

Mortality

Book II of the OMG Terran series Arc

by

Samuel Jacobs

for Dan and Mitsuo

Contents:

1. Expectations	1
2. The Black Lake	20
3. Mount Omine	48
4. Northern Light	61
5. Keiichi Morisato	79
6. The Palace of Aki Sakai	97
7. Homecoming	123
8. Arrow Cutter	132
9. For those who Sleep	153
10. Fortress of Souls	173
11. The Fugitive Goddess	189
12. Rivers of Fear	208
13. That which is Unspoken	227
14. Valkyrie	243
15. Last words	265
16. The Tree of Life	283
17. Nagare	294

The world we inhabit is a difficult one in which to find true beauty. But within the realm of the mind thought can give rise to a paradise unbounded. It is this that allows survival in even the bleakest of landscapes, the most oppressive prisons; a vanguard against the vicissitudes of humanity . . .

Hild, the second power

Disclaimer:

The characters of Oh My Goddess! are owned and copyrighted by Kosuke Fujishima, Kondansha Ltd, and Dark Horse Comics, Inc. No attempt is made to state otherwise.

Chapter 1

Expectations

Keiichi continued down the hallway, *"It's after midnight why am I doing this?"* he thought putting his hand to his heart once more attempting to slow its pace. He stood still 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 Skuld or even Belldandy 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 now only when everyone is asleep?* He knelt down at her doorway. *What difference does it make what people think - including my own sister?* "I don't care," he muttered. *Then why is it on your mind so much? Because there is truth to their words? Don't the last few months feel as though things have been sliding backwards? After all she no longer falls asleep in your arms -* "Stop, stop it! I just want to see her that's all."

Pushing open the door he spied her, resting comfortably on her small futon turned to one side, hands gently tugging the covers around herself. Silently he watched the rise and fall of her soft breathing. *Bell I love you so . . .*

The next morning, far away from Tariki Hongan temple, Urd rolled over in the large wood framed bed looking out the window beneath a glowing canopy of giant cedars. *"Tai?"* she yawned sleepily looking around. *Gone.* Where was he off to now? There seemed no end to the things that took him away these days. Squinting against the dappled sunlight she pulled herself up, gathering up her nightgown to make her

Mortality

way out the sliding glass door. Standing on the weathered deck she looked out taking in the greater forest beyond. Leaning over the railing she judged the sloping embankment forty feet below her as it dropped down to join the streambed a hundred yards away. A shake of her hair and she was over, landing on the loosened soil to slide freely down the forest slope. Reaching the stream she traced its meandering course through the pines as it bounded the eastern edge of the old dojo she currently called home. *Let us see if any of my fans are up yet*, she thought jumping over the fallen cedar that served as an impromptu footpath to the far side of the bank. Sure enough within minutes of her arrival small heads began to pop up from behind rocks and trees as one by one the neighborhood children began to take notice of her. As she had done almost every day that month, she pretended to pay them no mind swinging around the base of the trees beginning to sing:

*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,"*

Jumping the flat stones she crossed the streambed from one side to the other through the poorly hidden children, swooping dramatically through the tree continuing:

*"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 man . . .*

She swung back her arms outstretched, silvery hair waving as she danced on without care. For in these days Urd was happy; and it showed. Perhaps that was why she cared so little about her appearance to the children. Echoes of the goddess's voice soon brought half a dozen more children from the far side of the embankment. Down they came if for no other reason than to see what the mysterious stranger who had recently appeared in their midst might offer today; an entertainment that never failed to disappoint.

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

Expectations

With each turn her movements became more exaggerated, sweeping past knots of children who dove for safety at her approach.

High above her on the dojo's main steps, Naru looked down silently, watching the scantily clad woman continue her cavorting over the wet stones. She put her hand against one of the dojo's mighty oak pillars shaking her head. It wasn't so much she had any *particular* problem with this woman. She seemed likable enough. Takumi was clearly crazy about her. It was just - well, *was she really good enough for him?* For her Tai-chan? There was something about her, something that didn't quite seem - well, *proper* about her. No it wasn't just that. It was her ostentatious lack of what one might call humility. *That's it*, she thought. *It's her almost conceited sense of self-assurance I find irksome.* Yet deep down she knew the real problem was Takumi. She knew from experience he could be every bit as stubborn as this 'Urd' appeared to be. And so it seemed best to act cautiously, at least for the time being in any attempt to alter the current situation. She cast her eyes back to the ravine. *Really, dancing like that in front of children? What will the neighbors say? And why is she talking about being a boy?!*

Above her on the roof a pool of rainwater suddenly sprang to life as the familiar form of Skuld emerged from its surface. Quietly the goddess crept to the edge of her overlook, lying down on her stomach beneath overhanging pines monitoring her sister's performance. Skuld had grown much over the past year but her instinct for mischief was still very much intact. "She thinks she's so great -," she scowled. At that moment Urd's performance reached its crescendo as she leapt gracefully into the air. "*Oh if I were a - WAAAAAH!*" she cried slipping and crashing into the icy shallows of the stream. Bursting from its surface a second later she jumped to the shore like an angry cat suspiciously scanning the valley around her. Cursing she flung off her frigid wet nightgown throwing it to the nearest tree as she slowly trudged back up the slope pushing back her mane of wet hair as she went. The surrounding children froze taking in the sight of the naked woman as she continued her ascent back to the dojo.

Mortality

“GAAAAH!” Naru cried spitting out her tea at the sight. She ducked inside quickly running down the stairs and out the side entrance bathrobe in hand. “*Urd!*” she shouted. Urd looked up at the old woman calmly, waving to her as she continued up the hill. “Don’t worry Naru, I’m alright,” she said misinterpreting the old woman’s look of concern. “After all, children need to see perfection if they’re ever to truly understand it,” she muttered. The woman threw the bathrobe at her fervently hoping none of the young visitors would think to relay the day’s events to their parents that night. “*What the hell is wrong with you perv!!!*” came the sudden shout directly above them. Urd flinched looking around before her eyes narrowed. “Little girl come down here this instant!” Naru shouted spotting her at the edge of the roof. “*Yes little girl, come down here - before you get hurt,*” Urd hissed behind her. “Aaaaah!” Skuld cried withdrawing farther up the roof. “Oh look Naru, she’s scared. Don’t worry though, *I’ll get her down,*” the goddess said raising her hand. “I’m good at pest removal. Oh she may be a little *scorched* when you get her, but not so much you won’t be able to -.” she stopped, turning to look down the road. “What is it?” asked Naru. “They’re coming-,” Urd replied heading up the path. By the time Naru stood beside her on the road Skuld could see there were more than a dozen of them, each dressed in identical black and white uniforms carrying bows on their approach. At its head Takumi and two others walked side by side down the path toward the dojo. None seemed particularly talkative. “Back from morning practice so soon?” Urd asked tucking in the fraying edges of her newly acquired bathrobe. He brightened seeing her. “*Hey you,*” he whispered coming close, in no small measure to block her from view of the many pairs of eager eyes behind him. He looked at her outfit shaking his head. “*What was it today?*” “Eh, small pest control problem. But nothing to worry about. It’ll be under control soon enough. *Hey what a beautiful bow!*” she exclaimed taking it from his grip as behind her

Expectations

Naru seemed to visibly stiffen. Takumi's eyes met Naru's as they exchanged a wordless glance - one whose meaning she knew all too well by now: *we'll talk about it later*. He turned to the archers, most of whom appeared to be in their late teens or early twenties. "*Thank you for the lesson*," he said bowing. "You do honor to your late teacher." Rising up he took back the bow from Urd and continued in through the school's arched door. Behind him Naru shot an accusatory glance to the two in front as they looked back apologetically. From inside she heard Takumi's voice, "Naru I wonder if you would be so kind as to assist me in returning this to its proper place. I think it's had enough air for one day," he said reverently raising his teacher's bow.

"Of course," she replied shooting a final glance at the group. "Why don't you come inside and sit down? I've just made some breakfast."

"Great I'm starved -," said Urd. But a pleading look from Takumi told her it would just be he and Naru that morning.

"*Hah!* Looks like you're not getting any Urd - *because you're a loser*," Skuld taunted from the rooftop.

"Oh I'm getting something alright," she replied rolling up her sleeves. Skuld took cover behind the roof. "You know big-sis is expecting me - *very soon!* If I don't come back -."

"She'll have one less person to cook for?" queried Urd.

Inside Naru and Takumi sat quietly at the small table beneath the windows overlooking the great western ravine. "So what's going on?" she asked after a moment.

He shrugged taking sip of tea. "It seems they thought it would be a good idea to present me with Sen's bow," he replied sounding less than pleased.

"Well I'm sure they just thought -."

"And where would they get such an idea I wonder?"

Naru looked away pensively, considering the ancient cedars guarding the paths to lower ravine. "Maybe they believe you are the logical -."

"*I'm not*," he replied flatly. "I told you before we would stay until things got settled. The school currently has a number of strong students. Ikehara will arrive from Kyushu next month

Mortality

and sensei Kawakami from Hawaii the month after that. With their presence the school will be in a vastly 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 smiled putting his hand on hers, “You know it’s not that. The shameful truth is - she makes my heart soar.”

“*I know, I’m pretty close to the airport,*” Naru muttered.

“What?”

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

He sighed searching for some form of escape as he was fairly certain of what was coming next. “Umm yes?” he offered.

“I mean there are other women you know.”

He looked at the birds of the ravine wishing at that moment he too could fly. He loved Naru dearly, but when she got hold of an idea. “Such as?” he sighed innocently.

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

He blanched in mock horror, “Naru that’s sick! What is she twelve?!”

“*Hah, hah* you’re so funny. You know perfectly well I’m talking 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 of her appearance. Nevertheless he indulged her. “Err, 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 had already picked out the china pattern. “You know even the trees seem greener when she’s around. I mean they *actually* seem greener,” she muttered puzzled. For a moment she fantasized what it would be like having her as a kind of daughter-in-law. Ah that would be bliss: ‘*of course I can look after the children, you and Tai-chan go and enjoy yourselves. Yes, truly she represents everything one could hope for in a –.*

Expectations

“Yeah that’s not gonna happen,” Takumi interjected shattering Naru’s daydream like nails dragging across a chalkboard.

“What? How to you know?!”

“Um, well there is the matter of my own personal preferences I suppose. Also she’s taken.”

“Oh? She’s married?” Naru asked in a manner suggesting the first point wasn’t really a problem for consideration.

“Well not exactly married but . . .”

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

“That’s kiiiind of a long story. But trust me she’s taken.”

Naru sipped her tea unwilling to 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 see he was not. His eyes were following Urd in the lower ravine. “Nothing,” he muttered absently. “There’s nothing wrong with perfection at all,” he said looking on as Urd continued her self-appointed task of dunking Skuld’s head into the icy waters.

“*You see? You like it?! How does it feel?!*” she hissed plunging her under once more. “What?!” she asked innocently, spotting Takumi staring at her from the balcony. “*This is justice!*”

He smiled shaking his head his attention returning to Naru .

“What were we talking about again?”

“Oh never mind!” she sputtered taking the dishes. “Just drive me to town.” *Perhaps having Belldandy as a slightly more distant relation will be almost as good*, she thought.

From high on the ledge the visitor continued to move her hands over the granite seam, reading its energy. Around her the forest continued as it always had, its waters flowed, the winds above moving with untold secrets. Yet she herself remained immobile and unmoving. For she was a being quite apart from this world and around her the eddies of time did not flow so simply around her. Height, weight, density, displacement, effect, causality, they all existed within her as a single living confluence. After a moment she relaxed

Mortality

breathing as she stood alone on the cliff wall. “*I am certain now. This is the proper nexus.*” Reaching down she passed her hands over her body as the transformation took hold. Surveying the results she began her descent into the town below.

“Okay now that Skuld’s had her bath - *hey!* Where are you going?” asked Urd.

“Naru needs me to take her to town,” replied Takumi.

“Isn’t there a bus or something that does that for old people?” He looked back tiredly. “You want to take her then?”

“Aaagh, it’s just I’m just so bored here. How long are you going to 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 guarantee,” she said crossing her arms. “I suppose I can start blow drying Skuld -.”

“Takumi help!” the goddess cried running for the trees.

“Umm, your quarry is leaving . . .”

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

For the better part an hour Naru sat quietly during their trip along the mountain road to Hiraizumi. “Well at least you look better,” she remarked. “And there’ve been no more *-incidents* since you’ve returned.”

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

She nodded staring out the window as her mood turned somber. “You’re going to leave soon aren’t you?” she said.

“You know I’ll come back. And we’ll look in on you frequently. I won’t just go away like before. It’s just that right now - !” Takumi slammed on the brakes just as the girl stepped into the road in front of them. As the car careened to a halt as she put her hand to the hood peering inside. Satisfied she opened the door sliding into the back seat without a word. “Umm - *hello,*” Naru replied looking over the curiously dressed girl who nodded back at her blankly.

“Naru, I think its best you get out here,” suggested Takumi.

“Really?” She looked at the two of them. “Well I mean . . . if that’s what you want,” she said hesitantly.

Expectations

"I think so yes." The girl leaned back in the seat.

Naru was almost gone before turning back, "You know I was talking about the *older* sister right?"

"Don't worry Naru. I think she's older than she looks."

Amid Naru's continued frowning he departed down the road the girl opened her eyes. "Hello Kitty backpack, *really?*" he said over his shoulder.

"I'll assume that's some sort of insult about the way I'm camouflaged," the girl replied calmly staring out the window.

"Yes. And for future reference girls your age usually don't have that hair color."

"Fascinating. Now drive."

"Where?"

"Out of town." Hesitantly he returned to the road. Not all his previous encounters with this creature had ended well. Soon it appeared they had reached their desired destination. "Stop here," she commanded.

"Why? What is it you want from me?!"

"What I want from you is simple," she said turning the ring on her forefinger. "I want to talk to you."

"About what? Why me? Aren't you supposed to be fighting evil or something?"

She leaned forward her voice growing grim. "I want you to tell me everything you know about 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* you remember about the events that led you there." He looked back to see the Valkyrie's eyes had changed color, taking on shades of fearsome intensity. A characteristic he'd seen only once before which made him shiver.

"*Young lady are you alright?*" said the voice suddenly from outside.

"Huh, what?" Lind replied turning to face the man looking at her through the window.

"I'm fine," she replied as Takumi began to blush.

"Are you sure?" the passerby persisted.

Mortality

"Why doesn't he understand me?" Lind said irritated.

"It's just that people don't normally see someone my age out here on an isolated mountain road with - *a schoolgirl*. It doesn't look right."

She considered the information. "I see. Then let us go deeper into the woods to finish our conversation," she said getting out of the car and pulling him out of the driver's side by the hand behind her.

"I really don't think this is going to help the situation much," he complained following.

When he finally returned that afternoon, Takumi found Urd napping lazily on the bed. Gently he kissed the back of her neck. "Hey you -."

She yawned stretching out. "Who's that? You'd better get out of here before my guy comes home. Not that there's much danger of that these days. He never seems to be around," she said coolly leaning back.

"What kind of greeting is that?! Guess I won't tell you about the supernatural visitor I had today then," he said flopping down beside her.

"Who was it? The kami of boredom because I'm pretty sure that guy lives around here," she said rolling to face him.

"It was Lind. She caught me when I was dropping off Naru in town. Dressed 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 place tomorrow night."

Urd's eyebrow twitched. "Tai it's 5 miles to Takkoku no Iwaya from here, another mile to her house . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, you're right - it's a pretty far distance for someone like you," he said smacking her behind.

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

"*I know*, I know, and for the hundredth time thank you for putting up with all this," he said kneeling in front of her.

"I know it's been difficult."

Expectations

"So what did choppy want?"

"All kinds of things actually. Information about where I found Abyss, 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 had 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!*"

Urd gave him a push with her leg. "Bell sent her. Something about a Whirlwind party near Shirosaki beach. You *do* remember where that is don't you?"

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

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

"As I said before Urd, this will all be over soon."

"Uh-huh," she muttered suspiciously.

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

"I noticed."

"When is this party anyway?"

"In four days' time."

. . .

Under the shelter of the evening sky Takumi made his way down through fields of sugarcane toward the bleached ruins of the coral hewn church standing beside the bluff. Looking around he descended the sandy path down toward the beach until he reached the protection of the trees standing guard over the dark volcanic sands. Kneeling down at the water's edge he reached his hands into the cool ocean current trying to remember the last time he had visited this place. Silently he sat watching before him the outgoing waves empty into the endless expanse of the Pacific before him until the sound of footsteps roused him from his reverie.

"What are you looking for out there stranger?" asked the shadow behind him.

Mortality

"Urd! But how?" The dark visitor pressed a finger to his lips pulling him down to the soft volcanic sands, their whispers soon buried within the echoes of the surrounding sea . . .

As the morning light filtered down 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."

He sat up crossing his arms. "Hey no fair!"

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

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

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

He pulled the sheet around himself suddenly feeling rather exposed. "You know I wonder about you goddesses sometimes. Is that behavior even *legal* where you're from?"

"Oh honestly you sound like Belldandy sometimes."

"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 where I used to live; a long time ago."

"What is it you were looking for out there among the waves?"

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

"*Good early morning answer!*" she shouted throwing herself around him.

. . .

"What is it? Are you alright?" said the voice in the darkness.

"*I'm fine.* Go back to sleep. I just need to walk and clear my head," she replied."

"You're going for a walk at this hour?"

"I'll be back soon," Lind whispered closing the inner door to the 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 she reached the primary sanctum. Entering in the dark she approached the looming statue, her hands passing over the familiar folds of

Expectations

marble cloak which draped around its base. To be certain it had been an adjustment, coming so long ago here as she had. But she was not unhappy with her life. There were many things about the city she liked, the comrades she'd come to know, the cozy confines of her own small room, the ideals the place inspired. Yet despite it all, there were times when loneliness seemed to overwhelm her, dark spaces inside where words could not reach. So many things had changed since she had first arrived, so many things forgotten; or left alone for too long. Too many times of late she had awakened in the night listening to their echoes. "The time has come to reconcile the past," she said finally looking up at the statue which peered over her in the darkness. Reverently she knelt for several moments before rising to exit.

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

"Miss?"

"Yes!" squeaked the blonde jerking upright.

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

"Certainly. Umm, to which councilor would you like to speak?" she said bringing up the harmonic index.

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

The goddess's finger slowed moving down the page.

"Defense of this facility? But only -." *Oh my god it's Lind! It has to be. The One Wing herself. She's standing right in front of me! She's probably killed more people than are on this entire floor right now! Oh why oh why did I have to choose a career in councilor relations, or gone into city planning, or the Earth Help Center, or -*

Mortality

"Miss, is everything alright?" asked the Valkyrie peering down at the shaking goddess.

"Me?! Well, umm . . . I'm just a – little new to this," she said apologetically.

Lind smiled in spite of herself. "It's alright," she said taking up a position beside one of the large bas reliefs on the opposite wall. "We all have to start out sometime."

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

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

"Aaaah!" the councilor squeaked as a light atop her console suddenly blinked. "Okay let me see, that one is on the uppermost left panel so that means . . ."

"It's Odin," Lind said solemnly.

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

"I'd best go in. He doesn't like to be kept waiting," she replied putting her weight to the massive inner doors. She felt the weight of his eyes fall upon her as she entered. "Good to see you commander," Odin said coming into the light.

Wonder what that really means? The echo of his voice

seemed to resonate within her. "Thank you for seeing me."

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

"Rest," she replied finally. "And time."

"For what?"

"*To think*," she said her eyes following him.

"I see. And when would -."

"Immediately," she said clasping her hands.

"- *And you think it is wise to grant this request?*" queried the counselor standing with several others along the second tier under the high council chamber. Odin considered this, pausing to look out the window over the lower reaches of the city below; a city which in his youth he had helped to build.

"I believe it is necessary," he said finally. "She has been a Valkyrie here for many years and achieved much. But, over time, all warriors develop wounds. Some on the outside, others less visible. It's important such things are allowed to

Expectations

mend properly. In the end I do not think her request is unreasonable.”

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

“I do not think it is for us to say.”

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

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

“I understand your view,” muttered Ve sympathetically to his right. “We all know how your wife felt about her.”

Odin leaned forward on his staff feeling suddenly tired. “*My wife* . . . her opinion is not an issue here. How we treat those who serve is. Unless there are any formal objections I would ask her leave be approved.”

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

“Prima’s team would assume principal responsibility for the citadel. She’s an experienced commander who is more than capable. The demon realm has been relatively quiet of late. Now would seem to be a good time to make such a rotation.”

After several moments of discussion they were all in agreement. As the council members filed out, Vili leaned close. “I hope you know what you’re doing Wotan. This could prove very risky,” he cautioned.

Odin nodded looking out over a branch of the Vimir River which flowed through the eastern part of the city. He wished he could move as those waters. Taking up his staff he looked down considering the myriad of flickering fibers bound throughout its core. “You have no idea -,” he said at last, watching the pulse of a single strand with particular intensity.

. . .

“*But why are you leaving now?!*” demanded Chrono for perhaps the fifth time trying to keep pace with her taller companion.

Mortality

"It's just a short trip Tio, nothing to worry about," Lind said ascending the platform with half a dozen other Valkyries and several administrative staff at her side.

"That outfit is just plain weird," mused Rota looking at the denim jacket and ripped jeans her commander now wore.

"This is how wanderers dress these days - *apparently*," she said shouldering her pack.

"Yeah, *hobo* wanderers," said Peorth reaching her station on the upper deck. "I can see now that I'm going to lose my bet as to whether you're going down there to meet a guy," she said releasing the interlock on the primary gateway allowing the warrior to leave.

"When will you return?" insisted Chrono.

"Soon. In our time not long at all."

"Well then who will take -."

"Prima's team will assume primary responsibility for the citadel while I'm away," she said amid groans from the group.

"*Great*," muttered Pruor.

"*Team B*," hissed Pogn.

"*Are we being demoted?*" asked Rota.

"What? Of course not!" she said pushing them from the platform. "I told you I requested a break for all of us. Just consider it like a kind of vacation."

"And if something should come up during this 'vacation' they can't handle?" asked Sigrun her second in command.

"In that event you will re-assemble, but only if you're asked to do so. Otherwise I expect to see you all frolicking - *happily*." There were more mutters from the group.

"Well I guess that about covers it."

"*Not quite*," whispered Chrono tugging her sleeve. "Looks like someone's come to see you off."

"*Prima*," Lind nodded extending her hand.

"Don't worry about anything commander," replied her green-eyed counterpart confidently taking her hand. "You know I won't let anything *slip* while you're away."

The two smiled subtly tightening their grip. "*Of course*," replied Lind. "But if you should need assistance while I'm away know that my team is *always* ready."

Expectations

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

“Okay I guess it’s time to get going then - I guess,” Chrono said putting her hand awkwardly on theirs noticing the 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 hand. Lind nodded politely in return, raising her hand to her team before disappearing through the portal. As Prima too departed, Sigrun motioned for the rest of them to approach. “Rota, Mist, stay close, just in case,” she said.

“Should I follow her?” asked 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.”

“I let you do that to . . . make you feel better about yourself,” she sniffed.

“I doubt the commander needs our help,” replied Sigrun ushering them off. “For now just rest and stay out of trouble. Do you hear me?!”

“*Certainly*,” replied Pruor. “Rest, stay out and . . . something about trouble?”

Sigrun put her arm around the Valkyrie on her left. “Pogn you’re the youngest of the group - which in this situation means you’re the one most likely to act like an adult. Watch them Pogn. *Watch them like a hawk.*”

“A baby hawk,” teased Pruor tugging poor Pogn away with the others as they disappeared.

...

The tranquil pools of the remote atoll truly were magnificent, as was the great lagoon beyond. Even the lush volcanic slopes behind them possessed a transcendent beauty on this remote outpost a thousand miles from the nearest human habitation. It was all she had said it would be, removed from the polluting influences of man, the natural world truly was a thing of beauty. And yet as she crouched on the soft white sand beneath coconut palms Mara was still somehow ill at ease. Every few minutes she would look over her shoulder,

Mortality

scanning the jungle terrain before suspiciously returning her gaze to the waters of the lagoon. "What's she doing now?" she growled raising her head once more.

"What, you want me to go and check on her again?" snapped the demon at her side.

"*Nevermind,*" she breathed pressing her back against a palm tree. She tried once more to soothe the knot in her stomach. *What is all this about? 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 brought Mara back to the present as up from the depths came the naked form of the ruler of demonkind herself. Shaking off the water Hild casually accepted one of the half-dozen towels quickly offered to her by her elite coterie standing apart from the contingent who had accompanied them to the remote sanctuary.

"Shall we prepare something?" asked one.

Hild shook her head silently, dragging the towel across her torso as she walked off alone down the beach.

"Mara, come with me will you?" she said over her shoulder.

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

Following at a distance she saw Hild's eyes pensively scanning the heavens, as though trying to discern some hidden aspect of their design. Eventually she looked to the distant volcanic slopes. "I suppose that's how it must be then . . .," she mused finally. "I have searched every possibility but see no other alternative. Pity really. Mara?"

"Yes?"

"I need you to collect something for me."

"What?" she asked warily.

"Three shadow spirits. Each should be well versed in - their art."

"Shadow spirits? Why? They're not very . . . durable. If it is for an assault I could find instruments much more -."

"Are you questioning me?" Hild said waving her hand as she continued considering the distant volcanic peak.

"Oh no Lady Hild, of course not!"

Expectations

“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. Oh and Mara one more thing -.”

“Squawk!”

The demon’s eyebrow twitched upon spotting the circling gull overhead.

“Where was I? *Ah yes*, make sure they’re all -.”

“Squawk!”

With a snap of her fingers the bird exploded instantly. As the feather and ash drifted down in the late afternoon breeze she continued, “- experienced in the Feng.”

“The Blue Feng?” Mara muttered nervously.

“Mmm? Yes that’s right,” she said plucking an orchid from the nearest vine to place in her hair.

“Of course Lady Hild . . . right away,” she nodded rushing off to rejoin the group.

“Oh and Mara, I suddenly I have a taste for chicken,” she said smiling at the heavens.

“Um - *right*,” she muttered heading off up the beach.

The Blue Feng. 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 had a more insidious property. For those previously exposed, *re-exposure* resulted in a far more devastating effect, placing the victim into a form of irreversible coma. Since it did not technically *kill* its victim, its use was not, strictly speaking, illegal. But the grim nature of its effects had nevertheless 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 hit*. After all, she had been there the day her friend’s sister had been struck the first time.

Chapter 2

The Black Lake

Y*aaah!*” Keiichi cried jumping to catch the tablecloth as the wind carried it out beyond his hands. Twenty feet ahead Belldandy stepped up on a picnic table deftly intercepting it drawing it down from the air. “*Come here you -*,” she said coaxing it down and over the far end of the table.

“*Graceful*, so graceful,” Hasegawa sighed continuing to drag a large cooler of beer through the sand behind her toward the growing collection of tables sheltered at the end of the cove.

“She’s not the only one who thinks so, apparently,” said Chihiro, looking on as half a dozen male members of the Nekomi Tech Auto Club admired Belldandy’s ‘form’ in recovering the object.

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

“Nothin,” replied Tamiya looking 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 won’t,” teased Megumi.

“Well, I’m busy doing stuff here,” he replied embarrassed.

“Well, maybe you should get busy doing stuff *over there*,” she retorted. “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.”

“I can pretty much guess,” she muttered reaching for a beer.

“Why are you giving me this grief all of the sudden?”

“All of the sudden?” Keiichi it’s been -.”

“Okay I don’t need to be looking at her every second. There are things that need doing here.”

The Black Lake

"*Darn right!* And that's exactly where your eyes better be mister!" came the small voice behind them. "Because we still have a lot of stuff to move!"

Keiichi's eyes scanned the horizon. "Hey isn't that Sentaro I see over there Skuld?" he said directing her down the beach.

"Is it? Oh it is! *Sentaro!*" she shouted sprinting off. Soon the two were busily kicking water at each other along the surfline.

"I'm just saying -," persisted Megumi. "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 said stalking off.

Thank goodness. Now if everyone else will just get here, he thought. For perhaps the tenth time that day he looked to the east. *Why do I keep doing that? Because I miss her I suppose.*

It's weird but I do. I never thought I would. But I miss Urd.

It's not the same without her around. On the other side of the growing assembly of tents, tables, fires and assorted groceries at the far end of Shirosaki 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 older sister.

"*Give me that -* we're not eating that yet!" shouted Chihiro pulling Tamiya beside her as he attempted to open yet another platter of food.

"It's alright I made plenty," offered Belldandy as Chihiro put him in 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!"

The goddess smiled continuing to put out food. Then she felt it. Turning she saw the two figures making their way over the dunes toward the encampment. As they came closer she heard raised voices. "*Oh come on Urd you're being unreasonable!*" Takumi called as Urd continued to march ahead of him unmoved, arms crossed in front of her as though holding back tears.

"Urd what's the matter?" Belldandy asked rushing up..

Mortality

"It's Takumi he . . . *oh I just can't say it!*" she said choking up, her lip quivering dramatically.

"This is ridiculous!" he shouted tossing up his hands.

"What's going on?" Keiichi asked catching up with them.

"*What's going on?!* Apparently goddesses have a tendency to be crazy! Just thought you should know in case it runs in the family." Urd turned glaring back 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 protested.

"*-If I was OLDER THAN LIND!*" she howled as if no longer able to contain her anguish.

"Oh . . . OH!" Belldandy said nodding.

"You see Keiichi . . . *nuts.*"

"Well I guess from his perspective the two of you might appear pretty close in age," Belldandy agreed."

"*THANK - you!*" replied Takumi.

"WHAT?!!" said Urd.

"Well I mean, all three of you seem pretty close in age," added Keiichi.

"Belldandy's head came up. "All *three* of us?"

"*HA! Doesn't feel good does it Bell?*"

Belldandy bit her lip looking down at her reflection in a nearby pool. "Well, *maybe,*" she said wistfully, peering into the water.

"*You see what I mean!*" shouted Takumi.

Keiichi motioned for silence. "So you're saying you guys *aren't* close in age?" he said doing his best to try and salvage the situation.

"The truth is Lind's a little older than we are." Belldandy replied.

"Well how old are you then Urd?" demanded Takumi.

"Twenty-nine," she replied calmly.

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

"*Twenty-nine,*" she repeated more firmly.

"Well even if you *were* twenty-nine last year, that would mean this year you are -."

The Black Lake

"*Twenty-nine!*" she exclaimed as in the distance thunder echoed.

"Yep that sounds right," Takumi nodded looking overhead. "And did I mention how *young* you look compared to Lind?" Urd huffed, her eyebrow still twitching.

"Okay now that that's settled," he said putting an arm around her to kiss her.

"*No* - I'm not giving you one," she said stubbornly keeping her head just out of reach.

"Aw come on Urd!"

"No . . . *for you are evil*," she pouted giving him a look.

"You know when you look at me like that I can't tell if you're wise or just bored of seeing me."

"Probably both," she muttered.

He sighed. "Keiichi please tell me you have alcohol at this party." Alcohol it turned out was not to be a major problem at the evening's event. As the afternoon passed those not inclined toward its use through either common sense or character (Belldandy, Keiichi, Sentaro and Skuld) soon broke away from the main group to begin kicking a soccer ball along the beach. After half an hour of practice Skuld surmised they were excellent, prompting her to challenge all those assembled (*'any of you who aren't too afraid to wet your diapers,'* was her exact wording). Keiichi, still irritated over Megumi's ribbing and well aware he could outrun most of the auto club members also began spoiling for a game.

And so before long their opponents arose, as Otaki, Tamiya, Urd and Takumi took up their places with Chihiro and Hasegawa officiating. Mostly to irritate Skuld, Urd wondered aloud if some sort of handicap shouldn't be put on her team in order to offset the *obvious* differences in their skills. But as the game commenced it soon became obvious that they were more than equally matched. For though Urd had power she did not necessarily possess control. Though Takumi had speed he seemed sorely lacking in game fundamentals. And Tamiya and Otaki? Their idea of soccer seemed more closely related to football or wrestling than anything the rest of them were familiar with. As the rest of the auto club looked on (with

Mortality

varying levels of interest) both sides prepared for glorious battle.

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

"*Charge!*" shouted Skuld racing downfield ahead of them.

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

"No, no, it's okay I'll take her," replied Tamiya.

"*Well somebody take someone!*" Takumi shouted as Skuld streaked through their ranks. As he moved to intercept her she passed the ball to Sentaro. "*Gotcha!*" he yelled jumping over to Sentaro for the kill. But as he closed the boy swerved passing the ball through his legs, only to recover it on the far side continuing for the goal.

"SCORE!" shouted Hasegawa behind him.

"This is so much fun," breathed Belldandy alongside Keiichi.

Urd too came alongside Takumi, smiling as he stooped bent over panting. "Hey Tai, did you see that? That little boy went right past you. I'm asking because he went by you so fast I was afraid you missed it. Made it look pretty easy too."

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

"I suppose that might be *one* explanation. Of course the more likely is - *you're old!* You're just lucky to have someone young like me to look after you."

He straightened up smiling, "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!!!!*"

"Well feel free to unleash that any time now," he said lining up.

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

He smiled beside her, 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 from the center for Keiichi. But he soon found Keiichi no easy target, as he easily outmaneuvered him breaking into the clear. Less than anxious to hear another appraisal of his soccer skills

The Black Lake

from Urd, Takumi dove for Keiichi as he broke free. But an instant before they collided he appeared struck, crashing into the nearby benches with an awful thud.

"*Timeout!*" shouted Chihiro.

Tai are you okay?" asked Urd as he rolled painfully to one side.

"Urd is he okay?" asked Bell from the far side of the field.

"Yeah he'll be okay Bell," she waved, not bothering to check.

"No I'm not! She intentionally cracked my ribs. I didn't know this game was being played by prison rules!

"Oh don't be such a baby. I'm sure she feels bad enough," Urd said pressing two fingers to his side.

"Oww!"

"Didn't I just say *don't* be a baby?" she said healing him.

He wheezed trying to lay still. "Fine. I'll get him next time."

"You worry about Sentaro. *I'll* worry about Keiichi and Bell."

When play resumed Keiichi once more took possession of the ball pressing downfield. As Belldandy broke free of her defenders Keiichi lovingly nudged the ball in her direction including her in the attack as much as possible. For a moment they ran together, ahead of the pack side by side, happily enjoying the evening sky . . . until Keiichi suddenly tripped flying through the air to land awkwardly on Belldandy as they tumbled to the ground.

"Oh Keiichi please try to control your bizarre urges at least until it gets a little darker," Urd scolded.

"*What's going on down there?!*" shouted Skuld.

"Nothing. Just Urd trying to be funny," Keiichi said getting up.

"Don't blame others for your weird behavior Kei," Megumi shouted from the sidelines.

"You cheated Urd!" yelled Skuld.

"What, is she talking about?" asked Hasegawa.

"I - *don't know* . . ." muttered Takumi trying to distance himself from the coming storm.

"*Hey are we going to play soccer or just watch you guys make out Morisato?*" Chihiro yelled throwing the ball to Tamiya.

"You, I - let's just play soccer!" Keiichi snapped scrambling up.

Mortality

This time as Tamiya approached he passed the ball to Otaki who shot it toward the goal. But at the last moment the ball seemed to take a strange bounce, passing wide of the mark. "*You think that's funny Skuld?!*" scowled Urd shooting her younger sister a murderous glance.

"I didn't see anything," Skuld replied, innocently prancing down the field to Sentaro. She had almost reached him when she suddenly slipped, throwing her arms wide over him to break her fall.

"Skuld why is your face buried in Sentaro's lap?" inquired Urd. The goddess flew up, her eyes enraged as Belldandy moved between them. "Maybe it would be more fun if we focused on playing the game," she suggested helpfully.

"Of course we'd have more fun, if we played it the way Skuld and Sentaro are -," retorted Urd.

"*Shut up Urd!*" shouted Skuld. "You're a big cheater!"

"Let's just play -," pleaded Belldandy.

"Yes, *let's play*," echoed Keiichi, clenching his fists.

"Yeah, *let's play*," Takumi menaced, matching his tone.

"Is that what we're all saying now? Am I supposed to say that?" asked Urd."

"*Just get the ball -*," Takumi said charging.

"Oh I'll get the ball alright. And that little brat."

"Really? Because you're - *not doing a very good job of it!*" he shouted as Skuld and Sentaro raced past them.

Ducking her defenders Belldandy crossed behind Keiichi as they raced downfield with Takumi moving to cut them off. To his left Urd, Skuld and Sentaro battled for control of the ball as the pair pressed toward the goal. He couldn't quite see what happened next except that Skuld seemed to now be lying face down on the sand. "*SCORE!*" shouted Hasegawa.

Skuld sprang to her feet. "You cheated Urd. *Again!*"

"How could that be?" Urd shrugged.

"*Because -*," she fell silent knowing she could say nothing in front of the crowd.

"Maybe Skuld was just surprised by the strange direction the ball suddenly took," Keiichi said running up beside her.

"Oh that? It's my trick move," Urd said twirling her ankle.

The Black Lake

"I bounced it off her face into the goal. That's not against the rules is it?"

"It seems a bit strange."

"Does it?" she said turning. "You don't believe my trick shot? Would you like to see it again? *At close range!*"

"I think he does Urd," Takumi said running up, egging her on.

"Never mind that, *let's play!*" shouted Skuld preparing for war.

Urd pressed forward until a small shadow darted beneath her tripping her as Sentaro came up with the ball.

"*What?* That's illegal contact!" said Urd as the ball bounced along under Noble Scarlet's invisible influence.

"What are you complaining about Urd? *I* didn't see anything. Did anyone else see anything?" Skuld asked the bystanders.

"No!" they shouted in unison.

"Geez Urd don't be such a poor sport," she chided.

"Yeah Urd just play the game," Megumi said finishing her beer.

"Fine. Skuld why don't you go get the ball," she said as lightning suddenly flashed exploding the ball.

"*What?!*"

"I didn't see anything," Urd shrugged walking away.

"You know what you did Urd!"

"Sentaro, maybe you should get Skuld a little drink. I think she's getting delirious from dehydration."

"Maybe we should just quit before somebody gets hurt," suggested Belldandy.

"The weather does seem to be getting a bit - *unpredictable*," agreed Takumi nudging the ball's tattered remains. *Twenty-nine*, he thought.

"Skuld did you see that? BOOM!" said Sentaro catching up to her.

"Oh I saw it all right."

Keiichi caught up putting his arm around her. "Don't worry Skuld. They're just afraid of our combined power."

"Darn right!" she said brightening.

Soon after, the campfires were lit and Chihiro announced the official start to the evening's activities. Before long everyone had settled into eating and drinking. At one end Belldandy

Mortality

gathered together with Skuld, Urd, Sentaro, Hasegawa, Chihiro and Megumi, while at the other the men huddled in conversation with everyone appearing to have a good time. Everyone except Keiichi Morisato who had become a favored topic of conversation among the self-appointed male sages; each taking turns pouring out their unsolicited ‘advice’ on his love life. Words which only grew more insistent as the evening wore on.

“Keiichi . . . it’s complicated. You need to do ‘*this*’ and ‘*that*’ in order to keep a woman happy,” Tamiya counseled.

“Yeah especially ‘*that*’,” Otaki agreed drunkenly.

Keiichi sat in silence as the laughter spread throughout the group. “Yeah good point. Make a note of that,” Tamiya nodded as though the ramblings constituted some form of coherent plan. “More *that*.”

“What do any of *you* know about it?!” he said finally.

“Just saying, kindergarten romance isn’t going to hold her interest forever. Sooner or later she’s going to need a *real* man.”

“And what am I?!” he demanded.

“-A total wimp according to your sister,” said one.

“Look at you, you haven’t even taken two sips of your drink dude,” counseled Tamiya. “You gotta pick up the pace man.”

“*Drink, Drink, Drink*,” they now all began to chant.

Against his better judgment Keiichi took several swigs, if only to quiet their incessant yammering. “Well Belldandy doesn’t like it when I -.” He knew the words were a mistake as soon as they were out of his mouth. Now the comments came fast and furious:

“Listen to yourself dude!”

“Does she dress you too?”

“You’re totally whipped!”

Augh. This macho nonsense was never my style. “You don’t understand. Tell them Takumi - you know.”

From the back of the pack Takumi’s head now rose into view, his lips briefly breaking their embrace with a bottle of tequila.

“Don’t look at me Morisato I’m with them. If she was my woman I *definitely* would have changed up the sleeping arrangements by now if you know what I mean!”

The Black Lake

“Oh be quiet!” he said to their cheering. “I’ve had enough of all of you,” he said taking up his drink and heading down the beach.

“Make sure you check with Belldandy first,” said one.

“What are you doing, going over to the kids table?” added another. *“At least leave the bottle here. We don’t want it to get as lonely as your roommate!”*

To hell with them, he thought walking down the darkened beach until he reached the rocky point at the cove’s edge.

Haven’t I helped every one of them out at least a dozen times?

He picked up the bottle taking another swig. *They think they’re so cool?* “Well they’re not!” he murmured taking another sip.

He sat down among the rocks watching the dark waters lap at his feet. *It’s not as simple as they think. I wish it was but it’s not. I don’t know why.* He looked up admiring the heavens.

They’re just like you Bell, he thought. *So beautiful, so close, yet so impossibly beyond my reach.* He reached out his hand, “like those stars, no matter how hard I try I can never really -.”

“Those are planets you know,” the voice behind him murmured.

He turned looking at her. “I know Urd,” he replied sullenly.

“Well, on nights like this, men usually -.”

“I know Urd!” *God, why was I anxious to see her? She’s just like the rest of them!*

“Keiichi I was only trying to help!”

“Yeah well don’t!” he snapped. “You help too much Urd! I don’t need your help!!!”

Urd opened her mouth to say something but stopped, seeing the look in his eyes. *“Kei what’s the matter?”* she asked concerned.

“I, I don’t know . . .,” he said quietly shaking his head.

“What is it?” she asked going over to hold him.

“I -I’m losing her Urd,” he said trying to hold back his tears.

“Keiichi that’s crazy!”

“No they’re right . . . *all of them,*” he said putting his head in his hands. “I’m going to lose her because . . . I’m not good enough . . . not brave enough . . . not strong enough.”

“Keiichi that’s not going to happen.”

Mortality

"Then please tell me not to worry Urd," he said leaning against her starting to cry.

"*Keiichi . . .*"

Takumi lay back continuing to listen to the hum of the group's chatter floating along on the evening breeze. The tempo was pleasant, until he caught the flickering eyes of a particular goddess staring down at him from across the campfire. He felt a chill wash over him. "I didn't do it," he replied instinctively.

"I want to talk to you - *now*," growled Urd.

"About what?" he asked innocently.

"*Over here* -," she replied pointing. "Did you say something to Keiichi?"

"Urd it was no big deal. We were just, *you know*, giving him the business. That's all."

"Hey tough guy, in case you've forgotten I seem to remember *you* being pretty sensitive at times when it concerned us."

"Hey, HEY! That's stuff - that's our private stuff! *Private!* Just between you and me!"

"Oh but it's okay to make Keiichi feel bad about things he has trouble expressing?"

"I don't know. We were just trying to help him."

Even to Takumi's ears the excuse sounded weak, the look on Urd's face only confirming his suspicions. "Okay maybe it was a little mean. I'll go and talk to him about it . . . *later*."

"No you won't. You've done enough damage for one night. I told Bell to take him home. Which means we're stuck with all of this," she waved.

"Chihiro?!" he frowned.

Up from the darkness on their left popped Chihiro sporting a hat of poorly woven reeds.

"This is your party isn't it?" he asked.

"Yep," she said settling back down beside Tamiya.

"*Good*. Just checking," he said taking up his tequila.

. . .

Together the two beachgoers wobbled their way up the steps to the grounds of Tariki Hongan temple. "Let's get you to your room Keiichi," Belldandy said as they reached the front door.

The Black Lake

"*You smell good Bell,*" Keiichi mused sagging against her, his night of frustrated drinking finally beginning to take its toll.

"*You - not so much,*" she said taking him under the arm. The grounds were quiet as she led him inside.

"*You, you push up with soooo mushh of me,*" he said stumbling forward onto the thick futon in his room.

"I just want to make sure you're alright. That you're safe, *always,*" she said putting a pillow under his head.

"You always – you always take such good care of me no matter what I do," he murmured as much to himself as to her, looking up with unabashed admiration. Her eyes blinking back at him in the moonlight now seeming particularly alluring.

"Urd said it was important I bring you home right away. That we should talk. What's the matter Keiichi?" she asked bending low beside him, lighting a single candle at the foot of his bed. It wasn't a conversation Keiichi wanted to have with her. Not now. Not tonight. For this was not the image he wanted to convey. Weak . . . needy . . . confused. "You don't have to look after me. I'm not as weak as you think," he said lurching up only to flop over hitting his head on the floor.

"I don't think you're weak," she said pulling him back up. His mind swam searching for words. "You don't? 'Cause I'm not a little kid you know," he said leaning against her. "I've got thoughts . . . all kinds o' them when it comes to you."

"*And I you -*," she replied looking back at him earnestly.

He felt dizzy but the drink also gave him courage. "*Good!*" 'Cause I'm not a wimp!" he said in a somewhat feeble attempt to pounce on her.

"*Clearly,*" she said suppressing a smile. Even now there was something about the drunken hopefulness in his eyes she found completely adorable.

"I know Skuld would kill me if she knew I wuz here like this but - *wait*. Is she here?" he said looking around suddenly.

"*No*. She's at the party remember? It's just you and me," she said patiently.

"*Really?* Because umm Bell, do you remember that time . . . when you came to my room?"

She had little trouble guessing the incident to which he was referring. After all, she too had had thoughts of their afternoon

Mortality

together on his futon – occasionally. “I seem to remember something,” she smiled.

“Remember when you put your head on my chest so you could hear my heart?”

She inched closer. “Yes. So I could always find you no matter where you might be,” she said unconsciously tightening her fingers around the edges of his shirt.

“Ya’ know at that moment I thought, *how could I possibly love this person any more than I do right now.*” He swallowed looking away. “Because that's how I really feel Bell.”

“*Keiichi -.*”

With a certain lack of precision he turned pressing his lips to hers, his fingers slowly touching her ribs as his hand crept around toward her spine. Within her Holy Bell clamped her teeth around the nearest wingtip suppressing a moan. She shivered feeling his weight shift against her.

“*Do you love me Bell?*” she heard him ask, his voice sounding like little more than a distant echo over her own heartbeat.

“Because I love you - *so very much.*” She knew now he must be drunk, *very drunk*, for the Keiichi she knew would never say such things so openly.

“Of course I love you Keiichi, I pray for your every happiness.”

“No, no, not *pray for my every happiness.* I mean in your own heart. That which makes *you* truly happy.”

It was not a simple question to answer. For there were many things within a goddess’s heart. “You are there Keiichi - in the deepest part of my heart,” she replied.

“Am I? Because it feels as though we are forever in the same place, always there and unchanging. It makes me wonder if you haven’t somehow decided on me; as if I’m slowly fading away.”

“You will never fade from my heart Keiichi.”

“Then let me be with you Bell. Let me truly be with you tonight,” he said nuzzling up to her.

“... *Alright,*” she replied finally.

“*Bell -,*” he murmured moving his hands around her. She had thought about this moment, knew it might someday come to pass. Urd had discussed it with her, told her it was perfectly natural to be nervous at such moments . . . despite the fact she

The Black Lake

never seemed to be even when they were young. Still something about it had always put her off when it came to Keiichi. Even now she could not fully dispel the feeling; a vague sense of foreboding lying somewhere beyond them. He kissed her ear. "You okay Bell?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm *ok-ay*," she said taking a breath.

"You're so warm -."

It will be all right, she told herself. There's nothing to be afraid of. You're here with Keiichi. You're safe. You'll be fine. But at that moment a noise at the far end of the room made her jump.

She leaned forward peering into the darkness but there was nothing there. Nothing she could see at least. Keiichi continuedcuddling her, oblivious to her disquiet and all else around him. She felt her pulse quickening now as he tugged at her shirt. She felt his hands move down and over her hips and her body trembled. In their life together she prayed for him, wished for his happiness, truly hoped they would always be together. And yet now with each passing moment something else seemed to turn, something nameless and perilous started to encircle them.

"*Keiichi*," she whispered holding him tighter, hoping the sound of his heart would quell whatever threat lay outside in the darkness.

"*Belldandy*," he murmured blissfully. But she was certain now, a feeling of something flowing like water over the temple grounds beyond them. She looked, yet her eyes saw nothing.

It's alright, he's here with me. There's nothing's to worry about. Don't think about it, she told herself holding him.

"*Belldandy come to me -*," he said shifting against her.

Is this what I'm avoiding? But it's so important to him, she thought. But there was no mistaking it now, as the blackness began to surround her, encircling her arms and legs. She struggled to resist but the more she did the more darkness seemed to engulf her. *Belldandy I love you so much,* she heard him say in the distance. Powerfully now the force pressed in on her, flowing over her chest forcing her under. In her mind she fought the feeling but it would not let her go. She was in its grip now, relentlessly towing her under. Panicked she struggled for breath as its icy fingers began to fill her lungs.

Mortality

"Belldandy you're the reason I . . ."

"KEIICHI STOP!!!" she cried pulling away.

"Huh? Wha-?" he muttered confused.

She moved back tugging her shirt down, eyes wide with fright as she scanned the corners of the room for the unseen threat.

"What is it? Why are you being like this?!" he asked reaching for her.

"*Keiichi stop . . . don't,*" she said pulling back.

He looked back in shock. "Why? Why can't I come closer Bell? Why can't I ever come closer?!"

"I - don't know. There's something – something I can't see," she said flustered scanning the darkness.

"Even after all this time? Why can't I be near you?!"

Her eyes looked to his. *Doesn't he know I would always tell him the truth?* "I don't know Keiichi, it's just - *I can't*. There's something . . . around my heart," she said trying to suppress her tears.

(Around my heart?) He sat in silence, numb from the words.

"Is it me Bell?" he asked finally. "Is it something about me?"

"No."

(Around my heart). "How could it not be? You don't have to spare my feelings. Is it me?!"

"No!"

"Then what is it?!"

"I don't know!"

"You know you can tell me! If I'm what's keeping you from what you truly want-."

"Don't say that!"

But for Keiichi the reality of the evening had begun to sink in. Slowly he lay down on the futon dejected. He felt sick. *She knew. They all knew.* Every one of them. The truth he had always tried to ignore. *He simply wasn't good enough for her.* She was just too decent a person to ever tell him. Because she knew what it would do to him if she ever did, if she ever told him the truth: *Keiichi I love you, I care about you . . . I just not the same way you love me. I'm sorry but there's nothing I can do about it.* And so she had lingered there, doing her best to help him each day, to keep the promise she had made to him. In his stupor it all made sense now. When he thought about what

The Black Lake

she must have endured, what he truly must have put her through all these years, confining her like this; the pain was just too much for him to bear. He turned away lying limply on the covers. *"It's all right Bell, I understand."* He shut his eyes wishing he could just disappear. She had looked after him, cared for him, and in her own way loved him. But that was all it was ever going to be. That was why nothing had ever changed. For Keiichi the enormity of the realization was too much. For he had lost the most precious thing in his life. No, worse than that - he had never truly had it to begin with. He had simply been deceiving himself all this time.

"I'm so sorry Bell. I'm sorry. Sorry for keeping you for so long. It wasn't fair. Please forgive me . . . please forgive me," he wept.

Belldandy's eyes grew wide in horror. *"Keiichi what are you saying?"*

"Belldandy, I release you from any obligation you have to me.

I don't want to be a burden to you any longer."

She gasped. *"What are you saying?!"*

"It's alright. You've already done so much for me. So much more than I could ever repay. You don't need to do anything more. *No more -*" he sobbed.

"KEIICHI!"

The alcohol and stress of the evening were now taking their toll on Keiichi. He closed his eyes exhausted. *"You don't need to protect me any more Bell,"* he murmured. *"It's okay if you don't love me . . . because I will always love you,"* he said drifting off.

"But I do love you Keiichi. I do! Why is this happening?! Why am I failing?!" she cried holding the corner of the cover.

...

Early the next morning Takumi rolled over to find Urd sprawled beside him on the bed. Slowly sliding up from the covers he made his way absently toward the large picture window at the other end of the strange room, staring blankly out at the gray morning sky overlooking the ocean. He stood there for several moments before it hit him. *Where the hell am*

Mortality

I? He looked around for any clue. "Urd weren't we going to go to the residence?"

"*Meow-see-um*," she yawned cuddling the pillow closely to her.

"Yeah that clears things up," he mused. "*Urd where-are-we?!*"

"Huh?" she said opening an eye. "Some hotel," she replied rolling over.

"Hotel? How the hell did we even get here?"

"Uh . . . I convinced the manager to let us stay."

"Didn't Belldandy tell you to stop doing that?! And where is here anyway? And where is Skuld? I don't see her," he said only now noticing her absence.

"For the 100th time I don't know. That's why we're staying at the hotel!"

"What?"

"And you said *I* had a lot to drink last night?!" she said pulling the covers around herself before shuffling forward like a penguin to press his head against the window. "You see? We never left!" He saw it now, the beach lying out beyond them on the far side of the highway, stretching back toward the point. He was still a bit fuzzy, but the pieces were beginning to come back to him. "Skuld?"

"I dunno," shrugged Urd. "Maybe she walked Sentaro home?"

"Don't even joke about that. It's got to be 60 miles from here! Could one of Keiichi's buddies have taken them?"

Urd shrugged going back under the covers, not wanting to discuss the matter further at such an early hour. "Who knows? Maybe she's sleeping soundly somewhere this very moment."

"*Maybe?* You know Belldandy's going to kill us right?! Didn't you promise to watch over her? *Why did we do that again?* I don't really remember . . ."

"Oh don't worry so much. Skuld will . . . probably turn up. She and Noble Scarlet are probably bent over watching Sentaro sleep. Like you should be doing to me right now," she yawned.

"Your degree of sisterly concern is truly touching," he replied.

"Tell me when Skuld was little, did she get '*lost*' a lot?"

"Yeah, but Bell usually found her. Like this one time when she was three I put her on the back of a turtle out in the fields of

The Black Lake

Fensalir, and wouldn't you know it when I came back a couple of hours later she wasn't anywhere to be -."

"I'm beginning to understand why she doesn't always possess complete faith in you. Probably helps explain her proficiency with tools. It sounds like she had to engineer her own escape on more than one occasion."

"Oh honestly you sound just like Mom sometimes."

He looked at her in horror. "Mom?" You mean- ?!"

"Oh Gods no!" she said shaking her head. "I mean Belldandy's - anyway the point is . . ."

"-*The point is* we need to start looking for her," he said pulling her ankle. Urd only went further under the covers resisting him.

"You worry too much. What's the worst that could happen?"

He stopped for a moment thinking. "Urd seriously - *get up!*"

...

At that moment Skuld and Noble Scarlet were indeed busy watching Sentaro sleep. But they were not at his house. Nowhere near it. For Skuld it had all been an adventure. A great big adventure. The greatest, biggest, hugest, most exciting adventure anyone could ever -! She stopped holding her breath as Sentaro twitched before rolling over in their loft. The previous evening they had sat and talked late into the night at the campfire with the others, only to discover once the party had broken up Urd and Takumi were nowhere to be found. After some investigation they soon realized that the two (*drunken bums* or less polite verbal equivalents Skuld began using by that point) had inadvertently left them behind. Eventually they decided to set out on their own for the Seaside Residence where they had previously agreed they would spend the night. Initially all went well as they headed east along the coast road. But crossing beyond Kominato the land grew less familiar, and though Banpei indicated they were going in the right direction, Skuld seemed less certain. The roads appeared smaller and more choked than she had remembered in the darkness. Uncertain of what to do next they began to circle back when Skuld spotted what she thought was a familiar set of lanterns leading to a temple. A spot Urd had dragged her to on more than one occasion. "I've got a great idea!" she yelled

Mortality

rushing to the outer gate to begin kicking it as hard as she could.

“*What are you doing out here you little punks?!*” cried the irritated monk who answered. “*Do you know what time it is?!*” “Sorry but we’re looking for someone . . . *somebody old,*” she said peering past him through the partially open wooden gate. The monk slowly pointed to himself.

“Uh no, not you. Somebody older.”

The monk pointed at his colleague who had now come up the path to see what all the commotion was about.

“Umm, no not him either. Somebody *reeeeally* old.”

They looked at one another. “I hate to tell you this young lady but that’s not going to narrow it down much here.”

“*What’s going on out there?!*” came a call from the inner courtyard. “Are you two drinking the ceremonial sake again?!” the voice accused.

“*No sensei.*” they replied in unison.

“Because if you are -.”

“We’re not!” they shouted.

“That’s the guy!” Skuld shouted running past them.

“*Figures,*” said one. “Nobu-sensei you have visitors. *Small irritating ones.*”

From under the great pine the old monk emerged raising up his lantern. “Who? Ah yes, yes, I remember you!” Nobu said recognizing the young goddess. “What can I do for you?!”

After several moments of listening to her (somewhat enhanced) tale of woe, the senior monk replied he was more than happy to help. After all, given what he knew about her genealogy, how could he not help the pair which must represent *some form* of supernatural deity (a view Skuld was slow to correct).

“So do you know the way to the Seaside Residence?” she asked.

“*Yes, yes, but it’s too late to travel that road now. Never know what might be lurking out in that darkness this time of night. You wouldn’t believe some of the things I’ve seen out ther- ah but never mind that now. Come with me. We’ll find a place for you,*” he said leading them down the steps through the covered wooden corridors as they wound their way back to a warren of rooms at the rear of the temple. “You should be

The Black Lake

comfortable here,” he said finally directing them to a cozy loft. “Please feel free to spend the night.” The tired travelers quickly dove into their new found home dividing up the stack of soft blankets. Pausing at the doorway he asked, “Have you had anything to eat? You must be hungry. Can we get you anything?”

“No, no, you’ve done more than enough,” urged Sentaro.

“-But if you had some ice cream we wouldn’t mind,” Skuld said hopefully.

“*Skuld-*, Sentaro replied wondering if they were not already pushing their luck.

“I’m just asking -.”

“Hmm I’ll have to check,” the monk said handing up some pillows to them. “We can send someone out -,” he muttered triggering groans from the outer courtyard. “In the meantime do you require any ceremonial sake?”

“Err . . . sake?”

“As an offering,” he suggested. “*I understand it’s untouched!*” he called to the courtyard.

The teenagers eyed one another, “Well that is our normal sacrament,” Skuld said trying to sound authoritative.

“*Skuld -.*”

“*Shhh-*.”

“Is it really okay for you to be giving us this?” Sentaro asked as the elderly monk passed him the sake.

“Of course. We regularly bestow such offerings on the guardian kami of the temple. It’s not like you’re regular children after all. That would be immoral.”

“*Heh, heh, yeah - immoral,*” Sentaro said sipping as the monk disappeared down the steps. Ten minutes later the two were happily toasting each other’s health as they sat tucked into blankets spread out across the room.

“Hey Skuld are we really doing this?” Sentaro asked.

“We sure are Sentaro, *we sure are,*” she replied.

As morning broke over Tanjo-ji, Skuld heard a knock outside the door. “Skuld-sama are you awake? What would you like for breakfast?” inquired Nobu.

Mortality

Now this is the start of a great day, she thought looking around to see Sentaro asleep beside her. *I could get used to this.* An hour later she was working on her third serving of ice cream. "Shouldn't we try to find your sister?" asked Sentaro between bites of an equally large breakfast.

"Who? Drunky the witch? Maybe. Boy when I get my hands on her I'm going to . . . *WAIT A MINUTE!* I've got an even better idea! What if we take our stuff out and put it into the water, then come back here and phone big-sis? She'll pick us up while those two idiots are freaking out thinking we've drowned. *That'll teach 'em!*

. . .

At that momemt, down in the hotel dining room, Urd was showing a similar level of sisterly concern. "You see what I mean? It's just more convenient. All the food is laid out for you any time you want it. *Oh look crab legs!*" she said filling her plate.

"That's because it's a buffet Urd - *one we haven't paid for by the way.* Let's go -," Takumi said trying to suppress his increasing concerned thoughts.

"Just a few more bites. *Then* we can go looking for little miss goddess pain-in-the-ass." Half an hour later Urd was still chewing on a crab leg when Takumi picked her up and headed for the door. Crossing the highway they headed for the cove.

"You think we should have started at the residence?" he asked.

"They weren't there at 2 am. We'll start here and work our way back that way. You see anything?" she asked as he disappeared hopping down over the rocky point.

"Nothing. You?"

"No, don't see anything over here either. *Wait.* What's that over there?" she said pointing downwind at the water's edge.

"Give me a minute -," he said traversing the wave-tossed outcropping. At last coming around the rocks from the far side he stopped. There below him lay Banpei, partially buried in the sand surrounded by shreds of disconcertingly familiar clothing, slowly being carried out to sea. "*Aaaaaaaah!*"

"What? What is it?" Urd coming over the rocks beside him.

The Black Lake

Takumi leaned down, slowly picking up one of Skuld's tiny wet shoes.

"Hmm - *not good*," Urd replied turning it over examining it.

"Okay let's not too get excited. If Skuld was in any real trouble I would have sensed it . . . probably."

"Probably?!" And while we're on the subject I assume you don't have any GPS (*goddess positioning sense*) concerning the boy?"

She looked back smiling twirling her hair. "Well at least Bell isn't here. That's got to be a good sign."

"You mean as in *she-is-going-to-kill-us?!?*"

"Look if something terrible did happened, shouldn't we be seeing a few *more* pieces of 'driftwood' floating around down there if you know what I mean?"

"Ha, that's funny – as in we haven't *found their floating corpses yet?!?*"

"I'm just saying, they both look like they would float. Besides, we haven't even checked our residence yet. Let's at least go back there before we start spending good money on grappling hooks and such."

"I suppose a couple more hours at this point won't make much difference," Takumi replied testily.

"That's the spirit!"

Predictably, a search of the residence turned up no sign of Skuld or Sentaro. Just as Takumi was beginning to wonder whether it would be better to be buried in his original location or planted somewhere new, a familiar face appeared to them from over the dunes.

"There you are!" cried the monk cheerfully. "I thought I would find you here."

"Sorry Nobu we can't talk. We're looking for someone."

"The goddess?"

"They both stopped in their tracks. "You've seen her?"

"Of course. She and the boy spent the night at the temple."

Urd jumped from the porch landing beside him. "You mean she's been with you all along? But if that's true why did we find her -? *Oh I get it! That little brat! She set this up!*"

Mortality

"Well she did seem a bit upset last night when I spoke to her. Kept talking about child abandonment, drunken bums . . ."

"*Ah err*, I don't think we need to get bogged down in specifics right now," she said waving her hands. "So she's at your temple eh? Convenient. Because I'm going to *kill her!*"

"Urd, we've kind of had a lot of adventures today and it isn't even lunchtime yet. Maybe we should just cut our losses, thank our nice monk friend here, and go to collect our -."

"Wait, I've got a great idea!" she cried suddenly

"*Seems to run in the family*," Nobu muttered.

"I think I'm going to regret this but Urd, just what are you -?"

"Oshou, how much for a funeral?"

"*What?* Fudo-myoo is right. Don't do anything to enrage her. It might cause a typhoon!" pleaded the monk.

They both turned to look at him. "*A what?!*"

"A typhoon! It's one of her powers. She explained it to us last night as we were preparing sake for her."

A malevolent smile began to creep across Urd's face. "Did she now? Tai are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"That our hand is getting stronger by the minute?"

"*Exactly.*"

. . .

"You know I don't think we really should have stayed for lunch Skuld. It seems like quite an imposition," Sentaro observed finishing the last of his yellowtail.

"Oh its fine. They like doing stuff like that. It's like an honor for them really," said Skuld. "Look at how happy they are," she said pointing to the monks glaring back at her; forced to cook at Nobu's command. "And this way when we get back to bigsis's she won't have to cook for us - *right away anyway*. Now the only thing that's left is to call her and -."

Boooooooooong!

They both jerked looking up. "What was that?!"

"Do you smell smoke?" asked Sentaro.

Boooooooooong!

"Hey look something's going on over there. Wait is that your big sister? Why is she dressed like that?!"

The Black Lake

Skuld took refuge deeper into the bushes near the temple. "I'm beginning to get a bad feeling about this."

Up the winding path through the grounds the procession came, moving slowly toward the main temple. At its head Urd stood sobbing followed closely by Takumi and several senior monks. In her hands she clutched the soaked remains of their clothing.

"Oh my poor little Skuld!!!" she bawled.

Sentaro shifted beside her. "*Skuld* . . ."

"What? Serves her right-," she scoffed moving in for a better view. Below them the group gathered around the central shrine.

"Are you ready to begin?" asked Nobu quietly.

"Y-Yes," Urd sniffled. "I think so."

A moment later their clothing was ablaze.

"Hey! I liked that shirt!"

"Shhh. We don't have any choice but to play along for the time being," Skuld whispered kneeling beside Sentaro. But then she noticed Banpei too was being dragged forward.

"*What?!*"

"Are you sure you wish to do this?" the monk asked reverently.

"I'm told this object was very precious to her."

"Oh it's alright," sobbed Urd. "The things she made were all useless junk anyway. We just (*sniffle*) acted like they worked because, *well* (*sniff, sniff*) it seemed to make her happy. We just wanted to give her hope you know, to make her feel useful, no matter how *inept* she really was." Behind her Takumi looked down trying not to laugh as he sympathetically reached up placing his hand upon her shoulder. Skuld's face began to turn red, then white.

"I understand," nodded the monk. "*Acceptance*. Loving someone for who they are, no matter their flaws. It's very commendable . . ."

"Well that's just the kind of people we are," Urd replied graciously.

"*Lying bastards* -," Skuld snarled through clenched teeth.

"Yes, Skuld was always our favorite," murmured Takumi. "No matter what she did. Like that weird shrine she kept to the boy she liked in the center of her room -."

Sentaro looked over nervously at his companion, noticing her tooth grinding had given way to a kind of gnawing.

Mortality

"*Must kill -*," she muttered incoherently.

"-Yes that and the constant bedwetting, her flatulence," Urd continued.

The explosion from the hedges in the distance was instantaneous. "*You lying scumbags! It's all lies and you know it! I never did any of those things!!*"

"Look Urd your mysterious incantation worked. It really *did* bring them back from the dead," murmured Takumi.

"*Temporarily anyway -*," Urd said raising her hand.

"Ahhh! Sentaro run!" yelled Skuld.

As smoke and flame filled the air over the temple grounds Sentaro ran for the gate. But Takumi arrived first cutting him off. "Going somewhere?" he hissed.

"*Yaaah!*" the boy shouted kicking him squarely in the groin. Wordlessly Takumi dropped to the ground as Sentaro sprang past him to freedom.

"*Are you kidding me?*" Urd said approaching him. "*I got mine*," she said holding Skuld up by a limb like a prized pheasant. "This is getting to be a pattern with you. That kid doesn't even have any powers!"

"*Going-to-kill-you*," he mouthed painfully looking up from the ground.

...

As morning arrived Belldandy began her preparations, doing her best to forget the events of the previous evening. Soon however she spotted Keiichi peering out tentatively at her from the hallway.

"*Good morning*," she offered quietly.

"Good morning Bell," he replied shuffling. "Some party last night huh? I - don't really remember much of what happened last night. Do you?"

She said nothing continuing to stir the broth her face hidden. The look in her eyes told him everything he needed to know.

"Why don't you sit down? Breakfast will be ready soon."

He swallowed nervously. "You know you don't really need to do that anymore Bell . . .," he said slowly.

The Black Lake

Only the quickness of her reflexes kept the bowl from tipping. "What?" she said looking out the window as tears filled her eyes.

"I – I've been thinking. You - *you* do too much around here. You don't need to make me breakfast anymore."

She felt the chill entering her heart. Her hand started to tremble. In some ways it was worse than what she had felt last night. She stared outside at the trees beyond the window trying to clear her head. "Okay I'll just go get some laundry started then," she said trying to sound cheerful.

Keiichi looked down, "You – you don't need to do that anymore either Bell. Skuld's right. I'm perfectly capable of doing my own laundry. It's not fair for you to continue to do it." She nodded her head, feeling ill. Her fingers tightening on the doorframe no longer able to hold back her tears. "*I think I'll go outside then,*" she said rushing out the door. She ran until she reached the safety of the woods, the words still ringing in her ears: . . . *not anymore Bell . . . it's not fair . . . to continue. Would they continue? Was this the end?* She leaned down at the foot of the tree crying, laying down in the soft grass. She didn't want anyone to see her now. "*It's not my fault. Why is he punishing me? Why is all this happening?!*"

The heavy morning clouds had come and gone and several injuries repaired by the time Urd and her companions reached the front steps of Tariki Hongan temple. Mutual threats, exchanged to one another on the journey home kept them all silent as they reached the house. Dropping her bags Urd was surprised to see Belldandy sitting alone at the table.

"Bell we're back . . . finally. How are things here?"

Her sister said nothing continuing to sit in silence. The stillness of her body made Urd uneasy. She searched her sister's eyes. "What is it Bell?"

"Urd, when you're with Takumi, is it hard?" she asked.

"Oh don't get me started -, " she replied tossing her hair back.

"I mean every morning it's like *hellooo*, sometimes I just want to sleep but – *wait a minute*. What are you asking?"

"Is it hard Urd? The two of you. *Being together.*"

Mortality

She put her head down blushing. "*Of course that's what you're asking.* Umm well I suppose . . .," she started but the look in her sister's eyes made her stop.

"*No . . .*," she said finally. "Not really - *even on the hard days.* The truth is when I'm with him there's, I don't know, a kind of peace to it all."

"That's what I thought," Belldandy said lowering her head to her hands.

"You're saying you don't feel that way with Keiichi?"

"I don't know Urd. Last night I tried to be with him but there was something, something I can't -."

"Tell me what happened Bell."

Her arms tightened up starting to cry. "I can't. *Because I don't know.*"

"Maybe your feelings are trying to tell you something. I mean . . . is it possible he's not the one?" she asked tentatively.

"That's not it. It can't be. *I'm sure of it!*"

"It can't be, or you don't want it to be Bell?" she prodded gently. "Look, Keiichi's a great guy. No matter what happens I'm sure he'll understand."

"Don't say that! It isn't right. It isn't the way it's supposed to be! *I know it in my heart,*" she said running from the house. Urd followed watching her from doorway, standing for several minutes before turning, "Are you just going to lurk back there like some, well *lurker?*"

"It seemed like a private conversation," Takumi replied emerging from the shadows in the hallway.

She looked back tilting her head to look at him. "*You know what's wrong with her don't you?*"

"Know? Of course not. But I can guess."

"Well?" she replied folding her arms.

"I believe it may be a problem of . . . *mortality.*"

"Meaning?"

"I believe Belldandy may not yet have fully accepted that Keiichi is mortal."

"That's ridiculous. Of course she knows he's mortal."

"In her head? Of course. *But in her heart?* Of that I'm not so certain. Perhaps it's for the best."

"What do you mean?"

The Black Lake

"I mean I wonder what will happen to her on the day she fully accepts Keiichi's mortality. What will such knowledge do to her? To accept that which she has poured so much of her life and love into will one day move no more?" He shook his head. "It could cause her to unravel completely. How could it not? Because for them their outcome is certain. It is inevitable that he will die long before her." He walked up beside Urd, staring out the window at the goddess who now stood alone at the edge of the courtyard. "It may be an attempt by her subconscious to protect her. Ensuring that they never fully join may be the only way for her mind to limit the extent of the inevitable damage." "If you believe that then why don't you tell her? Can't you see she's in pain?"

He looked back, considering the eyes he had come to know so well. "Because as you say, at some level I think she already knows. Besides what would one say? How does anyone ever accept the loss of someone they love so much?"

Before she knew it Urd found herself pressing her arms around him, as if doing so might keep all evil things at bay. The two stood together quietly in the small kitchen as the air outside grew still. "If what you're saying is true then it poses a huge problem."

He nodded. "One which is inevitable, no matter what happens from this point on." Beyond them in the courtyard the trees appeared somehow lifeless now.

Mount Omine

The sun continued in its attempts to break through the thick morning clouds blanketing the mountain in gloom. Lind passed quietly among the visitors, unnoticed as she moved through the successive warrens of temples in the massive Koyasan complex. Every few minutes she would stop, trying to readjust her bearings. She had long since given up attempting to navigate by any man-made features as these had changed too much in the intervening years to be useful to her. Instead she guided herself using the mountain's more permanent residents, the massive cedars surrounding the paths. But even these had a tendency to change after more than 800 years. When at last she reached the sloping eaves of the Saito Pagoda in Danjo Garan she found it hard to believe it was the same structure she had visited in her youth, so great were the changes wrought upon it. It was here she had been sent, and here she had arrived that first night so many years ago; *the diamond realm* the monks had told her. And it was from here she would once more set out to find something that was lost she thought, reflecting on the path it had ultimately led her. "You were empty when I came old friend and so you are still," she said putting her hand on one of the pagoda's massive pillars. For the better part of an hour she rested beneath it, watching the tourists come and go from the shadow of the eaves, listening to the wind as it echoed through the mountain pines. Then gathering herself she walked due east down the granite causeway until at last she reached Ichinohashi Bridge at the outskirts of Okunion. Even now as she crossed the threshold to the massive forested cemetery she felt humbled by its power. She followed the forested path for more almost a mile before breaking away, continuing due east into the rising sun out onto the outer escarpment of the Kii range. Descending its slopes she made her way down the mountain's steep eastern face to the hollows of the lower canyons at their foot. She moved more quickly now, more

Mount Omine

fluidly, traveling for the first time in memory without thought of her team, or Yggdrasil, or anything else she had left behind her. Though the direction of her descent felt right it was not until she spotted the curves of the Amano River that she knew for certain. Wading into its shallows she stretched out her hands into the clear cool waters of the sandy stream. *I wonder if fish still -!* She turned flashing her hand across the water, skimming to instantly create the fingers of razor-sharp ice which struck the trees in the forest behind her.

“Oww!” came the retort a hundred yards behind her as the shadow dropped to the ground.

She stood up lowering her guard. “*Pogn?*”

“Uh, yeah it’s me . . .,” replied the voice nervously.

Of course it’s her, anyone else would have been hit directly.

“Come out!” she called.

The young Valkyrie emerged from the trees, still sheepishly pressing her cheek. Strange how here alone in the forest the commander seemed somehow even more intimidating. She realized that even at the best of times she had little idea of what Lind was really thinking. “I was just . . . seeing if you needed help. Are you going fishing?” she said awkwardly.

“Pogn, we’ve talked about this. You’re not to use your abilities unless specifically directed to do so. Yes?”

The Valkyrie lowered her head nodding. But then her eyes lit up. “Oh I get it!”

“What?”

“You’re going to the Ichino-hashii Bridge to meet someone.”

Why does everyone keep saying that? “No!”

“Well why are you walking there? Why don’t you just go there directly?”

Lind stretched her shoulders wading farther out into the stream. *Because there is no direct path to where I’m going,* she thought. “That is not your concern,” she said scanning the terrain ahead. *I don’t have time for this. It is still no short distance to Tenkawa from here,* she thought.

“What is it? What is up ahead?” Pogn asked following her gaze.

“Nothing you need to worry about.”

“I won’t tell anyone. I promise. *Orphan’s secret.*”

Mortality

Lind started to reply but then stopped, searching the girl's face, "Are you alright Pogn? Did they leave you behind again?"

"No I - *I'm alright*," she said looking into the contents of Lind's pack attempting to change the conversation. "Do you want me to fix lunch? I can fix lunch. Is this food for you?" "It's not for me," Lind replied. "Go back to them Pogn. They may not show it but they'll be worried about you. You will see in time that living with others is not the most difficult thing."

"What is?" she asked.

"Living - *with yourself*," she replied taking up her pack.

Pogn fell in stubbornly behind her. "I'll go with you, in case you need some help," she said. "You shouldn't be alone."

The commander smiled shaking her head. "Not his time Pog. I'll be fine. The next time I see *any* of you down here I expect it to be because there's an emergency which the group's combined talents cannot handle."

"You've trained us too well. Such an emergency does not exist," Pogn replied proudly. She stood in the stream silently watching her commander disappear around the bend of the flowing river. After a moment she took a cautious step forward. "*Don't . . .*," came the reply from the trees ahead.

It took several more hours before Lind reached the waterside temple of Tenkawa Daibenzaiten. As she approached the outer banks a scruffy waterman called to her, "*Yah seen any of these young lady?*" he shouted holding up two pieces of brownish stones from the riverbed.

She studied the river beneath her feet. "Umm . . ." *They all look like that to me*, she thought.

"Everyone thinks the best Hazuya and Jizuya comes from fifty miles north o' here up toward Kyoto," he continued sloshing by her. "Truth is the quality stuff's in a vein washed by this very river. These waters' remove all the impurities don't ya know," he said lurching close in a conspiratorial whisper. "Least that's my story anyway," he said flashing her a largely toothless grin. "Oh people say I'm crazy but -."

"- Polishing stones."

"Huh? What?"

"The stones you carry are used for polishing. The final stages of weapon sharpening."

Mount Omine

His eyes turned on her suspiciously. "Yeah, that's right. How da' you know that? You're not out here to move in on ma' territory are ya'?" he said clutching his bag closer to his chest. She smiled shaking her head. "No I just - I was once acquainted with someone familiar with their use."

He looked back at her less than wholly convinced. "Well what *are* you here for then little lady?" he said tugging at his beard. "I've heard that several meteorites have been brought down, down from the heavens to this place over the years."

"Ah, I should have known. You're one a' them."

"One of what?"

"You know, hippies, UFO seekers, shugendo wannabees - general weirdoes. Should have guessed by your hair I suppose," he said returning to rummaging through the water.

"No I just wanted to see if -."

"Ya' know this place used to be a great community. Now look at us!" he said lurching forward, his face bobbing close to hers.

"*AUGH!* I mean . . . I see your point. But really I'm not one of those. I'm just passing through."

"Passin' through eh? To where?"

"Mt. Omine."

"*Omine?* Ya can't go there! They don't allow no women up there," he said tilting his head squinting at her as several stones dropped back into the water.

Villagers weren't so picky the last time I was here, she thought.

"Well it's alright because I'm - *I mean* because I'm only going to the base of the mountain."

"Hmm, guess that's okay then," he shrugged. "Well keep your eyes peeled for more a' these," he said holding another beige rock wading farther downstream.

"Yes well - good luck with that," she said approaching the base of the stone steps leading out of the river to the temple.

True to the prospector's words, Tenkawa did indeed seem to attract a wide variety of visitors in modern times. She spent much of the next hour walking the grounds among them tracing the fate of the shrine's meteors. Though she found that many were nothing of the kind she eventually recognized a familiar shape. Reaching her hand down along the stone's back face her

Mortality

fingers traced its contours, finding the deep depression. Slowly she felt along the primary fracture as it angled away from her down and to the left. *We do this together - light the forge!* said the voice that echoed in her mind's eye.

"Quite the experience isn't it?" said the voice bringing her back to the present.

"Hmm?"

"Touching the stones. I can tell by your reaction."

Only then did Lind feel the tears on her cheek. "Yes, I – I," she blushed turning away.

"They say the meteors rained down from the heavens long ago to protect this place."

"Oh?"

"Yes, like magic."

"In my experience it takes more than that to defend a place,"

Lind said removing the offering of food from her pack and placing it at the foot of the nearby altar.

"What does it take?" asked the girl.

"That you may never know," she thought praying to the statue before taking her leave.

Walking the hill behind the temple, it was another hour before she reached the bend in the river marking the town of Dorogawa. To be sure the land was more settled now, more crowded but also more peaceful. *This is how it should always be*, she thought locating the old trailhead arching its way back from the far side of the main road into the mountain. By the time she reached the foot of the mountain's cliffs darkness was already beginning to fall. Furtively she looked around walking on, slowly drawing light to her hands as she proceeded up past a narrow section of the granite wall. Despite the weathering of years she could still make out the hidden inscriptions guiding her ascent up the slope. Ducking under an illusory crack in the granite ledge, she at last reached the confines of the narrow outer cave. Relaxing now she walked down the sloping cavern floor raising her hand until she reached a branch point in the darkness. Without pause she continued along the left passage, traversing its winding trail as it fell deeper into the mountain until at last terminating at a dead end. She raised her hand to the stone now as though speaking to an old friend, "*å inngå*

Mount Omine

noe.” Immediately the seal gave way revealing the modified interior. “*Lys -*,” she said entering the refuge laying down her pack as the entrance closed behind her. The soft light of the interior reflected off the polished stone as fresh air began to circulate. She stopped to pull off her damp clothes and dragged down the bedding putting it into the cozy alcove. Only with her gear laid did she now allow herself to bath in the small iridescent pool in the rear, stretching out to let herself feel the warmth and wear of the day. How she had longed to see this place once more. She tried to remember how long it had been, wondering how many sanctums like this existed in this world; created by goddesses or demons alike. She was fairly certain most of the senior Valkyries had at least one such refuge like this outside of Yggdrasil, perhaps more but, *ah* that was another matter. For a refuge this sanctum truly was, as could now be seen in the fading light. “*Forminske*,” she said closing her eyes. The whole interior of the sancutary now dimmed as the walls came alive in a series of subtle glowing glyphs, their unified pattern providing the refuge with enormous protection against any external threat. Lind’s eyes traced over segments of the symbolic subroutines making sure all was well. Satisfied it was as she had left it she lay back looking once more at the ceiling. “*Hjem*,” she whispered. Above her the stone ceiling began to change, its view becoming as stars in the heavens. ‘*That you may always find your way home -*’, read the inscription at its lower border. For several long minutes Lind stared at the words in the darkness doing battle with her own quiet tears. Finally she drew the blankets around her, preparing like a diver going under. *It is time*, she thought submerging into subconsciousness.

...

As she had for the past several days Belldandy awoke uneasy. Carefully she peered around the corners of the temple for any sign of Keiichi. She wanted to see him and yet not see him; uncertain of what to say every time they faced each other now. But as she reached the shed she saw there was no need to worry. He had gone. Gone before first light, gone without breakfast, gone as he was so often these days. She went back

Mortality

inside, picking up the sweatshirt by his bed he so often wore when working on his bike. Bringing it to her lips she turned it over and over in her hands only to realize she was crying. She sat alone in his room as Keiichi rode far beyond down the mountain, bracing himself against the cold wind through the narrow streets of the city below. Even now she could sense him, just not as acutely as before.

...

“C’mo!”

“I know!”

“Then do it!”

“I’m trying.”

“Really? Not very well.”

Takumi stepped back stopping his efforts altogether.

“Seriously you’re kind of terrible at this,” remarked Urd.

“Thank you for the encouragement,” Takumi replied.

“I just mean you don’t seem to have much talent in *this* general area,” she said moving her hands in suspiciously large circles.

“Yeah well it’s not exactly easy. Besides you’re not explaining it very well.”

She scoffed folding her arms, “I’m certain that’s not the problem. My instructions are exceptional. I’ll tell you what. Let’s do something else. Something simple. Imagine a grave physical threat. Use your emotions to try and visualize your defense.”

He nodded stepping forward. However as the minutes passed little appeared beyond wisps of smoke.

“Really? That’s it?!” cried Urd.

He shrugged looking away.

“I’m out there *getting killed* and that’s *the best* you can do?!”

Takumi was beginning to feel as though his manhood was somehow on the line. “You wouldn’t want to see what would happen in that event,” he scowled.

“Really? Humor me,” she said raising an eyebrow.

“You are certain?”

“Of course.”

He turned concentrating once more. But this time something did begin to form. Just as Urd had suspected the shape was

Mount Omine

simple, a solid form consisting of nothing more than a subtly flowing arc. But there was something disturbed and unnatural about the weapon's composition, its fibers comprising an intermingling of light and dark sinews. So too Takumi's eyes began to grow dark as the weapon's form took shape.

"There you go!" Urd called excitedly.

"Urd."

"You see? I knew you could -."

"URD!"

"WHAT?!" she shouted only to see Belldandy behind her.

"Tell him to put that away," she cautioned.

"Don't worry Bell. We're just -."

"*Tell him to put it away!*" she called in a voice that struck them both to their core.

"Okay, okay! Don't go all Valkyrie on me," she said waving.

"You saw the manifestation. *It's evil.*"

"Oh something's always evil with you," she complained. "*He's evil, the blade's evil, that sex stuff in our room is ev-*," she said stopping short upon seeing Skuld's eyes staring back at her with a look of utter contempt.

"*What the hell is wrong with you?*" she muttered shaking her head as she continued pulling Banpei out into the courtyard.

"That - wasn't meant for you," Urd said blushing.

Skuld ignored her, proudly taking center stage now in the outer courtyard. "Alright I'm ready big-sis!" *Today is the day*, she thought. "Is everybody ready?!" she beamed starting the initiation sequence.

"Oh my god is it time for *this* again already?" murmured Urd.

"Give her a chance -," urged Belldandy.

"Yeah, shut up Urd!" Skuld cried.

"It's just that I've got a lot to do today. Can't we just jump ahead to the part where you explode already and be done with it?" yawned the goddess.

"Nee-san!"

"I'm just saying. She's tried that stupid flying wing design out at least a dozen times always with the same result. It was funny the first few times; but now it's just getting sad."

"You be quiet!" shouted Skuld close to tears.

"Just let her try," pleaded Belldandy.

Mortality

“Yeah Skuld, show us what you can do,” said a voice behind them suddenly coming up the walkway. Bell turned to see Keiichi walking along the side of the house to join them. “We believe in you,” he nodded pulling off his gloves. Belldandy felt her insides tighten at his words.

“Oh please. Don’t boost her up with that whole - *we’re both engineers at heart* thing. It’s not a matter of belief. It’s power. She simply doesn’t have enough magical focus to initiate that kind of reaction. Personally I don’t see why you don’t just strap a jet engine onto Banpei and be done with it.”

“*You can’t do that,*” they said in unison.

“Why not?”

“The power-to-lift ratio would be all wrong. It’d be too heavy for the available surface area and wouldn’t handle properly; among other things,” Keiichi replied matter-of-factly. Skuld began to brighten. “Yeah! Not to mention the form is a direct conversion of Banpei’s base construct. To assume it quickly the propulsion system needs to be simple while leaving sufficient material to form the airfoil. Fortunately for a genius like me the solution is obvious.”

“Ramjet?” asked Keiichi.

“Wouldn’t work well from standstill,” she replied shaking her head. “A valveless pulsejet on the other hand -.”

“Would be way too noisy,” he answered.

“Unless you *mirrored* the engine sequence, setting their firing slightly out of phase.”

He thought about it a moment grinning, “I get it. The acoustic wavefronts from each succeeding cycle would interfere destructively with one another neutralizing the sound.”

“Technically it’s a bit more involved than that, there is some additional acoustic reversal and lensing involved but yeah that’s the basic idea.” Belldandy nodded in agreement with them not completely understanding but wishing Keiichi would look her way.

“*Blah, blah, blah* - that’s all I’m really hearing now,” shrugged Urd. “The point is I’m getting tired of putting you out every time you ignite. Maybe next time I won’t do it.”

“You won’t have to!” Skuld snapped trying to sound confident.

Mount Omine

“Just do your best,” said Keiichi. She nodded, quietly raising her hands in an attempt to ignite the engines. However as Urd had predicted no reaction was forthcoming - no matter how hard she tried. Skuld continued on in silence for several minutes trying to hide her disappointment. “*I guess you’re right,*” she said finally. “There’s just not enough -.” “Maybe just a little more,” Belldandy suggested as the jets began to glow.

“What good is it if she can’t do it herself?” demanded Urd. “It’s just one part of a process,” Belldandy replied. “She still needs to see how it handles. *You look good up there Skuld!*” she called as Skuld stood up grabbing the throttle.

“Let’s see what it can do,” Skuld said giving the controls a nudge. Up from the courtyard the craft drifted, slowly rising among the trees before accelerating away from them down the mountain. Seconds later she came back streaking overhead before crossing down and away toward the river.

“Look at her go!” yelled Keiichi.

“Yes, *look,*” Belldandy said inching closer to him hopefully.

“Well at least she didn’t explode,” Urd shrugged.

Miles below in the river basin, a group of boys continued performing their jumps. *WOOOOSH!* roared the sound of the craft passing overhead.

“Holy cow did you see that!” shouted one of the boys.

“Looked like a UFO!” shouted another.

“*Skuld?*” said the third watching it pass.

For the next ten minutes the skies above Tariki Hongan temple were filled with the arc of Skuld’s aerobatic maneuvers as the metallic wing swooped low over mountains and through the canyons. “Here she comes!” shouted Belldandy watching her touch down in the courtyard inwardly breathing a sigh of relief.

“*YEAH!*” Skuld yelled jumping off the craft in triumph.

“How did it feel?” said Keiichi.

“A bit more maneuverable closer to the ground than higher up, and the control surfaces still need a bit work, but other than that it’s in good shape.”

“So did you see all that?” Keiichi said nudging Urd.

“See what? It’s a noisier version of a broom with training wheels,” she complained heading for the house.

Mortality

As he prepared for bed that night Keiichi noticed the small package pressed at the foot of his door. "What is this?" he said picking it up. From around the corner Skuld's head appeared. "Remember when we got all those tickets riding your bike?" "You mean when *you* got those tickets *borrowing* my bike?" "Yeah well, that won't happen again."

"Because you're not going to disobey the law anymore?" he asked hopefully.

"No because the plate -, " she said pulling away its wrappings, "will always display a different number."

"What number?"

"*Who cares?* It won't be yours so you'll never get caught."

"Um, does Belldandy know about this?"

"No it's my special gift because . . . you - you're a good engineer," she muttered looking down.

"I can't take this Skuld," he said raising the plate. He saw her face fall. "If anything I should be giving you something today on account of your success," he said looking around.

"Oh just take it!" she scowled disappearing around the corner. There were times when Skuld was hard to love. Sometimes *very hard*. But not today. Seeing her in the evening light he knew it couldn't have been easy growing up in the shadow of her two amazing sisters. But then she was amazing in her own way. He stood there wishing he was better at telling her that. And so he let it pass. "I'll display it proudly," he muttered sliding open his door. From around the corner a pair of small eyes watched him go.

...

"Tell me what you saw again?" questioned Hild from her throne to the demons standing before her. The black-haired demoness quickly stepped in front of the others to ensure she was the first to tell the tale. "*Excellent*," said Hild after further discussion. "This is the opening we're looking for. Everything must be made ready. We will move tomorrow." Dismissing them all with a wave Mara turned marching away with the others. *Tomorrow*, she thought grimly.

Mount Omine

Morning came all too quickly for her liking. All night she had been plagued by the worst kind of dreams . . . *happy ones*, mostly involving Belldandy and her equally rotten sister. The kindness Belldandy had shown her, the food she had shared, the words of encouragement she had so often spoken. *Why? WHY? Why would she do that?! It made no sense! Treating an enemy that way!* And now in a few short hours she would . . . *So what?! A proper demon should be happy!* She turned her mind to the misadventures she and Urd had shared when they were young. She wondered briefly how Urd would be after . . . *Why am I even thinking about this?! I shouldn't be anywhere near it! Do you know what they would do to you if they even thought you interfered?!* she rolled over once more in her bed. *Ignore it. Don't think about it. That's the smart move.* She closed her eyes yawning only to see Belldandy's smiling face spring up once more in her mind. *Dammit!!!*

. . .

That morning life in the Morisato household began on an unexpected note, as Belldandy awoke to find a letter on the door which read:

*Bell,
I know how hard things have been between us these past weeks.
I don't want things to stay the way they are
I'm sorry for everything that has happened
I wish to tell you all that is truly in my heart
Meet me at noon today at the point overlooking the three
sisters.*

Keiichi

Her heart began to pound so quickly she thought she might faint. She tried not to concentrate too much on its meaning for fear she would burst into tears. Quickly she began searching for the things she would need. Out behind the temple the engine roared to life as she heard Keiichi leaving.

"Keiichi I'll see you soon!" she shouted from the doorway, too afraid to look him in the face at that moment. From the road she saw him lift his hand as he passed in the front of the house.

Mortality

“See you,” he said somberly. The happy tenor of her voice this morning only seemed to depress him more, a cruel reminder of his once happy life. He rode away that day trying to put all thought of her out of his mind.

Chapter 4

Northern Light

There was nothing special about the day she left. No one thing she could put her finger on no matter how many times she tried. It was just a feeling. Something that told her it was time; that if she didn't go now she never would. Something inside her. Even now so many years later she could not remember precisely what it was that had made her leave and take flight on that day. She took to the skies in the full knowledge that she had no way of knowing how far or hard the journey would be, or even if she would ever reach her destination. Yet none of it seemed to matter. It did not dim her desire to leave and reach the unseen lands. How many days she flew on through that tempest of wind and rain she could not guess. She only remembered the feeling of seeing those first green patches of forest laid out before her, alive and beckoning through the towers of cloud that tore her through the heavens at the end of all strength. *Is it true? Have I really reached the Northern lands?* Pushed beyond her limit she dropped down, collapsing onto the mossy slopes.

...

"Outlander! Stake it!" came the shout as she awoke with a start.

"I second that opinion," said her companion to the left.

"Silence. No one is staking anyone," said the leader stepping out in front of them. Squinting through the filtered sunlight of the trees the girl caught a glimpse of the dark-haired goddess above her. She was just as she had imagined she would be, beautiful and without equal, her luminous eyes peering down at her. The red-haired girl sat up blinking back silently at the group.

"Careful," cautioned the tall one hidden beneath a rust-colored cloak at the edge of the trees.

"Don't worry Hilyn," the blue-eyed goddess to her right replied leveling her bow. "If she so much as moves -."

Mortality

“Gna, just lower your weapon. Can’t you see you’re frightening her?” the lead goddess said kneeling.

“She looks half dead,” commented a green-eyed goddess riding up alongside her slipping down from her horse.

“Then let me complete the job,” muttered blue eyes sighting down her bow shaft.

“Gna that’s not helpful,” the leader said reaching back to secure her own bow. “You’re frightening her.”

“Frightening her? Frightening *her*?! What the hell she doing all the way out here in the Northern wilds by herself anyway? You have to admit that it’s kind of creepy . . .”

“It’s strange. This is the first one we’ve seen in a long time,” the leader said leaning in.”

“Oh Frey don’t do that! Haven’t you ever seen a horror movie? You don’t know what kind of things it’s capable of!”

“Doesn’t look like she’s capable of much of anything at the moment Gna,” Fulla replied.

“Probably means she’s extra dangerous,” Gna complained moving to one side. The dark-haired goddess looked back frowning.

“Well you don’t know -,” shrugged Gna. “That’s probably their plan, send in one that looks cute and cuddly then when you least expect it *Rawrrr - carnivore city!!*” she said reaching.

“Yeah - sounds likely, trying to take out four Valkyries with one exhausted girl,” said Fulla now slowly creeping behind Gna to toss her forward. “*Careful it’s hungry!*” she yelled.

“*Augh!* I mean – get away from me you green-eyed freak,” she complained shaking her off. “I’m only telling you to be cautious because I’m worried about *you* guys. I’m not afraid of it.”

“What do you think we should we do with her Frey?” Hiln said drawing down her hood unconsciously dropping her hand to the hilt of the sword. Instantly the girl jumped past them to a corner of the clearing before any of them could react.

“*WHOA* did you see that?! No more jumping Ms. jumpy!” Gna said raising her bow as Fulla did the same.

“Hiln - now look what you’ve done,” said the leader.

“I can’t help it if it’s skittish!”

Northern Light

Tentative the black-haired goddess approached cupping her hands. “Don’t worry about them, we mean you no harm,” she said trying to calm her. The look in the girl’s eyes told her she was less than convinced as her eyes continued to track the movements of the members behind her.

“Okay all of you – just move back,” she said waving them off to a safe distance. Slowly she reached over to her pack pulling out a waterskin. “You’ve come a long way. You must be tired. Thirsty? Here . . . *drink*,” she said offering the skin. “It will make you feel better.”

“Aww *come on Frey you’re not going to start feeding it now are you?!*” complained Gna. “Now we’ll never get rid of it!”

“Shhh. I have a good feeling about this one,” she said encouraging the girl as one might a small bird.

“With all due respect Frey, your instincts in these matters have not always been - *flawless*,” observed Fulla. There was a murmur of agreement from the group.

“Come on that was *one time*! One time in a thousand years!”

“Yeah, but it was one heck of a mistake,” mused Hilm.

Amid their discussion the girl snatched away the waterskin leaping to the far side of the clearing. Moving off to a safe distance like an animal she quickly took a sip, keeping a wary eye on the pack. Whatever it was it tasted good. *Very good*. She turned away hiding herself from view to quickly take several more sips in succession.

“Good?” the goddess asked nodding.

She had not realized how truly thirsty she was until that moment. She took several more wary swigs as the soothing comfort of the liquid flowed throughout her limbs. She felt relaxed . . . *tranquil*. She dropped to her knees collapsing on the ground before them. The goddess shrugged turning to the group.

“*Oh shut up Freya!*” they called back in unison.

...

The girl twitched several times before awakening with a start. Opening her eyes she realized the sun was now very low in the sky. She sprang to her knees surveying her surroundings. In front of her she now saw only a lone Valkyrie calmly stirring a

Mortality

pot over the evening fire. "You're fine," she said in response to the girl's silent stare. "We are quite safe here."

The girl's eyes continued to scan the terrain.

"I assure you we're quite alone," the dark haired goddess said continuing to stir. "Hiln's taken the rest on up ahead. Anxious to get back and check on her children no doubt."

"I don't think so -," the girl replied drawing her knife at her waist. "There's someone in the trees behind us."

"Dear?"

"Hmm?"

"That would be my horse," she said whistling. Down from the trees a great black stallion now appeared, slowly sauntering its way into camp. "This is Sleipnir," she said patting his side.

"And he has been my companion for quite some time."

The girl's brow furrowed remembering her current circumstance. "You gave me something!" she accused.

"Only what you needed," the goddess replied placing several more branches onto the fire. "You were dangerously depleted, drawn close to your limit. You needed rest."

"What makes you think you know my limits?" snapped the girl.

"I too am Vanir," the Valkyrie replied without looking up.

The girl's eyes grew wide.

"Yes. We are not so different you and I," she said unclasping her cloak. "There are others here like us - regardless of what you may have been told. But we can speak of that later. Have some of this," she said filling her bowl. "Then we can talk."

"What is it? Truth serum?!" she said suspiciously.

"Nothing you don't need," replied the goddess. She stopped short, realizing now how her words must sound. Quickly she dipped her own spoon into the girl's bowl tasting it. After a moment the girl reluctantly began to eat, slowly at first and then more rapidly. The goddess watched the visitor's face carefully as firelight danced over her reddish-brown hair and eyes. Eventually her voice grew hushed, somber. "It's been a long time since one such as you has come into these lands. And you're so young. What is it you seek?" she asked.

The girl fell silent looking down. *What reply could she give?*

When at last she tried to speak only tears would answer. She shook her head, "I - just wanted something to change . . . I just

Northern Light

needed something to change -," she wept putting her head to her arms. The Valkyrie knelt close beside her. "Please don't send me back!" she cried.

"It's alright."

"Please . . . *please don't make me go back!*" she sobbed.

The goddess put her hand to her and the girl began to feel some measure of her true strength. "I said you are safe and you are. Do you understand? Look at me!"

Nervously the girl looked up nodding.

"What is your name?"

She thought a moment. "My name? It is . . . Lind. And you?"

"I am Freya."

That was the night, thought Lind. *Why did I accept her words? I had always been so cautious.* Yet there was something about her, a measured patience in her eyes which held what she sought. As night fell in around them the goddess pulled the cloak over the girl, retrieving another from her horse. "You've come a long way there is yet still further to go. And no easy way back from here. Are you quite certain you wish to continue?"

"Yes," the girl replied firmly.

She crossed her arms. "Do you have any questions?"

The girl paused. "Where are we?"

"We are currently camped along the outer boundary in the Northeastern territories."

She eyed the pattern of the goddess's tunic. "What is that?"

"They are the marks of the Valkyrie," replied Freya.

Valkyrie. She had heard things connected to that name before. None of them very good. Yet the more she spoke with the woman the more comfortable she became and the two talked late into the evening. Eventually she replied: "There is no need to tell you, for you shall see it yourself tomorrow."

"Really?"

The Valkyrie nodded.

Yggdrasil. On so many nights Lind had lain awake wondering what the city might look like, a place said by many to be the most beautiful in all of creation. And now, now she would see it with her own eyes! "Then I must sleep. I must be ready!" she said throwing herself to the ground.

Mortality

“Yes, sleep. Sleep and when you awake we will go,” agreed Freya by the fire.

The girl hesitated. “You’re really going to take me there tomorrow aren’t you? You’re not just going to leave me here?” “By my word you shall see the city,” Freya replied drawing the blanket around her. However at that moment an unearthly cry rose in the distance. Slowly the goddess reached over taking hold of her bow.

“*The Northern Light!*” gasped Lind.

“What?”

“You’re clothing. It glows like the sky when I was a child!”

“It is not clothing, *it’s armor*,” Freya replied concentrating on the sounds carried by wind. “The glow - an effect of electromagnetic distortion when it’s used.”

“What is it?” she asked kneeling up beside her as the goddess looked out into the darkness.

“Not everything out here is tame,” she replied. “Something’s disturbed them.” After several long moments however she lowered her bow, the danger seeming to have passed.

“It’s alright, get some sleep,” she said bedding down beside her. “We have a long way to go tomorrow.” That night as they slept quietly beneath the forest of the outer border, the dark-skinned creature crept through the trees, looking down at them with great luminous eyes.

...

With the morning sun Freya and her companion rode west on Sleipnir making their way through the steep mountain vale to cross into the woodlands of Old Vanaheim. As the hours rolled by the girl saw the woodlands beginning to give way to patches of open meadow which grew mile by mile. Even on Sleipnir it was early afternoon before they reached the gap of the Miakuzai ridge. Below them Lind now saw a great broken plain of rolling hills extending far to the south, hemmed in above them by an imposing set of mountains. Freya turned in the saddle, “Away down to the southwest is what you seek,” she said pointing. Leaning forward Lind could just make out in the distance the tallest of the spires rising above the haze and cloud behind the hills. She shivered in spite of herself, “Is that

Northern Light

really it? It's beautiful - Are we going there?" she asked in quick succession.

"*Soon*. But there are a few things I need to take care of at home first," Freya said taking Sleipnir down the upper fork in the road leading away west. They continued on for several more hours before reaching a narrowing in the trail, the upper branch winding its way up toward a vast high mountain meadow. And it was here that Lind spotted the first of several handwritten signs posted along the road. The first read:

*Wanted: Have you seen this runaway goddess? Small reward possible. Inquire at Eagle's dark forest lookout - **If you dare!***

Below it lay an additional message in shakier script which read: *No big - BIG reward possible! (Details required before lunch).*

"Hiln must have reached her children by now," mused Freya.

"Well come along Sleip, let us see what's up ahead," she said leading the horse on foot up the narrow trail; not without what Lind thought was some hesitation. Soon they reached the boundary of a descending finger of woods, a southern extension of the great northern forest. "Here the road divides, with the lower branch descending to the Terraces and Yggdrasil Headlands, while the upper fork leads through the forest to my home of Fensalir," she said peering ahead tugging Sleipnir's reins.

"What lies along the third branch, away to the west?" asked Lind catching sight of the road weaving its way through hills of maple and birch toward an imposing citadel in the distance.

"That way leads to the Folkvang, the Tower Hills . . . and Sessrumnir," she said creeping through the forest glen. "This is the most direct route," she said letting go of Sleipnir. "From here the trail runs through the forest for about a mile before exiting on the far side of our fields. It's straightforward, yet it is sometimes -."

"There's something up ahead!" Lind warned, alerted to movement on her left.

"I see."

"Don't worry," the girl said anxious to prove her worth. "I will search it out." Fifty yards ahead she froze pressing herself against the base of a large tree as something swift and silent passed overhead. Uncertain of its exact position she remained

Mortality

still until whispers in the branches above alerted her to her quarry's location.

"I don't think it sees us but it definitely knows we're here. I can spot one of its beady little eyes!" said the older one peering down cautiously through the branches. *"Yeah keep coming turkey, you're almost in our territory!"*

"Careful!" warned her partner.

She could see now that there were two of them, a larger one and a smaller one, crouching close together on one of the upper limbs. She stepped out to face them.

"It's trying get through our defenses - Attack!" shouted the older one hurling a fireball. In truth it was more soot than fire but it was nonetheless unpleasant. Instantly she raised her hand obliterating the threat.

"Did you see that?" snarled the older girl bouncing on the upper bough as embers floated to the forest floor. "It thinks it's tough!"

"Aaaah," cried the little one. "Get in here where it's safe!" she said trying to pull her companion into their roughly hewn tree fort.

"Completely unnecessary. I have the situation well in hand!" she said jumping onto a higher more exposed branch like a ship's captain staring down contemptuously at the visitor.

"No one challenges the Eagle's dark forest lookout!"

Lind had to admire her confidence, given it didn't seem to be based on much. She guessed her to be about 11 years old, her companion (the one now busily hiding under a patch of leaves convinced that if her head was hidden then so must the rest of her) perhaps half that. Lind's eyes swept over the girl plainly expressing her opinion that she considered the girl no threat.

The girl's eyes narrowed enraged. *"Oh you asked for it!"* she yelled leaning over the edge raising her hand.

"No Urd don't! Remember what happened last time?" pleaded the little one pushing back farther into their fort.

"Trees grow back - annoyances don't!" she growled.

Lind turned sweeping her hands up as the mist enveloped her. An instant later she was gone.

"Did you see that?!"

"What do we do now?!" cried the little one.

Northern Light

“Emergency tactics. Blast everything below! *Yaaaaaaaaaah!*”
“*Alright you two that’s quite enough!*” Freya shouted sweeping her hand as a sudden gust of wind bounced them from the branches. Carried to the ground they scattered for the safety of the nearby trees.

“*Well?*” Freya said kneeling on the forest floor.

“Well what? It’s too late!” the older girl said peeking around the corner of a tree. “We found a new mother, a - a better one,” she said marching off farther into the woods. But the smaller pair of eyes remained, staring back at her wide eyed, her hands around the tree.

“Didn’t your aunt Fulla tell you where I was?”

“Don’t know - we don’t really listen to her,” called the older girl coolly from the shadows.

The small eyes before her blinked.

“Were you worried Verdandi?” asked Freya.

The blue eyes blinked back silently.

“Aww come here -,” she said opening her arms.

The girl hugged the tree tighter, unwilling to abandon her post.

“I have something for you . . .,” she whispered.

The small head poked around the tree a bit further.

Freya turned to one side blowing across the edge of her hand as brilliantly colored butterflies of all shapes and sizes began to appear. Slowly they floated up fanning out toward the girl.

“They want kisses – *every one*,” she warned.

The girl’s eyes lit up squealing as she broke from the cover of the tree running toward the goddess. As did her butterfly pursuers dissipated. “*Got you!*” Freya said snatching her up.

“And what about you?” Freya called out to the trees.

“*Never!*” the older girl shouted running through the trees trying to dodge the butterflies that had already started to swarm her.

“As you wish -,” Freya shrugged as the butterflies began lovingly pecking her into submission.

“*Aaah it burns, it’s torture!*” the girl shouted dramatically.

“I see you’ve captured the intruders,” Lind said walking up.

“Indeed. These are my children. The one here is called Verdandi and the other creature you hear howling is - Urd.”

Mortality

"*Your children?*" But-, she looked again at the older girl who now sprang from hiding to grab Sleipnir's reins.

"I'm riding him home!" she announced pulling herself up into the saddle.

"Oh alright Urd - here take your sister," Freya said passing her up to her as she trotted past. They followed the girls as they disappeared down the trail and out onto the plain.

"The older girl, her eyes -*and fire*," Lind murmured. "Is she- ?"

"She too is my daughter," Freya replied firmly.

Is she testing me? I don't want to insult her, she thought.

Leaving the coolness of the forest they soon entered an extensive meadow on the borders of Fensalir. "We are here," Freya said reaching the foot of a series of gardens extending all the way to a modest (at least by godly standards) house. She could see it was a cozy affair in two stories supported by subtlety curving main beams which extended down beyond the primary walls. At each corner of the house she saw collections of mysterious looking chimes designed to catch a different aspect of the wind. The gardens close to the house held trellises of brightly colored narcissus beside groves of snapdragons, morning glories and multi-hued bind weed. They walked to the rear of the house only to discover Gna resting easily in a hammock, doing her best to try and ignore the two children attempting to vigorously swing her this way and that. "*Stop - stop it you rotten kids!*" she complained as they swung her. "I'm back," Freya called ducking under an eve. "Finally. So did you finish off that animal after you found out all she knew? I hope she didn't suffer too – *Aaaagh!*" she shouted seeing the girl glaring back at her from the corner of the building.

"She's still with us Gna, as we discussed."

"Yeah I can see that," she grumbled.

"Hey you we're talking here. Could you give us some room?" Warily Lind moved off.

"There's something about her. She makes me nervous," Gna whispered. The visitor smiled. "Oh please! You know I could finish you in a heartbeat - *and probably will before the nights out*," Gna muttered.

"Gna!"

Northern Light

"Would you like that Freya? Would it make things easier if I finished her off for you? I mean what are you going to do with her now?!"

"Well, I was going to pick up a few supplies for her here, then I'd like you to -."

"*Stop.* Stop right there. I knew it. I knew I would get stuck taking care of your pet!"

"Oh, don't be so dramatic. She just needs a little time on her own to get used to this place. Take her up to the meadow on the far side of Eagle's lookout. She can camp there tonight. Then tomorrow -."

"*You mean there's more?!!"*

"You, Fulla and Hiln can start assessing her abilities."

Gna stood up crossing her arms.

"Pleeeeeease?" Freya said sweetly. "Just keep an eye on her for a few days until I arrange everything. Okay?"

Gna sighed. "There'd better be something good in this for me," she grumbled taking up her pack.

"Thank you."

"Of course. After all, if Valkyries can't rely on one another-."

"*None of us are safe,*" Freya replied.

"But even if we do this how are you going to convince -."

"*-Hold that thought,*" Freya said sensing a change in the wind.

Looking out from under the eave she saw him now, strolling up from the southern fields. He walked through the golden fields of wheat as though he had all the time in the world; the setting sun cast down upon his shoulders with Yggdrasil in the distance. He was coming. *Odin*. She ran down to intercept him wondering if it was intentional that he looked so majestic today under the late afternoon sun. "You kept me waiting," she teased grabbing his hand.

"You mean you hoped I'd be a bit longer in coming?" he replied taking her hand as they walked back toward the house. Wrinkling her nose she kissed him, "Did I mention you take my breath away every time I see you?" she whispered. For a long moment they stood side by side like newlyweds, watching the clouds drift overhead from the Tower Hills.

"*Bleah!*" Came the call from the rooftop as Urd observed them.

"Bleah," echoed her little sister beside her.

Mortality

"*Bleah*," breathed the falcon at Verdandi's feet.

"Hey, you taught Busa how to say *bleah*," cried Urd.

"Busa's a genius," Verdandi replied as the bird jumped to her shoulder.

Odin cast an eye over the assemblage. "And our new guest?"

"Oh they were just leaving," Freya said waving at Gna behind behind herself.

"Time to go," Gna muttered picking up the last of their gear starting up the path.

"*Just remember, I'm watching you!*" Urd shouted threateningly at the pair from the rooftop.

"*Me too!*" said Verdandi beside her crossing her arms.

Odin watched as the visitor looked back at them uncertain as Freya gave her an encouraging nod in Gna's direction.

"And she is?"

"A Vanir traveler," Freya replied loud enough for Gna to hear.

Odin shifted this gaze to her raising an eyebrow.

"Technically," she shrugged.

He watched their progress until they reached the forest. "How old would you say she is?"

"Sixteen perhaps. We came upon her near-dead in the outer territories."

"Amazing."

"*Amazing?* Near impossible with defenses at their current state. Her will and endurance must be truly exceptional. It's the only way she could have survived to reach the territory."

"Perhaps. She was alone?"

"I believe so."

"You believe so?"

Freya scanned the mountain escarpments above them for several moments before answering. Yes. I believe she is truly alone."

"On the run?"

She remained silent.

He sighed running his hands through his golden hair. "Why now I wonder?"

"I don't know. She said hope made her leave. *Perhaps . . .*" she looked up at him earnestly.

"*Freya -*," he scowled.

Northern Light

"She needs a home Odin. Somewhere to belong. *Something* to belong to. A family to believe in her," she replied intertwining her fingers with his.

He looked at the path once more but they were gone.

"You know she's going to be nothing but trouble Freya."

"No. She'll be great. You'll see," she said squeezing him.

He took her hand. He would have argued but he knew better.

For he could see her mind was already made up. "You know it's not just up to me. There's the council to consider."

"I know. But I thought I'd use this look when I went to see them," she said staring at him doe-eyed.

"Hah, I know that look. That's the 'why *can't* the bird sleep in my bed' look."

"Exactly."

"Okay Frey we'll try," he smiled shaking his head. You know sometimes I think you'll be the death of me."

"Impossible. Because together we're invincible," she said putting her head on his shoulder as they walked from the field.

"Ewww," moaned Urd watching their embrace.

"Yeah ewwww," Verdandi commented beside her.

"Someday you might not mind so much," Freya replied to them

...

"Yeah that's right keep going at a nice steady pace – stay in front of me," growled Gna as they reached the upper glen on the far side of the forest. "Stay where I can see you jumpy and we'll get along fine," she grumbled following behind Lind as they ascended the hill. Lind trudged on dutifully, idly wondering how difficult it might be to incapacitate her travel companion. "Just how far are we going to go?" she asked trying to picture the details of the trail behind them in her mind. "How about you keep going until you feel sleepy? With any luck that will be the outer territories," replied Gna. *No, it didn't seem too difficult at all*, Lind thought measuring her steps.

...

"And you're *sure* this where you left her last night Gna?!"

Fulla said coming over the ridge with Hiln the next morning.

"Of course I'm sure! I set up her camp next to those trees over there," she said searching the terrain with them.

Mortality

"Well she's not here. Let's spread out."

"Maybe she's gone."

Hiln paused. "*Does anyone else smell smoke?*" she asked.

"*Not just smoke . . .*," replied Fulla.

Gna too sniffed the air her eyes growing wide. "*Is that -?!*"

She raced ahead with Hiln over the hill.

They found the girl on the far side of the slope, sitting comfortably beside a fire gnawing voraciously on what looked like a drumstick.

"*Well at least she's had breakfast,*" Hiln sighed. "Fulla you've got to come see this."

Gna walked around the visitor's campsite horrified picking up a feather. "Is this - *Gyrfalcon?*!" she cried murderously. The girl looked up silently, politely offering her a wing.

"Are you kidding me!" Gna shouted.

"*Hmm* I think your bird's going to need some assembly," Fulla observed as she joined them.

"*I have* always wondered what they tasted like," said Hiln.

"Don't you dare!" Gna snarled.

"You see her family used to raise Gyrfalcons. You used to have one as a pet when you were little didn't you?" mused Fulla.

"What was its name Chika, Chicky - I don't know, anyway the thing is -."

"Oh I *knew* we should have finished you off the moment we set eyes on you," said Gna. "*Come here*, I'm going to cut off some of that red hair to make warnings for the rest of the flock."

"Cast," Hiln corrected.

"Shut up," Gna murmured manifesting her blade.

Watching her movements the girl set down the drumstick rising to her feet; the color of her eyes beginning to change.

"Uh - Gna?"

"I see it Fulla," she replied readying herself. "Oh I'm going to enjoy this -."

. . .

It was early afternoon by the time Freya joined her companions in the meadow. "What's this?" she called finding them all sitting exhausted, surrounded by several piles of rocky slag.

"Aren't you supposed to be training her?"

Northern Light

Gna looked back at her murderously. "She's strong for her age I'll give you that," she panted resting on her halberd.

Freya smiled.

"You think it's funny? She's some kind of monster! Oh and she's also a killer. You want to know why her hair is red? Probably from all the little cute forest animals she eats!"

"You eat meat too Gna," said Fulla.

"But not Gyrfalcons. They're cute!"

"Gyrfalcons?"

"See? Even Freya hates her now!"

"She'd have to be fast to catch a Gyrfalcon in flight. Where is she now?"

Hiln nodded toward the bluff. High above them in the crags of the cliff stood the girl, jumping and exploring the terrain with the energy of a teenager.

"How are you?" Freya called up to her.

"Better than they are," the girl replied.

"She knows we're not *really* trying to kill her, right? Because if we were -," Gna began belligerently.

Freya motioned for silence. "You don't mind showing me then?" she asked.

Finally a real chance, Lind thought dropping from the bluff to land before her. Freya began as the others had, directing rock into her path which she split with ease.

She's strong alright, but how skilled is she on her feet? Freya signaled to her, reaching out to materialize her axe. Lind too stepped back forming her blade. She moved quickly, fighting with tremendous vigor but not experience as Freya slowly boxed her in along the canyon wall slowly pressing her back step by step. Still the girl showed little sign of yielding or of panic; only grim determination.

It is as I feared, Freya thought. *She has seen death*. Instantly she reversed her blade causing it to pass perilously close to her opponent's throat. The girl stepped back but at that moment there came a blur from above. Freya twisted raising her axe but Fulla's eyes and arrow were faster.

"*Squaaaawk!*" the shadow cried tumbling to the ground as the arrow struck home. Gna materialized the full power of her fearful blade with Hiln close behind to strike the final blow.

Mortality

“*NO!*” Lind shouted diving to protect the creature. Quickly they circled her. “Show us!” said Freya. Slowly the girl stepped back, her hands desperate to staunch the blood flowing from Fulla’s arrow. “*Mint, Mint!*” she cried holding the damaged wing.

“*Don’t!*” warned Fulla. “Not for one of my arrows.”

“She’s right. Attempting to remove it will only unleash the full power of the seal,” Freya said squatting beside her.

“What is that thing?” said Gna eyeing the dark creature.

“It’s my companion Mint,” replied the frightened girl. “She was only trying to protect me. She didn’t mean any harm.”

“Yeah -,” mused Gna looking at the others.

“You got any *more* friends out there, spritely or otherwise you forgot to tell us about?” Hiln asked raising her gently curving sword.

“Whose mission it is to ‘*protect*’ you?” added Gna.

Freya signaled for quiet. “Give us some room. I think I can contain the damage,” she said running her hand deftly down the shaft back-tracing the seal before pulling it out. The creature cried out rolling over into Lind’s arms.

“Give me the wing,” said Freya.

“You can close it?” she asked panicked.

“It’s been awhile since I’ve seen a creature like this but I think I can do it,” she said following looks from the others.

She pressed her fingers together initiating the binding trace, slowly working its way over the sinew and bone vitalizing as she went. When she was done she handed the creature to Lind who knelt before her, “Thank you. *I’m sorry I* – I just didn’t know what you would do if you knew about Mint,” the girl pleaded. Freya nodded saying nothing, going off to join the others already in conversation. Mint raised her head weakly eyeing the girl.

“It’s okay - *we’re alright*,” she said attempting to convince herself as much as her companion. “We can get out of here if we have to,” she said trying to sound assured.

The creature wheezed looking down at its injured wing.

“*Don’t say that! You don’t slow me down.* I would never leave you behind,” she breathed watching the goddesses carefully.

“It’s alright. I can go fast enough for both of us if we need to

Northern Light

run for it," she said taking up the creature. "We'll be fine, we can make it, we – *we don't need anyone . . .*," she said brushing away tears as she judged the steep mountain slopes behind them.

Freya heard Hiln call to her mind as she approached, "*Look at this! It's Hild all over. And if you think I'm going through that again . . .*"

It's not Hild. Don't be so dramatic.

Dramatic? You do remember those intruders appearing at our southern boundary right? The one containing not only our prior top strategist but also Fulla's older sister? Not to mention Valkyries aren't exactly favorites right now. So we can ill afford an additional problem . . .

"Okay so what are we going to now?" demanded Gna as she reached them.

"I was wondering about that myself," said Fulla.

"Freya and I were just discussing it," Hiln said shifting her stance to better watch their visitor.

"The simplest thing to do is to send her away," mused Gna.

"Simplest and safest," agreed Fulla. "Gna says she was within striking distance of your children yesterday!"

Freya nodded saying nothing, running her hands over the tall blades of grass. "How many?" she asked finally. "How many young lives have slipped through our hands these past years? Look at them. If we send them away what will become of them?"

"Not our problem," Gna said stubbornly.

"We do have our own set," agreed Fulla.

Hiln sighed, "You two clearly don't understand. Our dear sister is already thinking of ways she can perform her mental judo on us. Just look. I see it right there in her eyes."

Gna stepped in squinting. "Yeah you're right. I see it too!"

"C'mon," Freya pleaded as the winds danced around her. "I'm just saying that given time I think she could become one of us."

"You've got to be kidding me Frey!" cried Gna.

"Impossible," echoed Hiln.

"Surely you understand Fulla? How we need to look beneath the surface? How people can change?"

Mortality

Fulla crossed her arms, uncertain.

“Look, their future is in our hands. If we show them faith they will do the same.”

“-Because that worked so well in the past,” murmured Hiln.

“This is not that situation. She’s not Hild.

“Ahh, don’t even say that name!” cried Gna. “And no kidding she’s not the Dark One. She doesn’t have a fraction of her power.”

“That’s not it. She’s her opposite. Hild had everything, without need or desire to impress anyone. Our visitor? I think she just wants to belong, regardless of her actions. If we give her a chance I do not believe she will fail at the critical moment.”

“-Which if true means she’d be the perfect weapon to send against us,” replied Hiln.

Freya shrugged to her old friend. “We were juniors last time around. This time we’re not.”

Hiln looked away toward the distant city, “I trust you Frey. We all do. But I’m not sure your instincts toward hoping for the best in others always serves you well.”

“I agree,” said Gna. “I don’t like it.”

“Then you’re really not going to like my next idea.”

They gathered together silently.

“I think we should keep all this between to ourselves.”

“You’re right Freya. I don’t like it. *Not one little bit*,” hissed Gna.

Keiichi Morisato

Morning had come and gone and Mara was still no closer to a solution to her problem.

“Just sit it out, don't even think about it,” she thought sipping her tea nestled in the crook of an ancient cedar. That in fact was exactly what she'd been trying to do all morning. But the wait was becoming unbearable.

Just a few more hours, she thought rocking. *Augh just let it happen, don't think about it. Don't get involved! That's the smart play,* she thought.

The problem was this wasn't just any goddess. It was Urd's little sister. And that made things complicated. Not to mention this particular goddess had shown her kindness on more than one occasion; an uncommon attribute concerning demons.

She continued to rock. *What's the point of worrying about it? With what's about to happen anyone with power to prevent it would be closely watched anyway. There's no way I'd even be able to get close - of course! The stupid human. He's powerless. No one would be paying him any attention. And it wouldn't be surprising if he did something reckless or insane. Who knows why humans do most of the things they do anyway? Yeah - that's the point of attack.*

But even Mara was not so foolish as to consider simply appearing at the front door of Whirlwind that day. Instead she slinked, cautiously working her way down through the city unseen.

Six blocks from her target she stopped, waiting on the rooftop; patiently watching and listening until she was certain that there was no unseen presence. Then exhaling slowly she dissipated as smoke, wafting and drifting lazily over the ground until at last she reached the mechanic's entrance of Whirlwind.

Arising on the other side she tossed back her blond hair to search for Morisato. She found him in the bay honing a cylinder head.

Mortality

“Polishing your crankshaft?” she said crouching behind him. He jumped falling over onto a stool only to scramble up on the far side.

“Why are you here?!” he said nervously taking up a large wrench.

Mara ducked under the hydraulic lift following him.

“You don’t really think that would harm me do you?” she asked taking the case hardened tool from his hands, only to snap it and toss it aside.

“What do you want?!”

“Ah yes, what I want. Well the fact of the matter is -.”

At that moment the metal door behind them clanged open as Chihiro burst inside.

“Morisato what’s going on back here? I thought I heard – *oh I see*,” she said stopping spotting the blonde haired woman standing behind him.

“That is not the answer Morisato!” she scowled.

“What?”

“Just because you’re having problems with Belldandy doesn’t give you the right to go hooking up with the first bimbo that comes along!”

He paused momentarily trying to process the information, only to look back at her in horror. “*Ewwwwww*!”

“Oh be quiet, don’t pretend you haven’t thought about it,” Mara said defensively. “We both know I could take you places Belldandy couldn’t even find on a map.” He looked at her seeming to grow pale at the thought.

“I have to say I’m very disappointed in you Morisato,” Chihiro fumed marching out.

“Good. *Great*. Mission accomplished. Thanks for stopping by. You can go ahead and turn me into whatever you had planned now,” he said sitting down at his station.

Mara smiled until remembered the purpose of her visit.

“Ah yes, Belldandy. Where is she?” she asked choosing her words and tone carefully in the event of later interrogation.

“What makes you think I’d tell you?” Keichi replied picking up a socket. The mere mention of her name these days seemed to tear at his heart. “I’m not her keeper, *I don’t know*,” he replied somberly.

Keiichi Morisato

Mara's eyes moved to the clock over his workbench. *Ten forty-five! Even worse he has no idea where she's headed right now. That's going to make it difficult to nudge him in the right direction. I'm going to have to give him the location. But how? I'll just have to trust he isn't quite as stupid as he looks. . .*

Mara knew she needed to be careful now. She hadn't said anything incriminating so far and wanted to keep it that way, "If you don't know where she is how do you know she's not in trouble?" she asked.

"Even if she is what can I do? She's a goddess. She doesn't need me - *for anything*," he replied quietly. "You should go now," he said, only to be interrupted at the sound of banging. He looked up to find Mara slamming her head against the wall. "*Don't you get it?!! They - !*"

Keiichi paused feeling his skin grow cold. He looked at her. He had missed something. He watched the demon clamp her hands over her mouth.

"*What did you say?*"

"Yeah you should be afraid of my threats -," she said motioning to him for silence.

What is she doing? A trick? Is she actually insane? She's weirder than normal even for her, he thought.

He watched her as she silently raised her hand mouthing the words. That was when he knew. Knew that something had gone terribly wrong. The fear he had always kept locked deep inside him now burst forth, the fear that something would someday happen to her, something that he couldn't control; was here. It was Mara's silent fingers that told him. That, and the look in her eyes.

...

"God, men have no class these days," Sayoko complained climbing the stairs to the upper roadway.

"Meeting me in such an ugly place! Don't they know how boring this part of town is? The plaza over there - boring. That café - boring. Those shops, bor - AAAAAAAAH!" she cried diving for the cement as the red shadow flew narrowly over her.

Mortality

At first she thought a car or perhaps a great mechanical bird had flown by narrowly missing her. But looking down the stairs she now saw the unmistakable shape of a motorcycle striking the bottom steps before rocketing away.
“*Morisato?!!!*”

Keiichi pressed on at a furious pace as he headed south along the winding turns of the mountain road. He did his best to control his panic, to forget the look of fear in Mara’s eyes, and to ignore the oil seeping now from the bike’s crankcase. Instead he replayed her words over and over in his mind: ‘*Three sisters – noon. You have seen them before*’. It gave him little doubt as to Belldandy’s current location. Indeed he had been there before, long ago as he watched the nighttime waves crash upon the moonlit pillars of stone on Cape Manazuru. He knew Mara could be lying, or leading him into a trap - *or worse*. But when he could not reach Belldandy at the temple he decided he had no choice. Besides, if Mara had wanted him harmed she certainly had no need for such an elaborate ruse. Cape Manazuru. Fifty miles. *In one hour*. The terrain and traffic between Tama and the Cape was challenging but not impossible so long as he reached the expressway quickly and there were no - *was that a police car?!*”

On the bridge above him the officer snapped to attention.

“Natsumi did you see that?!”

“Aww Miyuki we’re just about to eat,” complained her partner grabbing the tonkatsu.

“What are we even doing here anyway? I hate this side of town. There’s nothing but weirdos here!”

“Exchange program. Alright I’ve got his number,” she said leaning over the bridge. Tell them the plate is 20-75, no wait make that 12-77, no - *what the heck is going on?!* Tell them it’s a red racing bike - ridden by an average looking guy.”

“Yeah I’m sure that’ll get him,” replied Natsumi.

“Oh forget it!” Miyuki cried jumping behind the wheel. A quick U turn and the Honda was soon racing down the on-ramp toward their quarry. “Hit the lights Miyuki!”

“*Car on your right!*” she shouted.

“Mommy why is that car chasing the magician lady’s friend?” demanded Hajiri, watching as the patrol car flew past them. “I very much doubt they’re chasing anyone you know dear,” her mother replied moving out of the way. “I do know him! That’s the guy- *I won him once!*” she insisted. “Uh, *kids*,” she murmured driving on.

For the next few miles Keiichi had the advantage, outmaneuvering his pursuers as he skirted the western edge of Kanto range, the shadow of Mt Fuji continuing to grow. At the Tomei Expressway he sped southwest across the foot of Mount Oyama toward Isehara and the southern coast came into view. And it was here he realized he would never reach Belldandy in time as up ahead the traffic began to slow to a crawl. *Collision. Is someone trying to stop me?* He knew there were only two ways of reaching Cape Manazuru from his present position, continue on the expressway - or attempt a southern approach along the coast. Locking the front brake he swerved to exit the expressway leaving with many others along the Odawara-Atsugi road. But he rode the common course for only a few miles before heading southeast out of traffic and toward the coastal city of Hiratsuka.

It was a road he knew well. One day the previous autumn Belldandy had seemed to grow quiet; wistful. One day and then another. Then another after that. Uncertain of what to do he asked her to take a ride and together they had traveled to the very fields he now crossed.

“What is it Keiichi?” she had asked as they slowed.

“I just want to show you this,” he said pointing to the west revealing a stunning view of Mt. Fuji as it rose before them through a gap in the Kanto range. “I thought perhaps . . . you could use this today.”

She said nothing for a long time, tucking her arms around his in the afternoon sun. On that day, September 22nd. He never did know what was wrong with her; in the end he didn’t need to. The important thing was - they were together. Later that day they had ridden the remaining miles to the coast passing through a gap in the seawall standing side by side at the ocean’s edge.

Mortality

That was a good day, he thought passing through the fields now without a second glance.

He pushed on redoubling his efforts to reach the seawall, but not for reasons of remembrance. He knew today it would be his only chance to reach Belldandy in time.

Keiichi Morisato had grown up believing in order, believing in the rule of law. And he knew if he persisted – if he threw away those laws; the risks could be high. Moreover he'd be going against his word to Belldandy to never knowingly put his life at risk. But were there not times when other laws prevailed, obedient to the greater good? His instinct for self-preservation put up one last fleeting struggle: *Are you sure you want to do this? You have no idea what lies ahead. And no matter what happens she will likely never love you the way that you love her.*

He leaned in gunning the throttle. *Yes. Because in the end it doesn't matter how she feels about me. I know how I feel about her.*

Reaching the seawall he gave the bike a quick once over trying to steady his nerves. He knew he would only have one shot at the crossing. If the bike bogged down in the deep sand between the wall and the pressed pack of the shoreline he would never get it out in time. *The bike isn't suited for this. It's too heavy. But if I can keep on top with enough speed -.* He rose up suddenly gripped by the most awful feeling he would never see her again. He gave one last look at the watch she had given him. *Twenty-four minutes.* He choked the throttle accelerating as fast as the surface would allow. The sand before him grew but he pressed on feeling the bike take hold, the soft track beginning to give way to firmer pack. He rode down approaching the water's edge, leaning to gently distribute his weight, putting as much pressure as he dared on the throttle. He flew down the narrow strip of sand now just beyond the water's reach, screaming past gnarled columns of traffic on his right, pushing on with demonic intensity. Above him the sky grew dark casting shadows on the wet sheen of the ground before him. Accelerating along the shoreline he saw or perhaps sensed the approaching runoff spillway just in time, countering

Keiichi Morisato

the inch deep flow with the bike as he crossed, its spray flashing, tearing at his skin like chaff.

Ahead he spotted the outline of his first major obstacle: the Oiso marina. Weaving the bike through a break in the fence he gained the marina's roadway, speeding past groups of startled pedestrians. *Bell probably wouldn't be too happy about that*, he thought narrowly missing several.

It was a relief to have solid ground under his feet though it lasted for less than a minute before he dropped back down and out onto the confines of the open shoreline. Murderously he raced along the shoreline for several miles before reaching the dark heart of his greatest concern – that part of the Seisho bypass where the sea and land shrink to nothing in a ceaseless battle for control. He knew from memory the span was short, perhaps a half to three-quarters of a mile. But it was deadly as the beach narrowed to nonexistence over the track. Bounded by the waters of the Pacific on one side and stacks of 20-ton wave-dissipating tetrapods on the other, his only hope of crossing lay the brief inter-tidal period. He slowed approaching to measure its pace. Thirty seconds *more or less*, he thought. On a paved track it would have easily been within his ability. An expert might be able make it in half that. But here on the uneven pack of flowing wet sand closed in by towering blocks of concrete it bordered on the impossible. If the ocean surge caught him at speed it would be over in an instant. Stopping 100 yards short of what at the moment looked to be nothing but open water he caught his first glimpse of the low promontory headlands of Cape Manazuru, still fifteen miles distant. *Wait for me*, he whispered gathering his courage, performing one last check before choking the accelerator as the water before him crested. Belldandy's words came to his mind, *Thinking can save you, but sometimes thinking can get you killed. Yes, no time for uncertainty, I must trust my luck*. He felt his body tighten as the whine of the engine grew, waves pulling away as he passed the point of no return. He struck the forward sheet of the withdrawing water as the bike screamed through the narrow spit missing two huge terapod stacks. *Twenty five seconds*, he thought.

Mortality

Tucking in he poured on the speed as the bike flew past jumbled blocks of 20-ton cement to his right. *Nineteen.* Narrowly missing the jagged edge of the stack as he adjusted his posture to the slick surface. *Twelve.*

He now realized the exit was too far away for the time remaining. *Seven.*

On his left the waters began to rise ominously as the surge gathered strength plunging forward. "*Five, four, three - NOW or it all ends here!*" he thought pushing the bike to its limit, water rushing dangerously under his tires as the sea roared up. He twisted toward the wall, blocks dropping away at the last possible second opening out to unfettered coastline. Behind him now nothing remained, nothing but churning foment of the ocean waves. The shoreline before him widened to mere feet but for Keiichi was akin to life itself.

Riding beyond the breakwater now at Sodegahama he stopped for a moment to allow his shivering muscles to relax. Shaken but still in one piece he turned to the shadowed hills covering the city of Odawara to his right before riding up to join the open roadway to the southern coast. He looked at his watch. *Twelve minutes.*

Far beyond Keiichi out on the peninsula, Belldandy had already arrived, having reached the grounds ahead of time to find the perfect spot for their rendezvous. She had almost finished her preparations when she looked out to the coast expectantly.

I feel him, he is coming . . . and at great speed. The excitement she felt in that moment almost overwhelmed her. *His heart is pounding furiously; he's excited, confused - excited to see me.* She pressed her hands to her hips trying to calm herself. *It's alright, it's Keiichi, you speak with him all the time, everything will be okay. We're just going to talk and get everything resolved. But it's not, it's not fine . . . and hasn't been for some time. Lately it doesn't even seem like he - don't think like that! He's coming and that means there is still hope . . . unless he's coming to say. . .* She shut her eyes trying to banish all thought; anything that would make her cry. So focused was she that in that moment she did not feel the others approaching, taking up positions around her. She paced to and fro on the lawn as the

Keiichi Morisato

shadows moved around her, patiently readying their deadly implements. From the shadows the leader looked skyward.

Five minutes. . .

In those final desperate miles Keiichi did his best to focus his mind and control his fear, traveling the last eight miles of the coast road like a man possessed. Crossing the low slung Iwa Bridge over the inlet he no longer dared look at his watch. For he knew time must be almost gone. He rode the last mile in a blur rushing the bike past rows of tightly packed shops hemmed in under lines of drying fish trying to suppress his fear that he was already too late.

Belldandy rose up rubbing her shoulders, focusing her eyes on the road leading into the peninsula and the picnic grounds where she now stood. *He's close, he'll be here momentarily*, she thought as behind her the assailants broke into the open. Deftly the first master dipped his dart into the poison taking aim. *Position is good*, he thought. The skies above were overcast with little reflection and virtually no wind to mitigate his shot. She was looking away in the open, alone and unaware. The arrangement could not be more ideal. There would be no need for a second shot that day. With deadly skill he drew back his hand focusing on the target but then stopped. It was not the sound which alerted him but rather the sense of change, a change of something no longer connected to its surroundings. He turned to see the four hundred pound piece of metal screaming down through the air toward him. He twisted but it was too late. To his right Keiichi crashed to the ground landing badly beside the bike, the bones of his shoulder crunching as he rolled to regain his footing. *I only need to last a minute or so*, he thought pushing past the pain. Before him Belldandy stood frozen as the bike flew past her obliterating the assassin where it stood. She felt numb at the sight of Keiichi's fall as he struck the ground with a sickening thud. He rose but seemed not to recognize her, his eyes wild like those of an animal as he came at her

"Keiichi!!!"

He leapt through the air, yanking her down as the second dart clattered deflecting off his leather jacket. *"Trap! RUN!!!"* he

Mortality

shouted as together they fell rolling on the ground. She saw the fear in his eyes but also now the Keiichi she had always known, the one who had wished for them to always be together, the one who would always protect her, always be at her side. She extended her hand, raising the mandala that would provide them escape. *We're in trouble now but we'll get away, we will get out –we'll get home. And once we are there we will talk - talk the way we used to.* Forty feet ahead of her the seal's symbols began to form and coalesce. It might have ended that way that day on Manazuru, the two of them escaping to the temple. But she had focused too much power on raising the seal quickly and on their escape, blinding her to the final assailant who now emerged from the shadows on her left. Keiichi saw him too late, he was too far away as the creature closed to within forty feet of Belldandy with deadly intent. With a flick of his wrist the dart was in motion, closing on her, as beautiful as she'd been on the day they had first - .

"Snap!"

The creature cried out in disbelief as the hand swept out at the last moment cutting her off from him; the diving figure snatching away victory at the last instant. Ahead of them the completed seal now ignited.

The dart had missed. Keiichi had done it. He had saved her. He dropped to his knees grateful. Ahead Belldandy turned back to see him, smiling at her calmly, vaguely, as though. . .

"Keiichi?"

He gazed at her momentarily before falling to the ground without a word, the dart buried in his flesh. In that moment for Belldandy everything seemed to stop. She sprang to reach him but there was no sound. He was still. She threw her arms around him but his heart was silent.

"Keiichi?! KEIICHI!!!" she screamed as winds of sudden and terrifying power rose on all sides of them. Everything beyond them was instantly torn away, trees, earth and assailants as she struck the ground fracturing it into veins of brilliant light. "I've got you!" she screamed as they fell forward into the light.

...

"WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?!!" Peorth cried jumping up along with everyone else at the Earth Help Center as the

Keiichi Morisato

magnitude of the deformation shock registered on the monitors above them. All around alarms sounded in every corner of the center as the boundary wave continued to expand.

“Massive pulse!” Exe shouted glancing up from the panel beside her. *“It’s causing local warping of the planet cell!”* All eyes focused on the central display as the blast wave radiated out in all directions.

“Origin?” yelled Peorth.

“I put it somewhere on the south Sagami coast,” said Exe.

“Can you pinpoint the epicenter?”

“No, the intensity is such it’s swamping the regional sensors!”

Peorth had seen such an event only twice before. Fear took hold of her. *“Notify central command. Tell them we have a possible termination event of a first-class entity.”*

On the monitors above the wavefront began to collapse.

Chrono looked over the panel puzzled. *“Maybe it’s -.”*

“I’ve got an exit point!” Ere shouted from the far end of the room. *“I make it 35 degrees north 37 minutes 19 – it’s Tariki Hongan temple!”* Shock rippled through the room but Peorth was already gone, racing with several others toward the portal.

“Give me emergency release - main gateway seal, command authorization Peorth!” she shouted diving over the balcony.

They arrived at the temple to a heartbreaking scene as Belldandy continued attempting to raise a field over Keiichi’s lifeless body. *“Please - please,”* she murmured trying to hold her hands steady as she lifted her fingers once more. In their time together Belldandy could count on one hand the number times she had pressed her lips to Keiichi’s. But as her field collapsed once more she did so now without reservation, trying anything to provide him with a measure of her power.

“Move!” shouted Peorth shoving her aside. *“We’ve got him Bell,”* she said moving air into his lungs as they raised the seals around him.

“He was – he was struck,” she began.

“I see it Bell,” Peorth said sweeping her hands over him she and the others began opening the necessary protections. Belldandy could only watch as goddesses quickly filled in around her, each directing a differ path to his body.

Mortality

“Careful! *I think it’s the Feng*,” Peorth warned. With a downward motion she forced her power into him, destroying the remaining poison where it lay. “Much has soaked into him Bell but I’ve gotten what I can,” she breathed finally.

“His heart echoes once more,” Ex said sitting up beside her as a moment later Keiichi gasped for breath, Ere catching him as he turned to one side.

“Stay focused everyone. There is still much to do. It’s strange, he’s terribly weak. I’ve never seen this kind of effect before,” Peorth observed worriedly.

“Shouldn’t he have stabilized by now?”

“I’m not sure what effect the agent has on a human body, or even if we can inhibit it.”

An explosion on the ground behind them signaled Urd’s sudden arrival. “What is it Bell?!” she said pushing her way to the front.

“It’s Keiichi. *It’s bad Urd!*” she sobbed.

“*Oh no.*” She closed in with the others as they redoubled their efforts. Their anger, barely contained to this point now boiled over. “Demonic scum!” growled Ex.

“Are they insane?!” hissed Ere.

“They should all be destroyed,” Ex echoed venomously. “What kind of animals attack innocents? To think they would target a human.”

“Keiichi wasn’t their target,” Belldandy murmured.

“What do you mean?”

“It was an accident. He was trying to protect me. If he hadn’t saved me -,” she cried breaking down.

“*It’s alright Bell,*” Ere said comforting her.

“No, it was my fault. I wasn’t paying attention. I was so concerned about -,” she stopped, crying once more.

“We’re with you now Bell,” Ere nodded hugging her. Yet even as she did a pall seemed to fall over the others present. They grew quiet . . . hesitant.

“*Peorth?*” Ex asked giving her a questioning glance.

The goddess grimaced. “Bell are you saying Keiichi *intentionally* intervened to save you?”

“He was my protector,” she said touching her head to his.

Keiichi Morisato

Peorth hands slowed, her eyes beginning to tear. “*So you’re saying he made a conscious choice . . .*”

Belldandy looked up, her eyes growing wide as the full weight of the question now fell upon her. She looked back saying nothing. Peorth closed her eyes fighting the terrible weight of regret. But Belldandy’s fearful sobs had already begun. “*No Peorth, PLEASE!*”

“*I’m sorry Bell,*” she replied.

Desperately Belldandy tried to catch her eye, pathetically trying to smile to staunch her growing panic. “*No, no, it’s alright, you can still help,*” she pleaded with them.

“You know we can’t Bell,” Peorth replied moving off wiping away her own tears.

“*Peorth I’m begging you-*”

Urd’s voice grew behind them, “This is ridiculous! Don’t worry Bell, there’s nothing those here can do that you and I cannot!”

“You know that won’t change anything Urd. You know we would help if we could. *Any of us.* But he made a conscious choice to intercede - thereby affecting his own fate. And thus he is bound to its outcome. Now that we know, we must stop our intercession. Anything done further by us, any of us, from this point on would certainly be reversed. If we stop now it is my hope that which we provided in innocence may be maintained. You know we’d do more if we could.”

Belldandy rose slowly, eyes unfocused taking in the scene as though she no longer recognized them. Before her Keiichi sputtered as Ere shook her head refusing to leave his side, “We can’t leave him now, not like this. He won’t survive if we leave him like this!”

“I know. But what more we can do? Anything done from this point on would surely be reversed. Come with us Bell. You will need our help in the days ahead. Urd can manage what remains here.”

Belldandy flinched as though struck. She stepped back unsteadily, yet growing with fearful power, “*He is not going to die,*” she said bitterly.

“I understand Bell. But what can you do?”

Mortality

"He-is-not-going-to-die!!" she said in a voice that stopped them in their tracks.

"But if it is heaven's will -," Ex began.

"I'D BURN HEAVENS TO SAVE HIM!!!" she shouted as the winds around them now roared to life with terrifying power.

"That's treason!" gasped Peorth.

"No, it's a spontaneous utterance," Urd said trying to calm them while keeping a careful eye in case any decided to act on her words. "Made in a moment of extreme duress," she said as thunder sounded letting them know how any action might end. They looked at one another nervously. "You need to come with us Bell. You're not well. It's completely understandable," Peorth said lowering her voice.

Belldandy looked to Urd with eyes that asked only one question: *What do I do Urd? What do I do?!*

The fear in her sister's eyes struck her to the core. *We must think quickly; but what?* "We - we will stay here," she said finally. "To heal him," she said nodding to her sister.

"What?!"

"Nothing prevents us from attempting to heal him using any knowledge or technique possessed by this realm - only that which does not naturally exist here."

Peorth looked at them in disbelief. "Don't you understand? Even *with* our abilities, we're uncertain of what's happening or even if he can be saved. What possible hope do you think you have of saving him using only what exists here?!"

Urd's manner grew grim, *"What we do and how we do it is no longer a concern of yours.* Leave us! For we have work to do," she replied. There were protests but Peorth raised her hand knowing any further discussion was pointless. The longer they stayed at the temple the more unwanted attention they drew. And so she and the other goddesses left the sisters that day, kneeling together beside Keiichi, his still form lying beneath the trees of the courtyard. Peorth left wondering what she would say to them when next they met. In the awful silence that followed Belldandy put her arm under Keiichi listening intently to his heart. *"What do we do Urd? How do we help Keiichi?!"*

Keiichi Morisato

She searched the hollows of her sister's face. *The truth is I have no idea. But we need to think of something, and quickly.*

Urd stared at the waters of the pond.

"Takumi," she said finally. "He knows their medicine. He may have an idea."

"Perhaps," agreed Belldandy. "Bring him Urd. *Wherever he is bring him here now!*"

In an instant she was gone, soon returning with her disoriented companion who stumbled down beside her as they appeared on the temple steps.

Gaining his bearings he came over only to grow pale upon seeing the condition of the man who on more than one occasion had saved him from harm.

"What happened?" he demanded

"He was struck by a demon's poison."

He looked back blankly. "Can't you take him to a specialist for that?"

"Do you think you'd be here if we could?!" Urd shouted.

He looked him over once more. "This is bad Urd. Very bad indeed. We need to get him to a hospital. *Now.*"

"We can't take him to a hospital."

"*We have no choice.*"

"And what will we tell them is wrong with him?"

"I don't think that's our biggest concern right now."

"It is. They'll spend time looking for what they expect. We know it's not. We can't afford to waste what little time we have. We need something else. *Something more.*"

"Like what? What can I do Urd?!"

"*DO ANYTHING YOU CAN!*" she cried to him desperately.

He now understood the depth of their predicament. *They have no idea what to do*, he thought. It took him a moment to realize Belldandy was shouting something to him now.

"*Tell me what occurs to you – anything at all!* Anything you might need, anything that might help Keiichi. We can provide you with anything that exists in this world. Just tell me what you think he needs!"

Looking into her terrified eyes he realized he did not have the courage to tell her the truth. He pressed his hands to his head

Mortality

trying think, to think of something – anything that might be of help. “You say you can take me anywhere?” he said finally. “Anywhere.”

“Very well. *Take me to the palace of Aki Sakai.*” A moment later the group departed Tariki Hongan temple.

...

“*Our Lord wishes to see you-*,” the approaching demon said.

“Me? What does she want with me?!” Mara asked innocently.

“I do not know - nor do I care,” grunted the demon.

Cautiously Mara followed the guide, ascending the winding stone steps making their way across the eastern cliff face to the plateau overlooking the bay. Reaching the top Mara saw her, the Lord of all Demonkind, standing regally at the edge of the precipice framed against the setting sun. Mara shuffled forward cautiously. For several long moments Hild said nothing before finally clearing her throat. “I just want to tell you Mara, you can stop with those hung-dog looks. It’s starting to irritate me. *I know you were the one who alerted Morisato.*”

For a second everything around Mara seemed to freeze as she felt the air evaporate from her lungs. She closed her eyes hoping the end would be quick. But as the moments passed and nothing happened she ventured a tentative look from the corner of her eye. “There is no need for concern,” Hild replied lightly sweeping past her. “Of course I knew it was you. After all - *I planned for you to tell him all along.*”

“*WHAT?!!*”

“You’re far too predictable my dear. I knew your character would force you to tell him, just as I knew what he would do once you spoke. I even knew you would wait until the last possible moment. In truth sometimes it’s rather boring being a woman of my faculties,” she shrugged continuing her walk along the cliff face.

“But Belldandy -.”

“-Was never the intended target of the attack. Why would she be? Such actions would only exacerbate problems with our counterparts, likely increasing their numbers in this realm in the long run. After all they would want to find her, take revenge, et cetera, et cetera. But the loss of Morisato? Through his own action no less? Well to be perfectly honest -

Keiichi Morisato

I'm not convinced members of the upper council were ever very enthusiastic about his particular situation to begin with."

Mara began to feel sick. *She used me - to cause it all!*

"But - we can't kill humans," she stammered.

"We can't *intentionally* kill humans," Hild corrected.

"However if one were to become willingly involved through their own free will in a fight against a legitimate target . . . well there's nothing anyone can do about that. But really, what's the likelihood such an event would ever occur?" she said smiling.

"But Morisato - he didn't die immediately. He's still suffering . . ."

"Oh Mara, sometimes you sound positively like a goddess.

That too I'm afraid is a necessity. For it will serve as a valuable reminder to Belldandy, or anyone else in the realm foolish enough to seek out such a relationship that such things should never be undertaken. They are simply too fragile . . ."

She turned staring into Mara's eyes, "Don't be upset my dear, *you* didn't know anything about this. You're completely innocent. *And played your part well.*"

Now Mara understood. If it appeared they had intentionally targeted Morisato, Belldandy certainly would have received all necessary help to revive him. But in the present circumstance?

"Why didn't you just tell me? I could have - ."

"Wrecked the plan?" suggested Hild. "Oh no. Don't take this the wrong way Mara, but I thought it best to proceed this way. Mara looked to the horizon trying to clear her head of all emotion. *If she sees my thoughts now . . .*

Hild's voice drifted beside her sympathetically, "Don't be too upset. Just think of all the credit you'll receive for removing such a persistent irritation to our operation," she cooed.

Mara recognized the tendrils of her encircling verbal spell, working hard to resist it now, yet gave no sign. "S-strictly speaking, the approach depends upon the absence of any evidence which might demonstrate Belldandy was not the intended target of the attack," she observed

"*True -*," Hild said placing her hand upon her shoulder. "And we've certainly made rather . . . *sincere* efforts in that regard," she said letting it fall away. "But really, who in any such

Mortality

position of knowledge would want to make such an accusation? And even if they did what proof could they offer?"

"Of course Lady Hild," Mara nodded beginning to sweat. "I only mention it to protect your interests." For the briefest moment she let her mind wander over what might *really* have happened to the spirits sent to intercept Belldandy; grimly observing that disappearance of such creatures would not trigger an echo in the doublet. She wondered if her own fate was not already similarly sealed.

"Mara you don't look well," Hild observed sympathetically.

"I - I'm just tired. I need to rest," she replied soberly. "

"Of course my dear. By all means go," she said directing her with a wave. Slowly she rolled up her sleeves watching Mara descend the stairs. *There may be spots you still need hardening my dear, but in time I think you will make an excellent demon.* She returned to the cliff's edge once more considering the serene beauty of the sun over the setting bay below.

The Palace of Aki Sakai

They arose in a set of offices deep within the labyrinth of the empty medical wing. Quickly Belldandy laid Keiichi down as Urd looked around. “What do we do now?” she said searching the room.

“Nothing. Please just stay here and be as quiet as possible,” Takumi said disappearing out the door. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Quickly he darted down the corridor passing unnoticed out of the closed medical wing and into the main passageway, mixing with the tide of busy doctors, patients and researchers as he descended the stairs heading for the main annex. A moment later he spotted his quarry reclining in one corner of the medical library.

“Aki!” he called discreetly.

Her head popped up, peering at him with her glasses over a medical journal. “*Takumi?! What the heck are you doing here? I thought you weren’t supposed to come back?*” she said adjusting her ponytail.

“I came to see you. I need your help!”

She straightened herself more now. “What about?”

“Not here . . .,” he motioned. “Your office.”

She reached down retrieving her prized coffee cup leading him past the paneled concourses through the stacks to her rear office. Shutting the door she turned on him. “Okay spill it!”

“Well I - sort of have an emergency research project.”

“*An emergency research project?*” she said suspiciously.

“Yeah kind of – I really need your help! And your advice. You’re the only one who can do it!” he said conscious of time. “I know it’s asking a lot but - I need one of the isolabs on the new floor that hasn’t opened yet -.”

“*Stop. Stop right there. What do you need an isolab for?!*”

“Uh well, some research work I need to do . . .”

“And what does this ‘emergency research’ *entail* exactly?”

Mortality

“Uh well a um . . . *person*,” he muttered as quietly as possible trying to make the request sound routine.

“*What?!!!*”

“Yeah I know and I’m sorry. But I have nowhere else to go. I need the isolab’s resources. Right now.

“*Are you insane?!*”

“I’m begging you Aki,” he said trying to control his panic. “I know it sounds crazy but please. You’re my only hope.”

“*Only hope?* Of course I’m not! Take them to a hospital.”

“I - *can’t*,” he admitted reluctantly.

“Why not? Takumi what are you mixed up in?!”

“I can’t explain it now, but no hospital could effectively treat them. It’s not like anything I’ve ever seen before. Their best hope lies here.”

“*Not like anything you’ve ever seen before?* You mean it’s an unknown agent?!”

“We have all the facilities we need here,” he reasoned. “You know holding him here in an isolab is far safer than any other option.”

“Wait a minute. What do you mean *here* in the isolab?!”

“Aki you know I wouldn’t do this if it weren’t the most dire -.”

“They’re here *now*?!”

“Umm yeah, he’s in isolab-B.”

Her frustration was beginning to border on comical. “*Takumi!*”

“Don’t worry.”

“*Every time you say that I only worry more!*”

“Yeah I see your point, but it’s the most secure place I could think to take him and keep him while I investigate. All the outer passageways are locked and empty and the unit won’t be populated until next month.”

“And what do you plan to do then?!”

“By then I don’t think it will be a problem.”

“*You’ve just touched on my biggest concern!*”

He lowered his voice hoping his companions could not hear him. “If the worst happens Aki *I absolutely guarantee* he’ll be gone without a trace - *and no questions asked.*”

“How can you possibly guarantee that?!”

“I got him into your encrypted ward in the middle of the day without anyone noticing didn’t I?”

The Palace of Aki Sakai

“The fact that I haven’t heard any alarms or seen security personnel running around yet doesn’t exactly allay my concerns. What have you become?”

“Someone in desperate need of a favor,” he replied.

“Taku-chan I’m not sure we could keep this a secret even if we wanted to.”

“Aki trust me, I have *reliable assurances* that no one will come into the unit as long as we’re here. We can move a couple workstations into the lab to handle most of the analytics. I’ll perform all the patient contact work myself to minimize any potential hazards and monitor him round the clock. I just need the capabilities of the unit for a week or so. All the data we generate will be encrypted and handled locally so no one should be the wiser. *Please Aki*, there’s no time to spare.”

Perhaps it was the earnestness of his voice - perhaps something else within her which caused her resolve to weaken. *It’s not just anyone who’s asking*, she thought. “Alright,” she said finally. “I’ll initiate a connection to Iso-B and change the administrative and admittance codes. You should have access to the clinical network within the next five minutes. Please don’t make me regret this.”

“Trust me you won’t. And thank you. I know I have no right to ask any this of you,” he said heading for the door.

“T?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you - need a hand?”

He looked back somberly. “Yes. I need to set up for basic blood, metabolite and immune -.”

“I know. I’ll bring the kits,” she said rushing out.

He returned to the lab just in time to see Urd exiting out into the hallway. “Didn’t I just say don’t do anything!” he cried.

“We just remembered about Skuld. She went to the river today. I’m going to go get her.”

“Now?”

“It’s not exactly like we can leave her tied up to a post in the back of the Temple for a few days with food and water. At least Bell says we can’t. Besides, you really want her trying to find us on her own, coming here and asking a lot of questions?”

Mortality

"I suppose not," he murmured reluctantly.

With Urd gone, Takumi now had no choice but to focus on the tasks at hand. "Bell we need to get started. Before my colleague gets here I need you to tell me everything, *everything* you know about what happened to Keiichi."

"He was struck by demon's poison."

"I understand. And how does that work exactly?"

"If it's the Blue Feng it works by strangling the tree of life."

"Which means what exactly? It's choking his respiration?"

"*Rest -pyration?*"

"His breathing."

"The winds of his body are not the primary cause of his illness. At least it wouldn't be for a goddess," she said sniffing. "I'm not sure for a human."

"Alright then, where is his most *primary* problem located?"

She looked back at him puzzled. "I told you - the tree of life. It withers within him," she said becoming more agitated.

"And what *is* that exactly?"

"The tree connecting all living things." (*Why does he not understand?*)

"The tree connecting all living things. Do you mean his vascular system? His heart?"

She began to panic.

"Perhaps his central nervous system?" he said trying again.

"*Central -?*" she began to tremble.

"Here or here, or here," he said tracing his hands to each region.

"All of them!" she cried.

At that moment Aki burst in, her hands filled with packet carriers and syringes. "Go!" she shouted tossing him the first set ignoring the girl. "Who's that?" she asked opening the kit.

"Girlfriend," he said without looking up. Before he could say another word the door swung open as Urd and Skuld rushed in.

"Who are they?"

"More -," he replied tying off Keiichi's arm.

"Did anyone see them?!"

"Trust me no one saw them."

"*Taku-chan are you sure?!?*"

"Believe me I'm 100% certain."

The Palace of Aki Sakai

Seeing how shaken he was she held off further inquiry for the moment. "First tube!" Takumi called tossing her the blood-filled vial. Aki marked it quickly dropping it into the receiver just in time to see the horrified look on Belldandy's face.

"T -," she warned.

"Bell are you alright?" he called looking over.

"What are you doing to Keiichi?!" she asked terrified.

"Just collecting some samples so we can see what's going on."

He could see her face starting to go green.

"You mean you're removing his life essence?!"

"Um, just a little bit-," he began, stopping upon seeing a silent warning from Urd. "Err - no actually. That's not what we're doing at all," he replied.

"Then what are you doing!" she asked, her voice growing dangerously, the walls beginning to creak.

"Bell maybe we should go outside and let them do their work," Urd suggested taking hold of her arm.

She shook her off, "What are you doing? Is that hurting him?!"

The agitated goddess now began looking around the room as though seeing everything present in some disturbing new light.

"What is this place!" she demanded.

"It's just a place to . . . understand how the human body works," Takumi attempted.

"By taking it apart!"

"Well . . . sort of."

Urd winced at the choice of words. But at that moment Belldandy froze, her eyes fixed on something in a fluid filled jar. "What is that?!" she asked terrified.

He looked over his shoulder. "That? It's just a piece of perfused liver."

"From a body? *Does Keiichi have one of those?!*"

"Well that one was damaged and needed to be -."

The goddess began to gag.

"Okay - I think we've had enough show and tell for one day,"

Urd said grabbing her. "I'm going to take her next door," she said, herself beginning to become a bit queasy.

"NO! I'm not leaving Keiichi in this place. If he can endure it so can I!"

Mortality

“Yes that’s fine, I’m just asking you to ‘endure’ it in the next room,” Urd said pushing her out the door.

Aki’s eyes narrowed accusingly at Takumi upon their exit. “I can see those guys are going to be a big help to us,” she said sealing off the last of the vials. Only then did she spot the additional set of eyes staring back at her from the corner.

“Taku-chan there seems to be one more,” she observed.

Skuld, maybe you should -.”

“Shut up I’m staying. I’ve got a strong stomach. *I can stand intense gore!*”

Ten minutes later Aki and Takumi were standing side by side, breathing hard on the far side of the facility from their run through the empty wing down to the lab’s blood analyzers. “I marked it *priority* but we probably won’t have anything more than the basics over the next four to five hours.”

“Understood. Which means we’re going to need to make some educated guesses in the interim. Do you think we should have told them where we were headed? I don’t think racing past them without a word inspired much confidence.”

“Why? So the girlfriend could freak out again?” Aki asked.

“Good point. So what do you think?”

“What do *you* think?”

“Honestly I have no idea,” he shrugged.

“Some kind of disease?”

“Honestly it doesn’t seem likely. The onset was too fast. It’s only been an hour since contact. Biotic reaction?” he suggested.

“You mean like anaphylaxis? Possible, but the epinephrine we gave him doesn’t seem to be doing much. Makes me think it’s not immunologic. We’ll get a better idea once blood and toxicology comes back tomorrow. “

“I didn’t notice anything remarkable about the wound.”

“Me neither,” Aki said as they strolled together back through the empty wing. It had been too long since they had talked like this she thought. Everything had happened so suddenly last year. A part of her wished it could continue. “-Yeah it doesn’t feel right does it?” she heard him muse. “Some kind of venom seems more likely.”

The Palace of Aki Sakai

“Yeah that’s got me worried too. Like something we haven’t seen before or might not have an antiserum to. Still, seems a bit slow for venom doesn’t it? A neurotoxin would have paralyzed him in a few minutes. And there are no major hematologic signs.”

“There are numerous different kinds of toxins. Maybe some type of elemental poison. Like lead or arsenic.”

“Maybe. Either way all we can do is ramp up the supportive measures until we know more. Hopefully it will give us enough time.”

“And if it’s a faster acting poison?” he asked.

“If he’s alive in 24 hours we’ll know it’s not.”

“*Happy thought*,” he replied rubbing her arms. As they reached the door to the isolab his voice grew soft, “Aki I – we, can’t begin to tell you how much your help today means to us. I know it seems like I’m putting you at a huge risk but please try not to worry. They may not look it but there is a lot more to them than meets the eye.”

“You must owe him a lot, going through all this for him.”

For the first time that day he seemed to relax his guard, his mood giving way to melancholy. He nodded to her, “He – *Keiichi*, he held a lot together while I was . . . *away*. A lot that mattered. But it’s not just that. Aki have you ever seen two people *who were just so* -,” he stopped, shaking his head to prevent himself from faltering altogether in front of her.

“Never mind,” he said taking hold of the door to their domicile.

“It’s . . . a long story.”

“Does it have anything to do with why you left Taku-chan?” she said pressing her hand over his on the door handle.

“Partially, but not entirely,” he said pushing into the room.

Inside three anxious pairs of eyes met them at their entrance.

“Have you - *cured him yet*?” Belldandy asked. It was her tone that caught him, cleaving him to the core. Like the plea of a child who knows their most beloved toy is never coming back yet feels compelled to ask anyway, hoping against hope.

His eyes watered. “Aki, I think we’re going to need to stay here,” he said apologetically.

She nodded. “There are some adjoining offices through those doors. I’m sure we can dig up some bedding from the labs. It

Mortality

won't be much but it will be something. We're on the third floor so at least it will be relatively quiet."

"We still have a couple hours until sunset. We'll get things sorted out here," he muttered gratefully.

"There is no need to make other arrangements," said Belldandy. "Because I'm staying right here."

"Where? There isn't any place for you here."

"*I'll be fine!*" she said tight lipped, holding tight to Keiichi's blanket, gently drawing it around him.

"Bell it won't make any difference if you're twenty feet away."

"I'm fine Urd! He's hurt, he's hurt and *he could be . . .*" she pressed her hands to her forehead trying to stop her tears as the full weight of the day now bearing down on her. "I didn't protect him! I'm not leaving him alone now."

"Bell -."

"Don't say anything more. Get out. All of you! *It's all my fault.* If only I had been more -." she started to cry.

"No additional problems?" Aki said studying the sisters.

"We'll handle it. Just give me a little time. I'll speak to you tomorrow," he motioned walking her out. "And thank you again for all your help."

By the time the makeshift beds were made and food procured the sun had sunk low in the sky, hanging like a dark red omen in the west. Takumi stepped out onto the terrace spotting Urd, standing alone with her back to him as though carved in stone. Cautiously he approached her, encircling his arms around hers, kissing the delicate brow that now reflected such terrible pain. He put his head to hers looking into her eyes, eyes he had grown to know so well this past year. "*You know I forget sometimes -*," he whispered to her.

"What?" she replied continuing to gaze out over the city.

"How powerful you really are. And what you're truly capable of. Sometimes it scares me. Especially at times like this. When your mind turns to things truly dangerous. Please don't do anything that would take away our happiness Urd."

"What could I do?" she replied unmoving. He knew better than to deliberate at a time like this. Patiently he moved beside her folding his arms to look over the twilight city below.

The Palace of Aki Sakai

“What good is a system that does not protect the innocent?” she asked finally.

“Would going to war really change that?”

She shifted her gaze looking farther to sea. “I thought maybe, if there was enough chaos, perhaps they would forget them; leave them be,” she whispered wistfully.

“Do you really believe that? That they would just let them go? *In either realm?*”

“I suppose not-,” she said her voice growing sad. “Rules are rules. Even in the heavens.”

“Why is all of this happening Urd? Why can’t you just fix him, you and Bell?”

“Goddesses of sufficiently high rank can create all manner of new programs. But inhibit an ongoing one? In that our abilities are limited to just three options: (i) *prevent execution* of the threat program, (ii) initiate a *counter program* or, (iii) *directly modify* the threat program - assuming one can gain access to its code which in most cases we obviously can’t.”

“And in Keiichi’s case this threat program has been executed and is currently running?”

“Yes.”

“Can’t you modify the code?”

“To do that we’d have to know the program, its architect, and gain direct access to them.”

“Which could be anyone? Any demon?”

“Yes.”

“Sounds like initiating a counter-program is your only option.”

“Except that in this case we are prevented from doing that.”

“Why? He helped a goddess. Why can’t a goddess help him in return?”

“Because if such actions were allowed humanity could soon find itself entangled in a war between realms as each side sought to recruit them.”

“As opposed to the current system which is so much better?”

“I didn’t say I agreed. I’m just telling you the current state. Keiichi intervened in a legitimate action as far as they’re concerned. He made a conscious decision to risk his life for Bell’s. His fate is therefore bound to the consequences of that choice. If he wasn’t such actions would be without meaning.

Mortality

Our only recourse now is to defeat the program using knowledge available within this realm.”

“But the program could be anything! It could *easily* be beyond our capabilities here.”

“-And almost certainly is.” Urd’s shoulders seemed to sag, now at the end of her strength. “I know in my heart that it’s hopeless. But I just can’t break it to Bell. Not about Keiichi. *Not yet.*”

The world of the goddesses was beginning to look very different to Takumi. “And all of this is legal?! They can just come and do this to you whenever they want? How do you live?!”

“You need to remember that goddesses are not normally easy to track down. Typically we aren’t in the same place, or even on this plane of existence for very long. And no demon’s going to come looking for us in the heavens.”

“Yes but as for the three of you, they could just come and take you at any time?!”

“Skuld’s not currently at the age of majority. As for me well, any demon attempting to pull that off would want to make that calculation *very* carefully.”

“Bit dicey going after the leader of Demonkind’s kid?”

“Among other things. *But Belldandy?* She’d be a huge prize.”

“Damn, there must be times when you want to just pick her up and run.”

“If Keiichi . . . if something happens to him, that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

“Would you - ever come back?” he asked feeling alone.

“I would try. But I just don’t know . . . *because I’m such a failure!*” she said suddenly bursting into tears.

“It’s not your fault Urd.”

“*Of course it is. I failed them Tai!* I failed them and now . . .”

“What could you have done differently?!” he demanded.

But she was quite beyond reason by now, worn out by the day and grief. “*I’m no good Tai. I’m no good! I never have been!*” she sobbed leaning against him.

Though beyond reason, she was not beyond love, “*Shh of course you’re not - of course you’re not, my love,*” he murmured. “*You’re my girl, my good girl -*,” he said rocking

The Palace of Aki Sakai

her. "None of us would have made it this far without you," he said feeling her breathing beginning to slow.

"Why?" she said quietly blinking her tears away. "What's so good about me?" she demanded putting her head to him.

"*Um well* - the way you laugh. The way your eyes light up when you think you've found something interesting," he said feeling her begin to soften. "The way you look after us even when you're pretending not to," he said rubbing her shoulders. Her fingers circled his now. "Don't ever leave me Tai," she whispered, pushing against him as they turned to face the city. "They'd have to kill me," he replied placing his head atop hers. "Come to think of it even that didn't work. We're not done yet Urd; not by a long shot. We'll find it; something. We have to," he said encouragingly.

"Of course," she replied trying to sound hopeful.

That night Urd slept fitfully within the office. In her dream she felt herself walking, strolling along the shoreline with the blue ocean stretching before her as Keiichi and Bell walked hand in hand above her on the bluffs overhead. She continued at the water's edge searching for Skuld when she heard Keiichi call out, pointing to something far out at sea as Belldandy came by his side. She was about turn to see what it was about when the ledge fractured giving way. She shouted a warning but the cliff collapsed, watching as Keiichi fell, slipping from Belldandy's grasp down the face toward the rocks below. She ran trying to cross the distance. *I can get him*, she thought pouring on the speed as his body plummeted toward the rocks.

"*KEIICHI!!*" she screamed moving in a blur before he struck.

"I got you, *I GOT YOU!*" she cried hugging him tight.

"*I know Urd, thank you,*" he replied.

She looked at him, closely studying the features of his face as the wind whipped his hair. "*Keiichi,*" she said suddenly awake, blinking back tears against her pillow.

"Sorry if I disturbed you," Takumi said getting up.

"Did I - say anything?" she asked wiping her face.

"You love him Urd. I'll say no more," he replied heading out.

Mortality

Reaching the lab that morning Takumi saw that Belldandy was right where he had left her the previous night; curled up with her arm around Keiichi. But today something was different. Today the face on the bed was blinking. And because of that they eyes looking at him were smiling very brightly. Though it was clear from her silent expression that she knew Morisato was not himself; he was conscious. And that indeed was something to be thankful for.

She lay with her face next to his whispering what he did not know as he came into the room. Watching them in that moment a strange feeling took hold of him, like he was peering into a great abyss, a vast pool whose ripples might save or destroy the world. He cleared his throat alerting them, "Morisato can you hear me?"

He nodded.

"How do you feel?"

"Alright," he said giving him a tentative smile.

"He says he feels alright. That's good isn't it? Isn't that a good sign?" Belldandy insisted quickly.

"Of course, of course it is," he said searching Morisato's eyes.

"Keiichi, we've taken you to a secure medical wing for treatment. We should know more soon." Keiichi shook his head appearing not to have heard him or perhaps not to care, simply holding Belldandy's to reassure her. "*Safe*?" he asked. Belldandy looked down, unable to speak.

"You were the one who was struck Keiichi. Belldandy's fine," he assured him.

"*Good*," he breathed slowly.

For Belldandy the strain had become too much. She looked away, rocking as tears leaked from the corners of her eyes.

"Bell can I speak to Keiichi alone for a moment?" he asked.

She shook her head no. Only reassurances from Keiichi finally convinced her.

"I'll be just outside," she said finally closing the door.

Takumi smiled back pleasantly, at least until the door was closed. "Okay now how do you really feel Morisato?" he said sitting down as soon as they were alone.

"Alright," he nodded.

"That proves it."

The Palace of Aki Sakai

“What?”

“You’ll never make first class goddess,” he replied.

“Perhaps not,” Keiichi agreed lying back, allowing a portion of the pain to now eek through in the goddess’s absence. “I feel achy. Weak. Like my veins are on fire.”

“Belldandy told me you were struck by something yesterday, and something about a tree. So it could be your circulatory system. That was about all I could get out of her. Anything else you can tell me? Anything that might help?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Okay. We’re trying to run down a few things now. We brought you here because the goddesses are somehow prevented from using their powers to fix what’s wrong with you. You can see the strain it’s putting on Belldandy. I don’t pretend to understand it. The truth is I don’t think even they know exactly what’s going on right now.”

Keiichi looked up his voice growing tight. “I know. I feel it. I see it in Belldandy’s face. If things . . . if things go badly -.”

“Yeah, yeah don’t worry. I’ll make sure Bell gets tucked in nice and tight every night,” Takumi replied.

“Why do you have to be like that?!”

“Because you’re pissing me off Morisato. Let’s just see what we can do before we worry about what we can’t.”

“Yeah,” he replied wincing. “I’m just, worried about them. Worried about how they’ll be, worried there may not be much time left.” he cautioned.

“Understood. We’ll do what we can for the pain but now -.”

The door flew open as Aki swept in followed closely by Belldandy, Urd and Skuld. As the goddesses swarmed around Keiichi, Aki pulled him aside showing him the report.

“Preliminary results: *all normal*. Did he say anything?”

“Not really. Feels weak, achy. Nothing specific. Do we know anything else?”

She straightened her ponytail. “Most of the toxicology has come back. Same thing: Normal.”

He closed his eyes breathing a sigh of relief. “Weird. But it would appear to rule out most forms of direct poison. And the cellular assays?”

“Nothing yet,” she replied shaking her head.

Mortality

“Not surprising. It’s still early. All the same you’ve done a remarkable job getting as much as you have so quickly. He seems better than he did yesterday, which means the supportive therapy you initiated is probably helping.”

“Yeah, but which part?”

“Beats me. For now let’s take what we can get and be satisfied. We should keep everything going for now at least, even the antivirals. At least the serum results suggest he’s not contagious,” observed Takumi.

“*What?*” I thought you said you knew he wasn’t contagious!”

“Did I say that? I don’t think I said that . . .”

“*You said it!*”

“I think your imagining things, you’ve been under a lot of pressure lately,” he smiled, relieved as she was that their patient was still alive.

“No I’m not!” she said punching at him playfully.

“And what’s going on here?” Urd asked slipping between them.

“Oh we were just - *nothing*,” he said.

“And who are you exactly?” asked Aki noticing the woman’s uncomfortable stare.

“Oh sorry Aki this is -.”

“-A colleague who works *closely* with Dr. Sato,” Urd replied. Yes, he relies on my talents *quite a lot*,” she added assuredly.

“*What are you doing Urd?*” Takumi whispered behind her. But Aki seemed unperturbed, digging her hands into her lab coat. “I see,” she replied surveying the goddess from head to toe. “And what are those talents exactly?”

“She’s a, umm, a uh . . .”

Urd frowned at the interval it appeared to be taking him to formulate a response. “I’m an expert in body analysis,” she replied.

“*Body-analysis?*” echoed Aki.

“Yes,” she replied, comically shifting her posture in a way she thought a scientist might. “When I look at a body I’m very good at determining *what’s about to happen to it*,” she said her eyes narrowing.

“She means she’s a biochemist,” Takumi interjected quickly.

The Palace of Aki Sakai

"I see. Well then you'll no doubt want to have a look at these results," Aki said handing her the chart.

Urd's eyes seemed to glaze for a moment taking in the long list of figures. "Ah yes, right here," she said tapping. "I see the 'Na' is elevated," she observed confidently.

"That's sodium - and it's normal," Aki replied taking the clipboard back from her.

"Well that's the way we say it where I'm from," Urd snapped starting to blush. "Isn't that right Tai?!"

"Uh yeah, that's the way she -,," he began, knowing each word was only digging him deeper.

"Well at least we know your *expertise*," Aki said moving off to check the instruments.

Takumi felt Urd shift dangerously beside him. "You know in all the excitement yesterday I didn't catch your name," Urd said with a smile that made him nervous.

"Me? I'm Dr. Aki Sakai, acute care specialist and author of -."

"Yes, yes, Dr. Sakai, you remember - *the one who's helping us*," he said grabbing Urd's hand if for no other reason than to prevent anything from exploding.

"Aki, that's nice name - *for a little tramp*," she murmured heading for the door.

By noon Aki and Takumi had managed to collect the remainder of the follow-up samples, either by distracting Belldandy or by waiting for her eyelids to droop long enough to make it so.

When they'd finished Takumi dropped his lab coat leaving to find Urd. He found her at the back of their makeshift loft kicking impatiently at the wall as she floated back over the bed.

"Don't do that!"

"Why? Is Miss Lab Coat going to come in here and give me a ticket?" she said swinging her feet.

"Never mind," he said thinking it best to skirt her mood for the moment. "I should get back."

"Let me guess - *to the lab*?"

"Well there is this small project I was asked to work on."

"And what exactly are you going back there to work *on*?"

"Why are you being like this Urd?"

Mortality

She put her head up beside him, “I don’t like that girl - with her stupid glasses, her stupid lab coat, *stupid notebook* . . .

Taku-kun, that doesn’t even make any sense!”

“Is it possible you’re overreacting a bit?”

“Me? Overreacting? Of course not. If anything I’m underreacting.”

“That doesn’t really make. . .”

“So fortunate she was able to help us . . . Tell me when you told me to bring you here, was it because she was the most qualified person you knew? Or just the most attractive?”

“I don’t really know. After you the rest of the world just kind of looks like cat food.”

She looked back at him doing her best to try and maintain her frown. “Don’t try to charm me, I’m part demon you know -.”

“I’ve heard that.”

“-So I can tell if you’re lying.” She grabbed his face staring intently (some might say manically) into his eyes attempting to convince him of her otherworldly powers.

“So what’s the verdict?” he asked flatly.

“Oh it’s lucky you’re so cute,” she said hugging him.

“You know maybe you should go back to the temple?”

“Why? You want me out of the way?”

“Of course not! It’s just that we don’t know -.”

“Don’t worry about the temple. I’ve got top people on it.”

“Who?”

“*Top - people*,” she replied.

Tariki Hongan Temple had indeed begun to welcome a number of new visitors over the past few days as members of the Nekomi Tech auto club had, perhaps with a bit too much enthusiasm, taken up residence there. “Alright let’s get this stuff unloaded,” Tamiya said dropping down the first set of cases. “We’ve got a lot of stuff to bring in . . .”

The day all too soon wore into night as Urd tossed and turned in a vain attempt for sleep. It was after midnight when she finally gave up, pulling a blanket around her shoulders to walk out into the cool night air. “I thought you were out here,” she

The Palace of Aki Sakai

said seeing her sister standing on the balcony staring down at the city below. "What is it Bell?" she said coming behind her. "I was just thinking, thinking about you and I when we were young, in the days before Division. Those . . . *they were good days*," she said starting to cry.

"*I know*," Urd murmured putting her arms around her.

"*I wish mom was here*," she cried.

Urd nodded. "Me too. But you'll just have to make due with me kid," she said holding her. "But we've done okay so far haven't we?" she said shaking her.

"*Yes. Urd, what if . . . ?*"

"Don't think about it Bell. Keiichi's tougher than he looks. Just look at how long he's survived us."

"Of course. Yes of course you're right," she nodded.

"Bell have you, you know - tried what we discussed?"

"Examined their repositories of knowledge? I've checked everything I could find. Every hour, every moment Keiichi was asleep. I've looked and looked but none of it makes any sense! Their knowledge, its organization, even its form and description. It's just so too different from our own."

"Did try talking to Takumi about it?"

"I tried. I told him about the Feng and how it gnaws at the roots of Yggdrasil suffocating the tree of life. At least that's what it would do to us. I told him everything, but he just doesn't seem to understand. He keeps pointing to parts of Keiichi's body as though that was the problem. *Can you imagine?* Using words like 'hypoxia' or 'somnia' . . . He doesn't seem capable of understanding it."

"We must make him understand."

"I'm not sure we can."

"Why do you say that?"

"Urd don't be mad. You have to understand this is an emergency situation. I . . . looked into his mind."

"Don't tell me - nothing but dirty thoughts right?"

"Well there are a few things I want to ask you about later but the problem is, though there were many concepts of knowledge they just don't add up to anything I recognize. Nothing upon which to build an understanding"

Mortality

Urd rubbed her arms in the cold air beginning to realize the true desperation of their position. "If that's true it means -." "That there's no meaningful way we can help one another. Either they must find a cure in time . . . *or we do.*"

Urd knew now was not the time to point out the true scale of their problem. "Have - you given any thought to what Peorth said. About returning? I know the stress must be terrible. Maybe . . . maybe it's a good thing to return."

Belldandy leaned forward, her shoulders lowering on the railing, "Is that what you did Urd?" she said quietly. "When you thought all was lost? Did you just lie down and quit? No . . . and neither will I," she murmured.

"You know sooner or later they'll come for us Bell."

"No, not if things stay as they are. They have no reason to."

"And if it becomes necessary to take things beyond that?"

"*If they come they come,*" she replied. "And on that day we will part company. For both our sakes."

Despite the horror of the last few days Urd's heart felt suddenly light upon seeing her sister's resolve. She felt the strong urge to hug her as Bell looked down now at the city like a weary commander at the start of a long campaign. "You know that's never going to happen kid. Whatever happens I'm with you all the way."

"But we aren't the only ones to consider."

"*Those two will be fine,*" she said nudging her. "And so will Keiichi."

"Of course," she said saying the words as though they might protect him.

"Go to sleep Bell. You'll only worry him if he sees you looking worn out. Besides if Skuld wakes up and finds you missing she may go off to investigate. We don't need that." Urd pushed her onward toward bed, staying behind on the balcony. When she was gone she clasped her hands, shivering beneath the cloudless night sky.

...

Given their conversation the previous day Takumi suspected trouble might be brewing on the horizon. When he opened the door to the lab that morning he was sure of it.

The Palace of Aki Sakai

“Good morning Taku-kun!” called the figure leaning over the counter, pushing up her horn rimmed glasses as she gave her embarrassingly short skirt a tug.

“The effect - why it’s almost flawless,” he muttered looking for his notes.

“What’s the matter Taku-kuuun?! Don’t you like the way I’m dressed?” she pouted giving her skirt another tug. “I just thought I’d come to help you - *any way I could*,” she said biting her lip, batting her eyes at him. “Oh look!” she gasped suddenly clutching the clipboard to her chest tightly, “That light is flashing approximately 10% faster than it was yesterday! I must make a note!” she said quickly scribbling.

“Urd . . .”

“What’s the matter Taku-kun? Aren’t you happy? I mean I’m incredibly brilliant but apparently I don’t understand basic Japanese. Oh no that’s not it – it’s because it’s been a whole 5 minutes since I gave you a little squeeze!” she said pressing her chest to him.

“Again, is it possible you might be exaggerating just a bit?”

“What? Of course not. This is incredibly accurate. I’m so accurate I could be a camera. If anything this is a conservative portrait,” she said twirling her hair.

“I . . . really don’t think so.”

“Oh you’re right. I am forgetting something. I forgot to stare at you as though my glasses were set to X-ray mode,” she said leaning over the counter to peer at him creepily.

“Urd!”

“Shh I’m not done yet,” she said continuing to stare. “And who is this ‘Urd’ you keep talking about? Could it be that incredible depiction of womanhood I met yesterday? The one who’s sooo much cooler than I could ever be?” she said picking up a beaker to seductively slurp its contents.

“You know that’s formaldehyde right?”

“Phlaa!” she cried spitting it out. “Still probably tastes better than her mouth, which probably tastes like sp-.”

“Taku-kun I’ve got the results!” Aki shouted as the lab door once more swung open. “It looks like - ,” she stopped upon seeing Urd, not certain quite what it was she found distasteful about her appearance but fairly certain it was directed at her.

Mortality

She leaned forward adjusting her glasses as Urd did the same. *Yes there's something about her alright*, she thought.

"Well don't keep us in suspense!" Urd shouted attempting to mirror Aki's posture. "I need to write this down in my notebook." Aki peered back at her saying nothing as though trying to diagnose some peculiar form of mental condition. Her eyes shifted to Takumi. "Could you tell your 'assistant' the adults need to speak privately for a moment?"

"That's it! I demand you tell her who I am this instant Tai!"

"Who she *is*?" replied Aki.

"Yes. You see I - am a goddess!"

"A . . . goddess?" she repeated incredulously.

"Tell her Tai!"

"Uh yeah, she's a goddess," he said reluctantly.

Urd threw her hair back triumphantly exiting the lab.

"*She's also a little conceited -*" he whispered as the doors closed attempting to salvage the situation.

"*No kidding*," replied Aki. "I'm so glad you were able to bring her along. I can see she's going to be a major asset."

"Hey no need to be shy Aki, just tell me how you really feel?!"

He said smiling looking at the floor. "She's actually quite skilled. Her expertise is just . . . *in other areas*."

"Oh I'll just bet -," Aki murmured rolling her eyes.

He tried not to blush, "Well you have to understand, Urd's more of a - *theoretician* than a hands-on person."

"I'm surprised to hear that," replied Aki. "I would have definitely guessed her skills were of the *hands-on* variety. Honestly is that the kind of woman you're attracted to? Ah but of course it is. That's always the kind men gravitate towards!" Takumi looked around, suspecting his partner might be closer than she appeared, cautiously searching the room for any sign. "I'm just saying, haven't you ever thought *other* people might have talents akin to hers *as well as* additional attributes?" she said looking up at him innocently.

The squirrel-like sound of gnawing at that moment in the far corner of the lab's ceiling alerted him to Urd's chibi form. "Um yeah sure," he said only to spot a tiny pair of angry red demonic glowing eyes glaring back at him from the darkness.

"Ah! I mean - everyone has their own attributes I suppose - *not*

The Palace of Aki Sakai

that I know anything about it!” he cried as the eyes in the corner narrowed.

The volume of his voice made Aki turn. “I mean I see the attraction. Her skin’s perfect - I mean *literally perfect*,” she said puzzled as though the thought had only just now occurred to her. “How old did you say she was?”

“She’s older than she looks - *but still young!* Still very, very young!” he shouted seeing her eyes.

“What is up with you? Look all I ‘m just saying is - *ouch!* Where did that come from?” Aki asked bending down as another sharpened paper clip fragment flew right past her. With her back turned Takumi swung his notebook at the next projectile, sending it back in Urd’s direction forcing her to retreat back up the vent.

“What was that sound?” asked Aki.

“Um, owls I think,” muttered Takumi.

“Owls?”

“Yeah sometimes they -,” he stopped, realizing his odd hand movements were doing little to help his cause. Aki looked at him for a long moment slowly sipping her tea.

“Can I ask you something Taku-chan?”

“Um sure I guess,” he said looking around nervously.

“That little one. Is she - *normal?*”

“That’s a relative question with this group. Why do you ask?”

“She wanted to know if there was anything she could do. I told her that unless she was familiar with the inner workings of a nanotech sequencer, there really wasn’t much she could help with. I only ask because she gave me a kind of strange look and wandered off. I haven’t seen her since. Strange huh?”

Takumi began tapping his fingers on the desk wondering what Aki might have unleashed while trying to remain outwardly calm. “Well maybe I’ll just go have a quick look for her,” he smiled diving for the door. No sooner had it closed than it seemed to open again.

“Taku-chan?”

“*Nooooo-*,” said the fully grown Urd walking in.

“Ah, it’s you. *The assistant*,” Aki said returning to her work.

Urd forced a smile as Aki bent low over the microscope. “You know now that we have a moment to ourselves *Dr. Sakai*, I was

Mortality

wondering if you've had a chance to fully appreciate the *chemistry* of this situation. You understand what I'm talking about right?" she said leaning over to better highlight any differences in their respective physical charms.

"Oh I think I can crack your sphinx-like code," Aki replied without looking up.

"And?"

"It's probably something akin to - 'I'm sleeping with him, he's mine, hands off!'"

"Oooh you're better at this than I thought!"

"Not terribly difficult given the level of its encoding," she murmured. "I suppose it's only natural. After all, a woman of your *age* needs to protect her dwindling options."

Urd frowned. "I'll have you know I've had kings lay at my feet! Believe me you don't want to put our comparative knowledge of the male species to the test!"

"Of that I'm sure," Aki said dryly. "And by *that* I mean our respective knowledge of *laying*. Your manner of speech suggests you're very *well-traveled*."

Tips of the goddess's hair began to stand on end from the rising static charge. "You know since we're getting so chummy sharing our feelings and everything I should tell you that doe-eyed act of yours isn't going to get you anywhere. Let me be blunt. You're totally outclassed!"

"I may be out *something-ed*, but it's definitely not outclassed."

Urd's hand rose up just as the doors burst open, "Urd!!!"

"What?!" she shouted as Skuld and Belldandy fell into the lab.

"We're checking this area for potential current leaks!" snarled Skuld. "You know, like any *uncontrolled* releases of electricity? Because it might damage some of the *things* we need to save Keiichi! You know what I'm saying?"

As they spoke the laboratory lights suddenly flickered.

"What was that?!" inquired Aki.

"My program! It must be done compiling. I told Takumi to keep an eye on it," Skuld said running out.

"Wait, what? What *program* are you running? Are you modifying an instrument?!" Aki cried chasing out behind her. She caught sight of Skuld at the far end of the hallway heading downstairs. "She's headed for the special projects section!"

The Palace of Aki Sakai

After rushing headlong down several flights of stairs Aki found her next to Takumi in the basement in one of the dimly lit labs, their faces scrunched together over a small monitor. “Are you fooling around with the nanosequencer?!! You know how much that thing costs?!”

“Yeah you’ve got a lot of good stuff down here lady,” Skuld said continuing. “I found most of what I needed in this room or the one in the back.” Aki looked across the room, her face going pale upon seeing the disassembled instruments. “She’s destroyed the prototype!”

Takumi looked up from the monitor, “You mean the prototype you guys couldn’t get working? *Look Aki -*,” he said pointing to the rows of monitors in the room starting to glow as the data flow increased. More and more of them now began to flicker as the input grew from hundreds to thousands of sectors.

“But . . . that’s impossible! We’ve had our best people working on it for months. No one’s been able to stabilize the coherence problem in the nanopore array. She must be running a test data set.”

Takumi leaned back shaking his head. “It’s the real deal Aki. Look, its collecting on the Morisato samples.”

“But that . . . *who the hell is this kid!* Seriously who are these people Takumi?! We’ve had teams trying to untangle this for months!”

“I told you. They’re a group with *hidden* talents.”

“-It wasn’t too bad, once I understood the underlying principle the designers were going for,” Skuld said continuing to rework the algorithm. “The point functions governing quantum tunneling required modification in how they handled instantaneous levels of hydrogen bonding within the target molecule at the tunneling junction.”

Aki said nothing, alternating between looks of fear and disbelief. She peered beside the girl looking over the data.

“You see that? The peak in the high molecular weight component of the spectrum?”

“I see it,” replied Takumi. “What do you think it is?”

“I don’t know but it’s not in any of the control specimens. I’ve never seen anything like it in a nucleoid sample before.”

“Whatever it is, it’s getting through our prep columns.”

Mortality

“Yet still manifests as a high molecular weight product. It’s like some kind of polymer.”

“That’s got to be it.”

“Yes but what *is* it? And how is it affecting him?”

Before they could say another word the door to the room burst open as Belldandy rushed in “*What is it?!*” she asked quickly.

“We may have found something,” said Takumi.

She put her hands to her mouth trembling. “Is it true?”

“The data shows a clear trend. It seems to organize itself as a kind of molecular polymer.”

Tears began to stream down her face. “Thank you. *Thank you!!!* How long?” she pressed.

“Until - what?”

“Until you cure him!”

Takumi and Aki eyed one another. “Bell, you have to understand. We – we’ve made substantial progress here today. We’re beginning to ascertain the basic features of what we’re up against. But . . .”

“But what? Why can’t you cure him now?!” she said searching his eyes.

He looked to Aki. “Understanding fundamental features of the agent, if that’s what this is, is important. But it’s only part of the problem. We still don’t know *how* it’s harming Keiichi. Even if we do unravel the mechanism of how it’s working, producing a cure - *can take time*.”

“How much time? An hour? A day? *How long!!*”

Takumi looked to Urd.

“He doesn’t know Bell,” she replied finally.

“He doesn’t know?! *How can he not know?!*” she said beginning to panic.

Takumi looked down beginning to realize the magnitude of his error. He had done something he had no right to do. He had given her hope. The only thing to do now was let the awful realization set in.

“But if you understand this much . . . how long does it usually take?” she said wringing her hands beginning to tremble.

Takumi looked down silent.

“The truth is, there are disorders whose mechanism we’ve understood for years . . . and still can’t cure,” Aki said soberly.

The Palace of Aki Sakai

Belldandy shook her head her face growing white, "That's not true. It's not true is it Takumi?" she said desperately clutching her sides. He nodded continuing to look at the floor. Tears welled in Belldandy's eyes. "*I see -*," she said finally. Her words tore his heart. For he knew now she truly understood. Understood that in all likelihood they would never come close to finding a cure in time.

"We will of course continue with all haste," he said determinedly, trying to sound hopeful. But her eyes had turned away, growing dark. "Thank you for all your help," she murmured softly. "I must – *I need to go now*," she said walking unsteadily from the lab.

...

In the early hours of the morning Urd awoke feeling something was amiss. She looked out at the grey skies searching the next room to find Belldandy standing quietly, almost finished with her packing.

"What are you doing Bell?"

"*I'm going Urd.*" Her words seemed to trail off taking all of her effort.

"Why? What can you do out there you can't do here? Don't you want to be with Keiichi?!"

"Of course I do. More than anything. But I no longer believe my presence here is the best way to help him."

Urd felt her stomach tighten. *She's preparing to walk away from everything.* "Bell I don't think this is a good idea. How far do you believe you can push this?"

She said nothing picking up her pack.

"Where will you go?"

"Perhaps Yggdrasil," she replied solemnly.

"Are you sure you want to do that? Those here may still be able to -."

"I wish them all possible luck and speed. But as for myself I've already spent too much time here. It is time for me to be . . . *elsewhere*," she said shaking off her tears as she pulled on Keiichi's jacket.

"If that's your decision then I'm going with you. You'll need a sys admin if you're to have any hope of successfully accessing the mainframe."

Mortality

“No, I have no right to get you involved”.

“I was involved the day I became your sister,” she said touching her head to Bell’s. “You remember? You’re not going anywhere dangerous without me.”

“Urd, we - we would be running.”

“Yes. But it’s not exactly the first unwise thing I’ve ever done. If we’re really going to do this there are things we need to get ready. Overcoming the input lines alone -.”

“Input what?! *What’s going on?!*” Skuld demanded pushing her head above the blankets. “What are you talking about?”

“Bell and I may be taking a little trip,” replied Urd.

“If you’re going I’m going too!”

“It’s too dangerous,” she said shaking her head.

“If it’s dangerous then none of you are going,” Takumi replied suddenly behind them. “I come to check on you and this is what I find?”

“Oh I’m going!” Skuld said stubbornly, already beginning to throw random clothing into a bag. The Belldandy Takumi knew would likely have argued. But the one before him now stood silent, holding her hand out for support. “Okay Skuld.”

“So what is the plan?” he asked. “Let Morisato heal himself?”

“We’re just going on a little fact-finding mission,” said Urd.

“To Yggdrasil’s sonographic core. He’ll have to do without us for half a day. I’ll explain later. Can you make it happen?”

“What? Aren’t you supposed to stay here? In *this* world?”

They looked back at him silently. “Look I’m not accusing anyone of anything, but it kind of sounds like you’re thinking of hacking into the Heavens. I only mention it because, well a system that runs the world and is guarded by gods, well it just seems like it would be, you know, *extraordinarily dangerous to mess with!*

The sisters continued packing.

“I said, ‘it sounds like’ -.”

“Oh come on,” Urd said pulling him over.

“Wait, why am I needed on this suicide run?”

A strange expression crossed Skuld’s face, “Because we need computers - *lots and lots of computers . . .*”

Homecoming

“I told you already, we need computers - *not clouds*,” Urd muttered in his ear as Takumi waved for quiet continuing his negotiations on the other end of the line. He pulled back farther from her, “*Yes Larry I really appreciate your efforts. Like I say we only need to access the networks for about -*,” he looked to Skuld whose hands rose up from the tangle of growing cables. “*About 15 minutes. No of course it’s not anything illegal -*,” he grimaced. “*No the place we’re trying to patch into isn’t a client of yours. Yes I admit 25 level One disseminated nodes is a big ask but - and you’re sure you can support all substituent POPs (persistent points of presence) simultaneously? Yes I’m told that’s what we need. What for? Uh . . .* he looked at Urd as she drew something over her head. “*A bird - cloud?*” he guessed as Urd’s eyes narrowed. “*I mean it’s for a climate simulation! Yeah it’s a big one to be sure - but hey that climate’s not going to fix itself - and time is of the essence if you know what I mean. Okay and . . . you’re certain the server nodes can keep up with our projected emulation speeds? Great! Oh of course, this certainly settles our debt,*” he said hanging up.

“*Debt?*” inquired Urd.

“Let’s just say he was having some *personnel* issues last year when I was - you know . . .”

“Yeah you’re right - I don’t want to know. Skuld tell me, it will be enough?”

From beneath the lines of connectors Skuld appeared piping up, “With the switching networks we’ve taken over I think we’re approaching what we need. The ground interface has sufficient points of presence to keep them off balance for at least a couple of minutes. After that we’ll just have to protect the nodes as best we can.”

“A couple minutes doesn’t sound like much. Are you sure she’ll have enough time?” asked Takumi.

Mortality

"It's hard to say. We'll just have to wait and see."

"At least we'll have the element of surprise on our side for the first few minutes," said Skuld. "The library is in a secure central sector of Yggdrasil which should slow them down a bit once they've realized we're in."

"How?"

"No one can physically enter the core library because of its protections, only appear via a digital avatar. That means it will probably take them three to four minutes to spot our digital intrusion and locate our fingerprint within the library sub-systems before they can counter us. It's not like our entry alone should trigger an alert."

"You hope," he muttered looking around the room, wondering briefly what the penalty for heavenly digital intrusion was.

"I'm going to begin ticking over the system emulators now," Skuld said disappearing back under the mass of wires.

"What concerns me is not what happens to Belldandy's digital avatar inside the library. It's what happens to us *after* they ascertain what you are up to?"

"The number of distributed Earth-bound Points Of Presence within the network should make us reasonably hard to locate."

"Except that they certainly know who Belldandy is. Do you really think *The Heavens* are going to have a hard time finding someone once they decide to put their minds to it?!"

"Have a little faith," urged Urd. "Remember I'm a systems administrator. Oh and if you think middle management works more efficiently in the heavens - *it doesn't*. Besides, there still may be a few things about goddesses you don't know."

"You seem to be saying 'believe me' a lot lately. And although you keep telling me you're a sys admin, I'm pretty sure you don't work there anymore. Look even they will be able to figure out that Belldandy isn't likely to be far from Keiichi. That alone makes her pretty easy to locate."

"Except they think we're still at Tariki Hongan Temple. *And I've got plan regarding the Temple.*"

"*Great.* I don't even want to think about what the Auto club morons are up to there right now," pondered Takumi. "Alright so *after* they turn the temple and everyone in it upside down, how long do you think it will take them to find us?"

Homecoming

“You don’t seem to have much confidence in me.”

“It’s just I’ve been on some of your capers before, and we can *see* the building Keiichi’s in from here. Once they find him and start spreading out, what are we supposed to do, duck? I’ve seen what some of them can do with an axe.”

“If we’re lucky it will never come to that. The last time I looked simply perusing the digital archives wasn’t a crime. Even for Belldandy.”

“You act as though you’ve got it all figured out. Except I know you don’t. Typically you have no more than *half* of any plan mapped out.”

“Ha! That’s where you’re wrong. I have at least 55% of this plan mapped out.”

“Just remember one mistake and our ability to help Keiichi falls to zero.”

“You think Belldandy doesn’t know that?”

“If she does why isn’t she here helping us prepare?”

“She said there was something she had to do first.”

...

Megumi Morisato rode the last few miles under gray skies downhill through the narrow streets of Nekomi to her apartment. Turning the corner she saw Belldandy sitting waiting for her under the steps. “Bell I’ve been trying to contact Keiichi for two days! Where is he? I just came from the temple and the Nekomi Tech Auto Club members there told me something is terribly wrong. Is it true?!”

Belldandy put her head against the pillar starting to cry.

“*Megumi I’m so sorry. He’s, he is -.*”

Her face grew pale. “But how? I mean he’s always with you. Is - *is this you?* Does this have something to do with you?!”

Belldandy looked down nodding.

Megumi drew back her hand to strike. But at the last moment she found she could not. She could only look at the poor wretched girl under the porch and take pity. Hesitantly she lowered her hand putting it over Belldandy’s.

“Punish me, *I deserve it,*” Belldandy cried. “I deserve your hatred and more. Because I am the cause of all his suffering!”

“*Then do what you must to save him-*,” she said sitting down beside her under the stairs, “He’s the only brother I’ve got Bell.

Mortality

“*So do what you can,*” she said going to her bike. “Now where is he?” Where is my brother?” she said as the bike roared to life.

...

The room’s three occupants turned as Belldandy as she came in from the rain. “Are you alright? You look terrible. Where have you been?” asked Urd.

“It doesn’t matter. Is it ready?”

“It is,” said Skuld. “If you are.”

“Then let’s waste no time,” replied the goddess.

“Are you sure Bell? You look terribly weak.”

“I’m ready,” she said determinedly.

“*Alright.*” Skuld began laying in the emulation as the screens around them glowed drawing form. “It’s going to be a bit primitive compared what you’re used to but we should be able to place your avatar into the heart of the archives. Remember there’s going to be a few milliseconds delay in your projection because of the interface. You’ll have to adjust for it in relation to your movements.”

“I understand. *Thank you Skuld,*” she said before letting out a long breath preparing herself. “*Go.*”

“System ramping up,” Skuld said drawing the full weight of the emulation upon her. Takumi saw the waveform generating around her, mergeing their geometric arcs as she interfaced with the system.

“*Accessing - - - you’re in!*” shouted Skuld. “Be careful there’s some gravitational triggering around the primary gate.” Takumi watched as the monitors projected strange arrays of semi-transparent projections, rows, file blocks and columns rising higher than Belldandy’s body, “*Yggdrasil library interface recognized.*”

“What was that?!” asked Peorth jumping up in her chair with several others.

“Some kind of anomaly. We’re detecting an outside access point materializing on floor 3 of the Yggdrasil library subsystem,” said Ere.

“Hack from the demon realm?”

Homecoming

"I don't think so . . .," replied Ere. "Signature conforms to that of the angelic layer," she said pushing image data over to the main board. Other heads began to pop up from their monitors.

"Bell?"

"It's possible."

"Ex is she modifying the system?!"

Ex scanned her screens, "No indications of record change. She seems to be running some form of apparition trace from the Terran realm."

"Where is she now?!" asked Peorth tying back her hair.

"Determining sector . . . she seems to be – *yes*. She's in section 3-21 of the archive," shouted Ere.

Beside them Chrono frowned continuing to type stubbornly on her terminal. "She's still listed as a legitimate user. Perhaps she needs to look at something, *urgently* - and we shouldn't interfere," she insisted.

"Watch it," replied Exe. "What do you want us to do Peorth?"

"Push all simulation data to the CAVE. I'll deal with her myself," she said running down the hallway toward the emulator. Entering she swept her hands across its walls growing dark, her digital avatar projection soon standing deep within the library juncture. As members of the control room began to squeeze in, around, and over their monitors (betting began on the outcome of the coming confrontation), Peorth's form moved to intercept the ghostly image of Belldandy racing down the east wall toward her. Quickly she jumped aside two file columns landing on top of them in front of her like a cat.

"So you've decided to take my advice and return?" she asked the disoriented Belldandy standing in an alcove below her.

"I'm here now," she said stepping back to maintain her distance. The two digital avatars began following one another.

"Clever to come to the archives since corporal manifestations are not allowed here. You feared you might be captured?"

"I don't believe my presence here is a crime. Is the library somehow off limits to me now? I don't see why, for if I were to come in contact with any forbidden files I'm sure the system would block my access. Perhaps I just wanted to see if opinions on the matter had changed," she said keeping her

Mortality

distance. “No need for you to come all the way down here and check on me,” she said passing a file block between them.

“I’m sure you’re aware, even in the absence of your sister, it would be quite difficult for us to track a large number of simultaneous file modifications should they occur inside the vault proper. Is that your plan? Because I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“It’s quite safe to say at this point you don’t know my plans; or my heart. So I’m afraid I’ll have to refuse your invitation.”

Peorth tilted her head to one side. She could not remember Belldandy ever having rebuked her so directly.

The two stood silently for a moment until Peorth leapt down, descending on Belldandy. But she brought her hands up deflecting the move passing to Peorth’s left. Peorth dropped to one knee as she landed sweeping with a vertical motion from the elbow. As the light propagated Peorth reflexively circled her hands, the encasement growing around Belldandy boxing her in. Bell reached out, writing on the closing inner walls as they collapsed in her hands along with the floor below.

Landing on the next level she realized that Skuld was trying to say something to her: “Big-sis she’s trying to close the - !”

“I know,” Belldandy replied jumping over and under the oncoming blocks coming at her as Peorth closed in from above.

“*She just entered level 4,*” said the call from the control room.

“I see it!” Peorth snapped impatiently collapsing the floor underneath her. Instinctively Belldandy dove to her right as Peorth came down almost on top of her. Sweeping her hands counterclockwise the floor buckled where Peorth landed and she tumbled through to the next level. “*Belldandy!*”

Bell sprang forward as the blocks behind her burst up from the floor below with a furious Peorth close behind. Pouring on the speed Belldandy shifed a file column behind her into Peorth’s path. The goddess swerved to avoid it, only to crash into another file block that suddenly shifted from the right, “*Sorry boss we were trying to -.*”

“I don’t need your help!” she cried, exploding the column in front of her as luminous bricks scattered in all directions. In the control room all eyes followed their progress. “*Don’t help*

Homecoming

that's cheating!" shouted Chrono who was gathered with one group around the monitors.

Belldandy struck the file wall as Skuld shouted in her ear, *"Big-sis you've got to get out of there! She just took out two more of nodes. She's collapsing the access points quickly! She must have direct line of sight on you."*

Belldandy dodged left, diving to disappear into the stacks.

From their small room Takumi watched the monitor, awed by her level of physical prowess. "I'm amazed she's held on this long given our resources."

Still, the battle was quickly becoming one-sided as it ranged through the library. Slowly, relentlessly, Peorth was isolating and eliminating each of her points of presence.

"Is there something particular you're looking for Bell? Maybe I can help you," Peorth called searching the aisles for her.

Finally Belldandy stood up drawing her out.

"Augh big-sis don't do that! We're losing nodes fast," shouted Skuld.

Peorth turned and dropped down once more, hitting Bell before she dove into the stacks.

"Good shot!" shouted one faction in the control room as more money changed hands. It was clear now that though Belldandy was fighting; she was losing. Then with one deftly timed sweep Peorth closed her hand tumbling Belldandy from her feet. The goddess rolled pushing off the nearest file column to run for the center section of the archive.

"She's running for the port host!" warned Ere.

"She's not running, she's just moving efficiently!" Chrono shouted next to her in the control room.

Catching her at the junction Peorth drew out her hand as the space above portal became crystalline. Too late Belldandy saw the effect as the matrix cracked splintering her remaining defenses in a series of glowing fragments. As the blow landed Belldandy was thrown sliding across the floor as her avatar disappeared and the emulation collapsed. She had been locked out.

Up in the control room there came shouts of surprise. "She did it! *Peorth beat Belldandy!*"

Mortality

Peorth let her body relax now inside the CAVE. A few more breaths and she calmly answered over the loudspeaker, "External incursion terminated. Verify that all file blocks are secure," she said relinquishing control of her phantom. Upon reentering the control room the gathered goddesses bowed to her in recognition of her ability.

"The intrusion was identified quickly. It doesn't look like any files were opened or modified," said Ere.

"Good. Make sure everything is secure."

In their small room Belldandy slowly picked herself up off the floor.

"I'm sorry Big-sis. They sealed the rest before we could -."

"*It's alright Skuld,*" she said, her face a mask of grim determination.

...

Now quartered within the confines of Tariki Hongan Temple, members of the Nekomi Tech Auto Club spotted the car slowly approaching the back alleyway. "*Heads up guys,*" Hasegawa murmured as behind her two pairs of welding goggles rose up revealing Tamiya and Otaki. As the Ferrari passed Toshiyuki Aoshima rolled down the window smiling, "I just wanted to stop by and see if the news was true," he said springing solicitously from the car. "That Belldandy is in the market for a new boyfriend?"

"*That's not funny,*" said Hasegawa. "Keiichi is really ill."

"So it *is* true then. To whom do I write the check?"

Tamiya and Otaki fell silent as from deeper within the temple more Auto Club members began to appear. "What are you all doing milling around here? If its money you want for a get well card; wash the car. I'll give you a few bucks."

"Nah you don't want to get it done here," replied Tamiya.

"We're not properly insured, against accidents," he said throwing a pipe wrench through the windshield of his car.

"See what I mean?"

"Let me get that for you," Otaki said coming around on the other side of Aoshima to pull the tool free, only to drag it across the hood of his car. "Is that a scratch I see?" he said

Homecoming

looking at Aoshima, raising his hand to staunch the thin trail of blood now oozing from Toshiyuki's cheek.

"*It is,*" Tamiya replied leaning in for a closer look. "You know they say being a doctor's a lot like being an auto mechanic, except that patients scream more when you tighten their nuts. Do you think *I'd* make a good doctor Otaki?"

"Only one way you'll ever know man -," Otaki shrugged.

"Lady Belldandy would not approve of what you – *any of you are doing here!*" Toshiyuki cried stumbling backward.

"Then I guess it's good she's not here," Tamiya replied closing in on him.

"Should we do anything about that Herja?" Orlun asked as they sat together peering down at the group from the boughs of a giant cedar beyond the temple.

"And give away our position? Nah, that's probably just what they want us to do. Just call it in," said Herja lying back. "I just got comfortable."

"Checkpoint 2 reporting. Nothing going on. Actually there's a lot going on but none of it seems normal and/or interesting. No sign of our quarry yet."

Arrow Cutter

In her time since arriving at Fensalir, Lind's days had taken up a kind of routine. Every morning Odin would look out from the upper balcony only to see the girl silently standing guard somewhere near the residence. He would look on puzzled, never entirely sure what she was protecting them from. Still it seemed to give the girl solace. He shrugged scanning the southern fields until the sound of chirping below him caught his attention.

"Go! Get her – there is your target," whispered the voice insistently as he spied Urd's small hand poking Busa as he sat on the windowsill sunning himself.

"Urd, what are you doing?" he asked causing the girl's hand to retreat back inside, only to see a stick quietly appear a moment later continuing to poke the bird. *"Bell your bird isn't very smart-,"* he heard her complain.

"He just doesn't like you poking him," Bell replied climbing outside to stroke Busa's soft under feathers in her pajamas. She looked up smiling seeing her father. "Hi daddy," she shouted. *"Oh yeah you're so adorable,"* Urd grumbled climbing back up to her bunk.

"What's going on?" asked Freya coming out beside him.

"Your bodyguard seems to be waiting for you," he replied.

"Ah yes. I'm taking her up to the northern training grounds today," she said leaping up onto the primary beam.

"I see," he replied raising an eyebrow. Freya's 'short term' project was beginning to become rather extended.

"I'll see you later," she said bending down to kiss him before deftly sliding down the beam.

"Mom can I come with you?!" Belldandy cried as she slid past.

"No not today hon'. I'm taking Lind up to Avalon."

"Pleeease," she said grabbing Busa like a stuffed toy. "We both want to go. Urd too!"

"I don't want to go," Urd replied curling up under the covers.

Arrow Cutter

"It'll just be boring for you Verandi."

"You can leave me with grandpa - it's not far," she suggested.

"It *is* far. Besides you know he's busy these days," Odin replied.

"That's right. Besides your father wants to spend time with the two of you and do something special today. Doesn't he?" Freya smiled mischievously. Belldandy's eyes lit up as Urd sleepily poked her head out the window confused.

"Aw look at them. They're both so cute. Kind of makes you want another one doesn't it?" she teased hopping to the ground.

"*We're going to have to talk about that,*" he said watching her disappear into the forest with her charge.

Dutifully Lind followed along rising among the clouds as they climbed, ascending the jagged peaks toward the northern plateau. "These are among the mightiest mountains I've ever seen. You are from here?" asked Lind.

"In a manner of speaking. These mountains and their glaciers form the southern extent of the Vanir homelands whose citadels lie far to the north. It was in those lands I grew up."

"Is it difficult to get there?"

"You see that river flowing in the distance through the pass to the east? That is the Althus. Follow its course northwest and it will lead you to the coast; and my home of Noatun."

She tried to imagine what it must be like, for Vanir cities were said to be otherworldly, their homes places of old and strange magic. "The people there, they are like you?" she pressed.

"Several different races live within the homelands. In addition to Vanir, some of the Faye, the Kauto and also Sami dwell there as well; particularly west in the Barri forest."

By midday they had crossed several glacier-fed streams to reach the upper plateau. Turning back Lind could now see much of her new home below her with Fensalir at her feet and the spires of Yggdrasil rising in the distance; as far away as ever. Following Freya through the odd warmth of the plateau she saw great trees appear before them as they entered the sacred groves from the south. They walked until they came upon a circle of 12 massive stone pillars standing silently now in the center of the grove, a testament to the history of both

Mortality

Aesir and Vanir fortunes. “We have arrived,” she said. “This is the Idavoll, where the northernmost reaches of Asgard touch the southern fingers of Vanaheim. It is here in The Eye where the might of Asgard and the magic of the Vanir was finally woven together to form the future. Long have I desired to once more look upon the Pillars of Peace.” Freya said kneeling as she approached.

Lind looked up at the stones dumbfounded. “*The Pillars?* It’s a real place?!” For indeed The Eye was a place so famous, so heralded in tales of old she had always thought it a myth.

“The Eye is most definitely a real place,” Freya said placing her hand over the central spiral cut into the stone floor connecting the pillars. “And for those who take its message into their hearts it is something more, the home of *Kvasir* - guardian of wisdom.”

“That too is a legend!” Lind demanded incredulous.

“No, Kvasir was forged here from the will of all men,” Freya said drawing back her cloak. “It is said that for those who truly honor its meaning the echoes of Kvasir can still be heard among the Pillars. But now we must go now to find the others at the training grounds.” As Freya disappeared down one of the side paths Lind tentatively stepped up onto the spiral, listening. “*You’re a turkey -*,” echoed the stones as Gna suddenly jumped out, surprising her like some insane sprite.

“Look at your face! You really thought you were a turkey!” she laughed to Lind’s scowling reply.

“*You were spying on us.*”

“Ah, no I just didn’t want to interrupt Freya’s ‘big speech’ about The Eye,” she replied derisively. “I mean look at this place. These days it’s just kind of an empty lot.”

Lind walked behind her studying the pillars. Before some sat glowing stones containing symbols while others stood empty.

“Only five? Where are the rest?”

“*Who can say?* Taken by traitors,” Gna replied eyeing her.

“Such emotion, especially from one who considers this place no more than an empty lot,” Freya mused returning.

“Well when my ancestors tended to it, everything was in its proper place,” replied Gna. “Here and safe. Safe to govern and

Arrow Cutter

keep the balance. But that was before *Division* and the time of traitors.”

As she listened to Freya and Gna arguing about aspects of realm history, Lind walked on noting the stone inscriptions until she spotted a pair of green glowing orbs peering back at her through the leaves, seeming to hover in the forest beyond. “You mean I’m not the first one here?” they said narrowing as Fulla plunged out of the foliage into the circle.

“Of course not,” Gna barked over her shoulder.

“It’s time to begin,” Freya said taking the lead, “provided-.”

“*I’m here-*,” Hiln replied springing in from seemingly nowhere to join them. “I’ve been freezing my tail off waiting for you.”

“You know I could see you right?” quipped Gna.

“Let’s just get inside and warm up,” Hiln said pushing ahead of them down the path.

Freya followed close behind with Lind at her side. “I thought the halls of the Valkyrie were located in Yggdrasil?” she asked.

“They are, but for some types of training it’s best to come up here, on our own away from prying eyes.”

“Yeah, some of our training’s a bit too destructive to occur close to a city,” Gna replied mischievously.

“Don’t listen to them. That’s not the real reason we come here,” Hiln said disappearing into the grove ahead of them as it grew thicker. One by one they followed as Lind pushed forward behind them until she came out on the far side. She gasped taking in the scenery below. There in front of her lay a valley. But this valley was green and warm. From her vantage point on the lip of the canyon she could see it was more than a mile across to the other side and perhaps four times that in length. Above her she saw a gossamer canopy covering the whole of it which allowed sunlight to shine in but protected them from the blustery winds beyond.

“Welcome to the Vend,” said Freya. “What do you think?” she asked beginning the descent to the valley floor.

“It’s paradise!” gasped Lind.

“Long ago energies of the land were redirected here, warming the valley.”

“And a roof doesn’t hurt either,” added Gna.

“Amazing. What’s that at the far end?”

Mortality

"The Vend Pools. Believe me you don't want to know everything that goes on there," murmured Hiln.

"They are lovely. Almost as nice as the Pools of the Pacific - eh Freya?" Gna said as the Valkyries broke into laughter.

"Hey!" Freya frowned following.

"You know we were always behind you," Hiln said hugging her as Fulla joined in. Lind walked behind in silence trying to think of something to say. "I see others below. What is that?"

"Those along the river between us and the pools are from a school in Vanaheim I think. The east end up here is reserved for us," said Freya. "Come, let me show you," she said taking Lind ahead.

"Why couldn't we have just practiced at the Erie?" asked Gna when they had gone.

"I'm guessing it's a bad sign," muttered Hiln. "You saw how she was going on about tradition earlier."

"You mean -."

"I think she's trying to prepare us. I'll bet by the end of the day she'll have some proposal to lay on us involving the visitor."

"Aw *man*. And here I thought she was just being nice letting me take swipes at that girl's head," complained Gna.

"I'm going to take a swipe at *your* head if you don't get moving," replied Fulla. "I want to finish and go swimming before the stars come out."

As the day wore on it became obvious that though the girl was swift and strong, she was no Valkyrie. As Lind herself was beginning to realize. She battled them in a series of matches, fighting with desperate ferocity. Each time Freya managed to turn her attacks like wind forcing her to yield only to counterattack again along an alternative line. She moved back once more holding her axe in front of her evaluating her position. Lind jumped to one side throwing her amber hair back as her eyes began to glow.

"Do I anger you?" Freya asked calmly circling.

"No," the girl replied stubbornly.

"Good, because frustration is a weakness your opponent can -."

"YAAAA," cried Lind charging her.

Arrow Cutter

As the session ended she retired with the others, setting in at the base of the stream slumping beside Fulla.

"What is it?" the Valkyrie asked as the others began to swim. "Nothing. What do you care?" she said morosely. The Valkyrie watched her kicking her feet in the stream for several minutes.

"*She's going to ask me to leave -*," the girl replied finally. "I can feel it. I'm a big disappointment to her. It's been coming for a while now," Lind said staring sadly into the waters.

Fulla leaned down beside her putting her elbows between her knees, "I wouldn't be so sure. Things are not always as you imagine them. The truth is I've never known Freya to give up on anyone."

"Oh?" Lind said lifting her head wondering if the warrior was toying with her.

"It's true," Fulla nodded. "You wouldn't believe some of the people she's kept faith in. You should have seen me when I started."

"You were a problem?" she asked reflecting on the goddess's calm demeanor.

"Well not so much me . . . But I have an older sister. Green eyes just like mine. And she didn't do me any favors in the trust category . . ."

"You've known her a long time then?"

"A while - yes."

"And the tall one?"

"Freya and Hiln have known each other since they were young. Since before the time of Division."

The beginning of the Demon realm, thought Lind.

Fulla swirled her feet in the water, amused the girl had asked nothing of Gna. They sat together in silence as Hiln dove gracefully from the rocks disappearing into the waters of the stream. "Perhaps you -," Fulla began but Freya appeared behind her.

"Lind can I speak with you?" she asked. Nervously the girl got up following her up the path. They knelt under a low cliff overlooking the river above the stream. "The time has come for you and I to speak," she said shifting beside her. Lind nodded bravely looking away. "Yes, I was expecting this. You've decided to send me away then?"

Mortality

She looked over trying to catch her eye, “Yes,” she said gently. “But not for the reasons you think. A mission has come up. One which I believe you are uniquely suited for which I think will prove your worth to all.”

“A mission?” she said brightening despite her doubts.

“Yes. Something very important has gone missing. I want you to go retrieve it. I believe your skills in this matter will prove invaluable and demonstrate your rightful place here.”

Lind looked out at the slow-moving water passing over the stones, feeling once more the strange effect her words had on her; filling her with strength and hope.

“A simple matter to retrieve?” she asked.

“Normally yes. But this item was lost within the Terran realm.”

Terran. Of course she had heard of the violent world of men, though she herself had never seen it. Something about the place had always filled her with foreboding. Not so much because of the inhabitants, she knew from the tales she could likely best them. True she had heard that life in the primitive muddy realm had become more chaotic than usual lately, which was saying something, with rates of slaying high even by wildland standards. No it was something else. A feeling that no one was truly in charge down there, which had allowed *other* things to take up residence, older unspoken things best left alone.

“No one else can go retrieve it?” she asked.

“That’s complicated. It’s important the item be found quietly, without attracting any undue attention. Attention draws more powerful enemies, and with it more problems. You are not one of us. Alone your presence should not raise much notice. You see there is a war going on there Lind. A war within the Terran realm. The terrain and conditions will not be easy. But I believe they are within your ability. Things here are changing too.

Some say we must change with them. I do not know. It is hard to see the path before the growing clouds of the Demon realm. For now both sides bide their time, cautious of doing anything which might further escalate tensions. But time is growing short and something terrible is on the horizon. I can feel it. The loss of this item could tip the balance. I will not force you to go but I urge you to think about it. I believe this is within

Arrow Cutter

you and you may find strengths you do not yet realize you possess.”

...

As Lind lay back under the stars in the fields of Fensalir that night she tried to decide what to do. Was this not what she had been waiting for? The very hope to which she had pinned her hopes on so many nights? To show her promise and find a real home in the North? Rising to become a force in a corps of truly capable warriors, powerful enough to beat back anything that came at them; and in so doing create an island of tranquility far from the chaos she had known? She would rise in their ranks, rise and in time they would -. But was it really an opportunity? Or simply a bridge being cut out from behind her? She thought about Gna's words to her as they descended high plateau that evening, "I don't know what errand Freya has in mind for you but remember this: your sponsor cannot make you one of us - only the confirmation of three additional Valkyries can ever grant you that power." She mused gloomily over the thought until seeing Mint's face hanging upside down looking at her. "No you're right I can't think like that. We've made good progress these past months since coming here. They haven't run us off yet and it's not like we haven't been on our own before. As long we're together we'll be alright," she said closing her eyes trying to sound assured.

Below her the lights of the house twinkled as Odin picked up the girls settling them in front of the fire before bed. "I'm confused, why send her?" he asked.

"I bet she gets eaten by a big lizard," Urd interjected helpfully.

"No one's getting eaten by a lizard," said Freya.

"They have them down there, they exist!" shouted Urd. "I saw a picture of them once. They'll rip your guts out!" she said matter-of-factly. "She's small. She'll get eaten!"

"Thank you for your input," Odin said taking the girls one in each arm down the hall to their bedroom.

"Is that the way it really is?" Belldandy asked as he put her on her bed, reaching out putting her small arms around Busa.

"Yeah that's the way it is -," Urd shrugged climbing to her top bunk. "Big things eat small things."

Mortality

Belldandy hugged Busa tighter, his eyes bulging. "Is it?"

"I think she will be fine," Odin assured her.

"I hope she doesn't get eaten," Belldandy said sliding quietly into bed with Busa. "Verandi are you going to try to pull this every night?" he sighed.

Beside her Busa's head now popped out above the covers.

"It's cold outside. Couldn't Busa just -?"

"No. That's why he has feathers. Now go to sleep."

Belldandy now attempted to hold the bird aloft with wide eyes as her mother came to the doorway. "No. You heard you father," she said extending a hand for Busa, leaving the sisters to discuss the likely probability of being consumed by the local Terran wildlife. "*Crunch*- that's the sound it makes," Urd said as Belldandy shivered. Freya shook her head ascending the stairs. When she reached the top Odin was waiting for her.

"I don't mind telling you a number of councilors are concerned with your latest plan to retrieve the stone."

"The scouts we've sent so far have turned up nothing. We can't send a big force down. Not now. If the Demon realm already has it then it doesn't matter how many we send. We need someone who can spend real time there; someone unknown to them who is tough enough to survive. What does the High Council have to lose? Those members already suspicious of her should be happy to see her go. And with her away you won't be forced to play peacemaker every day which should please you."

"I suspect this is more about making your new recruit look good. But honestly Freya, why must you send her?"

"She's the logical one to go. Her kind have always been more adept at sense tracing than we. As she still has things to learn. Things she can learn down there.

"Things you can't teach her?"

"To make it a real part of herself? No. She needs to learn it on her own."

"By sending her into a war zone?"

"In our own ways we both know the terrible cost of war. Sooner or later we need to know how she will react in that terrible cauldron. I fear it will be sooner. When it comes to that point she will need to know not just what to do, but *why* to do

Arrow Cutter

it; for herself and for others. How to make the right decision when there is no one else to rely upon. It's something we will need to know about her soon. She's young. She's strong. She has courage. What's needed now is to test her wisdom and resolve to see if she can find a place among us."

"Sounds like you have big plans for her, perhaps bigger than you've revealed to me. Given recent history I can't imagine the Council is looking for more overly strong leaders."

"That particular problem came from within our own ranks. Look they always talk about needing 'proof'. Well, this way they will know if they can really trust her."

"And if she finds the stone and hands it to someone else? It seems a perilous course of action even to me. Another volatile element roaming around at a time when we don't need any more. Add to that it's no simple thing we're sending her out to do. *Alone.*"

"Then I suppose you'll need to trust your commanders can keep the winds steady," she said tossing her hair seductively around him. "I assume the position commander of the Valkyries is not a ceremonial one?"

"You know I trust you with my life to keep the winds steady Freya," he said putting his arms around her. "Just make sure she doesn't cause any typhoons."

"It's settled then. *She goes.*"

When the day came Lind stood uncomfortably in the morning sun, positioned with the rest of the group near the portal deep in the Yggdrasil complex. "Well at least I got to see the city," she said quietly bidding each of them her farewell. "Remember to be silent, so only signal if you need rescuing - *which I assume will be in about an hour,*" Gna muttered as Freya led her aside.

Lind bowed to her mentor, "I do not know how long I will be away. But I will not fail you. I hope you will not forget me."

"That's impossible," Gna muttered from the sidelines.

"Aw that's so nice," said Freya.

"No I mean it's *literally* impossible," replied Gna. "Given the difference in time flow here versus the Terran realm. One year here represents about 200 down there. She could gone for a

Mortality

decade and it would only be a couple of weeks here. So feel free to linger.” Lind frowned back at her.

“Okay time to go -,” Fulla said trying to move things along before anything else happened. “What’s the current date?”

“1182/3 C.E. Don’t worry. We’ll be here. We’ll be waiting.”

“*Some of us will be waiting,*” Gna murmured.

“And the reports of trouble with the Demon Realm? You’re sure I wouldn’t be more help to you up here?”

“I think we can handle anything that comes,” Gna assured her.

“The truth is you’re in more danger down there than we are here so watch yourself,” replied Fulla.

By the time Lind found her bearings, crossing the mountains into the Miyama River basin she knew for certain it was no demon she was chasing. Faint echoes of her quarry padded through rivers and over wet stone on the far side, trod footpaths through forests and holed up under granite outcroppings of the forest to keep warm between the rains. *A demon wouldn’t stop,* she thought. In one sense it made her job easy; in another maddeningly difficult. For unlike demons she couldn’t track humans over distance by aura, their spiritual energy was simply too weak. She had hoped to catch up to her prey by crossing the lands quickly, but time and the accursed rain in this place had long since washed away the majority of the trail. She decided the only way to try and track it was to follow the stone itself, even though she was beginning to suspect it may have been buried. At first she hoped that meant that the thief had simply met with misfortune, falling to his death or the like and that any moment she might come upon the treasure in a streambed or rocky hollow. But as the days drew on her certainty grew less and she began retracing the hills, wondering about darker things that might have befallen it.

Wearily she now began winding her way through villages and towns that dotted the region. During the course of her travels she came to grow indifferent to the vagaries of men she encountered there, their comings and goings, their battles on banners of red and white, the dirt, the chaos.

She hiked on, searching cave after cave that fall looking for any hint of her prize; starting to wonder whether she should

Arrow Cutter

seek out local assistance in her scouting. Perhaps that was why she stopped that day, perhaps she was simply lonely. Whatever the reason she tucked in that day along the steep canyon wall to spy on a small village across a bend in the Kumano River.

Though it was no bigger or smaller than others she had passed, she felt compelled to watch the group of riders approaching the town from the narrow pass to the west. She saw that there were several dozen of them, mostly on horseback trailing banners of red behind them. They began to slow as they approached the bridge over the river. She turned to scan the opposing riverbank catching movement in the reeds beyond.

All at once an unkempt man leapt from the streambed to reach the far side of the bridge. It was then she noticed the long weapon at his side. He seemed to be calling to them now, and from their reaction she did not think politely.

The group stood shouting together for a moment before one of them suddenly charged forward blade in hand. The man stepped away seeming to give him room before sweeping in the reverse direction, felling his opponent in a single blow. One by one several more challengers announced themselves, charging forward to take his place, each meeting similar measures of success.

Lind looked upon the scene dispassionately as she ate, following the poetic sweeps of the man's blade until impatience within the group caused them to change tactics, loosing arrows down upon him. The first narrowly missed as he succeeded in striking away the second. However two more quickly found their mark, striking him in the shoulder and thigh as he dropped to the ground. The leader raised his hand once more and they fired. But to their surprise the arrows seemed to clatter away missing their target. Only now did they see the second form on the bridge, for her movements were faster than most human could behold. She had flown almost without thinking and even now was not quite sure why as she stood facing the group. Quickly another arrow flew at her heart but she batted it away as the two groups stood in silence. "*Go. . . shoo-*," she said waving at them off as though directing a particularly unruly group of cattle. They stood still eyeing her

Mortality

warily. "Go!" she said more forcefully, growing concerned about the rate of fluid loss from the man at her feet. She heard a whistle and turned catching the arrow in mid-flight. Her turning of it now in her hands suggested in no uncertain terms it was time for the group to move on; her reddish eyes beginning to glow. From the far side of the bridge the commander raised his hand once more but before he could give the order Lind flung the arrow back at him, striking him in the throat instantly dropping him dead. Worse yet they now saw the girl extend her hand toward the river as long spines of ice seemed to appear beside her. She took up the first to her shoulder beginning to feel its weight. It did not take a military expert to judge her intent. They backed away as she took hold of the man dragging him toward the village gates behind her. She had almost reached them when the band regrouped, loosing more arrows upon her, thicker and more persistent this time. "Dammit!" she grumbled pulling him to cover as the thick wooden gates closed behind them.

...

The old ironworker shifted position, easing his shoulders as he slowly stirred the pot in the middle of the floor of the bamboo hut when his companion finally awoke. "You used to speak of '*drifting like clouds / flowing like water*' in movement.

Watching you the last few days I thought we might really have to send you '*drifting on waters*'."

The man smiled painfully trying to sit up. "It was a mistake for them to attack us here. The mountains protect us."

"The mountains - or our visitor?"

"So there was someone on the bridge. Where is she now Ryu?"

"She roams her and there, back and forth beyond the barrier over the last few day. But continues to return to the village."

"Why?"

"Probably has to do with the fact they keep feeding her."

"Why do they do that?"

"Some of the townsfolk think she's good luck. Like some demon come to help us. Feeding her seemed to make sense, even in this time of famine."

"Come to help *us*?"

Arrow Cutter

“Yes, it seems this end of the river road from Nara has become particularly icy following her arrival. Also seems that unfriendly men and horses keep sliding off it into the river. As such we have had no further attacks. You may see her yet today; she continues to look in on you.”

“Why?”

“She seems to have some interest in keeping you alive. She helped us mend you.”

“She did?!”

“Yes. Annoying. Kept muttering how we were doing things wrong and dropping things into your dressings. For now she seems to be camping out in the loft above the old forge.”

“Where did she come from? And why is she here?”

Ryu shrugged. “Who knows where such things come from? So far she doesn’t seem to be causing any harm. And you should have seen her on the bridge. She has your arrow ability; but no need of a weapon!”

“*Impossible!*”

“She caught one with her hand!”

“She caught one with her hand, or *in* her hand?”

“I tell you I saw it myself!”

“Well I didn’t,” he replied stubbornly.

“You had already passed out at that point.”

“Passed out! I didn’t pass out. I was just resting.”

“Yes, well you’ve been *resting* for three days now.”

“Well sometimes I need a lot of rest!” he rolled painfully to his feet before ducking outside. “If what you say is true I’m anxious to meet this ‘arrow angel’.

“As you wish. *Where is she now?!*” Ryu shouted to the little girl sitting hiding among the bushes along the roadside.

The girl stood up looking fiercely down the river road. “She - there!” she said pointing toward the racks of drying fish under a large cedar bending over the river.”

“*Good!*” Ryu nodded walking with Sohei as he tossed her a payment of dried persimmons.

He saw her now, wandering awkwardly up the dusty road looking into shop after shop, walking past the fluttering group of banners followed by a wave of both oncoming and fleeing children as she examined everything with child-like curiosity.

Mortality

"I see, it's clear to me now. Look at her hair! You have let some kind of demon into our midst! *That's* why she can stop arrows in flight."

"Perhaps but she seems to be on our side. Besides how many demons do you know that can walk in full sunlight?"

"Hmm . . ."

"Also I fed her some of the blessed sake and she didn't seem to mind one bit. Even asked for more! I know what I'm doing, I'm not a fool!" he sniffed watching her.

"Hmm. Perhaps she's a sake Oni?" he said narrowing his gaze.

"I've never heard of such a thing . . ."

"Well we do make some good sake," he sighed folding his arms, continuing to watch her as she now passed in front then curiously behind a row of banners. "Whatever she is, she's definitely not from around here . . ."

"Where then?"

"Look how she's dressed. The leather vestments, the measured pace. Perhaps some kind of low level warrior."

Ryu sniffed. "Nonsense. What country is so lacking in resources they require *female* warriors?!"

They walked toward her, blending in with the crowd following at a discreet distance - as indeed nearly half the town seemed to be doing. Turning a corner she continued on to the safety of the loft. Arriving she noticed a group of children had already gathered in front, standing on their toes, each trying to toss up bits of food over the ledge to the ravenous mysterious beast above. "*Kami, kami!*" they shouted scattering as she approached. Lind jumped grabbing hold of the ledge to pull herself up only to see Mint reveling in her pile of new found wealth.

"What's going on up here?!" she demanded.

Mint's eyes narrowed slowly moving her leg to conceal some of the choicer morsels.

"You're taking food? They don't have enough to feed themselves! *Wait is that a plum?*"

Of course Mint knew of her master's fondness for plums, given it was almost equal to her own. Quickly she darted as Lind swept her hand. "*Give it to me! I'm just taking this one thing Mint!*" she complained trying to pry it from her tight little

Arrow Cutter

claws. But Mint was unwilling to relinquish her prize so easily quickly biting into the fruit to claim ownership over it as Lind did the same. For a moment each stubbornly held on to it with their mouths.

“Um, am I interrupting something between you and your . . . bat?” he guessed. Reluctantly Lind released her grip on the fruit dropping to the ground, allowing Mint to take possession of her prize. She munched on it happily until a small stone struck her in the head. She leaned over the ledge baring her teeth as Lind receded.

“So you survived,” she said walking beside him. “Why did they want you dead?”

“They wanted this village. Or at least what it had to offer. I was merely a bonus.”

“I see. And you live here?”

“Kind of passing through,” he replied.

“Then why defend it?”

“They took me in some time ago. It seemed bad manners to simply let raiders come and butcher everyone. I hope it is a fair repayment of their trust.”

“Why do they come here?”

“Because of the war I suppose. The people from here are not aligned with them.”

“And that is why your banners differ from theirs?”

“Yes,” he said ruefully. “Who do you favor in this war?”

She thought quickly. “Like you I favor the red.”

“*What?! No that’s just blood!*” he protested looking at his shirt.

“Oh I see - yes I understand now - the banners - It all makes sense now. But what is your war about?”

“It is not *my* war. And as for what it’s about? What are all wars about? Someone wants more than they have.

“Then it’s not about the stone?”

“*What?! What are you talking about?*”

“I just I thought the war might be about a stone.”

“*Are you -? Why on earth would a war be about a stone?!*”

“Uh well, it’s a pretty nice stone.”

“I that case I must ask, why did you save the town?”

“I don’t care about the town,” she said simply.

Mortality

"Then why did you protect it?"

"Well I couldn't let it burn down until I'd asked my questions; and seen if there was anything worth eating here," she replied.

"And is there?"

"Some."

"Fruits - or people?"

"Don't know, I haven't tried any of the people yet," she said smiling.

"So are you a demon."

Lind hopped onto a low-lying branch overlooking the river,

"I'd like to think there's a little demon in all of us," she replied.

"Uh-huh. And as to your questions?"

"I need someone familiar with this area. Especially in that direction," she said pointing to the mountains to the north.

"Why exactly?" he asked growing suspicious.

"I need to find something. A stone."

"There are many there," he said pointing to the river.

"Not like this one," she replied jumping down beside him. "In the wrong hands this stone could cause great calamity."

He looked at her oddly surveying their current surroundings.

"You do know where you are right?"

"Not this. I mean the kind that *does not end*."

"Such an important stone!" he mocked.

"Thus my interest in finding it."

"How will you know when you've found the right one?"

She leaned to one side watching the flow of the river. "You might say I have a good sense of smell."

"Then you should go directly!"

"Good - but not that good. I need someone to guide me to the towns in which it might be held."

"You mean it may have been taken as a prize of war?"

She nodded.

"Who do you believe has it now?"

"Evil men I think."

"Sadly that doesn't narrow it down much."

"They took it from a temple on the distant mountain."

"He followed her gaze lazily until he realized her direction."

"You mean from Mount Koya?!"

"Yes. From the Garan."

Arrow Cutter

If it concerns Mt. Koya I must help her, the thought, but -.

“Wait, how could you even know that?! No women are -,”

“Well I can be very discreet when I want to be.”

“*Yes I’m sure you’re very good at hiding in the shadows,*” he grumbled. “But surely we can drop all pretense. For I see now you must be a demon. Your hair, your clothes, your weird pet. They all point to what you really are.”

“If I’m a demon then why would I help you? Why wouldn’t I just kill you and take whatever I want? Or at the very least force you to do my bidding? It would be much easier.”

He paused. “I don’t know, maybe you plan to lead us into the mountains and eat us one by one, or turn us into something.”

“*Hmm this ‘plan’ of yours sounds kind of complicated - what with all the guided tours and everything,*” she said as Mint appeared in the branches above her.

“Well maybe I don’t know the *whole* plan. Maybe you’re just trying to entice me with your charms.”

She looked to her companion puzzled for moment before the creature squawked something back,” *Ew that’s disgusting!*”

“Laugh if you want to but I have ways of discerning the truth! For no demon can stand before the image of the Buddha!”

She looked at him curiously, following him as he marched down the road to the temple where upon he entered, bowing low before the statue. She stepped in behind him examining the figure as Mint flew overhead chattering something to her.

“Yeah you’re right, this guy doesn’t look like he’s missing any meals,” she laughed. “But then they do seem to be feeding him-,” she said leaning over to examine the offerings.

“Blasphemy!” he said taking up an Onusa wand and waving it at them. Mint’s eyes followed it excitedly, jumping on it and biting the paper streamers joyfully.

“*Yaah - get off that you filthy rodent!*” he said whipping it around until Mint went flying into the rafters hissing.

“*What is going on here?*” cried the monk coming to see what the commotion was. “Oh now look what you’ve done. You’ve let a flying demon into the temple!”

“What?! No that wasn’t me!”

“I thought we just proved we weren’t demons?” asked Lind.

“All of you, get out!” shouted the monk.

Mortality

They wandered away, moving along the river until they found a protected spot under the trees reflecting in the light of the lanterns from the houses and road nearby.

“Let’s talk of this place. It’s beautiful, but this location is both a blessing and a curse,” Lind said deftly climbing the tree.

“This bend in the river is holding the village less than 1600 shaku in any direction, hemmed in by steep mountains on three sides and the river on the fourth. The principle elevated ground is under the ancient trees of the central temple, and other than the river road I count only a few steep mountain defiles out of here. Even the southern branch of the road is a poor exit as the river grows wilder in that direction - leaving you with only one primary access point. It provides a strong defense, but if you are ever overwhelmed here it provides little chance of escape.”

“I see you tend to think in military terms,” he replied easily.

“So far no force has ever managed to breach our primary perimeter, though our men are few. In truth it would take an army to breach this place, and that’s not taking into account our hidden defenses of which you are not yet aware. Our community is spread along the river to the north for several miles from here but in times of trouble they can fall back to our primary holds. For most of the year the bounding river is swift and cold enough to carry away even a sizable force trying to cross anywhere outside the rope bridges.”

She stepped up higher on the cedar. “I don’t think in military terms; I think in defensive terms. For I have seen what happens when people are unprepared for what may come.”

“Sounds like you’ve seen much for your age.”

“Your eyes tell me the same thing,” she replied without looking back. “Yes it’s true. I am alone. Without friends . . . other than Mint.”

“Your parents?”

She shook her head.

“Yet still you came. *Alone*.”

“It was necessary.”

“I know the feeling. I live here yet I too am alone. I had no plans to stay but in time marauders came. My life was not always so. When I was young those I loved were plentiful . . .

Arrow Cutter

before the war.” He watched her out the corner of his eye trying to judge her attire. “Where then do you come from? From across the sea?”

“A long way I have come to stand here,” she said ruefully.

“And I wish to return home as soon as possible.”

“And where is that?” he asked.

She looked upward.

He looked at her oddly, laughing. “*Stick around*. You may find your way back soon enough!”

She turned back, peering down at him with great luminous eyes. “What is your name?” she asked.

“You may call me Sohei,” he replied.

“You who walks the mountains. You have no true name?”

“Any name I had has long been forgotten,” he replied. “I now try to walk the path that a man might find peace.”

“Yes, I saw you peacefully providing your services the other day. You seem adept with a blade for a monk,” she observed.

“As are many in my vocation,” he replied.

She had decided. “*If you truly desire peace then you should help me*. Guide me in my search and help me restore order!”

“*Perhaps*. But I am not yet certain what *order* you desire.

There is much that is strange about you. I must remain vigilant. It is said that a demon reveals their true form at night. So I will watch you . . .,” he said quietly lifting some of the shrine’s ceremonial sake into his robe.

Mint glanced at Lind chatting something to her. “Yeah I agree, *that does sound creepy* Mint. You must of course make your own decision. Lead or do not but know this, in the end it doesn’t matter who possesses the stone; because in the end it’s coming with me,” she said her eyes growing dark.

“Well there is another problem with your plan.”

“What is that?”

“The direction you wish to travel is through Mt. Omine. No woman is allowed to set foot there.”

“I thought you said earlier we were demons?”

“Demons aren’t allowed there either!”

“And there is no way to solve this? Or your doubts?”

Mortality

He thought a moment. "It is said that if one's heart is pure and without fear, a traveler may successfully survive the three challenges that lie within the heart of the mountain."

"Then rest easy. For I can face any challenge you throw at me."

"We shall see. You should return to the loft. For it seems much lies ahead of you tomorrow." They had almost returned to the forge when something struck Lind in the back of the head.

"Ouch! *What the –.*" She turned to see a small girl standing behind her holding peach pits. "*You go home bad demon!*" the little girl said defiantly. Lind smiled looking over her small frame.

"That's Mai. She's um – *different*," he said as Mint flew by her snarling.

"Well tell her maybe I haven't had my *fill of little girls tonight!*" Lind snarled sending the girl scampering down the street.

For Those Who Sleep

Takumi opened the door to Keiichi's room only to find Belldandy standing there, hovering over his bed. He was lying still, the first time he had been still for so long. He watched the tension in her shoulders, thinking he should leave but then she spoke, her voice low and ponderous, "From where do the great waves come Takumi?" she asked. "Those that seem to come in from nowhere far out in the deep ocean, waves that come and overtake you despite all your careful planning, washing over you to change everything you once were. For that is what Keiichi is to me. Nothing can carry me back to what I was before." He could only watch her, solitary in her misery observing the labored breathing of Keiichi's body. "You're wrong," she said finally.

"About what?"

"You think I stay here for him. But I don't. I stay for myself," she said studying Keiichi's tortured face. "Because no matter what happens, these days are closer to my heart than any I have lived. Life isn't a game of counting up the good moments and the bad to see if you are happy. It's about creating as many meaningful moments as you can with the time you are given." "Still, Keiichi wouldn't want you to go through this," he said leaving her.

"Keiichi doesn't get to choose that," she murmured folding his sheets.

...

Keiichi awoke to see Belldandy lying asleep on his shoulder, her long hair drifting down over her face. "*Bell,*" he whispered. She opened her eyes. "*Hey you.* How are you?" she asked looking away from him out the window. "I never told you this but this is my favorite time of day," she confessed. "What time?"

Mortality

"The early afternoon, when clouds obscure the afternoon sun with just a touch of wind in the air. It feels as though we're alone, as though it's just the two of us playing hooky from the world." She glanced up at the tubes running down toward his body quickly looking away trying to hold herself together.

"Don't worry Bell . . ."

"You don't deserve this my love!"

"He looked back at her bravely. "Of course I do. Who more than me - for I've known more true happiness than most men dream of.

"Oh Keiichi! It's all my fault. You were hurt because of me!"

"I was hurt because I wanted to protect you, because I always want to be the one to protect you. No matter what."

Tears grew in her eyes. She looked down seeing the muscles of his arm contract. "I hate to see you in pain."

"I'm not in pain Belldandy," he said touching his hand to hers.

"Liar," she said leaning her head to his. "Keiichi you healed me, but I - I can't heal you!"

"That's not true. They tell me you're sacrificing everything. Please don't do anything dangerous Belldandy."

"It wasn't a sacrifice Keiichi. I just - I just wish we could ride, ride along the beach like we did that day, just go for miles and miles and never stop," she said starting to sob.

"I know. I want that too."

"All I've ever needed is you Keiichi," she sagging against him.

"-And this pillow," she said trying to make him smile. "Just you and this pillow," she said lying next to him.

But he turned facing her seriously, "Bell please listen to me. Leave. You don't need to see -."

"No."

Don't you see Belldandy? I'm nothing. I never was anything!" You should just -*let me go.*"

"You're not nothing to me Keiichi! To me you're the world."

Her tears raged now uncontrollably, drawn into an unknowable blackness breaking down completely. She had only cried like that once before - alone after her mother's funeral. Keiichi would be the only one to ever see her in such a state.

"Bell . . ."

For Those Who Sleep

“You don’t get to make that choice Keiichi! Only I decide who I love. Everything I need is right here. No matter what happens. If this is the end, it’s the end. Because whatever happens I’m going with you.”

“You can’t do that. Not now. Because the world needs you.”

“What about what I need . . .”

It was night by the time all their words were said and he was asleep once more. Night, night in this house where hours lost all track of meaning. She remembered her final words to him: *You cannot change what I feel, but if you wish for me to depart, I will go.* She rose calling to Holy Bell, as with their hands they created the white feather together. Releasing it to the winds she called:

*Carry on wind over sea and grass,
wash away my tears, and my hate as well,
and gather my strength for the shadows into which I now step,
covering my heart in quiet darkness. . .*

She turned at hearing Urd enter the room. “Skuld?” she asked. “*She’s asleep.* Takumi said I should leave you two alone. I’m sure - you had a lot to talk about.”

“He wants me to leave.”

“Do you want to cry Bell? It’s okay.”

She shook her head. “Crying won’t make him safe Urd. The only thing I ever wanted was to make him happy, truly.”

“I know.”

“Yet all I’ve brought him is suffering. . .”

Urd wrapped her arms around her. “No you haven’t. You brought him more happiness than he ever could have expected. He’d be the first to tell you that.”

“He said something like that. But -,” her tears began to fall.

“Why did I do it? Was it out of selfishness?”

“You did it because you wanted to be with him, because you knew he wanted to be with you, and because you know what I’m saying is the truth. No matter what happens he will be thankful for the time you two had. He wouldn’t want to think of you sitting here in pain. That’s just the kind of person he is.”

Mortality

"I can't go on without him Urd," Belldandy said kneeling down. "I'm sorry but I can't. I can't go back to what I was before."

Urd hugged her, wishing for the moment when they were still small, still safe in the Eagles Dark Forest lookout; safe in its branches from what lay beyond. But that world was gone now, buried in the past.

"Busa didn't go to any recovery center did he?" Bell said.

Urd hugged her tighter. "You knew about that?"

"At some level I always knew. When I checked for the center it didn't exist. But I told myself . . . I hadn't checked the right place, the right name. I told myself I was wrong and put it out of my mind. Like I forgot about him to make myself feel better. How could I do that Urd?! How could I . . ."

"They both did what they wanted to do most - protect you."

"But I didn't want them to protect me . . ."

"But you don't get a say in that right? Just like those guys don't get a say in what we would do for them."

They crouched down together now, alone under the light of this strange place. "What if he doesn't wake up Urd? What if . . . he dies?" she said now speaking the words she feared most.

Urd put her head to hers, "Even if it happens I'm sure he wouldn't have changed a thing. Because he was truly happy."

Belldandy nodded, going inside to wrap herself in his jacket.

"You're leaving then?"

"Yes. It's only a matter of time before they come for me."

"I don't think it's a good idea for us to separate."

"I knew you would say that," she smiled, walking away. "But that's how it must be."

"If you're going to go full you-know-what then you should take me with you."

"No. We could never overwhelm the system no matter how we approached it."

"There is always the *other* option," she murmured.

"I could never sacrifice you like that Urd. Besides, you more than anyone knows why I could never live there."

"The time may come when we don't have the option. How will we find you?"

For Those Who Sleep

"From now on you won't. It will be safer for you that way. I will to contact you when I can."

"How?"

She pulled Keiichi's phone from her pocket.

"You know they monitor those as well."

"Yes but I don't think it will be the first thing they check.

Besides, who would monitor such communication?"

"*True*, it would likely be the Earth Help Center. But do you really think we have any friends left there these days?"

"We shall see." The winds rose and she was gone.

Urd looked at the mountains rubbing her skin. *Don't do that. If you tremble they'll see how afraid you really are*, she thought.

Takumi found her on the roof watching the city below, watching with the same faraway look in her eyes that always frightened him. "She's gone then?"

Urd nodded backing up against him. "Did I ever tell you that Bell and I, we had a fort when we were young . . . it was our place . . . our place against the world," she said as much to herself as to him. "Bell, she always preferred the fields of Fensalir, those flowing golden hill whereas I always preferred the forest. Like my mother they say. But Bell, she always came with me regardless, no matter what was going on because we, we were . . ." she bowed her head crying.

"You will see her again Urd," he said putting his arms around her.

For much of the first night Belldandy hid in the city, using its population base, electronic noise and her abilities to obscure her position. She sat down outside one of the small alleyway storefronts never realizing how cold the nights could be here; embarrassed knowing it was because she'd always had a home. Alone she pulled out Keiichi's picture, kissing it pressing her back against the wall in an attempt to sleep. "Please, please, wait for me Keiichi," she said, suddenly aware of Valkyries moving in the distance.

Mortality

...

"Are you sure about this? Tensions are already running pretty high and we don't want to look like we struck first," Peorth said walking with Prima to Yggdrasil's primary control bank. "It's been four days since she breached the archive. All of our teams have searched but there's no sign of her; here or down below. This wind mage is slippery. As such is the most definitive way to locate her and bring her in. And as for striking first, *she* struck first when she tried to access the archives through a back door," retorted Prima.

"Well, she was technically correct about the legality of her presence," observed Peorth. "Plus we have no evidence she gathered anything illegal or even useful to her current situation."

"Her actions indicate intent! If her motives were so innocent why didn't she just come in through the front door?"

"Perhaps she was concerned you might refuse her entrance, or detain her illegally," Ere muttered behind them.

"I grow tired of your staff -," Prima said throwing her a threatening glance. "Belldandy's actions clearly suggest an intent to do societal harm. What other reason could there be?! Given your recent encounter with her I'm surprised at your attitude," Prima mused, laying her hands upon the goddess connection streams. Peorth shuffled beside her, disinclined at that moment to detail the difference between *discouraging* rival agency members from potentially problematic actions and insertion of Valkyries into the situation.

"This is about perception," Prima continued. "We must demonstrate our willingness to do whatever is necessary to protect society," she said moving her fingers over the board. "The disconnection of one goddess from the system doesn't compare with that."

"I'm merely suggesting that this strong course of action may cause more problems than it solves," suggested Peorth. "Both here and down below."

"I wonder if your personal feelings on this matter are clear?" asked Prima.

For Those Who Sleep

Peorth crossed her arm sighing. "We are of course here to assist you commander but I warn you, what you start here today may prove difficult to control."

. . .

Belldandy stood alone in the afternoon breeze on the ridge top of Mt. Tsukuba pensively watching the hospital below. It was as near as she dared go today. That strange foreign place which seemed to take Keiichi further and further away from her with each passing day. She had come to the mountain to clear her head and focus on her next move when she felt a sudden change in the air. She looked skyward but the connection had already been severed as she stumbled to the ground. Within her rapidly dimming field of view she reached out with her mind, out as far as she could: *Urd's not here, she's still in Tokyo - too far away . . .* She reached once more, "*Sister-*," she called before collapsing onto the grassy slope. Above her the cirrus clouds had already begun to move paying no heed to the body lying still beneath them on the mountain slope.

Inside the clinical core Skuld continued refining the recursive algorithm only to suddenly cock her head to one side. "*Big - sis? BIG SIS!*" she shouted running for the door. Aki and Takumi looked at each other in silence. "Is she - coming back?" Aki asked a moment later.

Bursting from the building Skuld jumped up as Banpei roared to life beside her from the bushes. Dropping to the bike she swerved sharply into the street narrowly missing several cars as she poured on the throttle making her way up the mountain. Reaching the top she found her sister barely conscious as the clouds overhead drew themselves out into a wide circle.

"*We must go. Is it possible?*" Belldandy asked weakly.

"I don't know big-sis. *I don't know.* The airframe . . ."

"I believe in you Skuld -," she said drifting off. They would be the last words she would speak. Skuld looked up seeing the change in the upper atmosphere. They would be on them in moments. "*You - know what to do Banpei,*" she said nervously as the wings of the airfoil coalesced. Checking the final configuration she secured her sister before marking the most

Mortality

precipitous drop along the cliff face. She knelt down holding her lucky wrench to her lips as she pressed her hands to her chest. She did her best to settle her breathing and clear her mind before she rose. Taking hold of the frame as they began to surge forward. “Go, go - GO!” she said pushing as the three of them dove over the edge of the mountain face. “DO IT!” she cried focusing her energy, trying not to think about their accelerating fall to the valley floor below.

She depends on me, believes in me, I'm the only one who can help her! Pressing her hands to the foil she focused her power as the last hundred feet of valley floor raced up to meet them and the jets ignited. Instinctively she stepped back hard turning the foil skyward, narrowly missing several houses as the jet carried them away from the mountain gaining altitude.

“GO BANPEI!!!” she screamed rising to her feet. Below them the landscape raced past them in a blur as she, her sister and Banpei roared hundreds of feet above the valley floor.

Relieved merely to be alive, she didn't put much interest in their trajectory initially as they flew toward the Pacific. But as they passed over the beaches of Choshi she checked her gauge.

Less than 15 minutes power. I need a plan, but what? I can't go back to the hospital and they'd certainly find us at the temple – even if we could make it that far. I need someplace close - a place beyond maps. Yes that's it! They don't know about it so they won't look for us there. She dipped the foil falling to the right as the aircraft banked steeply to the south following the rocky coastline.

On the mountain behind them, Belldandy's Valkyrie pursuers had arrived. “Nothing,” Kara said searching the brush.

“Nor here -,” replied Syn.

“That's impossible! Even a goddess like her couldn't have gotten more than a hundred feet once they clipped her. She has to be here. Maybe she rolled down the slope?”

“I don't think so,” Kara said standing up sniffing the breeze.

“You feel that? There's moisture in the air.”

Syn came alongside her puzzled. “Yes. Vapor trail. But there's no way. How would she even -?”

“Only one way to find out - *Let's go.*”

For Those Who Sleep

Once in the air it took them only minutes to pick up Skuld's track as she trailed southward. "*You see that?*" shouted Kara. "I see it! *We've got her.*"

The young goddess shrieked catching sight of the pursuing Valkyries approaching fast from behind as she passed over the Taitousaki Lighthouse.

"*We don't have the fuel or power to fight them. We've got to lose them quickly,*" she thought streaking over the Katsuura headlands. She looked ahead spotting the costal shield wall of a small inlet ahead. "Perfect." She pushed the foil diving toward the circular water tower atop the point.

"*You see that?!*" Kara yelled watching the girl's steep descent.

"*What's she doing?!*" Syn shouted accelerating to catch her.

"Looks like she's going to crash into the tower! We've got to get there first. You go left I'll go right!"

"Right." The Valkyries poured on the speed, closing the gap on the airfoil. Skuld bent low passing over the green hills of the Onjuku coast. A few more seconds and they would have her. Kara reached out for the maneuvering craft, "*Almost -!*"

"*Sorry!!*" Skuld shouted apologetically, hitting the release on the quantum net. Kara twisted but it was too late. The net hit her at full speed as she tumbled helplessly through the air along her initial trajectory, striking the water tower only to bounce off it before flying over the cliff's edge to crash into the blue waters of the inlet below. Dazed but still conscious she bobbed limply on the water's surface trapped in the net. Though Syn had managed to avoid being tangled in the net she hadn't fared much better. The outer rim struck her causing her to spin wildly before colliding with several onshore trees like a meteor. Skuld heard the faint cries of their curses as she raced across the bay ascending, drawing the flying wing over the rock wall at the far end. The Valkyries bobbed or swung silently from their respective positions.

"Syn you still . . . *alive?*" Kara murmured from the water.

"*No . . .*," Syn replied swinging from the vines of a nearby tree.

"Kara?"

"Yeah?"

"I hate that kid. . . How could this day get any worse?"

Mortality

“Kara, Syn this is command. Do you have her? Do you have Belldandy in custody?” They looked at one another ruefully. “Um, we’re going to get back to you on that one Herja,” Kara replied spitting out water.

...

“I already told you the whole story!” growled the wet Valkyrie still drying her hair under a towel.

“Well sure, but I’m just trying to get a complete picture,” Rota said surrounded by Mist, Pogn and the rest of Lind’s team trying not to smile. I mean it was just *the one* girl, right? I mean it wasn’t a *gang* of underage goddesses who attacked you was it?”

“Because they *can* be dangerous in a group,” admitted Mist.

“Oh yeah a group is a *whole* different story,” agreed Rota.

“I remember once, there was this gang of 10 year olds, and you had better believe that things got -.”

“Ha, ha, you’re all soooo funny!” Kara snapped glaring at them as they sat gathered with Peorth’s administrative staff. “I told you – she’s *not* a normal kid! She’s a MONSTER!”

“Twelve is a dangerous age,” observed Rota.

“Perhaps the *most* dangerous age,” agreed Mist.

“You know when I recover I’m coming after you two first right?” snarled Kara.

“Wow sounds scary – I mean if you hadn’t just been beaten up by a 12 year old. I might have to hire a couple of junior high school kids to protect us. But as for you two I don’t think you need to worry. Security’s pretty tight around here. I doubt there’s *any* way some young teens could get their hands on you here.”

“Well not here in town -,” agreed Mist. “But what about the school across the river? I mean some of them could potentially swim over and -.”

“You know you *can both go to hell right?*” shouted Syn.

“Yes, well before we do that and meet your future husband, why don’t you two leave this matter to some *professional* Valkyries capable of wrangling this dangerous fugitive,” Rota said, ducking several thrown objects as she disappeared down the corridor with Peorth and the others.

For Those Who Sleep

"It's been a few hours. How big is the search area now for this kid?" Rota asked once they'd reached the main atrium. "I have an appointment with a pool this afternoon I'd like to keep."

"Can't be that big," observed Mist. "If she'd darted over open ocean we definitely would have picked her up. She must be somewhere on the Chiba peninsula. It's only about 900 square miles. Not great, but not the end of the world."

"*Not necessarily-*," interjected Peorth. "Skuld's not stupid.

There are other ways she could have gotten off the peninsula without detection," she said drawing her finger along the highway connecting the Boso highlands to Kawasaki. "Given the size of her craft it's possible she could have flown it through/under the Tokyo Bay Bridge. Given the amount of interference at that site and her small size, it's not impossible that we could have missed her if she went out that way."

"*Damn! If that's true she could be anywhere by now!*"

"Yes, but it's just one possibility," Peorth said looking around.

"Such as?" the Valkyries said leaning in.

"If you look at her flight path she was proceeding in a pretty straight line at the end. Which would bring her to landfall right about *here*," she said drawing her finger down.

"I don't get it. What's so special about that spot?"

"Well it's not *general information*," Peorth said lowering her voice. "But there *is* something there. Skuld's older sister has a sanctuary close to that spot."

The Valkyries looked at each other their eyes lighting up.

...

They searched the shoreline, walking the eastern edge of the Chiba peninsula when suddenly Mist stopped. "Rota do you see what I'm seeing?"

"I sure as hell do -," she replied spotting their quarry. Skuld saw them at the same time, trying to look inconspicuous as she dragged a now inactive Banpei along behind her. They were on her in a flash, slamming her to the ground as she tried to turn and walk away.

"Skuld right?"

"Skuld? What kind of a name is that?" Skuld responded. "No, my name is uh-," she looked around the beach for ideas.

"*Sandy*."

Mortality

"Uh-huh. Do you know who we are?" Rota demanded.

"A couple of 'economical' escorts?" she shrugged.

"WHAT did you just say to us?!"

"Look I'm not judging. But I think you'll get a lot more 'business' if you head to the beaches farther south," she said.

"*Come here you little brat!*" Mist snapped grabbing her.

"Where is she?!"

"Who?"

"Your sister!"

"*I have a sister?!!*" she said happily.

"This little act of yours is starting to piss me off. Let me refresh your memory. You were *carrying* her a couple of hours ago on your flying piece of tinfoil right before you bounced two of our colleagues off a water tower! Does that narrow it down for you?"

She looked at them blankly. "And this is *today* we're talking about?"

"Fine. We'll find her ourselves. Sit here you little delinquent!"

"*Don't worry I got it,*" Rota shouted a moment later. "About a hundred yards - up toward that hill."

Skuld began waving her arms wildly. "What? Where? I don't see anything!"

"*Cute.* We knew it would be hidden - because we're professionals," Mist said approaching the building.

"*I* - my older sister says people can't go up there!"

"Oh so you *do* have a sister?"

"-And amnesia!" Skuld cried sympathetically.

Rota reached the entrance of the residence surveying it. "Don't you have to have some kind of permit to go exploring in there?! Because I don't think you guys should be -."

"**BOOOOOM!**"

Skuld winced watching the Valkyries fly overhead, landing in the shallows of the shoreline. "Alright now I'm *really* pissed. Are you alright Rota?!"

The Valkyrie stood up coughing. "Fine. It was more smoke than bomb. Hardly a deterrent for people like us."

"Did you find anything in there?" Skuld asked innocently.

"She's not in there - as I'm sure you're well aware.

"Well at least we have - *Oh my god!*"

For Those Who Sleep

“What?!”

“Rota your skin! *It’s starting to turn -.*”

“*Yours is doing the same thing!*”

The Valkyries turned to Skuld murderously as a series of impolite words began to appear on every inch of their skin.

“Why you little - *you led us there!*”

“No I told you not to go! I told you my sister - She’s crazy!!!”

The tattooing on them was becoming more distinct by the second. “You turn us back - *right now*. This is against the law you know!”

“I think it’s only against the law to *harm* goddesses. You’re both okay aren’t you?”

“I said turn us back this instant! This isn’t funny!”

“Well it’s not *my* magic. I mean think about it. Could an underage goddess really perform some kind of spell a *Valkyrie* couldn’t reverse?”

“You’re treading on very dangerous territory. Whose then?”

“Well I’m not certain, but it *might* be my older sister’s.”

The two groaned. Urd’s spells were not known to be easy to reverse even under ideal conditions. “Where is she?”

“I’m not sure. There’s been a lot going on with us lately. But I might know of a place where she keeps a reversal.”

“*Really?!*”

“Yeah, I’d be happy to go and look for it for you.”

“Thank goodness,” Mist replied relieved.

Rota was more circumspect however. “That’s all there is to it?”

“Well . . . maybe you could help me with something?”

They looked at one another suspiciously.

“Hey you don’t have to do it! You can just go back like that I suppose.”

“What is this thing you have in mind - exactly?” Rota said gritting her teeth.

“Nothing illegal. I just thought maybe you guys could help me with my science project.”

“Your *science* project?”

“Yeah. I need about a hundred pounds of stone from the lunar reserve to complete it.”

Mortality

"And I suppose it's just a coincidence that that's the exact amount required to keep, oh say a disconnected goddess on her feet for - what do you think Rota, a week?"

"I'd say it's a good estimate . . ."

"Really?! Wow that is interesting. I'm learning so much. Well like I say the choice is yours."

"The only way we'd even *consider* it is if you cured us first."

"Of course. I mean assuming I can do it that is."

"*Really?*"

"Certainly. My sister told me that Valkyries are duty bound to honor their word. What would their commander think if they didn't?"

...

"The thing I don't understand is - how do we keep getting ourselves into these situations?!" Mist said putting more stones into the packs.

"At least her remedy worked and we didn't have to come home looking like we'd been run over by a gang of graffiti artists. Let's get the rest of the rock packed and get out of here before anyone notices."

"Why the rush? We should make her wait."

"Oh no. We're going drop these packs right where she wanted them at Tariki Hongan Temple as quickly as possible."

"Why?" Mist asked puzzled.

"Because once we do we're going to sit back and wait, wait for these stones to be used. *Then we've got her.*"

The two managed to skirt most of the hallways out of the complex until they rounded a corner coming face to face with none other than commander Prima. "Where are you two off to?" she asked seeing their red faces and full packs.

"Camping," Rota replied quickly. "We were told to go on holidays as your team would be handling things here - unless of course you need us after yesterday."

"Heavens no," Prima said coolly.

"Very well then we will be on our -."

"Where are you camping?" Pogn asked suddenly appearing.

"*Nowhere Pogn!*" howled Rota.

"Yeah Pogn - take a hike!" replied Mist.

...

For Those Who Sleep

"I didn't think we were going to get out of there!" Mist sighed descending the slope with Rota as they approached Tariki Hongan Temple. "So how do you want to handle this with the other two watching the Temple?"

"Like concerned sisters of course. Just follow my lead. *Hi guys* - how's it going on dumb human watch?" Rota asked calling to Herja and Olrun. "We heard about Kara and Syn and wondered if guys wanted to go visit them. We can cover for you if you like. I don't suppose any of the targets have shown up here yet have they?"

Olrun swung down from the tree, "No, just the same group of morons we've seen since day one. Only thing that ever comes in or out of here is their beer runs. I see you've brought your packs so I guess you mean business."

"Yeah we're ready if you are," nodded Mist.

"Alright then, we'll come back tomorrow after breakfast,"

Herja said springing away.

"Sure thing, take your time," Mist said positioning herself.

"*As soon as they're gone we'll drop the bag,*" Rota muttered.

"*Package for Skuld!*" Rota called belligerently moments later dropping the bags beside the clothesline as several Nekomi club members looked on with disinterest. The Valkyries returned to the trees waiting until Skuld poked her head out from her room. "Just as I thought! You see? *Beer runs*. I knew Skuld would use it as a means to sneak in!"

They watched as Skuld looked around, skirting outside to pick up a bag before deciding it was too heavy. She unloaded stones from it until she was satisfied, calling to Banpei who then put the pack onto the bike. The Valkyries lay together silently, listening as she spoke to an older girl: "*If you know they're looking for her it seems a terrible risk to take.*"

"*I can't explain it now but I have to minimize the disconnection time,*" Skuld said. With that she was gone out the back gate.

"There she goes, just like you said," murmured Mist.

"We'll follow at a safe distance."

"What if we lose her?"

"We can't lose her, the bags are tagged." Following high above her Mist asked, "Where is she going?"

Mortality

"I'm embarrassed to say it but it looks like she's heading to Nekomi Tech. Why didn't we think to check that club room?! That's got to be where she's going." Sure enough Skuld pulled up to the club room, dragging the bag inside. However as the minutes passed and nothing happened they grew anxious. "Do you think she jumped out of there?"

"No. Yggdrasil would alert us to any jumps and she knows it. I think they're both in there. She's just letting Belldandy regain some strength. She's been disconnected for more than six hours now. It's going to take her some time to recover."

"So this is the ideal time for us to recover them."

"Yes." They burst in to find – Skuld alone reaching into the bag.

"Hey, what is this!"

"Where is she!"

"Who? I told you, this was for my science experiment!"

The Valkyries looked at one another. "Rota – *the Temple!*"

"Hang on let me check, I left a camera there. . . It's alright. I can see it's still there!"

"Okay bye then," waved Skuld.

"Oh you'd love that wouldn't you, you little brat! Having us leave so you can take off somewhere else. No you're coming with us, you, your stones and your little pet!"

"You can't do that!" Skuld protested growing panicked.

"Oh does that wreck your plan? C'mon!"

Soon they had all returned to the temple. "Skuld, I'm surprised to see you back so soon," Hasegawa said meeting her in the courtyard. "Are you and your friends staying for dinner?"

"Search the temple!" Rota said pushing past her.

"*Otaki hide the stuff!*" shouted Hasegawa."

"What stuff?!" cried Skuld. "They're looking for Belldandy!"

"Why would Belldandy be here? Isn't she with Keiichi?"

"They – they're confused. *I think they're mental,*" Skuld whispered causing Mist to growl.

"She's right. She's not here," said Rota.

"She couldn't have recovered that fast. Wait a minute – where's that girl you were talking to earlier!"

For Those Who Sleep

"You mean Megumi? She left with Tamiya a while back to take the trash to the recycling station," said Hasegawa. Rota turned to see Skuld behind her making some kind of motion. "*At least they didn't get any of the stone,*" Mist whispered. But Rota's face was already going pale. "Are we sure about that?" she said rushing over to the bag. "Does this look like the stuff we put in there?" Rota said holding up several fragments looking suspiciously like the rocks surrounding the temple." "Oh crap. CRAP!!!!!"

...

"Alright so run it down for me again . . . *slowly,*" Sigrun said standing with the other members of the team around Mist and Rota as they gathered on the outskirts of Yggdrasil.

"Well our best guess is that between the time of Kara and Syn's little mishap and Rota and I finding Skuld on the beach, the little freak managed to get her sister out of there so it was empty when we checked it."

"Where did she take her?"

"Well, we *now* think she was transferred by a third party to Tariki Hongan Temple slipping past Prima's crew."

"-And apparently the two of you," remarked Pogn.

"*Hey!* She didn't slip past us, she was already in," spat Rota.

"-And we left out the part about how *Pogn's* questionnaire almost got us caught!"

"Well if you'd *trust your teammates* once in a while and let them in on your illegal shenanigans maybe things would turn out better!"

"Yeah, you could have let us know guys," agreed Puror.

"Alright enough. You mean the whole time -."

"*Yeah.* We didn't realize it when we showed up, but we think Belldandy was already unconscious inside when we dropped off the lunar stone."

"So all the time you were chasing Skuld -."

"*Um yeah.* We think she used the time to recover. Worse, it appears they switched the stones while we were gone.

"How did that happen - *exactly?*"

"Our current theory is that the Nekomi Tech auto club members only *appear* stupid, and that their falls, tumbles and

Mortality

tackles around the bag were actually designed to remove and replace stones.

"I see," Sigrun said rubbing her eyes. "Okay one last question and this one's important. *Where is she now?*"

"Well from the camera we left, we know a girl and a male accomplice drove a truck out of the temple while we were gone. At the time it appeared to be filled with refuse and empty beer bottles but . . . we now think that Belldandy and the stones were in there as well."

"Ah-hah. And where is this truck now?"

They looked back embarrassed. "We found it outside a recycling station near Nekomi Tech."

"The Nekomi Tech that sits right next to a subway?"

"Yes."

"So in other words . . ."

"-She could be anywhere by now," hissed Puror.

"By any chance did that truck have the letters 'SCREW YOU' painted on the side of it?" Pogn added unhelpfully.

"Shut up Pogn!" the pair cried.

"Let's consider something else for a moment," Sigrun waved.

"Does Prima's crew know any of this?"

The two seemed genuinely offended. "C'mon do you think we're complete amateurs – despite recent events. We waited for them to return, told them we'd seen nothing and left. They have no idea Belldandy was in or out of there. They certainly don't know anything about our missing depot of stone."

"Fine. And Skuld?"

"We told her we'd better not see her anywhere but Tariki Hongan Temple in the future or we would confine her.

However . . ."

"What?"

"She asked if she could instead be confined to the place where they're keeping Belldandy's human. She was –persuasive."

"So you complied with her request?"

"Yes. We dropped her off there."

"You did the right thing. As long as she doesn't move from there we'll leave her alone. And the older sister?"

For Those Who Sleep

“We don’t know at the moment where she is but she does seem to come and go from the place where Skuld is now. We believe it’s her current base of operation.”

“In that case we’ll maintain a low profile and watch that site. Hopefully she’ll lead us to Belldandy. Prima’s team is camped out at the Temple so they shouldn’t get in our way.

...

Takumi put his hands into his lab coat coming downstairs, watching Urd send Skuld off to Keiichi’s room as he approached. “Were your investigations fruitful?” he asked. “Things are in motion. Now um don’t freak out, but a few small wrinkles have developed since this morning. Seems Belldandy was disconnected from the system today, Skuld got into some aerial combat with a couple of Valkyries, and she blew a couple of others up.”

He squinted back. “You said *don’t* freak out, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well if they’ve got Belldandy I don’t think Keiichi will be seeing her again. We shouldn’t have let her leave.”

“They don’t have her. Skuld was able to blackmail -.”

“I don’t think I want to hear any more . . .”

“Okay fine. But you need to go to the Nekomi Tech club room tomorrow.”

“I’m afraid to ask why.”

“There’s something there we need and I can’t go get it myself.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I’m sure there are eyes watching this place now.”

...

Megumi glanced over at Tamiya again as they drove down the road into the effortless quiet of the late afternoon clouds. “A storm is coming,” she said finally. “*I’m worried*. Do you wonder what this is all about? I mean she asked us to sneak her out,” she said, not mentioning her growing apprehension upon seeing Belldandy head for the subway in the opposite direction of the hospital when they let her off.

“It was for Belldandy, so I don’t need to know,” he replied.

“But to sneak her out. . .”

“Means someone is watching us, somebody Belldandy fears.”

Mortality

Tamiya looked at the girl lost in her own thoughts. “Don’t worry Megumi. Otaki and I know how to shake things up when needed. Storms are like that. They can tear things apart, but they can also bring things to the surface. “It looks like rain, we’d better cover the load,” he said as she smiled weakly.

“I just wish I knew what was going on with Keiichi.”

“You want me to drive you up to Tsukuba tonight?”

“No I’ll go tomorrow and probably stay a couple of days.”

“Ok. But don’t put it all on your shoulders. If you need us -.”

“I know. But you guys need to hold down the temple. If Belldandy comes back or tries to contact you, she’ll need you more than me. *Epecially* if something is watching the temple. I feel bad leaving you all.”

“Oh you don’t need to worry about that. We’ve got something special planned.”

“Something planned?”

“Yeah. It should confuse the hell out of them.”

From the trees Prima’s Valkyries watched the truck approach.

“Who is it?” asked Olrun.

“The same misfits we’ve seen before,” replied Goll as the truck passed beneath them, lumbering down the road into the temple.

“Looks like they made it for dinner.”

“I wish someone would make us dinner,” Olrun murmured snapping branches off to make her hammock in the tree.

Fortress of Souls

While the past month had been instrumental in teaching Lind details of the ebb and flow of village life, it had done little to illuminate her next steps toward recovering the stone. Though she'd become enough of a presence that handfuls of villagers would now nod to her when she wandered the streets with Sohei and the ironworkers, her relationship with Mai had not improved. The girl had continued lurking at the edge of the barn, yelling and throwing rocks or mud at her depending on the day before being chased off by Mint. Yet there was the feeling that the town had gained something. Visits by bandits had decreased and she even saw newly erected sharpened crossed fence posts as she walked along the northern edges of the town. She no longer bristled at hearing the sound of splintering trees or falling stone as the night air cooled them, nor drew her weapons when animals moved in the hills behind town. She had learned the mountains surrounding the town were a stronghold of the Sohei - warrior monks, as well as home to the Yamabushi, mountain ascetics who practiced a combination of Buddhism, Taoism and Shintoism. 'Those that live in the mountains depend on one another', Sohei would say.

"Lone warrior monks working together eh?" she said smiling. "Is that what passes for wit where you're from?" Sohei replied. "They watch the forest, maintaining its footpaths and shrines." "Then there is little need for you to be here," she said returning to the subject that had occupied them for the last several weeks. "Rather you should aid and guide me, unless there's something else that keeps you from returning to the world?" she said. He sighed looking back at the river. "We will let the gods of the mountain decide," he replied finally. "And *what* will they decide?" "Whether you are worthy. We go tomorrow."

Mortality

They set out early the next morning, following the river upstream for several miles, east and then north again. After a time she saw the path break from the river ascending through the ancient gate, deep within stands of Japanese cedar winding into the mountains. Lind continued up the steep mountain path following Sohei as the trail wound through canyons hemmed in by mist, conifer and vines. "Are sure you wish to continue?" he asked looking back at her through the growing fog.

"If this is meant to chill me you'll need to do better. In my home province we don't worry about mist, we worry about the Namu cats. They're light, fluffy, and playful in the snow."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

"By *play* I mean with one's neck, as they have 6 inch fangs."

"Ah."

"So this is no problem for me. You shouldn't worry."

"About the climb?"

"*About anything*," she said passing him.

They walked on deep into the mountains until they approached a set of cliffs. It appeared they had arrived.

"The core of the mountain contains three sacred tests of courage," he said solemnly. "If you are worthy of the gods you will pass. If not -," he looked down to the jagged rocks below.

"The first is Kane Kane Iwa, The Hanging Stone. It must be climbed."

"Seems straightforward," Lind observed.

"Ah but look there at the peak. That large overhanging rock. To reach it you must swing out over the chasm on the embedded chain to reach the top."

She nodded, rubbing her hands. "One must trust in one's own abilities and those who have come before in order to gain some treasures," she said, quickly moving over the rock face before stepping off and out into empty space to grab the length of chain, swinging herself around the rock face (with a bit too much flair for Sohei's taste) to gain a foothold at the top. He looked again to make sure he was not seeing things.

"Is that all that is needed?" she asked after a moment.

"What? Well *-of course not!*" he said moving on. "Beyond there is Nishi no Nozoki, The Insight from the West. Surround the rope around your feet and cast yourself feely over the cliff

Fortress of Souls

face headfirst and admit your failings to the gods.” He laid his pack down resting against the cliff face anticipating her reaction only to look and find her gone. He looked over the edge of the cliff face to see her dangling below him, the ancient rope coiled around one foot.

“I have made many poor decisions in life - so my confession is taking me awhile,” she said stretching out her hands to the nothingness beyond her and the rocks below. “*Oh hear me gods . . .*” Sohei frowned pulling himself back reflecting on the insane woman and her demeanor as the breeze gently bounced her off of the rocks as she dangled over the chasm.

“*Those who would protect life must resolutely accept death, lest they cling too tightly and obscure the truth. So it is written in our halls. I am guessing you have a similar creed,*” she said looking up at him from between her feet. He blinked back at her incredulously. “*So . . .* I see it’s true you have prepared your mind and trained your body. But across from us lies Byodo Iwa, The Stone of Equality. The final test!” The sheer rock tower jutted out at a steep angle over a deep and evil-looking gorge. Lind poked her head over suspiciously.

“The narrow footholds along the wall should allow those who have faith to approach the tower close enough to attempt to leap across to the other side. Do you understand?” Sohei asked. “*And there are no other tests beyond this one?*” she said from the far side of the crevasse. He looked over at her stunned trying to determine her exact route of her passage.

“Are you coming over or do you want me to return?” she asked.

“*I think we need a new rule about no women on this mountain,*” he muttered, wondering as he climbed across the sheer rock face if the spire had not pulled even farther away since the last time he had crossed. He jumped out reaching the far side but the foothold gave way as he landed. “*Gotcha!*” she said catching him by the upper arm holding him perfectly still over the gorge.

He eyed the bend of her arm, looking down below before looking up into her eyes, *I don’t care how strong she’s supposed to be - no human could do that*, he thought.

“It seems you have your guide, he said.

Mortality

“Glad to hear it,” she replied swinging him back across before jumping over herself.

“Just so you know I’m still recovering from my arrow wounds,” he said taking the lead toward the mountaintop.

“I never doubted it,” she replied as they approached the temple. From her vantage point she could see several men holding prayer beads gathered around a fire with several more nearby.

“I thought you said their kind didn’t gather?”

“Normally no. It’s not infrequent to find a few from the mountains here. But this is unusual,” he said signaling for her to stay. He approached, talking with them for several moments before returning.

“What is it? What’s happened?” she asked.

“Several of them were climbing the eastern slopes of Mt. Ōdaigahara when something came; fast and flowing. They split up to avoid it. These men traversed by different lateral paths but their strongest climbed the face. He did not make it to the junction point. The eldest says they drew the talisman around them, but it followed close behind like an evil breath, only drawing off as they reached the protection of the temple. They have lit the lanterns and said prayers for their fallen brother, however -.”

“What?”

“The lanterns on those distant hills do not answer . . .”

Lind stepped to the edge of the hill crouching down on her haunches. She seemed to be focusing all of her efforts on watching the distant silent hills. Her breathing slowed, her eyes seeming to subtly change color. For the first time since meeting her he saw something in her resembling fear. Even if he had not witnessed her actions on the rock her watchfulness would have chilled him to the bone. “How much time do we have before the sun sets?” she asked.

“Five hours perhaps.”

She cast her eyes over the men. The all looked tough, durable.

“Ask them to follow us down the mountain into town.”

“I doubt they will listen to us. Or follow a demon’s command.”

“Tell them they must do so, or they will all likely be dead by morning. For something is tracking us. And I do not think the distant hills fail to light their lanterns out of inattention.”

Fortress of Souls

“Bandits? Or perhaps the Taira? Maybe it’s one of your Namu cats,” he mused.

She looked back, her eyes returning to their normal color.

“Namu cats can be placated with bundles of Valerian root, unless you get one of the ones that doesn’t respond. No, this is something different.”

“How do you know?”

“All the intruders we’ve faced have come from the north.

Whatever this is it’s coming from the south.”

He stared at her trying to see behind her eyes. But there was nothing. “Who are you really?”

“A traveler. *Like you*,” she said staring back.

“Very well,” he said departing to try and convince those of the mountains to follow them.

By the time they reached the northern confines of the village night was falling, and with it there now arose a terrible wailing away to their left. “It’s behind us!” Sohei said as they rushed through the barricades and earthen work defenses. Lind stood looking back freezing. “It’s as I feared,” she said.

“What? What is it?”

“Something from the other realm. You told me once that there were defenses here, hidden defenses. If that is true now is the time to use them.”

“It will take time.”

“A luxury we do not have.” At that moment they heard the gong sounding below them away downstream in the temple. Pinpoints of firelight rose along the eastern edge of the village as torches illuminated the oncoming forest as they crept down from the mountain.

“I need to find Ryu and the others!” Sohei called signaling their companions as together they charged down river together.

Below her Lind heard shouts arising on all sides as Sohei and the others called out to the villagers directing them to run north. Hesitantly she followed Sohei, watching the shadows as she went. The wailing seemed to echo now, coming nearer then farther away in the darkness. All of the sudden it appeared on her left howling, cloaked and skeletal just outside the torchlight beyond the barricades, eight feet all terrifyingly close. Lind

Mortality

turned, ducking down as villagers rushed by her screaming in all directions now. "Sohei!" she shouted as the creature's hands swept inside the fires. She heard no reply as the racing humanity streamed past her like bats. She clenched her arms tightly around herself trying to slow her breathing. This was not the village of her youth, and she was no longer a child she told herself. At last her breathing stilled and she turned, reaching out her hand to materialize her blade. But there was nothing. Nothing there, nothing looking back at her, no face, only an awful empty nothingness. Her blood ran cold. The thing rose up in front of her, its long flowing robes and movement making it look deceptively as though it was forever trapped underwater. Yet when it came at her it moved with astonishing speed for something of its size. From the nothingness it seemed to smile.

"Lind!" Sohei shouted running on her right as archers and spearmen took their positions. She saw the elder from the mountain group at their front. "It's still outside the barricade." "It won't stay there for long. Where are the villagers going?" "Caves that lie beyond the river!"

"Good. Everyone needs to get there before -!"

But at that moment it leaped the protections into the village as full panic set in. Hails of arrows flew through the darkness striking the beast as the spearmen plunged forward.

Most of the villagers had made it past them but some stragglers still remained, running through them as arrows continued to fly. "This won't hold him for long, we need to get out!"

Sohei gave the call as together they retreated north toward the caves. They had almost reached them when she saw Mai running with several others. She drew back lifting her blade.

"No - she's too far away and it's between us!" Sohei warned.

The apparition doubled back on the girl as Lind gave a sharp whistle. Down through the night sky Mint flew, biting the side of the creature's head with its sharp teeth. Angrily it screamed turning to pursue her. But she was too fast and agile, streaking through trees and growth luring the monster away. Mai and the others scrambled to the safety of cave, its door closing behind them as a large skeletal hand suddenly plunged through an opening in the rock wall above them. "Plug it!" shouted Ryu as

Fortress of Souls

those inside screamed. Spears and the hammering of rocks pushed the creature back but those inside now sat in a deathly pall of silence.

"Do not stay like this," she said searching the cave wall. "For fear only gives it greater power."

"-You seem to know much of its ways," said the elder. She turned to see the villagers eyeing her.

"When I was young one such as it came to my village. When it was finished there were . . . *fewer*." For a moment she went back to the terrible sound of hammering and clawing against solid oak door of her childhood. An echo at that moment in the caverns above them up caused them all to jump. But it was Mint squeezing inside to fly down beside them. "Risen from the earth then?" Lind asked her companion as she hissed something back at her. "*I don't care about your ass*. It's still outside? Waiting for us? She says it is."

"Can it be fought?" asked Sohei.

"For now our best protection lies in each other. Unity is really what's keeping him out for the moment. Try to have them do anything of good cheer. It will weaken its hold on this place." "Then I ask you to lead us," Sohei said to the Yamabushi elder. Under the torchlight Lind watched as the mountain travelers gathered together in the center of the group, pouring out grain into patterns on the ground, chanting as they moved with their swords, surrounded on the outer ring by Sohei and the ironworkers and members of the village beyond. "Action through inaction, like pillars of the earth," the elder said. "For those who are centered may go where they wish without danger. If you do not fear death, there is nothing you cannot achieve."

"*Easy to say when you're pushing seventy-*," muttered Ryu.

"You saw him run past us and hold the head of the charge against that thing right? And they did lose a colleague today."

"*True*. How long do you think we're supposed to chant?"

"The creature is weakened by sunlight," Lind replied moving toward the wall. "It should give us the day to prepare."

"But prepare what?"

"Ringing the town with as many talisman as you can would be a good start. Unifying the village against it will break down its

Mortality

hold on them. Anything that can be done will help. Show them they can fight back and as they see it working it should allow the protection to grow stronger.”

“Very well. Spread the word.”

The next day the town was bustling with growing lengths of straw braid Shimenawa, zigzagging paper Shides and blooms of Ōnusa wands. Outside town, monks scattered salt to purify the grounds beyond the barricades. Farther out Lind, Sohei and the men of the forge worked to remove obstacles that might block their view from inside the town.

“Let me talk to you,” Sohei said as they walked the slope together between the town and the mountain, checking to see that all was as in readiness. “Did you know it was coming for you?”

“No. When we first heard about it in the mountains I didn’t know if it was here for me, the stone, or something else. But the way it came to the village . . . yes I think it’s here for me. It would have left if it was simply searching for the stone.”

“What is it? How did it arise?”

“It rises from the dark places of the earth feeding on hate and death which allows it to grow.

“Can we fight against it?”

“Refined elements from the earth veins possessing sufficient power can harm it and slow its actions.”

“Things like iron?”

“Yes. And steel.”

“Then we should forge what we can.”

“Yes,” Lind replied looking down to see Mai watching them from the ironworks below. She could see the girl had fully embraced the spirit of the day as she stood on stubby legs in a skirt made completely of paper Shides which shuffled when she walked. Though Lind still received stones from her, Mai had evidently decided Mint now deserved praise, handing her dried plumbs she now chewed politely as she sat beside her.

“Will it be enough?” Ryu asked as they entered town heading for the forge.

“I wonder as well,” Lind said heading toward the river.

“What are you doing?” said Sohei.

Fortress of Souls

“Attempting to make a call - the time has come,” she said placing stones into the water enclosing a small section of the river. Over the still water she now traced out the symbols which cooled and fell dissolving into the pool.

“Will it help us?”

“We’ll see,” she said looking skyward. She sat like that for some time watching the sky as the afternoon light grew.

“Doesn’t look like you’re getting much help,” he observed.

“It all depends,” she said pointing to a speck high overhead.

He looked up straining his eyes. He could see several specks now, each streaming toward them. “What is that?” he said but their tails were becoming obvious. “Meteors!” he cried as more and more villagers began to look up.

“They’ll bring them down as close as they dare but we should still think of how best to retrieve them.” One by one they streaked overhead crashing into the hillside.

“There! We need to retrieve them before nightfall,” she said climbing with Sohei and the Yamabushi, who pressed forward waving bundles of tightly tied burning reed as they carried ropes, hides and hooks outside the barricades to collect their fallen emissaries. In the falling light they pried the blackened forms of melted rock from the earth, dragging them down the slopes as the first stars began to appear. A wail from the far side of the mountain told them they were almost out of time as they made it behind the wall of talisman. Torches were lit as the men took up their posts and waited.

They did not have long to wait. The 8 foot tall figure suddenly appeared on the far side, its skeletal form shifting beneath its oddly drifting robes, reaching over the barricades trying to ensnare the unwary. But the talisman seemed to hold, and the prayers and smoke of the monks’ reeds further irritated the creature. Now another attack came as Mai charged forward from the back, beginning her own dance. “Hu, hu - hah! Hu, hu - HAH!” she chanted shaking her Shide-wearing pelvis at the demon. There came a terrible wailing but the demon could not seem to break through the perimeter. Behind her Lind looked on with Sohei, her eyes now beginning to glow. “Return to the shadows!” she called materializing her axe.

Mortality

Sohei looked from her to the weapon. "He doesn't look happy. I only hope what was brought can help. Is it a metal?"

"An alloy. Iron and carbon fused, hardened with tungsten and manganese, grown flexible with silicon. If forged and tempered correctly it should be able to pierce its hide."

"Your words are strange but we will do as you request," said Ryu.

"Then fire your forges! You must make them hotter than normal to break away and work these fragments, though the alloy is pure so it will take less to achieve its final form."

"Sounds like you're familiar with it."

"Long have I worked in the forges of the earth," she replied watching the creature pass.

"Those protections had still better hold. Even with all of us it will take days to complete," Ryu replied.

"Yes, and it is not an alloy you are used to. It will take time to learn how to handle it properly. But there is more laid into the heart of it than mere element. For the very breath of existence is cast upon it. As such it is a link between worlds, and we all give power to it. I will show you how my forbearers hammered form into the billets," Lind said as they shoveled pine charcoal in around it. They turned back to see the creature, rising now above the Yamabushi and Sohei warrior monks with its arms spread, terrifying behind the barricades emitting a horrible sound as though the gnashing of teeth and bone.

"It rises but does not cross. There are too many of them. Too many souls with too much to protect. They are strong in their ways. With the leaders gathered together here I think the protections will hold as long as they see strength in each other," Lind said.

"Especially the little ones," Sohei pointed seeing Mai had now been joined by several small companions in her dance.

"We must begin. But the question is what form is it to take?"

"You see the size of that thing. A sword will do little good. We must make something that will reach it, as long as we can muster."

"A naginata then."

"I think so," Sohei replied. "Thus, we will forge - *Abyss*."

"*Abyss*?" questioned Ryu.

Fortress of Souls

"The arrow catcher says that thing arose from the depths of the earth - and that is exactly where we will sent it back to."

"Yes. A good name for such creatures - *Abyssals*," Lind replied.

As the night wore on the fires were refurbished as were the guards. In the days that followed monks would appear by the forge talking and taking turns with the ironworkers, casting special prayers and offering help in honing the blades. Lind and Mint found their way into the flow of life between working the forge and walking the perimeter of the town reinforcing its weak points between naps in the loft. While the growing army of talisman in and around the town seemed to hold the creature at bay, Lind cautioned all to be on their guard, for it would return almost every night at irregular intervals. She didn't even want to think about the nights the creature did not return. Still she kept such thoughts to herself. As she lay on the edge of the loft looking at the stars she wondered how things were with Freya and her young family when she sensed movement below. "Why do you look up there?" Sohei asked quietly behind her.

"It's where I'm from. . ."

"You mean - you come from the heavens?"

"Yeah."

"So you're an angel? A Tennyo?!"

"Well not exactly an angel," she said thinking. "And given that I don't know what a Tennyo is, probably not."

He eyed her closely now (as Tennyo were typically quite beautiful). "Yeah probably not," he agreed finally. "Still you could be in disguise. Can you play the Biwa or flute?"

"Umm no. Not that I know of . . ."

"Yeah probably not then. Hey wait a minute! Can you float?! That bravery on the mountain doesn't count if you can float!"

"Uh well . . ." She was thankful for the interruption at that moment as several men came running.

"What's going on?"

"Something by the gate!" cried one. "One of the Yamabushi spotted someone trying to take down the talisman. The creature almost got in" More were gathered now coming toward the ironworks.

"What does he have to say for himself," demanded Sohei.

Mortality

“He says he remembers nothing. Sounds like wind in the trees, but nothing more.”

“It’s been around us long enough,” murmured Lind. “It’s starting to learn how we think, what we need, what we fear. . .”
“Hypnosis?”

“Or something worse,” she replied. “We should keep the fires high tonight and allow only the senior monks close to the outer fences.”

He caught her watching the mountains. “Is there something else?” She shook her head saying nothing, returning to the loft.

. . .

Working from his suspicions he arose early next day, spotting her exactly where he knew she would be, with her gear headed for the barricade. “Where are you going?” he asked stopping her. “The final phase is nearly complete. Why not wait? We only need another day.”

“No it’s been here too long. Its capabilities are growing. It is only a matter of time before it finds a way through. I think it’s waiting for me.”

“You don’t know that. We just need a little more time.”

“If it was searching for something else it would have been long gone by now.”

“Is there something you’re not telling me about all this? Something personal?”

She picked up her gear. “I’m not sure we should risk the weapon even if we had time to complete it. Remember what I said: it is a link between worlds. Its greatest value is not in fighting the Abyssal. It’s not in helping the village. It is in traking the stone.”

“And that’s all you care about?”

“It’s why I am here. It’s not that I won’t help you. It’s just that I think I can help most now if I leave. If we don’t lead it away it’s only a matter of time before it begins to corrupt this place. And there’s something else that concerns me. Remember when the elder talked about a sacred mirror at the temple center?”

“The Shinkyo.”

“He said that ‘god enters through the mirror to reside in this world’. That sounds very much like something from my realm.

Fortress of Souls

Like this place may have been a portal. But now it's not used for some reason. *Or is it?*" she asked, picking up her bag.

"I'm going with you - as promised."

"There's no need to, not yet. And I don't recommend it. I'm not sure what that creature is capable of."

"All the more reason you should not go alone. I know this country. You do not. Do you even have a plan?"

"After I've led it far enough away, I can return in daylight. It should buy enough time here to complete the forging."

"A good plan. *We should make haste.*"

"Ah! You are stubborn," she growled.

"And you are too young to go into those mountains alone Tennyo; even with your spirit animals and tricks.

Ryu and the Yamabushi elder watched the pair leave via the northeastern route ascending the river valley. "They have a strong will. I hope it is enough to keep them safe," the elder monk said raising his hand.

"Yes," agreed Ryu. "But there is much which remains below the surface here. I hope it can find peace - somewhere," he said casting his eyes upon the ironworks.

Lind, Mint and Sohei set out along the river valley, eventually making their way into the Kii mountains to the east. They checked the outposts whose lights had been reported extinguished finding nothing encouraging. But as the afternoon set in fog began to tumble down the mountain, flowing into the valley cutting off the light. "Do the clouds normally flow like this?" asked Lind.

"Not in this direction," warned Sohei.

"*Mint*," she said as her companion took off. But she had scarcely taken to the air when she turned back issuing a cry.

"Be on your guard!" Lind said as they scrambled for higher ground. The creature appeared, coming slowly out of the mist with the dimming light at its back.

"How far to the caves?"

"Too far. We can't make it," replied Sohei."

"Then we have no choice," she said materializing her axe.

Sohei took out his bow as he leaned in close to the rock.

Mortality

The creature flowed with the mist raising his hands sensing them. "You know me?" it whispered.

"I know your kind," Lind replied. "And I know what you did to the lands of my youth, they that let you roam . . . *Draugr*."

"Long ago that was . . . for I was a *lord* in life - as you should know! For I am he, the pain which precedes death . . . Glámr!" "Yes."

"Then you know I cannot be defeated . . ." he rasped.

"Much does your pride not let you see, wraith!" she said bursting out, her axe engaging the edge of his sickle.

"*Strong*. But not strong enough," he hissed.

She countered, breaking away as Mint rose in the air and Sohei fired. "Augh!" The creature's attention broke as both arrows struck him square. He winced, puzzled at their strength tearing them free. Lind continued to attack furiously but his strength was too great, throwing her back.

"Mint get back!" she cried as her companion harried him.

He tried to surround her as arrows whistled striking his black interior breaking his attack. Mint made a series of insanely tight swooping attacks ripping with her claws. Lind struck, once, twice in rapid succession but her sweeps connected with only tattered cloth confused by the shifts of his body at such close range. She stepped back but his sweep caught her and she tumbled. She tried to regain her foot but the creature - "*LIND!*" Sohei cried as the blow caught her and her body became as stone. "*LIND!*" He fired but saw now that it was of little use. The creature circled, pleased with his handiwork. She stood before him, blackened and silent.

Sohei scrambled up the steep embankment watching; but there was nothing to be done. When the creature looked up scanning the embankment he crept down along it cracks, certain at every moment he would come around the corner to meet the creature's empty face. He thought of making for the caves but in the end decided against it, preferring to take his chances along the longer river route using its sound and rushing water to try and hide his breathing and footsteps; trying to make it back to the sound of people and the light of the town.

It seemed to take most of the night, scrambling through the woods alone in shock before he finally saw the light of the

Fortress of Souls

bonfires and the senior monks standing guard. Under the torchlight he called to the gate and an amazed Ryu answered letting him in. Once inside he dropped to the ground as the defenders gathered around him.

“What happened? Where is the arrow catcher?!”

“She - is dead,” he said shaking his head as murmurs of disbelief reverberated throughout the crowd. “She fought well but the creature, it was too much; too much for us. She, she -” he dropped to the ground exhausted.

He awoke to sunlight the next day, finding a bowl of broth set beside him. Slowly he rose looking out on the road, watching as people went about their business as though it were any other day. And yet he could see something had changed. Something in the town. The temperature had cooled. The people no longer gathered, rather they simply waited. Waited for what? Even they did not know.

He walked to the loft putting his hand up, only to look across at the forge which now lay silent. He stayed there for some time thinking, thinking about the past; and of the future. He made his way down the river to the temple, and there he saw that one thing had changed. Resting in one corner of the grounds, under the branches of a cypress tree, lay a small pile of pebbles with a girl seated to the side. “Dear demon - *I hate you*, she said wiping her eyes. “You had a good pet, but you were a demon, and you smelled and you didn’t even -,” she halted, her tears overwhelming her. “Demon I . . . *I miss you!*” she cried longing to see the face she could no longer find, looking to the pile of stones, frightened and alone.

“*Loss is always hard*, particularly for you young,” said the voice behind him. “But then I suppose a man such as you is used to it.” He turned to see the Ryu standing next to him. “It’s miraculous either of you returned from such an encounter. And at least the creature did not return here last night.”

“Yes,” Sohei muttered watching the mountains. But then he paused. “And yet -why doesn’t he return? If she is truly dead why doesn’t he come back? Shouldn’t we be easy pickings for him now?”

“Perhaps he has no reason. Perhaps his mission is complete.”

Mortality

“Perhaps. She said something similar. But then why doesn’t her beast return?”

“Maybe it did not survive.”

“Possibly,” he nodded. Uneasily he watched the hills the rest of the day. But nothing came, and that night nothing seemed amiss. Later in his sleep something seemed to come to him, something he could see, or feel whispering over him, sounds of Lind screaming in torment while something . . . He bolted up only to find himself standing at the edge of the black impenetrable wood just inside the barricade. *Just a dream*, he thought turning and suddenly he saw it - huge and hanging above him, hovering, its face a mask of black nothingness. “I have such things planned for you,” it seemed to whisper, “*such beautiful things for you all . . .*”

The Fugitive Goddess

Er entered the control room in the early morning hours to find Peorth staring at her screen. “Do you want to go? I can take over.”

“No, I’ll stay here,” she replied wistfully.

“Something on your mind chief?”

“No. Just wondering. . . Wondering if I did the right thing. If I’d taken another path . . . You know this guy, Keiichi?”

“No.”

“He . . . he’s not a bad guy.”

“Okay I lied. I heard a bit about him.”

“Hmm. Who could resist the story of him and Bell?”

“No I mean about you and him! How you granted his true wish. That was masterful. You must have really liked him.”

“I - I don’t know. . .”

“And now you don’t know what to do?”

“Maybe.”

“Can I ask you something? Seriously? Why aren’t the senior gods doing anything?”

Peorth shrugged, “I’ve requested and requested an audience with them but . . . they don’t answer.”

“That’s weird.”

“Maybe they’ve lost faith in me. *I don’t know*,” Peorth said continuing to stare at the screen.

“Three days since they disconnected her from the system. How do you think she’s been able to remain hidden for so long?”

Peorth nodded tapping the screen, “Lunar stone?”

“I know right? But how’d she get it?”

“That’s a question. Allies?”

“That’s what I’m thinking. Which means there could be rebels in our ranks. But who would betray us?”

“I don’t know. Sounds like something demons would want us to think. No one would go that far. Maybe she’s just that good.

Mortality

At the hospital Takumi ducked inside, just beating the coming rain. "Okay everybody I'm back. And I've got food!"

"Well? What does my super sleuth think?" asked Urd.

"There's definitely something watching the temple."

"How's everybody else?" asked Megumi sitting down.

"They seem okay. They're settling into a routine. If they stay much longer I don't think we'll be able to get them to leave."

Megumi nodded picking up her meal and returning to Keiichi.

"How is he doing?" Takumi muttered when he and Urd were alone.

"He's getting weaker. Aki was here a few hours ago and wants to talk to you about it. Still, the way Megumi is with him makes me wish I had a brother. She's holding up better than I thought."

"Did she say anything about Bell?"

"No and before you ask, we haven't heard from her. Skuld says she has some thoughts about what to do but none have panned out yet."

"I suppose she could call?"

"She won't do that. She just said that to ease my mind."

"Where is Skuld? She hasn't come for her food."

"She's down in the control room with queen Aki."

"We need to watch her. She's working way too hard."

"Yeah. I'm sure she's counting down every hour since Belldandy left in her head . . . I'm going to miss him you know?" she said.

"I know Urd," he said holding her hand.

They turned upon hearing the commotion coming from down the hall. Peeking out they saw Skuld and Aki approaching.

"I'm sure I shouldn't ask about any of this, *but this guy just showed up and he appears to be on a mission*," Aki said stepping aside as the black crow kept walking toward them, a note clutched tightly in its beak.

"Why didn't you just take the note?" Takumi said bending low.

"CAWWW!" the crow replied threateningly.

"Jeez! I see what you mean," he said as their feathered guest walked past him sauntering up to Urd to present his note.

"I see," Urd said pursuing the instructions. "Bad news Tai. It looks like you're going out again."

The Fugitive Goddess

“What? Why do I have to go?!”

“You’re not important. No one will miss you,” she said. He folded his arms looking at her. “You know what I mean. People might be interested in where Skuld or I go at this point.”

“What’s the mission?”

“Take some clothes and other things I’ll put together tonight for a ‘donation’ to a local charity tomorrow at 9 am.”

“Where?”

“A fish market. It’s written right here,” she said pushing the note into his hands.

“This?! It’s on the other side of -” she looked at him sternly.

“I just mean it’s going to take *quite a while* to get there.”

“Yeah. Especially since you won’t be taking the trains.”

“Why not?”

“Doing so substantially reduces the positional complexity of where you are going at any moment in time, allowing ‘people’ to more easily project where you are going if they get onto you. Driving around randomly on the other hand reduces such projection advantages tremendously.”

“You mean I’m not even going by the most direct route?!”

“I’m sure we can get Aki to give you her bike.”

“Sounds like you’re ordering me Urd,” he muttered. “You know it’ll take at least four hours to get down there from here.”

“You don’t *have* to go, though you are her only chance -.”

“Hey that’s not fair!”

“I suppose I could ask Megumi to go. She doesn’t need to see her brother. Still, to put her into such potential danger -.”

“Okay Urd I get it. You know Aki is going to kill me for ducking out on her again, right?”

“I’ll write her a note. Say you’ll be back tomorrow.”

...

The old woman saw the girl approaching from the cape, her arms tucked into her hoodie, her long hair folded beneath her baseball cap. Pretty but alone on this foggy day, she took the same seat at the counter she had for the past two days at the small fish market. “Would you like some tea?” the old woman asked, wondering what trouble such a girl could be in. The girl nodded saying nothing.

Mortality

She had walked the cape that morning going over every part of it in her mind, every move and counter move frame by frame knowing she would only get one chance. The last two days for her on Cape Manazuru had been endless. She had walked every step that she and Keiichi had traversed there, reflecting on every path they had taken together, everything that had brought her to this point. She spent much of her time beating herself up. ‘What did I not reach in him? What did he not understand about me?’ Her message to Urd had been simple: ‘I pray in the time that we are given you have met with success in treating Keiichi; but if this is not the case send a messenger.’

“Are you warm enough dear?” the counter maid asked. “I can see you’re not used to life here on the water.”

“You’d be surprised . . .,” she said smelling the scents from the well-tended stalls.

“*Black crow delivery service*,” the voice said dropping the package beside her. She looked up to see Takumi’s expectant face. “I’d send you Keiichi’s regards but I’m sure you know them far better than I could convey.” He tried to say more but fell silent. “Do you require anything else from me?” he asked kneeling down beside her.

“No.”

“I’ll be off then,” he waved. “Be well Bell.”

She watched him and the bike disappear, picking up the bag as she placed money on the counter walking back to the campground. Above her in the heavens however, the air had already begun to change. Had it not been for Takumi’s sharp eye for coastal fog he might never have seen it. As it moved he turned the bike.

Belldandy broke from the cover of the trees cautiously making her way down to the sea cliffs. But she had covered less than a half the distance when the air around her began to shift, as tendrils of cloud drawing out into a circular pattern above her. She retreated slowly to a more defensible position as moments later Var, Saga and Sunna emerged from the far end of the glade. “*I’ve only come to talk*,” Var said raising her hands. “I knew they would send their best, someone important to me,” she replied.

The Fugitive Goddess

"I'm not here on their account. I'm here for myself. I know you Bell. You know I do. I know how this all must be for you. Please, please just come back with me. Then we can talk, the way we used to."

"What words could I say that would not cause you further pain?"

"Bell, this has gone too far. We need to fix this."

"This isn't something that can be fixed Var. Not your way."

On either side of Var, Saga and Sunna slowly began to move out.

"Don't do this sister! To fall from such heights," pleaded Var.

"Perhaps that is because you hold me up higher than you should," replied Bell. "Don't you see Var? I met him. It happened. I can't go back to what I was before. Regardless of what you may hope or feel."

"Don't let it end like this!" Var said sadly. "Have you forgotten all that you are?"

Bell's eyes rose to meet hers. "No. Have you?"

All at once Var felt the memory sweep over her, a terrible sense of falling as the air screamed around her, her body streaking down through the heavens toward the ground below. Unable to arrest her fall she fell through the skies, the ground racing up at her with its frenzied mass of demons. *"No please, don't let them get me!"* she thought trying once more trying to right herself. But it was no use, she couldn't focus and no one could hear her above the fray of the battle all around them. She plummeted toward the earth and those who would soon seal her away, concealing her forever in darkness -.

"GOT YOU!" came the shout feeling the pull at her side, sweeping her away and aloft, past the tops of the trees at a terrific speed as the two goddesses raced high above the pitched battle below heading skyward. The goddess poured on the speed and in that moment Var knew she was safe, safe and away from danger as the battlefield fell away below them. She pushed her head to one side shaking off tears, turning to see Belldandy's face close to hers as they rose together above Hild's army that day on Mount Akagi.

"I'm sorry Bell, I just - I got scared," she said shaking her head.

Mortality

"It happens to all of us," Belldandy replied holding her tight. Var remembered it all now, the look of surety and utter in Belldandy's eyes that day as they soared above the battlefield. "You sure you're alright?"

"Yeah Bell I'm okay now. Thanks to you."

Belldandy let her go, tossing her skyward as the goddesses arched back steeply toward the battlefield. Var broke right, diving low over the south slope to assist the lone runner racing ahead of her on the slope with his *naginata*.

Var blinked realizing she was back, back in the quiet of the field with the sun on her face and Saga and Sunna at her side. She gripped her hands, still feeling the echoes of that day, the blustering winds, Belldandy's arms around her and the fear in her heart. The same fear she now saw reflected in her sister's eyes, the goddess who had stood beside her on so many days never doubting. She stood back unevenly, lowering her gaze trying to find her voice, "Let him go Bell."

"I can't."

"Then I truly feel for you. You know I don't think I ever really told you how much . . .," but her words trailed off.

"Belldandy, I do not know if what you do here today is right or wrong . . . *I only know that my part in it is at an end.*" With that she simply turned and walked away. On either side of her the two remaining goddesses looked at each other in alarm.

"What? What did you do to her?!" demanded Saga.

"*Nothing*," Belldandy replied truthfully.

"Well - you know this doesn't change anything right? You know that, *right?*" Saga said her voice edging higher.

Belldandy paused watching Var disappear before addressing them. "I thank you for coming, and I wish we had more time to speak. But I'm afraid I must be going now."

The goddesses looked at one another stepping farther apart.

"You know that's not going to happen right? It's for your own good. You know you're coming with us," Sunna said shakily.

"You are both dear friends and I appreciate all that you have done. *But I am leaving now*," she replied.

"Belldandy . . . Stop!"

"I'm sorry Saga. I'm not going to do that."

The Fugitive Goddess

Saga set her stance as each of them froze. Belldandy knew the moment had come. She drew breath, feinting to one side as Saga and Sunna struck. Twisting tightly she drew the atmosphere past her allowing her opponents strikes to hit each other simultaneously. Quickly she reversed with a circular movement of her arms as the two fell before her, sweeping them gently to one side into the bushes. *"Sleep well my sisters,"* she said raising her hand opening the seal before her. She had almost finished inscribing the inner circle of glyphs when her movements began to slow. She looked up seeing them, an entire squad of Valkyries hanging silently above her with Herja at its head. *Their fallback measure,* she thought. "Belldandy I'm giving you a direct order!" Herja shouted. *"Surrender yourself and lie out on the ground!"*

They looked at each other silently for a moment, each uncertain what the other might do. Then the goddess looked down, slowly lowering herself to the ground. Herja watched the sweat run down the girl's cheek and jawline. One drop then another. *"Kara, go down and make sure -,"* then she saw it, the tips of the goddesses' golden hair beginning to bend. *"NO!!!"* But it was too late. At that instant the granite beneath Belldandy's feet fractured under the enormous pressure as her body burst forward.

"DIVE!" Herja screamed as Valkyries fell from the sky on all sides of her at a frightening pace. *What does she think she's doing? She'll never reach the seal,* Herja thought as they screamed toward their target.

Movement on each side became a blur as Belldandy turned twisting her body past the array of strikes and soldiers as Valkyries dropped into her path. Arcing past the goddesses zigzagging path, Herja slammed to the ground just short of the seal. *"Got you!"* she said.

But Belldandy was already in motion, jumping past her to one side as she touched the outer ring of the portal which then ignited. Only then did Herja realize the magnitude of her error as the ring began to spin, pulling everything in its path into the vortex.

From a distance Takumi looked on in horror as Herja and those Valkyries closest to the seal were sucked in instantly and

Mortality

vaporized, with those farther away fighting a desperate losing battle against its pull. Beyond them Belldandy flipped landing on her feet at the far side of the portal, running at top speed for the cliff's edge. Those Valkyries that remained threw furious fire in her direction even as they disappeared into the portal. Twenty feet from cliff's edge Belldandy jumped into the air narrowly avoiding a strike which triggered a collapse in the cliff wall from their combined firepower as it fell away into the ocean.

Takumi caught one last glimpse of her as her body arched over the cliff, diving down only to straighten out at the last moment passing through a *second* portal hidden in the waters below. High above her the last of her Valkyrie assailants were drawn in, consumed by the vortex's terrible power. Takumi continued running toward the site, but now wondered if he shouldn't be going in the opposite direction. He paused trying once more to contact Urd. "Hello?" came the sleepy reply.

"*Hello?! URD WHERE THE HELL HAVE YOU BEEN?*"

"Huh? Why?" she said sounding only mildly interested.

"Why?! Because your sister just wiped out squad of Valkyries!"

"*What?! Are you sure?*"

"Yeah pretty sure, I mean I'm standing here and they're not!" he said surveying the smoldering shrubs. "It was horrible. Like they got sucked into a jet engine! I know I saw feathers!"

He could hear her dubiously weighing his words on the phone.

"That doesn't sound like Belldandy," she replied showing far too little interest for his liking. "You sure you haven't been out at the temple smoking some of Otaki's 'special herbs again?"

"Come on Urd *that was one time!*"

"Maybe they just took off for coffee? You know how fast they are."

"Urd, there is a 70 foot section of the cliff that's 20 feet shorter than it was a minute ago. Did it fly off for coffee too?!"

"Well I suppose it's possible *something* happened. Where are you now exactly?"

"Thanks for your appraisal and I don't know. Somewhere on the South coast. If Belldandy can find Keiichi anywhere on

The Fugitive Goddess

Earth you should be able to find me here. Just look for the newly renovated cliff,” he said hanging up.

Before long Urd arrived, walking the hill as he followed behind continuing to mutter, “You were the one who told me to keep an eye on her, said it would be no big deal. I could have been killed!”

“All that yapping seems to indicate you’re still in one piece. Well I do see some scorching. No bones or flesh though; that’s weird,” she said eyeing the ground.

“That’s the part that’s weird?! I told you she vaporized them!”

“Still there should be some skull or hair or something. You wouldn’t believe how hard it is to get rid of all that stuff when you have to,” she muttered searching the grass.

“I’m not even going to ask,” said Takumi.

“Well it’s just – *stop!* Here we go,” she said. “Just as I thought. Come up behind me, but carefully,” she said bending low.

“*You see?* They’re not dead. She just gave them a bit of a makeover,” Urd said chuckling picking up a yellowish ball of fluff from the ground.

“You’re kidding! She - *chickenized them?!*” he said looking horrified. Peering through the grass he could see them now, perched together in several fluffy groups with red beady eyes. Some came running out now to confront them.

“She must have suspected they were closing in on her and set up this conversion field beforehand in case she was surrounded by a large group, hoping she could lure most of them into range if it came to it.”

“So they’re all chickens now?!” Takumi said still pondering her previous point.

“*It’s just a spell.* Valkyries have some similarities to birds anyway,” she shrugged petting one of her newfound pets.

“They’ll get sorted out in time. *Besides they’re so cute.* Feel how fluffy they are,” she said holding one up only to have it glare back pecking her finger.

“*Ow, you little -!*” she said whipping the bird back at its friends in the brush. “Takumi remind me, how do we tell all the local cats it’s dinner time?!” she said as chicks darted off in all directions.

Mortality

"Umm, not sure that's our biggest problem right now," he said pointing. Above them the clouds began to circle as soon as a second squad of Valkyrie appeared. Immediately they were surrounded as Prima stepped forward.

"Are you responsible for this?!" she snarled surveying the scene.

"Responsible for what? My man and I were just out here feeding these cute little birds we found," she replied.

Prima scanned the terrain, her eyes finally coming to rest on the collapsed cliff face. She looked back at Urd with utter contempt. "So that's the way you want to play it?"

"Don't worry. I'm sure the effect will wear off . . . *eventually*. Perhaps when they molt?" she suggested happily.

The Valkyrie's hands flew to her instantly lifting her off the ground. "You think this is funny?!!"

"A *little*," Urd admitted, casually leaning down to watch chicks jumping into the arms of the nearest Valkyrie squad member.

Prima tightened her grip. "Tell me you did this, and where your scum sister is. You hear me - *mote of the lower flame*?"

Urd's smile began to grow truly unpleasant. She tilted her head looking down at her captor, her eyes growing slit-like, now bearing an uncomfortable similarity to Hild's. "Two things commander: *One*, if it had been me doing this, I assure you none of you would be walking it off, and *two*: if you have any plans for using those arms again, I'd get them off of me," as behind her thunder echoed in the mountains.

Prima released her but did not reduce the intensity of her glaring. "I'm giving you an order. *Where is your sister?!*"

"You seem to have the two of us confused," Urd replied.

"Belldandy's the one always going out of her way to help others. *I* on the other hand have a tendency to *singe* things that get in my way – in case you've forgotten."

Prima bristled at the reminder. "*You - are required to obey.*"

"You think so? Because frankly I don't recognize your authority. Didn't you just call me the '*mote of the lower flame*' in front of all these people? Sounds like you're telling me we don't play on the same team. I'll take you at your word - and as such am under no obligation to heed your orders. Oh and if *truth* still matters to your kind, I had nothing to do with this

The Fugitive Goddess

and have no idea where my sister is. Of course you may still feel the need to capture me for some reason. That's your choice. But if you go that route I can assure you it will not be pretty, and you will be the first one I drop."

"*You -.*"

"- have wasted enough of my time. *Step off or fight!*" Urd shouted as the air around her crackled with electricity.

"Because you can put any thought of me going with you willingly out of your pretty little head right now!"

The younger Valkyries behind Prima shuffled uncertainly, as Urd's reputation for both destruction and unpredictability was well known. Prima weighed her options. True they did outnumber her six to one but cornered animals tend to react badly - particularly ones with *her* ancestry. The fact Prima was currently in the middle of retrieving her diminutive colleagues and that Belldandy's situation might engender sympathy in some parts of the heavens did little to simplify the matter. It hardly seemed an opportune time to determine if such sympathizers existed within her own group. And there was the fact she was Freya's daughter - the closest thing most Valkyries had to a deity. She would need to tread carefully. Reluctantly she stepped back allowing Urd to leave.

"*Wise choice,*" the goddess hissed brushing past her.

"Oh you think we're going to let you escape so you can continue helping your sister?" said Prima. "*Think again.* We're coming with you."

Urd smiled as though the idea entertained her. "You actually think Belldandy would even come near me now? You really must be an idiot. Trust me she's gone. *In the wind* as the say. And as for me, if you're thinking of staying on *my* tail, you'd better find some tougher members for your unit."

As Takumi began to hear growls and other unidentifiable but nonetheless unpleasant sounds from the surrounding Valkyries he interjected, "Seems like you guys are going to be busy defrocking your friends for the next couple of hours so I think we'll just -."

"*Don't think,*" Urd hissed. "You think too much! Thanks to our feathered friends we have extra chores to do in Belldandy's absence. Go into town and fetch next week's groceries. And

Mortality

don't forget the sake and Skuld's special cakes. Something good. Not the usual dog food you mete out. You know what I mean?" she said dismissively.

"You had me at dog food Indigo. But let me ask you, did you just give me an order? *Again?* Didn't we talk about that?!"

"Are we having a discussion?" she waved.

"So you want me to go all the way to -."

"*Do I need to give you directions too?*"

Takumi stalked off watching several Valkyries smile from the sidelines, murmuring something about who was in charge in their house. He secretly hoped that chicken defrocking was arduous work.

"So hard to find good help these days -," Urd mused. "Now if you'll excuse me I have things I need to attend to."

"You must not have heard me *dirt-wing*. We're coming with you," Prima said as several Valkyries lined up behind her.

"We're going to get to be *real* good friends over the next few days - since you won't be making a move without us."

"Go ahead - follow me if it entertains you. It'll certainly entertain me," Urd said rising.

To be certain Urd's path over the next few hours was circuitous, but as she was unable to shake off full grown Valkyries, she eventually came down at a nondescript office building near Shinjuku Dori at the edge of the Kabukicho district. "Alright guys, fun is fun but I really do need to go now. You're not old enough for this place."

Her minders eyed the sign. "The Petting Zoo? Why would there be a zoo in the middle of -*oh that's just sick!*"

"You mean we're not going to get to see a petting zoo?" said one of the younger Valkyries disappointed.

"Hey the day is still young," shrugged Urd.

"How they let a goddess like you hold a licence under *any* set of qualifications is beyond me," snapped Prima. "But if you think your behavior will shock us into getting off your trail you have another thing coming." Awkwardly they packed together in the elevator riding it to the top floor. The doors opened revealing a narrow lobby of black marble opening onto a gallery of floor to ceiling windows lined with tables on either side of the building. The group stepped out surveying the

The Fugitive Goddess

gallery and its views overlooking the city. Urd approached the well-dressed muscular host.

“May I help you?” he inquired.

“In all kinds of ways,” she teased touching his arm. “I’m Urd. I have a reservation.”

“Yes I see it here – *for one*,” he said eyeing the group.

“Oh they’re just my minders - because I’m such a bad girl! But I’m good now guys. *See you*,” she said walking with one of the attendants toward the rear of the gallery descending its circular staircase.

“We’ll be going with her -,” Prima said stepping forward.

“Do you - have a reservation?” the host asked looking over the curiously dressed group.

“We’re just going to have to impose upon you today,” Prima said pushing past him.

“I think not,” he replied grabbing her arm.

Now seizing a Valkyrie, *any* Valkyrie, is not generally considered a good survival tactic. For a commander of Prima’s rank, doubly so. Without a second glance she reversed his hold turning him to one side. Only then did she realize all was not as it appeared. For he was not easily moved. The host smiled, turning to place his hand upon her throat picking her up.

Immediately the walls of the foyer opened up as attendants appeared from seemingly nowhere, pressing in on them from all sides. “*They’re as pretty as I’ve heard*,” said one.

“*Maybe they’ve come here looking for dates?*” said another.

“Uh chief? I-don’t-think-these -guys-are-,” began one of the Valkyries to Prima.

“*No kidding!*” Prima yelled drawing her full strength trying to break free of her captor. The group quickly took up defensive positions in the lobby to counter the growing demonic threat.

“Augh!” cried Kara flying through the air.

“You’d better stay over here little lady,” one of the attendants said to Goll pulling her to one side.

Convinced she had adequately provided Prima and her playmates with sufficient entertainment, Urd descended the staircase to the lower levels of the club. Past the residences she found Mara playing pool with a dozen or more gathered

Mortality

demons. Their eyes met briefly as she watched the dirty blond bend low, patiently lining up her shot. "Hold on a minute Urd, I just have to make this point," she said instantly snapping the pool cue over the head of the demon beside her before striking the two beside him senseless. She now returned to the group, *"So what have we learned today?!"*

"Always follow the plan -," they muttered with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

"Yes, that's right! Always follow the plan - to the letter!" she said tossing the broken pool cue to one of the lesser demons before departing. "It's like I'm running a kindergarten here!"

"You and I seem to remember kindergarten differently," Urd said looking at the unconscious demons on the floor. "Besides when did *you* ever follow orders?"

"You're right, I set a terrible example," she replied flashing her a familiar toothy grin. "Speaking of which all that crashing I heard upstairs I assume had to do with you?"

"That hurts. Not to get into your business, but who knows what kind of hooligans you let into this establishment off the street. I was concerned for my safety just coming here."

"Yes well I'm sure our staff can keep whatever 'random hooligans' may have wandered into our penthouse off the street sufficiently entertained. In the meantime let's talk over here," Mara said leading her to one of the back rooms. Urd looked around the cozy lacquered quarters as Mara slid the door closed behind them. "Are you sleeping here Mara?" she asked.

"Ah it's complicated. I don't want to get into it. Let's just say there was some talking followed by some exploding that was problematic. So I'm staying in the Terran realm for a while. I'm going to take a wild guess and assume this isn't a social call?" she said opening a bottle of sake.

"Yeah. I'm here about Keiichi."

"So it's true then?" she said not able to meet her eyes.

Urd shrugged the way she always did when she didn't want to talk about things. "Takumi estimates he probably has no more than a few days left. Thus we find ourselves in a position where options are becoming limited. Belldandy would – well she asked me to arrange a meeting. Over my strenuous objections."

The Fugitive Goddess

“What makes you think Hild would even see you over this?”
“Mara, you never were good at this game; even when we were young. I’m quite sure the Old Bat would welcome the opportunity, thinking of the deals she can make with Belldandy. But if I’m wrong, I’m happy to see myself out.”
“I – the word can be sent,” Mara replied without looking up.
“We will be waiting.”
“Urd?”
“Yeah?”
“Is he . . . *nothing*,” Mara said finally, shaking her head.

“*Well that worked well!*” Kara observed tumbling out with the others into the street as the doors shut behind them. “Now we have no idea where Urd is!”

“At least we got out in one piece,” replied Herja. “A few more minutes and I feared for our virtue!”

“You said it, they’re disgusting!”

“Well the blue-eyed one was nice,” said Goll.

“What?” They turned on her excitedly.

“Did you get his number?” asked Olrun.

“Yeah when’s the wedding. . . I almost got eaten in there!” muttered Kara.

“I just mean that . . .”

“Ladies! We’re in the middle of Shibuya and we still have no idea where -.”

“*Look!*” Herja shouted suddenly.

They turned. No more than a hundred feet from them on the other side of the road stood Belldandy watching them patiently.

“Okay guys stay put -,” Prima whispered. “I’m just going to go over and talk to her. No one make any sudden moves. We don’t want things to get complicated in front of all these people.” But she had taken no more than a few steps when a second warning rang out. “*Prima! On your left!*”

Sure enough she turned to see a second Belldandy identical to the first standing on the opposite street corner.

“*Outside - two more!*” called Syn, scanning the far corners of the intersection. They could see each of them now, standing perfectly still among the moving sea of pedestrians. On any other day it might have been pleasant. But the sight of the silent

Mortality

goddesses surrounding them filled Prima with unease. After all her team was standing between Belldandy and her goal. And she'd seen first-hand how that experience could go.

"Two stay here to cover our retreat - the rest calmly approach the one nearest to you," she called to the group. Slowly Prima crossed the street, coming as close as she dared to the Belldandy before her. "You know we're looking for you right? You must come with us," ordered Prima.

"I've done nothing wrong," replied Belldandy. "Can a goddess not walk freely among the people?"

"It's gone too far, what you did to Vali's team."

"They had no right to detain me. Nor you to disconnect me from the system."

"You accessed the Yggdrasil library!"

"Did I have no right to enter? Did I do something unlawful?"

"Prima folded her arms unable to enunciate a clear answer.

You - you're going to lose everything!"

"I'm trying to save everything," she replied calmly.

"Everything that's important to *you*!"

"No. Everything that's important."

The Valkyrie hesitated tapping her foot on the sidewalk.

"Yes I see well -!" She struck instantly, hammering the girl into submission. But the form simply dissipated, swirling like ash around her, drifting like leaves in the wind. "*Now!*" she shouted as each member of the team struck - each with the same result.

"Keep doing what you think is right -," Belldandy's shadow murmured as it drifted into the winds, "and I'll keep doing what I *know* is right -."

"*Damn that wind mage!*" Prima cried searching around her,

"Her sorcery won't get her out of this! To exercise that level of control she must be close. *Find her!*"

They fanned out crisscrossing the Shibuya intersection but the sheer number of passersby quickly made the quest impossible.

High above them Takumi chuckled, continuing to lie on his stomach on the station roof watching the spectacle below. "I'll give it to you Urd, that was a decent show." He watched them scurry about the square for several minutes when a noise

The Fugitive Goddess

behind him roused his attention. Peering into the shadows he saw her now, coming up from beneath the massive air handling units, her body wrapped in a dark grey cloak. At first he almost did not recognize her so blue were her eyes, strikingly beautiful yet inhuman. As she stood in the shadow of the cooling tower alone with him now her brow seemed regal but strangely undimmed by doubt. She nodded acknowledging him as she walked to the edge of the building. He couldn't believe it was the same person he had seen that morning. Something about her stillness on the building's edge made him shiver, made him wonder if he really knew her at all. A feeling of power completely unbound from all constraint, as though she need only close her fist and the air around them would collapse. That she possessed such faculties had of course shown themselves to him previously, but it was only now that he began to understand the full measure of it. He eyed her trying to discern her mood.

"Urd has made contact?" she asked moving her hand.

"I saw her go in," he said, watching Belldandy's pursuers appear to catch sight of her in the crowd below only to find her vanish as they closed in. From their vantage point above the square he could see her leading them away toward Shinjuku.

"It won't be long now. *Come*. I think it's time to retrieve your care package. Can the bike take the two of us there?"

"If need be," he said heading for the roof access.

An hour later the group of Valkyries returned to the square, minus one fugitive.

"What about Urd?" Prima asked as they approached.

"Yggdrasil says she's still in there," replied Herja. "Unless . . ."

Prima nodded walking with her to the far side of the street.

"Unless what?" asked Olrún.

"Unless Dirt Wing jumped away using *someone else's* transport system," Prima retorted.

"She could do that?"

"She's one of them. If she jumped away using a demonic system we wouldn't know about it, said Prima.

"Not even Yggdrasil?" asked Olrún.

"Of course not. If we could track each other's jumps each side would know where every member was at all times; negating

Mortality

security measures. Neither side could allow that,” Herja replied.

“Hey guys? Does that look like a dog to you?” Goll asked approaching the statue. Prima came up beside her looking it over. Then she turned taking in the scene, her brow furrowed for several minutes before growing angry. *‘Dog food you mete out.’* She was telling him where to meet her!”

“Why? How does that help her?”

“He must have something they need,” Prima suggested.

“Then why didn’t he go with Belldandy when she left?”

“Maybe he wasn’t strong enough, or maybe things happened too fast or we somehow disturbed their plans.”

“Let’s hold on to that thought,” said Kara.

...

In the control room Ex, Ere and Peorth continued pouring over the evidence. “So you’re telling me the second gate -.”

“-Of course the second gate was always planned to be her true escape path!” scowled Peorth. “Vali’s team should have checked more carefully, always feel out both the inner and outer ranges of your target so they don’t come up behind you.” “Makes sense,” mused Exe. “Still, they were up against a first-class goddess. She was smart to hide there. We should have anticipated it.”

“Yeah I was thinking that too,” agreed Peorth. “Remnant fluctuations from such a major disturbance only a week ago were bound to create some localized noise, just enough for her to hide from the system if she kept quiet.”

“Now if we could just find a clue to where she’s going instead of where she’s been,” said Ex. “What else do we have?”

“The projections Prima’s team encountered are largely dust, silica and mother of pearl suggesting proximity to an ocean.”

“Given the whole country is in proximity to an ocean that’s not particularly helpful,” Prima hissed coming in to join them.

“Then my best advice is what I’ve told you from the beginning,” said Peorth. “Watch Keiichi Morisato.”

“You mean the Keiichi that is beyond all help?” said a small angry voice from the corner of the room. They turned as Chrono dropped her books noisily onto the desk.

The Fugitive Goddess

“I’m simply saying it’s the only point we can pretty much guarantee she’ll eventually come back to.”

“Then pardon me for hoping you’re not successful in that.”

“-Or perhaps it’s no accident that Belldandy has been so *fortunate* in her escapes to date,’ Prima observed.

“I’m sure you know how to check my logs,” Chrono said leaving.

Rivers of Fear

Sohei spent that day thinking. About many things he had not thought about for a long time. Things he had tried to forget. But so too he remembered other things. Things from his youth; things he had once hoped would come to pass . . . once upon a time. What changed, he wondered? When had it changed? He looked at the stream flowing beyond him, knowing that a man's life was like that; one tributary flowing to the great into the great unknown. He drew in breath rising, walking back through the listless village until he reached the forge, feeding the coals as the furnace began to glow.

"So you've made your decision then?" Ryu said appearing behind him. He nodded picking up his tools.

"A man could make a good life for himself here," Ryu mused.

"Not one like me I think," he replied.

"Because of what came before? We never talked about it, the night the ironworkers found you. I never asked where you were from or how you came to be here. Perhaps it was because your colors were as ours; perhaps because we did not care."

"And I have always thanked you for it Ryu. I hope that I have repaid the village's kindness."

"But it is *you* isn't it? You did not die on the bridge as some have said, nor burn in the terrible fires of Miidera or Nara."

He picked up the hammer rotating it in his hands. "I am only and lone traveler of the mountains," he replied.

"*Perhaps*. But a villager once told me a story from the beginnings of this terrible war. Of how a great army of red flowed to the banks of the river Uji but were held back, for a time. From the shores he saw the defenders on the tattered remains of the bridge, standing with the fire illuminating them against the night sky. Through the hail of arrows they stood upon its bones, shoulder to shoulder as they held the enemy at bay, pierced by bolts too numerous to count. He saw many fall

Rivers of Fear

yet some did not; fighting on like some demonic force of nature. One of them, he carried in his hands the same weapon you fashion now. For it is you isn't it? *Tajima the arrow cutter!*"

"That name is lost to time," Sohei replied solemnly. "Along with the men who failed in their task that night."

"A man can make a new path."

"The deeds of men live in their own time. But it matters not. Perhaps what now comes was set down for me long ago," he said striking the hammer.

"Perhaps enough has been done."

"It is never enough," Sohei replied. "For evil ever seeks to entangle the will of men."

"But how can mortal men fight gods?"

"If we do not try we will never know," he said feeding the flames.

"*Then go if you must you fool,*" said the Yamabushi elder coming behind them. "Go with the will of all good men to see your errand completed. But first we must help you finish what you started."

And so that night they gathered, skilled ironworkers, Buddhist monks and Yamabushi ascetics, each feeding the forge, each putting their talents to the test. Skilled and talented metallurgists there were, but also ritual and sacrament of inward grace born of the hopes of men. In darkness to judge the light of the metal they drove the strange metal home achieving its final form, heating and covering its spine in clay. Plunging the hot blade into the oil it contracted curving to produce the flowing tip and boundary between resilient body and hard edge. Now as they hammer the seals and tempered the blade as she had instructed Abyss was born, formed to harness the lost light, and destroy those who served darkness. . .

Sohei rested, preparing himself until early afternoon. Finishing he walked down the hill, passing Mai who watched him curiously beside her growing mound of stones. Well, two mounds now. One for the demon and one for her friend. As he approached the main gate more and more villagers stopped to watch him pass, walking to join the defenders.

Mortality

"It is ready," the elder said handing him the weapon. "Prayers were completed at sunrise. They have worked throughout the night and into the day polishing with the best stones from the river. We believe it will do you proud."

"I wonder if the reverse can be said?" smiled Sohei.

"You are sure it's still out there?"

"Yes. It has taken over the mountains."

"Then we are ready. Every man."

"I know. But I will be going alone."

"There's no need. They will all come if you ask. I as well."

"Which is why I do not ask. For the best warriors are needed here. Especially if I do not return."

"If you insist on going on a suicide mission, you might as well wear this," Ryu said setting the leather armor at his feet.

"So you kept it."

"I knew the day may come when you might need it. Though I hoped not."

Shaking hands with Ryu, Sohei pulled on the breastplate tying the lacquered armor at his side. "Open the gate," he said departing.

"Foolish to let him go. Now both are lost," said the elder.

"He is not the wanderer you know. He was once a dark terror on the battlefield. That is why he goes into the mountains to face the creature. He must at last face that part of himself. Perhaps a part of him hopes that there is something out there black enough to finish him. A quick stroke would prevent him from having to live with it," said Ryu.

The elder shook his head, "I do not think that creature trades in easy death," he replied.

For Sohei passing the gate was easy. But the walk gave him time to think. Slowly he prepared himself for what lay ahead. He rechecked the reach and movement of the blade, finding the old ways still within him. *The balance feels perfect*, he thought pulling it in towards his center, retracing his steps to that terrible hollow. The sun was low as he approached cautiously, hearing Mint's chirps guiding him in. Quietly he moved down the slope. But as he drew near he found there was no need. For the towering creature had not moved from its prize, possessing

Rivers of Fear

little fear of anything that might come calling. Lind's body stood still, frozen in time.

"*Come, come,*" he heard the creature echo suddenly, his back still turned to him; entreating him in a voice that sent shivers down his spine. "There is no need to creep about out there. *For I am the pain which precedes death,*" he said turning to greet him. "You have come to me because your life has outlived you, and you hope to end it." he said slowly.

Sohei sensed the eerie hypnotic effect of his words, reflexively raising the weapon to keep it between them. The faceless creature swayed looking at him, considering the properties of the angelic weapon in the dying light. "You have a new toy, but one that will not avail you . . . any more than the last," he mused. "You have come for her? *No*, she cannot leave this place. But I will allow you to *join* her," he said surging forward as Sohei swept the weapon in a tight arc protecting himself. The creature seemed amused, "You chose your in fate coming here yet still you hesitate? Very well, why don't we have a little game then?" he said in a voice he recognized was attempting to slow his reflexes. "I'll give you a chance - one chance to strike me. *Then I will kill you,*" he said. Sohei raised the weapon as the creature flowed after him moving over the uneven ground. Sohei positioned himself knowing he had only seconds. He would have to hope his guess was right. The creature seemed everywhere as he moved to the left and right down the slope. He fainted up and to the right with surprising speed then lunged with everything he had, releasing his grip on the weapon as it flew narrowly passing its target. The creature now drew himself up before the warrior as a horrible echoing sound rose on all sides which he interpreted as a laugh. "You missed," he said malevolently creeping forward.

"*I don't think so -*," Sohei replied stepping back. The Abyssal turned to see the blade pierced through his tattered dressings connecting him to the frozen form. He reached out but it was too late. The connection grew white hot, exploding as Lind burst free of the encasement, her body turning in the air to catch the weapon. She landed tumbling on the ground to rise defensively before the creature. Sohei saw fury as her eyes began to glow. "I knew you would come Sohei."

Mortality

"A link between worlds. Yes. I suspected it when he remained here and Mint did not return."

"*Strange*. You are free, yet you do not run," echoed the creature.

"You would only kill the town if we escaped."

"Yes, but I will do that anyway. I have such plans for them."

"That will not happen," Lind said moving behind him.

"*Because I'm going to finish you right here.*"

"You're an odd scrap of the upper realm," he mused. "To abandon your life for a group of humans. You must have been sent away for madness. No one in your realm would dare approach me."

"Get ready!" Lind warned but was instantly struck by a bolt of lightning from above. Two more followed engulfing her, the intensity of the blaze forcing Sohei and the Abyssal back.

"Lind - *LIND!*" Sohei cried above the maelstrom.

"*I'm okay - I'm alright!*" she shouted though it sounded to him as though she was in pain. The flash ended as the glow of the plasma around her began to fade, her form once more becoming visible. He looked on shocked at the transformation.

"Lind? Lind! Your hair, *your clothing!*"

She emerged from the light wiping away tears, "It's not clothing," she replied. "*-it's armor*. For the Lind he had known was gone; forged now into something greater. She raised her head carrying the marks. She was now - *Valkyrie*. The creature rose unperturbed, "Do you think such protections will aid you? Do you know how many Valkyries, freshly minted or otherwise I have taken?"

"Sohei be careful," she warned. "*He's preparing*. Step back and give me room." Suddenly she came at the creature in a burst of speed, Abyss close at her side as the creature slashed with deadly razor sharp ribbons. She ducked rolling as her own weapon struck home. The creature's cry filling the forest.

"*IMPOSSIBLE! I got cut!!*" the Abyssal shrieked grabbing his side with a terrible dark rage. "*No Valkyrie moves that fast!*" Lind's eyes glowed surveying him pitilessly, "*You're - done,*" she said moving again. The creature snapped the razor sharp ribbons across the darkness, too late seeing the double image of Lind on the ground and above him as her axe fell like some

Rivers of Fear

terrible avenging angel. The Abyssal moved but the weapon struck deep into his shoulder. He fell to the ground in agony sweeping back, barely avoiding Lind's finishing thrust to his center. With all thought of victory now gone the Abyssal raised his hand, and with a terrible shriek called forth malevolent winds to set the distant timbers of the village alight as he withdrew. Lind's eyes shown, furiously pursuing him as he escaped into the forest retreating.

"Lind stop! We need to get to the village!" Sohei cried.

But she continued to follow, pursuing the creature over the rocky terrain seeking its end. "*Lind!*" Sohei shouted once more. With great effort she broke off her attack as Mint led her back toward Sohei. Together they raced toward the light of the flames in the distance scattering off the clouds.

"Just go!" Sohei commanded as she and Mint took to the air racing ahead. Approaching the village at top speed she swept low over the water turning it to ice as she landed, sliding as she drew out icicles directing them toward the burning thatch roofs and timbers. Moving her axe around her now she drew up cold winds laden with snow, sending them pouring down over the burning crops and fields which turned them to rain. As the townsfolk rushed to battle the flames water flowed, pushing back the conflagration as wet winds drove the fire from the town. And in the thick of it were Lind and Sohei, coming in from the mountains, entering where the fire was too dense for the others. Seeing their return villagers cheered as the town beat the fire back.

The next morning they walked the perimeter, surveying the damage and putting out the last of the embers. "Much was burned, but it can be recovered in time," observed Ryu. "For now they seem more concerned about your change in appearance than anything in the village," he said noticing the tentative touches she was receiving on her white garments and hair as they passed.

"It's alright, I understand," she said watching them. "I felt much the same the first time I laid eyes on a Valkyrie."

"Is that some kind of angel? Sohei said it happened because you clashed against great evil in the darkness and this was the

Mortality

result. That the power of the battle was such that it tore away your earthly layer revealing your true form.”

“Did he?” she said catching sight of the small girl through the trees. “I suppose they’ll tell it that way then,” she smiled.

She whistled to Mint, though her companion was busily watching that morning’s fruit offering. Lind crept up through the trees, watching the girl as she sat alone, sadly putting another small stone on her growing memorial pile.

She rushed through the branches picking Mai up pretending to be angry, “*What are you doing there!*” she shouted causing the girl to squeal as Lind hugged her. Mai looked back at her wide-eyed with a mixture of terror and relief. She sniffed back her tears in stunned surprise. “I think . . . *you dead*. The Black . . . *kill you*,” she sobbed.

“Black? Kill me?” she frowned picking up the nearest dark colored stone and crushing it in her bare hands. “Something can kill me?!” she mocked causing the girl to smile. “Anything that comes - *I eat its heart!* But my favorite is still little girl’s toes!” she said nibbling her feet causing her to squeal.

“*Black?*” Mai asked cautiously looking at the mountains.

“*Gone*,” she waved. “*And he peed himself*,” she said to her giggling.

. . .

As groups of villagers gathered around campfires that night to celebrate the end of the nameless terror, the defenders too gathered, telling and retelling stories from each of their perspectives on the events of the past month. Toasts were drunk, prayers were said, and songs sung well into the night. Well what will you do now kami?” the Yamabushi elder asked as she and Mint sat happily eating their fill.

“She came to restore peace to the world of men; and I have promised to help her in that quest,” said Sohei.

“Then you have decided to return to the world beyond? That is good, I suppose,” said Ryu. “I don’t think the two of you will be able to stay here much longer, given the level of worship you now receive. Any more and they won’t let you leave!” Sohei nodded. “Yes, we will go. Our continued presence here would only grow rumors that would bring unwanted attention to the town. We have decided to go soon. And you?”

Rivers of Fear

"It will take time but we will rebuild," Ryu replied. "The events of the past weeks have reminded us of the strength of community during these hard times. Hopefully the war will leave us alone, at least for a while. But what of you? You are welcome to stay here," he said to the elder.

"Thank you. But we of the mountains will return to the place we belong. Our first task will be to reclaim the outposts that were lost; to purify the temples and to attend those not looked after. In time the mountain lookouts and trails will be re-established, so that travelers might look up in the night and see our lanterns once more."

"Where will you go?" asked the elder to Lind and Sohei.

"North toward Nara. It's the direction of the last sign."

"Then we'll see you off tomorrow."

The next morning they all gathered, as smiles and laughter greeted Lind's arrival.

"What is this?" Ryu demanded seeing her outfit.

"You want me to walk the length of the country with a white haired woman clad in white and blue armor?" Sohei asked.

"Just tell them she's a kami," he said.

"We're supposed to blend in not stand out. I figured the hood and cloak made her look more presentable, like nuns and monks making their way on roads of pilgrimage."

"Even with all that I'm not sure she will be left alone."

"We can only solve one problem at a time," Sohei replied.

"Those with a high level of interest in our appearance will quickly learn they should mind their own business," Lind replied as Mint burst from her bag showing her teeth.

"I don't doubt it. Unless they are in very great numbers, I doubt there are many who could trouble the two of you," observed the Yamabushi elder. "I've written letters of introduction for you to our friends in Nara and Kyoto. It should provide you with refuge," he said handing them over.

"Refuge?" murmured Lind.

"The road we travel leads into unfriendly territory. Nara and Kyoto have fallen, and the enemy's stronghold is near in the east. We must be watchful."

"I see."

Mortality

“One more gift to help you on your journey,” Ryu said signaling to the foreman who now brought forth a fine horse from the loft leading him by the reins. “This is a good horse. It will help you,” he said.

“It is too much. We cannot accept it,” said Sohei.

“We think you can. The town is safe. And there is much to be learned from the alloying techniques you provided.”

“And have you produced what I requested?” asked Lind.

“I have them here,” Ryu replied producing the daggers.

“I thank you.” Together the group walked with the horse to the bridge, slowing as they approached a group of children on the far side; one sitting on the road with her back to them.

“Are you waiting for me Mai?” Lind asked. The girl looked up doing her best to look happy. “There is something you need to do for me,” she said leaning down. “You see these daggers? Take one and I will keep the other. Learn and become proficient with it so that you might one day protect the town.” Her eyes widened as she reached out her small hand to snatch the dagger away before running off down the road with the other children, slashing innocent plants as she went.

“I can only wonder what you’ve set in motion,” Sohei said watching. Lind shrugged watching the children disappear under the shadow of the trees, running along the river toward the temple. It was how she would always remember them. But now they had reached the bridge.

“This is goodbye for now,” said the elder.

“Goodbye,” they replied.

They made their way for some miles, Sohei leading on foot with Lind and Mint riding without encountering a soul for the rest of the day. Toward evening they came into the valley deciding to settle down for the night. “I know this place, we should be safe. We’ll camp on our side of the Yoshino River tonight,” he said.

Lind leaned down passing him the packs. “How far to Nara?”

“We’ll be in the valley tomorrow,” he said going off for wood.

“The trees are beautiful,” Lind said washing herself along the shore as though never really appreciating them before.

Rivers of Fear

"Yes these mountains are the place for it. We're here at the right time. Beautiful but transient; like so much," he said igniting the fire.

"I'd like to come back here someday, when this is all over," she said scattering leaves over the flattened stones before laying down blankets.

"You mean so you can have a place to worship my bones?"

"Ew certainly not! Not at all!" She said as Mint too wrinkled her nose.

"I know, you prefer to play it cool. But underneath it all you're concerned you won't have a proper place to reflect on me in the future."

"You're crazy."

"After all I've seen, it's clear you're some kind of supernatural entity. So it's quite understandable you'd be worried about not having a proper place for reflection, given that you're clearly much more long lived than humans."

"I'd never do that. Wasting time on a human - *ha*," she replied.

"You don't need to be shy about it. I'll even make a little place for your hands. Lean forward and place your hands upon the stone."

"Why am I doing this?" she asked.

"*There*. Now I've got the proper measurement."

"For what?"

"For where your hands will go - when you come visit me."

"*That* will never happen." Behind them Mint dropped down onto the horse's head only to be quickly shaken off. She swooped down choosing her back as a secondary landing spot.

"I just meant someplace, a place I could always come back to, to see these flowers once more, the stars, the mountains. . ."

He pulled the food out beginning to cook. "Did you not have such places growing up?"

"No where I was the stars were . . . *obscured*. From the smoke and fires of the mines. They always stood far off, out of reach. As a child I worked the pits, fueling the forge with others like me. My mother and father, what I remember of them, worked hard forming the master armor."

"But you left?"

Mortality

“There was a conflict. From those wanting more. In the end I was alone; like many my age it turned out. But I lived at the foot of a great mountain, and so withdrew deeper into the forest. There I met Mint and together we began to learn how to survive; and dream a new dream.”

He noticed Mint staring at him intently now. “How so?”

“We sit here camped on this side of the river, surrounded by the dangers beyond. Yet still we look across and wonder what lies on the far side. And so did we. One day Mint and I climbed the mountains, and everything else, seeking what lay on the other side.”

“And you became what you desired because of it.”

“In time, yes.”

“Except I think you have it backwards. I do not think you *became* something, but rather the mantle of it was always within you - guiding you to your true home.”

She picked up her food thoughtfully as Mint came down beside her to eat. “A strange thought,” she muttered. “I will consider it with the sounds of the river,” she said tucking in.

The next day they descended the mountains, reaching the southern end of the Nara basin by midday. As the valley opened on either side of them they stopped for water at the temple of Kojima-dera. There she watched Sohei converse with several other monks, nodding in discussions in the shadow of the temple before detouring north east. “Change of plan. They say patrols are coming. We’ll head for Oka-dera on the eastern slopes of the valley tonight and keep watch from there. They say there are monks friendly to the Yamabushi who reside there who may be able to help us in our quest.”

In the afternoon Lind rode on horseback beside Sohei, raising her hands up to the wind smelling the dense green fields of rice rising rising on all sides of them. “You’re in old Japan now,” Sohei observed. “This place is much the same as it was five hundred years ago; a region of old influence and power unchanging.”

“Where I’m from 500 years can pass quickly, and no place is unchanging,” she replied.

Rivers of Fear

“True. The seat of power moved away from here to the north nearly 400 years ago. Some say for good.”

“From what I’ve seen of these ‘civilized’ men’s methods it may be a blessing.” The road sloped upward ahead of them as they approached the forest on the eastern edge of the valley. Turning the road climbed toward a canyon housing the outer gates of Oka-dera. Seated to one side was an old monk, bald and swathed in dark brown robes sitting slowly plucking a biwa.

Lind tilted her head to one side at their approach. “*He is blind,*” she whispered.

“Some things are hidden from me,” the old monk agreed continuing to play. “But not all things,” he said as at that moment men with weapon raised stepped from the trees on either side of them.

Mint’s ears drew back. “It’s alright,” replied Sohei.

“May I?” he said taking the lute and plucking several notes.

“*Terrible,*” the monk replied. “But you are most certainly the guests we have been waiting for,” he said as the men lowered their weapons.

“You’re well informed,” replied Sohei.

“You are not the fastest messengers in this valley. Our falcons are faster,” the monk replied. “I am Kaze . . . *Takeda*. Here however I use the name of Hojo, for obvious reasons.”

“You’re a long way from home,” replied Sohei.

“As I understand are you. The Yamabushi tell quite a tale concerning you two. Half of those gathered I’m sure are here simply to see you in the flesh. It’s not every day we hear of warriors from afar battling dark spirits in the mountains.”

“The village was in fact saved by my companion. For she is far more than she appears,” Sohei replied humbly.

“Then I’m sure we will all sleep more soundly tonight.”

He could see Lind was blushing. “My traveling companion is modest. It was he who freed me from the creature’s power.”

“Yes I’ve heard this ‘arrow cutter’ is not entirely what he seems. But there is time to speak of this later. We should not linger here,” he said standing up reaching for his cane. “Come, let us go inside. There is water and rest within.”

“Do you think we can trust him?” asked Lind eyeing the gates.

Mortality

"I think it'll be fine. The Takeda were our allies in the north."

"And if he's lying?"

Sohei surveyed the tightly knit forested buildings on either side in the small canyon as they passed through the gates. "I think we could make short work of this place if we had to."

The monk walked ahead up the path showing them where they could rest and bathe. She was glad of the chance. Her prior attempts to explain to Sohei about the importance of bathing were not entirely successful.

"You will be happy of it," Kaze said leading her up the back path. "The water here at the temple is especially good."

"Why is that?"

"Well it's a kind of a long story, but a great rain dragon was causing some problems here awhile back and after being subdued by one of our priests with the help of the gods, we were able to confine him in the pond here. The large stone you see in the water is a lid that keeps him in place."

She peered into the waters. "I'm not sure a dragon would be restrained by that."

"Well he kind of repented and helps us out these days." Kaze's hands felt along the wall until he found what he was looking for. "Do you see these wooden balls? They are a manifestation of the dragon's power which grants the user a wish when held. We call them . . . *dragon balls*," she looked at him flatly he put one into her hands proceeding to the bath.

She looked around checking before beginning to disrobe.

"Are you sure you're blind?" she said peering at him.

"No need to worry," he replied staring at her. "I'm sure your companion in the trees behind us would make quick work of me if it were otherwise."

She smiled seeing Mint's eyes grow. "Your ears are sharp old man," she said.

"Is it true your hair has a blue tinge?" he asked.

"Yes but it's a rather a recent addition. It used to be autumn."

"So I've heard. I remember autumn. The feel of that color. I remember . . . *so many things*. So many beautiful things. For I was not always blind." He sighed. "I suppose there are those who say that when one is deprived of sight one's other senses grow sharper - if you'd like to test that," he said reaching out.

Rivers of Fear

"It was just a thought!" he said upon being shoved from the enclosure so she could enjoy her bath in peace. When at last she came out drying her hair she crept up on a rock enjoying the last rays of the sun on the valley with Mint beside her. Ahead in the canyon she could see Sohei was already gathered around the campfire with the others, telling tales. Somehow it pleased her to see him like that, to see him talking in the company of others.

"Oka-dera is ideally located for that," Kaze replied in response to his latest inquiry. "Its position affords a good view of the roads of the lower valley, yet if visitors come we have ample warning of their approach. Long have we watched the major roads and their comings and goings."

"Then eyes here should be sharp for what we seek," said Lind joining them.

"But none of us quite understand what it is you are looking for," Kaze said turning at hearing her approach.

"It is as you have been told. A stone – *about this size*," Lind indicated. There was discussion among the group.

"Our eyes are sharp but not *that* sharp. Based upon the elder's words we have been reconsidering all those who have passed through the valley during the period indicated. Several irregulars have passed who did not stop and hurried north. We are now attempting to locate where they went as it may give us insight into their cargo."

"Remember that patrols may come here at any time. The men will show you our stores so that you may be ready with what you need," he said, waiting until the Lind and Sohei had been led away to speak further.

Those around the fire grew quiet. "What do you think?" asked one of the monks finally. "You spent time with her."

"Fools. Do you think I did not test her? She slipped into waters drawn from the sacred pool, and I placed a dragon ball directly into her hands. Nothing. She's no yokai regardless of stories you may have heard from the south. It must be as the Yoshino Yamabushi say. They are kami sent to help us. We will therefore provide them every assistance. Keep your eyes and ears open. For our enemies are numerous. If any problem comes, fetch me immediately. We must be ready."

Mortality

Soon they heard the footsteps of the visitors returning amid calls of gratitude. "Look at what they've brought!" the men said carrying packs full of dried fish. "They bring more than we can give them!"

"It's the least we can do for all your help and wisdom," Sohei assured. "We have not been north in some time but have heard of your troubles. It has been hard here?"

"Yes the war, famine and the fires have been devastating to Nara and the outlying regions. Some things we can grow in protected areas to sustain ourselves. But it is not enough."

"And never enough fish," the men replied happily throwing several into the pot. But that night the hunger in their bellies was forgotten as Kaze played under the stars and told them of all the goings on in the last two years among the wider world. Around him the men told stories of their bold adventures as free men do and they in turn told them of events in the south. "You seem to know much," Lind said, watching him.

"As I say, I was not always blind. When I was young I was a scholar, and it is now my role to guide you - and document this accursed war. So you could say it's my job to know - to know and interpret the deeds of these lands so they might be remembered. From the tenor of your voice may I assume I'm the first biwa hōshi you've seen?"

"I - yes. Where I come from there are none such as you."

Her words came out harshly but he knew it was only because she had no others. "Sounds like an unforgiving place."

"I was right to leave then," she sighed as Mint swooped down beside her curling up. "-You go up there if you want to," she said as her partner began to chat to her. "-No I'm going to stay here," she continued. Mint's screeching seemed to indicate some form of protest. "Oh your nuts," she replied eliciting more screeching. "-You and I remember that event very differently," she said shaking her head. "And what's going with your fur?" she asked scratching her head. "You get whiter every day." At this comment Mint marched off, situating herself on the branch of the lowest tree beside the fire.

The monk thought for a moment. "Tomorrow you will be heading to the Kasuga Grand Shrine in the foothills outside Nara. It should prove a sufficient base of operations for you to

Rivers of Fear

search the city. As a Fujiwara stronghold it has sympathetic allies. They should be able to provide you with more information. If the object is still in Nara, you may be able to intercept it there. Sleep now. We will fetch you when everything is ready.”

But she had slept only a few hours when Kaze awakened her. “What is it? What’s going on?” she asked seeing Sohei in the darkness at the other side of the packing. Mint sat up staring. “Patrols have been spotted coming from the west. We should leave now to get ahead of them,” Kaze said.

“We?”

“You two may arouse too much suspicion on your own. I have decided go with you.”

“If they’re on horseback won’t they catch up to us regardless of when we leave?”

“Yes. But they won’t see where we’ve come from.”

Sohei had finished packing now carrying the gear toward her. *He’s trying to save those at the temple* she thought. Together they soon set off to the north along the main road, under cloudy skies lashed by strong winds. Lind and Sohei took the lead walking ahead as Kaze rode with Mint. At sunrise they were still unseen on the road, but all too soon they spotted the group of soldiers approaching.

“We can take care of a few soldiers, murmured Lind.

“Yes but what about tomorrow, or the day after? It’s best we enter the city without too much commotion. Leave it to me.”

The mounted group of soldiers approached looking them over.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” asked the officer.

Lind stood quiet uncertain of what to say.

“My children are kind enough to escort me as I take up my new post at the temple in Nara,” Kaze replied quickly.

The soldier frowned. “And why does that one carry a weapon?”

Kaze turned his head blindly. “Ah well, you can’t be too careful out here these days. Never know who you’ll run into. I carry important texts for the temple.” As Kaze spoke up in an animated manner with his hands, Sohei lowered Abyss trying to quietly modify straps on several of the soldier’s saddles.

“And what is that on your lap?” the soldier demanded of Kaze finally.

Mortality

Lind's eyes flashed, the muscles of her left arm slowly descending toward her waist.

"Why that's my granddaughter of course," Kaze said easily as Lind and Sohei looked at one another. "Tired little thing," he said cautiously patting the blanket.

"Show me."

"Oh I wouldn't want to wake her. She's tired and a little cranky when she wakes up," he mused as the soldier reached over, tossing back the blanket only to see Mint's face hissing back at him. "Ahhhhh!"

The next moments were pure chaos. Mint flew up, unbalancing her assailant as several riders spurred their horses only to lose their balance dropping to the ground. Just as Lind went for her blade several arrows whistled past them from the trees. The soldiers whirled on the new threat, with those still able to turning to give chase while the freed horse bolted for the hills.

"*Bandits!*" Kaze shouted to no one in particular. "You best go after those horses; not all people in this valley are honest," he said truthfully as men dispersed in several directions.

"There is something here -," one of the soldiers said approaching Mint until Sohei rendered him unconscious.

"Oh no, look what happened to this guy . . . *apparently*," he shrugged.

"I think it's best we were on our way," Kaze suggested.

"Aren't you worried about 'bandits'?" Sohei replied.

"As you can probably tell from their aim, that was Oze and Tojiro from the temple. They've been shadowing us in case any problems arose. "Now where is your friend?" he asked.

Lind whistled as Mint's head popped up from the trees and the group were soon on their way back north.

"What are those? Lind asked approaching the distant mounds rising from the outer fields.

"Tombs of kings long dead," Sohei replied. "Five . . . seven hundred years ago. I told you this is an old place."

"Citadels of stone, a place to repose for all time." Kaze added.

"Not all men receive such a fine place to repose." Lind mused.

"They lie entombed with their good and their evil," Kaze murmured. "The house does not signify greatness of a man."

Rivers of Fear

"Then when the time comes, I hope your place is fitting," she said.

As the hours wore on they reached the outskirts of Nara, and the devastation was plain to see. Lind had never seen a city of men on this scale before, and it's burned ashen remains were terrible to behold. Walking through the grand central avenues they made their way east to the mountain foothills as the winds grew blustery.

"We seem to have reached it," Sohei said seeing the multitude of stone lanterns lining their path.

"Yes I've sensed it for a while now," nodded Kaze,

"Really?" asked Lind.

"This place holds special spiritual power. Can you not feel it? The forest surrounding this temple is old. No tree has been felled here for over 400 years."

She looked around in amazement until the old monk laughed.

"No that's not the reason! I knew we were approaching the temple because of the distant sound of the bronze lanterns. Can you not hear them on the wind? Kasuga-Taisha is famous for its rows of stone and hanging lanterns."

Listening now Lind found she could hear something, a resonance mixed among the thick wooded hills. She walked on with Mint over the rising hill, anxious to explore until the first of the temples came into view and she gasped.

"What is it?" called Kaze.

"She sees the forests of purple wisteria vines," replied Sohei.

"Yes, I suppose we're here at the right time," mused Kaze.

Lind walked down slowly under the covered walkways, marveling at the expansive clusters of purple and white flower cords flowing down around her, wondering if Yggdrasil had any place half so splendid until she stood at the foot of the inner courtyard. "What a nice young sapling!" she said, kneeling to brush its leaves as it stood beside the gate.

"Isn't it though?" observed the elder monk behind her. "I have great hopes for that cedar," he said.

"Genjiro!"

"Kaze-san! I see you made it here in one piece. Though I hear they are already looking for you, you old fool."

"Me?" he said pointing innocently to himself.

Mortality

“Yes it’s all very confusing -,” Genjiro said. Something about ‘man with a weapon’, ‘blind biwa charlatan’, ‘fallen nun’ and ‘mysterious beast’. Is this the mysterious beast?” he said looking at Mint who was busy searching for free rides by jumping on the backs of the resident deer; a game they did not seem to be enjoying equally.

“Just so,” Sohei said coming forward.

“And you must be our warrior monk. I must say your presence will come as a shock to many of your comrades, returning from a place so few come back from. The men on the road were fortunate they did not know with whom they truly contended, or I doubt they would have lived to tell the tale.”

Sohei bowed in response. “I am merely a guide. This is the person you have truly come to meet. Sent by the gods to aid us. She comes here on a matter of utmost urgency to restore balance within the realms of men.”

Now it was Genjiro’s turn to bow. “Our temple is at your service. You must be tired. Take your rest in the rooms we have prepared. Then we can eat and talk.”

“What does ‘fallen nun’ mean?” Lind asked she and Sohei walked off together down the covered walkway. “Nothing to worry about. I think the old men just want time to catch up and drink,” he said. All around them monks began lighting the lanterns giving an ethereal glow to the courtyard and path.

“Kaze is right. There is a power to this place,” Lind observed.

“Sounds a bit lyrical for you,” Sohei replied.

“The lights, it’s quiet here under the clouds,” she said catching the moonlight. “You’d be surprised how few places are.”

“Just as I suspected,” he said climbing the steps. “They’ve already got a spot, planning with cups in their hands.”

Genjiro called up seeing them, “We eat in one hour. Don’t be late. For we have news on your item.”

That Which is Unspoken

Belldandy woke up under the blankets upon hearing the tinkling sound of dishes. “Hello?” she said sitting up. Naru rushed immediately hearing her voice. “*Belldandy?! Are you here by yourself? Is Takumi here?!*”

“Um, he’s around somewhere,” she acknowledged.

The old woman’s eyes instantly lit up in supreme happiness.

“Never mind! I don’t mean to disturb whatever you’re doing!

I’ll leave you two in peace,” she said rushing out excitedly.

A little while later Takumi came in looking tired as he set down the bag of retrieved rocks. “Did you get any sleep Bell?” he asked.

“A little,” she nodded.

“Good,” he said only to look behind him and see Naru’s gaping mouth. Quick motions of her hands called him away which was followed by several minutes of insistent whispering. When he returned he looked even more tired. “Look, the um, crazy person who runs this place is insisting she make you breakfast,” he said embarrassed.

“You mean both of us.”

“She indicated I’m pretty much superfluous to the process. I told her we had a lot to do today but she’s pretty fixated on it.” Not long after they were all seated around the breakfast table as Naru looked on excitedly between them. “I told you – Bell and I just came here for *one* night because we needed to get something I left here for safekeeping.”

“Also we needed a quiet place to hold up outside of Tokyo,” Belldandy added.

“I see. So you two are running from something?” Naru probed.

“Yes-,” Belldandy confirmed hesitantly.

From the look in her eyes Takumi could only shudder at what thoughts might be going through Naru’s mind. “Well, we’re not *really* on the run,” he said trying to tamp her down.

Mortality

"Of course not. I mean it's not like you're hiding from the police," Naru said reaching her own conclusions. "Not someone like you my dear. Still these things can be complicated," she agreed.

"Naru, can I talk to you outside?" Takumi questioned.

"No you cannot," she said moving closer to Belldandy.

"We're doing this for a very good reason," Bell said trying to read meaning into Takumi's frown from across the table.

"Oh of course you are," Naru insisted. "No need to explain."

"Good. Because we don't need you getting -" Takumi began.

"Lady Belldandy," Naru said bowing her head. "Let me first say how pleased I am that you are here. Takumi is still immature and has many faults as a human being -."

"Hey!"

The goddess looked back confused. "Yes, I think he possesses many good properties."

"You do? Oh I'm so happy to hear that!" she gushed.

Takumi had resorted to attempting to glare Naru into silence.

"As I said we're just here to get something, we have, and now we need to go," he said taking Belldandy's hand leaving.

"Of course, of course, rather like the last time," she said waving him off. "Feel free to come anytime Belldandy. I hope to see you soon!"

"I hope that as well," she to herself as much as Naru.

Outside she walked on following Takumi under the trees uncertain of where they were headed or what his plan was.

"Sorry I just had to get out of there," he said letting her go.

"I suppose you need some . . . well peace before it all happens." She nodded walking under the trees. He saw her take the letter from her pocket, reading it over for perhaps the twentieth time. Keiichi had given it to her on the day she left, after speaking to her of his childhood and the things he could tell her but no one else,

Belldandy,

I'm sorry we won't be able to go to the places we talked about, or spend the days we had planned at each other's side. But I want you to know that for me the time we had together was

That which is Unspoken

enough. Enough to completely fill my heart. For it's not the hours we live, it is how we live them. Please be well - always.

Love, Keiichi

"Keiichi you are the wind within my heart," she said as her tears fell. Takumi looked at her hidden among the trees, uncertain of what to do until Naru called to him from the doorway.

"Tai-chan! I've just received the strangest call. It says you two are to go to this location," she said handing him the note.

"Is this what we've been waiting for Belldandy?" he asked.

"I believe so. It is best we be on our way and meet Urd."

"*Your sister?*" asked Naru overhearing. "Is that wise?! I mean, I do hope you three can work all this out," she said distressed.

"I hope that as well," Belldandy replied.

"Oh dear . . ."

"In case I never see you again, whatever you're thinking is wrong. Very, very wrong!" murmured Takumi.

A moment later Belldandy raised her hand and they were gone.

They appeared in the fog on the volcanic grounds swept by dense patches of cloud under a threatening sky.

"*Happy,*" Takumi observed looking around their surroundings.

"Is this the place?"

"It's as close as they'll allow us to come," said Belldandy.

"Let us begin." They walked until hearing footsteps behind them. Turning they saw Urd's form coming through the mist.

"*Urd.* Are you alright?" her sister said hugging her.

"I'm okay. I see you found her and the gear," she said kissing Takumi. "Bell are you sure about this? I still don't think -."

"I'm doing what I must. You two need not come."

"There's no way you're going into the demon realm alone."

"I don't like it Urd," Takumi said sniffing the air.

"Well what would you like? We're not really in a position to make demands here," she stepping ahead of them into the volcanic field. Belldandy came with her, moving without hesitation as she charted a course through the jagged fields of

Mortality

melted rock. Together they wove their way through the segments of stone toward their objective.

“How far?” asked Takumi.

“Some distance,” replied Urd. “This is as close as they’ll allow outsiders to come to one of their primary gateways.”

As the minutes passed he could see they were approaching the lip of an ominous ragged caldera, its borders hemmed in by rising vapor. Approaching the edge the mist grew heavier, as plumes of vapor obscured the view ahead. “You know I’ve always wondered what a gateway to the demon realm would-!” Urd’s hand grabbed him instantly as he took a step too far over the edge of the caldera almost falling into the sheer drop below. “*No - not curious!*” he said clutching her, wondering if there was a more accessibility-friendly way down.

“*Over here!*” Belldandy called locating the set of deeply cut stairs in the rock face. Takumi came up behind her his mouth silently agape. “You’re kidding right? You see how steep that is? There’s not even a handrail!”

“*I’ll tell them to make a note of it-*,” Urd replied tugging him along behind her following Belldandy’s descent. “If they wanted us dead they wouldn’t have to go to all this trouble.” Reaching the bottom the mist cleared and they could see the entrance. Takumi had not known what to expect but it certainly wasn’t this. To one side stood a large lava tube descending into the mountain with nothing beside it save a small booth and an even smaller girl.

“Not exactly the place I’d pick for a lemonade stand,” he muttered as they approached.

“Can I help you?” the girl said looking up.

“Umm yeah, are you - in the right place?” he said uncertain. The young girl smiled moving her eyes over him. “Isn’t the real question, are *you* in the right place?” she replied pleasantly. Almost immediately he began to feel distinctly unwell; as though being slowly suffocated. It was only then he began to notice the details of the red garment she wore, a finely interwoven pattern of bone shot through with images even more disturbing. The pattern seemed to flow and ebb calling to him, giving glimpses of the horrors awaiting them in the dark: *We have been waiting for you Sato, waiting for your return, to*

That which is Unspoken

return you to the place prepared. You remember it don't you? The dark rapture? Even now it waits for you, for you were never meant to leave your eternity in the darkness . . .
"Takumi!"

He jerked coming to, only then realizing he was shivering. "Come away from there!" Urd commanded. He stepped back stumbling blindly in the direction of her voice only to collapse as though all strength had left him. He struggled to breathe throwing back a frightened glance at the girl. She smiled at him saying nothing, the disturbing curve of her upper lip seeming to freeze his very soul.

"Don't - *don't look at it*," Urd said attempting to draw his gaze.

"*What is she?*" he asked.

"Old and utterly merciless. Are you alright?"

"I . . . I just need to rest," he said shakily.

Urd moved to block his view of the cave guardian as much as possible. "*Look at me*. Close your mind. They will try to use your thoughts against you."

He nodded but Urd did not like his look. *She's got him*, she thought.

"Urd -."

"It's alright Bell. I'll handle it," she said standing up.

The gatekeeper looked up inquisitively at her approach, "Is your friend not feeling well? *I do hope* he feels better soon."

Urd shrugged surveying the terrain. "I wouldn't be too worried. After all, you have bigger things to worry about."

"*Oh?*" she asked her inquisitive smile growing.

"Like those veins in the rock above you. Pure magnetite is it not?" she said scanning the cliff face.

The girl looked back at the overhang uncertain.

"That enchanted mail you wear beneath that getup which *reminds* you of your undying loyalty to the Diamakaicho is a superb conductor. I can only imagine what would happen to all that lovely skin, or whatever it is you've got stretched over those bones of yours if it were to suddenly come in contact with an immense electrical potential," she hissed. The girl glared back saying nothing, nevertheless edging away from the cliff face.

Mortality

“Don’t think that will help much,” Urd shrugged. “And one more thing, remember that down here *my powers* are not diminished. So think carefully before you do anything which might get you fused to that wall,” she growled taking her leave.

“We should go,” she said returning. “Tai can you stand?”

“I’m sorry Urd . . . I don’t think I can.”

“You must.”

“I know but - I can’t. I can’t do it. I’m sorry but - *I’m scared.*”

She tried to control her rising panic. “This is the only way.”

“I’m sorry . . .”

Urd exchanged looks with Belldandy who now came to her side. “*It’s alright,*” she said taking his hand. “Can you feel me? Do you feel my hand?” she asked trying to catch his eye.

“*I – think so,*” he nodded. He looked up at her apologetically.

“I know what you want me to do Bell but - I just can’t!”

“You don’t have to,” she said shaking her head.

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to go. I’ll be fine. Just wait for me here.”

“You can’t go down there alone.”

“I’ll be fine.”

He looked back terrified to the gate. “*No you won’t. They’re going to get us - It’s you they want!*”

“I’m going.”

“Keiichi wouldn’t want you to do this.”

“Keiichi is not here,” she said stemming her tears.

He closed his eyes trying to will his legs to move. “No I can’t let you . . . *because,*” he looked away ashamed.

“Because of love,” she said. “It is the love within us that gives us strength – the strength to cross the unthinkable,” she said rising. “Do what you must. . . but don’t let them influence you. Look to your own heart. Because that is the only thing that can guide you in this place.”

Slowly his breathing began to change. She could see his color returning. “Can you . . . guarantee we’ll be okay if we go?” he asked.

“No,” she smiled, her eyes bright against the volcanic ash.

“But we’re all here together, trying to cross this bridge. On the other side is Keiichi. I believe our best hope of reaching him now lies in those caverns.”

That which is Unspoken

He nodded slowly. "Thank you Bell. I think I can stand now," he said taking hold of Urd's hand.

"Then let's do our best," she said making for the entrance.

The guardian glared at them as they passed, watching them disappear into the shadows as the gloom consumed them.

Inside the volcanic cave's wide entrance gave way to a gently slope leading down. Walking beneath the serpiginous fangs of iron bound rock they moved onward purposefully; their realm of shadow giving way to one of near total darkness. Shuffling behind them Takumi heard Urd's voice. "How are you? Better?"

"Yes, in fact I've almost forgotten it," he said, failing to mention it was only because it had now been replaced by another concern. As his eyes adjusted to the dim surroundings he noticed a red glow rising from what appeared to be edges of the floor. Looking over he saw lines which for some reason caused him a kind of vertigo he could not place. He drew nearer. "I seem a bit dizzy that's all," he said trying to extend his hand for balance.

"In that case try not to look down," muttered Urd. Peering again into the dim light he now understood her warning. What he had thought were mere glowing rivulets along the sides of the floor were actually distant flows of considerable size arising almost a thousand of feet below them on either edge of the path, the appearance due to the lack of any reliable frame of reference. He also realized now the floor did not extend equally in all directions, flowing irregularly toward edges which terminated in sudden drops. He shut his eyes trying to steady himself in the darkness. "Tell me that glow means the edges drop down to a nice gentle slope, perhaps terminating in sets of cushions?"

"Err . . . if by that you mean it falls away on either side to rivers of lava, then yes - *least I hope it's lava*," muttered Urd. He felt his legs go weak. "Do you know how much farther it might be Belldandy?" he said closing in behind Urd.

"No," she said calmly. "I only know *when* it is. And that is all that really matters."

"*When* - it is?"

Mortality

“We are in Hild’s domain. We will continue along this path until she chooses to see us, at the scheduled time of our appointment.”

“You mean she could leave us here forever?!” he said now trying to mentally retrace his footsteps.

“It may feel that way, but no. Demons like goddesses take such appointments very seriously; just as they do the conditions of their contracts. When the appointed hour arrives we will see her, since failing to do so would reflect upon her reputation. She can make things *appear* different down here, however I assure you when the appointed hour is reached she will meet us; having agreed to do so.”

At her words light began to appear ahead of them in the darkness. As they approached the complex arose in all its magnificence, their path leading up to a courtyard filled with dark trees extending from one side of the volcanic mountain with the territory beyond seeming to drop away to a vast plain. Passing the courtyard they entered the throne room proper, the obsidian floor of its hall as smooth as glass and lined with Hild’s accumulated treasures and retinue of attendant demons. The approach turned in front of a high wall of onyx before coming to face the Daimakaichō’s throne. Beyond that Takumi could see the stygian floor past the throne dropped down into a warren of caves. “*Standard execution wall in front of the throne, sufficient space in the back to hold god knows what . . . nice,*” he murmured beside Urd.

“Try not to think about it. Besides I think *Monday* is executions day,” she whispered.

At that moment Hild seemed to appear out of nowhere standing behind the throne in a blood red gown that made Takumi shiver. “*Oh Bell*, you wreck the surprise,” she teased. “I mean there really isn’t any point continuing the charade if you’re going to give away the ending now is there?”

They stood facing one another silently.

“Ah well, it’s fun for the less initiated,” she shrugged to Takumi. “After all, we want visitors to feel as though they’ve gotten their money’s worth don’t we?”

“I suppose,” Belldandy replied quietly. “It’s a pleasure to see you again Lady Hild.”

That which is Unspoken

“Is it?”

“*Of course*,” she said graciously, stepping forward without hesitation.

Hild tilted her head to one side studying her carefully. Satisfied with the results she turned to Urd, “Good to see you as well daughter.”

“We’re not here at my suggestion,” she said folding her arms.

As Hild and Belldandy proceeded in polite conversation, the demons at their periphery relaxed their stance. Yet as the minutes passed Takumi found himself only growing more tense. There was something . . . something that seemed to grow upon his mind with each passing moment. A feeling of trickling within the stone behind him as though water; or perhaps blood. From the corner of his eye he attempted to catch Urd’s attention. The change in her posture was almost imperceptible, but he knew now she felt it as well.

“Well now, what can I do for you my dear?” Hild asked at last.

“Me? It’s not . . . *I’m not here for myself*,” Belldandy stammered, surprised at her inability to control her emotions now the moment had come. It’s – *I am here for Keiichi*.”

“I see. So it is as I’ve been told. He interjected himself into an altercation and was harmed in the process. Terrible business. Truly. When it reached my ears I assure you I dealt with them most severely. But with demon’s level of freedom and so many factions, they will occasionally act on their own. It’s always difficult to control. Unfortunate how the upper realm has chosen to deal with the matter, but then they always were very taken with rules. Which I suppose is why you have now come to me.”

Belldandy did her best to keep her head up and not cry,

“It’s . . . yes,” she said finally. “*And so I was wondering* - if perhaps some arrangement might be -,” she stopped, desperately to try and stanch the flow of her tears.

“I see. Well given all that has happened I will do what I can.

However you must know that if your human is in such desperate straits there are limits to what even I can do. Not knowing the causative agent I can’t even guarantee my efforts will be able to reverse the damage.”

Belldandy looked at her growing even more pale, “Of course.”

Mortality

“However, given that you’ve made a request and it seems only fitting I do my part. Of course due to its nature it seems only fair that I ask for something in return - on behalf of the realm you understand.”

Belldandy looked down shaking her head.

“*Belldandy* -.” Urd cautioned.

“Be careful in your advice now daughter,” Hild cautioned. “For I can sense something of Mr. Morisato’s presence, and it is quite clear he is almost out of time.”

“Bell there’s something not right about this,” Urd warned.

“*It’s alright Urd*,” Belldandy nodded. “I would not have taken up Lady Hild’s valuable time if I was not sincere in asking for her help!”

“Very well. *I vow to do all I can to save the life of Keiichi Morisato*. If he dies you owe me nothing. However if he lives you must depart these lands forever.”

“What? *But . . .*”

“Your presence on the surface world has caused an imbalance, a disturbance in the demon realm for some time.”

Belldandy seemed truly caught off guard by the request, “I, *but we . . . we had so many plans . . . about the future*,” she stammered.

“Yes of course. Still, isn’t this better than the alternative?”

Belldandy looked away searching the emptiness of the cavern walls. “I - *I don’t know*,” she said in tears.

“Oh very well,” waved Hild. “If he survives I’ll let you see him one day a year. And don’t let anyone say I’m not generous!”

“I - would only see him one day a year?”

Hild’s eyes grew pitiless. “*That . . . is my final offer*,” she said raising her hand.

Belldandy gripped her sides trying to think, to gather the will to raise her hand. “I understand,” she said finally.

“*Bell don’t do it!* For if you do it will always be,” warned Urd.

Hild frowned throwing her a withering glance. “You always speak of your sister’s wise and considered judgment. Why do you not trust her now? Can she not make up her own mind?”

“She’s upset. She can’t think . . .”

“She should be. Her beloved has so little time . . .”

That which is Unspoken

"It's alright Urd. I've made up my mind. *Let us proceed,*" she said kneeling down, solemnly raising her trembling hand.

"Belldandy -."

Hild too now reached out her hand. "Very well. *Let us seal our* ---- *!!!* Hild screamed in pain as Belldandy suddenly slammed her hands together, catching the demon's palm in hers, the flesh igniting from the tremendous force of heat as the flash of light grew blinding in the chamber. Belldandy jumped away instantly on guard, her eyes now a terrifying shade of iridescent blue, "*You were the one who hurt Keiichi!*" she said her body beginning to glow. "*May the Gods grant you mercy if anything happens to him - Anything at all!*" she screamed. The structures around them began to crack, no longer able to withstand the strain. Though she stood alone before Hild, for a moment even the demons stood back from the goddess's light. Hild knelt down, sweeping her hand to cover her burning fist finally extinguishing the blue flames. "*If you believe that then why did you come?!*" she snarled.

"I did not know for certain until I looked into your eyes," she replied readying herself.

But Hild seemed to relax, casting her arms wide. "I can now see we're going to have to do this the hard way!" she said snapping her fingers as the reptilian stone guardians broke free of their encasement in the wall behind them.

Takumi twisted in a blur, sweeping the blade as its sinews formed striking one of the creatures dead. To his left Urd extended her arm behind her, obliterating the creature without so much as a backward glance. As the fragments of decapitated stone fell Belldandy dove between them bringing up her hands. "*Shield!*" she shouted as the glow of the opaque barrier enveloped them against the wall.

"Impressive -," Hild said approaching the boundary that kept them in close quarters against wall. "But you are in my domain now, cut off with no help coming. I doubt you'll last five minutes!" she said striking the barrier as Belldandy groaned resisting the immense force.

"Hot - hot!" Takumi howled as the woven latticework of stone hidden beneath his robes began to glow. Urd cut away the harness beneath the cloak allowing the moon stone to drop to

Mortality

the floor. Shoulder to shoulder now they knelt down, pressed in by their defenses on all sides in the tight space. A second blow by Hild from outside nearly collapsed their protection.

"She's right, even with both of us we're not going last long in here!" Urd said turning to her sister.

Bell nodded looking at her. *"Do it!"*

On the other side of the barrier Hild could have easily waited them out. But that was not her style. For it did not project strength. Even though she held dominion over every corner of her realm, the small momentary outpost of resistance irritated her. Showed that something might contend with her; even if only for a moment. Not a signal put before other demons. She looked once more at the heavenly light of the barrier, an awful reminder of the land she would never again call home. *Time to end this*, she thought. She struck again, more powerfully this time but to her horror encountered nothing but air. Stumbling forward she tried to recover, just as the strong reassuring arms caught her.

"Dammit!" she thought feeling Takumi's fangs strike as he pushed his feet against the wall as hard as he could. The pair flew free of the barrier, sliding across the floor until they broke apart as Takumi dropped down into the catacombs on the far side of the throne. She sprang to her feet angrily slapping her hand to her neck. *The same *#\$%ing spot!*

"Hold them!" she bellowed. "I'm going to take care of a little pest control problem once and for all!" she said deftly dropping down into the caverns quietly searching the catacombs. "You think you can escape down here?" she said incredulously.

"I know every foot of these caves - *I helped build them.*" To her right she detected movement in the tunnel below and pounced. *"Gotcha! . . . ??? Oh get up you idiot!"* she said stepping over an unconscious guard at her feet. *"You're making us look bad!"* she said kicking another only twenty feet farther in. "Okay so you've had lunch!" she shouted into the cavern doubling back. "But really, how long do you think you can hide from me down here?"

"Not long -, " came the echo too close for comfort.

That which is Unspoken

She turned and struck instantly at the ceiling above. Her aim was impeccable and certainly would have hit him - had he not just cut away a hundred-ton stalactite. Hild's strike shattered the falling stone creating a dense shower of fragments raining down upon on her as Takumi jumped reaching the main palace floor. He ran diving, sliding on the floor until he snatched the orb at the right hand of the throne, pitching it to Urd past the stunned group of demons. As he did Belldandy swept her arms drawing him to her.

Hild hit the floor right behind them. "*Well that was fun . . .*," she said shaking off the remainder of the stone fragments from her robes. "Though I fail to see how your trip has in any way improved your current situation."

Urd held up the orb. Only the briefest shadow of irritation seemed to cross Hild's face. "Why Urdy, if you wanted to play with my things you need only ask. Not that it's much use to you -," she said stepping forward as the demons began to close in around them. Deliberately now Urd placed Takumi's hand upon the orb's seal. At this the approach of several of the demons began to slow. But Hild only looked on tiredly, "nice instinct, though he's presently rather a lesser shadow of myself. I'm sure you're aware he couldn't possibly muster the power necessary to break -." Urd now placed her own hand atop his. Hild's smile seemed to be growing strained but she continued, "You really think your code breaking ability is equal to-." Belldandy's hand now joined the others on the sphere as it began to glow.

Hild's smile was definitely beginning to look forced, "Well I suppose all you need now is time. How much of *that* do you think you really have?"

The demons began to move forward once more when the sphere's surface suddenly grew brighter.

"My Lord!"

"*Quiet.*"

"But Lady Hild she has the -!"

"*Shut - up!*" she said through gritted teeth.

Now it was Urd who seemed satisfied, "It sits at your right hand - from among all your treasures. I think it's safe to say this is something you *really* don't want to meet again!"

Mortality

The leader of demonkind folded her arms, eyes narrowing. "Perhaps. But isn't the real question whether *you* want to meet it again?"

The goddesses looked at one another.

"What if I told you that the *creature* you now hold in your hands is what killed your dear mother Belldandy?"

Even Takumi felt the shock that rippled silently between them: -!!! No! I told you what I saw that day Bell!

Belldandy eyes rose meeting Hild's. "If that is true then I would be *even more* anxious to meet her," she said evenly.

"Have it your way," Hild replied motioning for the demons to approach. "Take them alive." The nearest had almost reached them when the sphere suddenly began to change color.

"*The primary seal!*" One shouted as they jumped back.

"What did I say about talking?!" Hild said motioning for silence. Takumi noticed Belldandy's body beginning to tremble as she pushed herself to the limit trying to accelerate solutions to the remaining seals. Urd did likewise as Hild now waved her demons aside. "I wonder how much power you have left little goddess? *It can't be much,*" she taunted.

"Enough," Belldandy replied bravely.

"And I've got plenty," growled Urd. "Not to mention your pals here seem to be getting a little nervous. I wonder what that's all about?!"

Hild ignored her. "Belldandy is this what you really want? For it all to end like this?"

"The only thing I want from you now is a way out," she replied.

Hild laughed. "You can forget about that. When you arrived I assumed you would be smart enough to make a deal. *Any deal.* But now I see you continue to cling to a dream of having a real life with that man. The truth is there is no way out of here for you. You're cut off and it is *I* who now begins to perceive a whole new set of possibilities. You are in my domain now and you will remain here - *forever.*"

No sooner had she spoken than the secondary seal collapsed and its energy began reverberating throughout the chamber. The faces of the surrounding demons grew pale, with some clearly showing signs of distress as the living contents within

That which is Unspoken

the orb now began actively asserting itself trying to defeat the final seal.

Though Hild's face appeared unchanged her mouth spoke quickly. "*Alright*," she said raising her hand as though the prior conversation had not just occurred. "You want a way out? There it is," she said passing her hand as the vertical seal manifested on their right.

"*Bell?*"

Belldandy reached out with her free hand carefully inspecting the seal. After altering several symbols on the outer marker she signaled for them to go.

"We're not leaving without you," said Urd.

"I'll be fine," she said taking possession of the orb. "Now go!"

As Urd and Takumi dove for the portal Belldandy covered them, holding up the orb to any who tried to pursue. Its surface now began to blaze as she held it in front of her. "Remember what I said," she muttered throwing the sphere to Hild the before she too disappeared through the portal.

"Should we follow?!" asked one of the demons.

But Belldandy's escape was hardly chief among Hild's concerns at that moment. "*Silence!* This isn't as easy as it looks," she said weaving her hands around the orb as the spell blocks took hold, growing one upon another attempting to lock down the sphere. Though the energy from within was considerable, the seals slowly reestablished themselves as the glow began to subside. "*No, no*, you won't be seeing daylight anytime soon my dear," she said as the orb once again grew dark. "For you are far too valuable to me - *even in exchange for them*." Satisfied the seals were now stable she directed it back to its proper place.

"And the others?" asked her advisor.

She shook her head. "No need to follow them. Why would we? We have nothing to do with any of this. They came, they made a request, and left without a deal being reached. That is all there is to it."

"And any accusations she might make?" said the advisor.

"The rambling of a distraught and desperate mind. What proof do they have? *None*. And what have they gained for all their efforts? *Similarly nothing*. All they've succeeded in doing is

Mortality

squandering their last possible chance for assistance. And in so doing wasted what little time Morisato has left. For the end is near. Keiichi Morisato will not live to see another sunrise.”

Valkyrie

“Five weeks ago our reports say, horsemen appeared on the eastern side of the valley at Horyuji temple. We believe they carried with them an object of stone, taken with the aim of reducing the power of Koyasan.”

“Sounds like our target,” replied Lind.

“-And they passed through the North-South road, the same route that Lind and I used to come here?”

“Yes.”

Sohei shook his head, “Something is not right in this. Why would they travel miles out of their way over mountainous terrain to the territory of Tenkawa, rather than simply head north to the Yoshino River if their final destination was Horyuji?”

“What are you suggesting?” asked Genjiro.

“I do not think these are Taira we are hunting. If they were, why not use the more direct and well protected trails they control north to approach Horyuji? The only reason I can see for someone to use the harder route is that it allows them to hide from everyone deep in the mountains for the maximum possible period, exposing themselves in the open valley only for the final segment of the trip.”

“What difference does it make?” replied Genjiro.

“It matters who our true enemy is,” said Kaze. “A small group of hardy men, trained in the mountains. It matters if there is a hole in our security network. Horyuji. I wish we knew earlier. That’s almost halfway back to Okadera.”

“Don’t be dramatic. It’s less than a third of the way back. Still we should have no illusions. It’s almost five miles to the western side of the valley from here. It will be difficult for us to cover you effectively over that range without raising suspicions. And it’s position makes Horyuji’s easy to reinforce from the western hills.”

“That doesn’t matter, as I will be going alone,” said Lind.

Mortality

"You can't take on a place of that size on your own," said Sohei. "At least, not quietly. I, perhaps. But you? No."

"I'll be in and out before anyone knows."

"Are you sure? It's a big place," said Genjiro. "And fortified. We don't know where your item might be stored."

"He's right. We can't just plunge in all at once," said Sohei.

"We must split up, distract them in order to search. And it will be difficult for you to slip into such a place and blend in. If the alarm is raised it will be much more difficult to find your quarry, especially if we don't locate it quickly. What's more, we need to think those assisting us. If we don't do this right they might trace us back to the temples, and many will suffer."

"Then we'll go now," Lind proclaimed.

"No, we should wait until tomorrow. We need rest and approaching Horyuji in the evening will give us better cover," said Sohei. They spent the next day readying themselves until it was time to go. With an additional borrowed horse Lind and Sohei departed in the afternoon for their assault on Horyuji, riding like ghosts over the landscape with Mint in tow. They elected to cross the valley in the north near Nara, where patrols were more distracted. Riding through the broken woods of the western slopes, Sohei stopped as they approached the temple.

"They must be halfway there now," said Kaze looking to the far side of the valley.

"I suppose so."

"We must have faith in them. Don't you agree?"

"Of course."

"Yet last night you gave us remarkable information on our quarry. And this morning I heard a number of additional horses being saddled. *'It's not think these are Taira we are hunting.'* He is a perceptive one," Kaze said folding his hands behind him. "Tell me Genjiro, why did you do it?"

Slowly Genjiro rose pacing. "Can you smell it Kaze? The faint scent lingering beneath everything? Beyond the wisteria and cedar it lurks; the charred remnants of Kofukuji and of Todaiji, less than a mile from here. What we lost in those fires was incalculable," he said gripping his robes. "Hundreds of relics, to say nothing of the immense loss of human life. Two years

Valkyrie

ago it was, yet still they lie within site, smoldering ruins to remind us . . . to keep us down.”

“Which justifies theft?”

“I tried - I tried to tell them they were too exposed on their mountain. If the relics could be brought here they could be protected.”

“Nonsense. How could you imagine they’d be safer here?!”

“Following the terrible devastation at Kofukiji and Todaiji the enemy has left us relatively alone – and even the Tiara fear our forest. For a powerful enchantment lies upon it in their minds.”

“Did you know of these powers the stone possessed?”

“Had I known of its true role we never would have touched it.”

“Well those who did ‘touch’ it seem to have been the wrong men for the job!”

“*Indeed*. What happened to them we do not know. Fear? Greed? Clearly they were on their way here but something must have happened.”

“Someone got a better offer I suspect,” replied Kaze.

“It was a terrible mistake I admit Kaze. One we have been working ceaselessly to rectify.”

“By letting our visitors ride into a trap?!”

“You think I would have let them go if I knew for certain the stone was there? But the truth is we don’t know precisely where it is now. And so they must go.”

“And if they find their quarry? Do you vow to support them regardless of what they decide to do with it?”

“I do Kaze. I swear it.”

“Then I shall say nothing,” he replied reaching his hand skyward as a falcon flew down from the trees to him. “All we can do now is wait and pray for their success.”

What is it Sohei? Lind asked coming alongside him.

“The fishers. It must have been them!” he said suddenly.

“What are you talking about?”

“A week before you came. Men came, scouring the river for polishing stones. Yet there were several that, did not seem to fit in. It must have been them! Had I paid more attention . . . but they came from deep within the western mountains so I didn’t think to -.”

Mortality

"It's alright. We'll find it," she said.

As they approached the temple on horseback that night they saw that it was no small place. Ducking under trees Sohei and Lind managed to avoid the outlying patrols. But as they approached the outer walls they grew too numerous.

"There's no way in," said Sohei.

"Follow me!" she replied as beneath her hood the blue symbols began to glow. Leading the horses down the east side of the temple she turned right onto the main thoroughfare. "*We are sent by your lord emperor!*" she proclaimed to the puzzled guards. "Do they not know who that is?" she muttered looking at their faces.

"Yeah but they don't wear a lot of blue, '*Our great warlord who seeks to dominate the world!*'" he said quickly trying to calm them.

"*-Has provided you this holy guide to search out the unrighteous!*"

Amid their confused stares Lind turned starting to search the east wing with Sohei trying to slow down and contain those who might follow. But as he did even greater numbers began to arrive on horseback from the western precinct. To make matters worse the longer he stood there, the more they began to notice the difference in his appearance from their own.

"Yeah we didn't think this part out well," he muttered as the crowd grew. As members of the newer contingents now began to draw their swords he raised his hands. "I am merely a servant," he said innocently.

"Whose servant?!" they replied.

"*Mine!*" said the voice suddenly leaping atop the temple gate.

"I'd listen to her, she's a god!"

The group looked on suspiciously at the woman as she began awkwardly pulling away roof tiles.

"No she's not!" complained one.

"At best she's some low level yokai whose curse is to loosen roof tiles," joked another.

However by this point Lind had removed enough tiles to drop inside, materializing her axe as she slashed through the roof beams and in one stroke, causing the gate to collapse. As the

Valkyrie

structure tumbled to the ground she burst forward from the jumbled pile timbers pulling Sohei behind her. "You alright?" "Fine."

"We have to get to the western wing. There's nothing on this side."

"That's where they're coming from. They're going to overwhelm us!" he warned.

"Then we will have to trust our luck!" she said surging toward the leading edge of the group, as the two fought their way into the west side of the temple. But by now the alarm was fully raised against them as more and more soldiers came surrounding them. Quickly Lind and Soheu searched from room to room until she stopped. "Hold up – *here*," she said. Sohei pressed his palm to Abyss as its symbols lit up, causing wrappings and fragments of cloth within the room to glow. There it lay before them now, the first evidence, the first solid piece of what they had been looking for; as items in contact with the stone continued to give off their telltale glow.

"My god!" said Sohei.

"Looks as though it was unpacked in this room," mused Lind.

"Is it still here somewhere?"

"Raise the weapon higher. You see those washed-out traces? It seems as though it was moved from here - off to the north," she said trying to follow the steps.

"They must have perceived its worth and sent it on to, likely to Kyoto." Their reverie was quickly interrupted by the sound of soldiers on the outer walls on all sides. "We must get out quickly," said Sohei. "But how?"

"I make it a rule never go into a place I don't know how to get out of," she said heading for the southern wall. "I had hoped to conserve my power for problems we might run into during the escape but it looks like we're going to have to make an impression here." He watched the armor beneath her cloak begin to glow more brightly as she burst through the wall of the storehouse into a hail of enemy arrows. But she had indeed thought of the mechanism of their salvation as before them now lay a large pool of water. In the instant the soldiers fired she drew up a wall of water in front of them, turning it to solid ice as the arrows struck.

Mortality

"That will hold them - but for how long?" asked Sohei.

"Oh I think they'll lose interest in shooting at us shortly," she said as arrows continued to fill the ice. Raising her hand, a sigil began to scribe itself into the wall of ice causing it to tremble. Their attackers backed off just as the wall exploded, sending sharpened fragments of ice in all directions. By the time the chaos died down the two intruders were nowhere to be seen.

"I hope that's enough to keep them off us," she said as they climbed the steep northwestern slopes of the forest.

"It'll buy us some time I'm sure. Who would want to follow that?" Sohei said carrying her with her arm around his shoulder.

"I'm not used to the Valkyrie armor yet -," she said as they ducked down eluding yet another patrol.

"It will be fine. We'll make it," he assured her. "They don't have the men to put over the entirety of this terrain for long."

"Do you know where we're going?"

"From what I saw coming down we should be able to follow this spur of forest due north for about four miles. At that point we should be almost level with Kasuga-Taisha temple on the east side of the valley well before morning."

"And from there? What do we do? How far is this city you spoke of?"

"Kyoto is about twenty miles north of the branch point. We'll just have to take it one step at a time."

Upon reaching the northern terminus of the forest they headed down the slopes to the valley, amazed to find their faithful horses waiting. "That *is* a good horse," muttered Sohei. "I think it even brought food - that we didn't bring along!"

A whistle beyond them from the darkened plain soon revealed the presence of several ranged defenders from Kasuga-Taisha.

"You are safe?" they asked.

"We're in one piece," Sohei replied.

"Kaze says returning to the temple is now too dangerous."

"Give them our thanks and tell them we found evidence that the stone was at Horyuji but appears to have been sent on to Kyoto. We will ride from here."

"Good. We have packed your supplies and provisions."

Valkyrie

Kaze-sama suggests you travel to the eastern side of the valley - where your friends await you." They looked at one another. "Now we must go on ahead. We wish you luck," they said riding in the direction of Kasuga-Taisha.

With some resistance Sohei placed Lind on the horse and together they traveled for some miles in a slow arc toward the northern isthmus of the valley. When she was sure they were on their own Lind gave a long melodic whistle as moments later Mint circled down beside her.

"Well, what did you find out?" she said passing her a piece of fruit. Her companion began a long series of clicks, screeches and grunts; seemingly providing Lind with more information than she absolutely needed. "Yes, I'm sure your ass did get sore sitting in those trees. On the other hand you could have been with us - almost getting it shot off!"

"What does she say?" asked Sohei.

"Essentially that your hunch was correct; though the Okaderan monks do not seem to have been involved with it."

"Still, we should be mindful of that in terms of who we seek out in Kyoto."

"How large is this Ko-to?"

"Significantly larger than Nara."

"Such a big place. If the stone is there it will be difficult to find it. Kaze referred to friends in the mountains. How will we find them?"

"We won't. But we are traveling the northern isthmus and the sky is beginning to lighten. If someone is up there they will see us coming far in advance and intercept us."

The sun had risen by the time they forded the Kizu river on the eastern side of the valley, yet it was still several hours before they heard a familiar call on the mountain slopes above them.

"Ryu?!"

"So I see you're not dead yet, though you seem to be stirring up plenty of trouble down the valley. And with it, stories of a 'warrior servant of the frozen god' (doesn't make a lot of sense to me, why would god need a defender?), grow with each step. Tell me, did you two truly defeated 200 men at Horyuji?"

"More like two dozen received some ice burns," he replied.

Mortality

"I suspected as much. Well we couldn't let you guys perform all the daring deeds, so some of us have come to assist you."

"Some?" asked Sohei, as the Yamabushi elder appeared now with several of his men on the path above them.

"Kaze says there is reason to hope in your quest," he called.

"We know these hills better than anyone. We will guide you up to the temple of Kiyomizu-dera which will serve as your base in the north. But first rest, you must be exhausted from your long march."

They spent the rest of the day, and much of the night, catching up with each other under cover of the mountain cedars.

Then next day they moved on, traversing the eastern edge of the valley in the close cover of the hills.

But the further they went, the more Sohei seemed to slow, growing quiet.

"Are you alright? Are you injured?" Lind asked.

"I'm fine. Go on ahead. I will catch up to you," he said.

She walked on with the others leading the horse, occasionally looking back to catch sight of her companion who stood now staring down at the river.

"What's wrong with him?" she asked.

"We're approaching Byodoin, and we will soon be crossing Uji bridge," Ryu replied.

"Why does he linger?"

"He and his allies fought a great battle there years ago, an unsuccessful one whose loss was great, in the dark heart of men from which so few return."

She stopped looking back once more. For perhaps the first time in her life she felt the effect of war on a being other than herself. She walked back down the path, taking hold of Sohei. "Come away from that place," she said tugging him.

"Don't you see? If I go on from this place it really is as though I've returned to the land of the living. *Without* them."

She nodded, looking down feeling the blustery winds, "And bring greater hope to the world of men for it. For you are more now than you were, and your comrades lying still would thank you for it; and pray for your success in returning balance to the world."

Valkyrie

“-And as for returning to the world, you did that when your bones washed up at our village,” Ryu said behind them.

“Perhaps that too was the will of a higher power - though I believe it’s simply that the gods possess a sense of humor.” She could see Ryu’s words were bringing color back to their comrade. She decided to change the subject. “Will we see the great city today?”

“It’s currently hidden behind low lying hills to the northeast. To get you into Kiyomizu-dera undetected we will need to approach them at night, as we need to move past several unsecure temples. As such we’ll camp here tonight on this side of the basin and approach it late tomorrow.”

Unrolling her pack she took a long look at Sohei. He had done much and for the first time she considered if the path she was leading him into would substantially shorten his life; embarrassed she had not done so before. “Maybe - maybe you should go back - to the village,” she said finally.

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s just - when I was alone in the mountains, when we faced the dangers in the village – it all seemed somehow smaller. But now . . . so many tribes of men, so many and so ruthless, each with their own plans. I worry how it will end for you.”

“Your fears are not unfounded. But am not doing this solely to help you. For I have taken much from the world of men. Perhaps in time this will help balance things out. Perhaps . . . I *will* go back someday. When the world is . . . better.”

“That could be a long time,” she said looking around.

“Yes but I do carry a weapon of the gods, and we have felled some capable opponents. *So it’s a good start*,” he smiled.

“No I will stay, and lend my talents that I might restore this terrible beautiful world. Does that make you feel better?”

Mint stood up nodding on the tree branch, wiping her eyes.

“Both of you go to sleep, we have a long day tomorrow!” she said lying down turning her face away.

Lind awoke the next day to see the Yamabushi elder returning quietly to camp. As he came in she saw Ryu, like her, silently looking up from the fire.

“There is still time. We will eat and prepare, then make our way down. We’ll wait until the bulk of the day’s patrols are

Mortality

done later in the day. It's about eight miles from here, but the terrain can be challenging."

"How will we approach?"

"Three miles ahead there is the temple of Daigoji, with allies waiting. From there we will try to cross the plain to the western set of hills without attracting any attention. It's only about a mile and the stalks are reasonably high. The weather is turning which should help us. It should reduce the number of people we see."

With a nod from Ryu Sohei began to collect his things. By the time they had eaten and packed the Yamabushi were already half way down preparing the way. Approaching the temple the Yamabushi signaled all clear and they moved down alongside the outlying halls at the base of the hills.

"We'll try to move quietly in groups from Daigoji toward Kajuji on the far side," said the leader. "Do you see it?"

"Yes," replied Sohei.

"From there we will move along the mountain's spine, through the hold of the Inari to Kiyomizu-dera."

Waiting for the rain to start they crossed the plain to the temple without problems. However as they climbed she saw them grow ever more watchful to the west.

"What is it?" she whispered finally.

"We must be quiet," the elder said. "These hills are watched, and we are in the land of the Inari now."

"Are they enemies?"

"They are guardians of the grain. Gods like you."

She and Mint looked around nervously wondering what they meant. "Is that who you are watching for?"

"No. The capital of the enemy is close now, only two days ride to the west in Kobe. And they hold the city of Kyoto."

A moment later they crested the hills behind Mt. Inari and she saw it, the city of Kyoto lying to the northwest. She had never seen a human city so large. And though it couldn't compete with Yggdrasil, she could see even in its current state it possessed a charm all on its own. They walked on robed as monks, walking single file for several more hours before until in the late afternoon they crossed the last major defile, climbing the mountain spine leading to the backside of Kiyomizu-dera.

Valkyrie

Traversing the narrow footpaths the Yamabushi led them down the steep face toward the back entrance to Kiyomizu-dera, descending through shadow with the hill to their right as they moved north, the city and temple now below them in the west as the sun dipped low in the sky. Abruptly the elder signaled for them to stop, crouching low. Slowly she saw them coming now, monks clad in dark brown coming up the path. He came forward speaking with them for several minutes before signaling.

"We will leave you with them," the elder said. "These men are sympathetic to our cause and will lead you in from here."

"You're not coming with us?" asked Sohei.

"Our mission was only to deliver you here safely. Now we must return and regroup with Kaze's men in the south. He is making arrangements and will come north in a few weeks."

"Why didn't he come with you here directly?"

"I do not know. He said he had concerns he needed to see to first. He would not say more." Slowly the men gathered to leave.

"It was good to see you one last time Sohei," Ryu said.

"You as well. Look after the village; the men and yourself. I will always think of the forge whenever I think of my home in the south." Then they nodded to one another, the nod of men with too much to say and too little time in which to say it. Lind felt a pang of guilt watching them go. "They will keep you hidden; you can trust them," the elder said as the group came to a parting in the road."

"Be safe," Sohei replied wistfully. And then they were gone. He turned to the monks who led them down the final mile toward the temple. "You know I think we really are finally on our own now," he said as they looked out on the plains and the city of Kyoto. Entering the grounds of the greater temple he added, "I was thinking. It's customary to offer a gift."

"What gift could we give them?" she replied.

"Well couldn't you just do some 'kami' stuff in that outfit?"

"I can't do that! What if someone from the *other realm* was around here? We'd be alerting them to our presence!"

"I see your point."

"*I have an idea.* Mint can you do me a favor?" she asked

Mortality

retrieving a bag. Mint squinted back at her suspiciously. Following some further encouragement she finally set off, as the visitors were set up in one of the temple outbuildings which would serve as lodgings during their time in there. Soon after the monks departed Mint returned silently down through the trees with her prize.

“How many of these did you eat?” Lind asked looking over her take as Mint squeaked back something equally pointed.

Walking under the overhanging beams, Lind hurried outside calling the men. “A moment,” she asked. “There is no way we can sufficiently thank you for assisting us. Please accept these gifts, drawn from the highest trees in the most precipitous passes, that you might remember this day.” She reached into the bag producing segments of loquat branches containing golden fruit and began handing them out.

Sohei saw that the gift had the desired effect, for an offering of such lofty fruit directly from the hands of a goddess was nothing to be taken lightly. In fact though she and Sohei would never know it, the scene would later be immortalized by a monk on one of the temple walls, that of a goddess handing out loquat branches to empower the ‘protectors of the temple’. Some even say it is the reason biwa wood is common in temple staves to this day.

“How do you know what we provided them was of the highest quality?” Sohei teased when they had gone.

“Just look at Mint’s stomach. Do you really think she would have collected anything but the best if she was going to fly it back?”

Mint grumbled moving between them but settled quickly when she was allowed her pick of the finest blanket.

“The city is sizeable. Where do you think the stone is?” Lind said as the sky fell to darkness.

“My guess is if it’s viewed primarily as a military asset it will be located in the eastern section of the city. However if they view it as a religious artifact, then I think we will find it in the northern sector where most of their aligned temples are.”

“What do your instincts say?”

“I think it’s in the north. Or perhaps it’s just wishful thinking since it will be easier to retrieve there.”

Valkyrie

“Then we will start there. In either case, with what we have we should be able to locate it within a few weeks.”

He nodded, turning to sleep.

They began their search the next day, navigating the town with the help of their new guides, assisting them in avoiding watchful eyes in the city. They walked together in quiet groups through the streets surrounded by guards. Though they discreetly searched several of the northern temples, they returned to Kiyomizu-dera that night without success.

As the evening air cooled, Lind paced the temple’s expansive veranda waiting for Sohei.

“The men here seem dedicated,” she said watching over the city as he arrived. “Even fanatical. But why do they stand with us so strongly?” she asked.

He came beside her at the edge of the platform looking into the forest some forty feet below. “Do you remember the fires I told you of at the start of the war?”

She nodded.

“Some of the men here are survivors of those fires; or come from temples affiliated with those who died.”

“Killed by those who now hold the city?”

“In part. The whole truth is more complicated. It may seem odd to you, but some of the temples have had long running feuds.

For example the temple which burned with tremendous loss of life had a long running feud with a sister temple known as Enryaku-ji - who attacked this very monastery, burning it not twenty years ago. Coincidentally it is also one of the only temples left unscathed by our enemy in the current war.”

“So they work together?”

“It seems a reasonable assumption. Enryaku-ji to the east, the Tira stronghold to the west. Not an ideal situation. However the men of this temple are focused on defeating such enemies. But we should save this conversation for later. Others are approaching.”

Lind nodded. “*Mint*, sweep down as they come up and see if they’re armed.” Mint squawked in reply.

“Well if they *are* armed, bite them!” she said.

Mortality

As the monks drew closer, one sprang forward from the group. Glancing at Mint above them in the trees she returned only a shrug. Lind reached down but Sohei stayed her hand.

"You're alive!" the man said bowing before him. "When they told me the *arrow cutter* had arrived from the south I did not dare hope. But when I heard today of your defeat of 400 men at Horyuji, I knew. It is you Tajima. Returned from the dead."

"Alright this is getting out of hand!" Sohei replied. "Yes, it's me Kenji. But you have the kami I serve to thank for anything occurring at Horyuji," he said deferring to Lind.

The monks gathered around her. "So she is the one who returns lost souls from the dead with her golden fruit." Above them they heard Mint's scratching at the tree, pointing a claw to herself.

"No - no raising of the dead," he replied waving his hands.

"But she has come to help restore balance to the world and fight against evil," eliciting nods from the group.

Eventually the monks and Kenji let them go, allowing them to returning across the veranda making their way back to Amida Hall. "*I had no idea you were such a diplomat Sohei,*" Lind teased folding her arms as they walked.

"Nothing I said was a lie."

"You made it sound like I'm here to fight their enemies."

"You have to admit, explaining the exact details of the whole story would be - *difficult*. Besides, if their enemies get in our way I'll be only too happy to dispatch them."

"Who is this Kenji?"

"He was a young foot soldier when I knew him. Like many that night. He no doubt witnessed our efforts defending the bridge."

"He looks up to you."

"Like too many he looks up to the wrong things," he sighed.

"But I am glad to see him alive and in one piece." He looked out to the buildings of the capital.

"What is it?"

"Strange. I was just wondering how Mai and the others are doing in the village."

"It does seem a long way off from here, away to the south."

"I wonder if we'll ever see them again," he said.

...

Valkyrie

Morning came and Mint blinked herself awake lazily, stretching her long limbs as she raised her backside swishing her tail over Lind's sleeping head. Then she turned, suddenly jumping at seeing a man outside their room. She hopped to the ledge baring her teeth.

"Hey - I'm just bringing clean water," Kenji protested.

"You should know it's never good to surprise a god," Sohei said stirring. "It does not tend to work out well."

"I was told she requires a certain quantity of pure water. I assume that's why they put you above the feather falls. The waterfall here is the cleanest. I have brought a combination of the three flows which she may. . ." Lind yawned rolling over in the bed.

"Of course if I'm interrupting things -," he said looking away.

"Hey, it's not like that," he said amid Mint's confused look.

"You have rebuilt your naginata," Kenji said bowing.

"Uh, some manner of it. And you ask a lot of questions. How about I ask a few. How long have you been here?"

"I arrived eight months after, well . . . *after*."

"And this place?"

"It is home to a dedicated and serious brotherhood. They know the risks. You and your goddess may rest easy here."

"I see. And the approaches?" he said scanning the cliff.

"You've no doubt seen the protections of the mountain behind you. You were placed here because we have a good view and warning of the only approach to this position from the east."

"Good. But I fear we may bring you more trouble. I believe it may be necessary to check the temples at Mt. Hiei."

"Enryaku-ji?"

"Possibly."

"A fraught request, but we will accompany you nonetheless."

"No, the danger is too great. We will go alone. The problem is that while we will try to be discreet, we may be forced to use powers are available to us; which may raise questions as to our origin."

"I understand and will speak to the elders. But things are changing. More than you know. Do not worry about us."

Mortality

Lind and Sohei spent most of the day quietly in town collecting supplies and information they would need for the journey ahead. "We should enjoy this," Sohei said as they walked together through the narrow streets. "As things proceed I'm not sure we'll be able to come back." That night Lind, Mint and Sohei sat together looking out at the city from their quarters as they prepared for their journey. However, the next morning they were greeted by bells and monks running to man the lookouts. As they ran to join them, they could see in the west ominous signs as flocks of birds rose in the distance.

"Do you feel it?" Lind asked stretching her hands out over the horizon on the observation platform.

"What?" asked Sohei.

"The vibration. Something is coming. Something large."

Over the next hour the rumbling grew, finally revealing itself. Troops, men by the thousands, porters of every description came marching through the city under the banners of red.

"Are they here for us?" asked Lind as Mint moved behind her.

"Too many for us," Sohei replied. "This is something else."

Alarms rang throughout the city, announcing the procession of the army as it made its way through the streets, through and away to the east. "It looks as though they are heading toward Lake Biwa," Sohei said.

"What does it mean?"

"They march to battle, a great battle to the north it seems. They must feel they have the Minamoto cornered," he sighed.

"I will keep an eye on them from a distance, and report back to the temple," Kenji said going off with several others.

"Shall we leave as well?"

"It will be very difficult to move through the city today. But we are running out of time. I fear something terrible is coming."

The following day the temple elders would not let them leave without supplying them with guides to take them at least as far as the base of the mountain. After hugging the eastern side of the hills running north-south from the temple, they dismissed them, beginning their ascent into the mountains proper. But as they passed a small temple at the base of the mountain Lind slowed, staring up at the cloudy sky. The air above them began

Valkyrie

to change, the clouds beginning to sweep into a wide circle.

“What is it? A rainstorm?” asked Sohei.

“This is no rainstorm . . . *it is my masters*,” she said. Sohei shielded his eyes as the column of light suddenly descended through the wind and Gna appeared.

“*Valkyrie Lind!* You are requested to return to the Heavens!”

She looked to Sohei. “My mission is not yet complete!”

“Nonetheless your return is imperative!”

She grew suspicious. “If Freya needed me why did she not come herself? You’re doing this to make me fail.”

“Fool! Was I setting you up to fail when that demon was hot at your heels?! Do you not recall? *Three* votes are required to confer your powers. Who do you think the third vote was?

“I assumed Freya . . .”

“Freya was your sponsor. She *cannot* vote for you. *I was your third vote!* For Valkyries always work together for the greater good, no matter one’s personal feelings.”

“I promised Freya I would see this through. What is a higher priority is there?”

“*The Heavens are currently under attack!*”

“From the Demon realm?”

She nodded. Lind felt a cold shiver of childhood creep up her spine. “They’ve never attacked us directly before,” Gna said.

Numbly Lind began to gather up her things. “My - my master is in trouble,” she muttered to Sohei.

When she was ready, she looked back at the dark mountain.

“Don’t go Sohei. Don’t go on. Go back. Go back to that village,” she said hopefully.

“There is no going back - *not for people like us*,” he replied.

“I will go in your stead.”

She shook her head. “When I came. . . and now, I know . . . I - *I don’t know what to say!*”

“There is nothing to say,” he replied. “No choice to make. You must go back to where you are needed.”

“But . . .”

“Now you must trust the world of men, Valkyrie Lind - as we trusted you. Think no more of us here. Leave us to our task.

Only think to guard your own life in the battles to come.”

Mortality

She looked away her eyes tearing. "The weapon, remember what it can do. Help you it can, listen to it. It will protect you." "Such a thing should not be left in the mortal world," said Gna. "It is my creation and my responsibility. I trust it to the world of men – and who should wield it. We forged it together Sohei. And so I leave it with you . . ."

"We must go!" said Gna.

Lind looked back, seeing him retreat into the rain and shadow, smiling as he raised Abyss one final time. He walked away down the muddy trail past the shrine - and was gone.

She would never know that the enemy troops they saw in the city that day were going off to meet their doom in the battle of Kurikara, ultimately turning the tide of the war in favor of the Minamoto, forcing the Taira from Kyoto and heralding the final phase of that terrible conflict.

Through it all, Sohei searched from place to place without success. Yet as he made his way back toward Tenkawa in late 1184 under the shadow of Mt. Yoshino, he would receive his first critical clue; though he did not know it at the time. In the mountains he crossed a party of Minamoto, within whose ranks *Tajima the arrow cutter* was received with honor. As he talked that night with the men, receiving what news he could of their travels he was introduced to one Shizuka Gozen, mistress of the famed warrior Minamoto no Yoshitsune. As they spoke he told her of his travels and his attempt to satisfy the request of a strange deity whom he had fought beside, asking if they had seen or heard rumors of any unusual treasures fitting his description. But alas none had anything to report. Departing several days later he rode south as they traveled east. Arriving at the shrine of Tenkawa he was at last reunited with his friends, overwintering with them in the village. As he prepared to leave once more in the spring with several others, he was surprised to receive an urgent note from Lady Gozen.

Communicated through Kaze Hojo, it asked him to come to the to Kamakura with all due haste. When at last he arrived he was dismayed to find that Lady Gozen's fortunes had changed dramatically, for she was now a prisoner of Minamoto no

Valkyrie

Yoritomo hunting for her beloved Minamoto no Yoshitsune, breaching no rivals in his quest for unconditional power. Using Kaze Hojo's connections he was eventually able to speak with her. "How can I help you?" he asked. "No one can help me," she said sadly. "For I carry Yoshitsune's child, and he will never let me live because of it. But perhaps I can help you. During my time here I have heard many stories and rumors - including one that tells of a stone which glows blue in the moonlight and calm's men's minds." "Where is this stone?" he said feeling his pulse quicken. "Here, in this place," she said taking up her brush to trace a quick plan of the building. "I do not know which room precisely, but it is on the upper floor." "When the time comes I will find it, Lady Gozen." "*Then go quickly Arrow Cutter,*" she said completing her work. "Go and aide your deity. It is my revenge upon Yoritomo. Three weeks from now there will be a festival. That will be your best chance."

In the hills above Kamakura Sohei sat in meditation, looking at the waters of Sagami Bay surrounded by Kaze's men. He considered all the ramifications obtaining the stone might carry, and what it would cost him. He thought and thought. But in the end his loyalty to Yoshitsune and Lind was greater than Yoritomo. "Kaze I have a question to ask," he said at last. "Is it possible that a man might put the communal good above their own self-interests?"

He leaned in beside him. "By *man* I assume you mean me?" Sohei nodded.

"Before the war I would have doubted it. But I have seen much, too much of the world of men. What is it you ask?" he said waving his men away.

"If one needed to remove something, something precious, which would be sought high and low were it to go missing, where would you hide it?"

Kaze bowed his head thinking. "Given we are currently located in Kamakura I assume this object is in the hands of someone - *powerful.*"

"*Indeed.* Can I trust you?"

Mortality

He sighed. “*Why is helping the gods always so difficult?*” he muttered. “They *will* look for it high and low. Therefore the best place to hide it is under his nose.”

“What do you mean?”

“Place the object where he cannot look, in a place above suspicion.”

“Where?”

Kaze hesitated.

“You Hojo seem to own nearly everything here in Kamakura. Where would you put it?”

“What do you see below us?” asked Kaze.

“The money washing shrine. But why put it there?”

“*One*: that shrine was dedicated by Yoritomo himself. Who would dare desecrate it with a search? *Two*: it’s close - less than a mile if the object happens to be coming from Yoritomo’s stronghold at Tsurugaoka Hachimangū, which could be important if you have *followers* close at your heels. And *Three*, and perhaps most important: the flowing waters of the shrine. For where elevated water flows something else abides - *caves*. Over it’s lifetime this spring has eroded many facets of the mountain creating numerous caverns.”

“But if *you* know this, certainly others do as well.”

“Yes and some are quite celebrated. But only *our* guardians of Zeniarai Benten know the full extent of these passages, and even they talk of much which remains hidden. One unadorned stone lying among thousands of other in the deep recesses of the mountain? It would take them a *very* long time to find it; even if they decided to look. For as you surmise, *we* are far more familiar with this region than Yoritomo.”

“Which brings me to my final point. You don’t question my plans Kaze?”

“You mean can you trust me? To be perfectly honest, Yorimoto does not figure into my long-term plans. Also I make it a habit never to argue with gods. I’m told you and your companion made short work of a terrifying demon. I can only imagine what you might happen to to one old biwa player.”

On the second night of the festival Sohei gained access to the fortified shrine of Tsurugaoka Hachimangū using Gozen’s

Valkyrie

instructions. Access for Abyss was more problematic; but Kaze was not without his connections. On September 15th 1185, he finally found what he was looking for, holding it tight as he removed it from a chest lowering himself to the ground. Of his escape through the rice fields and of his pursuers, there are many stories. But most say his possession of the stone gave him power over men's thoughts and so none could match him. Though it was heavy, it was not so heavy he could not manage, and he climbed the barrier disappearing into Zeniarai Benten unseen. Within the shrine Kaze's men pushed the marker aside and they descended into the tunnels, traveling until they reached a large cavern. "It will be fine here," he said releasing the stone. As he left however, Sohei swept Abyss across the ceiling behind him instantly collapsing the roof.

"What have you done?!" they asked.

"Ensuring none of you are *burdened* with knowledge of the precise location of the stone," he said. "I trust no one had other plans for it. *The gods* would not like it. . ."

"But -."

"No need to worry. My companions can remove it if needed. And if any of you feel somehow cheated I should tell you, my *initial* version of the plan was to bring the ceiling down on all of us as a more secure security measure. For though I trust you; I trust no one completely. Not with this." Whatever their thoughts the men looked to one another quickly exiting the cave. Exiting the shaft Sohei saw Kaze's men inform him of what had occurred below. "I'm sure you are right Kaze. I'm sure the imperial authorities will look high and low for their possession. But in time it will fade. After all, there is so much to do," he said taking up his pack.

"And what will *you* do, now?" he asked.

Sohei simply waved walking away. "Remember our arrangement Kaze. Keep a place ready for me."

"All you have asked will be done," Kaze said watching him go.

...

Some legends say that the stone gave to Sohei long life, for he returned over the years with Abyss to keep watch over his charge. But this is not true. It would be more correct to say it gave him insight into the nature of life. In time he and others,

Mortality

survivors from Kiyomizu-dera, Yamabushi from the south and sohei like himself settled in the region of Kamakura, making their own community who worked together to keep watch; in Zeniarai Benten and elsewhere. Often on clear quiet nights he would sit in the hills above the shrine and meditate, waiting for Lind. But of course she never came.

As the years crept by, rumors grew of a divine stone washed by mountain waters. Eventually Sohei decided it must be moved. So too he began to wonder how long his wait might really be, and how much things might change in that time. Ever mindful of Kaze's advice as to hiding places he decided to make one last deal in secret, quietly moving the stone to an unmarked grave within the newly opened temple of Jukufuji in 1200, dedicated to Hōjō Masako herself; wife of Yoritomo. For he had always known of the subterranean passage lying close to the stone's original resting place, and Abyss's ability to find it.

"How do we help them sensei?" Kenji asked one night as he walked beside a now elderly Sohei. "How do we leave a message, for the heavens?"

"We need say only a little. For their eyes are keener than ours, and see farther than those of men. After I am gone, through means you should not speak, place a sign which can lead them back to me. It will be enough."

"I do not understand."

"One day my companion will return. When she finds me, she will have what she needs. I can say no more as we must be cautious, the servants of evil may also come at any time."

Sohei was buried in Zeniarai Benten in the year 1218 of the common era by members of the Hojo clan; a little over 9 weeks in Lind's time. Yoritomo made good on his threat to kill Shizuka Gozen and her son. To this day she lies in Kamakura, half a mile from Jukufuji. Years later upon his death Kenji asked that the sealed inscriptions he carried be placed upon his purified scapula. For Lind, the assault on Yggdrasil came and went. By the time it was over she knew Sohei was gone. She would not return to earth until after formal timeline unification in 1995 of the common era.

Last Words

“**T**akumi,” Aki prodded gently.

“*I know*,” he said going to search them out. He found the goddesses gathered together in the small office which had served as Belldandy and Skuld’s sleeping quarters. *How much like a family they look*, he thought. *Any family*. He saw the same terrible fear in their eyes he’d seen so many times before, the same hope he had not come to say what he now must. They had arrived several hours earlier directly from gate and the return had been difficult. For when Belldandy entered Keiichi’s room she found Aki and Megumi pressed in close to his chest. “Keiichi - KEIICHI!” Belldandy cried.

“*He’s alive Bell*,” Megumi said quietly. “He lost consciousness about an hour ago. He has been in and out. *We’ve been . . .* he - wanted me to give you this when you returned; in case you didn’t . . .,” she stopped, handing her the note,

Bell,

I saw that pair of gulls from my window again today, flying beyond the river and up into the morning sun. Higher and higher they rose, their paths crossing as they soared toward the distant clouds. I wondered, are they blessed or cursed for knowing their brief moment of happiness together in the unknown?

Keiichi

“*We shall see . . .*,” she said walking to the balcony alone, leaning over to look at the city below.

“The truth is he’s almost spent Tai,” Aki whispered as they stood together beside his bed. “We always knew these were merely stopgap measures. I think we’ve given him all the time we can.”

“And you’ve done it well. But given his state, can we -?”

Mortality

“We can probably give him something to wake him up for a little while if we have to. The problem is it may hasten -.”

“*I know.* But given the circumstances I think they will want it. Even if it’s only for a few hours. I told you I would take care of everything. *Like we were never here.*”

“If you’re sure -,” Aki said hesitantly.

Now they were gathered in this place, this foreign place none of them wished to be. “*Bell?*” Takumi said as softly as he could. “Aki has – she has made all the arrangements. If you wish to speak with Keiichi . . . *now would be the time,*” he said avoiding her gaze.

“Big sis, can I -?”

“Stay here Skuld.”

“*But -.*”

“Give them some time Skuld,” Urd said pulling her little sister to her. Takumi followed the look in her eyes, for her thoughts were the same as his own - *we should leave this place.*

“I’m surprised we don’t have additional visitors here already,” he said trying to think of something to say.

“A jump from the demon gate can’t be detected by our system, wouldn’t be much good to them if it could,” Urd replied.

“I suppose not.”

Down the hall Belldandy came in, kneeling at the side of Keiichi’s bed, studying his face in the starlight, her eyes filling with tears. “Tell me what to do Keiichi,” she whispered. “Tell me what I must do! *I don’t know what I do! They’ve cut me off, I can’t -.*” she cried putting her head against his.

Slowly Keiichi opened his eyes, “It’s alright Bell. There is nothing more to do. You’ve already done everything that needs to be done. Just stop. That’s all we need to do now . . .”

“I can’t Keiichi - *I can’t stop!*” she sobbed.

“It’s alright Bell,” he said putting his hand over hers. “The time for all this is now over.”

She shook her head unable to speak.

“It’s just - I don’t want this anymore Bell. *Please.* I don’t want our last moments together to be of hospitals and frantic attempts and fear. I just want to be with you. Let’s go home.

Last Words

Just take me home. Let us be quiet in our last few hours. Send everyone away. Let it be just you and me. Like it was in the beginning. That's all I want now."

"*I can't!* They say if you leave here you'll die Keiichi!"

"Nothing can prevent that now."

The muscles of her chest heaved in grief. "If only I hadn't been so selfish. If I'd taken Hild's offer, then maybe at least . . ."

"You did what you thought was right Bell. You always do."

And so it was that cloudless night that Belldandy and Keiichi made the decision to leave the confines of the lab and return to Tariki Hongan temple. Takumi thought he was prepared for it all, watching them pack. But when Megumi came to hug her brother goodbye for the last time - that was when the weight of it all truly hit him. The two had grown up together, shared many small moments and fought many battles. Whatever the tally of their wounds he could see in their parting the depth of their feelings for one another. He didn't think the simple act of saying goodbye would affect him so. But it did.

Megumi looked away, talking to Belldandy in the doorway wiping her tears, "I've done as you asked. I've told everyone to leave the temple, so it will be empty when you arrive."

Belldandy could only nod. "I will -."

"I know you will," Megumi said tersely. "Do you want me to give you guys a ride?"

"We'll handle our own transportation," replied Urd.

"Then this is goodbye I guess," she said walking out. Takumi followed, escorting her from the secure wing. She paused with her back to him at the door, "Will I ever see my brother again? Did I just say goodbye to him for the last time?" she cried.

"Whatever happens Ms. Morisato, know that your brother . . . well there are pitifully few men like him. I suppose I never told him that," he mused.

"Perhaps you should have," she said leaving.

When he returned to the floor he could see that each of them were ready to leave in their own way. "Aki, we're going to leave you now," he said amid the exchanged looks. "I - you have our thanks, every one of us. From the very bottom of our hearts, thank you. I will be back in a few days to -," he saw

Mortality

Urd scowl, “to talk this all through with you. Go home. As promised we will clean up everything here.”

“I feel bad,” he said when Aki had gone. “We should have -”
“*How* exactly would we have explained our method of cleanup and travel?” Urd replied. Moments later they were all standing in the courtyard of Tariki Hongan Temple.

“*We’re here!*” Urd announced loudly walking along the side of the house. “*Feel free to come out and face us from wherever you are. You may try to take us on yourselves but personally I suggest you go for backup.*” Watching the observers depart Urd turned to her sister. “For the last time, I think we should stay here with you Bell.”

“Keiichi doesn’t want it. I think they will leave us alone, at least for a little while. If I need your help I’ll signal. Keiichi and I . . . *there are things . . . it’s just a waiting game now,*” she said.

“If you’re sure Bell.” The last thing Takumi saw was Belldandy turning on the lights of Skuld’s room as Keiichi sat against the wall of the porch. A moment later he, Urd and Skuld arrived at the seaside residence.

. . .

Belldandy attended to Keiichi on the porch surrounding him with blankets and pillows so they could look at the stars.

“*Keiichi, is there anything -?*”

He put his head against hers, “Can we just stay out here and talk for a little while Bell? Talk like we used to, dreaming of all the things we . . . *that we . . .*”

“*Of course,*” she said crying beside him. She made him as comfortable as possible as the night’s air grew still. That evening she whispered many soft words to Keiichi Morisato. Words she wished she had said sooner, or more clearly, or more frequently. In those last hours she could not hold him enough, not kiss him enough, nor tell him more of what she desperately wanted him to hear. Keiichi smiled warmly in her arms, slowly becoming more and more quiet as he drifted off to sleep, no longer able to hear her voice. Belldandy rocked him shutting her eyes, trying to control her own dark feelings of panic and bitterness. *What was it I was afraid of all this time? Of losing myself? Isn’t that the point? To be lost with*

Last Words

someone? She felt as though she was standing on the edge of some great abyss, wavering in the darkness. She felt the end coming. *Yes, it is coming. . .*

Beyond the temple wisps of vapor began to seep in, creeping along the temple grounds closing in. Closing in on Keiichi. She had felt it before but this time she knew it was real. She tightened her grip on him. *“Go!”* she cried as the winds around her began to grow. *“You will not have him - not yet!”* she cried as the foundations of the temple began to tremble. The mist retreated but she knew it was only temporary. Soon nothing would keep it away.

Together at the residence, Urd, Takumi and Skuld each sought out their own form of refuge. Urd sat quietly by the doorway staring out to sea as Takumi and Skuld exchanged somber glances inside. After some time he spoke, *“I’m sorry Urd. I can’t tell you how sorry I am. In the end I know all I did was steal what little time they had left.”*

Urd continued watching the waves. *“No. We gave them hope. We did what we could to protect what was important to us. Regardless of the outcome we have nothing to regret. If Bell were here she’d say the same thing. You know that don’t you? You did your best. You have nothing to be ashamed of,”* she said looking at the ocean with tears in her eyes.

Of course he knew she was only trying to make him feel better. And of course he wanted to believe it. Believe her words were true. But he knew they were not. He had failed her. Failed them all. Failed to alleviate or even ease their suffering. And now there was nothing to do but wait. Wait and endure what would come after. He looked at the wall spanning Urd’s mural, following the strange symbolic carvings which had recorded so much of their lives over the past two years. His eyes now moved to a blank space in the corner. *I wonder how she will -*. There was no point thinking about it. It was too terrible to consider. He put his hand on the wall, moving it over the smooth surface to the end. It was done. He swept his hand away as his fingers passed over something. He looked back in the candlelight seeing nothing. Once more he searched moving his hand over the edge, finally feeling the faint depression of

Mortality

the line's sinusoidal shape as it wove its way over the wall.

"What is this?" he asked absently.

"What?" Urd said from outside.

"This line. I feel it yet it gives no sign."

Urd thought a moment realizing what he was touching, "It's a common element used to enclose such figures - *yggdrasil*," she replied.

"Yggdrasil? No, this is just a line," he said looking back puzzled. "There is no hint of any larger structure."

But Urd's gaze had already returned to the sea. "Not Yggdrasil, she murmured. "*yggdrasil*."

"What?!" he said confused.

She realized now how her words must sound, "Not Yggdrasil the city, *yggdrasil - the tree of life*."

"This is no tree. It's just a line," he said following it.

She looked up at the night sky. "It is. It's the first tree, the one before all others. And there are *two* lines."

His hand moved over the edges of the mural. "There *are* two lines. There's something - strangely familiar about them," he said following their flow.

"*As there always must be*," she replied. "Yin and yang, light and darkness, good and -," she stopped realizing that all had gone quiet. "Tai?" She said turning to see him staring at the wall in dead silence.

"What is it?"

"*The tree of life*. Belldandy said something similar to me that first day. As did you. *It strangles the tree of life . . .* All this time, she was trying to tell me."

"What is it? What's wrong Tai?"

"I think I've made a terrible mistake. Take me - to a library."

"What?"

"Take me to a library - *any library!*" he cried going for his coat. "Take me to the Nekomi Tech library!"

"*What?!!*"

"*Are you deaf you idiot!*" Skuld shouted pulling them outside.

"Take us to the library now!"

Urd raised her hand as the three of them sprang from the waters of the Nekomi Tech fountain a moment later, racing for the

Last Words

library doors at a dead run. “*Sir we’re about to close for the evening –.*”

“We’ll only be a minute!” he said pushing past him with his companions. Racing up the open staircase he bounded to the second floor looking for his quarry. *Botany-, biology-, biochem- here!*” he shouted darting down the aisle. Urd caught up to him frantically pulling down books from the shelves, examining each as he tossed them open on the floor. “Urd what are these?!” he asked.

“*What?* What would I know about inscriptions in a human book?!”

“Urd, please. *What are these?*” he said moving his hands over the pages. She looked down her eyes narrowing.

“Yeah, that *is* weird . . . they do all look like yggdrasil.”

His face grew pale. “Get us to Tariki Hongan temple!”

“What are you talking about?!”

“*We don’t have time for this!*” Skuld shouted desperately drawing her hands up as outside the waters of the fountain began to rush unnaturally toward them. “Skuld what are you – *oh shit!*” Urd said seeing the waters flowing against the glass of the library wall. Quickly she raised her hands to stabilize the tons of oncoming water, inscribing the seal on the vertical glass. “*Run!*” she said sprinting for the wall. “We need to reach it the same instant the water does, it won’t hold longer than that!” she said as the three touched the wall just before the library was flooded under a wave of water. An instant later the visitors emerged from the pond at Tariki Hongan temple as Belldandy rushed to meet them.

“I don’t understand, *deoxy-what?*” Urd continued.

“It doesn’t matter,” he replied. “Bell! yggdrasil - you have some kind of power over it don’t you!”

“Of course. *It is the First Power.* What is he talking about?!”

“He seems to have figured something out about yggdrasil and why it’s withering,” replied Urd.

“WHAT?” After all of his incomprehensible words and pronouncements - at last something she could hold onto. “I don’t understand. What is it you now see?” she said frantically. “The poison, it’s actually a polymer, hybridizing to cellular DNA and inhibiting gene transcription.”

Mortality

“Hybrid-what? I don’t understand?!” she cried frantically.

“The polymer is binding to his DNA preventing the normal pattern of transcription.”

She looked panicked to Keiichi’s still form on the porch. “*I don’t have time for this! Show me!*” she cried putting her hands to his head, his body convulsing from the power collapsing.

“*Breathe-*,” Urd said holding him. “Just breathe and think, think about the idea. Of what is happening to yggdrasil. You know what you need to say; just show her.”

Belldandy stood alone within the darkness of his mind, but now the images were starting to come, slowly, then more rapidly.

In front of her now the unmistakable form of yggdrasil was beginning to assemble itself, strange and different from the form she knew, more primitive and utilitarian, stripped of its harmonic poetry; but still recognizable. The strands grew and projected down and away below her into countless miles, forming itself into higher order structures before going dark. Now something grew anew before her, draping itself around the strand forming a triple helix, strangling the sinews of yggdrasil. The central core of the helix now expanded in size to show more detail, as vectors of increasing types and speed tore away at it, showing her the numerous ways in which yggdrasil could be damaged irreversibly, or torn apart within the links of its chain. Then she saw it as the others faded, a new force being applied, which caused the intruding strand to resonate, then shatter without injury to the primary strands. Along the long descending path of yggdrasil below her she saw it propagating, shattering the poison down to its fundamental building blocks as they fell away; yet yggdrasil remained unharmed. The harmonics of the new vector flew at her now, its elements being defined, transferred to her mind in an instant.

“What is it Bell?!” Urd said seeing her struggle.

“I don’t know. There’s something else, something more, he’s blocking. Something he doesn’t want me to see. *Show me!*” she commanded as the defenses of his mind collapsed and the visions came rushing in. Belldandy screamed breaking contact.

“*Bell I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to see -*,”

“I understand,” she said shakily.

Last Words

“Do you Belldandy? *Every cell*. The attacking polymer in every cell must be -.”

“I understand. But selective depolymerization is possible.”

“The reaction should cause cascading fragmentation throughout the polymer. It’s structure is different enough that *yggdrasil* should be safe in all cellular population. But it would require that one has sufficient power to perform such a -.”

“*There is a way*,” she said raising her hand.

In Yggdrasil’s central control room the sudden vibration caused everyone to sit up. “*What is that?!*” Peorth yelled jumping up.

“Looks like some form of massively parallelized hack,” Ex replied scanning the monitors.

“Coming from demon realm?” asked Peorth.

“*I don’t think so . . .*” Ex said hesitantly. “*It seems to be coming from the library.*”

“Huh, I don’t think your outcome that day with Belldandy was quite what we thought it was when you -.”

“*Thanks for your brilliant observation Chrono!*” snapped Peorth. “Alright, can we -?”

At that moment Prima and her team burst in. “What is it?!”

“There’s a disruption to the core system and we are attempting to isolate it,” replied Peorth. “It appears to be centered around Tarki Hongan temple, and therefore may be the subject of your inquiry.”

“Of course it’s them. Kill the lines!”

Groups of operators began to look at one another questioningly then back at Peorth.

“That is a very abrupt step. We need to move carefully.”

“That is Belldandy down there!” pleaded one. “Don’t listen to them,” pleaded another.

“You must of course do what you think is right,” Chrono said folding her arms at her workstation. “-But know that if you do, if we cut her off now; that it will be the end of it. The end of Keiichi Morisato. We all know it. The end of all her hopes for him. Are you really prepared to to that?”

“What is the weight of one human compared to that of the law?” Prima retorted behind them.

Mortality

“Last time I checked the Fighting Wing took orders from the civilian authority - not the other way around,” snapped Chrono.

“You seem very close to this. *Perhaps too close.* Perhaps you have been helping them?” Prima inquired pointedly.

“I’m sure you need no help to track my communications,” she replied.

“If your priority is to capture Belldandy and protect the system, you would do well not to interfere with our operations,” said Ere coming between them.

“We must end this quickly. Give the order to sever all connections,” demanded Prima.

“You can’t do that!” said Chrono. “Even if you care nothing for them, you don’t know what that might do to the system.”

“We need a decision,” insisted Prima.

“You must do something,” agreed Ex.

Peorth searched the worried faces of the room. They were beginning to gather into their own factions, the split threatening to grow wide. “*Give me a moment,*” she said departing the control room, walking down the central corridor to the high council chamber. Opening its doors she went inside to stand upon the receiving balcony. She pressed her hands to her forehead. “What is to be done?” she asked. But only silence answered her. The council chamber stood empty. “There are only moments. What should I do?” she asked. “*Why won’t you answer me?!*” she cried reaching out for the pillars on either side. It was then that she felt it, the carved relief under her left hand . . .

Time seemed to flow faster then, in those early days stretching away from her. The composition of events quicker and lighter too, much like the ocean spray itself in that place - far to the south of the Tower hills along the coast. Her mother was often away in those days, collecting and caring for the great trees of the upper realm, and so had relented in providing Peorth some measure of freedom within their costal hold.

Impatiently now the young girl made her way over the volcanic rock and sandy soil down to the domain of the towering Monkeypod trees that stood between her and the ocean.

Crossing the bridge over the steep defile she entered the main

Last Words

road of her small hometown, a place known for the unique medicinal properties of its exotic trees, fruits and flowers. After climbing through the limbs of an enormous banyan tree, she ran up one of the plumeria strewn side roads to see if her friend had already left for the coast ahead of her. Finding she was too late she proceeded through the rear paths past the houses, climbing past stout groves of teak to reach the ridgeline separating the town from the true coastal plain. In truth it was on this side of the hills she spent most of her time, racing down through terraced fields of sugar cane to the deep blue sea below. Far away to the north she could spy the cane giving way to fields of rice. The wind seemed to follow her as she ran, passing over the fields drawing her to the coast. Finally she reached the stands of bamboo, strategically planted to protect the cane fields as she broke through onto the sandy beach and its palms, racing for the water's edge. As she had every day that summer, she eagerly searched out her companion in the waves, little more than a mile from her family's house in Haf. "There you are!" she said spotting the black nose poking up from around the corner of the pier.

"Peorth is that him?!" asked her companion, standing ahead of her on the broken down pier.

"Of course! I told you he'd be here Astrid," replied the nine year old Peorth. The girl looked down hanging over the side only to be surprised by the sudden jump of the seal up from the waves. "AAAH!"

"Don't worry he's quite trained," she bragged, slogging into the water to pat his nose.

"So cool! You have the best pet of anyone!" she exclaimed.

"Yeah he's pretty awesome," Peorth admitted as the seal leapt up over her pushing his nose into her pockets in search of food.

"Patch. Behave."

Patch, so named because of the large spot around his left eye had become something of a local legend on the beach of late, in no small part because of his habit of entertaining and terrifying the locals in equal measure within the protected region of the gate. However Peorth was quick to point out that those who received such 'terrifying' encounters had usually walked into the water with some form of food on them. From her point of

Mortality

view given the various forms of surrounding wildlife, Patch was merely performing a public service to keep people safe. Whatever the opinion of the town elders, Patch and Peorth grew together along the family's hold on the coast, endlessly making their way along the beach and its finger reefs. Peorth grew in her knowledge of how to manage the trees and vines and Patch did too. They were happy together in their abode. But things could not always stay the same, and slowly they began to change. More and more when she visited him now she would see him staring beyond the sea gate, watching as packs of wild seals moved to and fro to their hunting grounds.

"C'mon Patch!" she called as her companion turned to follow.

They carried on, chasing each other through the water as they had most of that summer. But toward its end she would often see him swimming on the surface at the end of day, head up staring out to sea. So too she often found a particular seal hovering on the far side of the gate. Sometimes there, sometimes not. But always Patch searched. As time wore on she could no longer ignore the look in his eyes watching the sea. She remembered well that final day as the strong tropical winds washed over them in the warm afternoon air.

"But why let him go?!" insisted Astrid. "The law says you have every right to keep him."

The young Peorth sat on the ancient pier, casting her eyes to the horizon, "Yes. But that doesn't mean it *is* right to keep him," she replied quietly.

"But - he could die out there if he goes beyond the boundary."

"*He could*," she nodded sadly. "But that is no longer my choice. Not anymore -," she said wiping away her tears. "The right thing isn't always written in books. It has to live inside us," she said standing up.

"Don't do it!"

She pushed her hands outward as the vines moved, forcing themselves down and across to the sea gate and the family's seal, the bars groaning in response before finally giving way. As it tore open Patch dove down, swimming through the hole to the outer compound before finally heading skyward beyond the barrier to the sea. Out beyond the gate he surfaced stopping, surrounded by his new friends as he turned looking back.

Last Words

"Be free - *grow strong*," she said raising her hand as she stood tall at the edge of the pier wiping her eyes. Patch dove backward into the sea and was gone.

An hour later, Peorth's mother walked down to the beach to find her daughter alone.

"I broke the gate!"

"*I see*. Do you think it was right?"

She nodded as her tears flowed. "He had his own life."

Peorth's mother said nothing, leaning down to kiss her head.

"Shall we go back?"

"I think I'll just stay here awhile," she replied.

"Alright. Don't stay too long."

Peorth sat on the pier that day watching the sea and the sun as it went down, drawing everything she could remember about Patch onto the pier piling.

Back in the upper chamber Peorth's eyes focused on the relief carved into the column face. "No one is here by accident," she heard the voice say within her. She looked up at the chamber heading for the doors.

"What do you think she -?" asked Chrono.

"*Quiet she's returning*," said Ere.

"Commander communication with the temple is currently impossible due to the level of interference. However we've outlined a containment strategy," Ex said upon her return.

"I understand," she said resuming her post. "Tell me how much of Yggdrasil's resources is the target currently consuming?"

"Two percent of the ENTIRE SYSTEM'S output - and rising!"

"Chrono are the target's actions presently jeopardizing safety of the system in any way?" The operators looked to one another puzzled. "*Of the system?* That's not really an issue.

I mean no *one* goddess could ever possibly draw enough power to endanger central command," Chrono said giving her a curious look. Then she understood. "*No*," she replied firmly.

"There is no present danger to the system."

"At what point will the drain begin to inhibit operations?"

"Perhaps 10 percent. But that's not the issue. The real problem is that no entity could channel anywhere near that much power through themselves for long."

Mortality

“When will she reach her limit?”

“A first-class goddess like her might be able to withstand something like 2.5% for a short period. Beyond that . . .”

“She’s already at 2.1%!” cried Ex.

“We must cut her off,” agreed Prima.

“No,” Peorth said grimly. It’s her decision. She has to make it.”

“Are you telling me you won’t save a goddess in trouble?!”

Peorth sat down resigned, “What I’m saying is that people need to make their own choices; and live with them. That is what freedom is. Don’t interfere. *That* is my order.”

“What? Commander I must protest your actions -.”

“My actions are to protect the operation of this system. If you wish to take her into custody at the end of this, by all means do so. But we will let her try. If she survives you can send a team to apprehend her. Ex, what is her current status?”

“2.25% and rising!”

“You can’t just let her do this!” shouted Ere.

“It is her decision how she chooses to express her will.”

“2.7% -.” Those in central command now began to gather around their consoles, watching in horror. Down at the temple only Urd’s eyes could endure the brilliance of the light as she occasionally caught glimpses of what she thought were her sister.

“2.8% -.”

“This is beyond reason! No one can withstand that. Cut all output!” demanded Prima.

“Belay that!” shouted Peorth. She looked up at the monitors, *You’re not going to stop are you? No, of course not . . .*,” she thought sadly.

“2.9 . . . 3.-,” But Ex could say no more. She turned away closing her eyes as her tears fell. “*She . . . she’s gone,*” she said a moment later. In the control room there was nothing but stunned silence as the members consoled one another.

Shielding his eyes behind the wall, Takumi sensed it was finished. The blazing light and heat that had only a moment before been brilliant above him was now fading into points, like a star going dark. Beside him Urd jumped. “*Stay put both of you!* Don’t move a muscle do you understand? I mean it!”

Last Words

she leapt over the wall calling for Elegance as she ran. Takumi watched the angel burst into flight above her as she raced toward the dying glow. “*BELL!*” she screamed.

High above in the dark heavens the goddess opened her eyes. She turned looking down at the small points of light below her, myriads of them, holding together so many tiny beings. She turned in the darkness looking upward, taking in the vast array of stars overhead – space beyond measure as her body dissipated to the emptiness. It seemed as though she had been so concerned only a moment ago, about what she could not guess. For now all was peaceful in the dark sea of the heavens which embraced her, carrying her aloft and alone into the vastness of the universe. She rose on unseen winds knowing not her name or place or even time in the emptiness. She breathed, if indeed it could be called breath, as though doing so for the first time, moving as the universe moved. Only one tiny point of light still flashed below her, incongruous and willful within the peace of the universe.

“*Bell -*”

She looked down at the small point of flickering light. A tiny point that seemed to be barking at her. She focused more intently. Was the little light trying to talk to her?

“*-dandy!* **BELLDANY!**”

Why did she know that name? Was that my name - long ago? Yes, there was something familiar about the point of light. But it was so far away now. Too far away to make sense. She drifted out into time unknown as the point of light burst forth, “*Kei . . .* **KEI-ICHI!**”

Something. There was something strange about that name. What was it? Something important . . .

“**KEIICHI’S HERE!** *Don’t leave him!*” the point cried.

Keiichi . . . and -! The flickering washed over her as its meaning gripped her. She threw herself surging downward, trying to compress herself once more into her small being of matter. But there was too little now, too little remaining. She rushed down - down into unknown layers of being arising in a dark and unknown swamp. “Where am I?” she asked now hearing her own childlike voice in the darkness. For indeed she

Mortality

was a child; at least the part of her in this plane. A child lost in a vast dark wilderness.

“BELL!”

“URD?” she echoed. “I can’t see you!”

“*I know -*,” Urd said raising her arms against the fading light, closing her mind to all that might detract from her link with Belldandy. “Hold tight Belldandy. You are within quantum superimposition, between existence and nothingness.”

“I can’t find my way out!”

“I can’t guide you. You must find me,” she said trying to sound calm attempting to soothe the panic in Belldandy’s voice.

The childlike Belldandy began to walk the dark woods, over and under its branches and vines. But it seemed endless. She began to run, but nowhere did the gloom seem to lighten. She raced on panicking, only to stumble into a pool of quicksand. “Urd I’m sinking. I’m sinking!” she cried.

Urd’s helplessness overwhelmed her as she heard her sister’s voice in the quagmire consuming her. “Listen to me! Don’t give up Bell! You can do it!!” she shouted.

But the more the small hands of Belldandy struggled, the more she sank; until finally her face dipped beneath the surface. All was darkness now as the surface of the pond grew silent. As the life drained from her Belldandy felt the past, of water pressing in around her, of her body falling through an ancient lake . . .

But also she felt all that was within her now, every moment of her life, every face that had ever mattered. Every - face. Within the intangible void she struck, gripping the threads of her life. At the edge of the pond a vine tightened, twisting and turning against the weight of the girl as she now reached up breaking free of the surface. Turning she pulled herself up and free of the pool rolling to her side. The dirty girl knelt, slowly rising before she began to run once more over the uneven ground, racing the woods and underbrush until a single ray of light crossed her path. Stopping she turned toward for the source, tracing it through the darkness until she could see other slivers of light beginning to form ahead of her at the edge of the boundary. Running at full speed she threw herself through the edge of the forest, tumbling to land on her feet emerging onto an endless sunlit plain of wheat.

Last Words

She looked over the rolling hills scanning the terrain. For this was a place she seemed to recognized. A place from memory. She looked down at herself. She was older now, perhaps 14. Spreading her hands before her she began to move. Launching forward she ran for the nearest hilltop, catching sight of the figure standing on the distant hill with her arms outstretched facing away from her. "I'm coming Urd!" she shouted running as she flew toward her, the years returning to her more quickly now as she approached - 16, 18, 20, 22, running until she tackled Urd from the side.

"*Gotcha!*" Urd cried within the courtyard of the temple as Skuld and Takumi saw a figure of light burst forth in her arms. "Oh sometimes you worry me kid!" she said hugging her tightly as together they fell to the ground. "You see this hair?! It wasn't always this color you know!"

"It was always that color Urd," Belldandy replied smiling as she rested against her. Thank you Urd - *for everything.*" She turned to those behind her. "*Keiichi?*"

"All I can tell you is that he's alive," Takumi replied kneeling beside him.

"Why has he not awakened?" she asked.

"I don't know. His body has undergone a tremendous stress, even in the presence of your protection. Though we may assume inhibitor has been shattered, it will likely take several days for his system to rid itself of the remnants."

"In that case get him to the house. We can then -."

"*-You'll have to leave that to someone else,*" said a voice behind them. They turned to find themselves flanked by a group of Valkyries already on the ground behind them.

"*Take her -*," ordered Prima.

"*Can't you just give them a moment?!*" cried Urd standing up.

"No. Thanks to you we have more pressing matters to worry about. If we don't act quickly we could have a war. *Belldandy*, I formally charge you with willful interference in Terran causality. *Take her!*"

"That's not fair. She should be with him!" shouted Urd.

Mortality

"It's more than fair, and this has gone on long enough," said a voice from the far side of the compound. They all turned to see Lind emerge from the cover of the trees followed by Chrono.

"Lind! How did you get here?" asked Prima.

"I received an urgent message that something was amiss. I see now it does not quite capture the totality the situation."

"My team has everything under control," replied Prima.

"Really? Because I noticed several of your sub-commanders are missing from the on-call roster. Where are they?"

"Do you suppose she's talking about the group that's currently getting defrocked, or is she talking about some *other* group?"

Urd asked unhelpfully.

Prima glared back silently. "Well there may have been a few setbacks . . ."

"I can see that," Lind said looking around at the state of the temple. She walked forward taking Belldandy by the arm.

"Where are you taking her?" demanded Urd.

"The only place left for her to go," Lind replied somberly.

"Come on. It's time to go," she said leading her away.

Urd moved to stop them but Belldandy shook her head. "It's alright Urd. I've done what I needed to. Take me where you will," Belldandy said going with her.

"I'm afraid Mr. Morisato will need to be returned to –."

"Not until her trial is over and judgement rendered," replied Lind.

"In that case I'm going with her," her Urd growled. "You need someone up there to look after you."

"She will be treated fairly," assured Lind.

"Nothing about this is fair," snapped Urd.

"What about us?" asked Takumi.

"The two of you must watch over Keiichi. I'll be back as soon as I can."

The Tree of Life

For those familiar with the disposition of Heaven's High Court, it should come as no surprise they wasted little time in putting Belldandy on trial. As a prior member of the Supreme Council herself, Hild knew all too well the manner of their deliberations. As for the rest of the community, everyone was abuzz. How could they not be? An esteemed young goddess from one of the most prominent families engaged in a relationship with a human, putting her reputation (and even her life if stories were to be believed) on the line to protect him? There were rumors of challenges, near misses, and cat-and-mouse escapes with teams of Valkyries on Terran; and even stories of descents into the Demons Realm itself. But all of this paled in comparison to the most stunning rumor: that she had returned from the higher planes following dissipation, returned to protect her lover. Surely a tall tale and yet . . . hadn't similar rumors been connected with her mother ages ago? And what of the witnesses in Yggdrasil claiming to have seen it with their own eyes? There were whispers some may even have helped her. Wasn't her sister a demon? Perhaps she had corrupted her. Still, so sad her mother had been taken so young. Perhaps they shouldn't be too hard on her; she was only protecting her love after all . . .

It was all a strange business, even for the heavens. As the story spread people began to come from miles around. But then Hild always did like an audience. The young flocked to Belldandy's side supporting her. But many others did not. A split had begun to develop in the Heavens. That much was sure. Odin could sense it now as he looked out over the crowd in the Great Hall. Yes, she would be here soon, he thought. For Hild would not long be denied in claiming her prize. Below him in the hall he saw the gathering crowd, each seeking to catch a glimpse of the infamous ruler of Demonkind. For Hild had not been

Mortality

invited to the Great Hall in many years. Not since she led her army out to the new lands in protest so many years ago.

A moment later a glow appeared at the far end of the Great Hall and she appeared – The Lord of the Lower Realm. The Daimakaichō revealed herself in all her glory, a portrait of supreme power and beauty surrounded by four of her personal guards - *and something else*. Beneath robes of decaying black cloth the Abyssal stood behind her taller than the rest, a harbinger of death and emptiness beneath his helm; the embodiment of an ancient horror. Those gathered pressed back with their loved ones at their approach, mothers tugging overly inquisitive children back to the safety of the crowd. Hild smiled pleasantly enough as she came forward not entirely displeased by the looks of concern on the faces she past.

“You dare bring that thing here?!” bellowed High Counciler Villi above them.

“You have your guards, I should be able to have a few of my own,” Hild replied coming forward from the far end of the hall. They continued on, reaching the forward phalanx of Valkyries, but even these moved back at the Abyssal’s approach. Only Lind and Prima remained in their path, unmoved, grudgingly stepping aside only when directed to do so from the high gallery. Wedged between Rota and Mist, Pogn looked out at the visitors, suppressing a shiver as they drifted past.

“*How’s the shoulder?*” Lind muttered as the Abyssal passed. The faceless void turned its head toward her, “*Do not worry - Lind,*” he echoed from somewhere in the depths, “*I shall see you soon . . .*”

“Careful, or you’ll see me once too often -,” she replied.

Something resembling a rasp escaped as it passed, followed by Hild who proceeded until at last she stopped at the foot of the high terrace bowing gracefully.

“What is it you want with us?” said Ve, standing with the other councilors above her.

She cocked her head to one side dismissively, “Please, do not waste my time,” she replied. “You know perfectly well why I’m here. A small matter to be sure, but one in the interest of - *efficiency*, I wish to see adjudicated promptly. I speak of course of the interference by one of you members in a matter of

The Tree of Life

causality. An incident I'm sure you'll wish to remedy with all due haste to insure continued equanimity among our realms."

"We can handle our own affairs. Go back to the shadows!"

"Pleasant as always Ve. But I won't be put off today, and you of all people should know it's unwise to threaten me. After all, it would be unfortunate if I had to *unleash* anything in here," she said as the crowd grew quiet.

Odin put his hand to Ve coming forward, looking down at Hild from the terrace. From her place beside Belldandy at the front of the Great Hall Urd saw something pass in the silence between them. But what it was she could not tell.

"Good of you to come" said Odin. "Do you doubt this is still a place of rules?"

Something resembling a smile crossed her face. "*Rules* here so often become tests," she replied. "And when the value is high, even the greatest councilors sometimes need reminding."

"Then speak what you believe to be necessary. *Bring Belldandy forward!*"

...

Up in the Earth Help center, Peorth's crew sat gathered together like most everyone else in the capitol, watching on the monitor as events unfolded. So captivated were they that they did not at first notice when the alarm bell sounded.

"What is it?!" asked Ere.

"Portal alarm," replied Ex. "Someone's trying to get through a gateway access point up here,"

"It can't be a coincidence this is happening while everyone's busy downstairs."

"Indeed."

"Do they think we're not watching?" asked Chrono isolating the system.

"Where is it?"

"I've got it. . . *one floor down in the subsystem engineering annex*. It's almost directly below us."

"Then let's see who's trying to crash the party," replied Ere.

Grabbing whatever was at hand, they headed off to meet the intruder. Reaching the annex they spotted the portal illuminated

Mortality

in one corner. "Just as I thought. They're trying to use a local gate to jump in from the outside," said Ex.

"We've got them locked out, they can't get in," said Chrono peering forward. "Why does it keep trying to get through?"

Side by side they watched as within the vortex the form continued to flux and disappear, like smoke attempting to solidify only to dissipate.

"Why does it persist? Don't they know they'll never get through once we've detected them?" said Ere.

The form surged forward once more.

"What is that? Is that a hand?" asked Ex as the smoke drew together once more.

"Maybe an arm," said Ere standing back. "It looks as though it's holding something."

"The filter's blocking it, I'm going to lower it," said Chrono.

"What?! Why?"

"Just a little -," she said dialing back.

Now they could see - a ghostly arm forming and unforming like a wisp of smoke holding on to . . . something.

"It's trying to give it to us," said Chrono.

"I don't want it!" exclaimed Ex.

Chrono swept at it with a poker striking it away. As it tumbled to the floor the ghostly arm dissipated like smoke being sucked down into the vortex.

"It wasn't trying to attack us," said Ere.

"But what do we do now?!" replied Ex.

"*I'm going for Lind,*" Chrono said racing down the stairs.

She reached the main floor, squeezing her small form through the crowd until she found a spot across from Lind. She waved trying to catch the commander's attention. Lind looked back giving her only the briefest nod. *Now was not the time.*

"No," she signaled. *I need you now!*

Lind looked back shaking her off.

"Now!" Chrono said aloud.

Eyes began to move in their direction, causing Lind to attempt to exit the gallery as casually as possible with a nod to Prima.

"This had better be -," she began.

"C'mon!" Chrono cried grabbing her hand.

The Tree of Life

They reached the annex and the group gathered around the object. "Where?!" Lind asked immediately.

"Over here," said Ere.

"Don't touch it. It looks like . . ."

...

Those at the center parted as Belldandy came forward.

"You stand accused of interference in Terran causality. What do you have to say for yourself?" asked Villi.

"My actions arose as a result of an attempt to protect the life of my contract, proximal to his attempts to do the same for me."

Urd could hear young goddesses around her swoon.

"Anything else?"

"The attack upon him was unprovoked. I therefore believed my actions served the ends of justice - though I understand some here may feel differently.

"Unprovoked? The person in question directly interfered in a matter between realms," reminded Hild.

"A matter unconnected to you and in which you report you had no *particular* interest," observed Odin.

"Certainly less so than judging my own daughter's actions," replied Hild.

"The matter hinges upon intent," said Villi. "If Lady Belldandy was the intended target then Lady Hild is correct.

If however - ."

A disruption from the side balcony caused them to turn as Lind came forward with her guards. "*My apologies for interrupting My Lord. If however I might speak to you?*" she said her eyes glowing. "*I'm afraid it's rather urgent.*" All those gathered waited until Odin returned, but when he did the look upon his face made even Hild nervous. "There appear to be a few details we need to discuss," he said to the members. "*In private.*"

...

Several days later the senior demon took up her staff, the green gem aglow as she walked up the winding stone steps on the cliff face to reach the plateau overlooking the bay. As she so often did, the Lord of Demonkind stood along the edge of the precipice pacing against the setting sun. "Would you like me

Mortality

to take some action Hild?" Idunn asked after another moment of the demonlord's pacing. "I'm told Belldandy was released." "No," she replied putting her hands behind her back. "No, we won't be doing anything to Belldandy or her friends anytime soon," she said quietly. "A condition of our 'agreement'."

"How do you think they determined - ?."

"The nearest I can figure his people must have found some trace of the original toxin, analyzing it which identified certain subtle 'modifications'. Once they knew it wasn't designed for a goddess - well it all devolved into a discussion of intentional killing humans, blah, blah blah. *'If you would kindly assist us in identifying something Lady Hild' - Hah!*"

"Did Odin say Belldandy wasn't the target of the attack?"

"You know him. He's far too smooth for that. He gave me the 'disappointed' look he's been working on over the last *thousand* years while creating a graceful exit."

"Jerk," Idunn said as the two old friends laughed. "And then?"

"He launched into a 'sympathetic' discussion of how difficult it must be to control the actions of so many *independent-minded* demons."

"i.e. you don't know how to control your own idiots."

"Exactly!"

"Then there was more nonsense about the importance of discipline on both sides, etc. etc. *But he knew*. I could tell."

"Hmm. Still, he must hold a few kind thoughts of you. I mean, why give you a graceful exit if he was sure?"

"I'm guessing he has his own problems concerning the High Council's view of his daughter's behavior. Resolving things quickly helps him put the focus back on golden child's miraculous return from the higher planes."

"You think any of it's true?"

"Who knows Idunn. We'll need to find out at some point. But if it is, it could mean trouble."

"You mean if she's attained that much power already."

"I must say, she, Urd and her idiot boyfriend gave us more trouble than I anticipated when they visited. And her pinning strike was no joke."

"C'mon. Isn't the *real* reason they got out because of your amazing daughter?"

The Tree of Life

"Hmm. Did she do anything? I forget. . ."

"You're terrible! Why is it everyone else always needs to sing her praises? You know they're still talking about the *last* time she came into the realm and took out a couple of your guards. She's an amazing kid," Idunn said sitting down dangling her legs over the edge.

"-You mean the last time she came down to *disappoint* me and remind me of my failure as a mother?!" she frowned.

"I'm not sure that's an entirely fair. I heard you were holding her boyfriend at the time. Can you imagine what *we* would have done back in the day if someone had done that to us?"

Hild smiled sitting down beside her.

"Odin doesn't think you're a bad mother. Given everything that's happened - that should tell you a lot."

"*He* doesn't count," she said stubbornly crossing her arms.

"*You mean he's not the one whose approval you want.*"

"No it's just, Urd and Bell have become such a team that's all. It's preventing her from becoming all she could be."

"Well you have to admit, none of us exactly became what our parents had in mind for us. Least of all you. Still, you must be happy about her finding someone."

"Yeah, they seem to be doing well. They're not the problem."

"Indeed. Remember some of the idiots she's been with?"

"Don't remind me," Hild said chuckling.

"Did you see her there? Up in the Heavens?"

"Of course. Who do you think was standing at Belldandy's side the whole time? She saw me, looking over like some hate filled goth girl . . . *with hate me eyes.*"

"I can't imagine why."

"And who's idea was that?!"

"Well . . . at least she met her sister," Idunn said biting bit her lip.

"And what a blessing that has turned out to be . . ."

She shoved her friend playfully, "Some things can't be helped, even at our level. I mean: borne of the pools? Freya's kid has extraordinarily good luck."

"Yeah thanks for reminding me. And between you and me, I have a feeling *luck* had little to do with it. After all her mother was one of the most powerful Seidr's ever known."

Mortality

“Do you think it has something to do with golden child’s mysterious return from the higher planes?”

“Difficult to say. But you and I know Freya’s power better than almost anyone. Given its nature it makes you wonder.”

“Speaking of *almost anyone*, you see anybody else of note?”

“You mean other than the old fossils we tore the heavens apart for a couple millennia ago? Seriously if you want to know, why not just come out and ask? *Was my sister Fulla there?* Yes, I saw her in the back.”

“Still carrying dad’s bow?”

“Yep. Looked like she wanted to fire it too. Right into my head if she could have gotten away with it.

“Think she still wants a rematch?”

“With you?” Hild said looking at her. “What do you think?”

“What do you think of her chances?”

“Zero,” Hild said shaking her head. “For we have become something altogether different from what we set out as all those years ago. I doubt an entire squad of their most powerful Valkyries could even slow you down now. That’s why if anything happens to me -.”

“They wouldn’t dare try. If they came here - !”

“Look at you. You’re getting too excited!”

“No I’m not!”

“Yes you are. I can see your little cowlick poking up,” she said patting her hair down.

“*Lady Hild?*” the messenger interrupted behind them.

“Yes?”

“They have all arrived as per your request.”

Hild and Idunn rose walking. “I take it these are the members of the original team - or what’s left of them,” Idunn smirked.

“Yes.” Hild stood on the dais addressing them, “*By means unknown, Yggdrasil has gained detailed knowledge of the agent used on Terran. As a result Belldandy has been released and the matter is no longer under discussion. No acts of reprisal are to be undertaken. Anyone who violates this policy will find themselves in the display case.*”

Several winced as Idunn now took the stage, “Which is what I wanted to do to all of you anyway for security purposes, given your failure to the Daimakaichō! However as a result of her

The Tree of Life

overflowing grace, she has restrained my hand. Yet it seems to me we have a security problem. If anyone knows anything concerning this it would be in your best interest to speak now.” Down in front Mara strode forward, “Aside from the fact that we were all *ordered* not to interfere with events following the initial attack, I believe our failure was the result of human intervention.”

Idunn leaned down to her with her staff, “Explain yourself.” “Following the . . . uh, allowance of Belldandy and her companions to leave the Demon Realm, I was ordered to keep watch on her and report. Uncertain of where she’d gone I staked out Tariki Hongan Temple, assuming they would return there for their final hours. An assumption which turned out to be correct,” she said humbly complimenting herself. “Later that evening the Daimakaichō’s daughter appeared, excitedly relaying something they had apparently discovered about the nature of the agent itself. Belldandy then seemed to employ this knowledge nearly destroying the surrounding area but preserving, at least temporarily, the life of Keiichi Morisato. I would therefore argue that whatever they discovered on Terran was likely key to understanding and defeating the agent; and thus likely central to Heaven’s decision in this case.”

“And the agent has been destroyed?”

“I was forced to depart when Valkyrie units appeared at the temple, but Morisato was still alive as of this morning.” She stood quietly, watching as Hild and Idunn conferred with one another for several minutes. “Very well,” Hild said at last. “Go to Tariki Hongan temple and keep watch. We do not know what may happen from this point onward.”

Of course,” Mara replied bowing. “After all, these things are so hard to predict,” she muttered taking her leave.

. . .

Beneath the shadows of the majestic towers and rings of the citadel, Odin walked with his daughter along the shores of the Vimir toward the portal. “Why did you not ask for help Belldandy?” he continued.

“All I had were suspicions. Which I could not prove. What would the councilors here have said to that; helping your

Mortality

daughter with her suspicions? The law was clear with respect to the situation. With you as a magistrate of the law, anything I might have done would have put you in jeopardy. I didn't want to burden you until I was sure."

"I've said it before, you would have made a good councilor Belldandy," he said putting his hand to her. "Perhaps you can understand why I encouraged you so strongly in that regard."

"We've been all through that father," she replied.

"*We have*," he agreed. "I've listened to many councilors in my time, and you are speaking to your father. It is as important to listen to what is behind the words as the words themselves.

What you really mean is you were uncertain I would help you."

"Would you have?" she asked looking up. "I know how you feel about Keiichi. Though it's perhaps more accurate to say I was uncertain you would be in a position to help me."

Always striving to keep peace, he thought. He was gripped by an urge to both kiss and smack her on the head. She was so much like Freya at times. "When did you know?" he asked as they reached the bridge.

"With certainty? When I looked into her eyes," Belldandy said.

"So that was the real reason you went to the Demon Realm.

You bet on the likelihood they believed their position to be so strong at that point that they would not deny you entry."

"I did it to know the truth, to see if a deal could be struck, and because I had no other option at that point."

"Letting you in was not their wisest move. But even taking such a risk it still didn't give you proof."

"Not the kind the council would have accepted - no."

"Yet you still persisted."

"Perhaps we've identified the reason I'm unsuited to be a high councilor," she said turning. "Perhaps I'm more like Urd than you realize." She stood up on her toes to kiss him.

"But ultimately you found the proof. And in so doing saved the balance." He led her to the platform.

"I suspect more than Keiichi and I were being tested in all of this. But as to your question, you have Lind and her comrades to thank for that, not me. And even they are not your true benefactor."

"Who is?"

The Tree of Life

"We do not know. They believe it came from somewhere in the demon realm. Father I wouldn't normally ask but given the circumstances, what do you see in Keiichi's future?"

"Light," he replied.

Belldandy frowned.

"I sense his body is attempting to mend," he acknowledged.

"Thank you. You know where I'll be."

"Yes. I'm sending a contingent of those who wanted to go back with you," he said waving them forward. "In case the Demon Realm is not as satisfied with the outcome as they appear."

"What's this old man on about?!" Urd said suddenly appearing through the throng hugging him. "Something no good I'll bet!"

"Normal stuff, I'm trying to get her to stay," he admitted. "But she says she'd rather go with you." Odin and Urd watched as Belldandy greeted the others. "Everyone's talking about what you did on Terran Urd," he murmured.

"Eh, I think Elegance did most of the work," she shrugged.

"I'm proud of you kid," he replied hugging her. "Look out for them, and for yourself, and uh -"

". . . Takumi dad."

"Right." He watched his eldest daughter walk out to join them.

"Don't do anything foolish," he yelled to them stepping back.

"Never," Belldandy replied.

"First class goddesses shouldn't lie," he sighed watching them disappear.

Nagare

Three days had come and gone at Tariki Hongan Temple and Takumi was becoming increasingly anxious when at last he looked up sensing a change in the atmosphere above. From the deck he watched the clouds pull themselves out against the blue sky as Skuld raced past him into the courtyard. “Is it them?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said looking windward to the wide sweep of sky as the clouds drew themselves into a circle. Then there was an echo, like stone in the distance and a flash. He waited patiently, then saw them approaching the temple from the west, a whole contingent descending the slopes. There were nine in all with Belldandy at their head. At least he thought it was Belldandy. As they crossed the courtyard he sensed there was something different about her; something that somehow made her appear even more regal, even more beautiful if indeed such a thing were possible. Her eyes moved over the temple with a haunting grace that made him weak. He looked on captivated from the porch, watching her movements as she addressed those nearest her. *They must have settled it*, he thought. *They appear to be-* “Hey remember me?” said the voice suddenly beside him.

“Don’t I even get a hello?”

“Oh hi Urd,” he said continuing to stare at the group. “Is Belldandy okay?” he said leaning in for a better look.

“She’s fine. Along with your drooling reflex I see.”

He looked at her defensively. “Well it’s just I wanted to make sure she’s okay. She seems - *different*.”

“How can she not be?” said Urd. “For she breached the waters of mortality; and that’s no small thing. A feat performed only once before.”

“By who?”

“Her mother.”

“Wow. Tough family.”

Nagare

"If you only knew -," Urd said putting her arm around him. "Look at her. She's a first-class goddess at the height of her power. One on the cusp of becoming legendary." Belldandy had almost finished thanking her traveling companions when she began approaching the veranda. *She's going to talk to us*, Takumi thought excitedly. "How is Keiichi?" she asked him solemnly. "Who?" he said looking at her wide-eyed. A smack to the back of head by Urd brought him to his senses. "Oh I mean he has not yet awakened," he replied apologetically. Seeing her distress at this he added: "But his pulse is strong. Stronger every day now. *Perhaps he is just waiting for someone . . .*" "Of course," she said stepping into the house trying not to show her concern. "You have all done so much for him. I will see to his care from here on out." "It's no problem. We can stay," Takumi offered quickly. "*That's not what she means*," Urd said pulling him aside. "She wants time with him - *alone*. Given the council's decision I'm sure she now wants to put all her effort into healing him. We should give them room." "But what if she needs something?" he insisted. "Like your continued fawning?" inquired Urd. He blinked back innocently. "Well I guess we'll be getting out of your way now Belldandy. Take care of Keiichi . . . *lucky bastard*." "What was that?!" "I said it's good to have you home Urd," he replied intertwining his fingers with hers as they went down the steps. "*Come on Skuld we're leaving!*" called Urd. "What?! We are?! Where are we going?!" "Candy Land." "No we're not. You're both lying! You always lie! You go!" "Would you rather go to Electroshock Land?" suggested Urd.

...

With the guests gone, Belldandy removed her traveling cloak, quietly entering Keiichi's room to kneel at his bedside. His body was still, but she could feel his breathing was regular. Alone with him now the house seemed quiet. She sat with him

Mortality

in solitude as the weight of all that happened to them in the last few weeks finally caught up with her. She put her hands over her face trying to hide her worry as she lay down beside him. “*Keiichi . . .*”

The next day was peaceful but lonely as she tended him. Later that night she opened the window to allow the clear starlight to fall upon his face as she breathed in the mountain air before falling asleep beside him. Early the next morning, she awoke from under the covers, made breakfast and bathed. Then, on the afternoon of November 25th, Keiichi Morisato opened his eyes once more. He raised his head squinting, holding his hand up to make out the figure beside the window, silhouetted in the afternoon sun.

“Am I . . . *in heaven?*” he asked uncertain.

“Not yet -” said the figure turning.

“*Belldandy!*”

She was on him in an instant, falling over him on the floor.

“Are we - is everything okay?” he asked trying to look around.

“*Storms may come and go, and time may someday destroy even the memory of this place; but right now, at this moment,*” she said her eyes brimming with tears “*everything . . . everything is okay,*” she said pulling herself to him, holding him as though it was the first time. No, it was something else. It was the first time. The first time there was no reservation in the way she held herself to him, no longer holding back any part of her; out of duty, or fear.

“*I love you Keiichi – so very much,*” she sobbed kissing him, kissing as he hoped she one day would. That day had now come, fully and without reservation.

He held her in their small bedroom. “Are you alright Bell?”

“Yes. Because I’m not afraid anymore Keiichi. *I am not afraid of you, or me - and I am most certainly not afraid . . . of us,*” she said her tears falling freely now.

“I’m sorry. I know all this started because of me, because of my selfishness. I just don’t want the pain of life to hurt you.”

“It’s alright. Let us earn our scars Keiichi. Because I would rather live through all that might come to pass in the time we have, than spend an eternity in the heavens alone. *I’m with you Keiichi.* Like no other. What lies behind us is nothing

compared to what's in front of us. Whatever happens from this moment on I'm with you. *Truly.*"

"You mean - *are you sure Bell?*"

"*I am.*" And with that the goddess who had been given a second chance at happiness kissed him, kissed him with the full power of a goddess, as though she would never get another chance. To her amazement she felt his hands come up around her unsteadily, pulling her toward him. She reached down pulling the sheets of the futon around them, feeling the closeness of his skin, of her head on the muscles of his shoulders as her hands moved through the coarseness of his black hair lying close to him.

"*Keiichi,*" she murmured.

Now Keiichi was a gentleman. But even gentlemen have their limits. If his body was telling him to rest his head was certainly countermanding any such nonsensical orders. Belldandy cuddled close as his hands drifted down her back, moving over her as she had so often daydreamed they someday would. The hands she had watched work the contours of the bike countless times, strong yet patient hands that now held her. Not her fingers or her palms, but all of her. And all her thoughts, all her secret desires of him caressing her, brushing her hair, bathing her, the pressure of them together on the futon all of it she now knew would come true.

That November afternoon many things happened in the town of Nekomi. Hasegawa won a local drawing allowing her to buy dinner for Otaki and the Auto Club members at their favorite restaurant. Tamiya hurt his hand on his favorite wrench working on a modification for Chihiro, who looked after him for the remainder of the weekend. Megumi stopped in at a local party to visit her friend but wound up talking to a handsome stranger. And high up on a hill, tucked back in an old temple at the foot of a mountain, two young lovers tussled . . . as lovers often do. In their happiness they were far too busy to notice the visitor sitting quietly atop their roof. The Valkyrie looked up at the clouds, slowly pulling the locket from beneath her tunic. Opening the latch she looked at the picture inside, "*Your children are safe,*" she whispered. "*No, more than that - they're happy.*" She stared at the picture of

Mortality

herself and Freya a moment longer before the sound of an angel smashing through the roof of the house skyward made her flinch, only to blissfully float back to earth a moment later, hitting the edge of the roof to land in the courtyard below. Lind sat up blushing as she closed the locket. "Time to go," she muttered standing on the roof's peak. "After all - *I'm not an entirely insensitive person*," she said to herself walking away.

Far below her on the river plain, Sentaro and Skuld continued attempting to outdo one another on their bikes. "Look at this - *this is a super kick*," Skuld said pitching high into the air. "Oh yeah - *well this is a tornado twist*," Sentaro shouted throwing himself off the ramp. Behind them Urd and Takumi followed like dutiful parents, their fingers intertwined as they walked side by side against the setting sun. "*I feel something*," Urd said suddenly turning to the mountain. "Something good or something bad?" Takumi asked cautiously. "*Something good I think*," she said pulling him behind her. "I think we should stay away awhile longer. Spend the night at the residence. What do you say? *C'mon Skuld we're going!*" "No way!" "You can have whatever crazy ice cream you want," they said. "Fine!" Came the shouted as they dropped from the air seemingly from nowhere. Takumi turned but saw Urd was still looking at the mountains, a quiet smile on her lips. "Is everything okay Urd?" "Tai, did I ever tell you about my mother? The one who raised me?" she said wistfully. "I don't think so," he replied shaking his head. "I really should some time," she said putting her head to his. He looked at her puzzled. "You know I think there's a lot you don't tell me Urd." "Oh I tell you pretty much everything. Everything you *need* to know. Isn't that right - *smokey?*" "Are you talking to me?!" replied a voice in a nearby tree. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Nagare

“*Really?* I was told by a *very* reliable source that the Yggdrasil staff received an unusual care package courtesy of the demon realm. I wonder how that could have happened?”

“Yeah who knows. Probably sent by some crazy person. We’ve got a lot of them down there.”

“I’m sure,” Urd said walking under the tree. “Some crazier than others I suspect. Either way we’re going for dinner. Would you like to come Mara? I have a feeling we might owe you a dinner.”

“Well I’m not that hungry, but I could eat. And you probably do owe me a dinner,” she said dropping down beside them.

“In fact when you think about it I’m kind of the hero in all this,” she said walking proudly beside them. “For putting you up at our club in Shibuy I mean; not anything else.”

“Of course.”

Takumi looked at the pair suspiciously, “Mara if you’ve done us a favor I promise to do something nice for you someday,” he said as together they descended the hill into the city.

...

The next day within the stone walls of Zeniarai Benten a traveler appeared, requesting an audience with the senior administrators. Normally they would have sent such a visitor away, but there was an uncommon presence and grace in her eyes. “You are holding something for me,” she said as they looked at one another blankly. “Something in your *old* records, relating to the origins of this shrine.” She moved drawing a sigil upon the desk. “I was told that you would be ready when next I came.” It took more than a few trips back and forth, up and down, and through their warren of rooms to locate the relevant documents. And when at last they did there came more than a few curious stares from behind tall ledgers and around corners of boxes before they were in agreement. “*More than eight hundred years . . .*” she heard one of them whisper fearfully as others peered out in disbelief. “*Then I do not think we should keep it waiting . . .*” another replied as a young page was quickly and unceremoniously pushed in front of her with a set of directions. The job of assisting her in the catacombs it seemed was not one for which there were numerous takers.

Mortality

“We will set up some screens for privacy from the shrine’s visitors. It will take a moment,” the page said apologetically. Soon he led her on, past the screens to a stone block in the heart of the shrine. “This is the entrance,” he said.

Lind knelt down beside the stone, putting her hands over its surface. “*Hojo*,” she said tracing the symbols.

“Yes, here in Kamakura there are quite -.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said sliding the stone block to one side with shocking ease. Dropping down into the tunnel the page led her dutifully down several restricted passageways. After several surreptitious backward glances they reached a wall of solid stone. He raised his hand, tracing the outline of the hidden seam in the wall. “What you seek is in the cavern beyond this I am told. It is said that this – um placement block, will not present you with an obstacle,” he said handing her the torch.

“*Thank you*,” she said allowing him to retreat back down the corridor. When he had gone she stood silently for a moment gathering her thoughts. Then she braced herself against the 7-ton segment of stone pushing forward. Slowly it gave way, retreating into the interior of the chamber as she pushed it across the level floor. Once inside she returned the block to its original position, now finding what she had been searching for; what she had been expecting to see. Even so the mortal remains of Sohei made her pause. She found him just as Takumi had described him, lying quietly upon the slab of stone. Uncertainly she approached, kneeling before him slowly touching the bones. She knew it was an act no proper goddess would have performed, the tears welling up as she rested her hands upon him. She had no idea why. For he had been long dead. Dead and buried, separated from her by the long passage of history. And yet somewhere within her his echoes were still fresh, as fresh as the sound of his footsteps walking behind here in the village; or in the solitude of Mt Yoshino. That was the curse of living in different worlds. For her only 19 years had passed since she had stood with him against the Abyssal in that small riverside village. But here, 825 years had passed. Four years following her return she was scarcely 20 when the Realm Alignment Accord was finally signed, forever tying the timeline of the heavens and the demon realm with that of

Nagare

Terran. She closed her eyes thinking of his features. He was the first human who had ever shown faith in her, the first who had ever come back for her. Alone in the tomb now she began to weep, clutching her hands to the slab upon which he rested. It felt smooth like him, and solid. But there was something more. It was then that she noticed the curve of the shallow impressions. She looked down but there was no mistaking it, the curves precisely matched the placement of her hands. She shook her head forcing a smile. *"It's not like I'm missing you,"* she said curling her fingers tightly. However under the lid she thought she felt a groove. Looking below she could see it now, sliding her hand along the slab. With a burst of strength she pushed against it as the upper slab turned, revealing the hollow encasement beneath. Inside she saw the stacks of tied bamboo strips, volume upon volume. Quickly she picked them up one after another reading them:

- *rain continuing today as we rode toward Hakone. Near midnight we slipped through the . . .*
- *Overwintered in Tenkawa. Ryu and village well. Mai growing all the time. Showed off her horse and arrow . . .*
- *Lady Gozen reports escape impossible, but confirms seeing stone with markings similar to weapon five to six months ago. We are proceeding to. . .*
- *must trust in Kaze Hojo's report of the caves and structure of Yorimoto's stronghold . . .*
- *Kenji again urged me to join the monastery. Perhaps the time has finally . . .*

But then she spotted a lone parchment resting in the top corner. Carefully she picked it up:

Lind,

If you are reading this it means you were detained longer than anticipated. I fear now I may not survive long enough to greet you upon your return. I have therefore written down all that has occurred during my search into these pages, instructing that they be placed with me upon my death to await you when next we meet, as I hope we will in the future. Your staff rests at my side, for indeed it has never left me.

Mortality

In the days that became my travels, I have had time to consider all that you have said. About men's hearts and appearances. Of allies who may stand on foreign ground or clothed in foreign faiths. It may humor you to know that in my old age I sit quietly wearing the cloak of a priest. Nearly a year after your departure I picked up whispers of the stone, hidden away here in the north in Kamakura. As we suspected, it had been taken as a prize of war, a war which like all wars eventually ended. As I have detailed here I was eventually able to locate and remove it from its handlers, spiriting it away. However once in my possession I began to fear that someone might eventually come looking for it, someone - or something, who was not you. Based on your description of its power I sought to bury it. But where would it be safe? How long would it need to remain hidden? What changes might come upon the world during the period of its confinement? And how would you locate it upon your return? In the end with the help of those I came to trust, I have elected to bury it in Jufukuji, in an alcove two levels below the primary graves; reasoning that such a site was the least likely to ever to be disturbed. In the years that followed - several have come seeking the stone. But since we had no way of knowing whether they were friend or foe we kept it hidden, assuming you or your emissaries would locate me, or at least Abyss first.

As the years drew on fewer and fewer knew the location of the stone. I have made arrangements upon my death to be buried a distance from it, in a tomb that would discourage discovery by any but a person of your power and knowledge. To ensure a path to its discovery was not lost, a boy now grown to be a senior priest whom you may remember, devised a method to assure transmission of its location to you across time.

Throughout the many years of my life I have often wondered what might have become of you . . . if you are safe . . . if you are warm . . . if you are happy. I pray you eventually found the peace among your people that you so long desired, but never spoke of. Above all I hope that you have survived - and are well."

Nagare

Lind raised her arm brushing away her tears,

“And if you have survived, and by some miracle find your way back here someday; I hope you will not weep for me. For you returned to me the most important thing that men can have - you gave me hope. In men, and gods. Written here are all the details of my journey and all that came after in the years that followed. I pray it may be of use to you in your own quest. May the powers bless and keep you Lind. Thank you for letting me share in your adventure.

Sohei

Slowly she opened her pack inserting the manuscripts. Then picking it up she raised her hand to the wall as it suddenly burst to light, the words etching themselves into the solid rock. Pushing back the entry block once more she departed, sealing the chamber until only the faint glow of her inscription remained in the darkness:

“Light shines,

- even in the darkest of places”

Lind walked outside feeling the gusting winds pushing their way through the mountains to act upon the scattered clouds above Kamakura. The late afternoon sunlight rained down upon her as she walked, giving a long last look to Zeniarai Benten. She felt both weaker and stronger now. For even though she knew that men, like the cherry blossom, are destined to grow wither and fall; she knew they could be profoundly beautiful all the same. She walked on descending the road from the shrine, becoming just another face in the afternoon crowd. She would return to the heavens, but for now; now she just wanted to walk. She descended the forested roadway heading for the city, as one by one the curiously dressed women watching from afar fell into line behind her.

END

The story continues in Book III of the OMG Terran arc:

Oh My Goddess: Fallow

