at the roof’s edge.

“*Yes little girl . . . come down here . . . before you get hurt,*”

Urd echoed behind her maliciously.

“*Aaaaah -,*” Skuld whimpered drawing away.

“Oh look Naru she’s scared. Don’t worry though, *I’ll* get her down. I’m good at removing *pests,*” she muttered raising her hands. “Oh she might be a little *scorched* when I’m done, but not so much you won’t -,” she stopped turning toward the road.

“What is it?” asked Naru.

“*They’re coming,*” Urd replied heading to the main the road.

By the time Naru was beside her they could see there were more than a dozen of them, each dressed in identical black and white uniforms bows in hand. At their head Takumi and two others walked slowly side by side. None of them seemed very talkative.

“Back from morning practice early?” Urd asked straightening the edges of her newly acquired but fraying bathrobe.

Takumi brightened spotting her. “*Hey,*” he breathed stepping to her, in no small part to block her from view of the many eager eyes behind him. He shook his head taking in her appearance. “What was it today?”

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“Little pest control problem. But don’t worry, I’ll have it under control out soon enough. *Oh what a beautiful bow!*” she said taking the instrument from his hands. Behind her Naru stiffened.

Takumi nodded exchanging a wordless glance with her, one which by now she knew well: *we’ll talk about it later goddess.* He turned formally acknowledging the archers, all of whom appeared to be in their late teens to early twenties. “Thank you for the lesson,” he said with deepest respect. “You do honor to your late teacher.” Retrieving the bow he continued toward the dojo’s main entrance as Naru shot the two in front a quick glance; both of whom appeared to looked back apologetically. Takumi feigned ignorance calling behind him, “*Naru, I wonder if you would be so kind as to return this to its proper place,*” he said reverently extending the bow. “It has had enough fresh air for one day I think.”

“*Of course,*” she said shooting another accusatory glance at the group. “Why don’t you come inside and sit down? I’ve made some breakfast.”

“*Good I’m starved,*” exclaimed Urd. But a pleading look from Takumi told her it would just be the two of them this morning.

“*Hah!* Looks like you’re not getting anything Urd – *because you’re a loser,*” Skuld taunted from the rooftop.

“Oh I’m getting something alright,” she replied facing her. Skuld took cover behind the closest tree branch. “You know big-sis is expecting me - *very soon!*” she shouted. “If I don’t come back -.”

“-She’ll have one less person to cook for?” suggested Urd rolling up her sleeves.

Inside Naru and Takumi ate quietly at the small table overlooking the western ravine. “So what’s going on?” she asked casually after a moment.

Takumi shrugged sipping his tea, “Seems they thought it would be a good idea to present me with Sen’s bow.” He did not seem pleased by the prospect.

“Well I’m sure they thought -.”

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“Where I wonder, would they might have gotten such an idea?”

Naru turned to stare at the twin cedars of the ravine.” Maybe they believe you are the logical -.”

“*I’m not,*” he said flatly. “I told you before we would stay until things got settled. The school currently contains a number of strong students. With Ikehara arriving from Kyushu next month and Kawakami coming from Hawaii the month after that, the school will be in far superior-.”

“Is this because *she* wants to leave? *That goddess.*”

“-Who returned me from the underworld?” he reminded her.

“I understand. It’s only natural you’d feel some sense of obligation toward her.”

He sighed. “You know it’s not that. The shameful fact is I love her terribly.”

“I know, *the walls aren’t that thick here,*” Naru muttered.

“What?”

“*Nothing* . . . Look I understand. She’s very beautiful. I’m just saying, are you sure she’s the one?”

He smiled embarrassed, looking around as though for some form of escape. “Yes I’m sure.”

“I mean there are *other* women you know.”

His eyes wandered over the ravine wishing at that moment he could fly. He loved Naru dearly, but when she took hold of an idea . . . He knew he might as well get it over with. “Such as?” he ventured.

“Oh, I don’t know . . . ,” she replied trying to sound as though the idea had only just occurred to her. “Well for instance . . . what about that *sister* of hers?”

Takumi screwed his face up in mock horror. “Naru that’s sick!! What is she - *twelve?*”

“Oh, ha, ha, you think you’re so funny. You know perfectly well I’m speaking about the *other* one. *What was her name again?*”

Takumi was fairly certain Naru *knew* her name, given the way she’d acted on both of the previous occasions she had visited. Nonetheless he indulged her, “Umm . . . Belldandy?”

“Ah yes, *Bell-dan-dy*. I like the sound of that name,” she replied dreamily. He could tell by the look in her eyes she’d

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already picked out the China pattern. “You know even the trees seem brighter when she’s around.” For a moment she fantasized what it would be like having her as a kind of daughter-in-law. *Ah yes that would be bliss. Truly she represents everything one could hope for in a –.*

“Yeah that’s not going to happen -,” Takumi said rudely snapping her back to reality.

“What? How to you know?!”

“She’s taken.”

“Oh? She’s married?”

“Not exactly married, but . . .”

“Then how to you know? When Sen and I first met I was -.”

“*Kiiind* of a long story. But trust me - she’s taken.”

“Tersely Naru sipped her tea unwilling to yet admit defeat. “I don’t see why you’re so stubborn. I’m only interested in what’s best for you. I mean what’s so wrong with perfection? *Hey*, are you even listening to me?!” But she could tell from his expression he was not, his eyes staring down at Urd in the ravine below.

“*Nothing . . .*” he replied finally. “There’s nothing wrong with perfection at all,” he muttered smiling. Below them Urd continued her self-appointed task of dunking Skuld in the ice-cold waters of the stream. “*You see that? How does it feel?! How do you like it?!*” she said pushing her under once more. “*What?*” she shrugged catching Takumi staring down at her. “This is justice!” she shouted.

He said nothing continuing to smile, merely shaking his head as he turned away. “What were we talking about Naru?”

“*Never mind,*” she replied stacking up the dishes. “Just take me to town!” *Well perhaps having Belldandy as a slightly more distant relation will be almost as good!*

The interloper moved her hand along the seams of the granite within the wall feeling for its energy. Around her forest continued as it always had, its waters coursing around her, the winds above whispering untold secrets. Yet she herself was motionless unmoving, distinct from the currents around her. For she was a being apart in this world and the avenues of time did not flow so simply around her. Height, weight,

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density, displacement, effect, causality - they all existed for her, yet within her body moved as a single confluence. After a moment she breathed once more, standing up along the edge of mountain cliff. “Yes I’m certain now, this is the logical nexus.” Reaching down she passed her hands over the length of her body as the transformation slowly took hold. A moment later satisfied with the result she began her descent to the unsuspecting town below.

“Okay now that Skuld’s had her bath - *hey* where are you going?”

“Naru needs me to take her into town.”

“Isn’t there a bus or something around here that does that for old people?”

He looked at her tiredly. “*You* want to take her then?”

“*Aaagh*, It’s just I’m just so bored here. How long will you be?”

“Not long I promise. Then we’ll do whatever you want when I come back. Just please try to stay out of trouble?”

“I make no such promise. Though I guess it *is* about time to start blow drying Skuld -.”

“*Takumi help!*” Skuld cried making a break for the trees.

“Err, your quarry is leaving . . .”

“Don’t worry I think I can catch her.”

For the better part of their trip along the mountainous road into Hiraizumi Naru sat quietly. “Well at least you look better,” she observed. “And there’ve been no more *incidents* since you’ve returned.”

“I told you, you don’t need to worry about that anymore.”

“You’re going to leave soon aren’t you?” she said somberly staring out the window.

“You know I’ll come back and look in on you frequently. I won’t just go away like before. It’s just that right now - !!!!! Takumi hit the brakes just as the girl stepped into the road in front of them. As the car slid to a stop she put out her hand peering inside. Then without a word the curiously dressed girl opened the door hopping into the back seat.

“Umm - *hello?*” Naru said looking over their new guest.

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The girl nodded back blankly.

“Naru, perhaps it’s best you get out here,” suggested Takumi.

“Well, if that’s what you want,” she replied hesitantly.

“I think so yes.”

The girl closed her eyes relaxing.

Naru was almost out the door before turning back, “You know I was talking about the *older* sister before right?”

“Don’t worry Naru. I suspect she’s a bit older than she appears.”

With Naru still frowning, he departed as the girl opened her eyes.

“Hello Kitty backpack . . . *really?*” he said looking her over.

“I’ll assume that’s some sort of insult regarding the way I’m dressed,” said the girl staring calmly out the window.

“Yeah and for future reference most girls your age don’t have that hair color.”

“*Fascinating*. Now drive.”

“Where to?”

“That way. Out of town.”

He turned back nervously. Not all his prior encounters with the Valkyrie had turned out terribly well. Soon however it appeared they had reached their destination. “Stop,” she said.

“Why? What is it you want from me?”

She turned the ring on her forefinger “What I want is simple. *I want to talk to you.*”

“About what? Why me? Aren’t you supposed to be out fighting evil right now or something?”

Her eyes narrowed. “I want you to tell me everything concerning the cavern you and Sorano found that night.”

“Didn’t you guys already go over that place with a fine tooth comb?”

“Not there. The other location. The place where you found. . . *Abyss*. And I want you to tell me everything, *everything* about the events that led you there.” He could see the Valkyrie’s eyes were now alive with a fearsome intensity. A feature he’d seen once before and which made his very soul shiver.

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“Young lady are you alright?” the voice behind them asked suddenly.

“Huh - what?” said Lind turning to face the car now parked across from them on the road. “I’m fine,” she replied puzzled. Beside her Takumi began to blush.

“Are you sure?” the passerby persisted.

She turned to Takumi irritated. “Why doesn’t he understand me?”

“It’s just that people don’t normally see a person my age out here on an isolated mountain road with a, umm schoolgirl,” he whispered. “It just doesn’t look right.”

The Valkyrie considered this. “Alright then, let’s go deeper into the woods to finish our conversation,” she said pulling along.

“Yeah I - don’t really think that’s going to help the situation much,” he complained following her.

When he returned home that afternoon, Takumi found Urd napping on the bed. Gently he kissed the back of her neck.

“Hey you - .”

Urd stretched. *“Who are you? You’d better get out of here before my guy comes home. Not that there’s much danger of that these days,”* she replied coolly. “He never seems to be around,” she said tilting her head back.

“Hey! What kind of greeting is that? I guess I won’t tell you about the supernatural visitor I had today then,” he said dropping beside her.

She rolled over facing him. “Who? Was it the kami of boredom? *Because I’m pretty sure that guy lives around here.*”

“Lind actually. She caught me when I was dropping off Naru in town. In a schoolgirl outfit no less.”

“Oh shut up! *She did not!*”

“Hello kitty backpack and everything.”

“Now I know you’re lying!”

“It’s true. Ask Naru if you don’t believe me. Oh and by the way she invited us to dinner at her house tomorrow.”

Urd’s eyebrow twitched. “Tai it’s over 5 miles to Takkoku no Iwaya from here. Another mile to her house . . .”

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"You're right - a pretty far distance for someone like you," he observed smacking her bottom.

"*Hah!* Look, it's just that I don't need another lesson in - well frankly anything from that woman."

"*I know,*" he pleaded kneeling in front of her. "And for the hundredth time thank you for putting up with all this. I know it's been difficult."

"So what did choppy want?"

"All kinds of things actually. Information about where I found the weapon, what the chamber looked like when we entered. Everything. It was kind of weird."

"Why did she want to know?"

"I have no idea and I no desire to find out. By the way what happened to Skuld?"

"I sent her back."

"Why did she come in the first place? Oh don't tell me - *she missed you!*"

She pushed him to the bed. "Hardly. Bell sent her. Something about a beach party for Whirlwind. Near Shirosaki beach. You *do* remember where that is don't you?"

"Umm yeah, seems to ring a bell," he said sheepishly.

"Good. Because there's a rumor going around that that's close to where we *really* live.

"I told you before Urd this will all be over soon."

"Uh-huh," she said suspiciously.

"And for the time being we seem to have the place all to ourselves.

"I noticed that."

"When is this party anyway?"

"Four days time."

Under the shelter of the evening sky Takumi made his way down through the rustling fields of sugarcane to the bleached ruins of the coral hewn church. From there he walked the abandoned dirt road until reaching the protection of the trees standing guard along the dark volcanic sands of the ancient beach. Kneeling at the water's edge he stretched out his hands to the cool saltwater, trying hard to remember the last time he had visited this place. Silently he searched the endless

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expanse of ocean before him until the sound of footsteps roused him from his thoughts.

"What are you looking for out there?" whispered the shadow in the trees.

"Urd! But how -?"

The shadow pressed a finger to his lips pulling him into the soft sand, their hushed voices soon buried in the echoes of the surrounding sea.

As morning filtered in through the trees Takumi flopped over happily in bed. "Urd I had the most wonderful dream last night!"

"I know. After all I was there."

"What?! You mean you were *in* my dream?"

"*Something like that.*"

His brow furrowed.

"What?! How else am I supposed to know what you're thinking?" she shrugged.

"Right! Because *asking* would be terrible . . ."

"I find that method unreliable when it comes to men."

"You know I wonder about you goddesses sometimes," he said pulling the sheet around him, suddenly feeling rather exposed. "Is that behavior even *legal* where you're from?"

"Honestly you sound like Bell sometimes -."

"Yeah I thought so. Then you know -."

"That you go there sometimes? Yes I've known for a while now. But where *is it* exactly?"

"Just a place, an island in the Pacific where I used to live - a long time ago."

"What is it you were looking for out there?"

"I didn't know it at the time but - *you.*"

"*Good early morning answer!*" she said throwing her arms around him.

"*What is it?* Are you all right?" asked the voice in the dark.

"I'm fine. Go back to sleep. I just need to clear my head.

I'm going for a walk."

"At this hour?"

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"I'll be back soon," Lind replied closing the inner door to her room, the closest thing she could call home. Alone in the corridor now she walked the darkened passages of the Valkyrie subsection of Yggdrasil until at last reaching its primary sanctum. Entering the unlit room she approached the looming statue, hands moving over the familiar folds of its marble cloak draped about the base. To be certain it had been an adjustment, her coming here as she had so long ago. But she was not unhappy with her life. There were many things about the citadel she liked, the comrades she'd come to know, the cozy confines of her own small room, and the ideals the city inspired. Yet despite all this there were times when the loneliness seemed to overwhelm her, dark spaces inside where no words could reach. So many things had changed since she'd first arrived. So many things forgotten, or left alone for too long. Too many nights lately she had awakened listening to their echo. "The time has come to reconcile the past," she said finally gazing up at the statue over her in the darkness. Reverently she knelt for several more minutes before rising to exit.

The trainee straightened at the sound of approaching footsteps in the corridor. Within moments at the end of the great hall she saw the unmistakable shape of a Valkyrie approaching. *Relax, even though it's your first evening there's nothing to be nervous about. No emergency has been called so it's not like she'll need anything complicated. Not at this hour anyway. In fact she might just be here to -*

"Miss?"

"Yes!" squeaked the blonde jerking up.

"I wish to speak to a member of the council," the warrior informed her.

"Certainly. To umm, which councilor would you like to speak?" she asked bringing up the harmonic index.

"Given that I am tasked with coordinating defense of this facility perhaps it is best I speak to someone in a senior position," she replied.

The goddess's finger slowed halfway down the page.

"Defense of this facility? But only . . . *Oh my god it's Lind!*

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It has to be. The One Wing she's standing right in front of me! She's probably killed more people than are on this floor right now! Oh why oh why did I have to choose a career in councilor relations? I could have gone into city planning or the Earth Help Center or -

"Miss is everything alright?" said the Valkyrie peering down at the quivering goddess.

"Me? Umm, well, I'm just . . . a little . . . new to all this," she said apologetically.

Lind smiled in spite of herself. "It's alright," she said taking up position along one of the massive bas relief on the far side of the hallway. "We all had to start out sometime."

"Sure," nodded the blond perhaps a bit too vigorously. "But I'll bet you didn't have someone like *you* on your first day."

"No," admitted Lind. *Someone far worse -*, she thought.

"Aaaah!" the councilor squealed as a light atop her console suddenly beeped. "Okay let me see, that's on the upper left panel so it means . . ."

"*It's Odin*," Lind said solemnly.

"It is?! I mean that one's never blinked before so -"

"I'd better go. He doesn't like to be kept waiting," she said pressing her weight against the massive inner doors. Entering she immediately felt the weight of his eyes upon her.

"Good to see you commander," Odin nodded coming into the light.

I wonder what that means. The depths of his voice seemed to reverberate within her. "Thank you for seeing me."

"What is it I can do for you?" he asked politely.

"Rest," she replied simply. "And time . . . to think."

"About what?"

Her eyes followed him.

"I see. And when would you like this -"

"Immediately," she replied.

"You think it wise to grant this request?" questioned the counselor, standing now with several others along the second tier of the high council chamber. Odin paused looking out over the lower reaches of the city, a city which in his youth he had helped build considering his answer. "I believe it is

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necessary,” he said finally. “She has been a Valkyrie for many years and achieved much. But all warriors develop wounds in time. Some on the outside . . . others less visible. It’s important such things be allowed to heal properly. In the end I do not think her request is unreasonable.”

To his left Vili spoke, “It is the manner of this healing which concerns me. Do you really think it best for her to - *reflect* upon these events?”

“I do not think it is for us to say,” replied Odin.

“Sending her off on her own could strengthen *unhelpful* tendencies within her.”

“And could expose her to other dangers as well, yes I am well aware. But Lind has proven herself a hundred times over. Therefore I think we should grant her request whatever the cost.”

Above him Ve now spoke. “I understand your view,” he said sympathetically. “We all know how your wife felt about her.” Odin seemed tired, leaning on his staff. “*My wife* . . . her opinion is not at issue here. How we treat those whom serve us is. Unless there are any formal objections I would ask that her leave be approved.”

“Who would take her place during such an absence?”

“Prima’s team would assume primary responsibilities within the citadel. She’s an experienced commander and more than capable. The demon realm has been relatively quiet recently. Now would appear to be a good time to make such a transition.” After several moments of additional discussion they were all in agreement. As the members of the council filed out Vili leaned forward. “I hope you know what you’re doing *Wotan*. This could prove very risky,” he cautioned. Odin nodded looking down upon river flowing through the Eastern part of the city. Taking up his staff he eyed the flickering fibers held within its core. “You have no idea,” he said following the pulse of one fiber intently.

“But why are you leaving now?” Chrono demanded for the third time trying to keep pace with her taller companion. “It’s just a short trip Tio. Nothing to worry about,” Lind replied ascending to the platform with half a dozen other

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Valkyries and several administrative staff at her side.

“The outfit’s just plain weird,” observed Rota, looking over the denim jacket and ripped jeans her commander now wore. “This is how wanderers dress these days . . . apparently,” she replied shouldering her pack.

“Yeah, hobo wanderers,” Peorth called as they reached the upper deck. “I can see now I’m going to lose my bet as to whether you’re going down there to meet a guy,” she mused releasing the primary gateway interlock allowing her to leave.

“When will you return?” pressed Chrono.

“Soon. In our time not long at all.”

“Well who will take -.”

“Prima’s team will assume responsibility while I’m away.

A groan arose from the group.

“Great,” muttered Pruor.

“Team B,” added Pogn.

“Are we being demoted?” asked Rota.

“What? No of course not!” she frowned shooping them off the platform. “I told you I requested a break for all of us. Just consider it a kind of vacation.”

“And if something comes up during this ‘vacation’ they can’t handle?” asked Sigrun, her second in command.

“In that event you will assemble, but only if you’re asked to do so. Otherwise I expect to see you all frolicking - happily.”

There was another groan from the group.

“Well I guess that about covers it -.”

“Not quite,” whispered Chrono tugging at her sleeve as she reached the outer seal. “Looks like someone else has come to see you off.”

“Prima!” Lind nodded formally, extending her hand.

“Don’t worry about a thing,” said the green-eyed Valkyrie assuredly returning the greeting. “You know I won’t let anything slip while you’re away.”

The Valkyrie commander smiled as the two subtly tightened their grip. “Of course,” Lind replied. “But should you need any assistance while I’m away know that my team is always ready.”

“Kind of you commander. But I think you’ll find my team more than capable.”

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“Okay time to go then . . . I guess,” Chrono observed noticing their handshake had gone on for an uncomfortably long period.

“Have a good trip commander. Don’t let any demons, past or present, get you while you’re away,” Prima smiled releasing her.”

Lind nodded politely, raising her hand to her team before disappearing through the portal.

As Prima too now departed Sigrun motioned for the team to approach. “Rota, Mist, stay close - just in case,” she said straightening her cloak.

“Should I follow her?” said Mist looking to the portal.

“As if you could -,” teased Rota.

“I seem to be able to sneak up on you easily enough when it suits me,” she jibed.

“I . . . let you do that - to make you feel better about yourself,” she quipped waving her arms.”

“I doubt Lind needs our help,” Sigrun replied pushing them forward off the terrace. “For now just rest - and stay out of trouble.”

“Exactly what I had in mind,” replied Pruor. “Stay out and - something about trouble?”

Sigrun reached for the Valkyrie to her left, “Pogn you’re the youngest of the group - which in this case means you’re probably the one most likely to act like an adult. Watch them Pog. Watch them like a hawk!”

“Don’t you mean an eaglet?” Pruor laughed grabbing poor Pog and dragging her away with the others.

The tranquil pools of the remote atoll were truly magnificent, as was the larger lagoon beyond. Even the lush volcanic slopes in the distance possessed a haunting beauty on this outpost, a thousand miles beyond the nearest human settlement. It was all as she had said it would be, removed of the polluting influences of man the natural world was truly a thing of beauty. And yet as she crouched now on the white sands beyond the palms Mara was still ill at ease. Every few minutes she looked behind her, scanning the jungle suspiciously before returning her gaze to the waters of the

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lagoon. “What’s she doing now?” Mara growled raising her head.

“What, you want me to go check again?” hissed the demon at her side.

“Never mind,” she muttered turning her back leaning against the nearest palm tree. She tried once more to soothe the knot in her stomach. What is all this? It’s not like her. She’s too quiet; melancholy somehow, she thought. Indeed over the past few weeks Hild had seemed somehow different. She had spent hours floating in the tranquil waters of the lagoon as though lost in thought indifferent to those around her. A sudden splash awoke Mara from her reverie as up from the depths came the nude form of the ruler of demonkind herself. Shaking the water from her Hild casually took one of the towels quickly offered her by the dozen or so demons standing in attendance whom had accompanied her to this remote sanctuary.

“Shall we prepare something?” asked one.

Hild shook her head dragging the towel across her lean torso walking off down the beach.

“Mara come with me will you?” she after some time over her shoulder.

Damn it! Why is it always me? she thought sullenly.

Following at a respectful distance she saw Hild’s eyes move skyward, pensively studying the heavens as though trying to gauge some hidden aspect of their design. Eventually she turned her attention to the distant volcanic slopes behind them.

“I suppose that’s how it must be. . .,” she muttered finally.

“I’ve searched every possibility, but I see no other alternative. Pity. Mara?”

“Yes?”

“I need you to collect something for me.”

“What?” she asked warily.

“A group of three shadow spirits. Each should be well versed in - their art.”

“Shadow spirits? Why? They’re not very . . . durable. If it’s for an assault I could find those much more -.”

“Are you questioning me?” Hild asked continuing to gaze at the distant smoldering peak.

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"No of course not Lady Hild!"

"Good. What they lack in resilience they will more than make up for in stealth. Yes, they will be very difficult to detect - even for an expert," she mused. "Oh and Mara one more thing. Make sure -."

"Squawk!"

Her eyebrow arched spotting the gull circling above.

"Where was I? Ah yes, make sure that they all -."

"Squawk"

The demon queen snapped her fingers as the bird instantly exploded. While the feather and ash drifted down in the late afternoon breeze she continued, "- experienced with Blue Feng."

"Blue Feng?" Mara echoed fearfully.

"Mmm? Yes that's right," she said reaching aside for an orchid to place in her hair.

"Of course Lady Hild . . . right away," she bowed rushing to rejoin the group.

"Oh and Mara-," Hild called, "suddenly I have a taste for chicken," she said smiling maliciously at the heavens.

"Err - right," she nodded treading her way up the beach.

Blue Feng, she thought. Of course she knew all about the ancient angelic poison. Its application normally resulted in a period of paralysis for those unfortunate enough to come in contact with it. But it also carried another more insidious property. For those previously exposed, *re-exposure* resulted in a far more catastrophic effect, placing the victim into a state of irreversible coma. Since it did not technically *kill* its target its use was not strictly speaking illegal. But the grim nature of the living death it imposed had never the less discouraged its use for many years. And it was this which Mara now pondered. *Hild you've just told me who we're going to strike*. After all, she had been there the day her friend's sister had been struck the first time.

Chapter 2

The Black Lake

Yaaaa!" Keiichi cried jumping after the table cloth as the wind carried it from his hands. Twenty feet ahead of him Belldandy stepped up atop the table intercepting it, deftly plucking it from the air. "Come here you," she said encouragingly, gently dragging it down and over the far end of the table.

"Graceful, so graceful," sighed Hasegawa dragging the large cooler of beer through the sand to the large cluster of tables at the sheltered end of the cove.

"You're not the only one who thinks so apparently," chimed Chihiro, looking on as half a dozen male members of the Nekomi Tech Auto Club admired Belldandy's form as it were retrieving the object.

"Hey what are you looking at?!" Keiichi scowled spotting them.

"Nothin'" Tamiya replied turning away with several others.

"*Yeah that's right nothing -*," Keiichi said turning back to the supplies.

"Maybe they thought someone should take in the view . . . since they know you're not," Megumi said playfully.

"Well I'm busy - doing stuff here," he explained embarrassed.

"Well maybe you should get busy doing some stuff over there," she teased tugging him. "Some of them might get to thinking they can do a better job than you can."

"Oh be quiet Megumi. You don't know how we are when we're alone."

"No but I can pretty much guess," she replied reaching for a beer.

"Why are you giving me such grief all of the sudden?"

"All of the sudden?" Keiichi it's been -."

"I don't need to be looking at her every second. There are things which need doing here."

The Black Lake

“*Darn right!* That’s *exactly* where your eyes better be mister!” said a small voice behind them. “Because we still have a lot of stuff to move!”

Keiichi scanned the horizon. “Hey Skuld isn’t that Sentaro I see over there?” he said pointing down the beach.

“Is it? Oh it is! *Sentaro*,” she shouted sprinting away. Soon the two were kicking water at each other along the surf.

“I’m just saying,” Megumi persisted. “People think -.”

“I don’t care what people think! Seriously go bother someone else.”

“*Geez* I’m just trying to help! Don’t come crying to me when-.”

“I won’t!”

“*Fine!*” she bellowed stalking off.

Thank goodness. Now if everyone else will just get here, he thought. For the tenth time that day he looked to the dunes east of him. Why do I keep doing that? Well, because I miss her. I miss Urd. God is that weird to say? I don’t know why, but I do. It’s not the same without her around.

On the other side of the growing assemblage of tents, tables, fires and assorted groceries attending one end of Shiroasaki Kaigen beach, Belldandy too was watching the coast. It had been a long time, more than three months and she was anxious to see her sister.

“*Give me that* - we’re not eating that yet!” cried Chihiro next to her grabbing Tamiya as he attempted to open yet another platter of food.

“It’s alright I made plenty,” Belldandy offered as Chihiro dropped him into a headlock.

“That’s not the point. If you don’t train these guys properly they’ll never learn. Just look at them. They’re an embarrassment!”

Belldandy smiled continuing to put out food. Then she felt it. Turning she saw two figures making their way over the dunes toward the encampment. As they approached she heard their raised voices.

“Oh come on Urd you’re being unreasonable!”

Urd marched on ahead unmoved, arms crossed as though holding back tears.

“Urd, what’s the matter?!” Belldandy said rushing up to her.

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“Takumi - *oh I just can't say it!*” she choked, lip quivering dramatically.

“This is ridiculous!” he shouted in defense tossing up his arms.

“What's going on?” asked Keiichi.

“Keiichi I'm glad you're here. I need to tell you something regarding goddesses. Apparently they have a tendency to be C-R-A-Z-Y! Just thought you should know; you know in case it runs in families.”

Urd glared at him angrily.

“What's this all about?” asked Bell.

“*Takumi said I was -.*”

“I ASKED! *I asked if you were -.* It's not the same thing,” he cried.

“-If I was OLDER THAN LIND!” she howled no longer able to contain her anguish.

“Oh . . . OH!” Belldandy breathed nodding.

“You see Keiichi: C-R-A-Z-Y.”

“Well I guess from his perspective you two might appear close in age,” Belldandy suggested. “

“WHAT?!!”

“I just mean -.”

“Yeah,” added Keiichi. “I mean all three of you look *pretty* close in age.”

Belldandy's head came up. “All *three* of us?” she asked.

“Well I mean -.”

“*Ha!* Doesn't feel good does it Bell?!”

Belldandy chewed her lip, looking down at her reflection in the nearby pool. “Well I suppose *maybe,*” she said wistfully peering into the water.

“*You see what I mean!*” cried Takumi.

Keiichi motioned for silence. “So you're saying you're *not* close in age?” he said doing his best to try and salvage the situation.

“The truth is Lind's a bit older than we are.”

“Well then how old *are you* Urd?” questioned Takumi.

“Twenty-nine,” she replied flatly.

“Well technically yes nee-san, but in earth years you'd be closer to -.”

“*Twenty-nine,*” she said firmly.

The Black Lake

“Well even if you were twenty-nine last year, it means that this year you’d be -.”

“*TWENTY-NINE!*” Urd growled as thunder rumbled in the distance.

“Yeah, twenty-nine sounds about right,” nodded Takumi. “And did I mention how much younger than Lind you look?”

She huffed, eyebrow still twitching.

“Alright now that that’s settled -,” he said leaning in to kiss her.

“No, I’m not giving you one -,” she replied, comically moving to keep her head to keep it just out of reach.

“*Aw come on Urd!*”

“No . . . *for you are evil,*” she proclaimed looking down her nose at him.

“You know when you look at me like that I can't tell if you're wise, or just tired of seeing me.”

“*Probably both,*” she returned.

“Keiichi please tell me you have alcohol at this party,” he sighed.

Alcohol it turned out was not to be a major problem at the evening's event. As the afternoon wore on those not inclined toward its use through either character or common sense (Belldandy, Keiichi, Sentaro and Skuld) soon broke away from the main group kicking a ball along the beach. After half an hour of practice Skuld assessed they were excellent, promptly putting out a challenge to the rest of the group (*‘all of you who aren't so scared you'll wet your diapers,’* was her exact wording). Keiichi, still irritated over Megumi's ribbing and well aware he could outrun most of the other club members also began spoiling for a game. Before long their opponents arose - as Otaki, Tamiya, Urd and Takumi gathered to take up the challenge with Chihiro and Hasegawa as referees.

Principally to irritate Skuld Urd wondered if some sort of handicap should be given to such an *obviously* weaker team. But as the game began it soon became clear they were more than equally matched. For though Urd had power she did not necessarily possess control. Though Takumi had speed he seemed significantly lacking in game fundamentals. And Tamiya and Otaki? Their idea of the game seemed more closely related to wrestling than anything resembling soccer.

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And so with the rest of the club looking on with varying levels of interest, both sides prepared for battle.

"How do you want to take them?" asked Sentaro.

"*Charge!*" shouted Skuld charging ahead downfield.

"Okay here they come. I'll take Belldandy," said Otaki.

"No, no, that's okay I can take her," replied Tamiya.

"*Well somebody takes someone!*" Takumi shouted as Skuld streaked through their ranks. As he moved to intercept her she passed to Sentaro. "Gotcha!" he yelled moving toward Sentaro for the kill. But Sentaro swerved quickly passing the ball between Takumi's legs only to recover it on the far side continuing on for the goal.

"*SCORE!*" shouted Hasegawa from the far end.

"This is so much fun," Belldandy said catching up to Keiichi.

Urd found Takumi, smiling as he stood bent over panting. "Hey *Tai did you see that?* I ask because the boy went by you so fast I was afraid you missed it. Made it look pretty easy too."

"*See what?* That kid moves like gazelle! You never told me I'd be playing against a deer-boy!"

"Guess that's one explanation. Of course there are others - as in *you're old!* Good thing you have someone young like me to look after you."

He smiled straightening up. "Be quiet Urd. I haven't seen *you* do anything yet."

"I'm just waiting for the right moment to unleash my secret weapon."

"Which is?"

"*Sheer awesomeness!!!*"

"Yeah, well feel free to unleash that baby any time now . . .," he said lining up once more.

"*I suppose I'll have to.* After all, I wouldn't want to let a *little boy* make you look bad."

He smiled, but with a look of grim determination. "Okay new plan. *I'll* go after Keiichi, *you* take care of deer-boy. And as for the rest of you - *you don't all need to protect Belldandy!*"

As the teams approached once more, Takumi broke for Keiichi's possession of the ball. But he soon found Keiichi to be no easy target, as out-maneuvering Takumi he broke into the clear. Less than anxious to hear another appraisal of his soccer

